

Guideline Title: Higher Degree by Research (HDR) Thesis Examination

Guideline Owner: Dean, Graduate Research

This guideline supports the University to operationalise the *Research Training Policy* and must be complied with.

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1. INTENT

This guideline provides an overview of the HDR examination process and the roles and responsibilities of the Candidates, Supervisors, and University. Thesis Examination procedures apply to all Candidates enrolled in HDR Courses within the University. Candidates enrolled in joint or collaborative HDR Courses may have additional requirements as outlined in the relevant policies, procedures and agreements with partnering institutions.

2. ORGANISATIONAL SCOPE

This guideline applies to all Staff, Candidates and Supervisors involved in any aspect of Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) including adjunct positions and emeritus professors that administer, supervise, or otherwise contribute to HDR Candidates and HDR Courses.

3. DEFINITIONS

The [University Glossary](#) and definitions in the [Research Training Policy](#) apply to this guideline.

4. GUIDELINE CONTENT

Nomination of Examiners

- 4.1. The Candidate, in consultation with the Supervisor Panel, must submit a [Nomination of Examiners](#) form for review and approval at least 3 months prior to the submission of the thesis for examination.

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- 4.2. Examiners must be external to ECU and free from conflict of interest with the Candidate, Supervisors, University and where relevant, any partnering institution. The Australian Council of Graduate Research provides [Good Practice Guidelines](#) that will assist in identifying some, but not all, potential conflicts of interest with examiners. Candidates and Supervisors are required to declare any real or perceived conflict of interest upon the nomination of examiners. Further information can be found in [ECU Conflict of Interest](#) policy. Thesis examiners are approved by the relevant Associate Dean (Research).
- 4.3. Candidates, Staff and the University are required to adhere to several [legislative and other requirements](#) when engaging with foreign individuals and entities, including examiners. Candidates and Supervisors must note in the [Nomination of Examiners](#) form, any data management, international compliance, or confidentiality requirements relating to a thesis that need to be considered in the examination process, such as defence-related research, sensitive data etc. Where it is proposed that an international examiner is to be appointed, following the submission of the nomination of examiners, an international compliance review will be undertaken to ensure appropriate action is taken to address compliance obligations and mitigate any identified risks.
- 4.4. Candidates may be involved in discussions with their Supervisor Panel on the selection of appropriate examiners, however examiners should only be approached by Supervisor Panel members, and not the Candidate. Candidates and Supervisors may not contact any examiner during the examination period. All contact with examiners during the examination process will be conducted by Graduate Research Services, Research Assessments or the Dean, Graduate Research. Candidates and Supervisors are strongly recommended to nominate reserve examiners as any unforeseen circumstances affecting an examiner's availability may considerably extend the duration of the examination process.

Minimum number of examiners required:

Award	Number of Examiners
Masters by Research	2
Doctoral programs with oral examination	2
Doctoral programs without oral examination*	3

** 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.*

Thesis Submission for Examination

- 4.5. Candidates are required to submit their thesis for examination via the University's Prescribed Process. Candidates will receive a notification that the thesis has been received, following which it will be sent to the examiners by Research Assessments, if approved for examination.

Examination of Thesis

- 4.6. Candidates must produce a thesis that has relevance, is positioned within current international and national contexts, and that is conducted to the highest standards of integrity and ethics. The examination of the thesis will assess the Candidate's achievement of these and other relevant course requirements, including the display of expert technical and creative skills, and knowledge and understanding relevant to their field of research.
- 4.7. Approved examiners will be sent the thesis and asked to complete the written assessment within 6 weeks of receiving the thesis. Examiners will be directed to appropriate [guidelines](#) during the examination process. Examiners may receive an honorarium, with payments based on the standard amounts recommended by [Universities Australia](#).
- 4.8. In Exceptional Circumstances, the Dean, Graduate Research may approve a variation to the arrangements for the thesis and oral examination, including a variation in the number of examiners, requirement for oral examination, or otherwise.

Thesis Classification Levels

- 4.9. The Candidate's thesis will be assessed and classified as set out in this procedure and in accordance with the [Admissions, Enrolment and Academic Progress Rules](#).

Thesis Without Oral Examination

- 4.10. The process for thesis without oral examination, are outlined below:
 - a. Each examiner will independently submit an examination report to Research Assessments providing an assessment of the thesis and recommending one of the five thesis classification levels. Once all examiners' reports have been received, Research Assessments will forward to the Dean, Graduate Research for determination of the final thesis outcome. In determining the final outcome, the Dean, Graduate Research will take into consideration the recommendations of examiners and their own evaluation of the examiner report.
 - b. Where examiner reports differ, the Dean, Graduate Research may seek recommendations from the HDR Thesis Examination Committee (described in 4.23). In these cases, the HDR Thesis Examination Committee will review the examiner reports and will submit to the Chair (Dean, Graduate Research) a recommendation for one of the possible thesis classifications.

Thesis With Oral Examination

- 4.11. The process for thesis with oral examination, are outlined below:
 - a. Any PhD candidate commencing their degree on or after 1 January 2018 is required to complete an Oral Examination. When nominating examiners, the Candidate and Supervisors will be required to nominate an oral examination Panel Chair. Candidates may be involved in discussions with their Supervisor Panel on the

selection of an appropriate Panel Chair, however the Panel Chair should only be approached by Supervisor Panel members, and not the Candidate. The Associate Dean (Research) (from the relevant School) will review and approve the nomination of examiners and Panel Chair. The Panel Chair is required to:

- be an ECU Academic Staff member (Senior Lecturer or above);
- attend the relevant professional development prior to chairing an oral examination;
- not be an examiner or a member of the Candidate's Supervisor Panel; and
- be conversant with the methodology used but not necessarily a discipline expert or from the same discipline as the Candidate's research.

4.12. Prior to the Oral Examination, each examiner will independently submit an interim examination report to Research Assessments. The interim examination report will include a summary of the examiner's assessment of the Candidate's quality of work (Section 1), a rating of the thesis, an assessment of whether the Candidate should be permitted to proceed to Oral Examination, and an overview of proposed questions (Section 2). Candidate and Supervisors will be provided with Section 1 of this interim examiner's report only, and the Panel Chair and examiners with both sections of the interim examination reports approximately two weeks prior to the scheduled Oral Examination.

4.13. The Oral Examination scheduling will be coordinated by the relevant School or Teaching Area (i.e. Research Administration Officer).

4.14. During the pre-examination meeting, typically on the day of the oral examination, the Panel Chair will meet with the examiners to discuss or clarify:

- a. the purpose of the Oral Examination;
- b. the order of proceedings and schedule;
- c. format and order of questions;
- d. the possible or likely duration of the examination; and
- e. any questions from examiners regarding the examination process.

4.15. Unless approved by the Dean, Graduate Research where there are Exceptional Circumstances, the Oral Examination must be attended by the:

- Candidate;
- Panel Chair; and
- all examiners

4.16. The Dean, Graduate Research or the relevant Associate Dean (Research) may choose to attend an Oral Examination as observers.

4.17. The Panel Chair, following consultation with the Candidate, may elect to invite to the Oral Examination:

- a. other members of the Candidate's School;
- b. other parties as deemed appropriate, for example a support person for the Candidate (nominated by the Candidate) or industry representative (such parties will not usually contribute to any discussions)

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- 4.18. Candidates and Supervisors are not permitted to engage in any correspondence or dialogue with the examiners before the Oral Examination commences. Direct correspondence with examiners may be regarded as academic misconduct. Any dialogue with the examiners must be via the Panel Chair, Research Assessments, Graduate Research Services, or the Dean, Graduate Research. Candidates are normally required to attend the Oral Examination in person at their home campus but may attend via video conference when enrolled online or if approved by the Panel Chair. Examiners may attend the Oral Examination via video conference or in person at the expense of the Candidate's School or Teaching Area. Oral Examinations will be recorded and stored on the University's electronic management system.
- 4.19. On completion of the Oral Examination, the Panel Chair will consult with the examiners on the changes or amendments required to the thesis and a final single recommendation for one of the five thesis classification levels. The Panel Chair will aim to submit these required changes and the final classification recommendation within the final report to Research Assessments, within two business days following the examination. In some circumstances, where additional consultation between examiners is required before the report can be finalised, an extension to this period is permissible and must be approved by the Dean, Graduate Research.
- 4.20. If a consensus cannot be reached between examiners on the changes required or the final thesis classification level, the Panel Chair must submit a report to the Dean of Graduate Research containing:
- a. the examiner's assessments of the thesis and the oral examination; and
 - b. a statement summarising why the examiners were unable to agree on a single recommendation
- 4.21. If a thesis is to be revised and re-submitted, only the written thesis is re-examined, and a second Oral Examination will not be held.
- 4.22. Research Assessments will advise the Candidate of the result and instructions for the next steps in the process.

HDR Thesis Examination Committee

- 4.23. The HDR Thesis Examination Committee will comprise of a minimum of at least four Associate Deans (Research) (or their delegates). In cases where an Associate Dean (Research) (or delegate) is on the Supervisor Panel for a Candidate, they must declare the Conflict of Interest and must not be on the HDR Thesis Examination Committee for that Candidate.

Adjudication of Thesis Classification

- 4.24. For cases in which a classification cannot be determined by the Dean, Graduate Research, the matter will be escalated to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), who may:

- a. determine the appropriate classification, having considered the examiner reports and recommendations of examiners and the recommendations of the HDR Thesis Examination Committee; or
- b. request for an adjudicator to be appointed and determine the appropriate classification having considered the adjudicator's written recommendation, the reports and recommendations of examiners, and the recommendations of the HDR Thesis Examination Committee.

4.25. To be appointed as an Adjudicator, the person must:

- a. have appropriate expertise in the general research area;
- b. have experience as a Principal Supervisor (Level 4) and examiner;
- c. hold a qualification higher or of equivalent level to the award being examined; and
- d. be independent of the Candidate, Supervisor, and School. An adjudicator may be an ECU Academic Staff member unless they have a conflict of interest.

4.26. An external Adjudicator may be remunerated the same level as a thesis examiner. An internal adjudicator (ECU employee) will be required to conduct the review within their current employment contract.

Thesis Revisions

4.27. If a Candidate receives a thesis outcome requiring changes, revisions must be made:

- a. within 6 weeks for minor amendments;
- b. within 3 months for major amendments; or
- c. within 12 months for a thesis being revised and resubmitted for examination.

4.28. Candidates completing revisions should clearly document the examiner comment, action taken, and location in their thesis to facilitate the Principal Supervisor, Associate Dean (Research) or examiner (as the context requires) ensuring corrections have been made to the highest possible standard.

Submission of Thesis for Archiving

4.29. Once any required revisions have been made and approved, the Candidate must submit a digital copy of the entire thesis (text component of the thesis and, if applicable, any supporting material in digital form) in an electronic format approved by the University Library, and a signed copy of the Thesis Submission Form and any supporting documentation to Research Assessments.

4.30. The University Library will deposit the digital master version for appropriate retention in the University Archives. Electronic full text copies of theses will be made available as limited to ECU staff and students via the Library System (password protected) or to the wider community via the Institutional repository (open access), subject to any confidentiality requirements. Candidates, with due regard to the University's commitment to open access, may limit or prevent online access to their thesis. Considerations for data management,

ethics and participant consent, international and governance requirements and copyright should be taken when determining access to the archived thesis or research output. More information is available on the [Library Services](#), [Submit a Thesis](#) webpage).

Appeal

- 4.31. A Candidate may appeal to the Student Appeals Committee if dissatisfied with the assessment of their academic work or progress as per the [Admission, Enrolment and Academic Progress Rules](#).

5. ACCOUNTABILITIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Guideline Owner is the *Dean, Graduate Research* and has overall responsibility for the content of these guidelines and their operation.

The *Manager, Graduate Research Services* is responsible for currency of information and provision of advice relating to these guidelines.

6. RELATED DOCUMENTS

Rules

[Admission, Enrolment and Academic Progress](#)

Policies

[Conflict of Interest](#)
[Research Training](#)

Operational documents and resources

[Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research](#)
[Forms, Policies and Guidelines](#)
[Good Practice Guidelines](#)
[Guideline: HDR Thesis Examination](#)
[Library Services](#)
[Submit a Thesis](#)
[TEQSA - Joint and Dual Higher Degrees by Research Between Australian Higher Education Providers](#)
[Universities Australia](#)

7. CONTACT INFORMATION

For queries relating to this document please contact:

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8. APPROVAL HISTORY

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