

THESIS AND EXAMINATION OF HIGHER DEGREES BY RESEARCH GUIDELINES FOR EXAMINERS 2020

Issued by: Director, Graduate Research

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Signature:

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1 Introduction

- (1) These guidelines have been developed to assist examiners when they are asked to examine a higher degree by research thesis. They will also assist examiners in reaching their recommendation regarding the outcome of the degree.
- (2) These guidelines provide information about:
 - (a) Management of thesis examinations.
 - (b) Examining a thesis for the University of Sydney.
 - (c) Material sent to examiners.
 - (d) The examiner's report.
 - (e) Examination requirements for thesis containing creative or artistic works.
 - (f) Examination requirements for oral or exhibition examinations.
 - (g) Examination requirements for theses which include published works.
 - (h) Confidentiality and communication during the examination.
 - (i) Recommendations regarding the outcome of the award.

2 Management of thesis examinations

- (1) All management of thesis examinations at the University of Sydney will be carried out through the Research Education Candidature System (RECS), the software used to support higher degree by research candidature.

3 Examining a thesis for the University of Sydney

- (1) An examiner is required to assess a thesis presented for examination against the following criteria. The thesis must:
 - (a) be the student's own work;

- (b) embody the work undertaken by the student during their candidature;
 - (c) form a substantive original contribution to the area of knowledge concerned;
 - (d) afford evidence of originality by the discovery of new knowledge, and the exercising of independent critical ability;
 - (e) form a cohesive and united whole;
 - (f) include a substantial amount of material that may be suitable for publication;
 - (g) satisfactorily demonstrate that the student is able to identify, access, organise, and communicate new and established knowledge;
 - (h) be written in a standard generally acceptable to the discipline; and
 - (i) be written in English. If however, the student undertook their candidature in a language department of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the thesis may be written in a language other than English.
- (2) The thesis must contain a written component generally in the form of one or more critical hypotheses that outline and investigate the subject of the thesis in the relevant body of knowledge.
- (3) The thesis may contain:
- (a) artistic or creative works, software, computer code, or models;
 - (b) material that has been published during candidature with the student as either sole or joint author.
- Note:** see Clauses 6 – 8 of these guidelines for specific information on the examination of theses containing creative or artistic works, or published materials.
- (c) appendices. Appendices provide a place for the inclusion of supplementary material that is related to the research but not directly relevant to the argument of the thesis. Material in the appendices is assessable except where it is written entirely by authors other than the candidate.

4 Material sent to the examiner

- (1) An examiner will be provided with the name and contact details of the relevant administrative unit staff member. This is the person with whom the examiner should communicate during the examination process.
- (2) An examiner will be sent the following:
 - (a) the thesis. This will generally be in electronic format. If an examiner does not have the technical facilities or does not wish to examine an electronic copy of the thesis, they may ask the administrative unit to supply a paper copy;
 - (b) a form for reporting the result of the examination of the thesis to the University;
 - (c) the [Thesis and Examination of Higher Degrees by Research Policy 2015](#), the associated [procedures](#) and this document; and
 - (d) the [University of Sydney \(Higher Degree by Research\) Rule 2011 \(as amended\)](#); or
 - (e) the resolutions for all other degrees which can be found in the [faculty handbooks](#).

- (3) If an oral examination is planned, an examiner will be provided with details of the arrangements for the examination.
- (4) If the thesis contains an artistic or creative component, an examiner will be provided with details of the exhibition, installation, performance or other components as required.
- (5) An examiner will be provided with information about any specific conditions relating to the examination process.
- (6) An examiner appointed as assessor will be provided with:
 - (a) a copy of the thesis. If the thesis contains a creative or artistic component, this will be provided as either a documentary recording or as an exhibition, installation or performance. The documentary recording will be of a standard sufficient for assessment purposes;
 - (b) de-identified copies of all the examiners' reports;
 - (c) comments from the head of department;
 - (d) comments from the supervisor and student (if received).

5 The examiner's report

- (1) An examiner must complete the examination of the thesis, and submit the report to the relevant administrative unit staff member, within six weeks of the receipt of the thesis.
- (2) If an examiner feels that they are unable to examine a thesis, then they must notify the relevant administrative unit staff member so that a replacement examiner can be appointed.
 - (a) All theses files must either be destroyed or irrevocably deleted from any computer or storage system used by the examiner.
- (3) If a report is not received within four weeks, the examiner will be contacted by the administrative unit to see if they will be able to complete their report within the required time frame.
 - (a) If an examiner cannot meet this deadline, they must immediately notify the administrative unit so that another examiner can be appointed.
 - (b) All theses files must either be destroyed or irrevocably deleted from any computer or storage system used by the examiner.
- (4) In completing their report, an examiner must use the form provided by the University.
- (5) The examiner's report must be in English, except where the thesis is in a language other than English.
 - (a) If the thesis is in a language other than English, the examiner should preferably write the report in English; however it may be provided in the language of the thesis.
 - (b) If the examiner provides a report in a language other than English, then they must also submit a summary in English. This summary must be written so that reviewers can understand the key aspects of the report.
- (6) The report must include:
 - (a) a recommendation regarding the outcome of the award. Recommended outcomes are found in Clause 11 of these guidelines; and

- (b) a statement as to whether the examiner is satisfied that the thesis meets the required criteria as outlined in Clause 3 of these guidelines, and Clause 8 of the Policy.
- (7) The report must specify:
 - (a) the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis and the particular contribution made by the student;
 - (b) the reasons for the recommendation; and
 - (c) a description of the type of corrections required; or
 - (d) a detailed list of recommended errors and deficiencies required when the recommendation is revise and resubmit; or
 - (e) reasons for recommending that the degree not be awarded but be awarded for another degree for which the student is eligible; or
 - (f) reasons for not awarding the degree; and
 - (g) suggestions for the next steps in research or improvements for publication that are not required for the award of the degree.
- (8) If a thesis contains previously published work, in addition to the requirements in (4) and (5) above, the examiner must address the following in their report:
 - (a) whether the thesis indicates that the student has made a substantial original contribution to the knowledge of the subject of the thesis;
 - (b) whether the quality and extend of the student's contribution to publications where there are multiple authors merits the award of the degree.
- (9) The University considers all examiners' reports and the provision of the detail listed in (6) – (8) above will assist the University in reaching a decision about the outcome of the examination.
- (10) If an examiner does not return their report within ten weeks of the receipt of the thesis, they will be informed by the administrative unit that:
 - (a) the report regrettably can no longer be accepted; and
 - (b) another examiner will be appointed.

Note: if they are an external examiner i.e. they do not have an affiliation with the University, they will not be paid.
- (11) If the outcome of the examination is revise and resubmit, the original examiners will normally be asked to re-examine the revised thesis. An examiner should indicate in their report whether they would be prepared to examine a revised thesis.
- (12) The examination of a revised and resubmitted thesis is a new examination of the whole thesis, and must be carried out in accordance with the policy, procedures and these guidelines.
 - (a) Examiners who examine a revised and resubmitted thesis are provided with a separate report form that does not provide the option of revise and resubmit.

6 Examination requirements for a thesis containing a creative or artistic component

- (1) If the thesis contains a creative or artistic component, the examiner's report must relate to the whole thesis, including the creative or artistic component.

- (2) An examiner will receive the written component of the thesis before the examination of the artistic or creative component. However, if the creative component were a recording or a set of scores or similar presentation, the examiner will receive both components at the same time.
- (3) The artistic or creative work may be presented in the context of an exhibition, installation, performance or other context requiring in-person attendance.
 - (a) An examiner may be required to attend the examination of these types of creative components in person.
 - (b) If in-person attendance is not possible, the examiner will be supplied with a documentary record of the exhibition, performance or installation.
- (4) If an oral examination is held, an examiner may ask the student to discuss:
 - (a) the contextualisation of their work, where the student presents the development of the thesis;
 - (b) the creative or artistic component at the site of the exhibition;
 - (c) the written component and related matters.

7 Examination requirements for oral examinations

- (1) When an examiner takes part in an oral examination, they should:
 - (a) test the student's understanding of the knowledge described in the thesis;
 - (b) clarify points of principle or detail within the thesis;
 - (c) assess the contribution made by the student to the contribution and presentation of the thesis.
- (2) When an oral examination forms part of the examination process, the examiner will first be provided with a copy of the thesis. Based on the examination of the thesis, an examiner must provide an interim report at least seven days prior to the date of the oral examination. This interim report must include interim recommendations on the outcome.
- (3) Oral examinations may only examine material that would be examined under a thesis-only examination i.e. the thesis content and any appended material or creative or artistic component.
- (4) A chair of examination will act as a convenor of the examination. This academic who must be a University of Sydney staff member, and not from the same department as the student, will be appointed by the faculty. The convenor chairs the examination and any subsequent meetings of examiners. The convenor is not an examiner.
- (5) An examiner must attend an oral examination in person, or by telephone, video, web or teleconference. Attendance in person is preferable, where possible.
- (6) When an oral examination has finished, the convenor and examiners must meet in a confidential session to prepare the examiners' report and recommend an outcome.
 - (a) The convenor and the examiners are the only individuals who may attend this meeting. The University does not permit the head of school, supervisor, or student to attend this meeting.
 - (b) The report prepared by the convenor and examiners must be a single report, containing a consensus recommendation of the outcome of the examination.

- (c) The student may be invited back into the examination meeting to be informed of the recommendations to be made.
- (7) In the event that the examiners fail to reach consensus regarding the outcome of the examination:
 - (a) each examiner must confirm or revise their interim reports within two weeks of the private meeting; and
 - (b) the examiners' final reports, and the convenor's final report will be considered as if the examination had been a thesis-only examination.

8 Examination requirements for a thesis with publications

- (1) A thesis which contains previously published material must be assessed against the criteria set out in Clause 8 of the Policy and Clause 2 (1) of these Guidelines.
- (2) Examiners are asked to note that the examination of a thesis with publications is a different process from the refereed assessment of material for publication. The fact that a thesis contains refereed publication does not necessarily imply that the thesis merits the award of the degree.
- (3) In examining a thesis with publications, an examiner must address the following:
 - (a) whether the thesis including previously published material indicates that the student has made a substantial original contribution to the knowledge of the subject concerned; and
 - (b) for publications where there are multiple authors, whether the quality and extent of the student's contribution merits the award of the degree.

9 Examiner-as-assessor

- (1) If an examiner is asked to act as examiner-as-assessor, they must complete an initial independent examination of, and report on, the thesis based on the criteria in Clause 3 of these guidelines and Clause 8 of the policy.
- (2) If the thesis contains an artistic or creative component, this will be provided either in the format in which it was originally examined or via a documentary recording of the original.
- (3) Once an examiner-as-assessor has completed the initial report, they must then consider:
 - (a) de-identified copies of all the examiners' reports;
 - (b) comments from the head of department;
 - (c) comments from the supervisor (if received);
 - (d) comments from the student (if received);and assess the validity of the concerns expressed about the work under examination.
- (4) An examiner-as-assessor must provide the administrative unit with the following:
 - (a) an examiner's report, including a recommendation about the outcome of the examination; and
 - (b) a report on the comments of the previous examiners, head of department, supervisor and student.

10 Confidentiality and communication during the examination

- (1) The examination process is confidential.
- (2) An examiner must not disclose the contents of the thesis, including any intellectual property contained in the thesis.
- (3) An examiner will only use the thesis for the purpose of performing the examination.
- (4) Where obliged by law, or by contract, the University may require an examiner to sign a confidentiality agreement.
- (5) Examiners will not be informed about the names of other examiners of the thesis under examination except if required:
 - (a) by the use of an oral examination; or
 - (b) during the examination of a creative or artistic component of a thesis requiring in-person attendance.
- (6) Examiners must not correspond or communicate with other examiners regarding the examination of the thesis, except in discussion:
 - (a) prior to, or at, an oral examination; or
 - (b) at the examination of a creative or artistic component of a thesis.
- (7) Communication between the examiner and the University should preferably occur with the notified contact person.
- (8) Each examiner will submit an independent report. Examiners must not confer except as required by (6) above.
- (9) Examiners must not ask any other individual to examine the material in the thesis on their behalf or to comment on it.
- (10) An examiner's report may be released to the student during or after the examination. Examiners will be informed that, under the [Privacy Policy 2017](#) and the [Privacy Procedures 2018](#), students have the right to access information about themselves, including their examination.
- (11) University staff, including academic and professional staff, may contact an examiner to ascertain if progress of the report is delayed.
- (12) If an examiner perceives that the student, or a person acting on behalf of the student, or a member of the University, is attempting to influence the outcome of the examination, they must report this to the identified administrative unit contact.
- (13) Examiners' names will be provided to the student after the thesis has been submitted for examination:
 - (a) however, students will be informed that if the student, or any person acting on the student's behalf, contacts an examiner during the examination about the examination, the examination will be discontinued;
 - (b) if a student, or a person acting on a student's behalf, contacts an examiner about the examination during the examination process, the examiner must immediately inform the administrative unit contact.

Note: It is possible that students, examiners and/or supervisors may meet, for example, at a conference or seminar. In this case, the thesis and examination must not be discussed but other communication or conversation is permitted.
- (14) If a student has not submitted the thesis for examination three months after the examiners have been approved, the examiners will be contacted in writing by the administrative unit to see if they are still willing to examine the thesis at a later

date. Replacement examiners will be commissioned if the originally approved examiners are not able to examine the thesis at a later date.

- (15) All examiners will be notified of the final outcome of the examination.

11 Recommendations regarding the outcome of the examination

(1) *The student be awarded the degree without further conditions*

- (a) The thesis has fulfilled all of the criteria for a research thesis as listed in Clause 3 of these guidelines and does not require any corrections.
- (b) The degree can be awarded without any further action required by the student.

(2) *The student be awarded the degree subject to corrections of the thesis to the satisfaction of the University*

- (a) Corrections may range in extent, this category includes 'minor' and 'major' corrections. Changes regarded as corrections do not require the student to undertake an additional period of research, and should not result in the conclusions of the thesis being significantly altered.
- (b) Corrections may include:
 - (i) fixing errors or omissions in the thesis, such as incorrect citations, omissions, or typographical errors;
 - (ii) the addition or deletion of material in the text, tables, figures or appendices;
 - (iii) new or altered analyses of data, providing such analyses do not significantly alter the conclusions of the thesis;
 - (iv) updating of the literature cited to incorporate more recent relevant publications;
 - (v) alterations in the structure of a chapter and some of its content;
 - (vi) explanation or clarification as to certain questions raised by the examiner.
- (c) The examiner must provide a detailed list of these corrections in Part D of the examiner's report form.
- (d) The degree can be awarded once all required corrections in the thesis have been addressed by the student to the satisfaction of the Chair of examination.

Note: Changes as substantial as the addition, or re-writing, of a whole chapter, the provision of extra data, the possibility of altered conclusions, or the testing of conclusions, should be considered a revision requiring resubmission (see ((3) below) and not corrections.

(3) *The student not be awarded the degree, but be permitted to resubmit a revised thesis for examination following a further period of study*

- (a) The thesis in its current form does not merit award, but does have sufficient redeeming features to be reconsidered after further research and study.
- (b) There are errors and/or deficiencies that, in the opinion of the examiner, substantially affect the argument or conclusion of the thesis.
- (c) Deficiencies in the thesis may include, but are not limited to:

- (i) the failure to include original data in the thesis;
- (ii) significantly incorrect statistical analysis or erroneous or unsophisticated conclusions drawn from a statistical analysis;
- (iii) missing or inaccessible data preventing the determination of sustainable conclusions;
- (iv) inadequate experimental work;
- (v) the necessity for new experimental work to be carried out.

Note: There may be practical issues preventing a student from being able to undertake more clinical or laboratory experimental work.

- (d) The student demonstrates sufficient ability that, after an additional period of study, a thesis of the required standing may be achieved.
- (e) The examiner is required to suggest an additional period of research, exclusive of the time required to re-write the thesis.
- (f) The examiner is required to indicate whether they would be prepared to re-examine the revised thesis.
- (g) The examiner must provide a detailed list of recommended errors and deficiencies that the student is required to address before the thesis can be re-examined in Part D of the examiner's report form.
- (h) This option is not available for a thesis that has already been revised and resubmitted for examination.

(4) *The student not be awarded a doctoral degree but be awarded another degree for which they are eligible.*

- (a) The thesis is not considered satisfactory for the award of the degree for which it was submitted, but another degree for which the student is eligible may be awarded instead.
- (b) The examiner must provide reasons for this recommendation in Part D of the examiner's report form.
- (c) The examiner must provide a detailed list of any errors or deficiencies that should be addressed before any degree can be awarded.

(5) *The student not be awarded the degree*

- (a) The thesis does not merit award of the degree; and does not demonstrate sufficient ability by the student for a resubmitted thesis to achieve this merit.
 - (i) The hypothesis and methods included in the thesis may be fatally flawed in their conception, design and execution.
 - (ii) The conclusions reached are not valid.
 - (iii) The thesis is not capable of being rectified by an additional period of study, experimental work or research work.
 - (iv) The thesis does not merit consideration for the award of another degree for which the student is eligible.
- (b) The examiner must provide reasons for this recommendation in Part D of the examiner's report form.
- (c) Examiners are asked to note that, if the thesis contains a substantial amount of previously published material, then the recommendation of non-award may be questioned by the University's Higher Degree Examination Subcommittee.

NOTES

Thesis and Examination of Higher Degrees by Research Guidelines for Examiners 2020

Date adopted: 20 April 2020

Date registered:

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Administrator: Director, Graduate Research

Review date: 20 April 2025

Rescinded documents: Thesis and Examination of Higher Degrees by Research Guidelines for Examiners 2017

Related documents: .

University of Sydney (Higher Degree by Research) Rule 2011

Privacy Policy 2017

Thesis and Examination of Higher Degrees by Research Policy 2015

Thesis and Examination of Higher Degrees by Research Procedures 2020

Privacy Procedures 2018

AMENDMENT HISTORY

Provision	Amendment	Commencing
2(1)	Inserted "Research Education Candidature System (RECS) between 'through' and 'the'"	1 July 2020
7(5)	'where possible' added at end of subclause	1 July 2020
7(6)(b)(i) and (ii)	Subclauses deleted	1 July 2020
7(6)(c)	New subclause	1 July 2020
10(13)(a); 11(2)(a)	Minor typographical corrections	1 July 2020
11(2)(b)(iv)	Replace 'review' with 'cited'	1 July 2020