



Remote Thesis Defence

In response to the growing concerns surrounding the COVID-19 virus and with the need for social distancing, thesis defences should be scheduled with all participants joining remotely, until further notice.

The facilitation of remote defences will be the responsibility of the academic unit. It will be important for each academic unit to ensure that each individual who plans to participate in the defence is properly equipped to do so.

Below are some instructions and advice for successfully conducting a remote thesis defence.

Required Resources

In order to participate in a remote defence, each participant will need:

- A desktop or laptop computer or a tablet, equipped with a microphone and camera
 - o Most of the software options available also have smartphone apps which can be used to connect to audio and video.
- A reliable internet connection.
- An invitation/instructions to use to connect to the remote discussion.

Note that IT staff will be experiencing a higher than normal workload as the University responds to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, communication between academic units and ICT staff must take place with enough time for ICT to respond should assistance with set-up be required. Plan ahead!

Setting up a Remote Defence

In order to arrange a remote defence, the academic unit will need to set up a meeting using a software which supports web conferencing, and share an invitation with the required participants.

For web conferencing, the University supports the use of Cisco WebEx. Online training and support is available through the university (see <https://training.usask.ca/webex.php>). Some users prefer to use other software options, such as Skype, Zoom, and Jitsi.

Note: Several software options, notably Zoom, have been the subject of security problems, including the hijacking of defences. Regardless of the software used, the use of a meeting password and careful distribution of the meeting invitation is essential.

CGPS will not mandate the use of any single software, though we recommend exploring the options to which the University is already subscribed, as training and supports will be more readily available for those options.



Tips for Success

A successful remote defence will depend less on the exact software tool used, and more on proper equipment, connections, and preparedness. The following are some tips to use to ensure success in conducting a remote defence:

- To limit the complexity of facilitating the meeting, and the risk of technical difficulties, only required participants should plan to attend the remote defence. (i.e. Avoid having visitors tuning in).
- It is strongly recommended that a test meeting or trial be scheduled before the defence date. This provides an opportunity for participants to tune in and test their equipment and connections, to ensure that audio and video are working as expected, and to learn the ins and outs of the software they are using.
- Don't join a video conference from a computer you're connected to with remote desktop.
- If you have a slow connection, mute your video to save bandwidth.
- Debug your network connection in advance. The tool <https://mediatest.ciscospark.com/> is recommended by ICT. Often network connections can be improved by rebooting your Sasktel/Shaw modem and by disconnecting other wireless devices.
- The student should familiarize themselves with the options for how they will present their defence content. Using the screen sharing functionality (available in most video conferencing software options) will be the best option for students presenting via PowerPoint, or otherwise wanting to share content on their computer screens with participants.
- During the trial, or in advance of the defence, some basic video conferencing etiquette may be discussed for those who are not experienced. The number one etiquette tip we recommend is that all participants keep their microphones muted. Only unmute yourself when you are speaking. Another tip is to avoid interruptions – give people a few extra moments after they stop speaking to make sure they're done. With the inherent lag in video conferences, it's easy to talk over one another.
- As we cannot control the quality of each participant's internet connection, participants should be prepared for the possibility of technical issues (e.g. poor audio or visual quality; dropped connections). Planning in advance and conducting a test meeting should help reduce the risk of these things happening, but participants should be prepared to navigate these challenges nonetheless. The Committee Chair (for Master's defences) or Dean's Designate (for PhD defences) should be prepared to uphold the responsibilities as outlined below.



Getting Help

For assistance with WebEx issues, including arranging test calls, you can contact ICT support:

Help Portal: <https://jira.usask.ca/servicedesk/customer/portals>

Email: itsupport@usask.ca

You can also contact Cisco WebEx Support directly - they are available 24 hours/day, 7 days/week:

Help Portal: <https://support.webex.com/support/manage-ticket.html>

Phone (Toll-free, US and Canada): 1-866-229-3239

Phone (Toll, International): +1 408-906-1155

ICT cannot assist with other video conferencing tools (Skype, Zoom, etc). Reach out directly to those software providers for support if needed.

Responsibilities of the Committee Chair (Master's defences) or Dean's Designate (PhD Defences)

1. Represent the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
2. For PhD defences, distribute the pre-defence report and the dissertation summary by email (or other electronic means) just prior to the beginning of the defence.
3. Moderate the defence proceedings; ensure fairness.
 - a) Outline the potential technical issues that may occur, encourage patience and kindness towards each other, and describe the Chair's responsibility to suspend the defence if there are technical difficulties that compromise the defence.
4. Ensure that any questions posed in the External Examiner's Report are addressed by the Candidate during the question period.
5. Chair the *in-camera* discussion of the Examining Committee and convey the outcome to the Candidate.
 - a) Ensure the Candidate is removed from the connection for the entirety of the *in camera* discussion (Most software options allow participants to leave a meeting and then rejoin later)
 - b) Ensure that all of the forms are completed/signed.
6. Submit a report on the Final Doctoral Examination to the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies using the form provided.

Important note: The Committee Chair (for master's defences) or Dean's Designate (for PhD defences) has the authority to discontinue a remote connection at any time they judge that it is interfering with the proper conduct of the examination. If one or more participants drop from the connection or lose audio, the defence must be halted until the participant's connection or audio is restored. If the connection or audio cannot be restored after 30 minutes or if the total amount of time lost exceeds 60 minutes, the Dean's Designate **must** suspend the defence and notify grad.studies@usask.ca immediately. The College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies will communicate with the Candidate and their Supervisor regarding rescheduling the defence.