



Oral Examinations of PhD Theses at the University of Sydney

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The Objectives of an oral examination

An oral examination or re-examination of a thesis is seen as a desirable means of assessment, since it provides a means

- to test the comprehension of the candidate of the field of study described by the thesis and any appended material;
- to clarify points either of principle or of detail in the thesis;
- to assess the contribution made by the candidate to the content and presentation of the thesis;
- to provide an educationally rewarding and personally satisfying finale to the PhD candidacy; and
- to give the candidate the benefit of advice from the examiners.

In addition, the oral examination has the potential to reduce the length of a thesis examination by, for example, directly familiarizing the examiners with the University's standards and expectations, or by clarifying points which might otherwise be dealt with by re-examination.

Note: the oral should not be a forum in which the examiners' recommendation(s) are debated or challenged by the Head of Department, supervisor or candidate.

The Content of the Oral Examination

The oral examination of the thesis examines only that material which would be examined by a thesis-only examination (i.e., the content of the thesis and any appended material).

The Recommendation to Conduct an Oral Examination

The dean of the faculty, or nominee, has the responsibility for determining that an oral, rather than a thesis-only examination, be conducted.

- An oral examination of the thesis can be recommended by the head of department or requested by the student (however, to be consistent with the existing resolutions, a student cannot request an oral examination of a resubmitted thesis). Note that the head of department should already have discussed the examination process, including the possibility of an oral examination, with the student.
- An oral examination of the thesis is approved by the dean or nominee.
- An oral examination of the thesis will be approved only if the head of department confirms that the department will arrange the oral examination and bear the associated costs.
- The examiners are notified.
- The dean appoints a convener, from the faculty in which the candidate has been studying.

- The examiners' written reports are required within 8 weeks of the submission of the thesis.
- The oral examination is set, prior to the submission of the thesis, for a date within approximately 10 weeks after the date of submission.
- If the student fails to submit the thesis by the nominated date, the examination reverts to a thesis-only examination.
- Each examiner provides an interim recommendation.
- The convener examines the examiners' reports and recommends to the dean whether an oral should be held (e.g., no oral may be needed if all recommend award, award with typos, all revise and resubmit, all non-award)
- If the dean agrees that no oral is required, the examiners are so advised and advised that their interim recommendations become confirmed recommendations.
- If no oral is required, the examiners' reports and recommendations are processed as for a thesis-only examination.

Conduct of the Oral Examination

- The candidate, head of department and supervisor are given copies of the examiners' reports and interim recommendation.
- The oral examination is chaired by the convener. The candidate may be accompanied by another member of the University, nominated by the candidate.
- The oral examination will normally last between 1 and 2 hours.
- Absent examiners may participate by video-, web- or tele-conferencing, as may the candidate
- Absent examiners may send questions to the convener.
- Detailed responses to questions provided by absent examiners need not be returned to them.
- At least two examiners must participate in person or by video, web or telephone link.
- At the conclusion of the discussion with the candidate, the convener and the participating examiners prepare the examining committee's recommendation *in camera*.
- The supervisor and the head of department will not be present at the closed session, but the head will be consulted and the supervisor advised about the result to be recommended after the completion of the oral examination.
- The convener advises the candidate of the examiners' recommendation.
- Should the examiners resolve to recommend that the degree be awarded, subject to conditions listed in the examiners' report being addressed to the satisfaction of the head of department or school, the convener, in consultation with the head of department or school, will determine the emendations required.
- Should the examiners resolve to recommend that the degree be awarded subject to conditions listed in the examiners' report being addressed to the satisfaction of the head of department or school, the convener, in consultation with the head of department or school, will determine the emendations required.
- The convener prepares a report, endorsed by the members of the examining committee present, describing procedures followed, conclusions reached and advice given to the candidate.
- The candidate and head of department endorse the report as appropriate.
- The convener forwards the report to the dean.
- Should the examiners participating in the oral examination fail to agree, the Convener asks them to supply any revision of their interim reports within two weeks. The examiners' final reports and the convener's report are then considered by the University as for the examiners' reports in a thesis-only examination.

Outcomes of the Oral Examination

If the examiners recommend award of the degree, or award subject to the completion of emendations and the head of department agrees, the dean can approve award of the degree.

The conduct of an oral examination and the result of the examination are reported to the faculty postgraduate studies committee and the PhD Award Sub-committee for noting.

The following is included for consistency with our present resolutions:

If the head of department disagrees with the examiners' report and/or the examiners recommend revise and resubmit or non-award, the examining committees' report, the head of department's comments and, if appropriate, the candidate's comments are forwarded to the faculty's postgraduate studies committee and the PhD Award Sub-Committee for consideration under sections 3(4) *et seq* (p 47 2000 Postgraduate Studies Research Handbook) Note that this is not intended to represent a form of veto by the head of department. It simply reflects the present practice in which the Head of Department is required to comment on the examiners' reports.

Role and Responsibilities of the Convener

Normally, the convener, appointed by the dean of the faculty, will be from a department other than the one in which the student is enrolled. The convener is a representative of the dean, and is authorised and required to:

- discuss with the candidate in advance, the nature of the oral examination, noting that candidates are expected to prepare their own defence;
- advise the candidate, before the examination, of the main issues to be raised by examiners, observing, however, that examiners would have the right to ask other questions;
- assure the candidate that the examination is intended to be constructive and helpful;
- chair the closed session of the oral defence of the thesis;
- explain the proceedings to the examiners and the candidate;
- advise the candidate at the end of the session, on behalf of the dean, of the outcome of the examination;
- give the head of department the opportunity to append comments to the convener's report on the oral examination; and
- provide a report to the dean of the faculty, outlining the procedures followed, the conclusions reached and advice given to the candidate; this report should be written at the conclusion of the oral examination and endorsed by the members of the examining committee present.