



Guidelines for Examiners of Candidates for the Ph.D.

1. Procedure for Examination of Ph.D. Theses

An external examiner and an internal examiner (or occasionally two external examiners) are nominated to the Dean of Graduate Studies by the School's Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) in consultation with the Supervisor.

Examiners are asked to complete the examination process, including viva voce, **within two months** of receiving the thesis or as soon as practically possible thereafter.

Each examiner is asked to complete the attached individual report and send it to gsothese@tcd.ie and the other examiner **not less than one week before the viva voce examination**. These reports must be independent to allow for examiners to take different positions if they wish. This does not preclude discussion between examiners whose names will be made known to each other in their respective letters of appointment.

Following the viva (that is, on the day of the exam), the examiners, in conjunction with the Chair of the Viva Voce, are asked jointly to complete the attached joint report comprising (a) a brief commentary on the student's performance in the viva (b) a statement as to the result to be awarded and (c) an agreed list of changes if the result is that the thesis should be passed subject to minor corrections or an agreed list of revisions if the thesis is to be referred for re-examination. The internal examiner or, if there are two external examiners, the Chair, should submit the two individual pre-viva reports and the joint report, electronically, to gsothese@tcd.ie **on the day of the examination**. If, in exceptional circumstances, it is not possible to complete this process on the day of the examination the Chair of the viva should ensure that the reports are submitted to gsothese@tcd.ie no later than one week after the date of the viva voce examination.

Examiners' names are formally presented to the University Council in consolidated form once a year.

2. Viva Voce Examination

A viva voce examination is a mandatory requirement in the examination of a Ph.D. thesis. The internal examiner will make arrangements in conjunction with School-based administrative staff for the date and time for the viva voce. The external examiner should contact the internal examiner directly, not the Graduate Studies Office, concerning these arrangements.

The conduct of the examination is the responsibility of the examiners, in consultation with the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) and/or the Chair of the examination. All viva voce examinations must be chaired by the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) or her or his nominee. The role of the chair is to clarify College regulations, where appropriate, and to ensure that the viva voce is conducted in a courteous and professional manner. The Chair must intervene if the examiners do not adhere to these regulations. While there is no specified length for a viva voce examination, when the examination exceeds 2.5 hours the Chair should offer the student and examiners a comfort break of 10 minutes.

The student, if s/he wishes is permitted to have her or his supervisor present during the viva voce exam. If this is the case, the supervisor attends entirely in an observational capacity and should not



participate in the examination at any point, though the examiners may invite the supervisor's contribution on points of clarification. In unusual circumstances, the student may apply to the Dean of Graduate Studies for permission that a nominated person should attend (again exclusively in an observational capacity) in lieu of her or his supervisor. Where this permission has been granted the Chair will receive notification from the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Application must be made to the Director of Postgraduate Teaching and Learning in advance of the viva voce if it is proposed to run the viva voce on any other basis than that of a live face-to-face examination with all participants in the same venue. Approval for an examination to be conducted remotely, is contingent on the agreement of all those involved, including the student. A written record of the student agreement should be retained and it should be noted that the format of the viva voce cannot be used as grounds for an appeal if a student has agreed to that format. It should be noted that more frequent breaks may be required if the viva voce is conducted remotely. The specific [guidelines on conducting remote examinations](#) must also be consulted by all involved, in preparation for the viva voce.

Normally, in-person viva voce examinations are held in Dublin, with the travel and accommodation expenses of the external examiner covered by the School (economy class air fare for overseas travel). Exceptionally, the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate), in consultation with examiners and the candidate, and with the prior approval of the Dean of Graduate Studies, may arrange for the examination to be held outside Dublin, in which case the internal examiner's travel expenses (but not the candidate's expenses) will be covered by College.

The result of the examination must always be agreed by the examiners. When there is disagreement between examiners as to the result to be awarded, the Dean of Graduate Studies attempts to get agreement between examiners on the course to be adopted. If agreement is not achieved, the Dean of Graduate Studies may adjudicate or propose that new examiners be appointed.

3. [Expected Standards of the Thesis Submitted for Examination](#)

In judging the merit of a thesis submitted in candidature for the degree of Ph.D., the examiners should expect the standard and scope of work that a capable and diligent student should present after a period of three to four years of full-time study or its part-time equivalent.

Further details in this regard, and in particular in relation to whether it is appropriate for the thesis to be passed subject to minor corrections are outlined below.

In making their recommendations, examiners should note the **standard criteria** for a doctoral thesis in this University: it must

- (A) show evidence of rigour and discrimination,
- (B) Show appreciation of the relationship of the subject to a wider field of knowledge/scholarship, and
- (C) make an appreciable, original contribution to knowledge; it should show originality in the methods used and/or conclusions drawn, and must be clear, concise, well written and orderly and must be a candidate's own work.

The submission of a thesis is at the discretion of the candidate. A candidate is advised, but not required, to seek the agreement of his/her supervisor prior to submission. Postgraduate students whose thesis is under examination are considered as registered students of the university for the duration of the examination. As such, it is not appropriate, in this period, for either the student or



their supervisor to have any contact with either examiner in relation to the thesis during this period.

4. Determining the Result to be Awarded

The agreed 'Post Viva Report' should clearly indicate the result to be awarded and, specifically whether:

A. the degree should be awarded for the thesis as it stands

B. the degree should be awarded, subject to minor corrections being made to the thesis. If the thesis is passed, subject to minor corrections, the candidate must complete the corrections required by examiners within two months of the candidate receiving an official results letter from the Graduate Studies Office informing them that corrections are required. A memorandum is required from the internal examiner certifying that corrections have been carried out satisfactorily. Please note that it is only the internal examiner who will review such minor corrections. In the event of two external examiners being appointed for a student, it should be agreed, in consultation with the Chair of the Viva Voce which should be appointed to approve the corrections that have been made.

C. the thesis should be referred back for revision. This option (3) is not available if the thesis has already been referred back for revision. If the examiners refer the thesis for major revision, this means that re-examination is required (though a second viva voce is not permitted) and the candidate must pay a revision fee (see Academic Registry – What will my fees be?). Under exceptional circumstances, and with the prior permission of the Dean of Graduate Studies, revised theses may be submitted up to an absolute maximum of two years after the original date of submission. While examiners may indicate their view as to whether six months will be a sufficiently long period, any request to extend beyond that period must be submitted by the Director of Postgraduate Teaching and Learning to the Dean of Graduate Studies and only after the student has commenced the revision period on the register. Such late submissions will be subject to a further revision fee based on duration of revision period. A thesis can only be referred for such major revision once – and a thesis can therefore only be examined twice in total before a final decision on it is reached.

D. a lower degree (M.Sc., M.Litt.) should be awarded either for the thesis as it stands or, subject to minor corrections being made. If this result is awarded, the examiners' reports must make clear to the candidate the areas in which their thesis is deficient and why these deficiencies are not addressable by revision or re-submission. If the thesis is to be awarded a lower degree subject to minor corrections being made, then the same rules as outlined in option (B) above will apply.

E. the thesis should be failed (i.e. rejected). If this result is awarded, the examiners' reports must make clear to the candidate the areas in which their thesis is deficient and why, in the examiner's view, the thesis is irredeemably flawed.

On occasion, confusion or uncertainty can arise as to whether the changes that the examiners require should fall under the heading of minor corrections or whether they constitute the kind of revisions that would warrant the thesis being referred for revision and re-examination. To the extent that this will generally be based on an intuitive judgment from the examiners, it would be inappropriate for guidelines of this nature to be unduly prescriptive in this regard. Thus, the following guidance should be contextualized by the reality that, ultimately, the decision depends on this kind of intuitive judgment.



The critical point of differentiation between a situation where a thesis is passed subject to minor corrections and one where the thesis is referred for re-examination, is that, in the former, the examiners agree that the thesis is, in effect, of a pass standard - either on its face or when combined with the manner in which any concerns that the examiners may have had have been assuaged by the performance of the candidate in the viva voce exam. 'Minor corrections', therefore, as defined in this sense, are, in effect, enhancements to the thesis that the examiners regard as necessary for it ultimately to merit the award, but in the context of an overall assessment that the student, through her or his thesis and viva, has shown that her or his work is of Ph.D. quality. Thus, the examiners must be confident that the changes required are clear and prescriptive, and, if the candidate makes these changes, the thesis will be manifestly of Ph.D. standard. In addition, both examiners must be of the view that approval of the corrections require only the oversight of the internal examiner, i.e., that the external examiner requires no further assurance in relation to the overall standard of the thesis.

It is, then, a matter of judgment for examiners as to what kinds of changes can come under this heading. Clearly typographical errors or the equivalent would normally do so, but it is entirely possible that more far reaching alterations could also do so – for example the reworking of certain sections of chapters, or some expansions or contractions of parts of the thesis. In addition, it is possible that an examiner might ask the student to express themselves more clearly in parts of the thesis and that this could constitute a 'minor correction' for the purpose of this result. In all cases, however, the examiners are deeming the thesis to pass, and setting the candidate narrowly defined and clearly identifiable tasks. Thus, the candidate has the expectation that, should s/he complete these tasks, then s/he will be awarded the degree.

On the other hand, it would not normally be the case that fundamental revisions to the grounding hypothesis of the work or the remedying of significant gaps in research method or analysis could constitute 'minor changes'. Rather, in such circumstances, the appropriate result would be for the thesis to be referred for re-examination (or for a lower degree, or fail result to be awarded). Thus, a thesis should be referred when the examiners are clear that it is not currently at Ph.D. standard (i.e., where the thesis as a whole it is not deemed sufficient, as submitted, as an adequate treatment of the PhD topic) or where the examiners have any doubt that could it be brought to that level by a defined list of changes. In other words, the principal point of distinction between this situation and that where the thesis is deemed to pass subject to minor corrections, is the examiners' view that this thesis does not deserve to pass as currently presented and that fundamental changes are needed if it is to pass. In such circumstances, the examiners will suggest broad points of revision, rather than defined corrections. Whereas the student will, in general, seek to revise her or his thesis in line with these suggestions, s/he knows that it remains a matter of subsequent judgment as to whether the reworked thesis is of pass standard. In such instances, both examiners wish to review changes made, in order to reach a judgement on whether or not the standard is reached for a PhD.

In essence, therefore, the primary difference between the 'minor corrections' and the 'revision and resubmission' result does not relate to the scale of changes that are needed (although this is, of course, relevant). Rather it is based on whether the examiners take the view that the candidates performance thus far, in thesis and in viva indicates that the thesis is at pass standard (albeit that some amendments are needed so that the final, hardbound copy meets the university's expectations of what a Ph.D. thesis should be) or indicates that it should not be passed and that the candidate needs fundamentally to revisit his or her work if it is to be passed.



Finally, it should be noted that time periods are prescribed both for minor changes (2 months or 3 months for part-time students) and for revisions (6 months, or 9 months for part-time students). Where in exceptional circumstances, corrections or revisions prove impossible to complete within the prescribed time periods, students, with the support of their supervisor, may request an extension on the period allowed for minor corrections. Each request will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

5. Freedom of Information Acts

The texts of the external and internal examiners' reports are initially available only to the Dean of Graduate Studies, the University Council, the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) and the Supervisor.

However, candidates are entitled to see the reports relating to their examination on written request. Such requests should be addressed to the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) who would bring their request to the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Under the terms of the Irish Freedom of Information Acts 1997 and 2003, the University of Dublin, Trinity College, in common with other Irish universities, is a prescribed 'public body' subject to the Acts. These FoI Acts provide a right of access to records held by public bodies. External examiners should note that anything written or recorded in any form by them in the course of and for the purposes of the performance of their functions as an external examiner may be the subject of a request under the Freedom of Information Acts.

The right of access includes the right to one's own personal records, and the examination records of students come under the definition of a student's personal records. These records would include examiners' reports and any examination scripts and assessments that have been marked (and annotated) by the examiners. In general, the College must give a copy of these records to the student concerned if he or she makes a request for them under the Freedom of Information Acts. Additionally, students have the right to be given, on request, a written statement of the reasons for a decision of the College that affected them as individuals. Such decisions would include examination/assessment issues.

Further information regarding the Acts and their application to Trinity College is available at <http://www.tcd.ie/foi/>.

Professor Martine Smith

Dean of Graduate Studies