

Procedure 8: Oral Examination

1. OVERVIEW

This document provides an overview of the oral examination process and the roles and responsibilities of the candidate and University. Doctoral degree candidates commencing on or after 1 January 2018 are required to undertake an oral examination of the thesis as part of their thesis examination. Candidates commencing prior to 1 January 2018 may elect to undertake an oral examination of the thesis as part of their thesis examination in consultation with their supervisors.

2. ROLE OF THE ORAL EXAMINATION

2.1 The main objectives of holding an oral examination are:

- a) to provide candidates an opportunity to demonstrate their critical understanding of the research, its applications, and further directions in a constructive and supportive forum; and
- b) to provide examiners the opportunity to further assess the quality and independence of the research, and discuss aspects of interest in the thesis.

2.2 It is not the purpose of an oral examination to test the candidate's command of spoken English.

2.3 The outcome of the oral examination and the assessment of the thesis together will inform the examiners' joint recommendation regarding the award of the PhD qualification being sought by the candidate.

3. ORAL EXAMINATION PROCESS

3.1 Appointment of Examiners and Panel Chair

- a) Prior to the appointment of examiners, the Associate Dean (Research) may approve a variation to the arrangements for the oral examination. Variations may include an exemption from undertaking the oral examination only in extenuating circumstances.
- b) Two external examiners will be appointed, as well as a panel chair who is an academic staff member of the University.
- c) The examiners will be advised that an oral examination is required when they are invited to examine the thesis.
- d) The panel chair will be an ECU academic staff member, who is appointed by the Associate Dean (Research) from the relevant School. An alternative panel chair may be appointed if required.
- e) The panel chair must not be an examiner or a member of the candidate's supervisory panel.
- f) The panel chair may be from a different discipline, but should be conversant with the methodology used in the candidate's research.
- g) The panel chair must attend professional development provided by the Graduate Research School prior to chairing an oral examination.

3.2 Approval to Proceed to Oral Examination

- a) Following thesis submission, Research Assessments in Student Administration will send the thesis to the two external examiners for assessment. The panel chair will also receive a copy of the thesis at this point.
- b) Examiners will be asked to independently read the thesis and provide an interim examiner report, based on the criteria for the award of the degree, within 6 weeks of

receipt.

- c) The interim report should assess the quality of the thesis and provide sufficient detail of any revisions required. The report will also include the proposed questions to be asked at an oral examination.
- d) Once the examiners' reports are received, these will be forwarded by Research Assessments to the Dean, Graduate Research School.
- e) The Dean, Graduate Research School may determine that a candidate may not progress to oral examination, or that a variation to arrangements be made.
- f) If an oral examination is approved to proceed, the interim examiner reports will be sent to both examiners and the panel chair.

3.3 Oral Examination Participants

- a) The oral examination must be attended by:
 - the panel chair;
 - the candidate;
 - at least one examiner;
 - at least one of the candidate's supervisors (preferably the principal), to whom the panel may address questions during the oral examination.
- b) Administrative support will be provided for the panel chair. The administrative support person will not participate in the formal deliberations of the meeting, but may advise the panel chair on process, assist with any connection issues and complete other tasks as relevant to the conduct of the oral examination.
- c) The Dean, Graduate Research School (or proxy), or the relevant Associate Dean (Research) (or proxy) may choose to attend any oral examination as an observer.
- d) Following consultation with the candidate, the panel chair may also elect to invite to the oral examination:
 - other members of the candidate's School (to whom the panel may address questions during the oral examination);
 - Other parties as deemed appropriate, for example a support person for the candidate or industry representative (such parties will not usually contribute to any discussions).

3.4 Timing

- a) The oral examination is scheduled for a date approximately 10 weeks after the thesis is submitted. If the examiners' reports are not received in a timely manner the oral examination will have to be rescheduled.
- b) The oral examination must not be held until both examiners' written reports on the thesis have been submitted.
- c) An administrative support person will liaise with the panel chair to arrange:
 - the date, time and location; and
 - technology support for video conferencing and/or recording facilities.
- d) The candidate and panel members will receive at least two weeks' notice of the time and location of the oral thesis examination and any other requirements.
- e) If the oral examination needs to be rescheduled due to unforeseen circumstances (e.g. illness), all parties will be notified as soon as possible.

3.5 Venue

- a) Candidates are normally required to attend the oral examination in person at their home campus.
- b) The examiners may attend the oral thesis examination via video-conference or in person at the expense of the candidate's School.
- c) All participants will test connectivity prior to the oral examination.
- d) Remote participants in the examination should use a headset where possible to reduce audio feedback.

3.6 Preparation

- a) Research Assessments will send the interim examiners' reports to the candidate at least two weeks prior to the oral examination. This will give the candidate the opportunity to prepare for the types of questions they may be asked during the oral examination. The interim examiners' reports sent to the candidate will only include the comments on the thesis, and not the assessment of the quality of the thesis or the proposed questions for the oral examination.
- b) The candidate should attend oral communication training provided by the Graduate Research School prior to the oral examination.
- c) The examiners and panel chair are required to read all interim examiners' reports prior to the oral examination.
- d) The panel chair will devise a list of questions for the oral examination based on the those proposed by the examiners in the interim examiner report. These will not be provided to the candidate prior to the oral examination.
- e) The candidate and the supervisors are not permitted to engage in any correspondence with the examiners before the oral examination commences. Any dialogue with the examiners must be via the panel chair.

3.7 Duration and Format

- a) On the day of the oral examination, the panel chair will meet the examiners to discuss their interim reports and set an agenda with points for discussion and issues requiring clarification.
- b) The oral examination should normally include an assessment of the candidate's ability to:
 - display detailed knowledge of the thesis;
 - locate their research in the broader context of their discipline;
 - demonstrate the originality of the thesis and the contribution it makes to knowledge; and
 - defend the methodology and conclusions of the thesis.
- c) A standard oral examination is two hours, and may run for up to four hours.
- d) The panel chair will act as a facilitator and will manage the event including:
 - welcoming all parties and providing a brief introduction to the conduct of the oral examination;
 - allowing all parties to ask and fully answer questions;
 - asking questions from non-attending examiners;
 - ensuring the requirements of the oral examination are followed; and
 - ensuring that a final recommendation is made at the conclusion of the examination and this is communicated clearly to the candidate.

- e) The format of the oral examination will vary from case to case, and should be decided upon with reference to the considerations outlined in the objectives listed above. A standard format might include:
 - A pre-meeting of the panel chair and examiners.
 - Panel chair introduction.
 - A brief overview of the thesis by the candidate.
 - Questions from examiners on substantive issues to which the candidate responds.
 - The panel members deliberate in private and come to a collective recommendation.
 - The candidate may be verbally informed of the recommendation of the panel and any required corrections or revisions.
 - After the oral examination, the panel chair must complete a report which includes any required corrections or revisions.
- f) The oral examination may be recorded, with the approval of the panel members and the Dean, Graduate Research School, and any absent examiner sent a copy so he/she can contribute to the final recommendation.
- g) In the case of an absent examiner, the report will be deferred until the final examiner can contribute to the recommendation. This should be completed within 2 weeks, unless approved by the Dean, Graduate Research School.

4. EXAMINATION RESULT

- 4.1 Once the oral examination has concluded, the chair and the examiners will confer in private and the examiners will decide on their joint recommendation to the University regarding the award of PhD.
- 4.2 Following their deliberations, the chair and examiners may verbally communicate their recommended result and any required corrections or revisions to the candidate. This is not an opportunity for the candidate to challenge the result. In the event that the examiners cannot reach agreement about a joint recommendation, no immediate feedback will be provided to the candidate or supervisors.
- 4.3 Before the examiners disband, a list of matters to be corrected and amended must be produced and a recommendation made for the final single result. The report should be written by the chair and agreed between both examiners. The final report should take account of both the initial examination of the thesis and the oral examination and be submitted to the Dean, Graduate Research School. In exceptional circumstances, where additional consultation between examiners is required before the report can be finalised, the final report may be submitted within two weeks.
- 4.4 Possible outcomes from the examination are that the thesis be:
 - a) passed without conditions;
 - b) passed, subject to minor amendments being made to the satisfaction of the principal supervisor;
 - c) passed, subject to major amendments being made to the satisfaction of the Associate Dean (Research);
 - d) revised and re-submitted for examination; or
 - e) failed.
- 4.5 If the examiners disagree about the result and a consensus cannot be reached, the panel chair must advise the Dean of the Graduate Research School, who may refer the matter to the Graduate Research School Committee.
- 4.6 After consideration of the examiners' report, the Graduate Research School Committee will

classify the thesis as:

- a) passed without conditions;
 - b) passed, subject to minor amendments being made to the satisfaction of the principal supervisor;
 - c) passed, subject to major amendments being made to the satisfaction of the Associate Dean (Research);
 - d) revised and re-submitted for examination; or
 - e) failed.
- 4.7 If a thesis is to be revised and re-submitted, only the written thesis is re-examined and a second oral examination is not held.

A flow chart of the oral examination process described in these procedures is provided in Appendix A.

5. FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

[The Research Journey. The Assessment Process](#)

Doctoral Thesis Examination Procedure

