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

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Contact details</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Requirements for research degree programmes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Criteria for the award of a research degree</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>PREPARING FOR SUBMISSION OF THE THESIS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>General guidance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Appointment of examiners</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Use of unfair means</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>SUBMISSION</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Thesis submission and despatch</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>THE VIVA VOCE (ORAL EXAMINATION)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Arrangements for the viva</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Conduct of the oral examination</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Summary of viva outcomes</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>AFTER THE VIVA</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Results of the viva</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Minor Amendments</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Resubmission of the thesis</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Resubmission outcomes</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Resubmission for MPhil</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>AWARD OF DEGREES</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Approval of examiners’ recommendations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Etheses and library copies</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Receiving the award</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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, see: [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 RS is located at New Spring House, 231 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW. The Research Degree Support team in RS 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](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/contacts). 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 student’s research and showing the sources from which the information it contains is derived and the extent to which the student has made use of the work of others; and
- pass an oral examination in matters relevant to the subject of the thesis

1.2.2 For research degrees which incorporate taught elements and/or coursework, candidates are also required to have satisfactorily completed the taught Masters 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)). The taught elements act as a qualifying hurdle, but are not part of the examination process and should not be considered as part of the oral examination or the subsequent report.

1.2.3 The purpose of the oral examination is to allow the examiners to test the candidate’s knowledge of their research and subject area. It allows the examiners to clarify any

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1 For the degrees of MMus and LLM only, the decision to hold an oral examination is at the discretion of the examiners.
queries they might have following a reading of the thesis, and provides the candidate with the opportunity to defend the thesis in person. The oral examination is an integral part of the examination for research degrees and must be held (with the possible exception of the degrees of LLM and MMus).

1.2.4 The thesis should normally be written in English. Exceptionally, and with the permission of the Faculty, a student 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 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](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/mphil).
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:
- http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/code/preparation
- http://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 all three copies of the thesis directly to RS. 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 the thesis (either in print or in electronic format) 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 RS.

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

2.1.6 If a candidate wishes to submit non-standard material with the thesis, they should first seek written permission from the Faculty Officer well in advance of submission.

2.2 Appointment of examiners

2.2.1 The supervisor should nominate examiners well in advance of the student’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 student 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 RS 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, RS will write to the examiners to confirm their appointment. RS will also send them the necessary examiners’ report forms and guidance notes, along with the hard copy of the thesis.

2.2.5 RS 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: http://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 student 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 RS, regardless of whether it is their first submission or a resubmission.

3.1.2 Candidates must submit three copies of the thesis. This is usually submitted as two printed and bound copies and an electronic copy, which is normally provided on CD. The third copy can also be print instead of electronic. The two hard copies can be bound using comb or spiral binding, which is cheaper than the traditional black fastback cover; however, they cannot be submitted loose-leaf, i.e. in a folder or ring binder.

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 RS 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 RS that the Turnitin report is acceptable, RS will normally despatch the hard copies of 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 RS, 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 jointly test, 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 RS. This is a guideline, not an absolute deadline. The appropriate faculty contact in RS 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 RS, as this can lead to excessive pressure on both student and examiners if any delays arise, e.g. in checking the Turnitin originality report.

4.1.5 Oral examinations will normally take place in Sheffield. Exceptionally, an alternative venue outside Sheffield may be considered more appropriate, in which case all parties must be in agreement (the candidate, the supervisor and both examiners). The examiners must then seek approval from the Research Degree Support Officer in RS before making firm arrangements for the viva.

4.1.6 In exceptional circumstances, it may be possible for an oral examination to be conducted via a video-conference link. Faculty approval is always required where video-conferencing is proposed; therefore firm arrangements should not be made until the request has been considered and approved by the appropriate Faculty Officer.

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 The internal examiner/coordinator should ensure that the examination venue is appropriate for the purpose.

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 RS 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 room 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 amendments. The degree will be awarded once specified minor amendments have been completed. The candidate is allowed three months in which to make the required amendments. The three month period starts from the date the candidate is sent the list of amendments by the examiners. Once the candidate has completed the amendments, they should send an electronic copy of the amended thesis to whichever examiner is responsible for checking that the amendments have been satisfactorily completed (this is normally the internal examiner’s role). This is the only time it is acceptable for the candidate to send a copy of the thesis direct to the examiners.

iii. 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.

iv. 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 RS of the need to resubmit, including whether this is with or without a further viva examination.

v. 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 titles pages, cover and content.

vi. 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 RS of the need to resubmit, including whether this is with or without a further viva examination.

vii. 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 RS within two weeks of the date of the oral examination.

5.1.2 RS 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 amendments (see 5.2 below).

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

5.2 **Minor Amendments**

5.2.1 Where minor amendments are required, the candidate has three months to complete these. This period starts from the date on which they receive details of the required amendments. 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 amendments 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 amendments once they have been completed. This is normally the responsibility of the internal examiner.

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

5.2.5 When the candidate has completed the requested amendments, they should send a copy of the amended thesis directly to the examiner who is going to check the amendments. Usually an electronic copy is acceptable. 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 amendments.
5.2.7 Once the amendments have been checked and the designated examiner is satisfied that all the required amendments have been satisfactorily completed, they should sign and date the separate minor amendments sheet and return it immediately to RS. The amendments 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 amendments within approximately four weeks of receiving the revised thesis.

5.2.9 Once the examiner has confirmed that all amendments 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 of a thesis**

This is also sometimes referred to as ‘formal resubmission’ or ‘major corrections’.

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 RS.

5.3.3 The examiners should return their reports forms (along with the detailed comments on the required amendments) to RS within two weeks of the date of the oral examination. If the examiners have annotated the thesis with their amendments, 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, RS will write to the candidate to inform them of the outcome and will send them a copy of the examiners’ report, including the required amendments.

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 RS 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 RS only.

5.3.7 Once a resubmitted thesis has been checked on Turnitin by the internal examiner, RS 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 and dated and returned to RS 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 amendments have been completed

iii. The degree of MPhil should be awarded instead, subject to minor changes to the titles pages, cover and content. Examiners must provide details of the reasoning behind this decision.

iv. The degree should not be awarded; the candidate has failed. Examiners must provide details of the reasoning behind this decision.

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:

- The degree should not be awarded, but the candidate should receive the taught Master’s degree for the programme. Examiners must provide details of the reasoning behind this decision.

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 amendments have been completed

iii. 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 RS, the examiners’ recommendation must be approved by the relevant Faculty (on behalf of the Senate) before the degree can be awarded. RS arranges Faculty approval of examiners’ reports and recommendations. Formal notification of the award of the degree to the candidate can only be provided by RS 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 a Library copy of the thesis (typically an eThesis), which must include an abstract and provided a completed and signed Access to Thesis form;
- Completed an eportfolio summary for the Doctoral Development Programme (students 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, RS 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 amendments.

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 an unredacted copy of the thesis (i.e. a complete printed and bound copy where no content has been removed), which will be deposited in the University Library after the degree has been conferred.

6.2.3 Candidates who registered before the 2008-09 academic year are not required to submit to White Rose, but if they do not do so, they must provide a hard copy of the final, approved version of the thesis to RS for deposit in the University Library.

6.2.4 Candidates may set embargoes on their thesis (ethesis and, where relevant, print thesis). Embargoes must be clearly indicated on the Access to Thesis form, which must be submitted to RS 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 RS.
6.3 Receiving the award

6.3.1 Award letters are provided by RS 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.

6.3.3 RS is not responsible for making the arrangements for students to receive their degree certificate or attend a graduation ceremony. This is undertaken by the Events Team, 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: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/graduation/postaward