Guidelines for the Conduct of Viva Voce Examinations by Electronic Means

1. The University believes 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 was reaffirmed by the Research Degrees Committee in February 2014. 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. Approval from the Graduate School is required if it is proposed that the viva is not held at Aberystwyth University or that some or all participants are not in the same room. This should be in exceptional circumstances only. The conduct of a viva through electronic media will only be approved where:

   I. It would not be possible otherwise to proceed with the viva or where there would be an unacceptable delay. For example, if a student was unable to travel to Aberystwyth due to visa restrictions, or where the only suitable external examiner was based abroad and/or could not travel to Aberystwyth within a reasonable time frame.

   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.

3. The following principles shall apply:

   I. It is expected that electronic means would principally be used when an external examiner is unable to attend the viva, not the candidate. All candidates are expected to be able to make arrangements to attend the viva in person and will be made aware of this at the outset of their studies. There is a higher risk to the integrity of the examination when the candidate is on their own in a remote location than when an examiner is the remote party.

   II. All parties to the examination must agree in writing to the use of electronic means and the candidate must provide a written statement that s/he has waived any right to appeal against the outcome of the examination on the grounds of the use of the electronic medium itself.

   III. Vivas cannot be conducted via telephone; visual electronic means only are acceptable.

   IV. Official university video conference facilities, including desktop video conference, are the most reliable and secure electronic means available. Where sensitive data or subjects are being discussed, security is an important consideration. Reliability is crucial to ensure that the viva proceeds smoothly. Suitable technical support must be available and centrally supported technology should be used. Information Services must be consulted to ensure that a particular technology is acceptable.

   V. Use of more than two linked sites is not permitted.

4. 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 therefore any recording facility should be disabled.

II. The use of videoconferencing facilities at another university, British Council offices or other recognised venues is strongly recommended. Such venues will often have experienced, English or Welsh-speaking technical support staff available in secure facilities. Skype and other externally hosted services are less secure and reliable, and likely to be lower in quality. Information Services can advise on the available options. Where students request that they participate remotely in a viva which could have been held in Aberystwyth in a reasonable time frame, 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. Parties at remote sites should be asked to ensure there are no interruptions at their venue.

VII. Vivas vary considerably in length and the candidate will not participate in some parts. This must be borne in mind when booking a videoconference 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.

VIII. 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.

IX. If interruptions to power supplies or electronic links are likely, consideration should be given to whether 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.

X. 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 competed as a result, the student shall not be given a further opportunity to attend a viva and shall fail.

XI. 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.