



# Oral Examination Procedure

## Purpose

This procedure describes the oral examination processes for the Master of Philosophy Program at UNSW.

## Scope

It applies to candidates who commenced in the Master of Philosophy program from 2020, their supervisors, Postgraduate Research Coordinators, Higher Degree Committees and other positions responsible for management of higher degree research.

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## Introduction

Higher Degree Research examination has a number of components, each of which must be assessed as satisfactory before the degree can be awarded. This includes examination of the thesis, oral examination or creative work examination.

This procedure must be read in conjunction with the [Conditions of Award of Master of Philosophy Policy](#) and the [Thesis Examination Procedure](#) which outlines the processes for the preparation, submission and examination of the thesis component.

This procedure explicitly applies to the Master of Philosophy degree which requires all candidates undergo an oral examination and describes how the oral examination process must be conducted. Candidates from other HDR programs may also elect to undertake the oral component of the examination process.

### 1. Purpose of Oral Examination

The oral examination forms part of the overall assessment of a HDR candidate’s ability to carry out a research investigation. It is used to assess both the candidate and the thesis submitted for the award of the HDR degree. In particular, the oral examination:

- establishes that the candidate fully understands the work and its wider implications
- provides the candidate with an opportunity to reply to criticism or challenge
- enables the examiners to clarify issues in the thesis which may be unclear
- helps the examiners to decide on the nature and extent of any revisions which may be required

- authenticates the contribution made by the candidate to the thesis
- ensures that the candidate has a clear understanding of the contribution of collaborators to the thesis.

## 2. Oral Examination Criteria

The [Thesis Examination Procedure](#) details the examination criteria that the examiners are asked to use to assess the thesis. In addition, the oral examination assesses the candidate on the following criteria:

- demonstrates detailed knowledge of the thesis
- demonstrates the originality of the thesis and the contribution it makes to the state of knowledge in the field
- defends the methodology and conclusions of the thesis
- displays awareness of the limitations of the thesis.

## 3. Examination Panel

### 3.1. Role of the Examination panel

An Examination Panel must be appointed to administer the examination. The role of the Panel is to:

- review the thesis prior to the oral examination
- carry out the oral examination
- provide a final written report and recommendation to the Dean of Graduate Research on whether the degree should be awarded and the level of revisions required.

### 3.2. Composition of the Panel

The oral examination panel is comprised of:

- A Chair, who must be a senior UNSW academic with experience in HDR supervision. The Chair provides disciplinary and school specific representation during the oral examination and must be independent of both the supervisory team and the candidate. The Chair will be nominated by their Head of School or nominee (such as PGC).
- Two examiners, one of whom will be involved in the conduct of the oral examination and will be referred to as the Oral Examiner.
- Members of the supervisory team are not permitted to be part of the examination panel but may attend in the capacity of observers.

## 4. Roles and responsibilities

### 4.1. The candidate

MPhil candidates are responsible for:

- The preparation and submission of their thesis for examination. Candidates must ensure that the research described was completed during the period of enrolment for the degree and that it is an account of their own research.
- Ensuring that UNSW's policies and procedures on the responsible conduct of research are followed.

### 4.2. Supervisor

The Supervisor is responsible for:

- Providing formal advice on progress of the candidate's thesis throughout the candidature, and especially prior to submission of the thesis

- b. Ensuring that the thesis is in a format suitable for examination and that the candidate has followed all the procedures required for thesis submission (in the case of the Primary Supervisor)
- c. Providing recommendations to the Postgraduate Research Coordinator on the nomination of suitable examiners.

#### 4.3. **Postgraduate Research Coordinator**

The Postgraduate Research Coordinator (PGC) is responsible for:

- a. Nominating suitable examiners of the thesis to the Higher Degree Committee on the basis of the recommendations of the supervisory team
- b. Ensuring that the nominated examiners are appropriate, and that the examination can be carried out independently and free from perception of bias or preferential treatment.

#### 4.4. **Chair of the Examination Panel**

The Chair of the Examination Panel (the Chair) is responsible for:

- a. Ensuring that the examiners have reached a consensus on the recommendation
- b. Ensuring that the oral examination proceeds appropriately
- c. Providing a final recommendation regarding the award of the degree.

#### 4.5. **The Oral Examiner**

The Oral Examiner is responsible for:

- d. Taking the academic lead in the oral examination, asking questions of the candidate on the subject of the thesis and on relevant matters in the field or fields to which the subject belongs
- e. Discussing with the candidate issues raised in the examiners' reports and asking questions of the candidate on behalf of the other examiner(s).

#### 4.6. **Faculty Higher Degree Committee or Delegate**

The Higher Degree Committee (HDC) or Delegate (such as the HDC Executive, the Faculty Associate Dean of Research Training or the Director of Postgraduate Research) is responsible for:

- a. reviewing nomination of examiners, confirming that the examiners are appropriate and free from perceived or actual conflict of interest.

#### 4.7. **Dean of Graduate Research or Delegate**

The Dean of Graduate Research is responsible for:

- a. The implementation of these procedures
- b. Appointing the examiners
- c. Determining whether a higher degree research candidate has satisfied requirements for the award of a degree.

## 5. **Nomination of Examiners**

### 5.1. **Selection**

- a. In advance of the planned submission date, the HDC shall nominate 2 examiners as well as the Chair. The HDC may seek advice from the PGC, primary supervisor, co-supervisor, HoS or other member of academic staff.

- b. If the primary supervisor has failed to provide suitable recommendations within 4 weeks of the candidate submitting their thesis for examination, the PGC must take responsibility for the nomination of examiners to ensure a timely examination process.
- c. The nominated examiners must:
  - Be experts of international standing in the discipline, independent of the conduct of the research, academically reputable in the field of the thesis, with a significant body of published work, or other publicly recognised output as appropriate for their discipline;
  - Be free from any real or perceived conflict of interest (COI), in accordance with the UNSW [Conflict of Interest Disclosure and Management Policy](#) and the UNSW [Higher Degree Examiner Conflict of Interest Guide](#). All real or perceived COI must be declared and explained through the UNSW Nomination of Examiners process (see Section 5.3);
  - Typically hold a qualification at least equivalent to the level of the award being examined;
  - Have previous experience in HDR supervision and/or HDR examination; and
- d. Prior to the appointment of examiners, the HDC shall ascertain in writing whether the candidate has any concerns regarding the suitability of any person as a potential examiner. The candidate should also identify any person whose appointment as an examiner may result in a conflict of interest during the examination (e.g. any potential employers). For this purpose, the HDC requires the primary supervisor to ask the candidate to either provide the names of any persons that should not be examiners, or to identify any potential examiners about whose potential role the candidate may have concern.
  - Any concern raised by the candidate shall be placed on record with the HDC at the time of the appointment of examiners.
  - Where possible, the persons identified by the candidate should not be used as examiners.

## 5.2. Information Provided to Examiners During the Nomination Process

Primary supervisors are responsible for making the initial contact with potential examiners. At this stage, information provided to examiners should include:

- a. The UNSW examination model, including written and oral components
- b. The topic or title of the thesis
- c. The degree for which the candidate is submitting the thesis
- d. The planned submission date
- e. The length of time available for the examination of the thesis
- f. Reference to relevant UNSW procedures for examination.
- g. Change to examination date**
  - The examiner will be notified of any changes to the planned submission date after an examiner has accepted and the HDC has approved the nomination.
  - If an examiner is no longer available to examine the thesis after the amended date, the GRS must be informed so an alternate examiner can be nominated.

## 5.3. Conflict of Interest (COI)

The thesis must be examined independently and free from actual or perceived bias. The primary supervisor should also consult other members of the supervisory team about potential examiners, and avoid any real or perceived conflict of interest (COI) with the potential examiners prior to their nomination. Supervisors should consult the UNSW [Conflict of Interest Disclosure and Management Policy](#) and the UNSW [Higher Degree Examiner Conflict of Interest Guide](#) to assist them in this process.

In cases where any real or perceived COI exists, the following process applies:

- a. The COI must be declared by the primary supervisor, and any other members of the candidate's supervisory team, through the Nomination of Examiners process.
- b. The existence of a COI does not automatically prevent the approval of a nominated examiner. Information provided about the nature of the conflict is assessed by the PGC, Faculty HDC or Delegate, and the Dean of Graduate Research or delegate in the decision-making process.
- c. If a COI arises during the examination, one or both examiners' reports may be annulled, in which case (a) replacement examiner(s) will be appointed as described in the process outlined in Section 5.1.

#### 5.4. **Nomination of Examiners Process**

To appoint the examiners, the following process applies:

- a. The primary supervisor must submit the UNSW Nomination of Examiners (NOE) form. Along with the examiner's contact details, a robust justification of the suitability of the examiner must be provided, along with the declaration of any COI issues (see Section 5.3).
- b. The completed NOE form should be submitted to the PGC for endorsement ideally 2 weeks before the submission of the candidate's thesis.
- c. The PGC is responsible for reviewing the NOE. If they have additional questions about the justifications for an examiner's nomination, or any declared/undeclared COI, they will discuss this with the primary supervisor.
- d. The PGC must provide a recommendation on the nominated Chair and provide a justification for their suitability and their independence from the candidate and the research being examined.
- e. Once satisfied with the NOE form, the PGC notifies the GRS of their approval.
- f. The Faculty, either by PVC Research Training (or Faculty equivalent) or the HDC, will review any declaration of possible COIs and recommend approval of the nominated examiners. In cases where a COI is declared and the PVC Research Training recommends approval of the examiners, the Dean of Graduate Research or delegate will review the form to ensure UNSW's policies and procedures are being followed. Once approved, the NOE form is returned to the GRS for processing and the candidate will be informed of the examiners.

#### 5.5. **Date of the Oral Examination**

As part of the nomination of examiners process, the date of the oral examination should be discussed with the approved examiners in order to agree an appropriate date. The candidate must be informed of this date upon submission of the thesis.

#### 5.6. **Disclosure of Examiner Identity and Candidate Contact**

The identity of the examiners will be known to the candidate throughout the examination process.

- a. The examiners are expected to provide fair, independent and expert reports to the Chair. This does not imply any further obligation on the part of the examiners directly to the candidate.
- b. Candidates must not contact the examiners during the thesis examination process. This commences after nomination of the examiners has been approved and prior to report and oral examination. Violation of this requirement may be construed as an attempt to influence the examination and may give rise to an allegation of academic misconduct.
- c. Examiners must not contact candidates or any members of the supervisory team directly during the examination process. If they require information, they should contact the GRS. If contact is made by an examiner, the candidate and supervisor/s should inform the GRS immediately.
- d. The procedure for contact between candidate and examiner during examination will be disclosed to examiners at the time the thesis is sent.

## 6. Oral Examination Process

The examination has two components, the written examination and the oral examination.

### 6.1. Written Examination Component

- a. Examiners will be sent a copy of the thesis following thesis submission. Each examiner must submit a written report on the thesis and a recommendation on the thesis outcome with a strong justification. They must also provide a selection of questions to be addressed in the oral examination.
- b. Both examiners' reports will be considered by the Chair. The examiners' reports will also be sent to the supervisors on a confidential basis. Supervisors may comment on the reports in writing to the Chair on a confidential basis. The Chair may also request clarification of issues raised in examiners' reports from the examiners and supervisors. If the recommendations of the examiners are in conflict, the Chair will consult with the two thesis examiners and provide a written report or reports on the outcome of their consultations.

### 6.2. Oral Examination Component

- a. The oral examination should be scheduled approximately 8 weeks after the thesis has been submitted for examination.
- b. The timing and location of the examination will be finalised and all parties will be informed by the Chair.
- c. The Chair will distribute the examiner reports to the candidate no later than 1 week prior to the examination
- d. As part of the oral examination, the candidate will be required to give a presentation to the panel and colleagues, so the candidate should:
  - identify the core component of the thesis, its methodology, and its outcome; and
  - establish the originality of their work in relation to previous scholarship in the area.
- e. At the beginning of the oral examination, the Chair will explain to the candidate the composition of the examination panel, and the order of proceedings. It is expected that once discussion is underway, this will flow naturally with questions in no particular order. The Oral Examiner will discuss with the candidate issues raised in the examiners' reports and ask questions of the candidate on behalf of the other examiner. The Chair will ensure that the other examiner's comments and questions are discussed.
- f. The oral examination will normally last between one to two hours, and the Chair must ensure that breaks are taken if the examination exceeds two hours in duration.
- g. When the Oral Examiner is satisfied that the issues in the written reports, as well as any other concerns and interests have been adequately covered, they advise the Chair to bring proceedings to an end.
- h. When the oral examination has ended, the panel will discuss the examination in camera and draft a report and recommendation.
- i. Once the recommendation is finalised, the candidate will be invited back into the room and advised of the panel's recommendation. However, the candidate should be advised that this recommendation is provisional. The final outcome is determined by the Dean of Graduate Research, who will consider the written reports in addition with the report from the Chair of the Examination Panel and any recommended corrections made to the thesis.

## 7. Examination Outcomes

On completion of the oral examination, the Chair will provide a written report and recommendation, endorsed by the Oral Examiner, to the Dean of Graduate Research. The report will outline the extent of any revisions required

to the thesis before the degree can be awarded. The report will include one of the following final recommendations:

- a. **Award** - award the degree.
- b. **Minor Corrections** - award the degree after specified minor corrections to the thesis have been made to the satisfaction of the Chair and the Dean of Graduate Research by a specified date.
- c. **Further Work** - award the degree subject to revising part or parts of the thesis to the satisfaction of the Chair and the Dean of Graduate Research by a specified date.
- d. **Revise and re-examine** - permit the candidate to revise the thesis and resubmit it for examination on one further occasion only by a specified date.
- e. **Non-Award** – the thesis does not merit the award of the degree and does not demonstrate sufficient merit to warrant resubmission.

## 8. Thesis corrections

The Graduate Research School will notify the candidate of the recommendation and the next steps following the examination.

- a. In cases where the examination recommendation is 7(a), (b) or (c), the candidate must make corrections to the thesis and submit to the Chair of the Examination Panel.
- b. The Chair of the Panel will review the corrections and responses to the examiners reports and if satisfied, will make a recommendation to the Dean of Graduate Research to award the degree.
- c. In cases where the examination recommendation is 7(d), the process in Section 9 is followed.

## 9. Revise and re-examine

When a candidate receives a recommendation of 7(d) revise and re-examine, the candidate will be permitted to re-enrol in order to make the extensive revisions.

- a. The thesis should be revised in accordance with the changes requested in the examination report and resubmitted to the GRS.
- b. The original examiners should be used, where possible. The thesis, the original examiners' reports the oral examination report, and the candidate's responses to the report will be sent to the examiners.
- c. Examiners must submit a report and recommendation to the Chair.
- d. A repeat oral examination will be scheduled, and the examination will proceed as in Section 6.2.
- e. The candidate is only permitted to revise and be re-examined once. As such, the outcome of the repeat examination may only be 7(a), (b), (c) or (e).

## 10. Appeal of Examination Outcome

Where the examination process results in a 'Non-Award' outcome, the candidate has the right to appeal to the UNSW Student Integrity Unit. This appeal may only be lodged on grounds of procedural fairness.

**Version:** 1.1

**Effective:** 26 September 2024

**Responsible:** Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research Training), Dean of Graduate Research

**Lead:** Director, Graduate Research School



## Appendix 1

### Legislative compliance

This policy is intended to ensure that UNSW complies with the:

1. [Higher Education Support Act 2003 \(Cth\)](#)
2. [Higher Education Standards Framework \(Threshold Standards\) 2015](#)
3. [Australian Qualifications Framework 2011](#)

### Supporting documents

- [Thesis Examination Procedure](#)
- [UNSW Higher Degree Examiner Conflict of Interest Guide](#)
- [Roles and Responsibilities of Postgraduate Research Coordinators Guideline](#)
- [Higher Degree Research Supervision Policy](#)
- [Higher Degree Research Supervision Procedure](#)
- [Copyright Ownership Guidelines](#)
- [Intellectual Property Policy](#)
- [Research Authorship and Publication Dispute Management Procedure](#)
- [Research Misconduct Procedure](#)
- [Research - Handling Research Material & Data Procedure](#)
- [Plagiarism Policy](#)
- Open Access and UNSWorks Guidelines
- [UNSWWorks Digital Preservation Policy](#)
- [UNSWWorks Digital Preservation Procedure](#)
- [Complaints Management and Investigations Policy & Procedure](#)

| Definitions and acronyms |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| HDR                      | Higher Degree Research                        |
| MPhil                    | Master of Philosophy                          |
| HDC                      | Faculty Higher Degree Committee or equivalent |
| PCG                      | Postgraduate Research Coordinator             |
| PVC                      | Pro Vice-Chancellor                           |

### Version history

- **Version 1.0** approved by Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research on 22 November 2019 effective 1 January 2020. New procedure.
- **Version 1.1** approved by Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research Training), Dean of Graduate Research on 26 September 2024 effective 26 September 2024. Minor change removing requirement for examiners to be internal.





## Appendix 2: Flowchart for the Oral Examination Process

