

XIII. Master of Philosophy Examination Conventions

A. Scope

1. These *Examination Conventions* apply to all candidates of Newcastle University who, having met the requirements of the University's *General Regulations* and of the *Master of Philosophy Degree Regulations*, are eligible to submit a thesis for examination for the degree of Master of Philosophy.

B. The Examiners

2. A candidate's thesis shall be examined by examiners appointed by the dean of postgraduate studies on behalf of Senate. The examination shall consist of a review and assessment of the candidate's thesis (and where appropriate, other artefacts). A candidate may be required to take an oral examination in addition to submitting a thesis.

3. There shall ordinarily be one external examiner and one internal examiner appointed for each candidate. For staff candidates, the examination shall normally be conducted by two external examiners, although for junior members of staff, at the discretion of the dean of postgraduate studies, one external and one internal may be appointed.

4. All examiners will be nominated by the relevant head of school in consultation with the candidate's academic supervisor. Such nominations shall be submitted on the approved form at the same time as the candidate submits an application for approval of thesis title. This should normally be three months before the thesis is submitted.

5. Where the University is unable to appoint, or chooses not to appoint, an internal examiner for a student candidate a second external examiner will be appointed. In all cases where two external examiners are appointed, the dean of postgraduate studies will also appoint an independent member of University staff who will chair the oral examination. The Independent Chair will normally be from outside the candidate's school/institute.

The Independent Chair is not an examiner of the thesis but provides guidance on University regulations and procedures to ensure that the oral examination is conducted in accordance with normal University practice. The Independent Chair is required to be present for the duration of the oral examination.

(The Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes provides further detail in the section, 'Criteria for Appointment of Examiners'.)

6. The supervisory team will provide candidates with the opportunity to comment on the nominated examiners. If the candidate believes that there is a concern about the nominated examiners this should be drawn to the attention of the supervisory team and the head of school in writing, as soon as possible. Examiner appointments will, however, be reviewed only if it is clear that there may be bias or prejudice by an examiner.

7. A member of the supervisory team will not be appointed as an internal examiner. Where the University is unable to appoint an internal examiner a second external examiner will be appointed.

8. A former member of staff of the University shall not normally be appointed as an external examiner until at least five years have elapsed since that person left the employment of the University. A retired member of staff of the University shall not normally be appointed as an external examiner. A retired member of staff of another institution may be appointed as an external examiner only if he or she is still active in the field of research and study concerned.

Note: The University cannot undertake to arrange the examination of a thesis immediately after its submission. Candidates are warned that several weeks may elapse between the submission of a thesis and the completion of the examination, and they should consult their academic supervisor at least three months in advance of submission. The normal period between submission of a thesis and an examination is ten weeks, although circumstances may necessitate a longer time frame. Candidates shall be kept informed of the progress of the examination at monthly intervals by the graduate school administrator, should the examination process extend beyond the normal ten week period.

C. Nature of the Examination

9. The examination shall consist of a review and assessment of the candidate's thesis by the examiners appointed, chaired by the external examiner.

10.

- a) The examiners shall determine whether or not the candidate should be examined orally. It should be noted that the examiners cannot make the recommendation of a fail without giving the candidate an opportunity of an oral examination. The normal practice will be that an oral examination is convened unless the external examiner contacts the graduate school administrator to stay the oral examination.
- b) The examiners should independently write a preliminary report indicating their provisional assessment of the thesis and of the issues to be explored in the oral examination, if required. It is expected that, if the criteria for the award of the degree have clearly been met, the preliminary reports will be brief. If, on the other hand, the examiners have serious concerns about whether the criteria have been met, fuller reports will be expected. Each examiner's preliminary report should be sent to the relevant graduate school administrator in advance of an oral examination taking place. Examiners should not consult with each other before both independent reports have been submitted to the graduate school administrator. The reports will be forwarded to the relevant dean of postgraduate studies.
- c) Exceptionally, and two weeks or more in advance of a scheduled viva, if the external examiner upon initial independent review of the thesis is unequivocally of the view that the thesis is not worthy of defence without significant re-work by the candidate, s/he shall contact the graduate school administrator. The dean of postgraduate studies shall determine whether it is appropriate to permit the examiners to prepare a joint report. The decision reached under these arrangements shall be limited to

Convention 20 (b)iii only – i.e. permitting resubmission, where an oral examination will be required after resubmission.

- d) If an oral examination is required, the academic supervisor may, at the request of the candidate, be present at (but will make no contribution to) the oral examination. S/he should in all cases be available to be consulted by the examiners on the occasion of the oral examination. The supervisor will have the right to confer with the examiners following the oral examination, and to be given an oral report on its outcome.
- e) The academic supervisor will co-ordinate the arrangements for the oral examination and inform the graduate school of the details.

11. Where an oral examination is held, the examination shall consist of a review and assessment of the candidate's thesis by the examiners appointed and of an oral examination on the content of the thesis and subjects related thereto, chaired by the external examiner, where an independent chair has not been appointed. The oral examination shall be conducted in accordance with the guidelines in the University's *Handbook for Examiners of Research Degrees*. The purpose of such an examination will be to enable the examiners to:

- a) establish that the research has been undertaken by the candidate;
- b) test the ability of the candidate to defend his or her thesis;
- c) establish whether the candidate has a satisfactory knowledge of the wider field surrounding the research topic.

12. In examining a candidate's thesis, the examiners should take into consideration both the extent and merit of the work submitted and the quality of the exposition. With regard to the extent of the work, the examiners should satisfy themselves that the candidate's work shows evidence of adequate industry and application. With regard to the merit of the work, the candidate is expected to show distinct ability in conducting original investigations and in testing ideas, whether the candidate's own or others'. The exposition of the work in the thesis must be clear and must show that the candidate understands the relationship of the work embodied in the thesis and the theme of that work to a wider field of knowledge.

13. In the case of any work done jointly, or in wider collaborations, or under direction, it is important that the extent of the candidate's own contribution is made clear both in any introductory element of the thesis and at relevant points within the thesis.

D. Personal Extenuating Circumstances

14. Following submission of thesis, if a candidate is aware of any circumstances that may prevent them from attending the oral examination (where one is required), these should be brought to the attention of their supervisor and the graduate school administrator immediately, to determine if it necessary to delay the oral examination.

15. A candidate should also contact their supervisor and the graduate school administrator if there are personal circumstances they believe could impact on their performance at the oral examination. This information will be provided to

the examiners in advance of the oral examination, to determine if any reasonable adjustments are required.

16. Irrespective of personal circumstances, examiners will be expected to assess the candidate against the doctoral assessment criteria.

17. By attending an oral examination, a candidate is declaring that they are fit to attend the examination and, as such, it is unlikely that a candidate would be able to submit a later claim that their performance was affected by personal circumstances.

E. Examiners' Final Reports

18. Having considered all the evidence presented to them, the examiners shall submit a joint report form on the examination. The report shall include a written statement concerning the candidate's performance together with a recommendation as to the outcome of the examination.

19. Where two external examiners have examined the thesis and it is agreed that revisions are required (in the recommendations 20 a.ii or a.iii) they should agree between them which examiner shall receive the revised thesis and ensure that the required revisions have been made

F. Recommendations Open to the Examiners

20. Following the first submission and examination of a candidate, the examiners may make the following recommendations:

- a)
 - i. that the candidate be admitted to the degree of Master of Philosophy; *or*
 - ii. that the candidate be admitted to the degree of Master of Philosophy subject to minor corrections e.g. of detail or presentation but not involving changes to the substance of the text made to the satisfaction of the internal examiner, normally within a period of one month of receiving formal notification of the corrections to be made; *or*
 - iii. that the candidate be admitted to the degree of Master of Philosophy subject to minor revisions of a more substantial nature than in ii above, but not involving a major revision of the thesis being made to the satisfaction of the internal examiner, normally within a period of up to six months of receiving formal notification of the revisions to be made;
- b)
 - i. that the candidate's thesis be deemed to be of a satisfactory standard, but that the candidate be adjudged to have failed to satisfy the examiners in the oral examination and that the candidate therefore be required to submit within six months either for a second oral examination or for a written examination, as the examiners shall determine; *or*
 - ii. that the candidate be adjudged to have failed to satisfy the examiners in the thesis and the candidate be permitted to revise and

re-submit the thesis within twelve months for re-examination by both examiners without a further oral examination; *or*

- iii. that the candidate be adjudged to have failed to satisfy the examiners and the candidate be permitted to revise and re-submit the thesis within twelve months and be re-examined orally, by both examiners;
- c) that no degree be awarded and that the candidate be adjudged to have failed.

Minor Revisions or Corrections

21. Recommendation 20 (a) may be made subject to a requirement that the candidate correct minor textual errors or make minor revisions to the thesis before the deposit of a copy of the thesis in the University Library in accordance with the *Section XVIII Rules for the Submission of Work for Higher Degrees*.

22. Where minor textual corrections are required, candidates will be advised that the corrections must be made within one month of receiving formal notification of the corrections to be made. It shall be the responsibility of the internal examiner to certify that the necessary corrections have been made before a pass list can be issued.

23. Where minor revisions to the thesis are required, the candidate shall normally be required to make the revisions within six months of receiving formal notification of the revisions to be made.

24. In exceptional cases, an extension of time for making the corrections may be granted by the appropriate dean of postgraduate studies, subject to the candidate justifying such an extension, supported by the candidate's academic supervisor.

25. It shall be the expectation that the thesis will not require referral back to the external examiner and that the candidate will not be expected to undergo a further oral examination. However, if the internal examiner feels that any recommendation other than recommendation 20 (a) is appropriate following reconsideration of the thesis after the minor revisions have been made, the internal examiner shall refer the thesis to the external examiner. Where a thesis is thus referred to the external examiner, the examiners may determine that a further oral examination is required and may subsequently make any of the recommendations normally open following full revision and resubmission as set out in Convention 26 below.

Resubmission for Re-examination by Internal and External Examiners

26. Where a candidate has been permitted to revise and resubmit a thesis in accordance with Convention 20 (b) the options open to the examiners when re-examining the thesis shall be those set out in Conventions 20 (a)i or ii or (c) only. Where the candidate's oral performance on the first occasion of examination was satisfactory and the examiners are agreed, after considering the resubmitted thesis, that a further oral examination is not required, they may submit their recommendations without re-examining the candidate orally.

27. At resubmission, candidates must provide a commentary indicating the changes they have made to the thesis in response to the requirements of the Examiners.

Further Oral or Written Examination

28. In the case of a candidate subject to recommendation 20 (bi) above, the options open to the examiners following the further oral or written examination shall be those set out in Conventions 20 (a) or (c) only, except that, in the case of Convention 20 (a), no further revisions to the thesis other than minor textual corrections may be recommended.

Provision to the Candidate of Information about Corrections/Revisions Required or Resubmission

29. In all cases where a candidate is required to make corrections/revisions to a thesis or to resubmit a thesis, it shall be the responsibility of the examiners to provide full details of the corrections and/or revisions required of the thesis, but not extending to proof-reading or editing of the thesis. The examiners should provide a detailed written statement of the nature of the changes they wish to see made to the thesis, along with their completed joint report form. These should be sent to the relevant graduate school administrator who shall formally forward these documents on to the candidate and the supervisory team. When forwarding the final report to the candidate, the graduate school administrator will make it clear to the candidate that resubmission in itself will not guarantee the award of a qualification.

G. Communication of the Result to the Candidate

30. The dean of postgraduate studies acts as the Chair of the Research Degree Board of Examiners and any recommendations are considered by the dean who will then confirm or otherwise the recommendations of the examiners, following receipt of examiner reports by the graduate school administrator. The results of the examination or re-examination shall be communicated formally to the candidate by the relevant graduate school administrator, once they have been considered by the dean of postgraduate studies. Neither an examiner nor any other person is empowered to communicate the result formally to a candidate before the official notification of the result to the candidate by a graduate school administrator on behalf of the Academic Registrar. In any case where an examiner chooses to give the candidate an informal indication as to the recommendation that will be put forward, the examiner concerned must stress that the recommendation is subject to ratification and that only the graduate school administrator (on behalf of the Academic Registrar) is empowered to issue official results.

H. Disagreement between the Examiners

31. If there is a disagreement between the examiners or doubt about their intentions, they shall be consulted with a view to resolving the matter. Where there is irreconcilable disagreement between the examiners an additional external examiner shall be appointed.

32. The additional external examiner shall be asked to read the candidate's thesis and to conduct an oral examination. The additional examiner shall be told that the previous examiners had failed to reach agreement but will not have sight of their reports. On the occasion of this oral examination the candidate's supervisory team (and where appropriate the internal examiner) shall be available to be consulted by the additional external examiner. The dean of postgraduate studies shall appoint a member of University staff as an independent observer, who will report on the conduct of the oral examination.

33. The academic supervisor shall co-ordinate the arrangements for the examination. After the conclusion of the examination, the additional examiner shall make a recommendation which shall be final. He/she shall submit a final report to the relevant graduate school administrator which will, subject to the approval of the relevant dean of postgraduate studies, be forwarded to the candidate and the supervisory team in the normal way.

34. In the event that the recommendation of *admission to the degree subject to minor revisions within six months* is made, the revisions shall be subject to the satisfaction of the additional external examiner. In the event that the recommendation that *the candidate be permitted to revise and resubmit the thesis within 12 months* is made, the resubmitted thesis shall be examined by the additional external examiner who shall decide whether to conduct a further oral examination.

35. A candidate who is subject to the procedure set out in Conventions 31 and 32 shall be informed that the examiners originally appointed have disagreed and that an additional examiner will be appointed. The candidate shall not be informed as to the nature of the disagreement between the original examiners and shall not be given a copy of their reports. If, however, the candidate subsequently appeals against the final decision in respect of the award of the degree, the report of the original examiners will form part of the formal record of appeal. The candidate shall be informed that an oral examination will be required. After the oral examination, and once a final decision as to the award of the degree has been made in accordance with Convention 33, the final report of the additional examiner shall be made available to the candidate and the supervisory team, provided that the additional examiner's recommendation has been approved.

J. Provision for an Oral Examination to be Conducted Outside the University

36. It is expected that all oral examinations will take place within the University unless specifically requested otherwise and that all expected attendees are present at the University. With the approval of the dean of postgraduate studies, an oral examination for a candidate may be held elsewhere than at Newcastle. Both examiners should be present at any oral examination and only in very exceptional circumstances may the dean of postgraduate studies permit other arrangements to be made. (Further guidance is available in the Handbook for Research Degree Examiners.) A member of the supervisory team is not normally expected to be present unless at the specific request of the candidate to attend the venue for an examination held outside Newcastle, but is expected to be available to be contacted by the examiners if required, for example by

telephone. In all cases written consent for the examination to be conducted outside the university must be obtained from the candidate.

K. Posthumous Awards

37. A posthumous degree can be awarded where a deceased candidate's body of work is sufficient to meet the criteria for the award. To initiate a request for a posthumous award, the Academic Supervisor should provide a statement to the relevant Dean of Postgraduate Studies outlining why the deceased candidate should be considered for the posthumous degree. Requests should be endorsed by the Head of School (or nominee) in which the candidate was registered and should normally have the support of the student's family. (See the Policy on Posthumous Awards for Postgraduate Research Students <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/students/progress/assets/documents/PolicyonPosthumousDegreesforPostgraduateResearchStudentsAugust2015Final.pdf>)