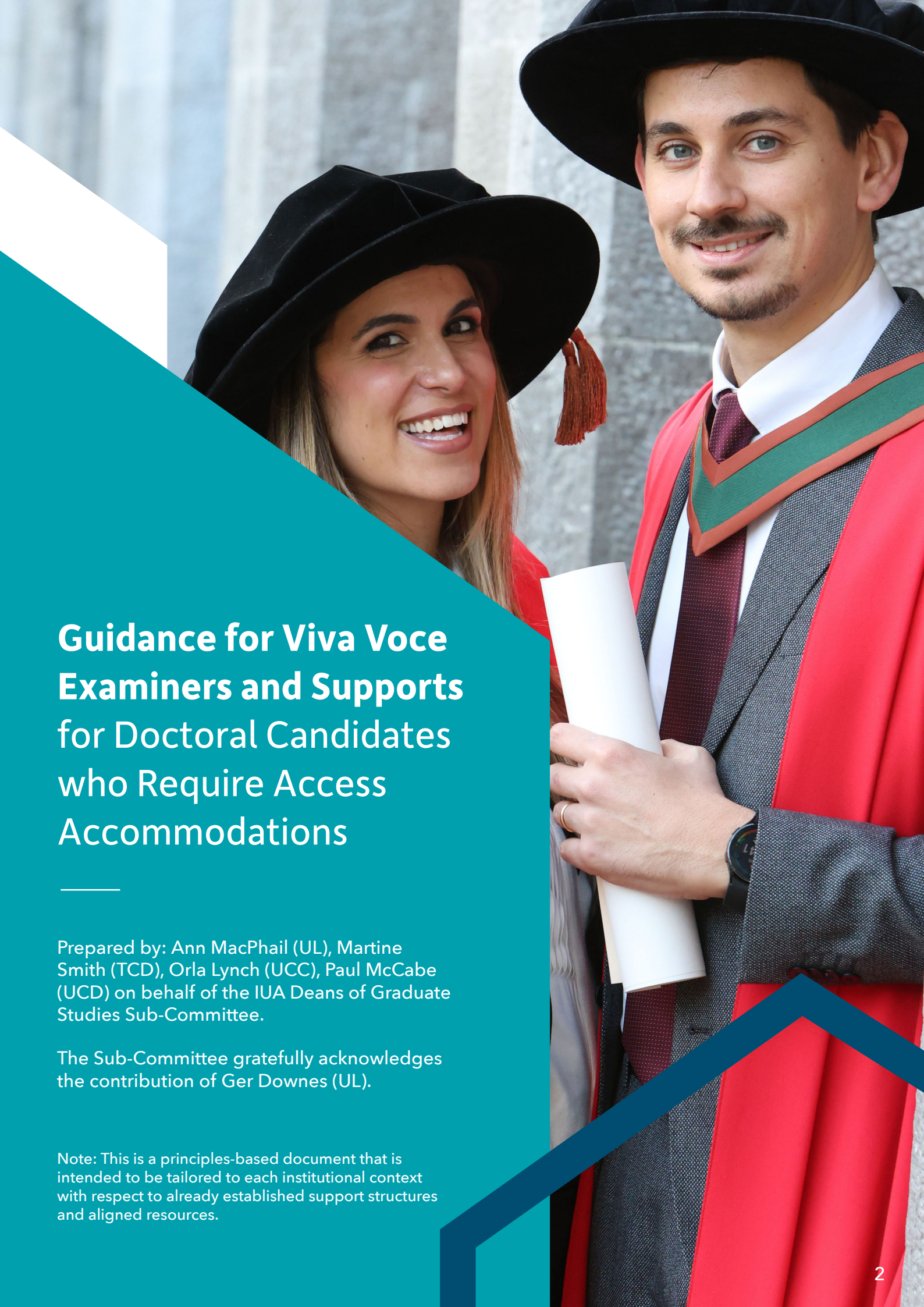


Viva Voce Examinations: Guidance for Examiners and Supports for Doctoral Candidates



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Guidance for Viva Voce Examiners and Supports for Doctoral Candidates who Require Access Accommodations

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The Sub-Committee gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Ger Downes (UL).

Note: This is a principles-based document that is intended to be tailored to each institutional context with respect to already established support structures and aligned resources.

RATIONALE

In the Irish context, the Viva Voce examination represents a high-stakes summative assessment that all doctoral candidates must undergo. The integrity of this examination is a critical factor in safeguarding the quality of an Irish Doctoral award. This document highlights the importance of safeguarding the integrity of this assessment while also exploring how best to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility in the procedures underpinning the examination to accommodate the needs of doctoral candidates who require access accommodations. The aim of this document is to assist candidates and their supervisors as they prepare for the Viva Voce. It is based on guidelines and a review of procedures and processes at several Irish universities and is informed by discussions with a diverse range of stakeholders across higher education institutions.

The suggestions in this paper are underpinned by the concept of Universal Design - an idea and an approach that recognises that the design and composition of structures and frameworks in society impact on how they can be used and who can use them. Central to this approach are transparent and inclusive practices that provide multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression. The focus is both on the strengths and challenges faced by individual doctoral candidates, as well as the environment in which they operate to provide equitable opportunities and outcomes for all.

This document firstly discusses the academic integrity of the Viva Voce examination process, including what it is and the principles that must be maintained throughout the process to ensure there is a parity of esteem associated with all who undertake the examination. It then provides direction on potential accommodations and examples of additional considerations that can be implemented, with the aid of university support services where necessary. Each university operationalizes student supports in line with their specific governance structures and resources. While the principles outlined in this document are agreed by all IUA member institutions, it is expected that the mechanisms that give effect to these principles will vary considerably by institution.



VIVA VOCE EXAMINATION

A Viva Voce is an academic interview where candidates are examined to evaluate their understanding of the subject matter of the thesis, an appreciation of its significance to established knowledge in the field, and an awareness of the breadth of the subject area. The Viva Voce provides doctoral candidates with an opportunity to defend their thesis and assists the examiners in deciding whether the candidate has met the requirements for the award of a doctoral degree.

There are several key principles underpinning the Viva Voce examination. The candidate must:

- demonstrate that their work is original and authentic.
- demonstrate that a thesis is a piece of high-level scholarship.
- demonstrate that the work is potentially publishable.
- demonstrate how the work contributes to the field of study.
- critically conceptualise findings, synthesise ideas, and establish links among constructs.

The integrity of this examination is the bedrock of the Doctoral qualification and is critical in the quality assurance of Irish Doctoral awards. These key principles of the Viva Voce examination must be protected. However, the organization of the Viva

Voce examination can take account of the needs of all individual candidates, particularly in relation to Learning Differences and/or Disabilities (LDD). Careful consideration should be given to whether the way in which the examination is conducted represents an additional burden on an individual and how a candidate might be supported to optimally present their work. This document seeks to explore when and if it is possible to accommodate specific doctoral candidate needs while ensuring any accommodations or adaptations do not undermine the integrity of the examination process.

The terms learning differences and disability include a broad range of self-identifications and diagnoses and incorporate the increasingly widely used term 'neurodiversity'. The terms disability and learning differences are imperfect in capturing the diversity of needs of doctoral candidates and the range of novel ways of learning, as well as barriers to learning, experiencing, and interacting with the world. In this document we acknowledge that there are a range of preferences around person-centred or identity-centred language, and we recommend that the language used for an individual doctoral candidate reflects the personal choices expressed by that individual. In this document, we have chosen to use person-first language, cognisant of the issues inherent in this choice. The preference is to adopt a diversity approach rather than deficit approach; inclusion and acceptance are key principles underpinning this approach.





ACCOMMODATIONS

Educational institutions have a legal duty¹ to do all that is reasonable to accommodate the needs of persons with LDD. In many universities, this type of support is captured under a reasonable accommodation policy and is often linked with disability support services. There are no determinative factors for reasonable accommodations and each case must be reviewed on its own merits. The Disability Advisors Working Network (2019) defines reasonable accommodations as “those actions that enable students to demonstrate their true knowledge and ability in examinations without changing the demands of the examination.” The intention behind the provision of such accommodations is to alleviate any disadvantages without affecting the integrity of the assessment. Often, such reasonable accommodations are referred to as standard or non-standard (exceptional). Effectively and usefully defining reasonable accommodations related to the Viva voce examination requires a collaborative process that includes the voices of doctoral candidates. Below are some specific suggestions for potential accommodations. The list is not exhaustive but is intended as illustrative of the kinds of accommodations that can support students to demonstrate their learning, while upholding the core elements of the examination process.

Planning the Viva Voce Examination:

Preparation for the Viva Voce examination often begins many months before the exam takes place. Usually, preparation involves informing the University of the candidate's intention to submit, choosing external and internal examiners and booking a venue. At this stage, candidates should be consulted as to any additional needs they might have and how these needs might be accommodated during the examination. Where feasible, supervisors should offer candidates a choice of venue or where permissible, the choice of an online/hybrid examination. In addition, the supervisor should discuss the type of room layout that the candidate is most comfortable with, their preferred placement in the room, the time of day that is most suitable for them, proximity to appropriate facilities, (including accessible bathroom facilities) etc. The type of lighting, access to technology, acoustics and size of the room should also be a part of this discussion.

Before the Viva Voce Examination.

The examiners should be made aware of the University policy on accommodations and the legal responsibilities of the examination panel to accommodate the needs of individual doctoral candidates. In the weeks before the Viva Voce examination, supervisors should offer candidates the opportunity to have a trial run in the examination location. In addition, a detailed schedule can be planned with the candidate including presentation timings and expectations, scheduled breaks, etc. As part of the trial examination, a selection of likely examination questions or areas of focus can be discussed, including how questions might be phrased, how to respond to questions that are not clear or questions they do not understand, and how to request an additional break.

The use of technology in the examination should be discussed prior to the examination and tested during the run through. The choice of the doctoral candidate to use assistive technology and additional ICT equipment (e.g., multiple monitors) should be noted and accommodated where possible. The supervisor, with the permission of the candidate, should communicate the candidate's specific needs to the examination team detailing any requests for accommodations. In making decisions about what information to share, only information that is critical to ensuring that the candidate's needs are met should be shared, and only where the candidate has agreed that the examiners should be informed. In all instances, the candidate should be supported to make decisions about what information they wish to be made known to others involved in the examination process.



During the Viva Voce Examination.

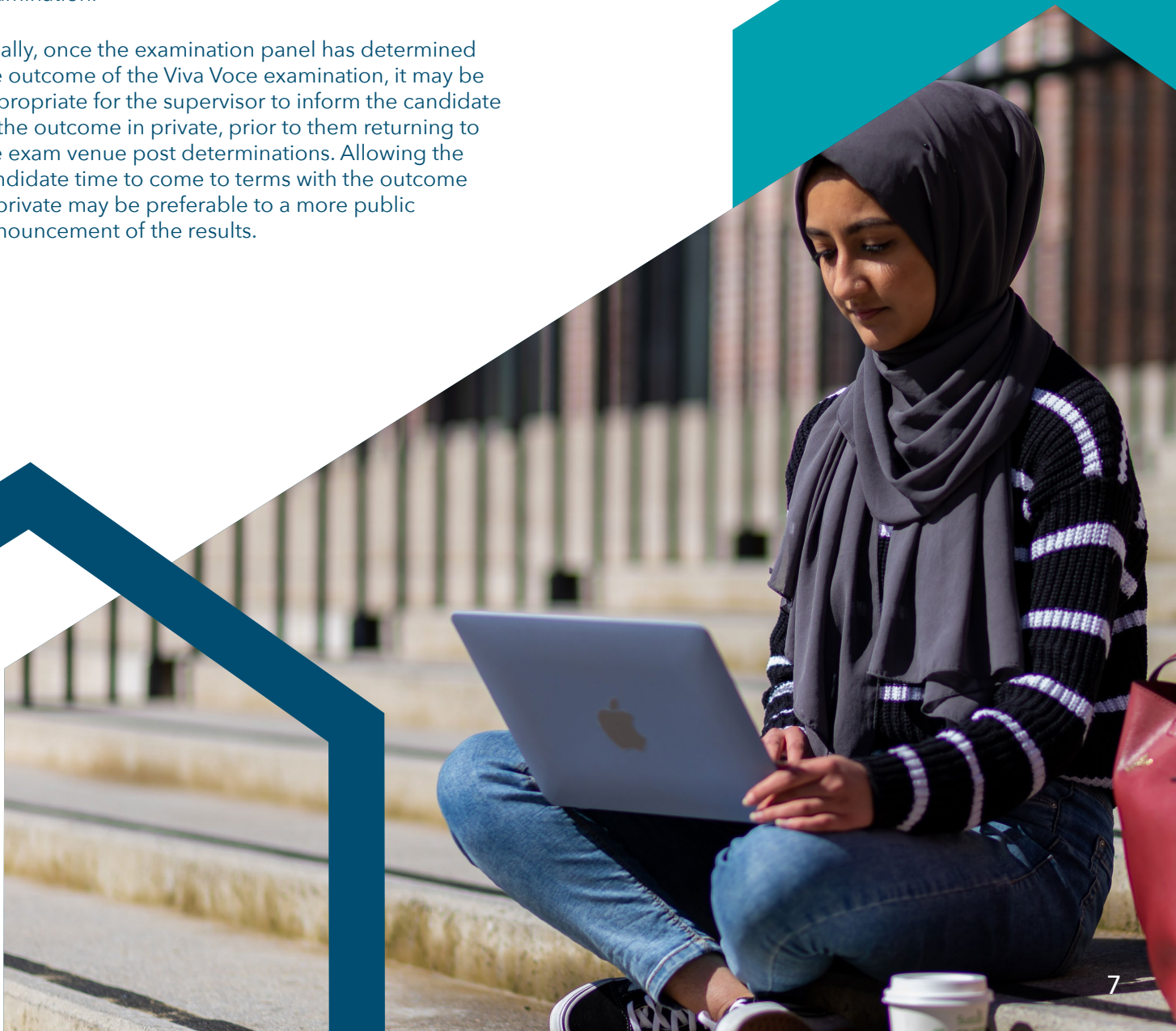
In many cases University policies dictate whether a doctoral candidate is expected to deliver a presentation during the Viva Voce; in some cases, a public presentation is also a part of the overall process. It is worth considering alternatives to these presentations if necessary and how alternative options might be accommodated given the policies in place in individual institutions.

The Chair of the examination panel should give clear instructions to the candidate about the examination's timings and structure well before the Viva Voce. The Chair is responsible for oversight of the Viva Voce examination, including implementing any agreed accommodations. The examination team should ensure that adequate time is given for the candidate to respond to questions, offering alternatively phrased questions (e.g., complex, long questions being broken down into shorter questions) to facilitate understanding where necessary. Examiners should give explicit instructions regarding their expectations in how they would like questions to be answered, and they should provide clear feedback to the candidate to assist them in meeting their expectations during the Viva Voce examination.

Finally, once the examination panel has determined the outcome of the Viva Voce examination, it may be appropriate for the supervisor to inform the candidate of the outcome in private, prior to them returning to the exam venue post determinations. Allowing the candidate time to come to terms with the outcome in private may be preferable to a more public announcement of the results.

After the Viva Voce examination.

The supervisory team should discuss with the doctoral candidate the most useful type of feedback that will facilitate them to complete any changes. The timing of the changes should also be discussed, and flexibility offered where possible, within the constraints of university-specific regulations. Doctoral candidates should also be directed to other supports such as, for example, proof-reading services on offer from disability support services or student skills centres, etc.



PROCEDURES AND OPERATIONAL MECHANISMS

Each institution has its own governance structures and resource allocation models and so it is neither possible nor appropriate to prescribe operational mechanisms to underpin procedures to implement reasonable accommodations across all institutions. The following outlines potential steps in a process to manage requests for reasonable accommodations, noting that the roles and responsibilities of individual key players will vary by institution:

1. Identifying accommodations: Prior to the submission of their thesis, doctoral candidates engage with their supervisor to request reasonable accommodations and identify the specific accommodations they wish to request. (Note: it may happen that a supervisor initiates the conversation on the potential to request accommodations, based on their awareness of how the candidate's learning preference may impact on the Viva). It is possible that candidates may not previously have engaged with support services such as Disability/disAbility. This should not be a barrier to requesting accommodations and should not be a requirement unless otherwise dictated by individual institutional policies.

2. Requesting accommodations: Doctoral candidate agrees in writing that information essential to understanding the nature of the reasonable accommodations can be shared with the examiners and Chair of the Viva Voce examination committee and any other relevant stakeholders. This is solely for the purpose of facilitating accommodations. In all instances, careful attention must be paid to ensuring that information is only shared with those for whom the information is essential. Supervisor submits the request to the Chair of the Viva Voce committee or other designated authority.

3. Agreeing accommodations: If at this point, there is disagreement about the rationale for or feasibility of the proposed accommodations, the Chair or other designated responsible person should refer the request to the Dean of Graduate Studies or equivalent. The Dean may seek further guidance from a Disability/disAbility Service or other such service prior to issuing a decision.

4. Communicating agreed accommodations: Once accommodations are agreed, the Chair liaises with the examiners to ensure clarity and agreement on the accommodations and to identify any support that examiners may need to help fulfil the requested accommodations.

5. Implementing and overseeing accommodations: The Chair is responsible for oversight of the implementation of the accommodations during the Viva Voce examination. In their report on the examination, the examiners should note the accommodations provided but should not describe any details related to any LDD that has been disclosed.

¹Disability Act 2005, the Equal Status Acts 2000, the Universities Act 1997, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities





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