



ACTT POSITION PAPER

Suggested Guidelines for a Non-Traditional Convocation/Graduation Experience

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November 26, 2020

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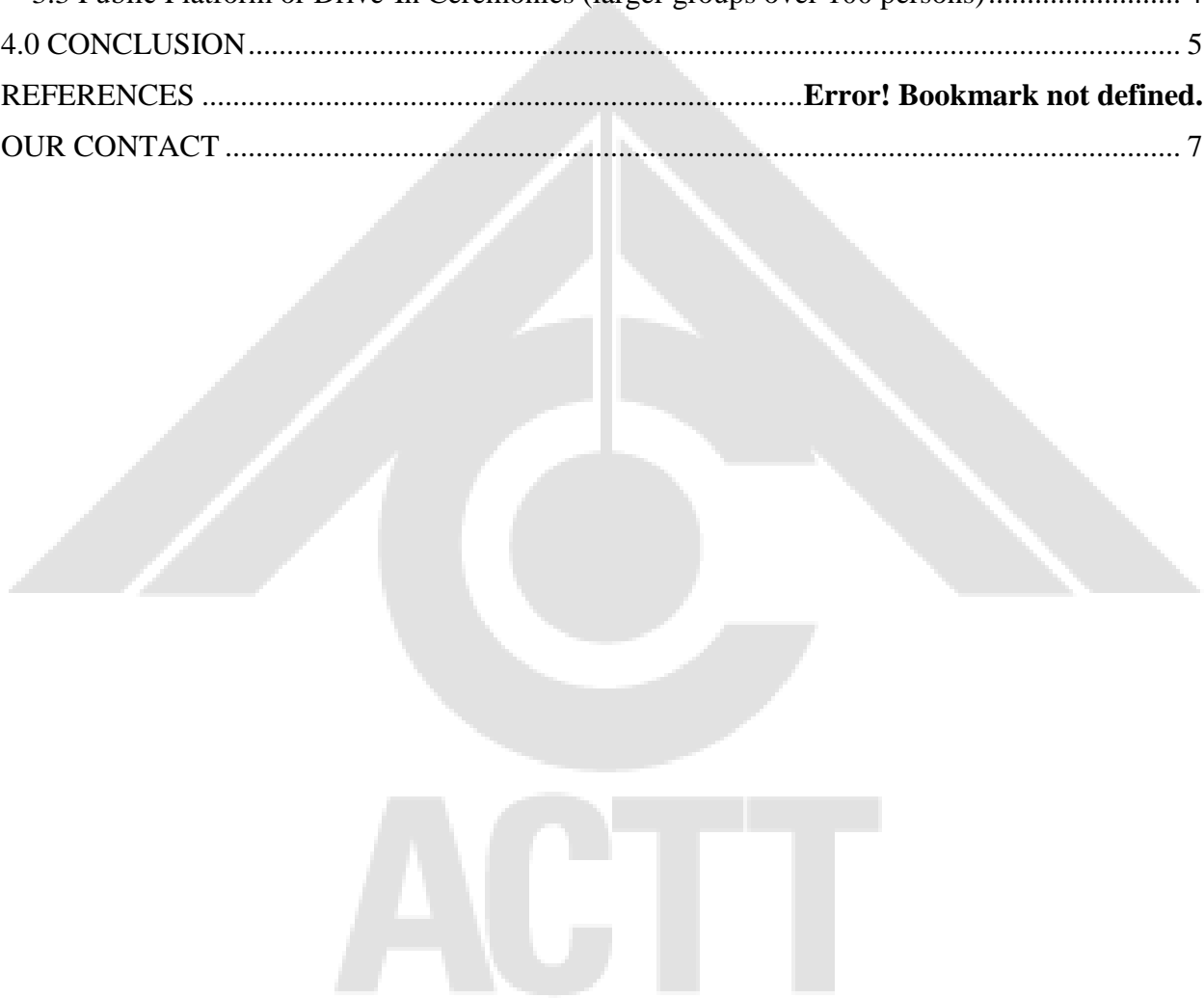
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ACTT POSITION PAPER

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR A NON-TRADITIONAL CONVOCATION/ GRADUATION EXPERIENCE

1.0 AIM

This position paper presents some suggested guidelines to assist ACTT-registered, accredited and recognised post-secondary and tertiary education (PSTE) institutions in Trinidad and Tobago who may be planning and conducting convocation/graduation ceremonies during the COVID-19 pandemic and other similar acts of God/natural disasters. The document may be also shared with similar institutions outside the context of Trinidad and Tobago for benchmarking, research and adaptation purposes.

2.0 BACKGROUND

Convocation or graduation ceremonies are one of the most memorable experiences for students as well as their relatives, administrators, faculty members and others who supported them during their journey. In traditional higher education settings, this experience has been ‘in-person’ or face-to-face. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many cancellations and postponements of convocations or graduation ceremonies. While higher education institutions worldwide have shifted to online learning since March 2020 due to the pandemic, consideration has been given to best practices for the hosting of what can be termed ‘non-traditional and virtual’ convocation/graduation ceremonies or a hybrid. We examined the convocation ceremonies of various institutions that include local and several international tertiary institutions such as the American University of Ras Al Khaimah (UAE), Florida International University (USA), Business Breakthrough University (Japan), which consisted of drive in ceremonies, virtual Minecraft universities and avatars, live streaming with graduands’ participation and robots as stand-in graduands.

Post-secondary and tertiary education institutions in Trinidad and Tobago are considering innovative ways to ensure that students have a convocation/graduation experience as similar or close to as possible to the traditional ‘in-person’ or face-to-face ceremonies. In a traditional setting the following have to be considered in these practices: i) wearing the graduation cap/mortarboard and gown, ii) walking in the processional, iii) interacting with peers, faculty and institutional staff, and crossing the stage to receive certificates, awards and the congratulatory handshakes.

With this in mind, these are the three major considerations for PSTE institutions that are registered, accredited and/or recognised by ACTT:

- The Setting – a physical setting, virtual platform or mixture of both;
- The Engagement Process – involvement of senior academic administrators, faculty and other staff, graduands, event staff, guests; and
- The Event Production – the use of audio and visual elements, virtual and other production requirements

3.0 MODELS

Convocations or graduations can therefore follow one of these suggested models:

- Fully virtual
- Hybrid which involves a physical space and a virtual platform
- Public space or drive-in ceremonies

3.1 Fully Virtual

In this scenario, the entire event can be held online. All aspects can be pre-recorded, such as:

- Welcome greetings
- The academic procession (this is dependent on the availability of persons and size of group)
- Addresses or speeches to include the:
 - Public Orator or Master of Ceremonies
 - Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, President and/or Head of Institution
 - Feature or Motivational Speaker
 - Valedictorian
 - Honourary Causa Speaker(s) (if required)
 - Any other designated speaker(s)
- Where possible, still images or video of graduands in their graduation attire with their certificate can be captured and displayed electronically or graduands can be asked to turn on their camera when their names are announced (this may work best for a small group of graduands).

Additional points to note include:

- Certificates can be dispatched in advance of the ceremony via a preferred mail provider.
- Institutions will have to be creative in celebrating graduands online, for example, use special music, such as institution/ theme songs, entertainment or pre-recorded sounds such as applause to celebrate accomplishments
- Based on the size of the graduating classes, virtual ceremonies may have to be held over several days. A maximum of two (2) hours for a virtual event is suggested. To facilitate the

suggested timeframe, graduands may be grouped alphabetically or by field, discipline and qualification and scheduled for separate events. Some ceremony components such as speeches may have to be repeated for each event.

- Coordination of and collection of gowns, as well as photographs of graduands in gowns, can take place in advance.

3.2 Hybrid/ Physical Space (suggested for smaller groups)

Some aspects of the graduation ceremony can be held face-to-face while adhering to all public health regulations for events. Other components can be hosted virtually or be pre-recorded. In this hybrid model, as previously mentioned, pre-recorded videos can include the Public Orator's introduction of graduands, welcome greetings and the academic procession with faculty. Participants can view these virtual proceedings while seated as they await their turn to receive their certificates.

Key components include:

- The Venue: PSTE institutions that do not have sufficient campus space can make alternative arrangements to use teaching and auditorium spaces provided by other educational institutions or other public/ private corporations.
- The Procession
 - The procession may take place in an enclosed or open space as existing structures mandated through approved public health regulations and public policies at the time of the event, with the existing social distancing, sanitisation and mask protocols observed.
 - Graduands can be assigned a number for appearance and a queue formed based on the assigned numbers, for example, graduands 1-20 can be accommodated at 10:00 a.m and 21-40 accommodated at 11:00 a.m. Institutions can verify the number of persons allowed per square foot.
 - Live presentation of certificates can take place based on the number of graduands, provided that they are appropriately distanced.
 - The presenter holds one side of the certificate and the graduand holds the other side to avoid contact. The presenter sanitises his/her hands periodically, such as after each group of graduands.
 - Other officials on stage may share nods with the graduands.
 - The graduand and presenter can face forward for official photographs to be taken.
 - After receiving the certificate, the graduand exits the stage and may leave the event or may view the rest of the proceedings from their vehicle either via live broadcast or stream.
 - The formal closing of the graduation ceremony can be held live and broadcast to graduands.

Additional points to include:

- It is recommended that there be no handshakes or physical contact between the presenter and graduand.
- Graduands will be able to view the proceedings through the live broadcast while awaiting their turn to receive their certificates.
- The ceremony can be shared online via a live stream with guests and those who are unable to attend.
- Sanitising, wearing of masks, gloves, in some cases, and social distancing guidelines should be adhered to.

3.3 Public Platform or Drive-In Ceremonies (larger groups over 100 graduands)

The convocation/graduation ceremony can be held outdoors to accommodate vehicles and a large number of graduands. In cases where there are over 100 graduands, the event may be coordinated over multiple days. This model was exemplified recently during the United States elections by political parties which held drive-in campaigns. The following can be considered:

- Covered stage can be erected in an open area.
- Seating area can be labelled for heads and specified stakeholders.
- Social distancing can be ensured by markers on the ground or flooring area.
- Graduands arrive at scheduled time for their graduation ceremony, guided by parking attendants to a designated parking area, and are registered by officials.
- Graduands remain seated in their vehicle until their designated time to join a queue.
- Graduands can be assigned a number for appearance and a queue outside the stage area is formed based on the assigned numbers.
- The presenter holds one side of the certificate and the graduand holds the other side to avoid contact. The presenter sanitises his/her hands periodically such as after each group of graduands.
- Other officials on stage may share nods with the graduands.
- The graduand and presenter can face forward for official photographs to be taken.
- After receiving the certificate, the graduand exits the stage and may leave the event or may view the rest of the proceedings from their vehicle either via live broadcast or stream.

Additional points to consider:

- It is recommended that there be no handshakes or physical contact between the presenter and graduand.
- Sanitising of hands, as well as furniture and equipment, wearing of masks, gloves and social distancing protocols shall be adhered to
- Graduands may be accompanied by guests (to be determined by the institution)

- Encourage carpooling (among families or close friends who are graduands), they can still view the proceedings through the live broadcast or from the car dependent on layout of the site.

4.0 CONCLUSION

ACTT recognises that convocation ceremonies are an integral part of the tertiary education experience and all attempts should be made to ensure that students are able to celebrate their achievements during any pandemic or natural disaster. Due to the current pandemic, post-secondary and tertiary education institutions in Trinidad and Tobago or external jurisdictions may utilise the three suggested non-traditional models when exploring convocation or graduation options for cohorts. This includes fully virtual, hybrid and public space or drive-in ceremonies. Ultimately, each institution in the future must examine its own unique situation, physical and financial resources and make the best decision in the interest of its stakeholders.

Our reference:

To reference this document please quote: ACTT (November 2020). *Position Paper: Suggested Guidelines for a Non-Traditional Convocation/Graduation Experience*. The Strategic Partnerships/Stakeholder Engagement Team, Office of the Executive Director, Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago.

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