Guidelines for the Oral Examination for the PhD

Purpose

These guidelines provide detail on the purpose, format and conduct of the oral examination as part of the PhD examination process.

Organisational Scope

These guidelines apply to all PhD thesis candidates, and were enacted in January 2014.

Definitions

Convener – the person who oversees the examination process. They are chosen from the approved list of Conveners held on the Graduate Research School website (see http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/phd/otago009283.html), and are a person independent of the supervision provided to the candidate.

Content

1. The timing of the oral examination should be established at or about the time the thesis is submitted for examination. The oral examination should be set for a date approximately three months after the submission date.

2. The oral examination is chaired by the Convener and is held after the examiners’ reports have been submitted, at or about the predetermined date (see (1)). If the examination is held at the University, it will normally be attended by at least two Examiners – usually the Internal Examiner and the New Zealand External Examiner. In cases when this arrangement proves impractical or impossible, at the discretion of the Convener the oral examination will be conducted by audio or video conference. Under these circumstances, the Internal Examiner and at least one of the other examiners will be involved in the examination. At the Convener’s discretion the third examiner could also be involved in the oral examination.

At the discretion and invitation of the Convener the supervisor(s) are normally present, and the Head of Department may also contribute to the oral examination. The Convener should ask the candidate if they wish their supervisor(s) to attend. The Convener may approve the attendance of others at the oral examination (e.g. the candidate may wish to have support people), but these participants do not normally contribute to the discussion.

3. The main objectives of the oral examination are to:
   (a) provide the candidate with a special opportunity to defend the thesis;
   (b) establish that the candidate fully understands the work and its wider implications;
   (c) provide the candidate with an opportunity to reply to criticism or challenge;
   (d) enable the examiners to clarify issues in the thesis which may be unclear;
   (e) help the examiners to decide on the nature and extent of any corrections or revisions which may be required;
   (f) allow the examiners to confirm whether the thesis should be recommended as ‘exceptional’.
4. The reasons why an oral examination is being considered as a normal part of the examination process include:
   (a) equity across the University – currently some departments require an oral examination while others do not. Equity is important in providing all students with the same examination experience.
   (b) the opportunity for the candidate to present their research and to have an in-depth conversation with the examiners. In particular:
      (i) it provides a special opportunity for candidates to discuss their research in depth;
      (ii) it may provide the candidate with an opportunity to reply to criticism and defend any contentious issues in the thesis;
      (iii) it may help to decide on the nature and extent of any corrections and revisions which may be required;
      (iv) it may allow for an exchange of ideas about amendments and revisions which might be required by the examiners, enabling the candidate to ask for clarification where written instructions may not be fully explicit;
      (v) it may assist the candidate to understand the full import of the examiners’ comments;
      (vi) it may enable the examiners to clarify issues in the thesis which may be unclear;
      (vii) it may allow for a discussion of opportunities for publishing from the research.
   (c) the opportunity for examiners to be assured that the candidate has mastery over the topic and the general field. This is becoming increasingly important as thesis formats are changing with the inclusion of multi-authored publications becoming more common. Examiners are often unsure of the intellectual contribution of the candidate and the oral examination provides a forum to explore the candidate’s understanding.
   (d) the opportunity for examiners to confirm whether the thesis should be recommended as ‘exceptional’.
   (e) consistency with national practice - the University of Otago is the only New Zealand University not to hold an oral examination as part of the PhD examination process.
   (f) internationalisation and the perception of quality. Many countries hold an oral examination as part of the examination process and indeed some countries require new academics to provide evidence of having done an oral examination as part of the PhD examination process.

5. The format of the oral examination will vary from case to case, and will be made clear in the Oral Examination Briefing Report. Normally, the format will include: a brief overview of the thesis by the candidate; questions from the examiners on the substantive issues communicated to the candidate beforehand; other questions and “free” discussion. The Convener may also address questions to the supervisors.

6. The Convener, with the administrative support of the Department of the primary supervisor, should make arrangements for the oral examination in accordance with The Role of the Convener Guidelines¹. The Oral Examination Briefing Report¹ details the logistics of the examination: when, where and the format. The Oral Examination Briefing Report will be sent by the Convener to the Doctoral Office and this Briefing Report, together with

¹ Available at: http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/phd/otago009283.html
anonymised copies of the examiner’s reports will be sent by the Convener to the candidate, supervisors and examiners at least two weeks prior to the oral examination.

7. The oral examination should normally include assessment of the candidate’s ability to:
   (a) locate his/her research in the broader context
   (b) display detailed knowledge of the thesis
   (c) authenticate the work (i.e. prove that it is the candidate’s own work).

8. In addition, the following points should be noted:
   (a) it is not the purpose of an oral examination to test the candidate’s command of spoken English in what is often a stressful situation. This is particularly important for candidates whose first language is not English, and for some disabled candidates.
   (b) it is appropriate in the oral examination to ask questions about the originality of the thesis, and about the contribution the thesis makes to knowledge.
   (c) the candidate should also be able to defend the methodology and conclusions of the thesis, and display awareness of the limitations of the thesis, in the oral examination.
   (d) for the oral examination to be regarded as successful, the candidate should satisfy the examiners that s/he is worthy of the research degree, which will always be ultimately a matter of academic judgement by the examiners.

9. Once the oral examination has concluded, the Convener and the examiners will confer in private. A recommendation on the final result will normally be formulated by the Convener in consultation with the examiners present for the oral examination. Thus the examiners participating in the oral examination have the mandate to make a final recommendation without having to consult any absent examiner. Such a recommendation should be mindful of the issues raised by the absent examiner. If there is a disagreement regarding a result by the examiners, the Dean of the Graduate Research School should be advised, who may determine that a referee is required.

10. Possible outcomes from the oral examination are recommendations that the thesis:
    (a) be accepted, or be accepted with minor editorial corrections, and the degree be awarded;
    (b) be accepted and the degree be awarded after amendments have been made to the satisfaction of the Convener of examiners in consultation with the internal examiner;
    (c) be revised and resubmitted for examination;
    (d) be rejected and referred to the appropriate authority within the University for consideration of the award of another degree;
    (e) be rejected with no right of resubmission.

Contact for further information about these guidelines

If you have any queries regarding the content of this policy or need further clarification, contact the Dean of the Graduate Research School at rachel.spronken-smith@otago.ac.nz.