**Guidelines for the Conduct of Viva Voce Examinations by Electronic Means (Online Vivas)**

**General Principles**

1. Following discussion with staff and students, the University has taken the view that the best way of conducting the viva voce examination required for all research degrees is face to face, with all parties present together in Aberystwyth. This ensures the integrity of the examination and provides the most conducive atmosphere for students to defend their work. The viva is not a formality and can have a major impact on the outcome of the assessment.

2. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, electronic vivas were only allowed in exceptional circumstances, subject to certain conditions and with the approval of the Head of the Graduate School and written consent of all parties. During the Covid-19 pandemic, in light of the difficulty of planning and holding vivas requiring travel to Aberystwyth and appropriate health and safety measures for face-to-face activities, and the importance of timely examination, online vivas became the default option.

3. The experience of online vivas has been largely positive. Staff and students have become more comfortable with the technology and there are benefits to using it, in reduced financial and environmental costs and greater scope to hold vivas in a timely fashion and with the most appropriate external examiner. While Research Degrees Committee still believes that face-to-face vivas provide the best experience, it is more relaxed about permitting online vivas where the participants are content. The approval of the Head of the Graduate School is still required and a case should be made for an online viva, but circumstances do not have to be exceptional.

4. An online viva may be requested where all participants would prefer one and have no concerns about its conduct and where:

I. Cost, travel or other issues make an electronic viva preferable, particularly where it would be difficult to proceed with a face-to-face viva or where there would be an unacceptable delay.

II. Agreed arrangements for a face-to-face viva had to be terminated due to unexpected circumstances such as severe weather or illness of one of the participants. The normal action would be to postpone the viva but if the student would be disadvantaged significantly by this, the use of electronic means may be preferable.

III. A joint or dual award is being offered and staff from the partner university are joining the assessment.

**Technology**

5. Microsoft Teams is the main supported technology within the University and would normally be used for an electronic viva. Where it is not possible to use Teams, for instance where students are based in countries where Teams cannot be accessed, other technologies such as Zoom could be used but cannot be supported in the same way by Information Services. Where sensitive data or subjects are being discussed, security is an important consideration. Reliability is crucial to ensure that the viva proceeds smoothly. Information Services may be consulted to ensure that a particular technology is acceptable.

**Running the Viva**

6. The viva will be arranged and scheduled by Faculty Academic Registry staff of Aberystwyth University. Calendar appointments will be sent to participants with the link to join the meeting. The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit can provide support.

7. Every effort must be made to ensure that the viva runs smoothly and without interruption, as closely as possible to a face-to-face meeting. The following practical points should be taken in to account in arranging an electronic viva:

I. It is AU policy not to record vivas and all participants should be clearly informed of this. Any recording facility should either be disabled or, since this cannot be done in Teams without restricting the ability to share screens, the Chair should ensure that recording is not turned on (it will be clearly visible if recording is turned on).

II. All participants should identify suitable venues and facilities where they can have a good quality connection throughout the viva, can be comfortable and will not be interrupted. If this is not possible at their home or office they should consider the use of appropriate facilities at another university, British Council offices or other recognised venues. Such venues will often have experienced, English or Welsh-speaking technical support staff available in secure facilities. Information Services can advise on the available options. Students can use AU facilities. Where students request that they participate remotely in a viva which could have been held in Aberystwyth, they must bear any associated costs such as room hire.

III. Picture and audio quality must be of sufficient quality to enable dialogue and to be sure of the identity of the student if s/he is the remote party. If the candidate is not personally known to the staff present at the examination then a member of staff should be invited to check their identity.

IV. If the candidate is at a remote site and not accompanied by a member of the examination board or supervisor, s/he should be reminded that they should be alone and, as far as possible, the visual view of the candidate should confirm this.

V. While last minute problems with arrangements may lead to a request to use electronic media, best practice is to test the proposed system well in advance – ideally at least a week in advance – so that any difficulties can be addressed and all parties can be as familiar as possible with the technology.

VI. Vivas vary considerably in length and the candidate will not participate in some parts. This must be borne in mind when booking a session so that a continuous link will be maintained for as long as required but can be suspended if required. The candidate must not be able to hear private discussions between the examiners. Separate calendar invitations can be used to ensure the student is not present at private panel discussions.

VII. Technical support covering the range of possible problems should be available as far as possible, in person at the venue or via an established telephone link. This needs to take account of the different time zones that may be involved and the possible length of the viva. If given sufficient notice, IS may be able to have staff available at the start of vivas or to check the set-up in advance.

VIII. If interruptions to power supplies or electronic links are likely, consideration should be given to whether to hold the viva by electronic means. In any event, there should be a contingency plan made known to all parties in advance should the link fail or deteriorate in quality, to enable the viva to be completed as soon as possible. All parties should have access to a telephone able to make calls to the other party and have contact telephone numbers easily available. The Examining Board should be able to remain in contact with the student while the situation is resolved and to ensure that they remain on site.

IX. The possibility must be kept in mind that a candidate could intentionally break the link and a contingency plan should exist for this. If it is established that this has occurred and the viva cannot be completed as a result, the student shall not be given a further opportunity to attend a viva and shall fail.

X. Chairs of vivas should be sensitive to the fact the viva can be a stressful event and the outcome can be disappointing to students. It would be sensible for candidates to have someone available locally to support them if they are at a remote venue.

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