Oral Examination Procedure

Procedure Statement

Purpose
This procedure describes the oral examination processes for all higher degree research (HDR) Programs at UNSW Sydney.

Scope
It applies to all research candidates, supervisors, Postgraduate Research Coordinators (PGCs), Faculty Committees and other positions responsible for management of HDR. The relevant Conditions for Award Policy should be read in conjunction with this procedure.

Are Local Documents on this subject permitted?
☐ Yes, subject to areas specifically restricted within this Procedure.
☒ No

Procedure Processes and Actions

1. Introduction
An oral thesis examination (viva voce) can be used as part of the assessment of a higher degree research candidate’s ability to carry out a research investigation. An oral examination does not replace a written thesis examination. Rather, an oral thesis examination (viva voce) is used to:

- establish that the candidate fully understands the work and its wider implications
- provide the candidate with an opportunity to reply to criticism or challenge
- enable the examiners to clarify issues in the thesis which may be unclear
- help the examiners to decide on the nature and extent of any corrections or revisions which may be required
- authenticate the contribution made by the candidate to the thesis and ensure that the candidate has a clear understanding of the contribution of collaborators to the thesis.

The oral examination is used to assess the candidate and the thesis that they submitted for the award of their higher degree research degree. Every component of the examination, including the thesis and the oral examination must be assessed as satisfactory before the degree can be awarded.

At UNSW, the Master of Philosophy degree requires candidates to undergo an oral examination. It is also recognised that an oral examination can be used to help determine the outcome in thesis examinations where there are divergent reports (see Thesis Examination Procedure).

The Thesis Examination Procedure must be consulted for details on the processes for preparation and submission of the thesis component. This procedure will describe how the oral examination process must be carried out.

2. Examination Criteria
The Thesis Examination Procedure details the examination criteria that the examiners are asked to use to assess the thesis. In addition to these, the oral examination will allow the candidate to:

- demonstrate detailed knowledge of the thesis
- demonstrate the originality of the thesis and the contribution it makes to the state of knowledge in the field
- defend the methodology and conclusions of the thesis
- display awareness of the limitations of the thesis.
3. Oral Examination Panel

An Oral Examination Panel must be appointed to administer the examination. The Panel is required to:

1. review the thesis examination reports and determine whether the candidate can proceed to the oral examination
2. carry out the oral examination
3. provide a written report and recommendation to the Dean of Graduate Research on whether the degree should be awarded.

(a) For the MPhil degree the thesis must be examined by two examiners, one of whom is internal to UNSW and the other must be external to UNSW. The Oral Examination Panel will consist of the internal examiner, who will act as the Oral Examiner, and a Chair, who will be nominated by the Head of School or their nominee.

(b) In the case of an oral examination being used where either a PhD candidate has received divergent reports or it has been agreed that it is required for the PhD degree, it is expected that the PGC, in consultation with the GRS, will liaise with the examiners to determine the composition of the examination panel, with a UNSW academic, recommended by the Head of School or their nominee, acting as the Chair.

(c) The nominated Chair must be a senior UNSW academic with experience in HDR supervision. They should be able to provide disciplinary and department-specific representation during the oral examination, and must be independent of both the supervisory team and the candidate.

(d) The supervisory team may attend in the capacity of observers, but cannot take part in the examination.

4. Responsibilities

4.1. The candidate

Research candidates are responsible for:

• The preparation and submission of their thesis for examination. They must ensure that the research described was completed during the period of enrolment for the degree and that it is an account of their own research.

• Ensuring that UNSW’s policies and procedures on research integrity are followed (see Related Documents).

4.2. Supervisors

Supervisors are responsible for:

• Providing formal advice on progress of the candidate’s thesis to the candidate throughout the candidature, and especially prior to submission of the thesis.

• Ensuring that the thesis is in a format suitable for examination and that the candidate has followed all the procedures required for thesis submission (in the case of the Primary Supervisor).

• Providing recommendations to the PGC on the nomination of suitable experts to examine the thesis.

4.3. Postgraduate Research Coordinator (PGC)

The Postgraduate Research Coordinator (PGC) is responsible for:

• Formally nominating suitable examiners of the thesis to the Higher Degree Committee on the basis of the recommendations of the supervisory team.

• Ensuring that the nominated examiners are appropriate and that the examination can be carried out independently and free from perception of bias or preferential treatment.

4.4. Chair of the Oral Examination Panel

The Chair of the Oral Examination Panel is responsible for:

• Ensuring that the examiners have reached a consensus on the recommendation

• Ensuring that the oral examination proceeds appropriately

• Providing a final recommendation regarding the award of the degree.
4.5. Faculty Higher Degree Committee (HDC) or Delegate

The HDC or Delegate (such as the HDC Executive, the Faculty Associate Dean of Research Training (ADRT) or the Director of Postgraduate Research (DPGR)) are responsible for:

- Reviewing nomination of examiners, confirming that the examiners are appropriate and free from perceived or actual conflict of interest and appointing the examiners.
- Reviewing the examiners’ reports and making a recommendation to the Dean of Graduate Research about the outcome of the examination.

4.6. Dean of Graduate Research or Delegate

The Dean of Graduate Research is responsible for:

- The implementation of the procedures
- Determining whether a research higher degree student has satisfied requirements for the award of a degree.

5. Nomination of Examiners

The identity of the examiners will be known to the candidate throughout the examination process.

5.1. Selection

(a) In advance of the planned submission date, the HDC shall appoint 2 examiners according to the Conditions for Award of the degree, as well as the Chair of the Oral Examination Panel. The HDC may seek advice from the PGC, primary supervisor, co-supervisor, HoS or other member of academic staff.

(b) If the primary supervisor has failed to provide suitable recommendations within 4 weeks of the candidate submitting their thesis for examination, the PGC may need to take responsibility for the nomination of examiners to ensure a timely examination process.

(c) The nominated examiners must:

- Be experts of international standing in the discipline, independent of the conduct of the research, academically reputable in the field of the thesis, with a significant body of published work, or other publicly recognised output as appropriate for their discipline
- Be free from any real or perceived conflict of interest (COI), as per the UNSW Conflict of Interest Policy and the UNSW Higher Degree Examiner Conflict of Interest Guide. All real or perceived COI must be declared and explained on the UNSW Nomination of Examiners form (see Section 5.3)
- Typically hold a qualification at least equivalent to the level of the award being examined
- Have previous experience in HDR supervision and/or HDR examination

(d) For MPhil examinations, one examiner will be internal to UNSW while the other must be external to the enrolling institution. The internal examiner cannot have been involved in the supervision of the candidate nor been involved in the conduct of the research.

(e) For oral examinations for a PhD candidate, both of the examiners must be external to the enrolling institution.

(f) Prior to the appointment of examiners, the HDC shall ascertain in writing whether the candidate has any concerns regarding the suitability of any person as a potential examiner. The candidate should also identify any person whose appointment as an examiner may result in a conflict of interest during the examination (e.g. any potential employers). For this purpose, the HDC requires the primary supervisor to ask the candidate to either provide the names of any persons that should not be examiners, or to identify any potential examiners about whose potential role the candidate may have concern.

- Any concern raised by the candidate shall be placed on record with the HDC at the time of the appointment of examiners.
- Where possible, the persons identified by the candidate should not be used as examiners. However, the HDC may appoint examiners even where the candidate has expressed concern. When such an appointment occurs, the record of the candidate's concern shall be brought to the attention of the HDC again at the time the examiners' reports are considered.
5.2. Contact with Examiners During the Nomination Process

The information provided to examiners on initial contact by the primary supervisor (or other person/s responsible for nomination) and prior to approval of examiners by the HDC should include:

- The topic or title of the thesis
- The degree for which the candidate is submitting the thesis
- The planned submission date
- The length of time available for the examination of the thesis
- Reference to relevant UNSW procedures for examination.

After an examiner has accepted and the HDC has approved their nomination, the examiner will be notified by the GRS of any changes to the planned submission date. If an examiner is no longer available to examine the thesis after the amended date, the GRS must be informed so an alternate examiner can be nominated.

5.3. Conflict of Interest (COI)

The thesis must be examined independently and free from actual or perceived bias. Therefore, the primary supervisor should consult the candidate and the other members of the supervisory team about their views on potential examiners and avoid any real or perceived conflict of interest (COI) with the potential examiners prior to their nomination.

Any real or perceived COI, as defined in the UNSW Conflict of Interest Policy and the UNSW Higher Degree Examiner Conflict of Interest Guide, must be declared by the primary supervisor, and any other members of the candidate’s supervisory team, on the Nomination of Examiners form. The above UNSW documents are informed by those of the Australian Council of Graduate Research.

In the case of internal examiners, it is imperative that the examiner has played no role in either supervision of the candidate or in the conduct of the research.

The existence of a COI does not automatically prevent the approval of a nominated examiner. Information provided about the nature of the conflict is assessed by the PGC, Faculty HDC or Delegate, and the Dean of Graduate Research or delegate in the decision-making process.

If a COI arises during the examination, one or both examiners’ reports may be annulled, in which case (a) replacement examiner(s) will be appointed as described in the process outlined in Section 5.1.

5.4. Nomination of Examiners (NOE) Form

To appoint the examiners, the UNSW Nomination of Examiners form must be completed and submitted by the primary supervisor. Along with the examiner’s contact details, a robust justification of the suitability of the examiner must be provided, along with the declaration of any COI issues (see Section 5.3). The completed UNSW NOE form should be submitted to the PGC ideally 2 weeks before the submission of the candidate’s thesis.

The PGC is responsible for reviewing the submitted NOE. If they have additional questions about the justifications for an examiner’s nomination, or any declared or undeclared COI, they will discuss this with the primary supervisor.

The PGC must provide a recommendation for the Oral Examination Panel Chair and provide a justification for their suitability and their independence from the candidate and the research being examined.

Once satisfied with the NOE form, the PGC is required to formally advise the GRS of their approval.

The Faculty, either by ADRT (or Faculty equivalent) or the HDC, will review any declaration of possible COIs and approve the nominated examiners. In cases where a COI is declared and the ADRT approves the examiners, the Dean of Graduate Research or delegate will review the form to ensure UNSW’s policies and procedures are being followed. Once approved, the NOE form is returned to the GRS for processing and the candidate will be informed of the examiners.

5.5. Date of the Oral Examination

As part of the nomination of examiners process, the date of the oral examination should be discussed with the approved examiners and a date agreed to. The candidate must be informed of this date upon submission of the thesis.
5.6. Disclosure of Examiner Identity and Candidate Contact

(a) When the University extends an invitation to examine a thesis, it expects the examiner to provide a fair, independent and expert report to the HDC. This does not imply any further obligation on the part of the examiner directly to the candidate.

(b) A candidate must not contact the examiner/s concerning the thesis after submission of the thesis for examination and prior to report. Violation of this requirement may be construed as an attempt to influence the examination and may give rise to a charge of academic misconduct.

(c) Examiners must not contact candidates or any members of the supervisory team directly during the examination process. If they require information, they should contact the GRS. If contact is made by an examiner, the candidate and supervisor/s should inform the GRS immediately.

(d) Pre-submission, the candidate must seek permission from the GRS before contacting the examiner/s. Any permission granted shall be in writing and require the prior agreement of the examiner concerned.

(e) This procedure will be disclosed to examiners at the time the thesis is sent.

6. Examination Process

(a) Examiners are expected to submit to the University a written report on the thesis that provides a recommendation with a strong justification. They must also provide a selection of questions that should be addressed in the oral examination. One of the following recommendations must be provided:

   i. The thesis merits the award of the degree subject to satisfactory performance in the oral examination.

   ii. The thesis merits the award of the degree subject to minor corrections as listed being made to the satisfaction of the Oral Examiner or nominee by a specified date, and subject to satisfactory performance at the oral examination.

   iii. The thesis requires further work on matters detailed in the report to the satisfaction of the Chair of the Oral Examination or nominee by a specified date, and subject to satisfactory performance at the oral examination.

   iv. The thesis in its present form does not merit the award of the degree and further work as described in the report is required. The revised thesis should be subject to re-examination.

(b) Both examiners’ reports will be considered by the Chair of the Oral Examination Panel. The examiners’ reports will also be sent to the supervisors on a confidential basis. Supervisors may comment on the reports in writing to the Chair on a confidential basis. The Chair may also request clarification of issues raised in examiners’ reports from the examiners and supervisors. If the recommendations of the examiners are in conflict, the Chair may invite the two thesis examiners to consult and to provide a written report or reports on the outcome of their consultations.

(c) The Chair of the Oral Examination Panel will make a report to the Dean of Graduate Research which includes the nature and outcome of any communications with the examiners and/or supervisor/s as described in 6 (b) and provides a recommendation on whether the candidate should proceed to the oral examination.

(d) When the recommendation is that the candidate is not ready for the oral examination, the Dean of Graduate Research will consider the report and either:

   i. permit the candidate to revise the thesis and resubmit it for examination on one further occasion only, or

   ii. appoint one or more further independent examiners to report on any areas of conflict. When the report is received, the Dean, in consultation with the Chair of the Oral Examination Panel, will determine whether the oral examination can proceed or whether the candidate must revise the thesis and resubmit it for examination on one further occasion only.

(e) Once a decision has been made on the oral examination, the GRS will advise the candidate of the decision.

(f) When the oral examination is to proceed, the timing and location of the examination will be finalised and all parties will be informed.

(g) As part of the oral examination, the candidate will be required to give a presentation to the panel, so the candidate should:

   • identify the core component of the thesis, its methodology, and its outcome; and
• establish the originality of their work in relation to previous scholarship in the area.

(h) At the beginning of the oral examination, the Panel Chair is to introduce the panel members and explain their roles. The Chair will also explain to the candidate the order in which the examiner will initially ask questions, although it is expected that once discussion is underway, this will flow naturally and in no particular order. The Oral Examiner will discuss with the candidate issues raised in the examiners’ reports and ask questions of the candidate on behalf of the other examiner. The Chair will ensure that the other examiner’s comments and questions are discussed.

(i) The oral examination will normally last between one to two hours, and the Chair must ensure that breaks are taken if the examination exceeds two hours in duration.

(j) When the Oral Examiner is satisfied that the issues in the written reports, as well as any other concerns and interests have been adequately covered, they are to advise the Chair of their readiness to bring proceedings to an end.

(k) When the oral examination has ended, the Chair will ask the candidate and the supervisory team to leave the room, after which time the panel will discuss the examination and draft a report and recommendation.

(l) Once the recommendation is finalised, the candidate and supervisory team will be invited back into the room and advised of the panel’s recommendation.

7. Examination Outcomes and Appeal

On completion of the oral examination, the Chair will provide a written report and recommendation, endorsed by the Oral Examiner, to the Dean of Graduate Research.

The report will include one of the following final recommendations:

(a) **Award** – award the degree.

(b) **Minor Corrections** - award the degree after specified “minor corrections” have been made to the thesis to the satisfaction of the Chair of the Oral Examination Panel and by a specified date.

(c) **Further Work** - award the degree subject to revising part or parts of the thesis to the satisfaction of the Chair of the Oral Examination Panel by a specified date

(d) **Revise and re-examine** - permit the candidate to revise the thesis and resubmit it for examination on one further occasion only, but only if the candidate has not already been permitted to revise and resubmit.

(e) **Non-Award** – does not merit the award of the degree and does not demonstrate sufficient merit to warrant resubmission.

8. Appeal of the Decision

Where the examination process results in a "Non-Award" outcome, the candidate has the right to appeal to the UNSW Student Integrity Unit. This appeal may only be lodged on grounds of procedural fairness.
### Accountabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsible Officer</th>
<th>Dean of Graduate Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact Officer</td>
<td>Director, Graduate Research School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Supporting Information

#### Legislative Compliance

This Procedure supports the University’s compliance with the following legislation:
- Higher Education Standards Framework
  

#### Parent Document (Policy)

- Conditions for Award of Doctor of Philosophy Policy
- Conditions for Award of Master of Philosophy Policy

#### Supporting Documents

Nil

### Related Documents

- Admissions Policy
- Admission to Higher Degree Research Programs Procedure
- Student Complaint Procedure
- Roles and Responsibilities of Postgraduate Research Coordinators Guideline
- Higher Degree Research Supervision Policy
- Higher Degree Research Supervision Procedure
- Variation of Candidature Procedure
- Research Code of Conduct
- Copyright Ownership Guidelines
- Intellectual Property Policy
- Open Access and UNSWorks Guidelines
- Plagiarism Policy
- Research - Authorship and Resolving Disputes Between Authors Procedure
- Research - Handling Allegations of Research Misconduct Procedure
- Research - Handling Research Material & Data Procedure
- UNSWorks Digital Preservation Policy
- UNSWorks Digital Preservation Procedure

#### Superseded Documents

Nil

#### File Number

[For Governance Use]

### Definitions and Acronyms

No terms have been defined

### Revision History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Approved by</th>
<th>Approval date</th>
<th>Effective date</th>
<th>Sections modified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>