MANCHESTER 1824
The University of Manchester

Oral Examination Procedure for Postgraduate Research Degrees

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1. Introduction and Purpose

1.1. This procedure sets out the expected oral examination process for all postgraduate research degrees at the University of Manchester.

2. Scope and definitions

2.1 This procedure is applicable to examiners, University of Manchester staff, external examiners and all full-time and part-time postgraduate research students (PGRs) of all postgraduate degrees (where an oral examination is being held):

2.2 This document should be referred to along with the relevant degree Ordinances and Regulations and the relevant degree examination policy:

i. Examination of Doctoral Degrees Policy
ii. Examination of Master of Philosophy (MPhil) Degrees Policy
iii. Examination of Master of Science (Msc by Research) and Master of Enterprise (MEnt) Degrees Policy.

2.3 Any deviation from this procedure will only be considered in the most exceptional circumstances and prior approval / PGR candidate agreement is required before the examination takes place.[1]

3. Roles and Responsibilities

3.1 It is the responsibility of University of Manchester staff, external examiners and PGRs as defined in 2.1 to adhere to this procedure.

4. Purposes of a Postgraduate Research Degree Oral Examination

1 Enquiries about deviation from this procedure should be directed to the appropriate Faculty Doctoral Academy who may, where necessary, consult with the Faculty Associate Dean for Postgraduate Research, the Associate Vice-President for Postgraduate Research and/or the Postgraduate Researchers Management Group (PRMG) via the Research Degrees and Researcher Development Team.

4.1 To enable the examiners to assure themselves that the thesis / dissertation and the research it reports are the candidate's own work. Where the thesis / dissertation is Journal format there may be sections that are co-authored. The copyright statement at the beginning of the thesis / dissertation must make it clear which sections are collaborative or not the candidate's own.[2]

4.2 To give the candidate an opportunity to defend the thesis / dissertation, clarify any obscurities that the examiners have identified and discuss the subject of the thesis / dissertation in its disciplinary and / or interdisciplinary context.

4.3 To enable the candidate to demonstrate a firm understanding of the field of research and thus give the examiners an opportunity to assess the candidate's broader knowledge of the field or discipline within which the thesis / dissertation falls.

5. The Oral Examination - Timeframe

5.1 The oral examination must take place without undue delay, normally within twelve working weeks from the date the thesis / dissertation is sent to the examiners.

5.2 Candidates must be available to attend the oral examination from the time that the thesis / dissertation is submitted. Candidates may only delay their oral examination in very exceptional circumstances and must apply to the Faculty Doctoral Academy for permission.

5.3 The appropriate Faculty Doctoral Academy is responsible for informing the candidate of the time and location of the oral examination not less than ten working days before the examination.

6. The Oral Examination – Examining Committee

6.1 The examining committee for a PGR degree must comprise at least an internal examiner and an external examiner, except in the circumstances outlined in the University's Nomination of Examiners & Independent Chairs for Postgraduate Research Degree Examinations Policy.

6.2 An independent chair may also be present under the circumstances detailed in the Nomination of Examiners & Independent Chairs for Postgraduate Research Degree Examinations Policy.

7. The Oral Examination – Format

7.1 It is permitted for the oral examination to be held entirely in-person, remotely via video link or in a hybrid format whereby one or more members of the examination appear virtually.

7.2 All participants must agree to the format of the oral examination and the technology used. A record of this agreement should be retained by the internal examiner.

[2] A Journal Format thesis / dissertation allows a PGR candidate (doctoral, MPhil or MSc) to incorporate sections that are in a format suitable for submission for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Apart from the inclusion of such materials, the thesis / dissertation must conform to the same standards expected for a standard thesis / dissertation and examiners must be satisfied that the degree criteria has been met before recommending an award. Further details on Journal Format can be found in the University's Presentation of Theses Policy, the Policy for the Presentation of Dissertations: Master of Science (MSc) by Research & Master of Enterprise (MEnt) and the Journal Format Theses - Guiding Principles.

8. The Oral Examination - Practical Arrangements

8.1 The internal examiner or is normally responsible for making the practical arrangements for the oral examination and for completing the appropriate documentation in the University's progression monitoring system to confirm the date, time and location of the oral examination. All other parties (including the PGR candidate and their supervisor/s) must be informed of the arrangements no less than 10 working days in advance.

8.2 If necessary, the internal examiner may be required to make practical arrangements for the external examiner's visit to Manchester. The internal examiner should normally be required to act as host during the external examiner's visit to the University.

8.3 In the absence of an internal examiner, an appropriate person (e.g. independent chair) must be nominated to make the arrangements for the oral examination and to act as host to the external examiner.

8.4 Candidates are required to inform the appropriate Faculty Doctoral Academy if there are any particular arrangements or adjustments that need to be made to enable their full participation in the oral examination. This should be normally done no later than the notice of submission stage of the examination process. Further advice and support is available from the University's Disability Advisory and Support Service.[3]

8.5 The oral examination should normally be conducted in English. In exceptional circumstances, the PGR may request permission from the appropriate Faculty Doctoral Academy to conduct the oral examination in a language other than English. Permission must be sought before the end of year two of the PGR's programme and be supported by a clear academic justification. The examiners' report must still be written in English.

9. The Oral Examination - Attendance

9.1 PGR oral examinations are open to members of University staff, the candidate's supervisor/s, and other PGRs of the University (subject to the agreement of the candidate and the examining committee).

9.2 Any individuals attending the examination other than the candidate, examiners and, where applicable, independent chair, must not participate in the examination. Supervisor/s may answer any questions put to them by the examiners, but at all other times must remain silent.

9.3 If the thesis / dissertation is subject to a confidentiality clause as of the Terms and Conditions of a funder then the internal examiner is responsible for ensuring that the external examiner and any additional attendees at the examination (other than the PGR supervisor) sign a non-disclosure

[3] The University has responsibilities under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments to its examination arrangements to ensure that candidates with additional support needs are not disadvantaged for reasons relating to a long-term medical condition, sensory impairment, specific learning difficulty and/or disability.

agreement prior to the examination. This form is available from the appropriate Faculty Doctoral Academy.

9.4 Former supervisors of the candidate who are no longer employed at the University may only attend the oral examination with approval from the appropriate PGR Director.

9.5 The examiners and/or the independent chair have the right to exclude from the examination anyone they believe may jeopardise the smooth running or integrity of the oral examination.

9.6 The candidate and/or examining committee should inform the appropriate Faculty Doctoral Academy no later than 1 working week prior to the examination if it is expected that other individuals will attend the examination. This is to allow any objections to be raised in sufficient time and to enable the Internal Examiner to make arrangements such as the booking of a suitable venue.

10. The Oral Examination - Pre-Oral Examination Report Form

10.1 Examiners must each complete a separate Pre-Oral Examination Report Form after reading and before discussing the thesis / dissertation with each other. The Pre-Oral Examination Report Form allows examiners to:

i. Clarify their preliminary judgement on the thesis / dissertation for discussion with the co-examiner at the pre-oral examination meeting;

ii. identify priorities and points for discussion at the oral examination;

iii. identify revisions required, thereby saving time after the oral examination (even if revisions change as a result of the candidate's performance or the views of the other examiner);

iv. identify issues which may need to be discussed with the supervisor or may need to be reported to the appropriate Faculty Doctoral Academy.

10.2 The examiners must exchange copies of their pre-oral examination reports either shortly prior to or at the pre-oral examination meeting. Each completed Pre-Oral Examination Report Form must be submitted via the internal examiner in the University's progression monitoring system along with the joint Examiners' Report Form after the oral examination.

10.3 Candidates can view the completed Pre-Oral Examination Report Form and the joint Examiners' Report Form in the University's progression monitoring system once the final exam recommendation has been ratified by the appropriate postgraduate research degrees committee.

10.4 Examiners must not annotate the thesis / dissertation with substantive comments. Only minor comments may be noted on the thesis / dissertation.

11. The Oral Examination – Pre-Oral Examination Meeting

11.1 Prior to the oral examination, the examiners must arrange to confer with one another, in order to:

i. exchange copies of their Pre-Oral Examination Report Form (if this has not already been done);

ii. identify issues to be raised in the oral examination;

iii. agree the broad strategy for the oral examination – who will ask which questions and in what order;

iv. confer with the supervisor, if required.

11.2 The internal examiner (or other nominated person in the absence of an internal examiner) is responsible for making the practical arrangements for the pre-oral examination meeting.

11.3 Sufficient time should be allocated for the meeting and the internal examiner or nominated person must arrange the attendance of the supervisor, if required.

11.4 If the examiners and, if applicable, the independent chair and supervisor/s are unable to meet in person for the pre-oral examination meeting, the meeting may be conducted by telephone or by other appropriate means (e.g. video link).

11.5 Examiners who suspect the candidate has committed academic malpractice should contact the appropriate Faculty Doctoral Academy prior to the oral examination taking place to seek advice.

12. The Oral Examination – Conduct

12.1 Those present at the oral examination shall be the candidate and the examiners, and if required, an independent chair. If supervisors, academic staff or other PGRs attend, they must not participate in the examination.

12.2 An oral examination may not proceed without all the appointed examiners being present.

12.3 The candidate should inform their supervisor/s of any exceptional circumstance, which in their view might affect their performance adversely prior to the oral examination starting. The Supervisor/s should ensure that the examiners are aware of any circumstances raised.

12.4 Examiners may seek advice from University support services on how to provide mitigation for a disability or exceptional circumstance that may affect the candidate's performance in the oral examination.

12.5 The candidate will be asked to withdraw before the examiners begin their final deliberations. The independent chair should be present at the deliberations.

12.6 The candidate should be made to feel at ease and the structure of the examination, as already agreed by the examiners, must be explained at the beginning of the examination.

12.7 It is essential that no one indicates to the candidate, either before or during the oral examination, what is the likely outcome of the examination. The examiners and the independent chair (if appointed) must ensure that any conflict of opinion that may arise during the examination will not lead to any indication of the likely outcome of the examination.

12.8 Each examiner will each contribute to the examination process but the external examiner normally takes the lead role.

12.9 Whilst some intensive questioning of the candidate may be needed, it must be non-aggressive in line with the University's commitment to the principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

12.10 The examiners may discuss ways of developing the candidate's research and writing beyond the requirements of the degree, but the candidate must be informed explicitly that these discussions are not part of the assessment.

12.11 The examiners may request to see evidence of the candidate's attendance at events related to their research (e.g. seminars, conferences and taught course units), where the regulations of the degree under examination require such components to be completed. Such evidence should be requested and presented by the Faculty Doctoral Academy before the oral examination.

12.12 The oral examination should run for as long as may be necessary for it to serve its proper purpose. The internal examiner or independent chair must give an opportunity for breaks if the oral examination is anticipated to last more than two hours, provided that this does not disadvantage the candidate.

12.13 If the supervisor/s do not attend the oral examination, they must be available to provide any clarification requested by the examiners (before, during and after the examination).

12.14 The supervisor and any others present may be asked to withdraw before the candidate, so as to provide the candidate with an opportunity to say anything to the examiners that they would prefer to say without the supervisor and others being present.

12.15 When the examiners have made their decision, they may communicate it to the candidate, making it clear that their recommendation is provisional, until approved by the appropriate postgraduate research degrees committee.

12.16 At the end of the oral examination, the candidate should be informed if the examiners have been unable to reach a decision and that, under these circumstances, separate reports will be completed and considered by the appropriate School or Faculty postgraduate research degrees committee.

12.17 If examiners decide not to tell the candidate the outcome, and to avoid any possible misunderstanding, the candidate must, at the end of the oral examination, be given a clear indication of the procedure by which they will be notified of the outcome and the likely timescale. Recommendations must be communicated through a formal process. Examiners should not feel under any obligation to communicate their provisional recommendation to the candidate or supervisor at this stage.

13. The Oral Examination – Conduct (in-person examinations)

13.1 In person oral examinations must take place in a University of Manchester owned venue and must start at a time when buildings are officially open. In very exceptional circumstances, the oral examination may be held outside the University of Manchester with the permission of the Faculty Associate Dean for Postgraduate Research. In such cases, the examiners must ensure that the supervisor can be contacted, if required, on the day of the oral examination. Any additional costs associated with holding the oral examination outside of the University must be met by the appropriate School or Faculty.

13.2 The oral examination must take place in a quiet, suitable room and without interruption (unless for designated breaks).

13.3 Candidates may take a copy of their thesis into the oral examination. If required, the candidate may also take a reasonable number of supplementary notes, pen and paper, into the oral examination.

13.4 If the candidate does not have a hard copy of their thesis / dissertation available, they can take in an electronic device from which to access a pre-downloaded document during the examination. This device should be should be muted with internet access disabled.

14. The Oral Examination – Conduct (examination including video link)

14.1 All participants must agree that they are happy to proceed remotely or partially remotely and a record of this agreement should be retained by the internal examiner. The quality of the equipment to be used by the parties appearing via video link must be taken into account prior to agreement.

14.2 Thought should be given to the security of the technology/meeting and it the technology allows it is advisable to set a password for the meeting.

14.3 It is advisable that the video link be set up at least 30 minutes before the examination time in order to test the connection and resolve any potential problems. All participants should also be able to contact each other by other means e.g. phone in case of technical issue.

14.4 Normally, the independent chair or internal examiner will 'host' the video link to mirror in-person oral examination arrangements.

14.5 Under no circumstances should a video / audio recording of the oral examination be made.

14.6 Candidates appearing via video link are permitted to take a hard copy of their thesis / dissertation into the oral examination. If required, the candidate may also take a reasonable number of supplementary notes, pen and paper. Candidates are not normally permitted to take in additional laptops / electronic devices. Any materials brought into the examination should be clearly identified, on camera, by the candidate at the start of the examination.

14.7 If the candidate does not have a hard copy of their thesis / dissertation available, they can take in one additional electronic device from which to access a pre-downloaded document during the examination. This device should be declared to examiners at the start of the oral examination and the device should be muted with internet access disabled.

14.8 All parties appearing via video link should, at the beginning, satisfy others that no other person is present apart from those agreed to be in attendance (see 9.6).

14.9 All parties appearing via video link should ensure as much as possible that there are no visual distractions on camera during (a blank wall is preferable). They should also ensure that their location is well lit so that faces can be clearly seen and should, where possible, be located away from external audible distractions.

14.10 If appointed and appearing by video link the independent chair should keep their microphone on mute throughout the oral examination, unless to offer breaks or to intervene if problems arise.

14.11 Supervisors, if appearing by video link, should have their microphone muted at all times. Supervisors should not take an active role and should make sure that they are available to the candidate immediately after the oral examination to offer advice and support if required.

15. The Oral Examination - Unexpected Disruption

15.1 If an oral examination is disrupted by unexpected events outside the University's control—such as building evacuation, technical failure, or sudden illness—the Chair of the Examination Panel (usually the Internal Examiner or Independent Chair) shall take such action as is necessary to ensure the safety of participants, that the examination remains fair, and that the candidate is not disadvantaged..

15.2 The Chair may pause, suspend or reschedule the oral examination where continuation would risk unfairness to the candidate. No academic decision shall be made unless the oral examination has been completed in accordance with the regulations.

15.3 All members of the examination panel, including the candidate, are responsible for raising any concern during the oral examination that may affect their ability to continue—such as feeling unwell—at the earliest opportunity. Such concerns must be brought immediately to the attention of the Chair, who will determine whether a pause, suspension or other appropriate action is required. Concerns that are not raised at the time will not normally be considered retrospectively as grounds for appeal.

15.4 Where disruption arises from the unavailability of an examiner, arrangements shall be made in accordance with the regulations for the appointment of a replacement examiner and/or for the rescheduling of the oral examination, as appropriate.

15.5 Any pause, suspension or rescheduling of the oral examination, and the reasons for it, shall be reported to the Faculty Doctoral Academy by the Chair so they may be formally recorded.

16. Procedures following the Oral Examination

16.1 Procedures to be followed after the oral examination, including examiner recommendations, approval of outcomes, and any subsequent actions, are set out in the relevant degree examination policy.

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