

# University of Edinburgh: Guidelines for the Examination of Research Degrees

## 1. Procedure and Timetable for the Examination

1.1 When a candidate indicates to the College Office that he or she is about to submit a thesis, the Head of School is asked by the College Office to nominate examiners. Each thesis is examined by a minimum of two examiners (one internal and one external to the University). In certain circumstances, more than one internal or external examiner may be required or desirable. Examples of these circumstances are given below.

[Action: College Office and Head of School]

1.2 At the University of Edinburgh, the research degrees of PhD and MPhil are examined through a two-stage process in which each examiner, acting independently, submits an initial ('Part I') report on the thesis before the oral examination is held. Following the oral, the examiners are asked to submit a joint ('Part II') report on the thesis.

1.3 The normal expectation is that the first part of the process will be completed within two or three months. Examiners are asked not to accept an invitation to act unless they are confident that they are able to read and assess the thesis within this period. The time scale for the oral examination will be determined largely by the availability of all those involved, but lengthy delays between the first and second stages of the process should be avoided where possible. If a delay appears likely, examiners are asked to notify the relevant College Office of the reasons. Candidates should be advised by the internal examiner within a month if there is any difficulty about examining the thesis within a reasonable time.

[Action: external and internal examiners]

1.4 There is sometimes a delay between the examiners being appointed and the candidate actually submitting the thesis. If the commitments of either examiner change significantly in the intervening period, with the result that a delay in the examination process is likely, the examiner should contact the College Office so that consideration may be given to appointing an alternative examiner. If, because of visa restrictions, overseas candidates must return home promptly, they are asked to make proper allowance for this when submitting their theses.

[Action: external and internal examiners, supervisors and candidate]

1.5 Graduation ceremonies are held in June and November/December. In addition, candidates may be awarded their degrees, in absentia, in February, May and October.

## 2. Appointment of Examiners

2.1 Before submitting nominations to the College Postgraduate Studies Committee, the Head of School should consult the candidate's supervisors over the choice of examiners. Students may volunteer the names of possible examiners, and should inform the principal supervisor if any special problems are likely to arise if particular examiners are appointed. Any comments will be taken into account but students have no right to determine the Head of School's eventual recommendation, and therefore have no right to veto any particular appointment.

[Action: Head of School, supervisors]

2.2 The external examiner may be approached informally by the Head of School or an academic colleague to establish his or her willingness to act. However, examiners are formally appointed by the College Postgraduate Studies Committee, at which time they are sent a copy of the abstract of the thesis.

[Action: Head of School and College Office]

2.3 The external examiner is appointed for his or her specialist knowledge, whereas the internal examiner may be a generalist. The internal examiner will normally, but not

necessarily, come from the candidate's own school. Internal examiners must be fully conversant with the procedures for viva voce examinations and the University and the relevant University regulations and, in particular, with the recommendations available to the examiners following the oral examination. It is the Head of School's responsibility to ensure that the internal examiner is aware of his or her duties and responsibilities. Heads of school must ensure that training is made available to inexperienced internal examiners, and that the internal examiner is aware of all his/her duties in the examination process (see section 12).  
[Action: Head of School and internal examiner]

2.4 In the interests of the integrity of the examination procedures, heads of school should be aware that all nominations should take into account any potential conflict of interest and the ability of the nominated examiners to provide an impartial assessment of the submitted work. No external examiner may be appointed who has:

- a current or previous kin relationship with the candidate
  - a current or previous close personal friendship with the candidate
  - an undue personal interest in any work that figures significantly in the candidate's thesis
  - been a staff or student member of the University or of an Associated Institution, or has held an honorary status in the University, at any time within the past three years.
- [Action: Head of School]

2.5 Appointment of more than one internal or external examiners

2.5.1 At least one external and one internal examiner must be appointed. A second internal examiner or a non-examining chair must be appointed where the nominated internal examiner is acting for the first time.  
[Action: Head of School]

2.5.2 In the exceptional circumstance of the second supervisor acting as an internal examiner, a second internal examiner must be appointed. The preferred alternative in such cases is to consider the appointment of two specialist external examiners and a generalist internal examiner.

2.5.3 In particular cases, such as the examination of an interdisciplinary topic, a second external examiner may be appointed.

2.5.4 Where a member of staff of the University is a candidate there must be two external examiners and one internal examiner. Where a candidate has been a member of staff of the University at any point during their research degree study the College Postgraduate Studies Committee should consider appointing two external and one internal examiners. For candidates in either of the above categories neither the Head of School nor the postgraduate director shall be appointed as an examiner without the express permission of the Senatus Postgraduate Studies Committee.  
[Action: Head of School and College Office]

### **3. Examination and grounds for the award of the degree**

3.1 In the first stage of the examination process, each examiner is asked to comment independently (by submitting the 'Part I report') on whether the thesis meets the criteria for the PhD degree or for the MPhil as laid out in the regulations. Examiners are asked to answer six specific questions and to make a preliminary assessment of the thesis. The reports should be sufficiently detailed to enable members of the relevant College PGS Committee to assess the scope and significance of the thesis and to appreciate its strengths and weaknesses. They should, as far as possible, be expressed in terms that are intelligible to those who are not specialists in the particular field of the thesis. The reports should include a statement of what the thesis purports to do and what it actually achieves.  
[Action: external and internal examiners]

3.2 The examiners' assessment of the scope of the research topic should take into account what may reasonably be expected of an adequately supervised, capable and diligent PhD student after three or at most four years of full-time study.

3.3 Examiners are asked to assess whether the thesis:

- is an original work making a significant contribution to knowledge in or understanding of the field of study;
- contains material worthy of publication;
- shows adequate knowledge of the field of study and relevant literature; it shows the exercise of critical judgement with regard to both the candidate's work and that of other scholars in the same general field;
- contains material which presents a unified body of work such as could reasonably be achieved on the basis of three years' postgraduate study and research;
- is satisfactory in its literary presentation;
- gives full and adequate references and has a coherent structure understandable to a scholar in the same general field with regard to intentions, background, methods and conclusions.

[Action: external and internal examiners]

3.4 A PhD thesis may not normally exceed 100,000 words in length (70,000 words in the College of Science and Engineering) unless a special case has been made and approved in advance of the examination by the College Postgraduate Studies Committee on the grounds that this is required for the adequate treatment of the particular topic. Similarly, an MPhil thesis should not normally exceed 60,000 words in length (50,000 words in the College of Science and Engineering). The maximum length refers to the main body of the thesis. This body includes the main text, prefatory material, footnotes and references, but does not include material in the appendices. Candidates should be aware, however, that the material in any appendices may be examinable at the discretion of the examiners.

[Action: supervisor, candidate]

3.5 Candidates are encouraged to publish their work, and provision is made for articles and papers to be bound in the thesis. 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 a compendium of jointly authored articles with no indication of the candidate's original contribution.

## 4. The Oral Examination

4.1 The second stage of the examination process is the oral examination. An oral examination is an integral part of the assessment and must be held in all but the most exceptional circumstances. Care should be taken to avoid giving the impression at any time that the oral examination is in any sense a mere formality. The rare recommendation to waive the oral is subject to the approval of the Senatus Postgraduate Studies Committee. The absence of the candidate from the UK is not an acceptable reason for waiving the oral. The oral need not be held in the UK if this is convenient for all the examiners and the candidate, and when appropriate arrangements can be made (e.g. when attending the same conference overseas). In certain circumstances it may be appropriate, with the agreement of all parties, to hold the examination by video link.

4.2 The Head of School must identify who will chair the oral examination. The appointment of a non-examining chair is recommended (but not required) in all cases in order to ensure consistency between examinations and fairness to the views of both the examiners and the candidate. The non-examining chair should be a person of appropriate seniority and experience from within the school. The appointment of a non-examining chair is mandatory if the internal examiner has no previous experience of PhD/MPhil examination. The non-examining chair should ensure that all parties to the examination process fully understand the

expectations of them and should offer assistance and facilitation where necessary. The non-examining chair is not expected to express a substantive opinion on the merits of the thesis. [Action: Head of School, non-examining chair]

4.3 The Head of School must either make all the necessary arrangements for the oral examination or must clearly delegate this responsibility to the internal examiner or the non-examining chair of the oral examination. In cases where the internal examiner is not from the candidate's own school, the Head of School must nominate someone from his/her school to make the necessary arrangements. Students should be advised of the names of their examiners at the earliest opportunity. The arrangements, including the date and place of the oral, the chairing of it, and the names of all those participating in it, must be provided in advance and with due notice, to all those who are to be present (i.e. the candidate, all examiners and any observer).

[Action: Head of School, internal examiner or non-examining chair]

4.4 The normal expectation is that the non-examining chair will introduce and chair the oral. Where a non-examining chair has not been appointed the internal examiner should chair the oral.

[Action: non-examining chair or internal examiner]

4.5 Through the oral examination, the examiners are asked to assess jointly whether the thesis, and the candidate's defence of it, satisfy the requirements for the award of the degree; the regulations are set out below and on the 'Part II report' form.

4.6 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 and to confirm that the work is indeed the candidate's own. [Action: external and internal examiners]

4.7 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 College PGS Committee should consider whether it is appropriate to appoint an alternative examiner or whether it is feasible (with the consent of the external examiner) for the internal examiner's comments and questions to be put to the candidate by another member of the University staff. On no account should an oral examination proceed in the absence of the external examiner.

[Action: Head of School and College Office]

4.8 Attendance of the supervisor as an observer at the oral, and his/her role

4.8.1 The principal or second supervisor may, with the agreement of the candidate, attend the oral examination as an observer. On such occasions, the examiners may invite the supervisor to comment on specific matters, but the supervisor should leave the examination room with the candidate and is not entitled to participate in the discussion and decision of the examiners. If a candidate lodges an objection to the supervisor's presence at the oral examination, the supervisor should not attend.

[Action: supervisor(s)]

4.8.2 In the case of collaborative CASE studentship holders it may be appropriate for the industrial supervisor to attend as an observer.

4.8.3 If there are revisions to be made to the thesis, these will be conveyed to the candidate and to the supervisor who should confirm with the candidate his/her understanding of the revisions to be made.

[Action: supervisor]

## **5. After the Oral Examination**

5.1 At the end of the oral examination, the examiners may, if they have agreed a recommendation, indicate their recommendation to the candidate. The examiners must

stress, however, that their recommendation will require to be considered and approved by the College Postgraduate Studies Committee. The committee has the power to modify or, exceptionally, overturn the examiners' recommendation. Formal confirmation of the outcome of the examination will be sent to the candidate by the College Office and Registry informed. If amendments or corrections are required to the thesis, or if the thesis requires to be resubmitted, details of the changes required will be sent to the candidate by the College Office.

[Action: College Office]

5.2 If the amendments or corrections required to the thesis are solely of a typographical nature, and the candidate is clearly informed of what these are, the candidate may proceed to make these corrections and have them verified by the internal examiner before the College Postgraduate Studies Committee has met. The committee, however, retains the power to modify or, exceptionally, to overturn the examiners' recommendation.

5.3 Following the oral examination, the examiners are required to complete and sign the joint Part II report form. The internal examiner should send the form to the College Office. The report should again include a brief statement of what the thesis purports to do and an account of what it achieves. Evaluative comments should be as full as possible and should include an indication of strengths as well as limitations, weaknesses and lacunae. The candidate's performance in the oral examination should receive due comment, and his or her explanations for any deficiencies in the thesis should receive appropriate mention. The joint report will be made available, in its entirety, to both the candidate and the candidate's supervisor. This is in order to provide guidance on the general quality of the thesis and level of the candidate's knowledge.

[Action: examiners]

5.4 The chair of the oral examination should ensure that the Part II report gives a full account of the examiners' views. If there are significant discrepancies between the examiners' comments in the Part I reports and their joint comments in Part II, the report should indicate how these differences were reconciled. If the views of one examiner have been given precedence over those of the other, the reasons for this should be explained. In the unlikely event of examiners failing to reach agreement, separate recommendations may be made and will be subject to arbitration by the College Postgraduate Studies Committee (see also the Postgraduate (Research) Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees).

[Action: examiners/chair]

5.5 Both internal and external examiners are asked to complete Part III of the report form giving their opinions of the examination process.

## **6. Outcome of the Oral Examination**

The various recommendations available to the examiners are set out on the joint Part II report form and examiners are asked to delete those sections which do not apply. It is essential to make clear which recommendation is being put forward to the College Postgraduate Studies Committee by quoting the regulation number and showing any further period of study.

### **6.1 Award Degree**

6.1.1 Most students choose to submit the thesis in 'temporary binding' at the outset. If the thesis is being recommended for the award of the degree but has been submitted in temporary binding, the candidate is required to formally submit a 'final' version of the thesis to the University. The candidate cannot graduate until they have formally submitted the final version of their thesis to the University. Candidates who began study on or after 1st September 2005 are obliged to submit one copy of the final version of their thesis in electronic form in addition to one hardbound copy. Although candidates who began their studies before 1 September 2005 are not required to submit their thesis electronically they are free to choose this option and indeed, are encouraged to do so. If they choose not to submit a copy electronically, then two hard bound copies of the thesis must be submitted to the College

Office. For further details refer to section 5.12 of the Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students. Hardbound versions of the thesis must conform to the Regulatory Standards for the Format and Binding of Theses and Portfolios of Musical Compositions (Section 3, Postgraduate (Research) Degree Assessment Regulations).  
[Action: internal examiner]

## 6.2 Candidate to make minor amendments

6.2.1 If there are minor revisions or editorial corrections to be made to the thesis these should be conveyed to the candidate and confirmed with the supervisor. The revised thesis is then examined by the internal examiner(s) (and by the external examiner if s/he so wishes), who must certify in writing that the corrections have been made. [Action: internal examiner]

6.2.2 One copy of the thesis should be handed back to the candidate. The internal examiner should retain the other copy to facilitate checking of amendments or corrections when the revised version is submitted. (If the modifications are very minor and can be dealt with by hand, both copies should be returned to the candidate for amendment). Once the candidate has carried out the specified changes, they are formally required to submit a 'final' version of the thesis to the University. The candidate cannot graduate until they have formally submitted the final version of their thesis to the University. Candidates who began study on or after 1st September 2005 are obliged to submit one copy of the final version of their thesis in electronic form in addition to one hardbound copy. Although candidates who began their studies before 1 September 2005 are not required to submit their thesis electronically they are free to choose this option and indeed, are encouraged to do so. If they choose not to submit a copy electronically, then two hard bound copies of the thesis must be submitted to the College Office.

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The examiner(s) must certify in writing that all the required corrections have been made. By checking the thesis in its permanent binding or by checking the copy that has been lodged in the Edinburgh Research Archive, the examiners can ensure that the 'final' thesis, as submitted to the University, is the same in every respect as the one examined.  
[Action: internal and, possibly, external examiner]

## 6.3 Resubmission of a thesis

6.3.1 Where the examiners decide that substantial revision is required and recommend resubmission of a thesis, the Part II report must include a clear and, if necessary, a detailed written statement of the aspects which require revision. The resubmitted thesis will be judged only against this written statement. 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. The written statement and the aspects of the thesis which require revision must be approved by the College Postgraduate Studies Committee and cannot subsequently be altered without the agreement of that Committee. The examiners should specify the further period of study under supervision (maximum 24 months) taking account of the candidate's work and other circumstances.

[Action: external and internal examiners]

6.3.2 A candidate is permitted only one opportunity to resubmit his or her thesis. Thereafter, at most, s/he may make only minor editorial corrections or correct stated minor deficiencies. It is important, therefore, that the candidate and his/her supervisor are quite clear what is required to meet the concerns expressed by the examiners.

6.3.3 In the event of resubmission, the examiners will normally be expected to agree to re-examine the thesis in due course. A second oral examination need not be held in those cases

where the initial oral examination was considered to be satisfactory. A second oral must be held, however, if it appears that the candidate is likely to fail.

6.3.4 If resubmission is recommended, only one copy of the thesis should be returned to the candidate. The other should be retained by the internal examiner to facilitate checking of changes when the thesis is resubmitted. [Action: internal examiner]

#### 6.4 Rejection of thesis, or downgrading of PhD to MPhil

6.4.1 Where the examiners decide that the thesis is incapable of revision to meet the criteria for the degree, or where they recommend that a thesis submitted for PhD should be passed only at MPhil level, the candidate will be given, on request, a statement detailing why the thesis was not accepted. The Part II report should therefore include such a statement. [Action: external and internal examiners]

6.4.2 If the examiners recommend failure of the thesis, they should return both copies of the thesis to the College Office. Both copies will, in due course, be returned to the candidate if requested. [Action: internal examiner]

## 7. Copyright and Confidentiality

The University and the candidate reserve the copyright and all other intellectual property rights on both the thesis and the abstract. The contents of the thesis and the abstract are proprietary, and examiners must hold them in strict confidence. No copies may be taken, nor disclosure of the contents be made without the prior written permission of the University given by the Secretary to the University and the candidate. Examiners must hold the contents of their joint report in confidence and not disclose them other than by submission to the University.

## 8. Appeals against the result of an Examination

Candidates who are dissatisfied with the result of an examination have the right of appeal. A candidate may appeal on the grounds of

- (a) substantial information which is directly relevant to his/her performance and which for good reason was not available to the examiners when their decision was taken;
- (b) the alleged improper conduct of the examination or
- (c) evidence of prejudice or lack of due diligence in the examination on the part of any examiners.

The University does not normally question the academic judgement of the examiners but may consider appeals on grounds such as procedural irregularity, bias or inadequate assessment. Examiners will be invited to comment on specific issues.

A candidate must lodge his or her appeal within six weeks of the results having been made known to the candidate by the College Office.

## 9. Payment of Fees and Expenses

The external examiner's claim for travelling expenses will be processed as soon as it arrives; payment should normally be received within a month. Arrangements for payment of the fee

will not be made until the oral examination has been carried out and the Part II report has been approved by the College Postgraduate Studies Committee.

## 10. Summary of Responsibilities

### 10.1 Responsibilities of the Head of School

- 1.1, 2.5 to nominate examiners;
- 2.1 to consult with supervisor and candidate over choice of examiners;
- 2.2 to establish informally the willingness of the external examiner to act;
- 2.3 to ensure that the internal examiner is appropriately trained and advised;
- 2.4 to ensure the impartiality of examiners;
- 4.2 to identify the chair of the oral examination including making the appointment of a non-examining chair where so decided
- 4.3, 4.4 to make necessary arrangements for the oral examination or to delegate this responsibility to the internal examiner or non-examining chair;
- 4.7 to consider, with the College office, alternative arrangements for an oral examination in the event of an emergency.

### 10.2 Responsibilities of the external examiner

- 1.3, 1.4 to ensure availability for the whole of the examination process;
- 3.1-3.4 to undertake an initial assessment of thesis and submit Part I report independently before oral examination;
- 4 to conduct an oral examination;
- 5.2, 5.3 to complete Part II report forms showing recommended outcome; to ensure that clear and comprehensive comments and further requirements are submitted to the College Office;
- 5.5 to complete Part III of the report form on the examination process;
- 6.2.1 if candidate is to make minor amendments and the external examiner wishes to see these, to certify that corrections have been made;
- 6.3.1-6.3.4 if candidate is to resubmit his/her thesis, to conduct a re-examination of the thesis;
- 6.4 if the candidate's thesis is to fail or to be submitted for a lower degree, to prepare an explanatory statement for candidate

### 10.3 Responsibilities of the internal examiner

- 1.3, 1.4 to ensure availability for the whole of the examination process; and to keep candidate informed of any delays;
- 2.3 to ensure familiarity with the University's regulations and possible outcomes of the oral examination; to seek advice if needed;
- 3.1-3.4 to undertake an initial assessment of thesis and submit Part I report independently before oral examination;
- 3.4, 3.5, 4 to conduct an oral examination;
- 4.3, 4.4 where an non-examining chair has not been appointed, to arrange the date and place and to introduce and chair the oral examination
- 5.2, 5.3 to complete Part II report forms showing recommended outcome, and to ensure that all examiners sign this report form; if resubmission is required, to ensure clear and comprehensive requirements are submitted to the College Office;
- 5.5 to complete Part III of the report form on the examination process;
- 6.1.1, 6.2.2 if degree is to be awarded, to check that the correct and 'final' version of the thesis has been formally submitted to the University;
- 6.2.1 if the candidate is to make minor amendments, to certify that corrections have been made and to check that the correct and 'final' version of the thesis has been formally submitted to the University;
- 6.3.1-6.3.4 if the candidate is to resubmit his/her thesis, to conduct a re-examination of the thesis. Retain one copy of the original thesis for checking;
- 6.4 if the candidate's thesis is to fail or to be submitted for a lower degree, to prepare an explanatory statement for candidate and return both theses to the College Office.

#### 10.4 Responsibilities of the supervisor

- 1.4 to ensure adequate time is allowed for the examination of a thesis if a candidate has visa restrictions;
- 2.1 to ensure candidate is consulted over possible examiners;
- 3.4 to ensure that the candidate is aware of the length restrictions on a thesis
- 4.8.1 to attend the oral, as an observer, if so invited;
- 4.8.3 to confirm with examiners an understanding of any requirements for revision or resubmission, and to discuss these with the candidate.

#### 10.5 Responsibilities of the non-examining chair (where appointed)

- 4.2 to ensure all parties fully understand the expectations of the oral and the ensuing processes;
- 4.3 to make all such arrangements for oral as delegated by Head of School;
- 4.4 to introduce and chair the proceedings of the oral;
- 5.4 to ensure that the examiners' views are fully conveyed in the Part II report, including an explanation of how any differences of view between the examiners were resolved.

#### 10.6 Responsibilities of the college office

- to ensure each candidate receives a copy of the necessary documentation ('Notice of Intention to Present a Thesis for Examination', 'Access to a Thesis and Publication of Abstract', six copies of the 'Abstract of a Thesis' and a copy of the current Postgraduate Study Programme or an extract of the relevant regulation);
- 1.1 to request the nomination of examiners from a Head of School;
- 1.3, 1.4 to monitor the timetable of individual oral examinations;
- 2.2, 2.5 to appoint examiners through CPGSC;
- 4.7 in the event of an emergency, to consider alternative arrangements for an oral examination;
- 5.1 to advise the candidate of the outcome of the examination and report to Registry;
- to send the Part II form to the candidate and his/her supervisor;
- to oversee the handling and final receipt of two bound copies of a thesis for lodging in the library OR to liaise with the Library to ensure that the 'final' version of the thesis has been submitted to the Edinburgh Research Archive;
- to consider, through CPGSC, the examination arrangements.

If you have any suggestions for changes or additions to these guidelines, please send them to Academic Services Section, Old College, South Bridge.

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