

Guidance Notes for the Oral Examination of Research Degree Candidates 2017

The University's *Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations* define the conditions under which the examination of research students will take place and the requirements expected of the candidate and the examiners. The following guidelines are intended to assist all those involved in the examination process in carrying out their responsibilities.

1. Arrangements for the Oral Examination

- 1.1 Before arrangements can be made for the oral examination of any candidate, examiners must have been approved by the Board of Studies for Research Degrees in accordance with the *Research Degree Regulations*.
- 1.2 In addition, a senior academic member of University staff with previous research degree examining experience (and no prior relationship with the candidate or their research project) will be selected by the Research Degrees Administrator (and confirmed by the Exec Dean – R&GS or the Chair of the Board) from a list previously approved by the Board of Studies for Research Degrees, to fulfil the **non-examining** role of **independent chair**¹. The role of the independent chair is to ensure that the examination is conducted fairly and in accordance with the *Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations* and these *Guidance Notes* and to ensure that all examiners are given the opportunity to question the candidate.
- 1.3 Oral examinations shall normally be arranged for at least six weeks after receipt of the thesis by the examiners, providing that all examiners are satisfied that the thesis forms a satisfactory basis for the examination and that they have completed a preliminary recommendation form signifying that this is their view.
- 1.4 The Director of Studies and the Research Degrees Administrator shall agree between them how to liaise with the examiners and the independent chair, the candidate and other supervisors to arrange a mutually convenient date, time and venue for the oral examination and to ensure that all parties are informed accordingly.
- 1.5 The Research Degrees Administrator shall ensure that all necessary documents and forms² are made available to all examiners and the independent chair before commencement of the examination.

2. Preliminary Meeting prior to the Oral Examination

- 2.1 A preliminary meeting of the examiners and the independent chair should be

¹ To avoid potential conflicts of interest in the event of an appeal, the Assistant Vice Chancellor (QA), the Chair of the Board of Studies for Research Degrees and the Exec Dean – R&GS shall not be permitted to fulfill this role.

² The Thesis or equivalent; completed Preliminary Report and Recommendation forms; these *Guidance Notes*; *Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations*; blank Final Report and Recommendation form; External Examiner expenses claim form; Independent Chair's report form.

scheduled to take place before the oral examination itself in order to discuss the approach to be taken. At the discretion of the examiners, the supervisor(s) may be invited to observe these discussions and may, either during or subsequent to the preliminary discussions, be given the opportunity to clarify any aspects of the research programme and the conditions under which it took place.

- 2.2 An agreed range of issues upon which the candidate should be questioned and an outline plan for the conduct of the oral examination should be drawn up during this preliminary meeting.

3. The Oral Examination itself

- 3.1 The candidate (and any observers³) should be invited into the room. The independent chair's obligations at this juncture are to:

- Introduce him/herself as the independent chair.
- Introduce the examiners to the candidate.
- Refer to any other persons invited to observe the proceedings (see below) and confirm that the candidate is comfortable with their presence.
- Explain that the examiners have been appointed in accordance with the *Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations*.
- Explain that their own role as independent chair is to:
 - Ensure that the examination is conducted fairly and in accordance with the *Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations* and these *Guidance Notes*.
 - Ensure that all examiners are given the opportunity to question the candidate.
- Further explain that as an independent, non-examining chair s/he has a neutral role in the assessment process itself, takes no part in the actual assessment of the thesis and cannot offer specialist discipline knowledge but only knowledge of regulations, procedures, policy and practice.
- Ensure that the examiners and the candidate have seen a copy of the *Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations* and these *Guidance Notes* and explain that they govern the conduct of the examination process.
- Describe the agreed plan for the conduct of the oral examination.

- 3.2 Examiners should then pursue their agreed enquiries and make notes on the candidate's responses where appropriate. If a candidate does not understand the purpose of a question they may ask for clarification and expect to receive it. Questions may relate both to the substantive content of the thesis, aspects of the research methodology and wider issues in the subject area which may have a bearing on the research. The external examiner(s) would be expected to play a significant role in the questioning of the candidate but the internal examiner(s) must be equally entitled to question the candidate.

³ At the discretion of the candidate, supervisors, advisers and other staff and research students may be present as observers during the oral examination. Supervisors and advisers may be asked by the examiners to clarify any aspects of the research programme and the conditions under which it took place. If none of the supervisors are present then they should be available in the event that the examiners do wish to seek such clarification during or subsequent to the examination. Otherwise, no-one should intervene in the examination process in any way, nor should anyone at all assist the candidate to answer questions posed by the examiners. Observers may be asked to leave the examination room at the discretion of the examiners.

- 3.3 The independent chair may interject to provide advice during the examination on regulations, procedures, policy and practice, or where there is any activity that is not fair or in accordance with the *Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations* or these *Guidance Notes*.
- 3.4 Once the examiners are satisfied that they have explored all issues related to the thesis, the independent chair should ask any supervisors and other observers present to leave the room, then ask the candidate if they wish to make a final statement about their research and if they feel that there are areas which they have not had the chance to explain fully.
- 3.5 The independent chair should then bring the proceedings to a close and explain to the candidate that the examiners may need time to discuss their findings in private before giving preliminary feedback to the candidate and supervisor about the outcome. The candidate should be informed of when the preliminary feedback and recommendation will be made known to them.

4. Outcome of the Oral Examination: Recommendations of Examiners

- 4.1 The *Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations* define the possible outcomes which may follow the oral examination and how these outcomes should be recorded on the recommendation form(s). In arriving at decisions a consensus of opinion should be sought but where this is not possible the procedures defined in the *Research Degree Regulations* shall apply. In such cases the examiners (in their respective final recommendation forms) and the independent chair (in their report form on the conduct of the oral examination), should comment on the lack of consensus, what attempts were made to reconcile their conflicting views, and why the disagreement could not be resolved.
- 4.2 Examiners should note that the Board of Studies for Research Degrees may accept either a majority recommendation (provided the majority includes at least one external examiner) or accept the recommendation of the external examiner. On this basis therefore, it is expected that the opinion of the external examiner(s) should be given due weight in the assessment of the candidate and the final decision which is arrived at.
- 4.3 The examiners should agree how the oral recommendation will be delivered to the candidate; normally, an external examiner would provide the detailed oral feedback but an internal examiner may do so and it may be agreed that the independent chair deliver the 'headline' outcome whilst the examiners provide more detailed comment and explanation.
- 4.4 The independent chair should then invite the candidate back into the examination room (accompanied by any observers if the candidate so wishes) and initiate the agreed process of delivering the oral recommendation; all examiners and the independent chair may participate by providing comment and explanation.
- 4.5 When the candidate has received the oral recommendation the independent chair should make it clear that the examiners are required to produce a written report for the Board of Studies for Research Degrees and that the examiners' decision is, formally, a recommendation to the Board which must be confirmed by the Board at a subsequent meeting and which will then be communicated to the candidate by letter.

5. Following the Oral Examination

- 5.1 Follow-up action required by the candidate should be made clear on the final recommendation form(s) and any additional explanatory detail should also be passed to the Research Degrees Administrator by the independent chair, or by (one of) the examiners, for transmission to the candidate (whether or not they might have received it previously). The examiners should agree and record on their final recommendation form(s) who will take responsibility for receiving and approving any changes required to the thesis.
- 5.2 The independent chair should return the examiners' report form(s) and their own report to the Research Degrees Administrator for presentation to the Board of Studies for Research Degrees.

6. Re-examination and Appeal

- 6.1 If the examiners determine that a re-examination is necessary, the procedures defined in the *Postgraduate Research Degrees Regulations* will apply. Following receipt of the recommendations of the examiners, the Board of Studies for Research Degrees will specify the conditions under which any re-examination will take place. The candidate will be informed of these conditions by the Secretary to the Board and will, if required, be able to consult the Research Degrees Administrator, the Exec Dean – R&GS, or the Chair of the Board of Studies for Research Degrees for further guidance.
- 6.2 Appeals procedures and the grounds for appeal in relation to research degrees are defined in the University's *Appeals Regulations And Procedures*. If required the Postgraduate Research Manager shall advise candidates on the procedures and inform the Chair of the Board of Studies for Research Degrees and the Chair of Senate of any individual cases which arise.

7. Procedural and Regulatory Matters in the Examination Process

- 7.1 Provision of the necessary documents and forms, shall be dealt with by the Research Degrees Administrator. Advice on the interpretation of the regulations and procedural matters may be sought from the Research Degrees Administrator or the Exec Dean – R&GS.

GUIDANCE NOTES FOR THE ORAL EXAMINATION OF RESEARCH DEGREE CANDIDATES	
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