

University of Aberdeen

Examining Research Degrees

Examination is by submission of a thesis and by oral examination.

1. The Thesis

Assessing the quality of the thesis is the most important of the examiners' functions. The standards to be attained for each degree are formulated in General Regulation 38 for research degrees, which requires that for the degree of **PhD, DPT, EdD, EngD, MD or ChM**, the thesis 'makes a distinct contribution to knowledge and affords evidence of originality as shown by the exercise of independent critical powers'; or for the degree of **MPhil** the thesis 'makes a contribution to knowledge and affords evidence of originality'; for a **one-year Master's** degree the thesis 'displays evidence of originality or that it is a satisfactory, orderly and critical exposition of existing knowledge within the field concerned'. As Regulation 40 of Schedule A – General Regulations for Research Degrees states, the one-year Master's degree can also be awarded with Distinction on the unanimous recommendation of the Examiners if they judge the thesis to be of outstanding quality overall at Master's level in terms of presentation, and, e.g., source discovery and interpretation, literature review, scholarly analysis, originality and/or contribution to knowledge. In applying these standards the examiners should bear in mind what can be properly achieved in the one, two or three years' full-time work (or part-time equivalents) which is required for the various degrees. Further, no thesis can be approved unless the thesis meets acceptable standards in the use of English, in quotation and citation, and in presentation. The Senate also expects examiners to pay appropriate attention to the candidate's use of evidence (the candidate's formal declaration that the work has been composed by him or herself) and that it is a record of work that has been done by him or herself.

Examiners may also wish to remind themselves of the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework Level descriptors for a Research Masters (SCQF Level 11) or Doctoral degrees (SCQF Level 12), depending on the degree to be assessed: www.scqf.org.uk/The%20Framework

Examiners are required to prepare independent written reports on their assessment of the thesis on the Independent Report Form (available at www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/postgraduate-research-1681). These *must* be prepared independently before the day of the oral examination but the examiners must also read each other's reports prior to the examination; they may be exchanged beforehand or brought to the examination, as may be convenient.

2. The Oral Examination

The oral examination is an integral part of the assessment for the degree, and is not to be regarded as a mere formality by either the candidate or the examiners: the oral is the culmination of the process of examination, and both candidate and examiners must recognise it as an occasion of central importance.

The primary function of the oral examination is to allow the candidate to explain, expand, and justify his or her thesis, in response to the examiners' questions. The oral examination may be used to establish a candidate's general knowledge of the field of his or her research, to establish the extent of any collaboration, to ascertain that the candidate can work independently and lead the work of others, and to confirm that the work is indeed the candidate's own. Whilst recognising teamwork and the substantial benefits of early publication it must always be possible to track the individual work of the candidate. Examiners must be able to evaluate the candidate's *role* in the work, the *process* of the experimentation and the resulting *understanding* of the science involved. The degree cannot be awarded for what is in

essence a compendium of jointly authored articles with no indication of the candidate's original contribution.

All candidates for the award of a higher degree by research are required to submit to oral examination unless there are exceptional reasons why the oral examination should be dispensed with. In such cases, the exceptional reasons must be given in detail on the Joint Report Form and be approved by the Quality Assurance Committee; dispensing with an oral for a research degree is seldom approved. If the examiners disagree in their initial assessment of the thesis, or if they are likely to recommend re-submission, an oral *must* always be held, but a telephone-conference or a video-conference oral, although not the most satisfactory procedure, is permissible when a candidate's return to Aberdeen would be difficult or impossible.

3. Arrangements and the Conduct of the Oral Examination

The **internal examiner (or internal moderator** – paragraph 10.4 refers) is responsible for arranging the oral examination. The internal will contact the external and the candidate shortly after receipt of the thesis to arrange a date which must be mutually convenient to all the examiners and the candidate, and which should normally be **within two months** of the receipt of the thesis by the examiners. The internal examiner should keep the candidate and the Registry informed if there is to be any delay in arranging a date for the oral examination (e.g. due to the external examiner being unavailable). The internal will arrange that the supervisor will be available on the date on which the oral will be held.

Oral examinations normally take place in Aberdeen but may be held elsewhere by the mutual agreement of all the examiners and the candidate. If, because of visa restrictions, overseas candidates must return home promptly, they are asked to make proper allowance for this when submitting their theses.

The room in which the examination is held should be in a University building. Arrangements should be made to ensure that the examination is free from external interruptions including the telephone, and relatively free from obtrusive noise.

The candidate, the examiners, the moderator if appointed, and the supervisor(s) *if invited*, are normally the only persons who may be present at the oral. The supervisor(s) should be available at the time of the oral examination but may attend only at the specific invitation of the examiners, and after consultation with the candidate; the internal examiner (or moderator) is responsible for ensuring that the supervisor(s) will be available.

The examiners may read each other's independent reports only when they are completed, and prior to the day of oral examination. Prior to the oral the examiners should agree on the lines of questioning to be followed at the oral, and who will lead on particular issues.

The internal and external examiners are equal as examiners, but, whilst the internal will convene the meeting, the internal will normally consider it courteous to defer to the external in the conduct of the examination. When two externals have been appointed they too are equal as examiners. The supervisor(s) if present may participate only at the invitation of the external(s), and only for points of clarification on specific matters.

While practice may be as flexible as is required, it is suggested an oral should not normally be less than one and a half-hours. When an examination lasts longer than two hours appropriate breaks must be agreed and formally recorded. If the viva is longer than 2 hours, then details of the breaks provided must be stated on the Examiners' Joint Report form, under the account of the viva. When it is envisaged that the examination will last more than 2 hours, breaks should be agreed at the very outset. If the examination runs longer than 1.5 hours, it should be stopped at that point and appropriate breaks agreed.

Candidates can be given the option to decline a break if they wish to do so, but this must also be recorded on the Examiners' Joint Report form.

At the end of the examination the candidate should be told that the examiners will proceed to discuss their report, and should be advised when to return to hear the examiners' recommendation. The candidate and the supervisor (s) (if present) should then be asked to withdraw.

If, owing to illness or other urgent and unforeseen reason, an examiner is unable to attend the oral examination, it may be postponed to a later date. If it seems likely, however, that postponement would be a serious hardship to the candidate, the Head of School should consider whether it is appropriate to appoint an alternative examiner.

4. Examiners' Reports

Immediately after the oral examination the examiners should agree on a joint report, and for this must use the Joint Report Form (available at www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/postgraduate-research-1681) which should be completed on the day of the examination. They must give an account of the oral examination on this form and make a joint recommendation of the overall result as indicated on the back of the form. All examiners must sign the Joint Report Form.

The internal examiner (or moderator) will normally submit all the forms for approval (Independent Reports and Joint Report), signed, and a list of minor corrections or major changes on the 'Post-Viva Corrections Required to Thesis form, available at (www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/postgraduate-research-1681) immediately after the oral examination, and in any case must do so within three working days. The forms should be submitted to the School Administrator for Postgraduate Research who will submit them to the Postgraduate Research Examiner Report Sharepoint for the approval of the relevant Quality Assurance Committee officer.

5. Examiners' Recommendations

Please note that the decision made by the examiners at the oral examination is a recommendation and must be approved by a member of the Quality Assurance Committee on behalf of Senate. Candidates should be told, by the examiners, of the recommendation to be made on the day of the oral examination, but they should be advised that it is a recommendation and will be put for the approval of the Quality Assurance Committee. The Registry will issue an outcome letter to the candidate once approval has been given.

If a thesis is sustained with minor corrections (see below), the decision from the oral examination must be approved by a member of the Quality Assurance Committee, but the actual corrections themselves need only be certified by internal examiner. Further approval for award of the degree is not required at the minor correction stage. It is, of course, required in the case of major corrections.

The examiners may decide that:

- (a) the thesis be sustained for the degree being examined
- (b) the thesis be sustained for the degree being examined subject to minor corrections being made by the candidate and approved by one of the examiners, normally within three months (up to 6 months is permissible upon the recommendation of the Examiners). This recommendation should be made where minor corrections are either (a) factual, typographic, limited in extent and can be achieved immediately after the oral, or (b) where there is no doubt that the thesis is of a standard for the degree sought but corrections are needed which should not require major re-working nor re-interpretation of the intellectual content of the thesis.

- (c) the thesis be not sustained in its present form but that the candidate be given the opportunity to re-submit in a revised form for the same degree within a stated period which should not exceed 12 months
- (d) the thesis does not meet the standards for the degree being examined but does meet the standards for the award of a lower degree and the candidate be awarded the latter degree without further examination
- (e) the candidate may re-submit the thesis in a revised form for a lower degree within a stated period which shall not exceed twelve months
- (f) the thesis be not sustained

The one year Master's degree can also be awarded with Distinction on the unanimous recommendation of the examiners.

Option (b)

When the recommendation is that the thesis be sustained, subject to minor corrections, a copy of the minor corrections required by the examiners should be lodged with the Registry along with the report forms. Although this decision must be approved by the Quality Assurance Committee, only one of the examiners, *usually the internal*, is required to check that the necessary corrections have been completed (the 'Certification of Corrections' form, which should be submitted by the examiner can be downloaded from <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/postgraduate-research-1681>). Minor corrections should be carried out within three months. When corrections have been made, and certified by the internal examiner, no further approval for the award is required. When corrections have been made, and certified by the internal examiner, no further approval for the award is required. A pdf copy of the final thesis must be submitted by the student to the library at cataloguing@abdn.ac.uk.

Please note, the internal moderator is **not** permitted to certify that the candidate has completed the minor corrections. In the case where there are two external examiners plus an internal moderator, one of the externals must be chosen to certify that the minor corrections have been completed.

Option (c)

Examiners will often come to the oral examination with certain doubts. One of the functions of the oral is to allow the candidate to explain, expand, and justify his or her thesis and if the candidate satisfies the examiners' reservations then the examiners may recommend that the thesis be sustained subject to minor corrections being made by the candidate. What is minor is a matter of judgement, but if it is the case that one examiner will be able to check that corrections have been made then the recommendation that the thesis be sustained subject to minor corrections may be appropriate. If, however, an examiner would require to reread the whole or a significant part of the thesis, or to check every quotation and reference again, then the recommendation should probably be that the candidate be given the opportunity to resubmit the thesis in a revised form, either for the same degree or for a lower degree, within a stated period, which should not exceed twelve months. A full account of the reasons must be provided by the examiners on the Joint Report Form. When resubmission is recommended, the examiners should also make recommendations about the conditions for resubmission, and must provide the candidate with a written statement about what is required to bring the thesis up to an appropriate standard for the award of the degree. A copy of this statement should be lodged with the Registry along with the report forms, and this statement will be given to the candidate. The candidate should consult with his or her supervisor when revising the thesis. The candidate and the examiners should not be in contact during this time.

6. Resubmission of a Thesis

Only one resubmission of a thesis will be permitted, irrespective of the degree being considered. The resubmitted thesis is submitted to the Registry. Resubmission requires re-examination of the thesis by

all the examiners who make a joint report using the Resubmission Joint Report Form (available at www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/postgraduate-research-1681). Normally, all those appointed to examine the original submission will be required to examine the re-submitted thesis.

The re-submitted thesis should be judged against the corrections stipulated as necessary by the examiners following the oral examination for the first submission. No further criticism of other material or aspects of the thesis passed as satisfactory at the first examination can be introduced at a later stage.

Following re-submission the examiners may recommend that (a) the thesis be sustained, (b) the thesis be sustained with minor corrections, (c) the thesis does not meet the requirements for the degree being examined, but that it does have merits which satisfy the standards required for the award of a lower degree appropriate to the discipline in which the candidate is registered or (d) that the thesis be not sustained. (The one year Master's degree can also be awarded with Distinction on the unanimous recommendation of the examiners.) The examiners cannot recommend that the candidate be given another opportunity to resubmit in a revised or modified form as a thesis may only be submitted twice.

Where a thesis has been resubmitted, a second oral examination will be held only if the Quality Assurance Committee on behalf of Senate approves a proposal to that effect, normally on the recommendation of the examiners. The examiners should clearly state in their first Joint Report that a second oral is being recommended. The re-submitted thesis should be judged against the corrections stipulated as necessary by the examiners following the oral examination for the first submission. No further criticism of other material or aspects of the thesis passed as satisfactory at the first examination can be introduced at a later stage. However, if a second oral examination is deemed necessary, the thesis as a whole, and not just the parts that were corrected, will be the subject of the oral. Thus, candidates should therefore be prepared to answer questions on any part of their thesis.

7. Consideration of Examiners' Reports and Notification of Outcome

The examiners' recommendation is considered by a member of the Quality Assurance Committee who has delegated power to recommend to the Senate whether a thesis be sustained and the relevant degree be conferred or whether the thesis be referred or failed. Once the recommendation of the examiners has been approved by a member of the Quality Assurance Committee the Registry will write to the candidate informing him/her of the outcome of the examination.

8. Examination Procedures for Joint Degrees with Curtin University

Joint PhDs under Alliance agreement with Curtin University require students whose home institution is Aberdeen to undertake a Viva examination by two internal examiners – one from each institution – and two external examiners – both external to Aberdeen and Curtin.

Students studying under this agreement whose home institution is Curtin may not require an internal examiner from Curtin. Instead, Curtin home students are permitted to be examined by three examiners who are all external to both institutions, plus one examiner from Aberdeen.

Please note that the Viva examination is expected to proceed according to the normal procedures for examination of research degrees at the University of Aberdeen, with the possible outcomes from the examination remain as they are for all research degrees.

All four examiners must prepare independent reports prior to the viva and must sign off the joint report. The report paperwork should be submitted to the PGR Examiner Sharepoint system for QAC approval, in the same way as is done for all research degrees.

9. Roles within the Examination Procedure

Head of School

- Nominates examiners after consultation with the candidate's supervisor

Internal Examiner

- Arranges oral examination with external examiner and candidate (ideally within 2 months of thesis being submitted), and makes sure supervisor is available on the day.
- Discusses with the external examiner whether to invite the supervisor to the oral examination .
- Informs the candidate of any delays in oral examination.
- Ensures University procedures are followed:
 - Makes sure Independent Reports are completed and exchange before the oral examination
 - Makes sure that the candidate is informed on the day of the recommendation to be made by the examiners.
 - Makes sure Joint Report is completed on day of oral examination and submitted to the Registry within three working days of the oral examination, along with both Independent Reports and corrections required, if required. The internal must ensure that the paperwork is completed and signed by both examiners.
- Signs off minor corrections as complete.
- Responsible for liaising with the external if any issues arise with reports, i.e. missing signatures etc.

Internal Moderator

- The Internal Moderator is required for Quality Assurance purposes and is there to ensure that the University's procedures are followed. The internal moderator will perform all the tasks stated above for the internal examiner, except examining the thesis.
- Please note, the internal moderator is **not** permitted to sign off a candidate's minor corrections. This must be one of the externals. The internal moderator must ensure that one external is designated to check the minor corrections and sign off the appropriate paperwork.

Registry

- Send nomination form to School for completion upon receipt of Intention to Submit.
- Send thesis to examiners upon receipt (the thesis will be sent as soon as possible from when it is submitted, providing the nomination of examiners has been approved).
- Issues letter detailing the outcome of the oral examination to the candidate from oral examination once reports are approved. A further letter will be issued once a minor corrections form is received from the internal examiner certifying that the corrections have been made.
- Will liaise with the internal examiner/moderator if reports/corrections forms remain outstanding for longer than the time frame for submission stipulated above.
- Receives reports from internal examiner/moderator post-oral examination and seeks QAC approval for the recommendation.
- Liaises with internal examiner/moderator if there are any issues arising from the reports. For example, if reports have been submitted without signatures, the Registry will contact the internal and ask that signed reports be supplied. It would be for the Internal to then liaise with the external.