

# Guidance for Examiners of Postgraduate Research Awards

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Thank you for agreeing to act as an examiner for a postgraduate research award at the University of Southampton. This guidance has been prepared to explain the *viva voce* process, and the expectations of examiners.
- 1.2 All postgraduate research awards at the University of Southampton are governed by the [Regulations for Research Degrees and Higher Doctorates](#) and the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). Whilst the guidance contained within this document brings together information from these sources, the Regulations and the Code of Practice should be referred to in the case of any confusion or dispute arising during the examination process.
- 1.3 For most examinations, two examiners are required – one internal and one external. In some circumstances, an additional external examiner may also be appointed. Research students who are members of staff of the University of Southampton should have two external examiners and an internal examiner appointed.

## 2. Responsibilities of the Examiners

- 2.1 Examiners are responsible for undertaking the examination of a research student for a postgraduate research award in accordance with the University's Regulations and Code of Practice. In order to do this, it is expected that examiners will have sufficient experience and appropriate subject expertise to be able to examine effectively. They should also be sensitive to, and take into account in the examining process, reasonable adjustments, equality and diversity. Collectively, the examiners should have acted as examiner for at least three doctoral examinations and be familiar with examination practice and standards in the UK. As an example, if the external examiner possesses subject expertise but limited UK examining experience, this may be compensated for by a suitably UK-experienced internal examiner. The examining team should have sufficient familiarity with examining procedures generally, and with the requirements of British postgraduate research qualifications. External examiners should normally hold academic posts in another higher education institution.
- 2.2 Examiners may wish to (re)familiarise themselves with the following QAA publications: [The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies \(October 2014\)](#), the [Characteristics Statement: Doctoral Degree \(September 2015\)](#), and the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Advice and Guidance \(Research Degrees\)](#).
- 2.3 The Internal and External Examiners are required independently to assess the thesis and each prepares an individual independent report on the work.
- 2.4 If you feel, for whatever reason, that you will not be able to meet these responsibilities and requirements, you should contact the Faculty Graduate School Office as soon as possible.

## 3. Appointing an Independent Chair

- 3.1 The *viva voce* will be chaired by the internal examiner or by an Independent Chair.
- 3.2 An Independent Chair must be appointed in the following circumstances:
  - in response to any request from the Faculty Graduate School Committee, an examiner, a member of the supervisory team, or the research student;
  - where the examination team is inexperienced at examining under the UK system (when one examiner has never conducted a *viva voce* before);

- where the internal examiner holds a substantive post within University Hospitals Southampton NHS Foundation Trust or associated NHS organisation, or is a member of staff employed at the Natural Environmental Research Council (NERC) or the National Oceanography Centre (NOC), or has a similar joint employment status between the University of Southampton and its partners;
  - where there have been substantial difficulties with research student progress;
  - where the *viva voce* is taking place with the assistance of video conferencing and/or other suitable technologically-based communication;
  - where the research student is undertaking a second *viva voce* either with or without a resubmission of the thesis.
- 3.3 An Independent Chair will not receive a copy of the thesis. The role of the Independent Chair is to monitor good practice within the examination and to ensure that the examination is conducted according to the University's regulations. The Independent Chair will ensure that the research student is treated fairly and appropriately and will ensure that the outcome of the examination is fair and appropriate given the research student's performance. The Independent Chair will be required to complete a Chair's Report after the completion of the *viva voce*, but this does not constitute an examiner's report.
- 3.4 A decision on whether an Independent Chair is required will usually be taken well in advance of the *viva voce* and you will be informed accordingly. However, it is possible that a request for an Independent Chair will be made very late in the process, for example if the Examiners' independent reports indicate a potential conflict between examiners.
- 3.5 If you would like to request that the examination has an Independent Chair, please contact the Faculty Graduate School Office as soon as possible.
- 3.6 If an Independent Chair is not required, the internal examiner will act as the Chair, and, after the *viva voce*, will complete the *Chair's Report following a Viva Voce for a Postgraduate Research Award* form.

## 4. Fees and Expenses (for External Examiners only)

- 4.1 The fee to be paid to the External Examiner will be as set out in the letter of appointment. At the time of issuing the letter of appointment, the Faculty Graduate School Office will send the *Bank Information (AP07) form* and the *External Examiner (PGR & PGT only) Claim for Fees and Expenses (AP08) form*, both of which should be completed and returned by the External Examiner to the Faculty Graduate School Office following the *viva voce*.
- 4.2 The fee covers the examination and the checking of any modest corrections/omissions of substance that are recommended after the *viva voce*. Where a further *viva voce* is required, an additional fee can be claimed.
- 4.3 External examiners may claim reasonable expenses if they are wholly, necessarily and exclusively incurred in the course of the University's business and are in accordance with the University's Expenses and Benefits Procedures manual.
- Rail – the most economical class of ticket, usually standard class return, should be purchased unless other tickets are available at a lower cost.
  - Air – payment for air travel may be approved providing the total cost does not exceed that of rail travel plus subsistence costs. The dates of travel and route of journey must be shown.
  - Car, motorcycle or bicycle – mileage expenses will be paid at the following rates, per round trip.
 

Cars: 40p per mile for the first 50 miles; 23p per mile thereafter  
 Motorcycles: 15p per mile  
 Bicycles: 10p per mile

- Subsistence expenses will be reimbursed providing full details are shown. Personal expenses, such as alcohol, mini-bars, newspapers, laundry, pay-per-view facilities, should not be claimed.

All original receipts must be submitted with the claim.

- 4.4 Guidance should be sought from the Faculty Graduate School Office should recommendations for local hotels be needed, or if a visitor parking space is required.
- 4.5 Information on visiting the University's campuses, including road, rail and air connections, can be found [here](#).

## 5. Arranging the *Viva Voce*

- 5.1 The date of the *viva voce* will be arranged through the member of the supervisory team acting as co-ordinating supervisor. Once the date has been arranged, you will be given further information, including directions to the venue. In preparing for and conducting the *viva voce*, reasonable adjustments will be made where necessary, to accommodate any additional needs of the research student and you will be informed if any measures or adjustments are needed in conducting the examination.
- 5.2 It is normal practice for the *viva voce* to be held on one of the University's campuses, with the research student and examiners present in the same room. In exceptional circumstances, video conferencing or other suitable technologically-based communication arrangements can be made for the conduct of the *viva voce*, provided all parties are agreeable to these arrangements and all necessary safeguards are in place to facilitate the smooth running of the examination, including identification checks of the research student and the need to assure the quality of the examination process. Responsibility for approving examination arrangements lies with the Faculty Director of the Graduate School.

### Attendees to the *viva voce*

- 5.3 The research student to be examined and the examiners (including the Independent Chair, where one has been appointed) should be present during the *viva voce*.
- 5.4 A supervisor should be available to provide clarification at the *viva voce* if requested by the examiners. At the request of the research student, one member of the supervisory team may be invited to attend the *viva voce*. A supervisor who is in attendance at the *viva voce* will not play an active role in the examination and may not take part in the judgement of the thesis under consideration.

## 6. In Advance of the *Viva Voce*

### Documentation

- 6.1 Each member of the examining team will be sent:
  - A soft bound copy of the research student's thesis
  - Names of other members of the examining team and their associated institutions (as applicable)
  - The *Examiner's Independent Report* template
  - The *Examiner's Joint Report and Recommendation form* template
  - Details on how to claim for fees and expenses (for external examiners only)
  - The Regulations for Research Degrees and Higher Doctorates
  - The *Chair's Report* template (for the Chair of the examining team only)
- 6.2 Where the research student is from a discipline where original practical work may be submitted in part fulfilment of the award's requirements, arrangements will be made for the examining team to access this content in an appropriate medium.

## Useful contacts

- 6.3 Although you may have other contact with the University, primarily through the research student's supervisor, your formal contact for the examination process is the Faculty Graduate School Office. Contact details are as follows:

Faculty Name	Email Address
Arts and Humanities	<a href="mailto:fah-gradschool@soton.ac.uk">fah-gradschool@soton.ac.uk</a>
Engineering and Physical Sciences	<a href="mailto:feps-gradschool@soton.ac.uk">feps-gradschool@soton.ac.uk</a>
Environmental and Life Sciences	<a href="mailto:fels-gradschool@soton.ac.uk">fels-gradschool@soton.ac.uk</a>
Medicine	<a href="mailto:fmed-gradschool@soton.ac.uk">fmed-gradschool@soton.ac.uk</a>
Social Sciences	<a href="mailto:fss-gradschool@soton.ac.uk">fss-gradschool@soton.ac.uk</a>

## Completing the examiner's independent report

- 6.4 All examiners are required to complete the *Examiner's Independent Report on a Postgraduate Research Thesis* in advance of the *viva voce*, and without consultation with other examiners. The completed report should be returned to the Faculty Graduate School Office **not normally less than 5 working days** before the date of the *viva voce*.
- 6.5 The report should include a brief description of the work carried out by the research student, its strengths and weaknesses, and should relate the work to the wider context of the research student's chosen field of research. You may wish to use the report to:
- consider whether the research student has demonstrated a broad knowledge and understanding of their discipline and its associated research technique;
  - assess whether the research student has applied the techniques, as appropriate, to their thesis;
  - comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis;
  - highlight any particular issues that you would like to draw out in the *viva voce*.
- 6.6 The report will be made available to the other examiner(s) prior to the *viva voce*. Although the *Examiner's Independent Report on a Postgraduate Research Thesis* will not usually be shared with the research student, you should be aware that in the event of a request through the Freedom of Information of Act or from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, the research student may access all documentation and email communications relating to their examination.

## 7. The Viva Voce

- 7.1 In advance of the *viva voce*, the examiners will have access to copies of each *Examiner's Independent Report on a Postgraduate Research Thesis*, and there will be an opportunity for discussion between the examiners at a preliminary meeting directly before the *viva voce*. During this discussion, the examiners should agree the key issues to be raised with the research student. It is also helpful for the examiners to agree the order in which issues will be raised and who will lead on each issue.
- 7.2 The *viva voce* is a formal occasion, and the room should be laid out appropriately. This is the responsibility of the chair. It may be useful to consider the following in setting out the room:
- that the room layout enables clear communication between the research student and the examiners;
  - that the member of the supervisory team (if in attendance at the request of the research student) is not in the direct sight line of the research student or the examiners;
  - that the research student is the closest individual in the room to the door;
  - that any accessibility requirements have been met;
  - that there is opportunity to regulate the temperature and light in the room - a window is preferable;
  - that there is enough table space to accommodate each person's copy of the thesis;
  - that a clock/watch is viewable by all attendees;
  - that fresh water is available to all attendees;
  - that a 'Do Not Disturb' sign is on the door;
  - that any telephones in the room - fixed and mobile - are unable to receive calls;
  - that spare paper and pens are available.

## Purpose of the *viva voce*

- 7.3 The purpose of the *viva voce* is to gather further evidence from the research student about their suitability for the award, in particular:
- to ask the research student to clarify issues relating to meeting criteria relating to specific parts of the thesis, to the thesis as a whole, and to the award;
  - to ascertain that the thesis is the research student's own work, that they have developed research skills at this level, and that they understand the
  - relationship of the thesis to the wider field of knowledge;
  - that in cases where the thesis and/or the research student clearly does not meet the criteria for the award, to try to determine the possible reasons. These may include the abilities of the research student and/or other factors affecting the research such as the quality of research training, the availability of resources, disruptions to the research process, or personal circumstances

## Explaining the purpose and process to the research student

- 7.4 After welcoming the research student and introducing the examiners, the Chair should explain that the *viva voce* provides an opportunity for the research student to defend their thesis in high-level debate with experts drawn from the relevant research community.
- 7.5 As many research students will not have previously undertaken a *viva voce*, it can be helpful to explain the process to them. The Chair should make it clear that the examiners have a duty to thoroughly explore both the work presented and the research student's knowledge and understanding of both it and the wider field and that persistent questioning is a normal and necessary part of the process. The research student should also be told that they may, if they wish, consult with their copy of the thesis throughout the *viva voce*.
- 7.6 If a member of the supervisory team is present at the *viva voce*, the Chair should explain to the research student that the supervisor will not play an active role in the examination and that they are attending in a supportive capacity only and will not ask any questions nor take part in the judgement of the thesis. However, they may act as a note-taker, which may be useful for the research student after the *viva voce*.

## Constructive questioning

- 7.7 Research students can be extremely nervous, and it is important to try and settle them down at the start of the viva by saying something commendatory but non-committal, e.g. "*We found your thesis very interesting, we particularly enjoyed ...*"
- 7.8 It is helpful to begin with questions that the research student should be able to answer without undue difficulty, e.g. "*Why did you decide to do this topic? What aspect of the work have you most enjoyed?*" Further questions should then be asked, covering the key issues and in the order previously identified. In questioning the research student, examiners should:

### 7.8.1 Ask questions in a constructive and positive way

- Examiners should try to ask questions in ways that are constructive and positive rather than destructive and negative, e.g. "*why did you try to solve the problem using method X rather than method Y?*" rather than "*Didn't you realize that you could have avoided these difficulties with method Y?*"
- Use an appropriate range of questioning techniques.
- Examiners may wish to ask general questions (e.g. "*how did you come to study this topic?*"); open questions (e.g. "*tell me about your methodology?*") and closed questions ("*why did you think that the confidence limits were unimportant in this case?*"). General or open questions are useful in encouraging the research student to reflect upon their work, while closed ones lead to specific answers. Examiners should try to tailor the type of question to the type of answer required and, if possible, aim for a mix of general and open questions (which are harder to answer but can reveal much more about the research student) and closed ones (which may reveal less but are easier for the research student to answer).

### 7.8.2 Recognise that research students may need time to answer

- Research students may need some time to gather their thoughts together and produce a coherent answer. Examiners need to recognise this and encourage research students to take time to think.

### 7.8.3 Commend a good answer

- When research students give a particularly incisive or interesting answer, it can be helpful to their morale to acknowledge this.

### 7.8.4 Give research students a chance to recover from a poor answer

- When research students give a poor answer, this may be through misunderstanding or nervousness. Rephrasing a question and asking it again gives the able research student the opportunity to recover the position or may confirm limitations in a weaker one.

## Poor practice in conducting the viva

7.9 Some examples of poor practice by examiners (*Partington et al 1993*)

- **An inquisitor**  
This examiner behaves like a TV interviewer quizzing a politician during an election campaign, rapidly shooting out hostile questions, interrupting the answers and generally trying to score points. Such an approach may intimidate the research student so that he or she is unable to respond, or anger them to the extent that the viva becomes an adversarial confrontation.
- **A proof reader**  
This examiner takes research students line by line through their theses asking questions about errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar. If these are exceptionally poor, instead of proof reading in the viva, examiners can make it a requirement that the thesis is re-typed or hand the research student a list of corrections after the viva.
- **A committee person**  
The committee person takes the research student through the thesis page by page questioning each matter as it arises rather than synthesising points into key issues relating to the trigger for the study, the methodology, the design, etc. However, it is also recognised that such very close scrutiny may be necessary for some disciplines.
- **A hobby horse rider**  
This examiner has strong feelings or prejudices about one area of the thesis and keeps returning to questions on this while neglecting other aspects of the research.
- **A kite flyer**  
The kite-flyer has identified a – usually fairly tenuous – link between the thesis and another subject and persists in exploring this to the detriment of the examination of the topic as defined by the research student, i.e. effectively examines a thesis which the research student did not write.
- **A reminiscer**  
This examiner continually regales the research student with stories of their own research career to the detriment of the examination of the research student's work.

## At the conclusion of the *viva voce*

- 7.10 When the examiners are satisfied that sufficient, relevant evidence has been gathered, the research student should be thanked for answering the questions and asked whether there are any concluding comments which they wish to make. The Chair should explain again that the examiners will now consult about the outcome, and make clear how the recommendation will be communicated to the research student. While this may be done informally after the *viva voce*, research students should be informed that formal notification of the result will be given by the Faculty Graduate School Office.
- 7.11 After conducting the *viva voce*, examiners have to decide upon a recommendation, write a joint report (within one working week of the examination), and decide what information should be given to the research student (including clear guidance if there is a requirement to amend or re-submit the thesis).

## 8. Reporting Requirements

### Preparing the Joint Report and Recommendations Form

- 8.1 After conducting the *viva voce*, the examiners are required to prepare a joint report which should include an agreed recommendation.
- 8.2 The *Examiners' Joint Report and Recommendation form* should be used to record the agreed views of all examiners in relation to the core outcomes of the research degree and their recommendation on the award of the degree, based on both the thesis and the research student's performance at the *viva voce*.
- Within Part A of the form, examiners are asked to confirm that the research student has demonstrated an original contribution to knowledge in their subject, field or profession and that the contribution has been made through original research and/or the contribution has been made through the original application of existing knowledge or understanding.
  - Within Part B of the form, examiners are asked to confirm that the research student has demonstrated the descriptors as specified in Part A of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education: The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies, November 2014.
  - Examiners are also required to provide a sufficiently detailed statement to justify the recommendation made in the report and to outline any criteria marked 'partially' or 'no' in Part B of the report. The statement should comment on the research student's performance in the oral examination and any discrepancies between the individual reports. Examiners may wish to comment on the organisation, structure, presentation, authenticity, content, publishable quality and critical awareness of the subject demonstrated throughout the examination process.
- 8.3 The examiners' recommendation must take one of the forms specified in paragraph 57 (a) to (g) as specified in the [Regulations for Research Degrees](#). For research students studying for a research degree with a substantial taught component, recommendations (a) to (f) will also be subject to the satisfactory completion of the taught element of the programme.
- 8.4 It should be noted that where the recommendation of the examiners is for re-examination at a later date ([Regulations for Research Degrees](#), paragraph 57 (e)), options (d) and (e) are not available as outcomes at the later re-examination.
- 8.5 The *Examiners' Joint Report and Recommendation form* must be signed by all examiners and submitted to the Faculty Graduate School Office within one working week of the *viva voce*.
- 8.6 The examiners' independent reports and their joint recommendation should be scrutinised and approved by the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, in their capacity as Chair of the Faculty Graduate School Committee.
- 8.7 In the exceptional circumstances that the appointed examiners are unable to reach agreement, the examiners shall submit independent reports, and the Faculty Director of the Graduate School shall recommend to the Faculty Education Committee the appointment of an additional external examiner. The Faculty Graduate School Office will provide the additional examiner with a copy of the thesis and the independent reports of the original examiners. The additional examiner shall be permitted to interview the research student in the presence of an Independent Chair before submitting a final report and recommendation to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, in their capacity as Chair of the Faculty Graduate School Committee. They shall consider the independent reports of the original examiners, and the report of the additional examiner, before making a recommendation to the Faculty Education Committee.

### Chair's Report

- 8.8 If an Independent Chair was present at the *viva voce*, they should complete the *Chair's Report form*. This form should be used to confirm that the examination has been conducted according to the University's regulations and the Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and supervisor, the research student has been treated fairly and appropriately; and the outcome of the examination is fair and appropriate given the performance of the research student.
- 8.9 The *Chair's Report form* must be signed by the Independent Chair and submitted to the Faculty Graduate School Office within one working week of the *viva voce*.

## 9. Further Actions

- 9.1 The Faculty Graduate School Office will provide the research student with a copy of the *Joint Report and Recommendation form*.

### Amendments/Corrections to the Thesis

- 9.1 When amendments have been recommended by the examiners, research students will be required to submit the amended thesis, in electronic format, to the Faculty Graduate School Office by a date as specified by the examiners. The Faculty Graduate School Office will then pass the amended thesis to the examiners: to the internal examiner for **minor** amendments, and to the internal and external examiners (for **modest** amendments).
- 9.2 Examiners should assess the amended/corrected thesis against the requirements as specified in the *Examiners' Joint Report and Recommendation form*. Examiners are permitted to request additional amendments on receipt of the amended thesis, but these should only address points raised in the original examination process – e.g. when a student has failed to make all amendments required. Any follow up amendments should be communicated to the research student by the Faculty Graduate School Office, and should be completed within a stated timescale and in recognition of the original timescale for amendments. Whilst it is possible for a thesis originally requiring modest corrections/omissions of substance to then require additional minor amendments, it is not possible for a thesis which originally required minor amendments to then require additional modest corrections/errors of substance.
- 9.3 Where examiners are unable to reach a decision about a revised thesis that has been submitted with modest corrections/omissions of substance; or where the research student has resubmitted a revised thesis in a second attempt at minor or modest amendments but has still failed to satisfy the examiners, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School should be notified.
- 9.4 Once the internal examiner (for minor amendments) or all examiners (for modest corrections/omissions of substance) are satisfied that the amendments have been completed to the standard required of the award, the examiner(s) should each email the Faculty Graduate School Office from their professional (e.g: @soton.ac.uk) email account with the following text: “*I can confirm minor/modest (delete as appropriate) amendments required by the examiners of (name of research student) following their viva voce of (date of viva voce) have now been completed by the research student satisfactorily and I therefore recommend award of (name of award).*”
- 9.5 A research student who fails to submit a corrected or revised thesis by the date set by the examiners shall normally be regarded as having failed the examination, the recommendations of the examiners shall lapse and candidature will be terminated. In exceptional circumstances, a revised date for submitting corrections may be approved in accordance with the [Regulations Governing Special Considerations and Suspension of Candidature for Postgraduate Research Students](#).

### Resubmission of the Thesis

- 9.6 Where a research student has been asked to resubmit their thesis, the examination process begins again. The examiners will receive a copy of the thesis, associated report forms, and be required to conduct a second *viva voce*, which should normally take place within three months of re-submission. It is not permitted to examine a resubmitted thesis without a second *viva voce*.

## 10. Examiners' Feedback to the University

- 10.1 External Examiners are invited to comment on their experience and perceptions of the overall examination process (including suggestions for enhancements) to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, by contacting the Faculty Graduate School Office. These comments can be considered confidential if it is felt appropriate to do so.
- 10.2 External Examiners are also able to make a separate confidential report directly to the Vice-Chancellor ([vice-chancellor@soton.ac.uk](mailto:vice-chancellor@soton.ac.uk)) on any matter of serious concern, and/or ask that their comments to the Faculty Director of the Faculty Graduate School be considered by the Vice-Chancellor directly.



## 11. Useful links

[University of Southampton Regulations for Research Degrees and Higher Doctorates](#)

[University of Southampton Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision](#)

[University of Southampton Quality Handbook](#)

[The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies \(October 2014\)](#)

[Characteristics Statement: Doctoral Degree \(September 2015\)](#)

[UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Advice and Guidance \(Research Degrees\)](#)

Document Information	
Author	Quality Standards and Accreditation Team
Owner (committee)	Academic Quality and Standards Committee
Approved Date	October 2018
Last Revision	August 2019
Type of Document	Guidance