

HEC Covid-19 Policy Papers

1. Background

- 1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has led to the suspension of face-to-face academic activities. To assist universities, HEC has released policy guidance notes, which are available on the HEC website, with the twin objectives of protecting the health of the university community while keeping higher education activities on track.
- 1.2 This is sixth guidance note in the series. It has been issued in response to queries from university administrators and students regarding the conduct of thesis defense (of graduating PhD/MPhil/MS students) and final juries (of undergraduate programs) during the lockdown period/ restrictions. This document, at later stage, will be combined with a subsequent broader policy advice to be issued on the conduct of examinations and student evaluation.
- 1.3 This guidance pertains only to selected steps in graduate degree programs (please see diagram below), namely the thesis submission, evaluation, and oral defense, and final juries. All other activities in the process are governed by separate guidelines, including the requirement of online readiness of universities.



2. Process Guidelines

- 2.1 **Authorization to Conduct Electronic Defense:** Until 30 August 2020 or, in case the Covid-19 restrictions are further extended, until two months after the removal of such restrictions, Degree Awarding Institutions (herein referred to by the generic title "universities") may conduct PhD/MPhil/MS defense or the defense of Final Juries of undergraduate programs through videoconference or electronic meetings,
- 2.2 **Power to Authorize:** Where the university rules currently do not allow electronic defense or electronic juries, the Vice Chancellor may authorize it upon request Director Advanced Studies and Research/ Director of Institute/ Dean through the Controller of Examination or other relevant authority, subject to subsequent ratification by the appropriate university statutory body, at the earliest possible opportunity.
- 2.3 **Designated Authority:** Each University will clearly designate the person or persons who are authorized to receive dissertations, theses, or project reports from students, evaluation reports from internal or external evaluators, or any other documents required in regard to the subject of these guidelines. Universities will ensure that the full contact information of the Designated Authority, especially their email address, is publicized widely and through all appropriate means.
- 2.4 **Thesis Submission:** Submission of PhD dissertations, MPhil/ MS theses, or final project reports may be made electronically to the Designated Authority. All other prescribed requirements for the submission, including format, deadlines, and content, will remain unchanged.
- 2.5 **Evaluation:** The submitted documents (i.e., PhD dissertations, MPhil/ MS theses, or final project reports) may be circulated electronically to both internal and external evaluators for review and comments. The Evaluation Reports may also be submitted electronically to the designated authority.
- 2.6 **Protection of Privacy:** The University will adopt appropriate security measures to safeguard against possible misuse, breach of privacy, or unauthorized leakage of evaluation reports or other documents.
- 2.7 **Open Public Defense:** In order to ensure the open public defense of dissertations, theses, and projects, the University shall make adequate arrangements to enable the participation of all interested persons, including faculty, students, and staff of the university as well as members of the public. These arrangements will include an open call for registration on the university's and HEC's websites, and subsequent communication to all registered participants of the online links needed for participation, in accordance with the code to be prescribed by the university.
- 2.8 **Participation of Examiners:** The University shall ensure the presence of all members of the Defense Committee at the electronic defense. If for any reason (including technical difficulties), one or more of the required examiners are not able

to participate fully in the session, the defense would need to be rescheduled until all formalities can be satisfied.

- 2.9 **ICT Tools:** Universities may, at their discretion, use any appropriate ICT tool for online defense, viz. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, Google Classroom, Video Conference, or other
- 2.10 **Access to ICT Tools:** It will be the responsibility of the University to ensure (a) that all members of the Defense Committee as well as the candidate have the appropriate technology to participate in the defense; (b) that the technology is tested prior to the defense; and (c) that remote participation is uninterrupted and, if interrupted, the defense shall be paused until the connections are fully restored.
- 2.11 **All Proceedings to be Recorded:** The proceedings of the online defense will be recorded with prior information of all the Defense Committee and the candidate, and maintained as confidential record with the University, for possible evaluation by the University or the HEC.
- 2.12 **Electronic Signatures:** The digital signatures of the Defense Committee shall be sufficient to certify the results of the defense.
- 2.13 **Announcement of Result:** Controller of Examination with approval of Vice Chancellor will announce result after receiving it from the designated authority.