Guidance for examiners of postgraduate research awards

Introduction
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 examination process, and the expectations of examiners.

All postgraduate research awards at the University of Southampton are governed by the University’s Higher Degree Regulations (http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionV/sectV-index.html) and the University’s Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision (http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionV/code-practice.html). Whilst this guidance brings together information from these sources, the Regulations and Code of Practice should be referred to in the case of any confusion or dispute arising during the examination process.

For most examinations, two examiners are required – one internal and one external. In some circumstances, an additional external examiner may also be appointed.

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Pre-viva
Although you may have other contact with the University, primarily through the candidate’s supervisor, your formal contact for the examination process is the relevant Faculty’s Graduate School Office.

Contact details for the relevant faculty offices are:

- Faculty of Business, Law and Art: pgrsofb@soton.ac.uk
- Faculty of Engineering and the Environment: pgrsofee@soton.ac.uk
- Faculty of Health Sciences: pgrStudentOffice.FHS@soton.ac.uk
- Faculty of Humanities: pgrsofh@soton.ac.uk
- Faculty of Medicine: pgrStudentOffice.FM@soton.ac.uk
- Faculty of Natural and Environmental Sciences: pgrsfnes@soton.ac.uk
- Faculty of Physical Sciences and Engineering: fpse-grad@soton.ac.uk
- Faculty of Social, Human and Mathematical Sciences: pgrstudentoffice.fshs@soton.ac.uk

Each examiner 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)
- A copy of the Examiner’s Independent Report Template
- A copy of the Examiner’s Joint Report and Recommendation form template
- Details on how to claim for fees and expenses (for external examiners only)
- Details of the current University Higher Degree regulations
- A copy of the Chair’s Report template (to be sent to the internal examiner when there is no Independent Chair appointed)

Where the candidate is from a discipline where original practical work may be submitted in part fulfilment of the awards’ requirements, arrangements will be made for you to access this content in an appropriate medium.

Responsibilities of the Examiners
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. The examining team should have sufficient familiarity with examining procedures generally, and with the requirements of British postgraduate research qualifications.

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.

If you feel, for whatever reason, that you will not be able to meet these responsibilities and requirements, you should contact the Graduate School Office as soon as possible.

Fees and Expenses (for external examiners only)
The University’s usual fees are set out in the Invoice Form. This fee covers examination and the checking of any modest amendments that are recommended after the viva voce. Where a further examination is required, an additional fee can be claimed. The following expenses can be claimed. If there are Faculty variations to this policy, it will be highlighted in the documentation accompanying the thesis:
- Return economy air fare or second class return rail fare (or the cost of travelling by car providing it does not exceed the second class return rail fare);
- Subsistence expenses (excluding alcohol) in connection with any necessary attendance at oral examinations may be claimed.

If you need recommendations for local hotels, or if you will need a visitor parking space booked at the University, you should contact the Graduate School Office, who will pass your query onto the relevant colleagues to assist you.
Information on visiting Southampton’s campuses, including road, rail and air connections, can be found at http://www.southampton.ac.uk/about/visit/getting-to-southampton.page.

Arranging the viva examination
The date of the viva will be arranged through the candidate’s supervisor. Once the date of the viva has been arranged, you will be given information on the viva, including directions to the viva room. 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.

It is normal practice for viva examinations to be held on a campus of the University of Southampton 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, 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 Director of the Faculty Graduate School.

Completing the Examiner's Independent Report
Examiners are required to complete the Examiner's Independent Report on a thesis in advance of the examination, and without consultation with other examiners. A copy of the completed reports should be returned to the Graduate School Office not normally less than 5 working days before the date of the viva. The report will then be made available to the other examiner(s) prior to the oral examination. This report should include a brief description of the work carried out by the candidate, its strengths and weaknesses, and 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 oral examination.

This report should not be used to record information on recommended corrections in thesis, this should be recorded in the Joint Report and Recommendations form.

Although the report 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.

Appointing an Independent Chair
The oral examination will be chaired by the internal examiner or by an independent chair. Independent Chairs must be appointed:

- In response to a request from the Faculty Graduate School Directorate, an examiner, a member of the candidate's supervisory team, or the research student.
- where the examination team is inexperienced at examining under the UK system (when one examiner has never conducted an oral examination before);
- where the internal examiner holds a substantive post within University Hospitals Southampton, or is a member of staff employed at the Natural Environmental Research Council or the National Oceanography Centre, or has a similar joint employment status between the University of Southampton and its partners;
- where there have been substantial difficulties with student progress;
- where the viva is taking place with the assistance of video conferencing and/or other suitable technical communication.
- where the student is undertaking a second viva either with or without a resubmission of the thesis.

A decision on whether a chair is required will usually be taken well in advance of the 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 Examiner’s Independent Reports indicate a potential conflict between examiners.

If you would like to request that the examination has an Independent Chair, please let the Graduate School Office know as soon as possible.

If no Independent Chair is appointed, the internal examiner will act as the Chair, and complete the Chair’s Report after the examination.

An Independent Chair will not receive a copy of the thesis. They will attend the viva in the capacity of overseeing the examination process, and ensure that the candidate is treated fairly and appropriately by the examiners. They will be required to complete a Chair’s Report after the viva’s completion, but this does not constitute an examiner’s report.

The viva examination

Before the viva examination
Examiners will have access to copies of all of the individual independent reports, and there will be an opportunity for discussion between examiners at a preliminary meeting directly before the viva. During this meeting, the key issues to be raised with the candidate should be agreed between examiners. It is also helpful to agree the order in which issues will be raised and who will lead on each issue.

The viva 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
The purpose of the viva 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 he or she has developed research skills at this level, and that he or she understands 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

Attendees to the viva examination
The research student to be examined, the examining team (including an Independent Chair, where one has been appointed), and a member of the supervisory team on request of the candidate should be present during the viva examination. If the candidate’s supervisor is not present, he/she should be contactable during the viva to provide clarification at the examination if requested by the examiners. Where the research student wishes a supervisor to be invited, a request should be made in writing to the Graduate School Office. A supervisor who is requested to attend by the
research student will not play an active role in the examination, and may not take part in the
judgement of the thesis under consideration.

At the viva examination
After welcoming the candidate and introducing the examiners, (including the forms of address the
candidate should use for the examiners) the chair should explain that the viva provides an
opportunity for the candidate to defend their thesis in high-level debate with experts drawn from
the relevant research community.

As many candidates will not have previously undertaken a viva, 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 he or she may, if they wish, consult with their copy of the thesis
throughout the viva.

If a supervisor is present at the viva he/she is there in a supportive capacity and will not ask any
questions. However he/she may act as a note-taker which may be useful for the student after the
viva.

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 which 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:

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. Questions may be general (e.g. ‘how did
you come to study this topic?’), open (‘tell me about your methodology?’) or closed (‘why did you
think that the confidence limits were unimportant in this case?’).

General or open ones 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).

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.

Commend a good answer. When candidates give a particularly incisive or interesting answer, it
can be helpful to their morale to acknowledge this.

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
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 recognized 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**
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 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 Graduate School Office, and the timeline for any amendments/resubmission only begin from the formal notification.

**Chair's Report**
The Chair should complete a Chair's Report form, detailing the conduct of the viva, and to confirm that the viva took place according to the University's Regulations and Code of Practice.

**Preparing the Joint Report and Recommendations Form**
After conducting the viva, examiners have to decide upon a recommendation, write a joint report on 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). The Joint Report and Recommendations Form should be used for this purpose.

The form should record the agreed views of both examiners in relation to the core outcomes of the award and your recommendation on the award of the degree, based on both the thesis and the candidate’s performance at the viva. The form will be read by the student.

Within the form, examiners are asked to
- confirm that the candidate has met the Doctoral Degree Characteristic (QAA 2015) that the doctorate ‘demonstrates an original contribution to knowledge in their subject, field or profession’ (Part A)
- confirm that the candidate demonstrates the descriptors for a higher education qualification at level 8 from the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (QAA 2008) (Part B)
- provide a textual report which confirms the recommendations of the report and to outline any criteria marked ‘partially’ or ‘no’. The textual report should comment on the candidate’s performance in the oral examination and any discrepancies between the individual reports. You may wish to comment on the organisation, structure, presentation,
authenticity, content, publishable quality and critical awareness of the subject demonstrated throughout the examination process. The report should also set out clearly any amendments which the candidate is required to make.

- select one recommendation from the form.
- sign the form.

The internal examiner should return the Joint Report and Recommendations Form to the Graduate School Office as soon as is possible, but no later than one working week following the viva. If at all possible, internal post should not be used.

Recommendations are usually made, via the Graduate School Office, to the Director of the Faculty Graduate School, acting on behalf of University Senate for the consideration of external examiner’s reports. The Director of the Faculty Graduate School may return the report to the examiners if s/he feels that the report does not meet the standard required.

Recommendations
Examiners have a choice of several recommendations they can make on the form. Only one should be selected, and the recommendation should align with the report on the form

1. That the degree be awarded. When this recommendation is confirmed, this will lead to an immediate recommendation by Faculty Programmes Committee to the Vice-Chancellor for the candidate’s award to be confirmed.

2. That the degree be awarded, subject to minor amendments. You should be aware that the University’s timeframe for this is three months. 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. Crucially, minor amendments require no new research. The amendments required should be detailed in the Joint Report and Recommendations form. Minor amendments will be submitted electronically by the candidate to the Graduate School Office who will pass the amended thesis to the internal examiner. The internal examiner is responsible for certifying that the revised thesis meets the requirements of the award.

3. That the degree be awarded, subject to modest amendments. You should be aware that the University’s usual timeframe for modest amendments is six months, but as examiners you can recommend a period of up to nine months. Modest amendments may include limited further analysis but will not affect the originality of the central thesis. The amendments required should be detailed in the Joint Report and Recommendations form. Modest amendments will be submitted electronically by the candidate, to the Graduate School Office. The Graduate School Office will pass the amended thesis to both/all examiners. Both/all examiners will need to confirm that the revised thesis meets the requirements of the award. If examiners cannot reach a decision, this will be referred to the Director of Faculty Graduate School, where a further external examiner should be appointed, with approval from the Faculty Programmes Committee to assess the thesis and the other examiner’s reports. The additional examiner shall be permitted to interview the research student before submitting a final report and recommendation to the Director of the Faculty Graduate School.

Options 1, 2 and 3 are deemed a ‘pass’.

4. That the candidate be permitted to attend for a further oral examination. This is usually used when the examiners feel that an additional oral examination would allow the candidate to better demonstrate that s/he has met the requirements of the award. You will be asked to examine the further oral examination. The oral examination should be rescheduled as soon as is convenient to all parties, and definitely within three months of the date of the original viva.

5. That the candidate be permitted to submit a revised thesis, which will be subject to a further viva examination, within twelve months. The required amendments to the thesis should be outlined on the Joint Report and Recommendations form. You will be asked to re-examine the thesis and conduct the further viva examination.

Options 4 and 5 may not be selected if the examination follows a resubmission.

6. (For some awards only) that the candidate be permitted to apply for an award less than that of the doctoral level award, for example the MPhil (for the PhD examination), a diploma or master’s degree (for the EngD examination), or the Master or Diploma of Clinical Practice
(for the DClinP examination). In these cases, the candidate must satisfy the requirements for this lower award. However, candidates will not be expected to rewrite their thesis to satisfy the (lower) maximum word requirements for the award.

7. That the degree not be awarded, and that resubmission of the thesis is not permitted. It is unusual for a thesis to be failed outright at first submission stage, and where examiners are considering this they may wish to discuss their decision with the Faculty's Director of Graduate School. If this recommendation is made, a full report is essential giving reasons for this decision.

For all recommendations with a date (for example, three, six, or twelve months), the date starts from the point at which the final, completed form is sent to the student by the Graduate School Office.

Award Descriptions
To award a research degree, the examiners must be satisfied that the research student’s thesis meets the relevant award description.

Descriptions of a doctoral level award
In all cases, successful candidates for a doctoral level award must have demonstrated

• the creation and interpretation of new knowledge through original research or other advanced scholarship, or of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline and merit publication;
• a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or an area of professional practice;
• the general ability to conceptualize, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;
• a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

• make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
• continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.

And holders will have:

• the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

Descriptions of an award at MPhil
The MPhil is an award of considerable distinction in its own right and is awarded for the successful completion of a substantial element of research or equivalent enquiry. The MPhil differs from the PhD only in terms of the scope of study required and the extent of the original personal contribution to knowledge.

More specifically, for the award of MPhil, research students must have demonstrated:

• 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;
• 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;
• conceptual understanding that enables the research student to:
  o evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline; and
  o evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses;
- a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship.

Post-viva

Amendments

When amendments have been recommended by the examiners, candidates will be required to submit the amended thesis, in electronic format, to the Graduate School Office by a date as specified by the examiners. The Graduate School Office will then pass the amended thesis to the appropriate examiner(s). 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 and the recommendations of the examiners shall lapse. In exceptional circumstances, a revised date for submitting corrections may be approved by the Faculty Graduate School Directorate.

Examiners should assess the amended thesis against the list of amendments required in the original 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 – for example, when a student has failed to make all amendments required. Any ‘follow up’ amendments should be communicated to the research student via the Graduate School, and 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’.

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 Director of the Faculty Graduate School should be notified.

Once the internal examiner (for minor amendments) and all examiners (for modest amendments) are satisfied that the amendments have been completed to the standard required of the award, you should email the Graduate School Office with the following wording from your .ac.uk (or other professional) email account.

‘I can confirm minor/modest (delete as appropriate) amendments required by the examiners of (name of candidate) following his/her viva of (date of viva) have now been completed by the candidate satisfactorily and I therefore recommend award of (name of award).’

Resubmissions

Where a candidate has been asked to resubmit their thesis, the examination process begins again. You will receive a copy of the thesis, associated report forms, and be required to conduct a second viva examination, which should normally take place within three months of submission. It is not permitted to have a resubmission of the thesis without a second viva examination.

External Examiner’s Report

External Examiners are invited to comment on their experience and perceptions of the overall examination process (including suggestions for enhancements) to the Director of the Faculty Graduate School, through the Graduate School Office. This report can be considered confidential if it is felt appropriate to do so.

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 report to the Director of the Faculty Graduate School be considered by the Vice-Chancellor Directly.

Useful links

Examination forms
Examiners’ Independent Report Form
PhD Joint Report and Recommendation form
DClinP Examiners’ Joint Report and Recommendation form
DClinPsych Joint Report and Recommendation form
DEdPsych Joint Report and Recommendation form
DM Joint Report and Recommendation form
EdD Joint Report and Recommendation form
EngD Joint Report and Recommendation form
MPhil Joint Report and Recommendation form
MPhil PhD Health Psychology and Professional Practice Joint Report
External Examiners for Higher Doctorates Fee Claim Form
Chairs Report Form

University regulations
University Regulations for Higher Degrees
University’s Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision

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