

Mbarara University of Science and Technology



Guidelines for Online Research Proposal and Thesis Defense

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The higher education landscape is rapidly changing. The technological rise of the 21st-century and the widespread integration of those technologies into our society, combined with access to internet have introduced novel approaches by which people effectively meet and hold conferences. Such approaches include Webinars (Web conferencing) using software and applications of various kinds such as Zoom, Teams and GoToMeeting. These technologies have subsequently impacted onto graduate research proposal and thesis defense approaches requiring a review of the current traditional defense models. Already Makerere University has integrated technologies to enhance the online research proposal and dissertation/thesis examination methods. Again, with the emerging infectious diseases requiring social distancing strategies for prevention of transmission of infection, virtual and blended proposal/thesis defense approaches have become more important than before.

The Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST) policy and regulations for research proposal and dissertation/thesis defense as stated in the Graduate Handbook currently provide for face-to-face examiners-candidate interaction. This is the preferred traditional practice requiring all participants to be physically present in the examination room. This ensures the integrity of the examination and provides the most conducive atmosphere for students to defend their work. Again, it provides for more quality because there are gestures of oral presence that may not be visible online.

1.0 Circumstances under which online *viva voce* shall be considered

- i. Disaster, health and political emergency that would significantly disadvantage the student by waiting to prepare a face-to-face *viva voce*.
- ii. Travel restrictions including inability to get visa.
- iii. Relocation of the student or examiner outside the University.
- iv. A joint or dual award is being offered and staffs from the partner university are joining the *viva voce*.
- v. Any other force majeure event.

2.0 General Considerations

- i. The general University regulations governing graduate research proposal and thesis/dissertation defense shall apply
(<http://www.must.ac.ug/downloads/policies/MUST%20Postgraduate%20Handbook%202018.pdf>)
Therefore, these online defense guidelines do not replace those University traditional regulations.
- ii. MUST shall provide the infrastructure to suit online examination processes.
- iii. MUST Computing Services shall provide technical support and shall ensure a stable internet connection.
- iv. Following receipt of Internal and External Examiners' reports by the Dean, permission to conduct a virtual *viva voce* shall be sought and obtained from the Director, Directorate of Research and Graduate Training. In the letter, the Dean shall justify this method of defense and shall indicate that the student and all examiners have agreed in writing to participate.
- v. The student shall consent that s/he is informed and willing to participate in the virtual examination process, and 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.
- vi. It is the responsibility of the Faculty Dean to coordinate the online defense.
- vii. The online participants must connect using hardware and network connections that ensure that all participants are visible and audible and that the connection is stable and available throughout the scheduled time of the defense.
- viii. The device used shall have both audio and video functionality, but the video function shall be maintained during defense.
- ix. The video conference practice run one week prior to the defense to ensure that participants are comfortable using the technology shall be done.
- x. A good balance between web-conference security (to avoid disruptions, i.e. 'web-bombing') and allowing for an open public participation in the defense shall be maintained.
- xi. The graduate proposal and dissertation/thesis defenses are open to the public audience. A specific link or video connection instructions shall be circulated to the University community in advance of the defense.

3.0 Before the defense

- i. The Defense Chair, External and internal examiners shall have a virtual meeting to discuss their approach to the *viva*.
- ii. At least three examination panel members shall be physically present in the same room.
- iii. The Chair shall open the meeting 15 minutes before the scheduled start of the defense.
- iv. All participants shall join the meeting at least 10 minutes before the defense begins.
- v. Online examination panel members shall not be in public setting during the *viva voce* exercise.
- vi. Score sheets shall be given to Panel members before presentation begins.



4.0 During the defense

- i. The Chair shall explain the format of the defense, including the time allowed for the oral presentation and set the ground rules for participation.
- ii. To avoid distracting the candidate during oral presentation, examiners and audience members' microphones and camera shall be turned off.
- iii. The Chair will call on the supervisor to introduce the student. In the absence of the supervisor, the Dean will introduce the student.
- iv. The student shall project the slides and make presentation (PhD 45min, Masters 20min, and Postgraduate Diploma 15min).
- v. The panel and audience members shall ask the questions via the tool, in which case the Chair shall turn on their video and microphone and invite one at a time to interact directly with the candidate.
- vi. Each examiner shall individually assess and score the candidate's performance using the university score guidelines.
- vii. If an examiner must leave early due to technical difficulties, s/he shall be allowed to send the score via email to the Chair before the end of the viva session only if s/he has been in the same session up to the end of candidate presentation.
- viii. Normally, if communication is broken during the *viva voce* and a connection cannot be re-established, the examination must be terminated and re-scheduled. However, where the examiners agree that a truncated *viva voce* provides the basis for a positive recommendation (pass as it stands, or pass subject to minor corrections), this recommendation may be made without the *viva* being rescheduled.
- ix. Any re-scheduled examination shall normally take place within one week of the original *viva voce*. Where it will take longer than this, the delay should be communicated to the candidate and the examiners by the Dean. Permission for the delayed examination shall be sought from Director, Directorate of Research and Graduate Training.

5.0 At the end of defense


- i. At the end of the question period, the examination panel shall be shifted to another room in preparation for the private deliberations.
- ii. All examiners shall endorse the examination report and agree on the required changes.
- iii. The report shall include a statement that "the viva voce was conducted virtually."
- iv. The online examination panel members shall endorse the examination report with their electronic signatures.
- v. The Chair shall invite or reconnect the candidate and the public to return to the meeting to announce the defense outcome.
- vi. The Faculty Dean shall provide the written comments to the candidate.



Process of planning and conducting online Research Proposal and Thesis Defense

- 1 Share details of exam date, time & format → Dean ensures that the candidate, supervisors, examination/ viva voce panel are aware of the exam format and any time zone difference
- 2 Requesting MUST Computing Services Technical Support → Dean submits request to MUST Computing Services for technical support 3 days before the scheduled viva voce exam and to Estates Dept. for UMEME backup
- 3 Scheduling the online examination → MUST Computing Services helps to schedule the online exam using Web-conferencing recommended settings
- 4 Prior to the online examination → Candidate connects with Dean who in turn contacts MUST Computing Services to ensure smooth technical preparations
- 5 Starting the examination → MUST Computing Services facilitator helps to start the viva-voce exam, & deals with any technical issues
- 6 During the online examination → Chair moderates the exam; regular MUST proposal/thesis defense procedures apply
- 7 Deliberations → Panel is shifted to another room for private deliberations
- 8 End of online examination → Panel brought back to examination room, verdict is announced & the meeting ends


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VICE CHANCELLOR


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