

## GUIDANCE NOTES FOR EXAMINERS OF RESEARCH DEGREE THESES

Research Student Administration  
Registry  
Academic Services

### Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Definition of Research Degrees	2
Research Degree Award Requirements (Extract from University Regulation 7.4.1)	3
Examination Report Form	4
The Oral Examination (Viva Voce)	5
Final Recommendation	6
Conclusion of Examination	9
Failure of Examiners to Reach Agreement	9

### **Introduction**

Examiners are asked to read these notes before commencing the thesis examination.

University Regulation 7 (Assessment and Award) and the Code of Practice on the Assessment of Research Degree Theses set out the regulations around the submission, assessment and award of research theses and can be found on the [University's legislation webpages](#).

Examiners are required to observe the terms of the General Data Protection Regulations and the [University's Data Protection Policy](#)

It is University policy to carry out a plagiarism check on every thesis submitted for examination before the examination process commences. The [Code of Practice on Academic Integrity](#) sets out the regulations relating to plagiarism. If you have any concerns about plagiarism, please [contact Research Student Administration](#)

The University has recently published [Guidance on the use of GenAI for thesis writing by postgraduate researchers](#), which examiners should be aware of.

<b>Degree</b>	<b>Definition from University Regulations</b>
<b>MA/MSc by Research</b>	A programme, normally of one year's duration, in which the key activity is undertaking research, combined with appropriate research training (which may be credit-bearing). Registered Students must produce a thesis containing research work of merit.
<b>MMus</b>	A programme, normally of one year's duration, of training in research with an emphasis on the acquisition of research skills. The programme comprises 60 credits of taught modules from a notional 180 credits for the programme and a research project.
<b>MRes</b>	A programme, normally of one year's duration of training in research with an emphasis on the acquisition of research skills. The programme comprises between 30 and 60 credits of taught modules from a notional 180 credits for the programme, together with one or more research report(s) or a thesis
<b>MPhil/MLitt</b>	A programme, normally of two years duration, in which the key activity is undertaking research, combined with appropriate training which may be credit-bearing. Registered Students must produce a thesis containing original work of merit, worthy of publication. The training is expected to involve no more than the equivalent of 20 to 50 credits spread over the two years from a notional 360 credits for the programme.
<b>PhD</b>	A programme, normally of three years duration, in which the key activity is undertaking research, combined with appropriate training. Registered Students must produce a thesis which makes an original contribution to knowledge, worthy of publication in whole or in part in a learned journal. The programme may include the equivalent of up to 120 credits of research training spread over a notional 540 credits for the three years of the programme.
<b>PhD with integrated study</b>	A programme, normally of four years duration, which integrates research with taught postgraduate work in a range of skills and subject focused modules, up to a maximum of 180 credits. Registered Students must produce a thesis which makes an original contribution to knowledge, worthy of publication in whole or in part in a learned journal.
<b>Professional Doctorate</b> (E.g. ClinPsyD, EdD, ThD, EdPsychD, SocSciD, ForenPsyD, HScD, DPT, App.Ed. Child Psy.D, DPharm, ForenClinPsyD)	A programme, normally of three years duration, which integrates taught postgraduate work and/or professional practice with research within a programme of 540 credits. Registered Students are assessed by a combination of written examinations and/or project report(s), dissertation or thesis which collectively make an original contribution to knowledge, worthy of publication. The programme comprises no more than 180 credits of taught modules.
<b>EngD</b>	A programme, normally of four years duration which integrates research with taught postgraduate work up to a maximum of 180 credits. Registered Students must produce a thesis which makes an original contribution to knowledge, worthy of publication in whole or in part in a learned journal.
<b>DDS</b>	A part-time programme, normally of two years duration which may include taught postgraduate work up to a maximum of 180 credits. Registered Students must produce a thesis which makes an original contribution to knowledge, worthy of publication in whole or in part in a learned journal or equivalent
<b>MD</b>	A full-time or part-time programme, normally of two years duration for the full-time programme or four years' duration for the part-time programme, which may include taught postgraduate work up to a maximum of 180 credits. Registered Students must produce a thesis which makes an original contribution to knowledge, worthy of publication in whole or in part in a learned journal
<b>DBA</b>	A part-time programme, normally of four years duration, which integrates taught postgraduate work and/or professional practice with research within a programme of 540 credits. Registered Students are assessed by a combination of written examinations and/or project report(s), dissertation or thesis which collectively make an original contribution to knowledge, worthy of publication. The programme comprises no more than 180 credits of taught modules.

## Research Degree Award Requirements (Extract from University Regulation 7.4.1)

7.4.1 (a) The Registered Student shall prepare and present as appropriate a report or reports, a dissertation or a thesis, based upon the Registered Student's own work, on the subject of the Registered Student's advanced study and research. A Registered Student shall complete all the requirements and pass any taught credits as specified in the programme requirements approved by the Senate or under delegated authority.

7.4.1 (b) Where the Registered Student's programme includes research training or other taught modules, the Registered Student must attain a satisfactory standard (achieve credit) in each module before being recommended for the Award of the degree. Assessment of taught modules will be as specified in these Regulations.

7.4.1 (c) The thesis and other assessments for a research degree should demonstrate that the Registered Student:

- (i) has an adequate knowledge of the discipline within which the research is grounded and of the literature relevant to the research;
- (ii) is proficient in relevant method(s) of research;
- (iii) has undertaken an independent investigation;
- (iv) can present information clearly; and
- (v) can put forward arguments in an appropriate and coherent form.

7.4.1 (d) A thesis for the two-year MPhil should, in addition to the requirements set out above, contain original work of merit, worthy of publication in part or in whole, representing a significant contribution to knowledge, and demonstrating that the Registered Student can exercise independent judgement.

7.4.1 (e) A thesis for a doctoral degree should, in addition

to the requirements set out above, represent an original contribution to knowledge, demonstrate that the Registered Student can exercise independent judgement and be worthy of publication in whole or in part in a learned journal or the equivalent.

7.4.1 (f) A Registered Student may not submit material for assessment which has already been submitted for another degree awarded at this or any other University, unless all the following conditions are satisfied. The material previously submitted for another degree must:

- (i) form a minor part of the submission;
- (ii) be supplemented by new material;
- (iii) be appropriately integrated into the additional work completed for the subsequent degree; and
- (iv) be adequately identified.

7.4.1 (g) A Registered Student may submit material for assessment which has already been published provided that the following conditions are satisfied. The material published must:

- (i) be appropriately integrated, either in the body of the work or as an appendix to which reference is made; and
- (ii) be adequately identified and referenced.

7.4.1 (h) If material submitted is the result of collaborative research or work, the submission must clearly identify the Registered Student's contribution.

7.4.1 (i) A Registered Student should submit a synopsis (in English) of about 200 words of the work presented, to be included in the bound copies of the work submitted. The examiners shall be required to certify that the synopsis is an accurate summary.

## **Examination Report Form**

**The date by which the examination process should be completed and the reports submitted to Research Student Administration (RSA) is stated the e-mail confirming your appointment.**

It is University policy to make examiners' reports available to Heads of School (or nominee), supervisors and the candidate in order that they may benefit from examiners' comments and advice. The acceptance of an invitation to act as an examiner is on the understanding that examiners are willing to have their reports made available in this way.

An electronic version of the report form will be sent to you by e-mail with confirmation of your appointment. When returning reports via e-mail, please insert your name and the date you return the report in the signature section of the report.

**The Report Form comprises:**

### **Part One: Independent Report**

All examiners should complete and return to RSA, an independent report (normally up to 500 words in length) **before the oral examination or conferral with the other examiner(s)**. Examiners should retain a copy of this for use in the later stages of the examination process. Examiners should note any matters that they may wish to raise at the oral examination.

**An oral examination is compulsory for all doctoral degrees. Where an oral is not held for a masters degree, examiners should proceed to Part 3.**

### **Part Two: Joint Report on the Oral Examination, where held.**

The report, normally up to 200 words, should address the areas raised in the oral examination. Examiners

should also satisfy themselves that the thesis is the candidate's own work.

### **Part Three: Final recommendation.**

Where an oral examination is held and examiners agree, this can be a joint report. Where a final recommendation cannot be reached, each examiner should complete a separate Part Three report. In such cases, please refer to "Failure of Examiners to Reach Agreement" (page 9).

**Where an oral examination is not held**, each examiner should return a separate Part Three and may confer after completing their independent Part One report.

### **Part Four: List of required corrections**

Where minor or major corrections, or revise and resubmission is recommended, the examiners should provide clear guidance on the amendments required.

Where an oral examination is held and examiners agree a final recommendation, this can be a joint or independent report.

### **Part Five: External examiners' comments on academic standards and procedures.**

External examiners are invited to complete Part Five commenting on academic standards and procedures.

At the conclusion of the oral examination, examiners may return the copies of the thesis to the candidate at the end of the oral examination, or return them to RSA.

The **provisional** result may be given to the candidate immediately following the oral examination.

## The Oral Examination (Viva Voce)

An oral examination is:

- compulsory for all doctoral degrees (first and resubmissions)
- held at the discretion of the examiners for masters by research but **MUST BE HELD in all cases where the examiners are proposing that the thesis be: revised and resubmitted, or rejected and a lower qualification awarded, or rejected**

### Arrangements for the Oral Examination

It is the responsibility of the internal examiner (or chairperson if two external examiners are appointed) to make the arrangements for the oral examination. The internal examiner should notify the chairperson, external examiner(s) and candidate, in writing, giving at least two weeks' notice of the date, time, venue and any Reasonable Adjustments. The supervisor should be available on the day of the viva but does not attend the oral examination.

The oral examination should normally be held at the University of Birmingham and held in a suitable room without interruption or by video conferencing.

If the oral examination is to be held by video conferencing, the following must be ensured:

- All parties must agree to the oral examination taking place via video conferencing
- The School/Department/Institute/College must ensure that the quality of the video link has been tested and that time differences between locations do not disadvantage the PGR

### Off-campus Oral Examination

For oral examinations to be held in person outside the University of Birmingham, approval must be sought from the Research Progress & Awards Sub Panel via a written request submitted to RSA which should include confirmation that all parties agree to the alternative arrangements.

### Purpose/Aim of the Oral Examination

- provides the candidate with an opportunity to defend their thesis;
- examines the general field within which the subject of the thesis lies;
- clarifies points of ambiguity;
- satisfies the examiners that the thesis is the candidate's own work;
- assists the examiners in their decision as to whether or not the candidate has met the requirements for the degree.

### Conduct of the Oral Examination

**The chairperson, internal, external examiner(s) and candidate must be present** and if any are unable to be present, the oral examination **must** be re-arranged. No other person may attend except with the unanimous approval of the chairperson and examiners.

Supervisor(s) should not be present at the oral examination but should be available on the day.

Time should be made available before the oral examination for examiners to meet and discuss their preliminary reports and the approach to the oral.

Students are permitted to bring a copy of their thesis into the viva and any notes they deem appropriate. They should also be free to make notes during the viva should they wish to.

At the start of the oral examination the chairperson should introduce those present, putting them at ease, explaining the format of the oral examination, and what happens afterwards.

The chairperson will remain for the duration of the viva.

The chairperson will intervene if there is a danger of misunderstanding, unfairness, bias or unprofessional behaviour.

Each examiner should contribute to the questioning with the external taking the lead.

There are no rules governing length. It is at the examiners' discretion to make it as long or short as they think necessary. Short breaks are permitted if required.

During the oral examination an indication of the likely outcome should not be made.

Students are permitted to bring small items into the viva that may help manage anxiety e.g. fiddle toys, religious items.

Where there is an unexpected interruption to the viva the chairperson should take the lead in instigating appropriate action. Where it is not possible for the viva to continue, the examiners, in consultation with the chairperson, should determine whether sufficient discussion has taken place for a final recommendation to be made or whether a new date needs to be arranged to continue the viva.

**Inclusive Practice Standards for the Oral Examination**

Allow the candidate to bring prepared notes in addition to a copy of the thesis.

Provide the opportunity for the candidate to write down questions and make notes during the viva and refer back to these as required.

Provide an opportunity for the candidate to take time to formulate a response to questions and seek clarification/rephrasing to facilitate to ensure their understanding.

Try to present one question at a time (avoiding multi-faceted questions where possible), keeping them as short and clear as possible.

Be prepared to rephrase questions, or repeat them, if the candidate appears to have misunderstood.

Try to avoid ambiguous phrasing and colloquialisms.

**End of the Oral Examination**

The chairperson should ask the candidate to withdraw while the examiners deliberate.

The examiners, through the chairperson, may invite the candidate and supervisor(s) to hear the provisional recommendation.

## Final Recommendations

Recommendation	Description	Time Limit for submission of corrected thesis
<b>Award Available for Submission and Resubmission</b>	<b>No amendments of any kind are required</b> All requirements for the degree have been met and the thesis is free of typographical errors	N/A
<b>Minor Corrections Available for Submission and Resubmission</b>	<p>The thesis is generally acceptable and the candidate should not be required to undertake any further research.</p> <p>Corrections do not alter the results and/or conclusions of the thesis in any way. These may be errors and omissions of a clerical nature, minor changes in phraseology, small improvements in descriptions or explanations or corrections of faults in subsidiary arguments.</p> <p>The candidate is required to submit a document indicating how they have made the corrections to the thesis in order to assist the examiners in the checking process.</p> <p>The award of the degree is withheld until the corrections have been completed to the satisfaction of the internal examiner.</p>	<p><b>Normally one month</b> from the date on the letter advising the candidate of the outcome.</p> <p><b>Examiners are permitted to give additional time and this should be clearly indicated on Part 3 of the report form.</b></p> <p>Minor corrections are subject to approval by the internal examiner (for two external examiners to the examiner nominated to check the minor corrections). An electronic copy of the corrected thesis will be sent directly to the examiner by the PGR.</p> <p>The examiner should advise RSA within <b>four weeks</b> of receipt of the corrected thesis if the corrections have been carried out to their satisfaction.</p> <p>The award of the degree is withheld until the corrections have been completed to the satisfaction of the internal examiner.</p>
<b>Major Corrections Available for Submission and Resubmission</b>	<p>In excess of minor corrections but not, in the opinion of the examiners, sufficient to require revision and resubmission of the thesis.</p> <p>May involve rewriting sections, correction of calculations or clarification and amendment of arguments. It is expected that once the major corrections have been made the thesis will reach the required standard for the degree.</p> <p>The candidate is required to submit a document indicating how they have made the corrections to the thesis in order to assist the examiners in the checking process.</p> <p><b>To accommodate required corrections, it is permissible for the corrected thesis to exceed the word count for the degree for which the corrected thesis is being submitted.</b></p>	<p><b>Normally six months</b> from the date on the letter advising the candidate of the outcome.</p> <p><b>Examiners are permitted to give additional time and this should be clearly indicated on Part 3 of the report form.</b></p> <p>Major corrections are subject to approval by all examiners. An electronic copy of the corrected thesis will be sent directly to all the examiners by the PGR.</p> <p>The examiner should advise RSA within <b>six weeks</b> from receipt of the corrected thesis if the corrections have been successfully carried out.</p> <p>The award of the degree is withheld until the corrections have been completed to the satisfaction of both examiners.</p>
<b>Further Minor Corrections following major corrections</b>	<p>Where examiners require further minor corrections to be made to the sections of a thesis affected by major corrections, a comprehensive list of the required further corrections should be returned to RSA, together with an explanation of the reasons for the request. Requests will be referred to the Research Progress &amp; Awards Sub Panel for consideration.</p> <p><b>Examiners should not request candidates to carry out any further corrections until the decision of the Research Progress &amp; Awards Sub Panel is known.</b></p> <p><b>Further corrections following minor corrections are not permitted</b></p>	

**Notes on corrections**

To remove any ambiguity, guidance given to the candidate should be explicit and in the form of a detailed list in Part Four of the report form, or marked in the body of the thesis (reference should be made to this in Part Four of the report form). The list of required corrections can be either an individual list or a joint list with the other examiner(s).

Examiners are not permitted to provide feedback on draft corrections prior to the formal submission of the corrected thesis. The candidate is advised to consult their supervisor for guidance on completion of the required corrections and the supervisor should liaise with the examiners on behalf of the candidate if clarification on corrections is required.

<p><b>Revise and Resubmit</b> Available for Submission. This recommendation is available for a resubmitted thesis only where new examiner(s) are appointed.</p>	<p>Substantial revisions are required to the thesis involving, for example, rewriting sections or the introduction of significant new material or further experiments, calculations or research, or profound correction of an argument.</p> <p>A full re-examination will be required and a further oral examination is obligatory for candidates resubmitting a thesis for a doctoral degree and must be held for a masters by research where the examiners are recommending award of a lower degree or reject.</p> <p>The revised thesis must not exceed the permitted word count for the degree for which it is being resubmitted.</p> <p>There is no guarantee that the revised thesis will reach the required standard for the award of the degree.</p>	<p><b>One Year</b> from the date on the letter advising the candidate of the outcome.</p> <p>If the examiners wish to give additional time this should be clearly indicated on Part 3 of the report form.</p> <p>It is expected that the same examiners will examine the resubmitted thesis. If they are unable to do so, the reports on the first submission will be made available to the new examiners upon request.</p>
<p><b>Award lower Qualification with or without corrections</b> Available for Submission and Resubmission</p>	<p>Where the thesis and/or a candidate's performance in the oral examination (if held) is unsatisfactory and does not meet the standard for the award of the degree for which the thesis was submitted.</p> <p>Once the required corrections have been made, it is expected that the thesis will reach the expected standard for the lower qualification.</p> <p>Candidates have the right of appeal against this decision.</p>	<p><b>One month</b> – Minor corrections <b>Six months</b> – Major corrections</p> <p>from the date on the result letter advising the candidate of the outcome.</p> <p>If the examiners wish to give additional time this should be clearly indicated on Part 3 of the report form.</p> <p>An electronic copy of the corrected thesis will be sent directly to the examiners by the PGR for checking.</p> <p>Minor corrections are subject to approval by the internal examiner, major corrections subject to approval of all examiners, who should advise RSA within <b>four weeks (six weeks for major corrections)</b> of receipt of the corrected thesis if the corrections have been carried out to their satisfaction.</p> <p>The award of the degree is withheld until the corrections have been completed to the satisfaction of both examiners.</p>

<p><b>Revise and resubmit for a Lower qualification</b></p> <p>MPhil, MA/MSc by Research for PhD.</p> <p>MPhil, MA/MSc by Research, MRes (if 60 credits of taught modules have been passed) for a doctoral thesis with taught elements.</p> <p>MA/MSc by research for a two year MPhil.</p> <p>Available for Submission. <b>This recommendation is only available for a Resubmitted thesis only where new examiner(s) are appointed.</b></p>	<p>Where the thesis and/or a candidate's performance in an oral examination (if appropriate) is unsatisfactory but with revisions the thesis may ultimately merit the award of a lower qualification.</p> <p>Candidates have the right of appeal against this decision.</p> <p>A full re-examination will be required. There is no guarantee that the revised thesis will reach the required standard for the award of the lower degree.</p>	<p><b>One Year</b> from the date on the result letter advising the candidate of the outcome.</p> <p><b>If the examiners wish to give additional time this should be clearly indicated on Part 3 of the report form.</b></p> <p>It is expected that the same examiners will examine the resubmitted thesis. If they are unable to do so, their reports on the first submission will be made available to the new examiners.</p>
<p><b>Reject without the opportunity for resubmission</b></p> <p>Available for Submission and Resubmission</p>	<p>Where the thesis and/or the candidate's performance in an oral examination (if held) is unsatisfactory. In the view of the examiners, there is no reasonable prospect of the candidate being able to revise the thesis to merit the award of a research degree.</p> <p>A postgraduate certificate (60 taught credits) or postgraduate diploma (120 taught credits) may be awarded in recognition of successful completion of taught modules required by the programme.</p> <p>Candidates have the right of appeal against this decision.</p>	<p>N/A</p>

## **Conclusion of Examination**

The examiners should complete and return Part Two (if an oral has been held), Parts Three and Four of the report form together with the thesis (if not already handed back to the candidate at the end of the oral examination) to the RSA Team.

The chairperson should complete the chairperson's Oral Report form and return it to the RSA team.

The candidate, supervisor(s) and Head of School (or nominee) will be formally notified by letter by the RSA Team and sent copies of examiners' reports.

In cases where examiners agree and an adequate report

has been submitted and the recommendation is to award the degree or to award the degree subject to minor or major corrections, action to advise the candidate will be taken by the RSA Team without reference to any academic authority.

In cases where the recommendation is for resubmission, or award a lower qualification or rejection, reports will be submitted for consideration and approval by the University's Research Progress & Awards Sub Panel. If the Research Progress & Awards Sub Panel disagrees with the examiners' recommendations, the matter will be referred back to the examiners with a view to reaching agreement.

## **Failure of Examiners to Reach Agreement**

Where examiners are unable to agree on a joint recommendation they should each complete Part Three of the Report Form separately and return it the RSA Team. The RSA Team will ask the examiners to confer to see whether they can reconcile their differences before any other course of action is taken.

Where the examiners are unable to reach agreement a new examination will be held with new examiners and a chairperson. The candidate, the original examiners and chairperson, the supervisor(s) and Head of School (or nominee) will be advised of this by the RSA Team.

The candidate will be advised that their thesis should not be amended in any way before the new examination is held.

None of the original examiners can be re-appointed.

In their letter of appointment, the new examiners will be advised only that the original examination has been

inconclusive. The reports of the original examiners will not be made available to the new examiners.

The reports of the original examiners will be made available to the Head of School (or nominee), the candidate and the candidate's supervisor(s).

If the new examiners submit recommendations that differ, the RSA Team will ask them to confer to see whether they might reconcile their differences before any other course of action is taken. If they are unable to reach agreement, an adjudicator will be appointed as laid down by the Research Progress & Awards Sub Panel.

The adjudicator should make a recommendation based on the thesis and the reports of the original and of the new examiners. The adjudicator should not have been the chairperson of the oral examinations. A oral will not normally be held.