

DOCTORAL ORAL EXAMINATION (VIVA VOCE) STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

Document name	STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES: DOCTORAL ORAL EXAMINATION
Owner	Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (SRIPCC)
Portfolio manager / initiator	Vice Principal: Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation (VP: RPSIC)
Procedure custodian	Executive Dean: College of Graduate Studies
Policy	Policy for Master's and Doctoral Degrees
Date approved	12 March 2020

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Part A: INTRODUCTION

Background

The oral examination (*viva voce*) is an important part of the doctoral assessment process at Unisa. As stipulated in the *Procedures for Master's and Doctoral Degrees*, in addition to writing a thesis, postgraduate students who are registered for Doctoral studies, shall appear for an oral (*viva voce*) examination, to defend the submitted work before a panel of specialists on the subject. The purpose of the oral examination (*viva voce*) is to assess the candidate on the subject field of the thesis and establish whether all the requirements for a thesis submitted for a doctorate have been met as stipulated in the National Qualification Framework and the *Policy for Master's and Doctoral Degrees*.

Objective of the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

The objective of this SOP is to provide a step-by-step process or instructions, to assist Colleges to conduct an oral examination (*viva voce*) for doctoral students. This SOP describes the process that should be adopted when conducting an oral examination for doctoral candidates. This SOP has been developed to provide clear guidance to all Colleges on the processes that should be followed in conducting oral examinations (*viva voce*).

Rationale

The premise underpinning this SOP is to enhance the coordination of the doctoral oral examination (*viva voce*). A coordinated approach will lead to a timely and effective way of assessing doctoral candidates to ascertain their understanding of research, and establish whether the work represents their contribution to knowledge.

Scope

This SOP applies to all doctoral candidates who registered for the qualification at Unisa for the first time in 2021 and beyond. The certification of the degree will be done only after oral examination (*viva voce*).

General

The oral examination (*viva voce*) shall be conducted only if the examiners have passed the candidate and after the corrections have been attended to by the candidate. Notably, the changes are attested to in writing by the supervisor.

The oral examination (*viva voce*) shall be conducted only after the non-examining chair is satisfied that the recommendations of the examiners have been attended to by the doctoral candidate.

The language for conducting the oral examination (*viva voce*) shall be English or the language the thesis is written in, and such an examination will take place through a virtual platform or other ways deemed appropriate.

Non-Compliance

Colleges that do not follow this SOP may find that their awarding of doctoral degrees are not supported, and the throughput rate thereby negatively affected.

Terminology

Corrected thesis	Thesis corrected on the basis of reports of examiners and the non-examining chair's report after the examination of the first submission
Non-examining chair	A non-examining chairperson, usually an experienced permanent senior member of the department; or the Chair of a department in the College or School other than the department that hosts the qualification, or the Director of the School, Deputy Executive Dean or the Executive Dean of the College.
Oral (viva voce) examination	A formal oral examination used to determine the final awarding of a doctoral degree
Oral Examination Committee	A panel of examiners constituted according to section B of this SOP
Virtual Meeting Platform	Generically refers to video conferencing using chat tools such as skype, teams, zoom and other synchronous electronic communication. Such software must automatically enable recording of the proceedings.

Part B: ORAL EXAMINATION PROCEDURES

The deliberations of the panel and all reports flowing from it are confidential. The oral examination (*viva voce*) will be conducted online through a video-link. Face-to-face oral examinations can be arranged under exceptional circumstances and must be approved by the Executive Dean of the respective College. A minimum of five (5) members are required to form a quorum.

At least two of the examiners of the thesis should attend the oral examination (*viva voce*) and be part of the committee. One of the examiners should be an international scholar and be an expert in the thesis topic. The panel of examiners must attend the entire oral examination (*viva voce*). The authority to ensure that the panel of examiners is well constituted rests with Executive Dean of the respective College.

Composition of the Oral Examination (*Viva Voce*) Committee

The oral examination (*viva voce*) committee consists of the following:

1. Chair of Department or approved representative
2. Higher Degrees Committee Chairperson in the Department
3. Non-Examining Chair (NEC)
4. Director of the School or their delegated representative (Chairperson of the meeting)
5. Supervisor(s) (ex-officio member)
6. First examiner
7. Second examiner
8. Third examiner

Part C: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

This section defines the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved in the oral examination (*viva voce*) process. It outlines the roles from the start to the end of the process.

Doctoral Candidate

The candidate should:

1. Present themselves for the oral examination within one year of the date of attending to the report by the non-examining chair
2. Ensure the right online equipment is available from their end
3. Always keep the camera on throughout the oral examination
4. Ensure that background noise is limited during the oral examination
5. Have an electronic copy of the thesis that is paginated identically to the copies that were submitted for examination, on hand for reference purposes
6. Know the most significant results in the thesis
7. Prepare for the oral examination and have notes on new developments relating to the study that would have come to their attention since completing the study where applicable
8. Leave the meeting while the panel deliberates, and then come back in when prompted to so in order to receive the outcome of the oral examination
9. Revise the thesis based on the recommendations of the non-examining chair and the oral examination within three months (where applicable) of the date of the oral examination
10. Apply for permission from the Executive Dean of the College if he or she is unable to present themselves for the oral examination within one year of attending to the report by the non-examining chair.

Director of the School

The Director of the School or their delegated representative candidate shall Chair the oral (*viva voce*) examination process but is not an examiner for the doctorate. Other roles and responsibilities include:

1. Maintaining the integrity of the oral examination

2. Requesting examiners to declare any potential conflicts of interests before the oral examination
3. Confirming that a quorum exists
4. Arranging a meeting beforehand with the panel of examiners to agree on the procedure of conducting the oral examination (for instance, the procedure of asking questions and the time allocated to each examiner)
5. Introducing the examiners to the doctoral candidate
6. Explaining how the oral examination will be conducted
7. Protecting the doctoral candidate from harassment
8. Ensuring that the examination covers both the thesis and oral defense
9. Affording the doctoral candidate a chance to ask any questions and make final comments before concluding the examination
10. Putting the matter to vote if there is no unanimity of the outcome of the oral examination among the panel of examiners
11. Ensuring that the oral examination result form in the annexure is completed and signed (a record of minutes of the meeting and attendance register will suffice for virtual sessions)
12. Announcing the recommended outcome of the examination to the candidate at the end of the *viva*; but the qualification can only be awarded after approval by the College of Graduate Studies

Chair of Department

As examiners, the Chair of Department has full voting power. The Non-examining chair is the only person that should contact the examiners to:

1. Making recommendations to the Executive Dean of the College via the Head of the Offices of Graduate Studies and Research regarding the awarding of the degree after receiving the report of the non-examining chair
2. Referring the matter to the Executive Dean of the College after consultation with College Examination Committee if the panel of examiners fail to reach a decision
3. Submitting the results of the examination process for approval by the Executive Dean of the College of Graduate Studies

Higher Degrees Committee Chairperson in the Department

As examiners, the Higher Degrees Committee Chairperson in the Department has full voting power and is responsible for:

1. Organising of the oral (*viva voce*) examination
2. Arranging a pilot/trial run of the oral/*viva voce* examination with the candidate a day prior the examination to ensure functionality of equipment both from the Unisa and candidate's sides in liaison with the non-examining Chair.
3. Ensuring that copies of the corrected thesis, reports of examiners, latest Turnitin report and response to the examiners' comments by the candidate are shared with the panel of examiners prior to the oral defense

Non-Examining Chair

As examiners, the non-examining chair has full voting power. The Non-examining chair is the only person that should contact the examiners to:

1. Establish the panel of examiners, including the examiners that assessed the thesis five weeks in advance of the oral (*viva voce*) examination
2. Arrange a time, date and link for the oral examination
3. Distribute the corrected thesis together with copies of the examiners' reports to the panel of examiners at least two weeks before the date of the oral examination
4. Circulate the doctoral candidate's PowerPoint presentation to the panel of examiners a week before the oral examination
5. Act as the scribe of the panel of examiners and keeps all the records of the process
6. Prepares one consolidated report for feedback on corrections from the oral examination
7. Provides the supervisor with any written recommended changes resulting from the oral examination
8. Communicate the date by which the amendments should be submitted to the College
9. Make recommendation to the Head of College Research and Graduate Studies regarding the award of the degree

Supervisor(s)

The role of the supervisor is a supportive one. The supervisor(s) should attend the oral (*viva voce*) examination of their doctoral candidates, but they cannot say anything during the examination unless if examiners request clarity or information from them. They may not be involved in the deliberations to finalise the results of an oral examination. The supervisor:

1. Provides the non-examining chair with an electronic copy of the corrected thesis within three months of receiving the final report of the non-examining chair
2. Ensures that the recommended amendments to the thesis have been attended to and submitted to the non-examining chair by the due date
3. Provides a written report by the student on how the amendments suggested by examiners were addressed

Examiners

At least two of the examiners should attend the oral (*viva voce*) examination. One of the examiners should be an international scholar and be an expert in the thesis topic. Examiners should not have any close links with the doctoral candidate. Examiners have full voting powers. The examiners will take turns to ask questions about aspects of the thesis. They may also interleave their questions. They must give the doctoral candidate an opportunity to add anything to the answers they have given. Examiners may question the candidate for one to three hours. The examiners may ask questions on the following aspects and other matters related to the research:

1. All aspects of the thesis that lack clarity
2. Claims that may need further substantiation or elucidation
3. Inadequacies such as missing references, incomplete discussions or analysis and conclusions
4. Areas that may require a more detailed discussion than what is provided in the thesis
5. How the research is novel
6. The relationship of the research with the existing body of knowledge and how the research contributes to the literature in the field
7. Evaluation of the research journey and how challenges encountered shaped the research or were dealt with
8. Appropriateness of the research methods data and analysis thereof
9. The link between the data and the theoretical concepts
10. How the findings are related to the existing body of literature
11. Future research areas and their implication for the field of study
12. Major achievements of the research

At the end of the oral examination examiner(s) will delegate the authority to the supervisor to check that the recommended corrections are satisfactorily done.

Part D: ORAL EXAMINATION PROCESS

During the oral (*viva voce*) examination, the doctoral candidate is expected to communicate her or his research in a manner understandable to a non-specialist audience and demonstrate to experts in the field the contribution to knowledge of their research by describing and defending their research. The doctoral candidate should be afforded adequate opportunity and time to explain his/her research and to defend the thesis. The recording of the proceedings must be done only by the non-examining chair. All electronic devices should be disabled. No assistance or intervention by the supervisor(s) is allowed.

Presentation during a doctoral oral examination

The doctoral candidate should prepare a 30-minute PowerPoint presentation on their study and forward the presentation of the thesis to the non-examining chair (NEC) two weeks in advance of the oral examination.

The presentation should include the following:

Introduction and background

Problem statement

Objectives

Methods and materials

Results/findings

Conclusions

Contribution, implications and further research

The candidate is given an opportunity to present the research in simple and straightforward terms that are understandable to non-specialists and describe the contributions made by the research. A member who is not part of the panel of examiners attending the oral examination may ask questions after the presentation, and before the panel of examiners engages with the doctoral candidate.

Engagement with the examiners

The examiners may question the doctoral candidate for between one and three hours. The questioning will focus on the content of the thesis and the doctoral candidate's understanding of the research problem. The doctoral candidate will be excused after the oral defense for the deliberations to take place. The examiners will deliberate on the conduct and outcome of the oral (*viva voce*) examination in the absence of the doctoral candidate, and the supervisor. The deliberations are confidential proceedings. The doctoral candidate may fail outrightly if there is evidence of cheating and the decision of the examiners should be unanimous. Examiners must sign the oral examination results form (Annexure 1) as endorsement of their decision.

Part E: REPORTING

1. The Non-examination chair prepares and submits a detailed report to the Executive Dean of the College or his or her nominee indicating the outcome of the examination process within one month after the conclusion of the oral (*viva voce*) examination.
2. Submission must include the supervisor's non-evaluative report, examiners' reports, non-examining chair's report, oral defence report, Turnitin report, ethics clearance approval, proof of language editing, and attendance register and signed oral examination result form.
3. The Executive Dean or his or her nominee submits the final result to College: Graduate Studies Division: Assessment, Research and Examination Support.
4. The entire oral examination will be recorded. The file of the recording to be stored with College: Graduate Studies Division: Assessment, Research and Examination Support on the student file.

Part F: APPEALS

In terms of the *Policy on Master's and Doctoral Degrees*, all Doctoral candidates have the right to appeal against the unfair practice in the oral (*viva voce*) examination. Appeals are monitored and resolved by the Senate Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee unless they have been satisfactorily concluded at the College level. The procedures are set out in the *Procedures for Master's and Doctoral Degrees*.

ANNEXURES

ANNEXURE I: ORAL (VIVA VOCE) EXAMINATION RESULTS FORM (NO MARK SHOULD BE ALLOCATED)

(To be attached to the detailed report by the Oral Examination Chairperson)

Name of Student:

Student number:

Degree registered for:

Thesis Title:

RESULT		EXAMINERS' RECOMMENDATION		
1.		SUFFICIENTLY MEETS THE REQUIREMENTS		
1.1		Student passes and no additional amendments are required.		
1.2		Student passes subject to minor corrections and revisions		
2.		INADEQUATE		
2.1		There is evidence that the work is not the candidate's own		
Designation	Name	Affiliation	Signature	Date
Chairperson (Director)				
Chair of Department				
Non-examining Chair				
Higher Degrees Chairperson in the Department				
External Examiner				
External Examiner				
External/Internal Examiner				
Supervisor				
Co-supervisor				