

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER DOCTORAL COLLEGE

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

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 multi-way upgrade vivas by electronic means. 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 outbreak¹. The checklists and other guidance for examiners produced are likely to be of use to the College Upgrade Committees when conducting upgrade vivas.

This temporary policy will be kept under ongoing review, and will be formally reviewed after a period of three months. Policies will normally be reviewed three months after approval, in this instance as the review point would fall in August the review date may be delayed by one month to allow for review in September.

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 [Pro-Counselling](#).

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 Multi-Site Virtual Vivas

- 1) A College PGR Support 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 Research² for a decision, should approve arrangements for a multi-site viva examination by electronic means in order to enable an upgrade viva to proceed without the need for participants to meet in a single physical location provided that they are able to have confidence that the conditions set out below can be met in each instance. A remote viva should not proceed without such approval. Arrangements for

¹ [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.

² Whilst this will normally be the College DPGR, in accordance with the information set out in the introduction to the TQA Manual, the College DPGR is acting on the delegated authority of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean of College. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean of College may delegate their authority as appropriate to the Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor, Associate Dean (Education), the Associate Dean (International and Development) or the Associate Dean (Research and Knowledge Transfer)/College Director of PGR students as relevant, and this should be noted for resilience.

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 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 virtual means, 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 case³. 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’](#).
- 3) Addressing these points means that:
 - a. The College Upgrade Committee, the student, and their lead supervisor (as an observer), must confirm in writing that it is feasible for the viva to be conducted in this way. The viva must be postponed if agreement is not reached. If the student has any concerns about proceeding in this way they may apply for deferral prior to the viva without detriment.
 - b. 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 virtual means has had no substantive bearing on the examination process.
 - c. 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.

³ Arrangements have been made to provide a space on the Streatham campus where one or more of the participants in the viva, who are able to travel to the University’s Streatham campus, and who do not have access to a suitable environment or technology off-campus, might use a digitally enabled, sanitised space on-campus. However, the current level of restrictions on non-essential movement mean that this resource is not currently available. As and when restrictions are lifted more guidance will be made available on the use of this space.

- d. 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.
 - e. 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 virtual means had no substantive bearing on the viva process;
 - v. Ensuring that all participants confirm that they have not kept a recording of the viva.
 - f. 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) 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.

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Dean of Postgraduate Research and of the Doctoral College

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