

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER DOCTORAL COLLEGE

Viva Voce Examinations by Video-link – Temporary Policy in Response to Impact of Coronavirus Outbreak

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Part 1) Context

Due to travel restrictions and social distancing measures introduced in response to the Coronavirus outbreak, it is necessary to put in place a temporary policy on the conduct of vivas by video-link. The University currently uses Microsoft Teams for this purpose, or alternative platform, provided approval has been given by PGR Support ahead of the viva.

PGR Support contact: whilst this temporary policy is in place a member of the PGR Support team will be identified as a point of contact for each viva, and examiners will be informed who their named contact will be.

The current policy on [Vivas by Video Conference](#) contained within the TQA Manual is acknowledged to be outdated for the present situation. This will be reviewed and updated in due course. In the meantime, to meet the immediate need to facilitate the continuation of vivas where possible, the following approach to managing video-linked vivas will be implemented, having briefly consulted with the Doctoral College Management Group, and members of the wider community through the Doctoral College Forum. 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 March 2020), and whilst it will be kept under ongoing review, it will now remain in place until end of the 2020/1 academic year. Any student who has concerns about proceeding in this way should discuss this in the first instance with their College's PGR Support Team.

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

Other Examination Requirements: Please note that aside from the requirements with regard to holding vivas by electronic means, and the requirements around thesis submission the requirements set out in the [TQA Manual](#) and the [Calendar](#) should still be followed as normal unless an exception has been approved by the Dean of Faculty in writing. Exception requests must be sent to dcqualitydevelopment@exeter.ac.uk and are normally requested by the PGR Support Teams and put forward on the recommendation of the relevant College DPGR.

Reminder: 'A viva may not proceed without all the examiners, and a Non-Examining Independent Chair when appointed, being present⁴. 4: If an examiner is unable to attend the viva should be postponed, or where necessary consideration given to revising the membership of the Board of Examiners (for example where an examiner will be unavailable for an extended period of time). If the appointed NEIC is unable to attend the College should arrange for a substitute NEIC to take their place. If there is not time for the appointment to be approved, the College should ensure that the substitute NEIC is someone who has previously undertaken the NEIC role: as they are not an examiner they need not be a subject expert.

Examiners are reminded that if they are concerned that they may have identified evidence of Research Misconduct they should follow the procedure set out in section

6 of the [‘Research Misconduct: Procedure for Graduate Research Students suspected of Research Misconduct’](#).

Conduct of Vivas via video-link

- 1) **Approval Process:** 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.. Where a decision is made to postpone a viva instead the [PGR Support contact](#) should be informed. As the internal examiner is normally responsible for organising the viva they should take the lead on approaching the College Director of Postgraduate Research to manage this.
- 2) The College is responsible for taking all reasonable steps to ensure that the candidate is not disadvantaged in any way compared to the normal situation of a face-to-face viva. In so doing the College should be mindful of the latest advice available from IT Services with regard to holding meetings online. In determining whether or not it is appropriate to conduct any viva this way, the College **must** be able to have confidence that:
 - a) The Examiners will be able to assure themselves that the thesis is the candidate’s own work;
 - b) The technology is sufficient to enable a viva to take place without limiting communications, and that arrangements will be made to postpone the viva if this is not the case¹;
 - c) 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;
 - d) 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 viva examination conducted this way. See also [‘Before the Examination: Scheduling the Viva’](#) (6.2.3) and [‘Assessing Candidates with Disabilities’](#).

The PGR Support Team may consider that the College has provided *de facto* confirmation that it 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 the College Director of Postgraduate Research 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)-c)

- 3) **Viva Process:** Addressing these points means that:
 - a) All viva participants (all members of the Board of Examiners, the NEIC (where appointed), the supervisor if invited to be in attendance, and the candidate) must confirm in writing if it is not feasible for the viva to proceed 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 candidate’s circumstances change or they have significant concerns about proceeding in

¹ 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).

this way even after this date they should discuss this as soon as possible with their College's PGR Support Team² .

- b) Participants may still attend the 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) All viva participants (all members of the Board of Examiners, the NEIC (where appointed), the supervisor if invited to be in attendance, and the candidate) must confirm, commencing with the candidate, at the conclusion of the viva that the holding of the examination via video-link has had no substantive bearing on the examination process.
 - d) The Board of Examiners 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 could be recommenced successfully at a later date.
 - e) Internal Examiners should contact their [PGR Support contact](#) for advice with regard to organisation of vivas.
 - f) The 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.
 - g) If an NEIC has not already been appointed, **a Non-Examining Independent Chair must now be appointed**. In addition to the normal duties of the role, the NEIC will be responsible for:
 - (i.) 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 candidate, if there are any indications of problems with the technology being used.
 - (ii.) If the viva is halted, confirming in writing to all participants that the viva has been postponed as soon as possible;
 - (iii.) Verifying the candidate's identity by checking ID that the candidate presents on camera to the Examination Board.
 - (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 examination via video-link had no substantive bearing on the examination process;
 - (v.) Ensuring that all participants confirm that they have not kept a recording of the viva.
 - h) Consideration should be given to the need for members of the Board of Examiners (and the NEIC, where appointed) to consult privately on the conduct of the examination. The arrangements for managing the candidate (and supervisor, where relevant) joining/leaving/re-joining the meeting should be set out in advance of the viva.
- 4) **Arrangements for halted vivas:** If the viva is halted at the beginning of the viva arrangements will need to be made for another viva to take place at a later date. If a viva is halted once the viva is underway, arrangements will normally need to be made to allow the viva to recommence from roughly the point at which it halted at a later date, however, the NEIC 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:** Where needed, when confirming approval of the request to hold the viva, the College Director of Postgraduate Research should lodge a copy of the approval with the [PGR Support contact](#) who will ensure that the [Postgraduate Administration Office](#) have a central record of all instances where approval has been given for an examination to be conducted via video-link to ensure consistency of approach, where specific approval was not required this should also be noted. Examiners should provide feedback on conducting vivas virtually to their [PGR Support contact](#) in order to support review of the policy, and updating guidance to other examiners, if needed.

² Please mark your email as urgent if your viva is due to take place within two weeks of making contact

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April 2021