CGS 8

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES (SOP): DOCTORAL ORAL EXAMINATION (*VIVA VOCE*)

Document name	**STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES: DOCTORAL ORAL EXAMINATION (*VIVA VOCE)***
Owner	Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation (RPSIC)
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Policy	Policy for Master's and Doctoral Degrees
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Terminology

CMC	College Management Committee
CoD	Chair of Department
Colloquium	An academic conference or seminar.
Corrected thesis	Thesis that has been corrected based on the candidate's engagement with the provisional examiners' reports.
Defensible thesis	The written component of the examination (thesis) is found to be of such a standard that the candidate can defend the research at an oral examination. This refers to a thesis that can be accepted unamended, or after either minor or major corrections.
Examiner (full decision-making powers)	Refers to the person who examined the written component of the examination (thesis), who may contribute to the discussions at the *viva voce* and who will deliberate after the *viva voce* on the outcome of the examination.
Electronic presentation	The presentation is displayed in the form of a slide show using software such as PowerPoint, Freelance, Co-rel presentations or Astound.
HDC	Higher Degrees Committee
Indefensible	The written component of the examination (thesis) is found to be of such a standard that it clearly fails to meet the basic requirements of a doctorate. In such a case, the errors are so significant that an oral examination will have no chance of defending and remedying these errors to such an extent that the thesis could become passable.
Non-examining chair (NEC)	The non-examining chairperson, usually an experienced, permanent, senior member of the department appointed for the examination process.
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
Observer, no decision-making powers	An observer may not contribute to the discussions during the *viva voce* proceedings and does not take part in the deliberations after the proceedings.
Official result	The final outcome of the examination formally approved through institutional processes and communicated to the candidate. This result is **binding and recorded** for academic and administrative purposes.
OGSR	Office of Graduate Studies and Research
Oral examination (*viva voce*)	A formal oral examination that forms part of the assessment of the doctoral degree.
Oral Examination Committee	A panel constituted according to section B of this SOP
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
Unofficial result	The preliminary outcome of the viva voce, communicated to the

	candidate after the examination and deliberation, where the outcome is favourable. This result is indicative only and **not final**, as it remains subject to formal verification, submission of examiner reports, and institutional approval processes.
Virtual Meeting Platform	Generically refers to video conferencing using online platforms such as Skype, Teams and Zoom and other synchronous electronic communication. Such software must have the functionality to record the proceedings.

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*, the examination for a doctoral degree shall not consist of a written thesis only. In order to complete their studies, doctoral candidates must also appear before an oral examination committee to defend their theses. This requirement also applies to candidates who are registered for joint doctoral degrees or the PhD by Publication. The purpose of the *viva voce* is to assess a doctoral candidate's in-depth knowledge of their research and its broader context. It gives the candidate the opportunity to discuss their thesis, defend their work against scrutiny and demonstrate their understanding of the field of research. *It* also enables the examiners to probe the candidate's knowledge to confirm that the work is the candidate's own and to determine whether all recommended corrections during the examination of the written thesis have been addressed. In addition, the *viva voce* serves as part of the examination to verify that the doctorate meets the criteria as stipulated in the National Qualification Framework (NQF) and the Unisa Policy for Master's and Doctoral Degrees. This Standard Operating Procedures must be read in conjunction with the Policy and Procedures for Master's and Doctoral Degrees.

Objectives of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)

The objective of this SOP is to provide a step-by-step process or instructions, to assist Colleges to conduct a *viva voce* for doctoral students. This SOP describes the process that should be adopted and provides clear guidance to Colleges on the processes that should be followed in conducting the *viva voce*.

Rationale

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

Scope

This SOP applies to all doctoral candidates who registered for a doctoral qualification at Unisa for the first time from 2022 onwards. The *viva voce* forms an integral part of the examination process, and a candidate will not be awarded the degree without successfully defending the thesis during the *viva voce* component of the examination process.

General

The *viva voce* shall be conducted only if all examiners recommended that the written thesis is defensible or if the CMC recommended that the *viva voce* proceed despite the lack of consensus or if an arbitrator has determined that the thesis is defensible. In such cases, the NEC must arrange a meeting beforehand only with the examiner(s) who did not find the thesis defensible The NEC must inform the examiner(s) of the decision and ensure that they understand that, although they may have found the thesis not defensible, a higher committee or an appointed arbitrator has determined that it meets the threshold to proceed to the *viva voce*. The examiner(s) are required to acknowledge this decision and to participate in the *viva voce* process accordingly, while retaining their responsibility to independently evaluate the candidate during the oral examination.

The language for conducting the *viva voce* shall be English and such an examination will take place through a virtual meeting platform or other ways deemed appropriate.

All Colleges must follow the SOP.

All participants in the *viva voce* are expected to demonstrate respect, courtesy and academic integrity in their interactions with those present.

The *viva voce* will be conducted in an academically appropriate and professional manner.

Part B: ORAL EXAMINATION PROCEDURES

The deliberations of the panel and all reports flowing from it are confidential. The *viva voce* will be conducted online through a video-link. Face-to-face oral examinations can be arranged in exceptional circumstances where all parties involved in the process have explicitly opted for this option. In the case where a face-to-face oral examination is approved, the candidate will be responsible for his/her own expenses with regard to travel and accommodation. The examination committee must be duly constituted (see the composition of the committee below) to form a quorum. For the decision of the *viva voce* to be ratified, a minimum of two (2) examiners of the three (3) examiners are required. If only one (1) examiner is available, the NEC must submit a report to the CMC for a recommendation to the Executive Dean of the college for a final decision. The recommendation may include the postponement of the *viva voce* to the earliest date where at least two examiners can attend or the appointment of an additional examiner. Decisions on exceptions must be applied consistently across all colleges.

Composition of the Oral Examination Committee[1]

The oral examination committee consists of the following:

1. Chair of the academic department[1] or approved representative (observer, no decision-making powers) and/or
2. Higher Degrees Committee Chairperson in the department or approved representative (observer, no decision-making powers) and
3. Supervisor(s) (observer, no decision-making powers) and
4. Non-examining Chair (NEC) (no decision-making powers) and
5. Examiners (full decision-making powers)

1. An academic department may, as part of their SOP, decide to include carefully selected staff members as observers.

Part C: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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

Doctoral Candidate

The candidate should prepare a 30-minute electronic presentation of their study and compile a table of all corrections recommended by the examiners, demonstrating how each feedback has been addressed. It is recommended that the presentation and the list be shared with the supervisor(s) beforehand to clarify any aspects the candidate might be uncertain about before the *viva voce.*

1. The presentation should include the following, but may be structured according to the convention of the relevant discipline
    a. Introduction and background
    b. Problem statement
    c. Objectives
    d. Methods and materials
    e. Results/findings,
    f. Conclusion(s)
    g. The engagement with the amendments done after the examination of the written thesis
    h. Originality of contribution, implications, and avenues for further research

2. The *viva voce* must take place within six (6) weeks from the date on which the supervisor confirmed that the candidate has satisfactorily complied with the examiners' reports (round 1). The candidate must defend the thesis at the date and time as communicated by the NEC.

3. In the case where load shedding or connectivity problems have been identified, and where such problems could interfere with the proceedings, the candidate must prepare for such risks as far as possible. If a candidate needs to travel to mitigate such risks, travel and accommodation costs are for their own expense.
4. The candidate must ensure that he/she has access to the required online equipment (computer or laptop and relevant software, e.g., MS Teams or Zoom) and is able to use

it for an online presentation.

5. The candidate must keep the camera on for the entire duration of the *viva voce*. However, where connectivity is a problem, the candidate may request permission to switch off the camera during the presentation, but must switch it on during the introduction and Q&A session.

6. Ensure that background noise is limited, as far as possible, during the oral examination.

7. The candidate must have a copy of the original thesis that was submitted for examination on hand for reference purposes.

8. After the candidate's presentation and the Q&A session has concluded, the NEC thanks the candidate, explains the next part of the process, and adjourns the meeting. The result will be released within four (4) weeks of the completion of the oral examination.

9. The candidate must be aware that the department in which the qualification is hosted may set up a colloquium to prepare him or her for the *viva voce*. The candidate will be able to present their research to a panel of academic and industry professionals. The panel will not have read the thesis beforehand, but will be able to ask questions and give input to the candidate about the presentation. The date and time for the colloquium will be communicated to the candidate by his or her supervisor.

Supervisor(s)

1. The supervisor(s) have no decision-making powers.

2. The role of the supervisor(s) is a supportive one. The supervisor should provide guidance to the candidate with regards to the presentation. The supervisor(s) should

attend the *viva voce* of their doctoral candidates as observer. They may only participate verbally if examiners request clarity or information from them.

3. The supervisor must provide the NEC with the presentation and the table of corrections seven (7) working days before the *viva voce* takes place.
4. The supervisor(s) must not be involved in the deliberations to finalise the results of a *viva voce*.

Non-Examining Chair (NEC)[1,2]

1. The Non-Examining Chair (NEC) is the first point of contact for the candidate and all examiners and is assisted by a designated departmental administrative officer[1,2] where logistical arrangements are concerned.
2. The NEC holds procedural authority over the process and safeguards the integrity of the examination, while the examiners retain full responsibility for determining the academic outcome of the *viva voce*.
3. The NEC must establish whether any external factors, e.g., load shedding or connectivity challenges, could affect the *viva voce* proceedings. If necessary, the Department and the NEC must make the necessary arrangements for video conferencing facilities at a Unisa campus. If a candidate may experience challenges because he or she is an international candidate or a candidate who is outside South Africa during the time of the *viva voce*, the department must make arrangements with a University in close proximity to the candidate or the South African Embassy in consultation with the Directorate: Strategic Partnerships, Special Projects and Alumni.

1. *A designated departmental administrative officer assists the NEC to arrange and organise a time, date, and link for the oral examination, acts as scribe for the panel of examiners, keeps records of the process (minutes of the examination process) and performs additional functions that may be determined by the NEC.*
2. *The designated departmental administrative officer will not have decision-making powers.*

4. The NEC determines and communicates the time, date, and link for the *viva voce* in consultation with the candidate, the examiners, CoD and/or HDC chairperson **four (4) weeks in advance** of the *viva voce*.

5. The NEC must arrange a meeting beforehand with the examiner(s), who found the thesis not to be defensible, if the CMC recommended that the *viva voce* should proceed despite the lack of consensus on the defensibility of the thesis or where an arbitrator was appointed, to communicate the decision. The said examiner(s) need to be given a comprehensive overview of what the arbitration process determined. This will clear the way for the original set of examiners to focus on the Viva-Voce.

6. The NEC must arrange a meeting at least 30 minutes prior to the *viva voce* with the examiners in order to brief them on the *viva voce* process and their responsibilities

7. The NEC sends the procedure to the candidate (Annexure A).

8. The NEC sends the procedure for the *viva voce* to the examiners (Annexure B).

9. The NEC records the entire *viva voce* process.

10. The NEC will chair the *viva voce* proceedings.

11. The NEC will facilitate the question-and-answer session. The Q&A session will last between 30 and 45-minutes.

12. After the candidate's presentation and the Q&A session has been concluded, the NEC thanks the committee, explains the next part of the process and adjourns the meeting.

13. The NEC directs the examiners to a new link, immediately following the *viva voce* where the NEC will facilitate the examiners private deliberations.

14. In the case of a consensus that the candidate passed the *viva voce*, the NEC contacts the candidate and the supervisor directly after the deliberations to inform them of the unofficial result.

15. The NEC receives the completed Form V51 (DV2) from each examiner.

16. The NEC compiles the minutes of the *viva voce* meeting, downloads the attendance register and distributes the minutes for approval by the oral examination committee members.

17. The NEC will include the approved minutes of the *viva voce* meeting in the final examination report.

18. The NEC submits the final report and recommendation regarding the outcome of the examination and the awarding of the degree to the Head of the Office of College Research and Graduate Studies.

19. In the event of a non-unanimous viva voce outcome, the NEC must compile and submit a final report, together with all relevant documentation, including the examiners' reports, the viva voce recording(s), and any supporting evidence, to the CMC for consideration. The CMC must review the evidence and recommend a final outcome regarding the awarding of the qualification. Where the CMC is unable to make a recommendation based on the available evidence, or where additional independent assessment is required, it may appoint an arbitrator to review the matter and provide a recommendation before a final decision is taken.

20. The arbitrator will be sent an electronic copy of the thesis to examine. The arbitrator will have six weeks to examine and submit his/her provisional report. On receipt of the provisional report, the NEC provides the arbitrator with the anonymised reports of the original examiners and the anonymised viva voce transcript, but may request the recordings. The arbitrator uses all the available information to compile his/her final report. The arbitrator's decision is final.

    The arbitrator's final report is forwarded to the Executive Dean or delegated person (which may be a College Examinations Committee established for this purpose) or the College Executive Committee for recommendation via the CGS: M&D Research Examination Coordination Department to the Vice-Principal: Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation or delegated person for approval.

Examiners

1. All the examiners should attend the *viva voce*. Refer to Part B: Oral Examination Procedures. In the case where an arbitrator has been appointed, the arbitrator does **not** attend the *viva voce*. If an examiner is unable to attend the *viva voce*, they must provide the NEC with full details outlining the reason for their non-attendance.

2. Examiners have full decision-making power.

3. Examiners may consult with the NEC regarding the *viva voce* procedures.

4. Examiners are required to focus rigorously on both the scholarly content of the presentation and the doctoral candidate's depth of understanding of the research problem. In fulfilling this role, examiners should actively engage with the candidate by posing questions that critically assess whether the candidate demonstrates comprehensive, in-depth knowledge of the research, including its theoretical foundations, methodological approach, and broader academic and practical context.

5. Guided by the facilitation of the NEC, the examiners will deliberate the outcome of the *viva voce*. The deliberations are confidential proceedings.

6. The examiners should be satisfied that the comments they made when examining the written component of thesis have been satisfactorily addressed by the candidate.

7. The examiners should, on Form V51 (DV2), indicate whether the candidate has passed or failed. In the event that the candidate has failed, the examiners shall provide clear reasons for this decision.

8. Examiners must submit Form V51 (DV2), to the NEC **within one (1) week** after the oral examination.

Part D: REPORTING

The NEC 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 (1) week** of receiving the final reports from the examiners.

Submission must include:

- the supervisor's non-evaluative report,
- examiners' provisional and final reports,
- arbitrator's report (if applicable)
- confirmation from the supervisor that the candidate engaged with the provisional reports prior to the *viva voce*
- the NEC's final report and recommendation,
- approved minutes of the *viva voce,*
- Turnitin report,
- ethics clearance approval,
- proof of language editing (if applicable), and
- the *viva voce* attendance register.

The Executive Dean or delegated person submits the final result to College: Graduate Studies, Division: Assessment, Research and Examination Support.

The entire oral examination will be recorded. The file of the recording, apart from the examiner panel deliberations, should be stored with the respective college for the duration allowed by the Virtual Meeting Platform. The approved minutes of the recording must be kept on record.

Part E: APPEALS

In terms of the Policy on Master's and Doctoral Degrees, all master's and doctoral candidates have the right to appeal against unfair practice in supervision or examination. A candidate who wishes to appeal on these grounds should appeal in writing to the Executive Dean, or his or her nominee, of the College in which the candidate is registered within ten (10) days of receiving the official results. The reasons for the appeal must be set out in the written appeal. The Executive Dean will refer the matter for investigation to the Head: Research & Graduate Studies of the College, who will inform the Executive Dean or his or her nominee of the outcome of the investigation within 30 (thirty) days of the date of referral. 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 final outcome of the appeal will be communicated by the CGS: Assessment, Research and Examination Support section.

ANNEXURE A

Candidate procedure

Dear Candidate

As part of your PhD study, you will be required to attend an oral examination called a *viva voce.* With the *viva voce*, you will be able to defend your thesis before the oral examination panel and demonstrate your understanding of the subject of your thesis. You will be required to answer questions to support aspects of your thesis that the examiners need clarity on. Your video feeds need to be active for the duration of the *viva voce.*

However, should you have connectivity challenges, you must inform the NEC, in which case you may be given permission to switch the camera off during your presentation. The camera must be on during the introduction and the Q&A section of the proceedings. The proceedings will be recorded.

You will be required to give a 30-minute electronic presentation on your thesis covering the following:

a. Introduction and background
b. Problem statement
c. Objectives
d. Methods and materials
e. Results/findings,
f. Conclusion(s)
g. The engagement with the amendments done after the examination of the written thesis
h. Originality of contribution, implications, and avenues for further research

The presentation must be in the form of a slide show using software such as PowerPoint, Freelance, Co-rel presentations or Astound. The final presentation must be sent to the supervisor ten (10) working days before the *viva voce*. You will be required to communicate your research and demonstrate to experts in the field the contribution to knowledge by describing and defending your research.

After your presentation, there will be a 30-minute Q&A session. If there are further questions after this time, the NEC may open the floor for additional questions for an additional 15 minutes. The examiners may ask questions in order to establish (a) whether their proposed amendments have been implemented after the examination of the thesis; and (b) whether you have an in-depth knowledge of your research and its broader context.

The *viva voce* will take place in English via a virtual meeting platform. You will be informed of the *viva voce* meeting time and of the preliminary meeting time by the Non-Examining Chair or the designated departmental administrative officer.

The preliminary meeting aims to test your systems and ensure that you can share your presentation, that you are audible and that you have a video feed.

The oral examination panel will consist of the following members[1]:

1. Chair of the academic department or approved representative (observer, no decision-making powers) and/or
2. Higher Degrees Committee Chairperson in the department or approved representative (observer, no decision-making powers)
3. Supervisor(s) (observer, no decision-making powers)
4. Non-examining Chair (NEC), Chairperson, (no decision-making powers)
5. Examiners (decision-making powers)

Your supervisor(s)' role will be supportive, and they will not be able to give input during the *viva voce* process. Therefore, it is recommended that you share your presentation with your supervisor and clarify any aspects you might be uncertain about before the *viva voce.*

The academic department may allow members of the department to be invited as observers.

Please refer to the *Procedures for Master's and Doctoral Degrees*.

All participants in the *viva voce* are expected to demonstrate respect, courtesy and academic integrity in their interactions with those present.

All the best in preparing for this last step in your PhD journey.

Regards

Non-Examining Chairperson (NEC)

Annexure B Examiners' procedures

Dear Examiner

The University of South Africa (Unisa) has introduced an oral examination (*viva voce*) for PhD candidates who registered for the first time in 2022. You will still evaluate the PhD thesis as an examiner in the electronic format. You must submit your provisional examination report and the Form (V51(DV1)) by the due date which is indicated in the appointment letter. The *viva voce* is only conducted if all examiners indicated that the thesis is defensible or after the relevant College Management Committee made a recommendation when not all the examiners' reports were unanimous regarding the defensibility of the thesis or where an arbitrator found the thesis to be defensible (you will be informed accordingly), i.e., unamended, or accepted after minor corrections or after major corrections, **and** only after all proposed amendments have been made to the satisfaction of the supervisor. You must submit your **final recommendation on Form** (V51(DV2)) to the NEC **one (1) week** after the *viva voce* has been concluded.

The candidate will make a 30-minute presentation of their thesis. After that, there will be a 30-minute Q&A session. If there are further questions after this time, we can open the floor for additional questions before the deliberations for an additional 15 minutes. In the Q&A session, you will be allowed to engage with the candidate on the research or areas of the research about which you might need more clarity. We will aim to keep the proceeding to 75 minutes.

You may ask questions in order to establish (a) whether the proposed amendments have been implemented by the candidate; and (b) whether the candidate has an in-depth knowledge of their research and its broader context.

The viva voce will be set up by the NEC within six (6) weeks of receiving confirmation from the supervisor that the candidate has satisfactorily engaged with the provisional examiners' reports. The *viva voce* will take place online via a virtual meeting platform, unless otherwise agreed upon. The NEC will confirm the time, date, and link for the viva voce and share these details with you. The candidate's presentation and table of corrections will be forwarded five (5) working days before the viva voce.
The NEC will arrange a meeting 30 minutes prior to the viva voce to explain the

procedures.

After the presentation and question and answer session by the candidate, the meeting will be adjourned. I will, directly after the *viva voce*, provide you with a link to join a virtual meeting where the examiners will deliberate for 20 to 30 minutes on the outcome of the *viva voce*. The outcome of the deliberations should inform the completion of Form V51(DV2). This will be seen as your final recommendation.

All participants in the *viva voce* are expected to demonstrate respect, courtesy and academic integrity in their interactions with those present.

Regards

Non-Examining Chairperson (NEC)

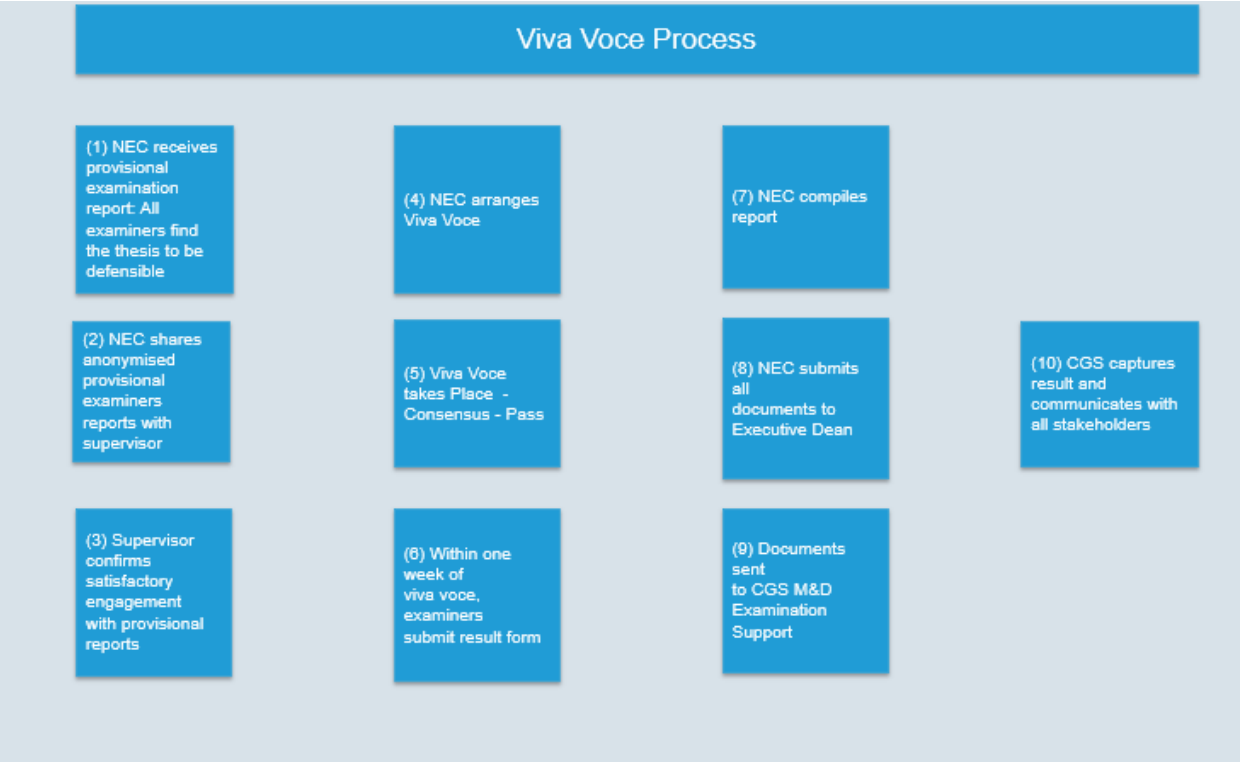
Annexure C

Consolidated Timeline – *Viva Voce* Process

Phase	**Activity**	**Timeline**
Trigger	Supervisor confirms that candidate has addressed the examiner reports	Day 0
Scheduling	Viva must be conducted	Within 6 weeks of Day 0
Scheduling	Viva arranged, date time and link and finalise logistics	Within first 2 weeks after Day 0
Scheduling	Arrange meeting with affected examiners (if CMC/Arbitrator decided on defensibility)	10 working days before *viva voce*
Preparation	Candidate submits presentation and table of corrections to supervisors	10 working days before *viva voce*
Preparation	Supervisor submits the presentation and table of corrections to NEC	7 working days before *viva voce*
Pre-viva	NEC provides presentation and table of corrections to examiners	5 working days before *viva voce*
Day of *Viva Voce*	NEC meets with all examiners	30 minutes before *viva voce*
Day of *Viva Voce*	Candidate presentation	30 minutes
Day of *Viva Voce*	Q&A	30 to 45 minutes
Post *Viva Voce*	Examiners deliberations	20 to 30 minutes
Positive Outcome	NEC provides unofficial results	Immediately after the deliberations
Reporting	Examiners submit Form V51(DV2)	Within 1 week after *viva voce*
Reporting	NEC submits report and documents to CMC	Within 1 week after receiving Forms V51(DV2)
Official outcome	Release of result	Within 4 weeks after *viva voce*

Annexure C

Viva Voce Process Flow



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