

University of London

## **GUIDANCE ON THE CONDUCT OF ORAL EXAMINATIONS AND RELATED MATTERS**

### **Guidelines and Checklist for Examiners for the PhD [Federal and College Regulations]**

#### **Eligibility to Examine**

1. Examiners are asked to inform the Academic Registrar at the Senate House (via the Research Degree Examinations Office - details in paragraph 48) if they have had any connections with the candidate or his/her supervisor/adviser which they consider would make it desirable for the University to reconsider the appropriateness of their appointment as one of the examiners. These connections could be either personal or professional. Of the latter it is considered, for example, that an Examiner, whether Internal or External, who has played a significant part in advising the candidate is inappropriate and particularly so where the collaboration has led to the publishing of papers by the candidate and the Examiner jointly. It is stressed that it is accepted that Examiners will usually be acquainted with the supervisor, and sometimes the candidate, and that this in itself is not a bar to acting as an Examiner. Any connections so notified will be considered by the Academic Registrar in consultation, as appropriate, with the appointing body.

#### **Timetable for Examination**

2. In the interests of the candidate the University expects that the examination will be completed and that the examiners will have submitted their final joint report and other relevant documents to the University within three months of the despatch of the thesis to the examiners. If there is difficulty in complying with this request, please inform the Research Degree Examinations Office (details in paragraph 48) (See also paragraphs 32-33).

#### **Preliminary Independent Reports**

3. Each examiner is asked to write an independent preliminary report on the thesis. It is expected that this will be written by each examiner after reading the thesis but before conferring with the co-examiner about it. Typically the preliminary report identifies particular areas which the examiner believes should be explored with the candidate during the oral examination, and, if possible, a tentative recommendation, based on an assessment of the thesis, for the result of the examination. Tentative recommendations should not be indicated to the candidate in advance of the oral, which is an integral component of the examination.

4. The examiners should exchange their preliminary reports with each other before conducting the oral examination. The preliminary reports must be submitted to the University at the conclusion of the examination process (see paragraph 33).

5. If the examiners have any queries about the thesis which they wish to raise with the supervisor in advance of the oral examination, they are at liberty to do so. If the examiners have any queries about the University's requirements for the award of the PhD and about the regulations please contact the Research Degree Examinations Office (details in paragraph 48). Please note that all matters relating to the examination are confidential and examiners should not contact any third party, other than the supervisor as provided for in the regulations and this guidance. Otherwise all queries must be pursued through the RDE Office.

6. The educational needs provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act require institutions to make reasonable adjustments for candidates with physical and special learning difficulties in their assessment. Examiners will be advised of any special arrangements for a candidate with their appointment letters. However, if examiners are informed directly by the supervisor or candidate of any disability, even in confidence, they should seek the advice of the RDE Office (details in paragraph 48), in order that they might be properly briefed.

### **Oral Examination**

7. An oral examination must be held other than in those circumstances for which provision is made in the regulations (ie on resubmission of a thesis following referral).

8. When the thesis is despatched to the examiners the candidate's supervisor<sup>1</sup> is asked to contact the examiners and the candidate to arrange and confirm a mutually convenient time and place to hold the oral examination.

9. The University makes no special requirements about where the oral examination is held (other than a normal requirement that it be held in London). The oral is frequently held in the office of the supervisor or the internal examiner if that is convenient. A committee room can be booked at the Senate House, if necessary. The Research Degree Examinations Office (details in paragraph 48) should be contacted by the Supervisor or one of the examiners if a room at the Senate House is required for an oral examination; and they should also be contacted if it is proposed that the examination is to be held outside London or its Colleges. The holding of an oral examination by telephone or by video-conferencing is not normally permitted, and any enquiries about this should be addressed in the first instance to the Research Degree Examinations Office (details in paragraph 48).

10. The supervisor can attend the oral examination as an observer, provided that the candidate has not indicated that his/her supervisor should not be present. (The examiners will be informed if that is the case.) Individual supervisors follow different practices in regard to their attendance at oral examinations, some making it their practice routinely to attend, others not attending.

11. The examiners should indicate in the appropriate place on the yellow sheet the date of the oral examination and whether or not the supervisor was present.

12. No persons other than the examiners, one supervisor and the candidate may be present at an oral examination.

13. The purpose of the oral examination is to examine the candidate on the subject of the thesis and, if the examiners see fit, on subjects relevant thereto. The examiners should discuss, prior to meeting the candidate, the strategy they propose to adopt during the oral examination and, at its outset, outline this to the candidate.

14. During the oral the examiners should seek to establish whether all the requirements for a thesis submitted for the PhD have been met (these are set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees), and that the thesis is genuinely the work of the candidate.

15. If the examiners have any doubts that the thesis is genuinely the work of the candidate they should contact the Research Degree Examinations Office (see paragraph 48).

---

<sup>1</sup> or other person designated by the candidate's College to undertake this task.

16. There are no set requirements about the conduct of oral examinations, nor about their duration, but they should be conducted in such a way that the candidate has adequate opportunity, encouragement and time to explain his/her research and to defend the thesis. It is recommended that, during a long oral examination, examiners should allow short break(s) at appropriate point(s) (see also paragraph 46).

17. The supervisor, if present, does not have the right to participate in the examination but may contribute if invited to do so by the examiners.

18. If the candidate becomes so unwell or distressed during the oral examination as to be unable to proceed, the examiners should, after such consultation with the candidate and supervisor as is possible at that time, decide whether or not to continue the oral examination. If they do continue it, they should note in their final report that the candidate was unwell. If they decide not to continue they should determine whether sufficient evidence has been provided to allow a decision to be taken or whether it will be necessary to hold the oral examination on another occasion.

19. If the candidate makes comments to the examiners, which put them under moral pressure (eg alluding to the consequences of failure for him/her), or offers any kind of incentive to the examiners to pass him/her, the examination should be terminated and a report made to the Academic Registrar via the Research Degree Examinations Office (see paragraph 48).

20. In addition to examining the candidate orally, the examiners do have the discretion to examine the candidate by means of written papers or practical examination. This provision is rarely invoked and examiners are asked to contact the Research Degree Examinations Office (see paragraph 48) if they wish to do so.

21. At the conclusion of the oral examination the candidate and the supervisor (if present) should withdraw and the examiners should initially confer together on the result in private.

22. The examiners have discretion, after the initial private discussion, to consult the supervisor irrespective of whether he/she was present at the oral, particularly if they have doubts relating to the appropriate decision to be made.

23. It is recognised that the examiners may wish, particularly if their decision is that the candidate has passed, or will pass subject to making minor amendments to the thesis, to advise the candidate orally and informally of their decision at the conclusion of their deliberations following the oral. Examiners are advised to exercise particular care if they do this, and always to make clear to the candidate that the result is not formal and final until notified by letter from the University to the candidate after the examiners have submitted their written report and all other requirements have been satisfied. [see also paragraphs 36 and 37 below]

### **The Result of the Examination**

24. The options open to the examiners in determining the result are set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD degrees. These, in summary, are:

- (a) Pass.

(b) Pass, subject to minor amendments to be completed and checked by one or both of the examiners within 3 months<sup>3</sup>.

(c) Not pass, but candidate allowed to rewrite the thesis and resubmit it within 18 months for examination by the same examiners (an oral examination need not be held on re-entry).

(d) Not pass, but be allowed to re-take a written paper(s) or practical examination (*rarely used*, see paragraph 20 above).

(e) Not pass, but be allowed to submit to a further oral examination within 18 months on the same thesis and by the same examiners.

(f) Fail PhD, but either has met the requirements for the MPhil or might after revision of the thesis during a 12 month period be able to meet the requirements for the MPhil.

(g) Outright fail. No further entry to the PhD or MPhil degree will be allowed.

25. Examiners should not consider option (f) unless they have first considered and rejected as inapplicable the preceding options; and should not consider option (g) unless they have previously considered and rejected as inapplicable all the previous options (see also paragraphs 29 and 30).

### **Reporting to the University on the Examination**

26. The package of documents sent by the Research Degree Examinations Office with the thesis to one of the examiners (normally the Internal Examiner) will include a yellow sheet. The examiners are required to complete and sign this sheet indicating, *inter alia*, which of the eight available decisions they have made; **AND** they are required to write a joint report giving the grounds on which their decision is based. The joint report should be on a separate sheet and should include the following **at the beginning**:

(i) candidate's name (and College); and

(ii) thesis title; **and at the end**:

(iii) the signatures of each of the examiners; and

(iv) date.

27. The report should have regard to the requirements of a thesis for the PhD (see the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees). It should not cross-refer to the examiners' preliminary reports unless the examiners wish the candidate to be sent a copy of those preliminary reports (see paragraph 37 below).

---

<sup>3</sup> The examiners may require the candidate to make specified minor amendments to their satisfaction within three months. The amendments required should be set out clearly, normally in writing, and normally be provided within two weeks of the oral examination. The Examiners (or one of their number nominated by them) may arrange directly with the candidate for the amendments to be made. The Examiners may, however, wish this to be arranged through the Research Degree Examinations Office (see para 48). In either case the Examiners should complete the yellow sheet (see paras 26 and 33) and return it, with the required enclosures, to the Research Degree Examinations Office normally within two weeks of the oral.

28. If the examiners decide to refer the candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis for the PhD in 18 months, they should indicate in what ways the current thesis fails to satisfy the requirements for the PhD degree, and should indicate clearly, although not necessarily in detail, the revisions which they consider should be made.

29. If examiners who are referring a candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis in 18 months have agreed that it will definitely not be necessary to conduct an oral on the revised thesis, they may so indicate in their joint report. If they will definitely require an oral on the resubmitted thesis they should so indicate; and if they wish to reserve their position until they have read the revised thesis they should state this.

30. If the examiners decide that the criteria for the MPhil have been, or might be satisfied they should:

(i) indicate the basis for their decision not to allow resubmission for the PhD,

**and**

(ii) should indicate in a positive way how the requirements for a thesis for the MPhil (set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees) are satisfied **or** (if they are recommending that the thesis be revised and resubmitted for examination for the MPhil degree,) how the criteria for the MPhil might be satisfied.

(The MPhil Degree of this University is an award in its own right and may not be awarded unless the criteria for that degree are satisfied. It is not awarded as compensation for a failed PhD.)

31. If the examiners' decision is to fail the candidate outright, they should indicate the basis for their decision to reject all the other options open to them.

32. The examiners are asked to agree between themselves at the end of the oral examination the arrangements for drafting and finalising their joint report and for sending it, their preliminary reports, and their copies of the thesis to the Research Degree Examinations Office.

33. It is important for the candidate that the examiners complete the yellow sheet and send it, together with their preliminary reports and their joint report, to the Research Degree Examinations Office as soon as possible after the completion of the oral examination. **Reports must normally be submitted within two weeks of the oral examination.** [If the examiners have indicated on the yellow sheet that they require the candidate to make minor amendments, a further form will be sent by the Research Degree Examinations Office (to the examiner named on the yellow sheet if only one, or the Internal examiner if both examiners are to check the thesis) for certification that the criteria for the degree (listed in paragraph 2 of the yellow sheet) and the minor amendments have been completed satisfactorily. If, for any reason, it is not possible for the reports to be returned within two weeks of the oral examination, one of the examiners should contact the Research Degree Examinations Office (see paragraph 48) to discuss the problem.

34. PhD degrees are formally awarded on the last day of each month. In order for the degree to be awarded to the candidate in a particular month the examiners' reports and two

copies of the corrected theses (one hard bound and one soft bound) must have been received by the Research Degree Examinations Office by the last day of the month in question.

35. Examiners have the right to make comments in confidence in a separate report to the University (see the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees). Such reports will normally be forwarded immediately to the authorities of the relevant College.

#### **Notification to the Candidate**

36. If the examiners reach a unanimous decision and there are no unresolved anomalies, that decision will normally be conveyed to the candidate without prior reference to another committee. No official notification of the result of the examination can be issued to the candidate or to any other authority until the reports have been received and processed and any anomalies resolved.

37. A copy of the yellow sheet and the examiners' joint report is routinely sent to the candidate when he/she is officially informed by letter from the Academic Registrar of his/her result. The candidate does not normally see the examiners' preliminary reports, but may do so if the examiners so request and will do so in the event of his/her appealing against the examiners' decision. The examiners' joint reports are, of course, forwarded to the authorities of the candidate's College.

#### **Examination of Re-entry Candidates**

38. Unless it is impossible for them to do so, it is expected that the original examiners will examine the candidate on re-entry whether to the PhD or to the MPhil.

39. In examining a re-entry candidate the examiners should have regard to the report they made on the first examination, copies of which can be made available to them.

40. Examiners have discretion on whether or not to hold an oral examination on a revised and resubmitted thesis, but will need to have regard to any statement they have made about this in their joint report on the original examination (see paragraph 28).

41. When the revised thesis is despatched to the examiners the supervisor is asked to contact the examiners to ask if an oral is required and, if so, to consult as necessary (see paragraphs 8 and 9 above).

42. Apart from the possibility of not holding an oral examination, the re-entry examination for the PhD is subject to exactly the same rules and procedures as the original examination and all the decisions set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD degrees are open to the examiners. Although it is open to Examiners to recommend a further referral to revise and resubmit the thesis, they are advised to be cautious about this and, in particular, to consider the currency of the research contained in the thesis if re-examined after a further 18-month period.

#### **If the Examiners are not in Agreement or Require Further Assistance**

43. The Examiners may request the appointment of a third examiner at any time if they consider it desirable and should always do so before they report formally that they are unable to arrive at agreement. In these circumstances they should contact the Research Degree Examinations Office for advice in the first instance.

### **Examiners' Fees and Expenses**

44. A fee of £150 is paid to each examiner at the PhD following the initial examination and following any subsequent re-entry examination after a referral. Payment is authorised automatically on receipt of the examiners' joint report.

45. Examiners external to the University of London and its Colleges may claim travel and other expenses in accordance with the relevant schedules. Claims should normally be submitted to the Research Degree Examinations Office at the conclusion of the examination, but may be submitted earlier where advance payment for tickets has been necessary.

### **Equal Opportunities**

46. All examinations of the University are subject to the University's Equal Opportunities Policy, copies of which are available from the Research Degree Examinations Office. All candidates are subject to the same academic criteria and requirements.

### **Appeals Procedure**

47. The University has a Procedure for the Consideration of Appeals by Candidates for Research Degrees, which is available on request from the Research Degree Examinations Office, and may be found at [http://www.lon.ac.uk/documents/censec/Ordinance\\_015\\_regulations\\_para\\_10\\_23\\_.pdf](http://www.lon.ac.uk/documents/censec/Ordinance_015_regulations_para_10_23_.pdf)

### **Research Degree Examinations Office at the University of London, Senate House**

48. At the request of the Colleges of the University, examinations for research degrees are administered centrally by the University of London from the Senate House. The details of the office which administers these arrangements are set out below. **If you have any concerns or wish to seek advice at any stage in the examination process, please do not hesitate to contact this Office:**

**Research Degree Examinations Office  
University of London  
Senate House, Room NBQ1  
Malet Street  
London, WC1E 7HU**

**Telephone: 020 7862 -8307, -8308, -8309, -8310;  
fax: 020 7862-8304;  
e-mail: [rde.enquiries@lon.ac.uk](mailto:rde.enquiries@lon.ac.uk).**

The Research Degree Examinations Office is open to personal callers and for telephone callers from 9.30 am – 5.30 pm Monday – Friday.

Revised by RDC May 2006