

# **HANDBOOK ON EXAMINING FOR RESEARCH DEGREES**

## **1 Preamble**

- 1.1 The appointment of External and Internal Examiners is a fundamental factor in maintaining standards in research and the procedure for appointment ensure that such standards are upheld. External Examiners for Higher research degrees are appointed by the Research Degrees Committee on behalf of the Senate and such appointments are reported to the Senate for information.
- 1.2 Heriot-Watt University Academic Regulation A8 sets out the requirements for the appointment of External Examiners for the Higher research degrees currently offered by the University.

## **2 Appointment of Examiners**

- 2.1 For each candidate undertaking research they must be examined by at least two Examiners, of whom at least one must be an External Examiner. *In the event of an Internal Examiner also acting as Supervisor of the candidate or if the candidate is a member of staff of the University then at least two External Examiners should be appointed.*
- 2.2 The recommendation for the appointment of External Examiner(s) for the degree should be initiated by the Supervisor(s) of the candidate and endorsed by the Director of Research (or their delegate) in the organising School.
- 2.3 Nominations for the appointment of Examiners and approval of thesis titles for research degrees should be made on the appropriate forms which can be found [here](#)

External Examiners should normally be senior members of the research/scholarly community. Nominated External Examiners will be asked to complete a form to confirm their details and previous experience as part of the appointment process. This form should evidence that the proposed Examiner is competent to examine at this level is available. The form should demonstrate that the Examiner is competent to judge the standard of the work presented, can judge its technical quality and can assess the research methods adopted. The Examiner will also be required to compare the University's degree with other degrees and give recommendations to students on the pass/fail boundary.

- 2.4 An Examiner should not normally be proposed if that Examiner (or a colleague from the same institution and subject area as the proposed Examiner) has been appointed within the last two years in the same subject area in the University as the proposed candidate. Similarly, the Examiner should not normally be proposed if a member of Heriot-Watt University's staff in the same subject area as the candidate has been appointed within the last two years in the same institution and subject area as that of the proposed Examiner.
- 2.5 An Examiner should not hold any position within an industrial sponsor or other organisation that has an involvement, whether direct or indirect, with the student's research. This requirement is in place to prevent potential conflicts of interest. There are also other situations which may be considered a potential conflict of interest. In situations such as these, advance approval will be required from the Chair of the Research Degrees Committee before the appointment can be made.
- 2.6 All Examiners should normally hold a PhD (or equivalent) and have been engaged in appropriate research or equivalent scholarly activity for a number of years. In some circumstances proposed Examiners who are able to provide evidence of equivalent experience and suitable technical competence in a relevant subject area may be appointed.

A variety of evidence will be provided in order to demonstrate that an Examiner has the experience to judge the standard of the thesis. Examples include having examined other candidates either as Internal or External Examiner and having supervised Postgraduate Research candidates to successful completion.

- 2.7 The criteria for an Examiner for a Research Masters Degree should be the same as that for a PhD (or equivalent) except that the Examiner should as a minimum hold this qualification and have supervised students to this level.
- 2.8 The form should be submitted for approval at least four weeks prior to the date of submission to allow time for the proposal to be approved on behalf of the Research Degrees Committee and for the relevant correspondence to be sent to the Examiners confirming this appointment.
- 2.9 On approval, the External Examiner will receive a formal letter of appointment which indicates the name of the candidate, school, degree, Internal Examiner(s) and Supervisor. A copy of the letter is sent as appropriate to the Internal Examiner and Supervisor for information.
- 2.10 In certain instances the Chair of the Research Degrees Committee (or the Dean's Administrator on his or her behalf) may contact a Supervisor directly to obtain additional information on a nominated Examiner prior to the appointment being approved.

### **3 Expected Standards for Postgraduate Research courses of study**

- 3.1 The standard of the **Degree of Master of Philosophy (MPhil)** and **Degree of Master of Research (MSc by Research)** shall be that expected of a good Honours graduate who has satisfactorily completed a research course and has investigated and evaluated or critically studied an appropriate topic over not less than 18 months (MPhil)/ 12 months (MSc by Research) of full-time study, or equivalent, and has presented a satisfactory thesis. In addition, a candidate for these awards must be able to demonstrate a full and proper understanding of the research methods appropriate to the field of study concerned.
- 3.2 The standard of the **Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (or equivalent)** shall be that expected of a good Honours graduate who has satisfactorily completed a research course and has investigated and evaluated or critically studied an appropriate topic over not less than 24 months of full-time study, or equivalent, resulting in a significant original contribution to knowledge, and has presented a satisfactory thesis. In addition, a candidate for the award of PhD (or equivalent) must be able to demonstrate a full and proper understanding of the research methods appropriate to the field of study concerned.

### **4 Preparation of Examiners' Individual Reports in Advance of Examination**

- 4.1 The relevant Student Service Centre will ensure that each Examiner is sent a copy of the thesis, together with information on how to access the appropriate Academic Regulations, guidelines and report forms using the Academic Registry website: <https://www.hw.ac.uk/students/studies/examinations/thesis-examination.htm>
- 4.2 Each Examiner, having read the thesis, should prepare an individual **typewritten** report **in advance** of the viva. The report should cover all relevant issues arising from the candidate's thesis that the examiner wishes to highlight. Each report should be prepared on the Individual Examiner's Report Form template available at <https://www.hw.ac.uk/students/studies/examinations/thesis-examination.htm>. The Examiners should discuss their individual reports before the start of the examination.
- 4.3 Where no viva is scheduled to take place, which is normally the case for Research Masters degrees, the same sequence of events as set out above should still be followed.

### **5 Viva**

- 5.1 The Internal Examiner is responsible for making all necessary arrangements for viva. The Internal Examiner is responsible for ensuring that the External Examiner and student are properly consulted on these arrangements.

- 5.2 A viva is normally expected and required for a PhD (or equivalent) candidate. Remote vivas are an option, especially in cases where external examiners are based internationally. However a remote viva is only possible with the agreement of both examiners and the student.
- 5.3 A candidate for a Research Masters Degree is required to undergo a viva only if the Examiners so decide.
- 5.4 Further details on the operation and regulation of a viva are available in Guidelines for Postgraduate Research Student Vivas – Role of the Internal Examiner which can be found at: <https://www.hw.ac.uk/students/studies/examinations/thesis-examination.htm>

## 6 Recommendations of the Examiners

- 6.1 Immediately after the viva the Examiners should seek to arrive at an agreed recommendation.
- 6.2 The Internal Examiner must ensure that the candidate is formally notified in writing of the examiners' recommendations as soon as possible and certainly no later **two weeks** after the viva. This notification must include all details of required revisions, amendments and necessary resubmissions, indicating the scale and scope of the changes required.
- 6.3 The Examiners should use the University's Joint Examiners Recommendation form available at <https://www.hw.ac.uk/students/studies/examinations/thesis-examination.htm> to give a brief description of what happened during the viva and the examiners' thoughts after the viva, as well as recording one of the following recommendations:
- (a) That the degree be awarded;
  - (b) That the degree be awarded subject to minor corrections being made to the thesis to the satisfaction of the Internal Examiner(s) within a period of three months;
  - (c) That the degree be awarded subject to significant corrections being made to the thesis to the satisfaction of the Internal Examiner(s) within a period of six months;
  - (d) That the candidate be allowed to resubmit their thesis after further work for consideration of the external examiner, within a period not exceeding twenty-four months without a further viva (**resubmission fee due**);
  - (e) That the candidate be allowed to resubmit their thesis after further work for consideration of the external examiner, within a period not exceeding twenty-four months with a further viva (**resubmission fee due**);
  - (f) That the degree be not awarded
- 6.4 Exceptionally, in the case of a PhD submission, any of the above recommendations may be made alongside the recommendation to award the candidate with the degree of MPhil instead of PhD. The Examiners' Joint Recommendation Form must contain a clear rationale for arriving at this recommendation.
- 6.5 In cases where a re-submitted thesis is being considered, only options (a), (b) and (f) may be put forward as valid recommendations and may not normally recommend a further resubmission, under the terms of the Academic Regulations which can be found at: <https://www.hw.ac.uk/documents/regulations.pdf>
- 6.6 The MacFarlane Prize commemorates the contribution to the University made by Professor A G J MacFarlane during his tenure as Principal and Vice Chancellor. The Award is made annually to a PhD or EngD graduate who has clearly produced a performance of outstanding quality during the period of research. This may be demonstrated by some or all of the following: work of significance in the field of study; a distinguished contribution to knowledge; a thesis of high quality and/or a body of published work.

If the Examiners consider the candidate to be appropriate for the award, this should be stated on the Examiners' Joint Recommendation Form.

## **7 Submission of Examiners' Report Forms**

- 7.1 The completed Individual Examiners' reports and Joint Examiners' Recommendation form must together provide sufficiently detailed comments on the scope and quality of the work to enable the University to satisfy itself that the criteria for the award of the degree have been met.
- 7.2 All of this documentation should be submitted to the appropriate School PGR Office as soon as possible and, in any event, no later than four weeks from the date of the viva. In the event of the Examiners failing to reach a consensus, this should be stated on the Examiners' Joint Recommendation Form along with an indication of the area of disagreement. Where no oral examination is required, the Examiners should still complete the Examiners' Joint Recommendation Form.
- 7.3 In all cases, the Internal Examiner must also submit a declaration with the final copy of the thesis, stating that any required corrections have been carried out to the satisfaction of the Examiners in accordance with the Academic Regulations.
- 7.4 The Research Degrees Committee will consider the reports and recommendations from the Examiners and, on the basis that the requisite criteria are satisfied, will recommend that the degree be awarded.

## **8 Re-Examination**

- 8.1 In any case where re-examination is recommended, both Examiners should complete the Individual Examiners' Report Forms in the normal way and should indicate on the Examiners' Joint Recommendation Form why they believe that re-submission has the ability to lead to a successful conclusion. These reports will be submitted to the Chair of the Research Degrees Committee (via the Deans Administrator).
- 8.2 After taking any action deemed necessary, the Chair (acting on behalf of the Research Degrees Committee) will approve the recommendation and request that the candidate be informed of the terms of the re-submission. A record of all interactions with the candidate during this time (e.g. letters, meetings, etc.) should be retained in the student's official file held in the appropriate School.
- 8.3 At the appropriate time each Examiner will be provided with a copy of the revised thesis. Having read the thesis, the examiners should prepare new individual typewritten reports on the Individual Examiner's Report Form and complete a further Examiners' Joint Recommendation Form at the appropriate time, depending if a viva was requested on the Joint Examiner forms as part of the original examination.

## **9 Confidentiality of Reports**

- 9.1 Examiners' Reports are confidential to the Research Degrees Committee and shall not normally be disclosed to the candidate<sup>1</sup> or Supervisor. However, in the event of an appeal (under Academic Regulation A12), and notwithstanding their confidential nature, the Examiners' Reports could be made available to those dealing with the appeal on behalf of the University and, with authorisation by the Vice-Principal, to the appellant.
- 9.2 Reports are disclosable under the terms of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, unless particular parts of them qualify for an exemption and Examiners should be aware of this when writing

---

<sup>1</sup> \* Under the 2018 Data Protection Act a research student has the right to request and see their personal data in written reports concerning them and has other conditional rights, such as rectification of inaccurate data. The information Governance service is responsible for managing all such requests.

such Reports. All Freedom of Information requests must be referred to the Information Governance service who will advise and seek authorisation from the Vice-Principal before releasing information in response to requests.

## **10 Examiners Fees and Expenses**

- 10.1 Fees are payable to External Examiners on receipt of completed report forms.
- 10.2 The form to arrangement payment for the external examiner can be found at: (<https://www.hw.ac.uk/students/studies/examinations/thesis.htm>). Further queries regarding this process should be directed to the appropriate School PGR Office
- 10.3 Reasonable expenses incurred in connection with an External Examiner's duties, including travel, accommodation and/or subsistence costs, should be itemised on an expense claim form. Expense claims will only be accepted with attached all individual itemised receipts. The University's Expense policy and Expense Claim Form can be found <https://www.hw.ac.uk/students/studies/examinations/thesis.htm>. Individual Schools may have limits to expense claims that can be accepted, these queries should be directed to the appropriate School PGR Office.
- 10.4 Expenses are processed by the appropriate School PGR Office. They are normally processed immediately upon receipt of the report so long as the expense form is completed fully and correctly and the appropriate individual itemised receipts. It should be noted that expense and fee payments may be processed separately.