Guidelines for Doctoral Oral Examinations

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with The University of Auckland Statute for the Degree under which the candidate is registered. They contain information for the:

1. Examination Committee
2. Organisers of Oral Examinations
3. Candidate
4. Chairs of Oral Examinations
5. HoD Nominee in the Oral Examination
6. Oral Examiner

1 Information for the Examination Committee

If the Examination Committee recommends to the Board of Graduate Studies that the candidate should proceed to Oral, then the Examination Committee should also recommend which of the examiners should be the Oral Examiner and whether the oral examination should take place in person, or may be conducted by videoconference.

In making their recommendations the Examination Committee should take the following into consideration:

a. The nature and quality of the written reports. Candidates will benefit from an academically rigorous oral examination.

b. The ability to organise the oral examination in a timely manner. The availability of examiners may differ, especially if it is recommended that the oral examination should take place in person.

c. The cost of the oral examination if the sum will exceed the $950 maximum that the School of Graduate Studies will contribute if the examiner is within New Zealand or the $1250 contribution if the examiner is from overseas.¹

If the Board of Graduate Studies accepts a recommendation that the oral examination should take place by videoconference, the Graduate Centre will contact the candidate and seek their agreement to this.

2 Information for Organisers of Oral Examinations

a. In Person

Flights and accommodation should be arranged by the department. The Graduate Centre will reimburse the expenses once the oral examination is completed and all claims have been submitted. The department should submit a final total to the Graduate Centre once all claims have been met. The Graduate Centre will then reimburse the department via a journal transaction. The department must submit the final total to the Graduate Centre within three months of the date of the oral examination.

¹ The amount contributed by the School of Graduate Studies is to cover the airfare and one night’s accommodation for domestic travel and up to two nights for international travel and is inclusive of GST. It may also be used for the examiner’s airport transfers, meals and incidentals. It does not constitute a per diem allowance. Any balance above this figure must be covered by the department.
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For reimbursement to occur:

(i) The original receipts need to be provided. They have to be GST receipts; copies of credit card or bank statements cannot be accepted as proof, as they do not show GST.

(ii) Meals can be reimbursed only for the examiner’s own meals at reasonable cost.

(iii) Alcohol, mini bar and personal phone calls cannot be covered.

No reimbursements will be made for additional expenses incurred without the prior approval of the School of Graduate Studies.

b By Videoconference

The facilities used for videoconferences should be through accredited providers with recognised video and audio protocols and high quality equipment. A test call should be organised prior to the actual conference call so that the appropriateness and compatibility of equipment can be checked. Conferences should normally be two-way only. The School of Graduate Studies will meet reasonable costs for oral examinations conducted by videoconference where the Oral Examiner is the party off-site.

3 Information for the Candidate

a The Graduate Centre will notify candidates once the Board of Graduate Studies has accepted the Examination Committee’s recommendation that the candidate should now proceed to oral examination. If the Examination Committee has recommended that the Oral should be conducted by videoconference, the candidate will be asked if they agree to this. If the candidate does not agree to this an in-person Oral will be arranged, but this may delay the oral examination.

b If the candidate is being examined under the 2011 PhD Statute the Graduate Centre will send the candidate the evaluative section of their examiners’ reports (Part 2 of their reports). These will be sent no fewer than five working days before the oral examination. Candidates being examined under other doctoral statutes will not receive any written reports before their oral examination.

c At least five working days before the oral examination, candidates will be advised by the HoD or the HoD Nominee (who will be present at the examination) as to what the format of the oral examination will be, and whether or not some kind of presentation is expected. The HoD or his/her nominee and the supervisor are able to give guidance as to what is usual in the candidate’s discipline.

d Candidates should prepare for the examination by thoroughly refamiliarising themselves with their theses and, in the case of candidates being examined under the 2011 PhD Statute, by reflecting on the issues raised in the written evaluations of their theses. The oral examination is likely to commence with an invitation to the candidate to summarise the main points of the thesis. The candidate should identify the core component of the thesis, its methodology, and its outcome. Briefly outlining previous scholarship, they should establish the originality of their work. Candidates should prepare themselves so that they can succinctly explain the “what, how and why” (and perhaps the “so what”) of the thesis. It is also helpful to practise explaining any aspects of the research that may invite the examiners’ attention, and, if possible, to practise answering questions before the examination. Preparation is likely to improve
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the candidate’s ability to explain their work, to think on their feet, and will also boost their confidence.

e With the candidate’s agreement, the main supervisor may attend the oral examination. The supervisor is not an examiner and may only participate in the discussion to the extent requested by the Chair. Candidates are not allowed to have support people or whanau in the room during the oral examination. They may wait nearby.

f Once in the examination room the Chair will explain to the candidate the order in which the examiner will initially ask questions, although it is expected that once discussion is under way this will flow naturally and in no particular order. The oral examination usually lasts between one and two hours.

g The Oral Examiner will discuss with the candidate issues raised in the examiners’ reports and ask questions of the candidate on behalf of the other examiner(s). The HoD Nominee will ensure that all of the examiners’ comments and questions are discussed. When the Oral Examiner and HoD Nominee are satisfied that the issues in the written reports and any other matters of concern and interest have been adequately covered, they will signal their readiness for closure to the Chair. The candidate may also be offered the opportunity to ask questions of the examiner.

h At the close the Chair will indicate that the examination has finished. The oral committee will discuss the examination and formulate their recommendation. The Graduate Centre will formally advise the candidate of the outcome of the examination.

i In the event that minor corrections or revisions are required, the HoD Nominee will provide the candidate with a written report detailing the minor corrections or revisions required within 5 working days of the oral examination (2011 PhD Statute Clause 9).

4 Information for Chairs of Oral Examinations

a At least five working days before the oral examination, the candidate will be advised by the Head of Department or HoD Nominee as to the format of the oral examination and whether or not some kind of presentation is expected. The HoD, his/her nominee and the supervisor are able to give guidance as to what is usual in the candidate’s discipline. The presentation should be no more than 20 minutes long. The HoD is responsible for ensuring that the presentation equipment is set up.

b No fewer than five working days before the oral examination, candidates being examined under the 2011 PhD Statute will receive the evaluative section of their examiners’ reports (Part 2 of their reports). Candidates being examined under other doctoral statutes will not receive any written reports before their oral examination.

c Twenty to thirty minutes before the oral examination, the Chair should meet with the HoD Nominee and Oral Examiner to discuss the examiners’ reports and process for the oral examination. This meeting should establish the roles of the panel members, the allocation of questions (although it is expected that once discussion is underway the questions will flow naturally with some form of order), and the options as to the outcome. The Chair should ensure that questions or issues in the report(s) of the other examiner(s) will be covered. The supervisor may be invited by the Chair to attend this meeting to ensure s/he is fully briefed.
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d. The Chair should check that the room is properly set up to ensure the comfort of the candidate.

e. At the commencement of the examination, the Chair will introduce the panel members and explain their roles. The oral examination usually lasts between one and two hours. Where it is necessary to continue beyond this, the Chair should ensure breaks are taken after no more than two hours.

f. If the examination is taking place by video conference and there are serious problems with the electronic link, the Chair may have to call a halt to proceedings. If appropriate, and if the candidate agrees, it may be possible to continue with a teleconference. If the link cannot be re-established and a teleconference is either not appropriate or agreeable to the candidate, the oral examination will have to be reconvened at a later date. The Chair should inform the Graduate Centre if this is the case.

g. During the oral examination the Chair should ensure proper procedure is followed. The Chair should be wary of statements which may pre-judge the outcome.

h. The Oral Examiner will discuss with the candidate issues raised in the examiners’ reports and ask questions of the candidate on behalf of the other examiner(s). The HoD Nominee will ensure that all of the examiners’ comments and questions are discussed. When the Oral Examiner and HoD Nominee are satisfied that the issues in the written reports and any other matters of concern and interest have been adequately covered, they will signal their readiness for closure to the Chair. The candidate may also be offered the opportunity to ask questions of the examiner.

i. At the close, the Chair will indicate that the examination has finished and the candidate will be asked to leave the room. The panel will then discuss the examination. The Chair may invite the supervisor to be present for this discussion.

j. The candidate may be invited back into the room and advised of the panel’s recommendation. However, the Chair must make clear to the candidate that the result is provisional and the final outcome shall be determined by the Board of Graduate Studies.

k. If the recommendation is to require that the candidate make minor corrections, revise part or parts of the thesis, or revise and resubmit, the Chair may take the opportunity to advise the candidate and the supervisor about the nature of these corrections and/or revisions or to explain how the candidate will be advised about these corrections and/or revisions at a later date. However, it is the HoD Nominee’s responsibility to ensure that the candidate is provided with a copy of the required minor corrections/revisions within 5 working days of the oral examination (2011 PhD Statute Clause 9).

l. The Chair will draft a report and recommendation; a template report can be found at http://www.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/cs-pq-doctoral-forms. This should be endorsed by the HoD Nominee and Oral Examiner on the same day if possible, and sent to the Graduate Centre.

m. The Graduate Centre will then formally advise the candidate of the outcome.
5 Information for the HoD Nominee

The HoD Nominee is a member of the Examination Committee (along with the HoD and the Associate Dean (Postgraduate) for the Faculty): “This person will have thorough knowledge of the general field of the thesis, but not necessarily of the thesis topic, and will normally be a staff member of the University” (PhD Statute Clause 9).

The role of the HoD Nominee is to provide disciplinary and department-specific representation across the examination process.

Specifically, the HoD Nominee should contribute to the doctoral examination process (as described in Clause 9 of the relevant PhD Statute) in the following ways.

a Before the oral:
   (i) Contribute to the decision making of the Examination Committee
   (ii) Read enough of the thesis to know its main purpose and findings (but not as an examiner)
   (iii) Read the examiners’ reports thoroughly
   (iv) Read with care portions of the thesis that are subject to specific comments in the examiners’ reports
   (v) Bring contextual information forward from the Examination Committee to guide the Independent Chair in the process of the oral examination.

b During the oral:
   (i) Assist the Independent Chair in ensuring that all the examiners’ questions get addressed
   (ii) May ask general questions from the field: i.e. “discuss with the candidate the subject of the thesis and relevant matters in the field or fields to which the subject belongs” (PhD Statute Clause 9).

c At the conclusion of the oral:
   (i) Endorse the Independent Chair’s report and recommendation, usually on the grounds of a valid process rather than for substantive reasons (the latter being the purview of the Oral Examiner)
   (ii) In the event of ‘minor corrections’, ensure that the candidate is provided with a copy of the required minor corrections. It is expected that the candidate will be provided with a written report detailing the minor corrections required within 5 working days of the oral examination (2011 PhD Statute Clause 9).
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(iii) In the event of ‘revisions’, ensure that the candidate is provided with a copy of the required revisions. It is expected that the candidate will be provided with a written report detailing the revisions required within 5 working days of the oral examination (2011 PhD Statute Clause 9).

(iv) In the event of a ‘revise and resubmit’ outcome, ensure the Examination Committee understands the requirements that the student must meet and that a meeting is held with the candidate within two weeks of the oral examination.

6 Information for the Oral Examiner

The Oral Examiner takes the academic lead in the oral examination, asking questions of the candidate on the subject of thesis and on relevant matters in the field or fields to which the subject belongs.

At the conclusion of the oral the Oral Examiner:

a Endorses the Independent Chair’s report and recommendation, ensuring that the report notes the substantive reasons for the recommendation.

b In cases of ‘revisions’ to the satisfaction of the Oral Examiner, checks the revisions made by the candidate within one month of receiving the revised thesis, and informs the Graduate Centre as to whether the revisions are satisfactory. If the revisions are not satisfactory the Oral Examiner will provide the Graduate Centre with a list of outstanding issues that need attention.

c In cases of ‘revise and resubmit’, examine the revised thesis as a whole. If a further oral examination is required it is preferable if the original Oral Examiner is able to attend the second oral examination.