Guide to the thesis examination process for candidates of research degree programmes

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

This document has been produced by Research Services (RS) to help candidates of research degree programmes through the thesis submission and examination process. It gives details of the submission and examination process, as well as important information on the University’s requirements for research degree programmes and the criteria to be met to be awarded a higher degree by research. It also provides detailed information about the possible outcomes of the viva. This document complements the Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code).

Nothing in the content of this guidance takes precedence over University Regulations, which may be subject to amendment.

1.1 **Contact details**

1.1.1 Research Services is located at New Spring House, 231 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW. The PGR Support Team in Research Services is responsible for research student progression and assessment, including the following aspects of the examination process:

- Faculty approval of appointment of examiners;
- Thesis submission and despatch of theses to examiners;
- Faculty approval of examiners’ report forms and processing of recommendations;
- Award of degrees;
- Processing of examiners’ expenses and external examiners’ fees.

1.1.2 For contact details, please see: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/contacts/student](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/contacts/student). Queries regarding any aspect of the examination process should be addressed to: pgr-enquiries@sheffield.ac.uk.

1.2 **Requirements for research degree programmes**

1.2.1 Before the award of a higher degree by research can be made, each candidate is required to complete a prescribed period of training and research, and:

- present a thesis containing the results of the candidate’s research and showing the sources from which the information it contains is derived and the extent to which the candidate has made use of the work of others; and
- pass an oral examination in matters relevant to the subject of the thesis

1 For the degrees of MMus and LLM only, the decision to hold an oral examination is at the discretion of the examiners.

1.2.2 For research degrees which incorporate taught elements and/or coursework, candidates are also required to have satisfactorily completed the taught Master’s units/relevant coursework as specified in the University Regulations for each programme (full details of these requirements can be obtained from [www.sheffield.ac.uk/calendar](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/calendar)).

1.2.3 The oral examination is an integral part of the examination for research degrees and must be held. The purpose of the oral examination is:

- To enable the examiners to assure themselves that the thesis and the research it reports are the candidate’s own work.
• To give the candidate an opportunity to demonstrate that they can defend the thesis verbally, clarify any issues that the examiners have identified and discuss the subject of the thesis in its wider disciplinary context.
• 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 falls.
• To ensure that the candidate’s knowledge and understanding of the subject are of the standard expected for the award of the degree.

1.2.4 The thesis should normally be written in English. Exceptionally, and with the permission of the Faculty, a candidate may present a thesis that is written in another language where this is of demonstrable significance to the impact and dissemination of the research.

1.3 Criteria for the award of a research degree

1.3.1 The examiners are required to review the thesis in the light of the University’s criteria for the award of its research degrees.

1.3.2 A candidate for the degree of PhD, PhD with Integrated Studies, MD, DDsc, DMedSci, EdD, DEdCPsy, DClinPsy or EngD is required to satisfy the examiners that their thesis:
• Is original work which forms an addition to knowledge;
• Shows evidence of systematic study and of the ability to relate the results of such study to the general body of knowledge in the subject;
• Is worthy of publication either in full or in an abridged form.

1.3.3 In addition, the form of the thesis should be such that it is demonstrably a coherent body of work, i.e. includes a summary, an introduction, a description of the aims of the research, an analytical discussion of the related findings to date, the main results and conclusions, and sets the total work in context.

1.3.4 The examiners’ judgement of the thesis should be based on what may reasonably be expected of a diligent and capable candidate after completion of the prescribed period of research and with due regard to the University’s criteria for the award of the degree.

1.3.5 A thesis for the award of an MPhil degree must demonstrate that it represents a contribution to the subject, either through a record of the candidate’s original work or a critical and ordered exposition of existing knowledge; takes due account of previously published work on the subject; is an integrated whole and presents a coherent argument. For a full list of MPhil criteria see: www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/mphil.

1.4 Publication format thesis

1.4.1 Candidates may submit a publication format thesis, which comprises a collection of papers that are in a format suitable for submission for publication in a peer-reviewed journal or other appropriate outlet for academic research. Those sections may comprise scientific papers, book chapters or other appropriate published formats. The papers may appear alongside traditional thesis chapters, or they may comprise the majority of the thesis as a collection of published
works that forms a substantial and coherent whole, supported by a commentary that links the submitted works and outlines their coherence and significance.

1.4.2 Materials included in the publication format thesis may include those that are solely and/or partly authored by the candidate. The papers or chapters may have already been published, be accepted for publication, or planned for submission for publication where a specific format is expected. Equally, there may be no intention of submitting them for publication because of the nature of the results; the purpose is to prepare the candidate for academic publishing and to familiarise them with the conventions and formats.

1.4.3 The thesis must remain an original contribution to the field of research. Within the introductory section to the thesis, the candidate should provide a clear explanation of the nature and extent of their contribution to each of the publications presented, as well as the contribution of any co-authors and other collaborators. The materials contained within the thesis must normally be derived from original research undertaken by the candidate while supervised by a University of Sheffield supervisor.

1.4.4 More detailed information on the requirements for publication format thesis are available in the Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/thesisformats.

1.5 PhD and MD by Publication

1.5.1 The University offers the degrees of PhD and MD by Publication. The ‘by publication’ route is offered only to staff, as an alternative to the standard PhD or MD route. It is designed to enable recognition of the research activities of those members of staff who have published work but have not completed a PhD or MD.

1.5.2 The recommendations available to examiners of PhD and MD by Publication differ from those of standard PhD and MD degrees and are specified on the examiners’ report forms. Please also see: www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/phdbypublication.

2. PREPARING FOR SUBMISSION OF THE THESIS

2.1 General guidance

2.1.1 The Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes contains current rules on the form and content of the thesis and is updated annually. For detailed information on preparation and formatting of theses, please refer to the following pages:

- https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/preparation
- https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/formatting

2.1.2 It is strongly recommended that the supervisor has read the final draft of the thesis and agrees with the candidate about the appropriate moment to submit the thesis. However, ultimately it is the candidate’s responsibility to decide when to submit their thesis.
2.1.3 In the case of a first submission and a resubmission, the candidate must submit one electronic copy of the thesis directly to Research Services, following the procedures outlined at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/submission. The candidate should inform their supervisor when they have done so, to ensure they can fulfil their responsibilities promptly.

2.1.4 Under no circumstances should a candidate attempt to send their thesis direct to the examiners prior to their viva examination. Candidates are also not permitted to send draft versions of their thesis to the examiners for comment prior to submission. The examiners are not permitted to read or examine any version of the thesis other than the version they will receive from Research Services.

2.1.5 The candidate must also submit an electronic copy of the final thesis to Turnitin (first submissions and resubmissions).

2.2 Appointment of examiners

2.2.1 The supervisor should nominate examiners well in advance of the candidate’s thesis submission in order to avoid subsequent delays in arranging the viva. Examiners must be formally appointed by the Faculty before they can participate in the examination process.

2.2.2 Candidates should be advised of the names of their examiners at the earliest opportunity; preferably, this should be before they are nominated, in case the candidate is aware of any potential conflict of interest that the supervisor might not know about.

2.2.3 The candidate should advise the supervisor and Research Services if they have any previous or planned future connections with one or both of the nominated examiners, or any other reason to believe there is a conflict of interest. This includes, but is not limited to, current or former academic supervision, pastoral relationships, family relationships, friendship, employment or professional connections.

2.2.4 Once their nomination has been formally approved by the appropriate Faculty Officer, Research Services will write to the examiners to confirm their appointment. Research Services will also send them the necessary examiners’ report forms and guidance notes, along with the thesis.

2.2.5 Research Services can provide advice and information to candidates, supervisors and examiners alike on matters relating to the University’s regulations and procedures for examining theses.

2.3 Use of Unfair Means

2.3.1 The University has high expectations of its postgraduate researchers and it is essential that any work they produce for examination is their own work and is properly referenced. Candidates should ensure that they are familiar with and fully understand the guidance on the use of unfair means before they submit their thesis for assessment (see: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/plagiarism).
2.3.2 The University is licensed to use Turnitin, which is a plagiarism detection software in common use in UK universities. All theses are submitted to Turnitin prior to being formally sent out to the examiners, to ensure that unfair means have not been used.

2.3.3 Any candidate found to have used unfair means in their thesis may have action taken against them under the University's Discipline Regulations and may be subject to a disciplinary penalty.

3. SUBMISSION

3.1 Thesis submission and despatch

3.1.1 Candidates must formally submit their thesis to Research Services, regardless of whether it is their first submission or a resubmission.

3.1.2 Candidates must submit one electronic copy of the thesis to Research Services, following the procedure outlined at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/submission.

3.1.3 Candidates must also submit their thesis to Turnitin where it will be checked to ensure that unfair means has not been used. This should be done at the same time as submitting the thesis to Research Services and the version submitted to Turnitin must be identical to the submitted thesis. This check will normally be undertaken by the internal examiner. If the internal examiner is unable to undertake this check in a reasonable timeframe, e.g. due to annual leave/sick leave, this may be delegated to another appropriate member of staff, e.g. PG Tutor, so as not to delay the examination process.

3.1.4 Once the department has confirmed to Research Services that the Turnitin report is acceptable, Research Services will normally despatch the thesis to the examiners within three working days.

3.1.5 Candidates should not, under any circumstances, send their examiners a copy of the thesis for examination. The thesis must always be sent to examiners by Research Services, along with the relevant reports and guidance.
4. THE VIVA VOCE (ORAL EXAMINATION)

4.1 Arrangements for the viva

4.1.1 Examiners are required to test jointly, by oral examination, the candidate’s knowledge of matters relevant to the subject of the thesis. For the degrees of LLM and MMus only, the oral examination is at the examiners’ discretion.

4.1.2 The candidate is not responsible for making any of the viva arrangements; these are the responsibility of the internal examiner or internal coordinator.

4.1.3 The examination should normally take place within 10 weeks of the examiners being sent the thesis by Research Services. This is a guideline, not an absolute deadline. The appropriate faculty contact in Research Services should be notified if, for any reason, this timetable cannot be met.

4.1.4 The viva should not be arranged until the thesis has been sent to the examiners by Research Services, as this can lead to excessive pressure on both candidate and examiners if any delays arise, e.g. in checking the Turnitin originality report.

4.1.5 Oral examinations, where held in-person, will normally take place in Sheffield. If a venue outside of Sheffield is proposed, agreement must first be reached with the candidate, the supervisor and both examiners, prior to approval being sought via the Faculty Administrator in RS. In addition, during the current Covid-19 pandemic, faculty approval is required before any in-person viva can take place.

4.1.6 For the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic, where possible and appropriate, viva examinations should take place remotely and this should be considered the norm. All vivas must be arranged in accordance with the procedures set out on the video-conferencing approval form, which is available to download at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/viva. This includes a stipulation that vivas should be conducted using Blackboard Collaborate and must be recorded.

4.1.7 The viva arrangements, including the date and venue of the oral examination, and the details of all those participating in it, should be confirmed to all parties at least two weeks prior to the date of the examination.

4.1.8 In the case of candidates with additional support requirements, advice and guidance can be obtained from the University’s Disability and Dyslexia Support Service (www.shef.ac.uk/disability). This should be sought well in advance of the viva so that if any recommendations are made there is time for them to be implemented.

4.1.9 Where the viva is taking place in-person, the internal examiner/coordinator should ensure that the examination venue is appropriate for the purpose and that appropriate social distancing measures can be put in place to ensure the safety of all participants.
4.1.10 The internal examiner/coordinator should ensure that the candidate’s supervisor, or other appropriate member of staff, will be available immediately following the examination in order to offer advice and support to the candidate.

4.1.11 A supervisor may only be present at the oral examination at the specific request of the candidate and with the prior agreement of the examiners.

4.1.12 In cases where two external examiners have been appointed, an internal coordinator will also be appointed who will attend the oral examination to ensure that the University’s procedures are followed. The coordinator will play no part in the actual examination process.

4.1.13 It is the candidate’s responsibility to attend the oral examination on the specified date, and at the time and location, as arranged by the internal examiner/coordinator. Candidates must promptly advise the internal examiner, the supervisor and the appropriate Research Degree Support Officer in Research Services if they are unable to attend the oral examination. Candidates must provide a valid reason for non-attendance at a pre-arranged viva examination supported by documentary evidence (e.g. a medical note in the case of illness).

4.1.14 Any unauthorised absence from the examination, or absence without a valid reason or evidence, is likely to result in the candidate failing the examination and being withdrawn from the University.

4.2 Conduct of the oral examination

4.2.1 The external examiner normally leads the oral examination and both examiners will ask the candidate questions and follow up on the candidate’s answers. The internal examiner or internal coordinator is responsible for ensuring that the University’s procedures are correctly followed.

4.2.2 In exceptional circumstances, the candidate’s supervisor may be present at the oral examination at the same time as the candidate, providing the candidate and the examiners have agreed to this in advance. The supervisor should not participate in the discussion, except when asked to provide clarification on a specific matter, and should enter and leave the viva with the candidate.

4.2.3 The examiners will inform the candidate of their recommendation at the end of the viva. Candidates should note that this is only a recommendation at this stage and is subject to approval by the relevant Faculty once the examiners’ reports have been submitted and considered.

4.2.4 Candidates may not claim expenses incurred in relation to their oral examination.

4.3 Summary of viva outcomes

4.3.1 Examiners must clearly indicate their recommendation concerning the award (or non-award) of the degree. These are the permitted recommendations for doctoral degrees:

i. The degree is awarded without the need for any corrections to the thesis
ii. Minor corrections. The degree will be awarded once specified minor corrections have been completed. The candidate is allowed three months in which to make the required corrections. The three-month period starts from the date the candidate is sent the list of corrections by the examiners. Once the candidate has completed the corrections, they should send an electronic copy of the amended thesis to whichever examiner is responsible for checking that the corrections have been satisfactorily completed (this is normally the internal examiner’s role).

iii. Major corrections. The degree will be awarded once specified major corrections have been completed. The candidate is allowed six months in which to make the required corrections. The six-month period starts from the date the candidate is sent the list of corrections by the examiners. Once the candidate has completed the corrections, they should send an electronic copy of the amended thesis to whichever examiner is responsible for checking that the corrections have been satisfactorily completed (this is normally the internal examiner’s role).

iv. The degree will not be awarded at present. The examiners would like the candidate to undergo a second viva, without the need for changes to their thesis, before making a final decision.

v. Resubmission of the thesis. The degree will not be awarded at present. The examiners request substantial changes to the thesis, and the candidate has one year to revise and resubmit the thesis for re-examination. The examiners may also require a second viva. The candidate will be formally notified by Research Services of the need to resubmit, including whether this is with or without a further viva examination.

vi. Failure – award MPhil. The candidate has failed the doctoral degree and the degree of MPhil will be awarded instead, subject to minor changes to the title page, cover and content.

vii. Resubmission for MPhil only. The doctoral degree is not awarded at present; however, the candidate is invited to resubmit for an MPhil. The examiners request substantial changes to the thesis, and the candidate has one year to complete these. The examiners may also require a second viva. The candidate will be formally notified by Research Services of the need to resubmit, including whether this is with or without a further viva examination.

viii. Failure. The degree is not awarded; the candidate has failed.

4.3.2 Some higher degrees by research also incorporate a taught Master’s element, e.g. EdD or DEdCPsy. For these degrees, only the examiners may also recommend:

- The degree will not be awarded, but the candidate will receive the taught Master’s degree for the programme.

4.3.3 For the degree of DClinPsy, the examiners can also recommend:

- The degree should not be awarded, but the candidate can submit an entirely new thesis for DClinPsy with a second viva. The candidate has one year to prepare this.
5. **AFTER THE VIVA**

5.1 **Results of the viva**

5.1.1 The examiners should return their completed report forms to Research Services within two weeks of the date of the oral examination.

5.1.2 Research Services will arrange for the reports to be considered by the appropriate Faculty Officer and will formally notify the candidate of the outcome of the examination, once the reports have been approved. The exception to this is where candidates pass subject to the completion of minor or major corrections (see 5.2 below).

5.1.3 If a candidate has passed subject to completing minor or major corrections the examiners will provide the candidate with a list of the required corrections as soon as possible following the viva. The examiners will subsequently confirm to Research Services when the corrections have been satisfactorily completed. Please note that Research Services requires written confirmation of the completion of minor and major corrections from the examiners before the degree can be awarded.

5.2 **Minor or Major Corrections**

5.2.1 Where minor corrections are required, the candidate has three months to complete these. For major corrections, the candidate has six months to complete the corrections. This period starts from the date on which they receive details of the required corrections from their examiners. There is no need to wait for the viva outcome to be approved.

5.2.2 The examiners should ensure that the candidate receives a comprehensive list of the required corrections to the thesis as soon as possible after the viva examination. They should ensure the candidate has fully understood their comments and intention.

5.2.3 One of the examiners should be designated to approve the corrections once they have been completed. This is normally the responsibility of the internal examiner.

5.2.4 Research Services does not formally inform the candidate of the outcome of their examination at this point or send them the required corrections; this is the responsibility of the examiners.

5.2.5 When the candidate has completed the requested corrections, they should send a copy of the amended thesis via email directly to the examiner who is going to check the corrections. This is the only case where it is acceptable for candidates to submit a thesis directly to the examiners.

5.2.6 It is not necessary for the candidate to resubmit the revised thesis to Turnitin if the candidate is only undertaking minor or major corrections.

5.2.7 Once the corrections have been checked and the designated examiner is satisfied that all the required changes have been satisfactorily completed, they should sign and date the separate minor/major corrections sheet and return it immediately to Research Services. The corrections are not considered completed until this form is received; verbal approval is not sufficient.
5.2.8 As a general guideline, examiners should aim to complete their checking of the minor or major corrections within approximately four weeks of receiving the revised thesis.

5.2.9 Once the examiner has confirmed that all corrections have been completed, the candidate is almost ready to be awarded their degree. There are a few further requirements that must be completed before the degree can be awarded. Please refer to Section 6 for further details.

5.3 Resubmission and re-examination of a thesis

5.3.1 Where substantial changes to the thesis are required (i.e. a resubmission), the candidate has one year to resubmit their thesis.

5.3.2 This year begins when the candidate is formally notified of this outcome by Research Services.

5.3.3 The examiners should return their reports forms (along with the detailed comments on the required corrections) to Research Services within two weeks of the date of the oral examination. If the examiners have annotated the thesis with their corrections, they should ensure that the thesis copy is returned to the candidate.

5.3.4 Once the recommendation for resubmission has been approved by the Faculty, Research Services will write to the candidate to inform them of the outcome and will send them a copy of the examiners’ report, including the required corrections.

5.3.5 Where a candidate is required to resubmit their thesis this should be regarded as a formal re-examination. As such, there should be no unauthorised contact between the candidate and the examiners prior to the re-examination.

5.3.6 The candidate must not send a copy of the thesis to the examiners, either informally or for comment, prior to the formal resubmission. The candidate must formally resubmit their thesis to Research Services following the same procedures that apply to first submissions, including submission of the thesis to Turnitin. The examiners will be sent a copy of the resubmitted thesis by Research Services only.

5.3.7 Once a resubmitted thesis has been checked on Turnitin by the internal examiner, Research Services should be notified that it can be formally despatched to the examiners, along with the relevant re-examination report forms and examiners’ guidance notes.

5.3.8 The original examiners will normally be required to undertake the re-examination.

5.3.9 Following receipt of the resubmitted thesis, the examiners should review it in the same way as they did the original thesis. If a further oral examination was recommended after the first examination, this should take place within 10 weeks of receipt of the thesis by the examiners.

5.3.10 If a further oral examination is not required, the examiners should aim to complete the re-examination of the revised thesis within approximately eight weeks of receiving it. This is a guideline, not an absolute deadline.
5.3.11 Once the examiners have reached their decision, the joint report form should be completed, signed, dated, and returned to Research Services as soon as possible.

5.4 Resubmission outcomes

5.4.1 Examiners must clearly indicate their recommendation concerning the award (or non-award) of the degree. Here is a summary of the permitted recommendations for doctoral degrees following resubmission of a thesis:

i. The degree is awarded without the need for any corrections to the thesis
ii. The degree should be awarded once specified minor corrections have been completed
iii. The degree should be awarded once specified major corrections have been completed
iv. The degree of MPhil should be awarded instead, subject to minor changes to the title pages, cover and content.
iv. The degree should not be awarded; the candidate has failed.

5.4.2 Some higher degrees by research also incorporate a taught Master’s element, e.g. EdD or DEdCPsy. For these degrees, only the examiners may also recommend:

i. The degree should not be awarded, but the candidate should receive the taught Master’s degree for the programme.

5.5 Resubmission for an MPhil

i. The degree is awarded without the need for any corrections to the thesis
ii. The degree should be awarded once specified minor corrections have been completed
iii. The degree should be awarded once specified major corrections have been completed
iv. The degree should not be awarded; the candidate has failed. Examiners must provide details of the reasoning behind this decision.

6. AWARD OF DEGREES

6.1 Approval of outcomes

6.1.1 Once the examiners have returned all their reports to Research Services, the examiners’ recommendation must be approved by the relevant Faculty (on behalf of the Senate) before the degree can be awarded. Research Services arranges Faculty approval of examiners’ reports and recommendations. Formal notification of the award of the degree to the candidate can only be provided by Research Services after it has been approved by the relevant Faculty.

6.1.2 Awards will be withheld until the candidate has fulfilled all the requirements for the award of their degree. Prior to award, all candidates must ensure that they have done the following:
• Paid any outstanding tuition fees and tuition-related fees to the University;
• Deposited an electronic Library copy of the thesis, which must include an abstract and provided a completed and signed Access to Thesis form;
• Completed an ePortfolio summary for the Doctoral Development Programme (candidates who pre-date the DDP must have completed the requirements of the Research Training Programme, where applicable).

6.1.3 Following formal approval of the recommendation by the Faculty, Research Services will send the candidate an award letter and a copy of their examiners’ reports.

6.2 Etheses and library copies

6.2.1 A successful candidate must upload a copy of their thesis to the White Rose eTheses Online server (WREO). This must be the full, final version of the thesis, which has been approved by the examiners following completion of any required corrections.

6.2.2 In some cases it may not be possible for a candidate to include certain content from the thesis in the electronic version, typically due to copyright concerns or where there are commercial sensitivities. In these cases, the candidate must also provide a complete unredacted copy of the thesis (see: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/librarycopy).

6.2.3 Candidates may set embargoes on their ethesis. Embargoes must be clearly indicated on the Access to Thesis form, which must be submitted to Research Services before the degree can be awarded. Candidates who upload their ethesis to WREO must also set any embargo options themselves as part of the upload process. This will not be done by Research Services.

6.3 Receiving the award

6.3.1 Award letters are provided by Research Services once all requirements for the award have been met.

6.3.2 The award letter will be sent to the candidate’s correspondence address, unless the candidate asks to collect it in person. A scanned copy of both the award letter and the examiners’ report forms is also emailed to the candidate. Note: during the current Covid-19 pandemic, award letters can only be sent via email.

6.3.3 Research Services is not responsible for arranging for candidates to receive their degree certificate or attend a graduation ceremony. This is undertaken by the Events Office, who will contact candidates with details of their next available graduation ceremony, and information on obtaining the degree certificate by post (‘in absentia’). For further information, please see: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/graduation/graduation-process