

## UNIVERSITY OF EXETER DOCTORAL COLLEGE

### Arrangements for Upgrade Vivas by Electronic Means – Temporary Guidance in Response to Impact of Coronavirus Outbreak

#### [Part 1: Context](#)

#### [Part 2: Conduct of Vivas via a video-link: Approval Process](#)

#### [Conduct of Vivas via a video-link: College Upgrade Committee Process](#)

### Context

Due to travel restrictions and social distancing measures introduced in response to the Coronavirus outbreak, it is necessary to put in place arrangements to support student progression through the conduct of upgrade vivas via video-link. The University currently uses Microsoft Teams for this purpose.

These arrangements are based on those which have been used to manage remote viva voce examinations successfully in response to the impact of the Coronavirus outbreak<sup>1</sup>. The checklists and other guidance for examiners produced are likely to be of use to the College Upgrade Committees when conducting upgrade vivas.

Whilst this policy is in place it applies in all instances where any viva participant will be joining via video-link. This temporary policy has been reviewed after its initial period of usage (from May 2020), and whilst it will be kept under ongoing review, it will now remain in place until end of the 2020/1 academic year.

It is important that the University ensures that students feel supported through the viva process, as much as possible. In this regard, it may be useful to keep in mind the points of contact available for students that include the PGR Support Team, Wellbeing Services, and [Spectrum Life](#).

**College Upgrade Committees are reminded that if they are concerned that they may have identified evidence of Research Misconduct they should contact their PGR Support Officer and follow the procedure set out in section 5 of the [‘Research Misconduct: Procedure for Graduate Research Students suspected of Research Misconduct’](#).**

### Conduct of Vivas via a video-link

#### Approval Process

- 1) Arrangements should be made to proceed with a viva examination via video-link provided there is no evidence to indicate that the conditions set out below (2) can not be met This policy applies in all instances where any viva participant will be joining via video-link. . Arrangements for managing this process will differ by College, but in all instances the PGR Support team should keep records of the decisions made.
- 2) Where approval has been given to hold a remote upgrade viva, the College is responsible for taking all reasonable steps to ensure that the student is not disadvantaged in any way compared to the normal situation of a face-to-face viva. In so doing, the College should be

---

<sup>1</sup> [Associated guidance such as with regard to the use of MS Teams and the checklist for examiners](#) is likely to be useful to College Upgrade Committee members – the Chair of the College Upgrade Committee’s responsibilities during the upgrade viva are equivalent to the responsibility of the Non-Examining Independent Chair (NEIC) in the final examination process.

mindful of the latest advice available from IT Services with regard to holding online meetings. In determining whether or not it is appropriate to conduct an upgrade viva by video-link, the College **must** be confident that:

- a. The technology is sufficient to enable an upgrade viva to take place without limiting communications, and that arrangements will be made to postpone the viva if this is not the case<sup>2</sup>. Where it is the attendance of a member of the College Upgrade Committee that is the source of difficulties, consideration should be given to whether another member of staff could appropriately replace them without detriment to the upgrade process. Where it is the attendance of the lead supervisor, this would normally only be appropriate if another member of the supervisory team could substitute for them, and the student should be made aware of this. Exceptionally if no member of the supervisory team is able to attend the Dean of Postgraduate Research and of the Doctoral College has given delegated authority to the College DPGR to approve an upgrade viva taking place without the presence of a member of the supervisory team as an observer. In such cases the student must be given full opportunity to defer their upgrade viva until arrangements can be made to hold the upgrade viva with a member of the supervisory team present;
- b. All participants are able to access an appropriate, comfortable location for the viva where the probability of interruptions occurring is minimal. To facilitate this, participants should be reminded of the need to ensure that they have refreshments and have made appropriate arrangements for their comfort.
- c. Where an ILP is in place, any reasonable adjustments can be complied with, bearing in mind that the advice set out in an ILP might not have been written for a remote upgrade viva. See also '[Inclusive Practice within Teaching and Learning](#)', and in particular, [section 7, 'Postgraduate Research Students'](#).

The PGR Support Team may consider that the College has provided *de facto* confirmation that it is has confidence in points a)-c) by virtue of the fact that no participant has raised concerns in advance about any of these points. Specific approval from a College PGR Manager or the Head of PGR Support, if necessary using their judgement to refer any cases to the discipline Director of Postgraduate Research or College Director of Postgraduate Research<sup>3</sup>, for a decision is required where:

1. An ILP is in place, to ensure that appropriate adjustments can be made;
2. Or any concerns have been raised about proceeding with the viva by those attending the viva with regard to points a)-b)

3) **College Upgrade Committee Process:** Addressing these points means that:

- a. The College Upgrade Committee, the student, and their lead supervisor (as an observer), must confirm in writing if it is not feasible for the viva to be conducted in this way, by no later than the date specified by their PGR Support Team in their communications. If necessary, the PGR Support Team will investigate alternative options, which may include postponing the viva. If the student's circumstances change or they have significant concerns about proceeding in this way even after this date they should discuss this as soon as possible with the relevant PGR Support Team<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> By exception and with approval to do so, where participants do not have access to a suitable environment or technology off-campus, it may be possible to provide space on campus for one or more participants, to use an appropriate digitally enabled, covid-secure space on-campus. This will be subject to the latest Government guidance at the time in question. Students who have concerns about proceeding with a viva via video-link should contact their PGR Support Team. See also 3)b).

<sup>3</sup> Alternatives to the College DPGR are those set out in the [TQA Manual](#), as able to act on behalf of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean of College.

<sup>4</sup> Please mark your email as urgent if your viva is due to take place within two weeks of making contact.

- b. Participants may still attend the upgrade viva via video-link from a location on campus, where they are the only participant in that space, and where this is a permitted use of that space in accordance with covid-secure rules at the time in question, for example, participants who are able to work from an individual office, or students who have secured a [private study space](#).
- c. The College Upgrade Committee, the student, and their lead supervisor (as an observer) must be asked to confirm at the conclusion of the viva, commencing with the student, that the holding of the upgrade viva by video-link has had no substantive bearing on the examination process.
- d. The College Upgrade Committee should be mindful of the risk that the viva may need to be halted and should ensure that it agrees an approach to record-keeping during the viva discussions to ensure that the viva can be recommenced successfully at a later date.
- e. The online platform for the viva should be tested with all participants ahead of the viva taking place, and approval must always be subject to confirmation of a successful test.
- f. The Chair of the College Upgrade Committee will be responsible for:
  - i. Verifying the candidate's identity by checking ID that the candidate presents on camera.
  - ii. Halting the viva in the event that the technology fails or is significantly interrupted or is of a poor quality such that participants are not able to fully engage in the viva. This may include halting the viva at the request of the student, if there are any indications of problems with the technology being used.
  - iii. If the viva is halted, confirming in writing to all participants as soon as possible that the viva has been postponed;
  - iv. Keeping a record and reporting to their College DPGR in the first instance should anyone present be unable to confirm that the holding of the upgrade viva by video-link had no substantive bearing on the viva process;
  - v. Ensuring that all participants confirm that they have not kept a recording of the viva.
- g. Consideration should be given to the need for members of the College Upgrade Committee to consult privately. The arrangements for managing the candidate and supervisor joining and leaving the meeting should be set out in advance of the remote upgrade viva, noting that the student shall always be invited to talk with the Committee after the supervisor is asked to leave.

- 4) **Arrangements for halted vivas:** If the viva is halted at the beginning, arrangements will need to be made for the viva to take place at a later date. If a viva is halted after it is underway, arrangements will normally need to be made to allow the viva to recommence at a later date from roughly the point at which it halted. However, the Chair will be responsible for making a judgement on whether the viva should recommence later or would need to be restarted completely.
- 5) **Records and Feedback:** The PGR Support team should keep records of decisions made to hold or not hold a remote upgrade viva, along with records on actions taken with regard to postponed or halted vivas. College Upgrade Committee members should provide feedback on conducting vivas remotely to the PGR Support team in order to support review of the policy and updating guidance for other upgrade vivas, if needed.

Professor Andrew McRae  
Dean of Postgraduate Research and of the Doctoral College

April 2021