



## **Guidance Notes for the Examination Process**

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### **Introduction**

The final assessment stage of the MPhil or PhD is by an oral examination. The procedures, standards and possible outcomes are described in full in the regulations (¶ 81-154). These are designed to meet Chapter B11, Indicator 17 in the UK Code of Practice, and to ensure that the process is carried out with equity and probity. It is the supervisor's responsibility to inform the research student about the nature of the examination, its possible outcomes, and to prepare the student for the event.

## **Notes on Regulations**

- The University will ensure that assessment rules and regulations for research degrees awards are published in a full and accessible form, and are made freely available to research students, staff and external examiners.
- Through the Research Degrees Sub-Committee, the University expects regulations and procedures for the assessment of research degrees students to be applied rigorously, fairly and consistently and carried out to a reasonable timescale.
- Students will be required to complete a declaration that the material presented for assessment is their own work and will be reminded by their supervisors of the penalties for plagiarism.
- The University holds that the examination process should be completed within a reasonable process (1-4 months) following the submission of the research student's thesis for assessment. The student will be notified of the list of conditions within two weeks of the examination; likewise he or she will be notified of ratification of the examining panels' recommendation by University Research Degrees Sub-Committee (URDSC) within two weeks of the meeting of that Committee.
- Before the formal conclusion of the viva, examiners should ensure that (a) the student is informed of the recommended outcome; (b) the student is aware that the recommendation of the panel must be formally approved by the URDSC; and (c) if the award of the degree is conditional on amendments being made to the thesis, the examiners must ensure that the student is advised of the changes required, aware of the deadline for submitting the revised work and knows which examiner or examiners have responsibility for ensuring that the amended material meets the requirements agreed at the viva.
- It is considered good practice for an examiner to volunteer his or her copy of the thesis (or a separate sheet of amendments) to the research student, if it has been marked up with corrections. These corrections should be minor (e.g. typing mistakes, citation errors, layout, etc.); any more substantial requirements must be listed and described in the examiners' report.
- Doctoral examinations at Staffordshire University are overseen by an independent chair, whose primary concerns are for the fairness of the whole event, its compliance with the University's regulations, and the welfare of the student, and clear communication between examiners, students and any supervisors in attendance. Chairs will be themselves active supervisors who also have examination experience. Chairs will always come from a different Faculty to the student, but otherwise are selected from a centrally held list of staff members approved by URDSC. A training course for new and existing chairs will be offered annually by the Graduate School.

## **Notes on Outcomes**

Following the oral examination of an MPhil or PhD thesis, the examination team have the following menu of recommendations.

- Direct Award
- Revisions
- Resubmission
- Change of registration (not available for MPhil registrations)
- No award

The above recommendations are described in paragraph 131 of the Research Degrees Regulations. Additional explanatory notes to these recommendations are as follows:

- In the case of *Direct Award*, minor corrections to typographical or layout mistakes in the manuscript may be suggested to the candidate, so that the corrected thesis is in the best possible shape for presentation to the public. These are suggestions and not requirements. These suggestions should not include the rewriting of passages, beyond minor rephrasing.
- In the case of *Revisions required*, the required changes are not optional. A complete list of these changes must be made on the examination report form.
- The key principle of the *revisions required* outcome is that the examiners are broadly satisfied that the thesis, and its defence, is of MPhil / PhD standard, but that the manuscript is not ready for presentation to the public.
- The examination team must agree the timescale of revisions, if six months is not considered appropriate.
- The examiners must decide whether the internal, external or both examiners are to approve revisions. This decision should be informed by both the quantity and difficulty of the revisions, and also by the need for specialist expertise to judge them.
- In the case of *Resubmission*, the examiners are not confident of the MPhil/PhD standing of the thesis and/or its defence, but believe that this standard may be reached with further work by the candidate. Specifically, not all of the overall aims and objectives of the project were reached to the relevant standard, or not all aims and objectives were suitable for the award of an MPhil/PhD.
- The details of this further work must be specified on the examination report form.
- *Resubmission* will not normally be the appropriate category when the required work is primarily a matter of expression – i.e. the quality of the writing – unless the quality is so low that the aims and objectives of the thesis are simply unclear to the examiners.
- *Change of registration*. The examiners are not confident of the doctoral standing of thesis and its defence, nor do they believe that this standing could be attained. However, the Examiners do believe that the candidate has achieved some recognisable level of research which may be of the level appropriate to the degree of MPhil.
- As before, the examiners must specify their suggestions as to how the thesis might be rewritten so as to be appropriate to an MPhil.
- Only after receiving the rewritten manuscript should the examiners then liaise as to whether a further oral examination is required.

## **Guidance for Students**

This is a brief note outlining the programme for your examination, which we hope, will help lessen some of your anxieties about your viva. We are aware that this is an anxious time for you and we will do whatever we can to help.

### **The Examination Panel**

The examination panel will normally consist of an external examiner, an internal examiner and a Chair. In some cases there may be two external examiners. The Chair of the examination will be a senior member of the academic staff of the Faculty who has extensive research experience. Their role will be to orchestrate the examination and to take the lead on matters of University Procedure or Regulation.

### **The Agenda**

The agenda for the examination is attached. Please note that agenda items 1-5 will be conducted before the formal examination itself. You are not involved in this part, which will have taken place before you arrive. Following the examination, the panel will ask you (and your supervisor if they are present) to leave the room and return to the waiting area. The panel will then have a discussion before asking you to return to the room to convey their decision and recommendations verbally to you.

A letter confirming these recommendations in writing will be sent to you a few days later, from the Research Awards Administrator.

## **AGENDA**

### **Before the Candidate enters the room the following will be completed:**

1. Introductions
2. The process of research examinations at Staffordshire University
3. Exchange of Preliminary Reports
4. Discussion of the issues to be raised in the examination
5. Agree the examination schedule  
(i.e. which questions will be asked, in which order and by whom)

**The Candidate (and Supervisor) enters the room** - *the role of the supervisor is purely to clarify any facts and to answer any questions which are specifically directed at them from the examiners.*

6. Introductions to the Examination Team
7. Oral examination

### **When the examination has ended the Candidate (and Supervisor) will be asked to leave the room.**

8. The post viva discussion and completion of the Examiner's Report and Recommendations.

**Candidate and Supervisor are invited to re-join the examination team**

9. The outcome and recommendations of the viva will be conveyed to the Candidate (and Supervisor) verbally.  
*(Written recommendations will follow from the Research Awards Officer but will be subject to the approval of Research Degrees Sub Committee (RDSC) when it next meets)*

**We would like to wish you all the best for your examination.**

## **Guidance for Examiners**

Thank you for acting as an examiner for one of our research degree candidates. The notes below outline the University's examination procedure.

The University expects that the examiners of a research degree should normally be able to complete the examination process within three months of receiving the thesis. Whilst recognising that examiners will have many other commitments, examiners are asked to adhere to this time limit if at all possible as delays in the examination process can cause considerable distress to candidates. If it appears that the three month period will be exceeded, please inform the research degrees administrator immediately so that the situation can be explained to the candidate.

- **Before the Oral Examination**

An **independent** preliminary examination report form will be e-mailed to the examiner when the thesis is posted out. In order to preserve the independence of the preliminary examination reports, examiners are asked **NOT** to discuss the thesis at this stage with the other examiners. The report form must be completed and returned to the appropriate research degrees administrator **at least FIVE WORKING DAYS BEFORE THE DATE OF THE VIVA**, when all the examiner preliminary reports will be circulated to the examiners and chair for perusal in advance of the viva. (Missing signatures can be obtained on the day of the viva). On the day of the viva, there will be an opportunity for the examination team to meet and discuss the reports and thesis before the start of the oral examination. The reports, and this discussion of them, forms the basis for a running order of topics or questions in the viva itself.

- **The Oral Examination**

All candidates for doctoral degrees and for the degree of MPhil are required to attend an oral examination after the first submission of their thesis. The purpose of the oral examination is to enable the examiners to clarify any ambiguities in the thesis, to satisfy themselves that the thesis is the candidate's own work, that the candidate is familiar with the relation of his/her work to the field of study and also that his/her knowledge and appreciation of adjoining fields in the subject are up to the standard expected for the award of the degree. Examiners should attempt to make the candidate feel at ease and to probe the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the thesis.

Normally an examination team will consist of an external examiner, an internal examiner and a Chair. The Chair will be a senior member of the academic staff. His or her role will be to orchestrate the examination and to take the lead on matters of University procedure or Regulation. The examination team, between them, must have experience of a minimum of 3 previous examinations at the level to be examined.

Before the viva takes place the examination team will have a short meeting. At this stage the independent reports will be exchanged and the format and structure of the viva will be discussed.

Supervisors may, with the consent of the candidate, attend the oral examination but they must not play any role and can only answer questions directed at him/her. The supervisor must leave the room with the candidate prior to the deliberation of the examiners on the outcome of the examination.

Where the examiners are in agreement a joint report and recommendation must be completed and signed by all members on the examination panel. The preliminary reports and joint recommendation of the examiners must together provide sufficiently detailed comments on the scope and quality of the work to enable the University to satisfy itself that the criteria for the award of the degree have been met. If the examiners are not in agreement, separate reports and recommendations should be completed.

If you would like, please offer separate written comments, or the annotated version of your copy of the thesis, to the candidate after the exam, to help him or her make corrections. Such corrections cannot be different from those listed on the examination report form. Please also feel

free to suggest further avenues for research to the candidate, although not as requirements for the degree.

For the outcomes of the examination, please see the section 'Notes on Outcomes' above.

The examiners may informally indicate to the candidate the substance of their final recommendation but the Chair will explain to the candidate that the University's Research Degrees Sub-Committee will make the final recommendation when it has received all the examination reports. The candidate will receive formal notification of their award following the next meeting of the University's Research Degrees Committee.

### **Following the oral examination – external examiner only**

The Examiner Fee/Expense Claim Form, sent with the thesis, should be submitted as soon as possible following the examination. All expenses should be evidenced by receipts and should be claimed by the examiner retrospectively. The University cannot be charged in advance for accommodation or travel expenses.

Upon receipt of the claim form it will be sent to the Faculty for approval before being forwarded to the University Payroll Dept for processing through the Monthly pay run, paid on the last Wednesday of each month. (Payroll Dept deadline is 5<sup>th</sup> month for payment at the end of that month.)

## **Guidance for Chairs**

The Chair is a representative of the University Research Degrees Sub-Committee whose role is to facilitate the process and procedures of the examination; s/he is not an examiner but looks to enable the examiners to focus on the issues raised by the thesis. Training for new doctoral examiners is available from the Graduate School on their annual program.

### **PRE-VIVA**

Chairs will be informed as to the time and place of the viva they have agreed to chair and circulated with copies of the examiner's preliminary reports five working days before the viva (electronically if available in this form). **It is essential that these are read as soon as possible following receipt in order to determine the nature of the preliminary recommendations. In extreme cases these might be sufficiently negative to suggest the possibility of cancelling the viva; in such cases make contact with the Chair of URDSC or email thegraduate.school@staffs.ac.uk**

### **THE VIVA**

On arrival at the location of the viva chairs will be provided with a folder containing:

- Agenda
- The preliminary reports of the external and internal examiners.
- The appropriate examination report and recommendation form, on which to enter the recommendation of the examiners. Where revisions are required these should be entered in detail, agreed and signed off by the examiners.

**N.B.** In cases where the revisions required are so detailed and extensive that it is not feasible to enter them fully and legibly on the RDC form without an unrealistic extension of the process, then broad headings of the areas requiring revision should still be noted. Fuller guidelines can be provided following the viva – by the Chair or, with agreement, the internal examiner. But the examiners should sign the form containing their broadly agreed areas for revision.

- A copy of the relevant Research Degree Regulations
- Notes on outcomes (see above).
- Spare expenses claim form for the external examiner.

The Chair will not be provided with a copy of the thesis before the viva unless this is requested. However a copy will be available at the viva – this is useful for noting sections of the work needing revision, particularly when the chair is unfamiliar with the discipline examined.

**PRELIMINARY MEETING:** on meeting with the examiners – and effecting introductions – it is also useful to explain the role of chair as not all universities operate this system. Next, it is essential to ensure that the examiners have received and read one another's preliminary reports and that they understand the implications of these within the context of the university recommendations, and determine the extent to which they are in broad agreement as to their preliminary recommendations, i.e. is the thesis broadly acceptable, albeit that there are issues to be pursued in the viva. The next stage is to agree a working agenda in terms of issues to be covered in the examination and which of the examiners is to take responsibility for areas of questioning. Inevitably, this cannot be too rigid and the progress of the viva will, possibly, raise other issues. However it is important that a working framework is established within which the examination can, with necessary flexibility, proceed.

**N.B.** There is no administrative support for the Chair during the viva and so all issues raised by the examiners – most specifically as these will relate to recommendations as to the result of the viva and actions to be taken – need to be noted; an agreed sequence of areas to be covered in the viva will therefore assist the Chair in keeping an accurate note of these issues.

In this preliminary meeting it is also useful to establish issues such as seating arrangements, and the anticipated duration of the viva. Also to ensure that water – and requisite number of glasses – are available.

**LUNCH:** Lunch will be arranged for the chair and examiners by the relevant Faculty Administrator.

**THE VIVA:** the candidate and, possibly, the supervisor will attend at the agreed time.

**N.B.** Supervisors can attend with the agreement of candidate but they can only act as observers. Any contribution they make can only be at the invitation of the examiners.

When the examiners are ready, it is appropriate for the Chair to invite the candidate (and possibly supervisor) into the room and effect the necessary introductions. It is also appropriate that the Chair explains the nature of the process – including the position of the supervisor (if present) and his/her role as Chair – before handing over to the examiners according to the broad agenda already agreed.

**N.B.** Usually, experienced examiners will ask a basic introductory question along the lines of 'what first interested you in this topic'? If this is not suggested, the Chair could propose that this is done.

### **DURING THE VIVA**

As noted above, the Chair needs to check that the issues discussed in the preliminary discussion are covered (examiners can forget some) and take notes (including – where relevant – page references to the thesis if they are identified as containing crucial points necessitating attention).

**N.B.** Examiners will have made their own notes with regard to issues from typos to fundamental errors in argument, usually but not inevitably on the thesis. They are usually willing to provide these to the candidate to assist with any required revisions but the candidate also needs to be informed as to requirements in a structured way, hence the Chair needs to have a clear grasp of the informing frame within which the specific and individual notes of examiners can be located.

Usually, the process progresses smoothly and the Chair can leave things to the examiners as they follow through the agreed agenda. However there can be occasions on which difficulties arise, e.g. an examiner having an expected answer to a question and attempting to elicit that response irrespective of the extent to which the candidate has given other, 'unacceptable' responses. While it is important that the candidate is 'tested' the Chair does need to be alert to this becoming 'harassment' and be prepared, politely, to suggest that questions move onto other aspects of the agenda. The Chair is responsible in this sense for the conduct of the viva in terms of its fairness to the candidate while also ensuring that the thesis is fully examined and defended.

Chairs can exercise discretion as to whether a break should be permitted in the course of the viva; this could be beneficial to those candidates for whom English is not their first language; also for all participants if the process appears to be taking a particularly long time (one could normally expect the viva itself to last around one and a half hours, up to two and a half). When the agenda appears to have been covered, check with the examiners if they have any other issues they wish to raise. If they do not, then the Chair asks the candidate (and supervisor) to leave the room, giving them a time (usually not less than 20/30 minutes) at which to return and wait to be called into the room.

**POST-VIVA DISCUSSION:** The Chair needs to take the lead on this and as s/he will be aware of the preliminary recommendations of the examiners the simplest way to progress discussion is to ask whether they wish to revise those initial recommendations. Apart from the recommendation that the degree is awarded, all other recommendations will involve the candidate to undertake further work. Here it is essential that the Chair ensures, through discussion with the examiners, that what is required is noted clearly and in its entirety.

**N.B.** Examiners have to agree on a recommendation and, in fairness to all concerned, the

Chair needs to explore all possibilities of achieving this – and, if necessary, noting the reasons why is not possible. In such – rare – instances, the decision as to future action will be taken by the University Research Degrees Committee. Here, the Chair's notes as to the process, and the reasons as to why an agreed recommendation was not possible, are an invaluable guide for the Committee.

When the discussion is complete, the recommendation agreed, and the specific requirements for further work also agreed and clearly noted then the Chair can invite the candidate and supervisor back into the room.

In most instances – where the recommendation is positive (albeit in varying degrees) the recommendation can be given by the external examiner. Following congratulations – and in those instances where changes are required – it is essential that the Chair take the candidate through the areas where work is required, seeking input from the examiners as necessary and ensuring that the candidate is clear on all points. As noted above, examiners may have annotated their copies of the thesis and be prepared to give those to the candidate so as to assist in the revision process but it is the Chair's responsibility to take the specific notes and ensure that they are clearly recorded on the final report as this will be the basis of the letter of instruction to the candidate (see above with regard to occasions when the recording of full details might take place outside of the viva). Only when all points have been covered and the candidate expresses their understanding of the recommendation in all respects, can the process move to closure.

**N.B.** Irrespective of the recommendation it is important that the Chair makes clear to the candidate that it *is* a recommendation and as such will require ratification by the University Research Degrees Committee.

**N.B.** The Chair needs to ensure that those aspects of the report requiring the presence and agreement of the examiners is completed, e.g. their signatures, some sentences which can form the basis of a short report on the viva, which of them (or both) will take responsibility for signing off the thesis when any required revisions have been completed. The folder containing the completed report – and thesis if provided – should then be returned to the relevant Faculty Research degrees administrator.

Finally, ensure that the external has an expenses claim form – if not, use spare one - and thank the examiners for their participation.

## **Key Stages**

### **-- INITIAL THESIS SUBMISSION --**

The candidate should submit the following to the relevant Faculty Research Degrees administrator:

- i) 3 (Non-Staff members) or 4 (University Staff Members) soft-bound thesis copies, one for each examiner plus Chair.
  - Print on both sides of the page
  - Bind appendices separately from the main text
- ii) An electronic version of the thesis, in Microsoft Word or PDF formats. These can be provided by email, or on a memory device.
- iii) A completed Student Declaration

The relevant Faculty Research Degrees administrator will send a copy of the thesis, together with the preliminary report form and regulations, to every examiner.

The Faculty Administrator will make and confirm the arrangements for the viva (i.e. date, time and place of the examination) to the Chair, Examiners, Candidate and Principal Supervisor.

Examiners will complete and return the preliminary report to the Faculty Administrator for circulation, 5 working days before the viva, to the examining panel members (chair + examiners);

The Faculty Administrator will send the Chair a copy of the thesis and 'Viva Documentation Folder' containing the examiners' recommendation report on which to record the Final Recommendation of the Examiners, following the viva.

Immediately after the examination, the Chair will return the 'Viva Documentation Folder' containing the completed examiners' recommendation report to the Faculty Administrator for presentation to the URDSC for ratification. The Administrator will formally convey the viva outcome in writing to the candidate.

### **-- REVISIONS --**

If revisions or resubmission are recommended, the candidate should submit the revised thesis electronically only to the Faculty Administrator who will then forward the thesis to the relevant examiner(s) for assessment.

The examiner(s) will assess the revised thesis and submit a recommendation report for ratification by the URDSC. The Faculty Administrator will formally convey the outcome in writing to the candidate.

### **-- CONFIRMATION --**

Following the award of the degree the candidate must submit to the Faculty Administrator an electronic copy of the thesis, as above.

On receipt, the Faculty Administrator will complete the following actions:

- i) complete the student's award status on the University student database, ii) inform Student and Academic Services that the award Certificate can be produced and information about the next Award ceremony can be sent.
- send copy of the title page and abstract to the British Library.

- send the electronic copy to the University library for the work to be deposited in the repository of the University, and in turn an electronic copy will be sent to the British Library Electronic Thesis On-line System (EThOS).