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 (oral) examination 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 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.

Responsibilities of the Examiners

2.1 Examiners are responsible for undertaking the examination of a candidate 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. Collectively, the examiners should have examined at least three doctoral examinations and be familiar with examination practice and standards in the UK. External examiners should normally hold academic posts in another higher education institution. 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.

2.2 Examiners may wish to (re)familiarise themselves with the following QAA publications: The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Doctoral Degree Characteristics Statement and Chapter B11 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

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.

Appointing an Independent Chair

3.1 The viva voce (oral) examination 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 directorate, an examiner, a member of the supervisory team, or the research student;
- where the examination team is inexperienced at examining under the UK system (including when one examiner has never conducted a viva examination under the UK system before);
- where the internal examiner holds a substantive post within University Hospitals Southampton 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 examination is taking place with the assistance of video conferencing and/or other suitable technical communication;
- where the research student is undertaking a second viva examination 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 candidate 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 (oral) examination, 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 (oral) examination 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 complete the Chair’s Report following a Viva Voce (Oral) Examination for a Postgraduate Research Award form after the viva voce (oral) examination.

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 (oral) examination.

4.2 The fee covers the examination and the checking of any modest amendments that are recommended after the viva voce (oral) examination. Where a further viva voce (oral) examination 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 (Oral) Examination

5.1 The date of the viva voce (oral) examination will be arranged through the candidate’s supervisor. Once the date has been arranged, you will be given further information, including directions to the venue. If any reasonable adjustments are required, in accordance with the requirements of the Equality Act, these will be notified to you by the candidate’s supervisor.

5.2 It is normal practice for the viva voce (oral) examination to be held on one of the University’s campuses, with the candidate and examiners present in the same room. In exceptional circumstances, video conferencing or other suitable technical communication arrangements can be made for the conduct of the viva voce (oral) examination, 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 candidate 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 (oral) examination

5.3 The research student to be examined, the examiners (including the Independent Chair, where one has been appointed) should be present during the viva voce (oral) examination.

5.4 A member of the supervisory team, on request of the candidate may be present at the viva voce (oral) examination where the research student wishes a supervisor to be invited. In such cases, the research student should submit a request in writing to the Faculty Graduate School Office.

5.5 A supervisor who is requested to attend by the research student will not play an active role in the viva voce (oral) examination and may not take part in the judgement of the thesis under consideration.

5.6 If the candidate’s supervisor is not present, they should be contactable during the viva voce (oral) examination to provide clarification if requested by the examiners.

6. In Advance of the Viva Voce (Oral) Examination

Documentation

6.1 Each member of the examining team will be sent:

- A soft bound copy of the candidate’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 candidate 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 candidate’s supervisor, your formal contact for the examination process is the Faculty Graduate School Office. Contact details are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty Name</th>
<th>Email Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Humanities</td>
<td><a href="mailto:fah-gradschool@soton.ac.uk">fah-gradschool@soton.ac.uk</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 (oral) examination, 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 (oral) examination.

6.5 The report should include a brief description of the work carried out by the candidate, its strengths and weaknesses, and should relate the work to the wider context of the candidate’s chosen field of research. You may wish to use the report to:

- consider whether the candidate has demonstrated a broad knowledge and understanding of their discipline and its associated research technique;
- assess whether the candidate 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 (oral) examination.

6.6 The report will be made available to the other examiner(s) prior to the viva voce (oral) examination. Although the *Examiner’s Independent Report on a Postgraduate Research Thesis* will not usually be shared with the candidate, 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 candidate may access all documentation and email communications relating to their examination.

7. The Viva Voce (Oral) Examination

7.1 In advance of the viva voce (oral) examination, 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 (oral) examination. During this discussion, the examiners should agree the key issues to be raised with the candidate. 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 (oral) examination 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

- The room layout enables clear communication between the candidate and the examiners;
- An attending supervisor (if the student has requested the supervisor to attend) is not in the direct sight line of the candidate or the examiners;
- The candidate is the closest individual in the room to the door;
- Any accessibility requirements have been met;
- Ability to regulate the temperature and light in the room - a window is preferable;
- There is enough table space to accommodate each person’s copy of the thesis;
- A clock/watch is viewable by all attendees;
- Fresh water is available to all attendees;
- A ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign is on the door;
- Any telephones in the room – fixed and mobile – are unable to receive calls;
- Spare paper and pens are available.

Purpose of the viva examination

7.3 The purpose of the viva voce (oral) examination is to gather further evidence from the candidate about their suitability for the award, in particular:

- to ask the candidate 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 candidate’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;
• in cases where the thesis and/or the candidate clearly does not meet the criteria for the award, to try to determine the possible reasons. These may include the abilities of the candidate 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 candidate

7.4 After welcoming the candidate and introducing the examiners, the Chair should explain that the viva voce (oral) examination provides an opportunity for the candidate to defend their thesis in high-level debate with experts drawn from the relevant research community.

7.5 As many candidates will not have previously undertaken a viva voce (oral) examination, 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 candidate’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 candidate should also be told that they may, if they wish, consult with their copy of the thesis throughout the viva.

7.6 If a supervisor is present at the viva voce (oral) examination, the Chair should explain to the candidate 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 student after the viva.

Constructive questioning

7.7 Candidates 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 …” It is helpful to begin with questions that the candidate 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 candidate, 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 candidate 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 candidate) and closed ones (which may reveal less but are easier for the candidate to answer).

7.8.2 Recognize that candidates may need time to answer

• Candidates may need some time to gather their thoughts together and produce a coherent answer. Examiners need to recognize this and encourage candidates to take time to think.

7.8.3 Commend a good answer

• When candidates give a particularly incisive or interesting answer, it can be helpful to their morale to acknowledge this.
7.8.4 Give candidates a chance to recover from a poor answer

- When candidates give a poor answer, this may be through misunderstanding or nervousness. Rephrasing a question and asking it again gives the able candidate 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 candidate 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 candidates 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 candidate a list of corrections after the viva.

- **A committee person**
  The committee person takes the candidate 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 candidate, i.e. effectively examines a thesis which the student did not write.

- **A reminiscer**
  This examiner continually regales the candidate with stories of their own research career to the detriment of the examination of the candidate’s work.

At the conclusion of the viva

7.10 When the examiners are satisfied that sufficient, relevant evidence has been gathered, the candidate 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 candidate. While this may be done informally after the viva, candidates should be informed that formal notification of the result will be given by the Faculty Graduate School Office.

7.11 After conducting the viva, 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 candidate (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 vivavoce (oral) examination, the examiners are required to prepare a joint report which should include an agreed recommendation.

8.2 The relevant *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 candidate’s performance at the viva voce (oral) examination.
• Within Part A of the form, examiners are asked to confirm that the candidate 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 candidate 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 candidate’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 101 (a) to (g) as specified in the Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision.

a) That the degree for which the research student has submitted a thesis be awarded. This recommendation will lead to an immediate recommendation by Faculty Education Committee to Senate for the candidate’s award to be confirmed.

b) That the degree for which the research student has submitted a thesis be awarded, subject to minor amendments to the thesis being made by a date specified. Minor amendments include: minor errors/omissions of substance, typographical errors, occasional stylistic or grammatical flaws, corrections to references, addition/modification to one or two figures, and minor changes to layout, and require no new research.

These amendments need only be certified as meeting the requirements of the award by the internal examiner. The date specified for the submission of such minor amendments should normally be no later than three months after the formal notification to the research student.

c) That the degree for which the research student has submitted a thesis be awarded, subject to the correction of modest errors/omissions of substance being made by a date specified. Such amendments may require limited further analysis but will not affect the originality of the central thesis.

The amendments will be of a scale to require certification by both the internal and external examiners, though normally not so extensive that a further viva voce (oral) examination is required. The date specified for the submission of such modest amendments should normally be no later than six months after the formal notification to the research student, although examiners may recommend a longer time period (nine months), subject to a valid academic rationale, which will require approval from the Faculty Director of the Graduate School. All examiners will need to confirm that the revised thesis meets the requirements of the award. If the examiners cannot reach a decision, this will be referred to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, where a further external examiner should be appointed to assess the thesis and the other examiners’ reports, with approval from Faculty Education Committee. The additional examiner shall be permitted to interview the research student before submitting a final report and recommendation to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School.

d) That the research student be required to attend for a further viva voce (oral) examination.

All examiners will be asked to examine the further viva voce (oral) examination which should be rescheduled within three months of the date of the original viva voce (oral) examination.

e) That the research student be permitted to resubmit, by a date specified, a revised thesis for the same degree for re-examination, including an additional viva voce (oral) examination, on one subsequent occasion.

The date specified for submission of the revised thesis should normally be no later than twelve months after the formal notification to the research student. All examiners will be asked to re-examine the thesis and conduct the further viva voce (oral) examination.

f) That, in the case only of a PhD research student who has failed to satisfy the examiners, permission may be given to the research student to apply within a specified time for the award of (e.g.) the degree of MPhil.

Submission may be allowed without re-examination, subject to any minor amendment of the thesis which may be required by the examiners. Alternatively, at the request of the examiners, submission of a revised thesis may be subject to re-examination, including a
viva voce (oral) examination. In such circumstances, the work must meet the normal
criteria for the award of the (e.g.) MPhil degree.
g) That the degree be not awarded and that re-submission of the thesis be not permitted.

8.4 It should be noted that where the recommendation of the examiners is for re-examination at a
later date (option (e) above), 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 (oral)
examination.

8.6 In cases where the examiners are unable to reach agreement, a further external examiner will be
appointed to assess the thesis and the other examiners’ reports. The additional examiner shall
be permitted to interview the candidate before submitting their final report and recommendation.

8.7 The Examiners’ Joint Report and Recommendation form will be reviewed by the Faculty Director
of the Graduate School who may return the report to the examiners if they feel that the report
does not meet the standard required.

Chair’s Report
8.8 If an Independent Chair was present at the viva voce (oral) examination, 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 Code of Practice, the student has been
treated fairly and appropriately; and the outcome of the examination is fair and appropriate
given the performance of the candidate.

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 (oral) examination.

9. Further Actions

9.1 The Faculty Graduate School Office will provide the candidate 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, candidates 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: internal examiner (for minor amendments), and all examiners for
modest amendments

9.2 Examiners should assess the amended/corrected thesis against the requirements as specified in
the Examiners’ Joint Report and Recommendations 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, in recognition of the original timescale for amendments. Whilst it is possible for a
thesis originally requiring modest amendments to then require additional minor amendments, it
is not possible for a thesis which originally required minor amendments to then require
additional modest amendments.

9.3 Where examiners are unable to reach a decision about a thesis revised for modest amendments; or
where the candidate has resubmitted a second attempt at minor or modest amendments and
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 amendments)
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 candidate) following their
viva of (date of viva) have now been completed by the candidate satisfactorily and I therefore
recommend award of (name of award).”
9.5 A research student who fails to submit an amended or corrected thesis by the date set by the examiners shall normally be regarded as having failed the examination and the recommendations of the examiners shall lapse. In exceptional circumstances, a revised date for submitting amendments/corrections may be approved by the Faculty Graduate School directorate.

**Resubmission of the Thesis**

9.6 Where a candidate 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 (oral) examination, 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 (oral) examination.

**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) 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
- UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Chapter B11: Research Degrees
- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
- Characteristics Statement – Doctoral Degree