Guidelines on the use of Video Conferencing (VC) to undertake
Viva Voce **Examinations for Research Students**

1: Rationale:

The normal expectation is that the *viva voce* examination for research degrees will take place at the University of Limerick (UL) with all the relevant parties in attendance. However, consideration may be given to conducting *viva voce* examinations using the University's video conferencing facilities in the following circumstances:

1. Video conferencing facilities may be used in *viva voce* examinations where an external examiner or other participants is unable, for reasons of prohibitively high cost, time constraints or restricted mobility, to travel to the UL to undertake or participate in a *viva voce* examination within a reasonable time frame.

2. The distance from the external examiner's home location to UL is not the sole justification for use of video conferencing facilities. External examiner appointments are based on a supposition that the nominee attends UL (in person) for the *viva voce* examination. Where the Candidate is a UL staff member at least one of the external examiners must attend the examination (in person).

3. The option of video conferencing should not be made available to a Candidate who does not wish to return to the University for the *viva voce* examination. However, in circumstances where there may be difficulties such as immigration, health related, financial issues or travel related matter which preclude a candidate from attending the University, an exceptional request to hold the *viva voce* examination by video conference or Skype for Business may be considered. Such circumstances must, in all instances, be documented and include confirmation that the examination panel are in agreement.

4. The relevant academic department/school must obtain written (email) agreement from the participants that the technical support & logistical arrangements in the remote locations will facilitate the completion of the video conferencing.

5. Where video conferencing is being contemplated, consideration should be given to the following:
    - the detailed logistical and technical preparation on the part of both staff of the University and staff at the remote location
    - the fact that a personal visit by an external examiner may facilitate more in-depth interaction with both the Candidate and the staff member(s) present as well as providing opportunities for networking and visiting research facilities

- experience to-date indicates that some Candidates may feel increased anxiety as a result of video conferencing, notwithstanding their willingness to engage with it;

2: Procedures for using video conferencing in *viva voce* examinations:

1. Video conferencing may be used only with the written agreement of the PhD Candidate and all members of the examination panel, provided that the relevant head of the academic department/school (or nominee) is satisfied that the circumstances relating to the external examiner justify the use of video conferencing.

2. The relevant department/school must obtain written agreement from the Candidate and the examination panel that s/he is willing to avail of video conferencing in undertaking the oral aspect of the examination process. The Candidate may decline to use video conferencing as a format for undertaking the oral examination and defer the examination.

3. The relevant academic department/school in conjunction with the Chairperson of the examination panel is responsible for ensuring that all parties involved in the *viva voce* examination are informed of the specific details (date, time and venue) of the video conferencing arrangements.

4. Where an external examiner attends the examination by video conference, all expenses associated with providing a video link between the examiner and UL will be on the submission of official receipts be reimbursed by the academic department/school. Where the Candidate attends the examination by video conference, all costs associated with providing a video link between the Candidate and UL will be defrayed by the Candidate.

5. Examiners' will be required to comment on the *viva voce* examination using the standard examiners' report form and should refer explicitly to the use of video conferencing. Examinations shall not be recorded.

In addition to the above, ***in cases where participants will be attending the viva voce from an external location(s) by video conference, the following requirements apply:***

6. The relevant academic department/school must approve and agree the arrangements in writing prior to the organisation of the *viva voce* examination.

7. The Chairperson must ensure that the video conferencing facility is functioning prior to the examinations.

8. Taking into account the time-zone difference, a suitable time for the PhD examination must be agreed between the PhD Candidate and examiners.

3: Technical considerations for using video conferencing in *viva voce* examinations:

1. Where the participants in the viva voce examination are dialling in from a variety of remote locations, there are additional matters that will require consideration namely:

    *   the broadband connectivity from the location of all the remote participants
    *   contact details, (email, landline, mobile) for all the participants should be provided in advance.
    *   the availability of technical staff to provide increased support to the various remote locations

2. When arranging video conferencing the quality of the equipment used should be taken into account. It is of the utmost importance that reliable equipment and technology is used for the examination. Contingency plans are essential in the event of technology faults and the school/department must ensure such plans are in place and that adequate security measures are taken to ensure the integrity of the examination process.

3. When undertaking an online viva using the recommended Video Conferencing software, i.e. Polycom system, Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams or Vscene (for Apple Mac), the Chair should call a log in advance of the examination with ITD requesting the VC service and technical support. The call must be logged on https://itdservicedesk.ul.ie using the viva voce examination form in the Audio Visual Services section **at least two weeks (where possible, preferably longer)** in advance of the examination.

4. International time- zone differences between the two locations must be taken into account to ensure that the Candidate is not disadvantaged by an examination taking place at an inappropriate time. Where time-zone differences raise the possibility that an examination may have to take place outside standard working hours, the matter must be discussed with UL Information Technology Department (ITD) well in advance, normal operating hours are: Irish time 09:00 to 17:15.

5. The video conferencing facilities should be booked for as long as it is reasonably estimated the *viva voce* examination will take (including deliberation time and the recall of the Candidate). The UL ITD booking facility includes technical support for the duration of the process for the video conferencing facilities. As per the code of practice viva voce examination timeline, the duration of the examination should normally be in the range of one hour and a maximum of three hours.

6. UL ITD recommends the use of a Polycom System, Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams or Vscene (for Apple Mac) to eliminate potential technical compatibility issues. The set-up of the conference facilities should be such that the person/people at each end of the link should be able to see the other person/people present at all times.

7. A test conference call between the relevant participants should take place in advance. In no circumstances can a Polycom system, Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams or Vscene (for

Apple Mac) take place where a test call from the remote location(s) before the examination has not worked properly.

8. While the examination is in progress either the Chairperson or a designated staff member, should take responsibility for operating equipment at a basic level. This involves duties such as adjusting the camera settings, providing instruction on how to operate the equipment and (where the Candidate is in the remote location) setting the facilities to `mute' during the deliberation period.

9. While it is uncommon for the Polycom System, Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams or Vscene (for Apple Mac) or Skype for Business to malfunction when in use, the possibility of a technical issue (e.g. broadband connectivity, network failure or power outage) should not be disregarded. In this event, the examination will have to be rescheduled.

10. The Chairperson of the viva voce has additional responsibility to monitor the quality of communication via the Polycom System, Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams or Vscene (for Apple Mac) to ensure that it is of an adequate standard. The chairperson may need to defer the viva if the quality of communication deteriorates and the viva vice examination cannot run effectively.

11. The Chairperson will be required to ensure that the Candidate is independently undertaking the *viva voce* under the normal examination conditions.

12. Prior to the commencement of the examination, the Chairperson of the examination panel must advise all the participants of the aforementioned eventualities.