

Guide for Examiners of Research Degrees

Pertaining to: PhD, EdD, DAgriFood, MPhil, LLM by thesis.

1. Arrangements for the viva voce examination

A viva voce examination (viva) shall normally be held for a doctoral Candidate and may be held for the degree of LLM or MPhil. The Internal Examiner is responsible for arranging the viva, and the examiners should agree on a date in consultation with the Candidate. Following submission, the Candidate must inform their Supervisor and Internal Examiner of any dates when they will be unavailable to attend the viva, which should normally be held within four calendar months of the submission of the thesis. On occasion, it may not be possible to hold the viva within this period due to the availability of the Examiners or for other reasons.

The University of Reading is committed to embedding sustainable practices across the University's operations. In alignment with this, and to minimise our travel emissions, we ***strongly encourage vivas to be held online where possible, and in particular when an overseas external examiner is appointed.*** In person vivas may be held when the examiners feel it essential, and will normally be held at the University of Reading campus where the student is based.

It is a requirement to hold a viva if the Examiners are minded to recommend that the degree for which the thesis has been submitted should not be awarded. The Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Research Studies has the power to waive this requirement in exceptional circumstances.

Supervisors

A supervisor may not serve as an Internal Examiner for their student. In circumstances where there is no other member of staff with appropriate specialist knowledge, provision will be made for the appointment of two External Examiners.

A Candidate's supervisor may not attend the viva unless the External and Internal Examiners and the student unanimously agree that there are exceptional reasons why he or she may be present to observe. The Candidate has the right to speak to the Examiners alone at the end of the exam. For all students, the Candidate's supervisor should be available for consultation by the Examiners at the time of the viva.

Independent Chairs

An Independent Chair for the viva is essential when the Examiners do not include an Internal Examiner (i.e. the Candidate is being examined by two External Examiners or by an External Examiner and an Internal Examiner who is no longer employed by the University).

The appointment of an Independent Chair for the viva will normally be considered in the following circumstances:

- a) Where the Internal and Examiner examiners have limited experience of undertaking a UK viva;
- b) Where the External Examiner, the Internal Examiner or, exceptionally, the Student, reasonably requests that a Chair be appointed;
- c) Where the Candidate has held a staff contract of employment, for example as a GTA (whereupon two external examiners will be appointed);
- d) Where the viva is a second examination of the thesis following a failure or an appeal.

The roles and responsibilities of an Independent Chair

The Independent Chair is normally a senior member of staff from the same department (or sometimes a cognate department) as the Candidate. They should have experience of the Reading system of viva voce examinations for research degrees. They should not have been involved in the supervision of the student.

Apart from making any introductory comments, the Chair will not normally play a role during the viva itself (i.e. whilst the student is being questioned) other than to oversee the proceedings as an impartial observer. They should only intervene if there are concerns about the nature of the questioning or the state of the student. The Chair should remain present for the duration of the viva, as well as the post-viva decision-making and relaying the outcome back to the student. During the decision-making stage, he or she may be called on to provide advice on the institution's regulations, but would not be involved in the decision on the outcome of the exam.

The primary responsibilities of an Independent Chair are to ensure that:

- The examiners are aware of, and adhere to, Reading's regulations and procedures;
- The examiners' pre- and post-viva reports are completed in line with regulations;
- The assessment is rigorous, fair, reliable and consistent;

- The examiners' questioning is appropriate;
- The Candidate has an opportunity to defend the thesis.

The Internal Examiner will remain responsible for the administrative arrangements for the viva. In circumstances when there is no Internal Examiner, the Independent Chair is responsible for liaising with the External Examiners and making the appropriate administrative and practical arrangements for the viva.

If the Internal Examiner or External Examiner or Candidate wishes to request that an Independent Chair be appointed to oversee the examination procedures, he or she should contact the Doctoral Examinations Officer at the earliest opportunity, stating the reason for the request.

Contact with the Candidate

The Internal Examiner must inform the Candidate about progress with making arrangements for the viva no later than one month after receiving the thesis. This contact should be repeated at monthly intervals until a viva has been arranged (or, where no viva is to be held, the Examiners have communicated their decision to the Doctoral Examinations Officer). The same procedure should be adopted where a thesis is presented after minor or major amendments, or resubmitted after an initial failure.

The Examiners may decide that as well as a viva, they require the Candidate to undergo a written or practical exam, or both.

2. Film, Drama and Art Candidates

The special conditions relating to theses and the submission of original works as part of practice-based research are described in the [Rules for Submission of Theses](#).

There is some flexibility permitted in the proportional relationship of each component within the proposed arrangements, depending on the critical significance of the practice for the central research questions.

3. Thesis format

Given the variation between disciplines across the University, we do not prescribe upper- or lower-word limits for a thesis. However, as a guide, lengths of a thesis are typically ~90,000 words for a Doctorate, ~60,000 words for an MPhil, and ~30,000 words for an LLM.

We allow disciplinary flexibility regarding the format of a thesis. However, we require that the thesis must be written in English, except in the case of Candidates registered in the Department of Languages and Cultures, who may submit the thesis in the language most relevant to the subject.

Increasingly, and in STEM subjects in particular, substantial articles or papers that have been generated during the Candidates project are included in a Candidate's thesis. This has significant benefits for both the Candidate and the supervisor: the output is published in a timely manner rather than waiting until the thesis has been examined, and the Candidate does not write a chapter and then revise this for the article. However, we stress that the *viva voce* examination is an independent assessment of the Candidates work and so, even where a peer-reviewed output has been included in the thesis, this does not automatically mean that the examiners will be fully satisfied with the content.

A thesis may be a mix of articles and "traditional" thesis chapters. Where co-authored research articles are included in the thesis, we require a statement of contribution that is endorsed by the supervisor; clearly, we cannot allow Candidates who have a very minor role in generating novel research to claim credit and a PhD for the work done mainly by others. Many publishers, for example Elsevier, have a contribution statement for publications such as their CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) scheme which a Candidate may use to quantify their contribution to the different elements of the publication. We would normally expect the Candidate to have contributed the majority of the data generation, analysis and writing of any publication included in a thesis.

If articles and papers are to be included, these are normally "substantial". Again, this varies between disciplines, but the article should be considered to be the equivalent of a "traditional" thesis chapter.

We recognize that the time to acceptance and publication varies between disciplines. Thus, we do not require that all the thesis chapters have been published, and so may be draft, under revision or in press.

Whilst examiners are asked to assess that the Candidate has demonstrated the academic ability expected of a PhD, we also ask that the "form in which the thesis is presented is satisfactory", and so irrespective of the format, the thesis should present a coherent piece of work that is suitable for publication through our repository.

4. Supervisor's statement

The Candidate's supervisor will be asked to submit a statement to the Doctoral Examinations Officer reporting any circumstances which might be relevant to the Examiners' consideration of the thesis (for example, denial of access to source material) and to offer comment on the format and presentation of the thesis. This statement will be forwarded to the Examiners as soon as possible.

The Examiners should take account of the statement and may consult the supervisor(s) in any way they wish. The Examiners' decision and report remain entirely their responsibility. The thesis should be examined solely on the basis of the relevant academic criteria.

5. Reasonable adjustments

Some Candidates may have an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) that has been developed in partnership with our Disability Advisory Service. From this, some recommendations for reasonable adjustments may be made to meet a Candidate's needs, to allow them to perform to the best of their ability in the viva. Such recommendations are reviewed by the Doctoral and Researcher College to balance the needs of the Candidate with the integrity of the examination process. For example, a request to be permitted regular breaks during the viva is usually treated favourably whereas a request to have prior written notice of all questions would not normally be approved (but, for example, broader "topics" that will be explored may be a reasonable compromise).

Once approved, the requested reasonable adjustments are communicated to the examiners by the Doctoral Examinations Officer.

6. Preliminary reports prior to the viva

Each Examiner is asked to prepare independently, prior to the viva, a report which outlines their preliminary view of the thesis. The Examiners should exchange these reports and read them prior to the viva. The Internal Examiner is asked to attach copies of both pre-viva reports to the main Examiners' Report Form which is forwarded to the Doctoral Examinations Officer at the end of the viva.

7. Examiners' Report following the viva

After the viva, both Examiners must complete and sign the Examiners' Report Form and return the signed copy to the Doctoral Examinations Officer as soon as possible and ***within a maximum of 21 days of the viva.***

Criteria for assessment

In examining the Candidate's thesis and in submitting their Reports, Examiners are required to address the following points:

- (1) The form in which the thesis is presented. Irrespective of the format, the thesis should read as a coherent body of work, and should be examined on this basis.
- (2) The work presented by the Candidate is such as might reasonably be expected as the result of one year's full-time postgraduate work for LLM, two years' full-time postgraduate work for MPhil and three years' full-time postgraduate work for PhD.
- (3) Whether the abstract of the thesis is acceptable as it stands, or needs modification.

(4) The Candidate understands how his or her special theme is related to a wider field of knowledge.

(5) For the PhD the Candidate must demonstrate each of the following:

(a) the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, to extend the forefront of the discipline, and to merit publication in an appropriate form.

(b) a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice.

(c) the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and the ability to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems.

(d) a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship.

(6) For the MPhil or LLM, the Candidate must demonstrate each of the following:

(a) a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice.

(b) a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship.

(c) originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline.

(d) conceptual understanding that enables the student to critically evaluate current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline.

(e) conceptual understanding that enables the student to critically evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

(7) On the final part of the form, Examiners are asked to write a joint written report of at least 100 words which should cover the following points:

- The quality of the content of the thesis and the extent to which it meets the specified criteria.
- Where appropriate, the presentation / format of the thesis.
- The Candidate's performance during the viva.
- Any recommendations relating to work that is particularly suitable for publication.
- The nature of any corrections to be made (detailed comments about these can be provided subsequently).

The joint written report will be forwarded to the student, the Supervisor, the School Director of PGRS and the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Research Studies by the Doctoral Examinations Officer. If Examiners wish to raise any issues relating to supervision or procedural matters, these should be submitted in a separate report or letter to the Doctoral Examinations Officer for the attention of the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Research Studies.

Results

Examiners must indicate the overall result on the front page of the Report Form, choosing one of the following options:

- Award the PhD
- Award the PhD subject to Minor Amendments
- Result Deferred - Major Amendments required
- PhD Fail result – recommendation to award an MPhil
- PhD Fail result – recommendation to award an MPhil, subject to minor amendments
- PhD Fail result – no degree awarded

Award the PhD subject to Minor Amendments

The Doctoral Examinations Officer, upon receipt of the Examiners' Report Form, will confirm the result to the Candidate and forward to them the Written Report section of the Form, and any separate list of required amendments and/or annotated thesis. The Candidate should normally complete the amendments within three months of receiving confirmation of the result. The Candidate should submit the revised thesis directly to the Internal Examiner together with a list of the amendments made (with respective page numbers) or highlighting the amendments in the revised thesis. The amendments should be checked by the Internal Examiner (normally within three weeks of receipt) and, if satisfactory, the Doctoral Examinations Officer should be informed by email that the degree should be awarded. If further small amendments are required, the Candidate should be given a maximum of four weeks by the Internal Examiner to complete these and return the thesis to the Internal Examiner.

In exceptional circumstances (for example, if a student has to work full-time, or has difficult personal circumstances) the Examiners can make a request in their report (for approval by the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Research Studies) that the student be permitted up to six months to complete the minor amendment. Additionally, where a Candidate has been diagnosed as having dyslexia or dyspraxia, he or she may request six months in which to complete any minor amendments.

Extensions to the period allowed for corrections can be granted by the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Research Studies if exceptional circumstances arise during the period.

If the Candidate does not complete and submit the minor amendments to the thesis within the period allowed, then a result of PhD fail: No degree awarded shall be recorded.

Result deferred - Major Amendments required

The Examiners' Report Form and any separate list of amendments required by the Examiners, together with copies of the preliminary (pre-viva) reports should be sent to the Doctoral Examinations Officer as soon as possible and within 21 days of the viva. The Written Report section of the Form and any separate list of amendments and/or annotated thesis will be forwarded by the Doctoral Examinations Officer to the Candidate and copied to the supervisor(s) and the relevant PGR administrator. The result will be deferred until the amended thesis has been received and re-examined.

The Candidate will be required to make major amendments to the thesis within 12 months. If the Candidate does not complete and submit the major amendments to the thesis within the period allowed, then a result of PhD fail: No degree awarded shall be recorded. Extensions to the period allowed can be granted by the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Research Studies in exceptional circumstances.

When a thesis has been re-submitted following major amendments, the Doctoral Examinations Officer will send the thesis to the Examiners, both of whom are responsible for the examination of the amended thesis.

It is at the Examiners' discretion as to whether another viva is held. However, it is a requirement to hold a viva if the Examiners are minded to recommend that the degree for which the thesis has been submitted should not be awarded, whereupon it is a requirement that an Independent Chair is appointed for the re-examination. The Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Research Studies has the power to waive this second viva requirement in exceptional circumstances.

The re-submitted amended thesis should be examined within a normal maximum of three months of receipt by the Examiners (two months if a second viva is not held). Both examiners must sign the Report Form. The results available to the Examiners will be:

- Award the PhD
- Award the PhD subject to Minor Amendments
- PhD Fail result – recommendation to award an MPhil (or subject to minor amendments)
- PhD Fail result – no degree is awarded.

Further major amendments to the thesis are not permitted following re-examination but the examiners can require further minor correction be made, in which case the Candidate will be permitted three months to complete these, to the satisfaction of the internal examiner,

If the Candidate has not met the criteria to be awarded the PhD, but has met the criteria for the degree of MPhil, the examiners can recommend to Senate that the Candidate be offered the degree of MPhil (with or without minor corrections).

After a report making the alternative recommendation has been approved by the Vice-Chancellor on behalf of Senate, the Doctoral Examinations Officer will notify the Candidate of the result, offering the option of accepting the MPhil or re-submitting for the PhD (provided the thesis is not a re-submission for a second examination, following a Fail result in the first examination).

The student will have three months from the date of notification to accept the MPhil and, if minor corrections were required, to make the amendments and re-submit the amended thesis to the Internal Examiner. Alternatively, the student can notify the Doctoral Examinations Officer within this three-month period of their intention to re-submit for the PhD. They will be permitted to present themselves for re-examination on one further occasion within three calendar years. Candidates will be advised of the exact deadline by the Doctoral Examinations Officer.

PhD Fail result: No degree awarded

If the Candidate has not met the criteria to be awarded the PhD or the MPhil, the recommendation of Fail: No degree awarded will be forwarded to Senate for approval. Following approval, the Candidate will be notified of the outcome by the Doctoral Examinations Officer and informed that they will be permitted to present themselves for re-examination on one further occasion within three calendar years. Candidates will be advised of the exact deadline by the Doctoral Examinations Officer.

8. Notifying the Candidate and submitting the Examiners' Report

Examiners must submit the Examiners' Report Form to the Doctoral Examinations Officer as soon as possible and within a maximum of 21 days of the viva. The Doctoral Examinations Officer will notify the Candidate of the Examiners' recommendation by email within 14 days of receiving the Report.

If the Candidate is not informed of the outcome of the exam at the viva, the Internal Examiner is required, within seven days of the viva, to either inform the Candidate of the proposed outcome or to indicate to the Candidate the timeframe for communication of the outcome. In cases where the outcome is unlikely to be resolved within seven days of the viva, the Doctoral Examinations Officer must be informed. The Doctoral Examinations Officer will assume responsibility for informing the Candidate of the progress in determining the outcome.

In the case of a Candidate who has a tuition debt (including Library fines) of more than fifty pounds to the University, the Doctoral Examinations Officer will notify the Candidate that he or she will not be informed of the recommendation until the debt has been settled.

9. External Adjudicator

In the rare circumstances that the Examiners for a Research Degree have an irreconcilable difference of view in relation to the assessment of a Candidate and are not able to agree on a result, the internal examiner should inform the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Research Studies who will then seek approval from the Senate to appoint an External Adjudicator. The External Adjudicator will consider the thesis and the Reports from the Internal and External Examiners, and will submit a report to the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Research Studies. The recommendation of the External Adjudicator will then be presented to Senate regarding the outcome of the Examination. The External Adjudicator may exceptionally hold a viva voce examination of the Candidate if they consider that a viva is necessary to determine the recommendation.

10. Review of Results

Information on the procedures for a Review of Examination Results is given to each Examiner and Candidate, and can also be found on the Doctoral and Researcher College website (along with other examinations related documents in the Policies & Procedures section).

11. Advice

For further guidance or clarification of the examination rules and procedures, please contact the Doctoral Examinations Officer by emailing deo@reading.ac.uk.

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