

Guidelines for the conduct of MPhil and PhD oral examinations

Eligibility to examine

1 Examiners are asked to inform the Research Degrees Manager if they have had any connections, either personal or professional, with the candidate or supervisor which might make it advisable for the School to reconsider the appropriateness of their appointment. For example, an examiner who has played a significant part in advising the candidate would be inappropriate and particularly so where the collaboration has led to the publishing of papers by the candidate and the examiner jointly. The School accepts 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.

Timetable for examination

2 In the interests of the candidate the examination should be completed and the examiners should submit their final joint report and other relevant documents within three months of the dispatch of the thesis to the examiners. If there is difficulty in complying with this request, please inform the Research Degrees Unit in good time (See also paragraphs 32-33).

Purpose of the examination

3 After reading the thesis, examiners will be aware of specific matters they want to take up with the student. However, the general purposes of the viva might be summarized as follows:

- (a) To check the student's understanding and ability to produce research to MPhil or PhD standard;
- (b) To clarify areas of weakness;
- (c) To ensure authenticity (ie that the thesis is the candidate's own work);
- (d) To develop ideas further and advise on publication;
- (e) To test knowledge of the broader context;
- (f) To test oral skills;
- (g) To make a final decision in borderline cases.

Preliminary independent reports

4 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, it 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.

5 The examiners should exchange their preliminary reports before conducting the oral examination. The preliminary reports must be submitted to the School at the end of the examination process.

6 If the examiners have any questions about the thesis which they wish to raise with the supervisor before 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 or about the regulations they should contact the School's Research Degrees Manager.

7 Please note that all matters relating to the examination are confidential and examiners should not contact any third party other than the supervisor. Otherwise all queries should be pursued through the Research Degrees Unit.

8 The educational needs provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act require institutions to make reasonable adjustments for candidates with physical and learning difficulties in their assessment. Examiners will be advised of any special arrangements for a candidate with their appointment letters. However, if they are informed directly by the supervisor or candidate of any disability, even in confidence, they should seek the advice of the Research Degrees Manager.

Oral examination

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

10 When the thesis is sent to the examiners the candidate's supervisor¹ should contact the examiners and the candidate to arrange a mutually convenient time and place to hold the examination.

11 The School makes no special requirements about where the oral examination is held (other than that it should normally be held in London). The oral is frequently held in the office of the supervisor or the internal examiner if that is convenient. The Research Degrees Manager should be contacted if it is proposed to hold the examination outside London. The holding of an oral examination by telephone or by

¹ or other person designated by the School to undertake this task.

video-conferencing is frequently unsatisfactory and not normally allowed, and any inquiries about this should be addressed to the Research Degrees Manager.

12 The supervisor can attend the oral examination as an observer provided that the candidate has not indicated otherwise – in which case the examiners will be informed. Individual supervisors follow different practices in respect of oral examinations, some making it their practice routinely to attend, others not. (See also paragraph 18 below).

13 The examiners should indicate in the appropriate place on the examiners' report cover sheet the date of the oral examination, whether or not the supervisor was present and the duration of the viva.

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

15 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 to it. Before meeting the candidate the examiners should discuss the strategy they propose to adopt during the oral examination and, at its outset, outline this to him or her. If they will be questioning the candidate about matters beyond the immediate subject matter of the thesis they should make it clear to him or her that they will be doing so and that he or she will therefore not be expected to have the same level of knowledge of these matters as of the content of the thesis.

16 During the examination the examiners should 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.

17 If the examiners have any doubts that the thesis is genuinely the work of the candidate they should contact the Research Degrees Manager.

18 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 or her research and to defend the thesis. It is recommended that, during a long oral examination, examiners should allow short breaks at appropriate points.

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

20 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. If they do continue, they should note in their final report that the candidate was unwell. If they decide not to continue they should determine whether they have

enough evidence to make a decision or whether it will be necessary to continue the oral examination on another occasion.

21 If the candidate makes comments to the examiners which put them under moral pressure (such as alluding to the consequences of failure), or offers them any kind of incentive to award a pass, the examination should be ended and a report made to the Academic Registrar via the Research Degrees Manager.

22 In addition to examining the candidate orally, the examiners do have the discretion to examine by means of written papers or practical examination. This provision is rarely invoked and examiners are asked to contact the Research Degrees Manager if they wish to do so.

The result of the examination

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

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

25 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) That the thesis meets the criteria set out in the regulations and the candidate has satisfied us in the oral examination for the degree of PhD.
- (b) That the candidate has satisfied us in the oral examination and the thesis otherwise meets the criteria but the candidate is required to make minor specified amendments.
- (c) That the candidate should be allowed to re-present the thesis in a revised form for re-examination for the PhD degree.
- (d) That the thesis meets the criteria but the candidate failed to satisfy us at the oral examination.
- (e) That the candidate has not met the criteria for the PhD award but that the thesis does meet the criteria for the award of the MPhil.
- (f) That the candidate has not satisfied us in the examination and should not be permitted to re-enter for the examination for the PhD or the MPhil degree.

26 Examiners should not consider option *e* unless they have first considered and rejected as inapplicable the preceding options; and they should not consider option *f* unless they have previously considered and rejected as inapplicable all the previous options (see also paragraphs 30 and 31).

Reporting to the School on the examination

27 This set of documents includes an examiners' report cover sheet. The examiners must complete and sign this sheet indicating, *inter alia*, which of the available decisions they have made, and 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:

- (a) candidate's name;
- (b) thesis title;
- (c) signatures of each of the examiners;

(d) date.

28 The report should have regard to the requirements of a thesis for the MPhil/PhD (see the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees). It should not cross-refer to the examiners' preliminary reports unless the examiners want the candidate to be sent a copy of those preliminary reports (see paragraph 38 below).

29 If the examiners decide to refer the candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis for the PhD (MPhil) in 18 (12) months, they should indicate in what ways the current thesis fails to satisfy the requirements for the degree, and should indicate clearly, although not necessarily in detail, the revisions which they consider should be made.

30 Examiners who are referring a candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis in 18 (12) months should indicate on their joint report if (a) it will definitely not be necessary to conduct an oral on the revised thesis, (b) they will definitely require an oral on the resubmitted thesis or (c) they want to reserve their position until they have read the revised thesis.

31 If, after an examination for the PhD, the examiners decide that the criteria for the MPhil have been, or might be, satisfied they should:

- (a) explain the basis for their decision not to allow resubmission for the PhD,

and

- (b) show 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 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.

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

33 The examiners should agree between themselves at the end of the oral examination the arrangements for drafting and finalizing their joint report and for sending it, their preliminary reports, and their copies of the thesis to the Research Degrees Unit.

34 It is important for the candidate that the examiners complete the report cover sheet and send it, together with their preliminary reports and their joint report, to the Research Degrees Unit as soon as possible after the completion of the oral examination. Reports must normally be submitted within two weeks of the examination. If the examiners have indicated on the cover sheet that they require the candidate to make minor amendments, the Research Degrees Unit will send a further form to the examiner named on that sheet for certification that the criteria for the degree 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 Degrees Manager to discuss the position.

35 Examiners have the right to make comments in confidence in a separate report to the Deputy Director (see the regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees).

Notification to the candidate

36 Particularly if their decision is that the candidate has passed, or will pass subject to making minor amendments to the thesis, the examiners may want to advise the candidate orally and informally of their decision at the end of their deliberations. 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 the School has notified the candidate by letter after the examiners have submitted their written report and all other requirements have been satisfied.

37 If the examiners reach a unanimous decision and there are no unresolved anomalies, that decision will normally be conveyed to the candidate after the Research Degrees Subcommittee has confirmed it. No official notification of the result can be issued until the reports have been received and processed and any anomalies resolved.

38 A copy of the cover sheet and the examiners' preliminary and joint reports are routinely sent to the candidates when they are officially informed by letter from the Academic Registrar of their result.

Examination of re-entry candidates

39 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.

40 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.

41 Examiners have discretion on whether or not to hold an oral examination on a revised and resubmitted thesis (See paragraph 29 above), but will need to have regard to what they said about this in their joint report on the original examination.

42 When the revised thesis is sent 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.

43 The re-entry examination for the MPhil and the PhD is subject to the same rules and procedure as the original examination. However, examiners are not permitted to recommend a further referral to revise and resubmit the thesis and must choose from option (a), (b), (d), (e) or (f).

If the examiners are not in agreement or need further assistance

44 If the examiners are unable to agree they should contact the Research Degrees Manager who will refer the matter to the Research Degrees Subcommittee.

Examiners' fees and expenses

45 A fee is paid to each examiner following the initial examination and following any subsequent re-examination. Payment is authorized automatically on receipt of the examiners' joint report.

46 Examiners external to the School may claim travel and other expenses. Claims should normally be submitted to the Research Degrees Unit at the end of the examination, but may be submitted earlier where advance payment for tickets has been necessary.

Equal opportunities

47 All examinations are subject to the University's and School's equal opportunities policies. All candidates are subject to the same academic criteria and requirements.