



Handbook for Examiners of Research Degrees

January 2022

Introduction

This handbook will provide guidance on your role as an examiner for research degrees at Ulster University. More detailed information relating to research at the University and the regulations governing entry to, progress through and completion of a research degree may be found on the University's website at <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/doctorscollege>. Should you have any queries about your appointment please contact the Doctoral College at the address below.

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Nomination of Examiners

Three months prior to a candidate's submission deadline, the Doctoral College will contact the relevant faculty administrative support team requesting the initiation of the process for appointing examiners. The supervisor, in consultation with the relevant faculty Research Director and in accordance with the following guidelines, will recommend one suitable external examiner (two for candidates who are full time members staff of the University and who have had more than two years' service with the University), one internal examiner and a chairperson (who is not an examiner). The composition of the Board of Examiners must then be approved by the Board of the Faculty and also by the Doctoral College Board.

Criteria for Nomination of the Board of Examiners

External Examiner

In appointing Boards of Examiners, the Doctoral College will consider the overall composition of the Board in order to achieve an appropriately qualified, experienced and independent set of examiners.

External Examiner

The external examiner MUST:

- (i) have acknowledged expertise in the candidate's field of study
- (ii) be research active in a relevant field, or have previously made a significant contribution to knowledge of that field
- (iii) be available to attend a meeting of the Board of Examiners, normally within three months of receipt of the thesis by The Doctoral College
- (iv) not have acted previously as the candidate's supervisor
- (v) not have been a member of a department or school of the University during the previous three years. NB Visiting Professors may exceptionally be appointed if they meet criteria (iv) and (xi)

- (vi) be prepared to sign a confidentiality agreement if required by the nature of the work and endorsed by the Doctoral College Board
- (vii) declare any conflict of interest with regard to examination of the candidate (e.g. emotional or family relationship) or the research topic (e.g. commercial interest in a related project where clause (vi) applies)
- (viii) not have published with any of the candidate's supervisors in the preceding three years

In addition, the external examiner **MUST NORMALLY**:

- (ix) have previous experience of examining (externally or internally) at the corresponding research degree level, preferably within the United Kingdom
- (x) must normally not have acted as external examiner for an Ulster University research degree more than three times in the previous five years
- (xi) have the 'right to work' in the UK and be based in the UK. Where a Faculty wishes to appoint an external examiner who does not meet this criterion, the Faculty and/or Examiner must meet the additional costs accrued in terms of visas and travel

Internal Examiner

The internal examiner **MUST**:

- (i) have sufficient knowledge of the field of study to judge the suitability of the methods adopted and to appreciate the context of the work and the significance of the outcome
- (ii) not have acted as the candidate's supervisor at any point
- (iii) be research active
- (iv) have supervised a candidate to successful completion at the corresponding research degree level and/or acted as internal assessor for PhD interim assessments
- (v) be available to attend a meeting of the Board of Examiners, normally within three months of receipt of the thesis by the Doctoral College
- (vi) be prepared to sign a confidentiality agreement if required by the nature of the work and endorsed by the Doctoral College Board
- (vii) declare any conflict of interest with regard to examination of the candidate (e.g. emotional or family relationship) or the research topic (e.g. commercial interest in a related project where clause (vi) applies)

In addition, the internal examiner **MUST NORMALLY***:

- (viii) not have acted as an internal assessor on interim PhD assessments for the candidate.

*Where nomination of an internal examiner who has acted as internal assessor for the candidate is permitted by exception because this is considered academically essential, the nominated Chair and external examiner **MUST** meet *all* of the Criteria for Appointment (i.e. no case will be permitted for an exceptional appointment of a Chair or External Examiner who does not meet one the 'MUST NORMALLY' criteria).

Chair

The Chair of the Board of Examiners is not an examiner, and MUST:

- (i) not have acted as a supervisor or adviser for the candidate
- (ii) be available to attend a meeting of the Board of Examiners, normally within three months of receipt of the thesis by the Doctoral College
- (iii) be prepared to arbitrate between examiners in instances where there is disagreement; and, must be prepared to draw together a final report on the thesis including provision of details of revisions amendments required by the examiners or the deficiencies of the thesis.

In addition, the Chair MUST NORMALLY:

- (iv) have past experience of supervision and examining at the corresponding research degree level
- (v) be a member of the same Faculty as the candidate
- (vi) be a senior member of the academic staff (Senior Lecturer or above)
- (vii) be experienced in the role and/or have received appropriate training

Appointment of Examiners

Upon appointment, examiners are provided with the following by the Doctoral College:

- formal notification of their appointment
- a link to the University Handbook for Examiners of Research Degrees (including rules and regulations for the specific degree programme)
- a copy of the work submitted for examination
- an expense claim form
- clarification of UU expenses and payment procedures
- a link to set up a user account within the PhD Manager system

Duties and Responsibilities of the Examiners

The main duties of examiners of research degrees are:

- to determine whether the submitted work meets the standards of the award and if not, in which aspects it is deficient
- to submit a preliminary report via PhD Manager at least one week prior to the date of examination
- to consult with the Chair of the Board of Examiners if a case has been made for the oral examination to be waived
- to agree with the supervisor a date and time for the oral examination
- to meet with the other examiners prior to the oral examination in order to compare reports and agree procedures for the oral examination
- to finally decide, following the examination of all written and where appropriate oral evidence, if the candidate has met the standards for the award
- in consultation with the other members of the Board of Examiners to make a recommendation to the Board of the Faculty
- in consultation with the other members of the Board of Examiners to write a joint report on the candidate's performance

- where a thesis is to be revised, to agree with the other examiners a list of the amendments to be made or additional assignment(s) to be completed
- where a thesis has failed, to agree with the other examiners a list of deficiencies in the thesis.

1. Pre-examination procedures

- 1.1 The candidate will submit an electronic version of their thesis through PhD Manager and may additionally be required to provide the Doctoral College with copies of the thesis in temporary binding for the internal and external examiners if requested. The electronic version of the thesis will also be used in order to facilitate the use by examiners of software designed to detect plagiarism. Examiners should not accept copies of the thesis directly from the candidate.
- 1.2 Once the composition of the Board of Examiners has been approved, the supervisor will consult and arrange with the candidate, the Chair of the Board of Examiners, and the examiners, a suitable date, time and venue for the oral examination, allowing a minimum of four weeks from receipt of the thesis by the examiners to the oral examination date. Where possible, and where the External Examiner is attending in person, the supervisor will attempt to schedule the oral examination to allow the External Examiner to travel to and from the University on the same day. Thereafter, the Doctoral College will make corresponding administrative arrangements.
- 1.3 The examination will be held on the campus of Ulster University where the candidate is registered (unless prior approval has been sought from the Doctoral College Board) and the candidate will be examined in person in a face to face oral examination in the presence of the entire Board of Examiners. In situations where the External Examiner or candidate is unable to attend campus in person, remote viva arrangements will be facilitated by a nominated viva co-ordinator. Under no circumstances will examination by telephone be permitted.
- 1.4 It is expected that an oral examination will be held in all but exceptional cases. Exceptional cases include instances where the thesis is deemed to be of an acceptable standard for the immediate award of the degree and no amendments, revisions or additional work is required and where the candidate is ill or otherwise incapacitated to the extent that he/she cannot defend the thesis, and in instances where the thesis is a re-submission and the examiners deem it to be of an acceptable standard for the immediate award of the degree and no amendments, revisions or additional work is required.
- 1.5 In the event that an oral examination is not held the examiners should agree the final report. The final report, in instances where the candidate has failed, should include a comprehensive list of the deficiencies of the thesis.

2. Examiners' Preliminary Reports

- 2.1 Following receipt of the thesis and prior to the oral examination the examiners are required to submit independent preliminary reports via PhD Manager at least seven days before the oral examination; examiners are asked not discuss the thesis or the report with any other member of the Board of Examiners until such time as all reports have been submitted.

- 2.2 The supervisor is also required to submit a short report prior to the oral examination; the purpose of this report is to confirm that the thesis is the researcher's own work, to inform the panel of any circumstances that may have affected the production of the thesis and to comment on the impact of the research.
- 2.3 In their reports the examiners may, exceptionally, recommend that the requirement to hold an oral examination should be waived although the University would advise that an oral should be held unless the circumstances strongly suggest otherwise. The Chair of the Board of Examiners must gain agreement from all examiners and the candidate if the oral examination is to be waived under this provision.

3. Assessment Criteria for the Examination of the Thesis

In assessing the thesis and preparing the preliminary report, the examiners may wish to give consideration to the following:

- 3.1 the thesis must be essentially free of plagiarised material, from whatever source; such material will be discounted in the assessment of the merit of the research
- 3.2 the title of the thesis is accurate and succinct; describing the work carried out, and contains appropriate key words for electronic abstracting
- 3.3 the abstract accurately describes the outcomes of the research without extraneous discussion and is of appropriate length, at less than 300 words
- 3.4 the aims of the research are clearly identified and the extents to which these aims have been met are fully discussed
- 3.5 the context of the research is well developed through reference to contemporary and historical material where appropriate
- 3.6 the volume of effort reflected in the piece of research is appropriate to the length of the research programme
- 3.7 the thesis reports a piece of independent and original work carried out by the candidate and where collaborative work is included the relevant contribution of all participants is clearly identified
- 3.8 the thesis contains clear evidence that appropriate methodologies have been selected and justified, that they have been correctly applied and that the results have been properly interpreted
- 3.9 where results are presented in other than textual form these use suitable formats that are intelligible, unambiguous and not repetitive.
- 3.10 the candidate must demonstrate in the thesis a critical understanding of the outcomes of the research and its significance

- 3.11 the use of reference materials in the thesis must be appropriate to the field of study, must be correctly used and cited and should contain the most relevant research
- 3.12 the overall presentation of the thesis must be of a standard that makes assessment of the work readily possible; the language use, organisation and layout and absence of errors must be of a high standard
- 3.13 the research contained in the thesis must represent a level of practical and intellectual achievement by the candidate suitable for the award of either a master's or doctoral degree.

Examiners are asked to bear in mind that theses must be completed within strict time limits, adherence to which is monitored by the Doctoral College Board in consultation with those responsible for the progress of individual candidates. Theses constitute the outcome of a period of training in research methods and, in order to present a satisfactory thesis; candidates must exhibit a capacity to apply appropriate techniques successfully at master's or doctoral level. (Additional information on the requirements for the degree of MPhil may be found in Appendix 1)

4. Oral Examination

Preparation for the oral examination

- 4.1 The Chair of the Board of Examiners will check to ensure that the room booked for the oral examination has been appropriately laid out. In advance of the oral, the Board will discuss the preliminary reports of the examiners and the report of the supervisor. Any aspects of the work that require clarification, and any doubts or concerns about achievement of the criteria for the award will be identified. These key issues must be addressed during the oral examination of the candidate, who must be afforded reasonable opportunity to clarify and/or defend the work presented.
- 4.2 The examiners should, nonetheless, agree on a line of questioning which provides opportunity for exploration of the breadth of study and its context. The Chair will encourage the examiners to adopt a strategy which will (a) help the candidate to settle down initially, (b) include discussion of any key issues which they have already identified, (c) achieve suitable breadth of cover, and (d) give the candidate a clear indication where the strengths and weaknesses lie. Questioning by the external examiner(s) should predominate yet provide opportunity for periodic contribution by the internal examiner.

5. Recommended Agenda and Procedures for the Meeting of the Board of Examiners

The meeting of the Board will comprise four parts;

Part 1: The preliminary meeting of the Board members allows for introductions and

- To note the regulations for the degree
- To note the Recommendation of the Examiners report and in particular the sections which must be completed by the Board of Examiners

- To review preliminary reports from the internal and external examiners and from the supervisor
- To determine procedures for the oral examination including the allocation of questions

Part 2: The oral examination includes Board members and the candidate. One supervisor may also attend (with prior consent from the candidate). After introductions, the Chair should enable examiners to ask questions and the candidate should be afforded sufficient opportunity to respond. The Chair should ensure that questioning is appropriate and once concluded should ask the candidate to leave the room for the duration of the concluding meeting.

Part 3: The concluding meeting allows the examiners to decide on the recommendation to the Board of the Faculty and to complete the Examiners Report.

Part 4: The final briefing includes the candidate (and any attending supervisor) and the Examiners should outline their decision and provide feedback, including any requirement(s) for revision to the thesis.

6. Assessment of the candidate's oral performance

In assessing the candidate's performance and preparing the report the examiners may wish to give consideration to the following:

- are the examiners satisfied that the thesis presented is the candidate's own work
- did the candidate show a satisfactory knowledge and understanding of the context and significance of the work
- did the candidate show a satisfactory knowledge and understanding of the methods and techniques adopted
- was the candidate able to explain aspects of the thesis which required further clarification
- was the candidate familiar with key literature cited in the thesis ○ in the case of a candidate whose research programme was part of a collaborative group project, did the oral examination demonstrate that the candidate's own contribution was worthy of the award

7. Recommendation of Board of Examiners

7.1 The examiners are required, where they are in agreement, to present a joint report and recommendation to the Board of the Faculty for the award or otherwise of the degree; if the examiners are not in agreement, they are required to present separate reports and recommendations; the Board of the Faculty may then either accept the recommendation of the external examiner(s) or require the appointment of a further external examiner.

7.2 Where the decision is that the candidate must revise and resubmit the thesis for examination or where no degree should be awarded and no further

submission accepted, the examiners should agree on the wording of the final report, clearly indicating the deficiencies which have prompted the decision.

- 7.3 If the examiners are satisfied that the standard required for the degree has been reached, but are, nevertheless, of the opinion that the candidate should make some corrections or clarifications to the thesis not so substantial as to call for the submission of a revised thesis, they may make their recommendation that the candidate should be awarded the degree subject to the completion of corrections, within either three or six months, depending on the extent of the corrections.
- 7.4 Corrections refer only to those changes which can be explicitly documented by the examiners; these include grammatical or typographical errors, or errors in referencing, minor restructuring, such as faults in subsidiary arguments which do not significantly affect the conclusions of the thesis, or the requirement for an additional piece of work which clarifies and/or enhances the work; any amendments requiring an academic judgement or input from the external examiner(s) should be classified as revise and resubmit.

8. Procedure after Examination

- 8.1 Once a decision is reached by the examiners, the Chair may indicate informally the recommendation to the candidate but should make it clear that the final decision rests with the Board of the Faculty.
- 8.2 Once formal approval of the Board of the Faculty has been confirmed, the candidate will receive formal notification of the outcome via the PhD Manager system within two weeks of the date of the oral examination.
- 8.3 A candidate has ten working days, from the date of formal receipt of the examiners recommendation, in which to request further clarification of any associated requirements. Any such request should be addressed to the Doctoral College, following consultation with the supervisor.
- 8.4 Where the degree has been awarded subject to minor amendments, the internal examiner will liaise with the candidate to ensure that the amendments have been carried out satisfactorily and confirm this within PhD Manager.

9. Appeals

Examiners and supervisors should note that in the event of an appeal by an unsuccessful candidate **ALL** papers relevant to the examination and supplied to the Appeal Committee will also be supplied to the candidate. This should be borne in mind when preparing preliminary reports and the final report.

10. Examiners' Fees and Expenses

Fees and expenses are payable to external examiners in accordance with the rates approved by the Resources Committee. Under Home Office regulations, claims for fees and expenses may only be processed once the examiner's 'right to work' in the UK has been proven. Examiners will be provided with details of acceptable forms of evidence prior to appointment and original documentation

will be verified at the oral examination. The University will not normally appoint examiners from outside of the UK but where the Faculty wishes to appoint such a person, they shall be responsible for the additional costs of visas and travel.

11. Submission of Thesis following the Examination

In the case of a candidate who is recommended for the award of the degree, candidates shall submit an electronic version of the thesis along with the Ulster EThesis Deposit Agreement via PhD Manager. This will normally be one month after the meeting of the Board of Examiners in cases where there are no corrections, or three or six months after formal notification of the examiners' requirements for corrections.

APPENDIX 1 ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (MPHIL)

Assessment Criteria for MPhil

The degree of MPhil is awarded to researchers who have demonstrated:

- a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice
- a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship
- originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline
- conceptual understanding that enables the researcher: to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline; to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level
- continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level

APPENDIX 2 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS

The alternative recommendations available to the Board of Examiners, as detailed in Regulations for MPhil and doctoral degrees, are reproduced below and listed on the corresponding report forms (RS13a and RS14a, respectively)

For a submission for the degree of MPhil the report of the board of examiners shall recommend:-

- a that the degree should be awarded, **or**
- b that the degree should be awarded subject to minor corrections to the thesis being made, or to clarifications and/or enhancements being completed, to the satisfaction of the internal examiner within three months of the oral examination, **or**
- c that the degree should be awarded subject to corrections to the thesis being made to the satisfaction of the internal examiner within six months of the oral examination in accordance with the definition of 'corrections' as detailed in the Handbook for Examiners, **or**
- d that the candidate should revise and resubmit the thesis for the degree of MPhil, **or**
- e that exceptionally, and on the basis of a unanimous decision by the examiners, the degree of PhD be awarded, or a re-submission for the degree of PhD be permitted subject to minor revisions.
- f. that the degree should not be awarded and no resubmission permitted

For a submission for PhD the report of the board of examiners shall recommend:-

- a that the degree should be awarded, **or**
- b that the degree should be awarded subject to minor corrections to the thesis being made, or to clarifications and/or enhancements being completed, to the satisfaction of the internal examiner within three months of the oral examination, **or**
- c that the degree should be awarded subject to corrections to the thesis being made to the satisfaction of the internal examiner within six months of the oral examination in accordance with the definition of 'corrections' as detailed in the Handbook for Examiners, **or**
- d that the candidate should revise and resubmit the thesis for the degree of PhD, **or**
- e that the candidate should revise and resubmit the thesis for the degree of MPhil, **or**
- f that the candidate should be awarded the degree of MPhil subject to presentation of an amended thesis in accordance with the provisions for the presentation of a thesis for the degree of MPhil, **or**
- g. that the degree should not be awarded and no resubmission permitted

If a candidate for the degree of PhD fails to satisfy the examiners and is allowed a resubmission, the candidate may apply for examination for the degree of MPhil, as an alternative to re-examination for the degree of PhD.

For either MPhil or PhD degrees

One resubmission may be permitted, subject to the following:

- a a candidate shall submit for re-examination within the period of one year from the date on which permission for re-examination was granted;
- b the examiners shall give the candidate guidance on the deficiencies of the first submission;
- c the appointment of an additional external examiner may be required for the re-examination;
- d the examiners may exempt the candidate from repeating any part of the original examination which was deemed to be satisfactory

Where the examiners' recommendation is that the degree should not be awarded and no further submission should be accepted, an indication of the deficiencies of the work shall be given.

For a submission for a PhD by Published Works the report of the Board of Examiners shall recommend:-

- a. that the degree should be awarded, **or**
- b. that the degree should be awarded subject to minor corrections to the thesis being made, or to clarifications and/or enhancements being completed, to the satisfaction of the internal examiner within three months of the oral examination in accordance with the definition of 'minor corrections' as detailed in the Handbook for Examiners, **or**
- c. that the degree should be awarded subject to corrections to the thesis being made to the satisfaction of the internal examiner within six months of the oral examination in accordance with the definition of 'corrections' as detailed in the Handbook for Examiners, **or**
- d. that the candidate should be re-examined within twelve months, which may include the submission of a revised thesis and published work and an oral examination, **or**
- e. that the candidate should be permitted to re-apply as a candidate for the degree after a period of not less than five years, **or**
- f. that the degree should not be awarded and no resubmission permitted.

The candidate may not apply for the degree of PhD by published work on more than two occasions.

APPENDIX 3 The Roles of Chair and Supervisor

The Role of the Chair of the Board of Examiners

The Chair (who is not an examiner) should be satisfied that suitable arrangements have been made for the meeting of the Board of Examiners, that preliminary reports from the examiners and the supervisor have been received via PhD Manager, that any case for exceptional waiver of the oral examination has been addressed, and that the candidate is otherwise available to attend.

The Chair must ensure that the examination is conducted properly and fairly and act as a mediator should there be points of disagreement between the examiners. Examiners must, nonetheless, be made aware that they may submit separate reports for consideration by the Board of the Faculty if agreement cannot be reached.

The Chair should ensure that any communication to the candidate is detailed and explicit in its contents, and that it is submitted promptly via PhD Manager for transmission to the candidate.

In the event of the candidate being required to resubmit the thesis, the Chair will decide whether or not a further oral examination is required on the basis of the preliminary reports. If so, the Chair will ask the Doctoral College to set up the oral examination. If not, the Chair will submit the report in PhD Manager in order that the examiners' decision may be communicated to the candidate.

The Role of the Supervisor

The supervisor is not a member of the Board of Examiners and shall only attend those elements of the Board at which the researcher is also present (e.g. the oral examination and the final briefing at which the Board of Examiners outline their decision to the candidate and provide feedback including any requirement for revision to the thesis); the supervisor's attendance is at the consent of the candidate.

The supervisor may not contribute unless specifically asked to do so by the Chair and the researcher may not ask the supervisor to speak.

Only one supervisor may be present and the choice of supervisor should be made by the researcher.

The supervisor should only attend lunch with the Board of Examiners where this follows the oral examination.

Subsequent to the oral examination the supervisor may provide information relevant to the completion of the examiners' report.

The supervisor should, where the candidate has to amend, correct, revise or resubmit the thesis, be clear about the extent and nature of the work required.