

## Guidance on the Conduct of MPhil/PhD Oral Examinations

### 1 Eligibility to Examine

- a) Examiners are asked to inform Royal Holloway Student Administration ([researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk)) if they have had any connections with either the candidate they are examining or his/her supervisor/adviser which they believe would make it desirable for Royal Holloway to reconsider the appropriateness of their appointment.
- b) These connections could be either personal or professional. For example, it is considered that an examiner who has played a significant part in advising the candidate is inappropriate as is an examiner who has collaborated with the candidate on a joint published paper. Please note that it is accepted that examiners will usually be acquainted with the supervisor, and sometimes with the candidate; this, in itself, is not a bar to acting as an examiner.

### 2 Timetable for the Examination

In the interest of the candidate, Royal Holloway expects that the examination will be completed, and that the examiners will have submitted their Decision Report form and Final Joint Report form to the Royal Holloway Student Administration within 3 months of the dispatch of the thesis to the examiners. If there is difficulty in complying with this request, Student Administration ([researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk)) should be informed.

### 3 Preliminary Independent Reports

- a) Each examiner is asked to write an independent Preliminary Report on the thesis (the Preliminary Report form is sent with 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 the Preliminary Report identifies particular areas which the examiner believes should be explored with the candidate during the oral examination, and, if possible, gives 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.
- b) The examiners should exchange their Preliminary Reports with each other before conducting the oral examination. A copy of the Preliminary Report forms should be submitted to the Royal Holloway Student Administration prior to the oral examination.
- c) If the examiners have any queries about the thesis, they should either raise these via Student Administration or at the viva. If the examiners have any queries about the Royal Holloway's requirements for the award of the PhD and about the [Research Degree regulations](#), please contact Student Administration. Please note that all matters relating to the examination are confidential and examiners should not contact any third party as provided for in the [Research Degree regulations](#) and this Guidance. All queries must be pursued through the Royal Holloway Student Administration.

Please note that examiners should receive no communication from either the student or the supervisor regarding the first submission and resubmission examination. If an examiner has any queries about the process, they should not hesitate to email [researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk) or call 01784 414647. Any communication, especially that relating to the thesis, may be considered a breach of the Research Degree Regulations. So if an examiner is contacted by either the supervisor or the student, they should notify Student Administration immediately.

- d) The Equality Duty 2010 require educational institutions to make reasonable adjustments so that disabled students are not put at a substantial disadvantage by our policies and procedures. Under the Act, a person has a disability if he or she has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. Therefore, it protects student with physical impairment, Specific Learning Differences (such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD), long-term health condition and Mental Health Difficulties. In the light of this, examiners will be advised of any special arrangements for a candidate with their appointment letters. However, if examiners are informed directly by the supervisor or candidate of any disability,

even in confidence, they should seek the advice of Student Administration in order that they might be properly briefed.

#### 4 The Oral Examination

- a) An oral examination must be held except than in those circumstances for which provision is made in the [Research Degree regulations](#) (i.e. on resubmission of a thesis following referral).
- b) When the thesis is dispatched to the examiners, the candidate's supervisor is asked to contact the examiners, the Independent Chair (if applicable – see 4.d.) and the candidate to arrange and confirm a mutually convenient time and place to hold the oral examination.
- c) College Regulations require that the oral examination should be held at Royal Holloway or at Bedford Square or Senate House in central London. Alternative locations are only permitted in exceptional circumstances through a request for a suspension of College regulations which needs to be sought by the candidate's supervisor prior to any examination arrangements being made. The holding of an oral examination by video-conferencing is not normally permitted. If exceptional circumstances this may be permitted through a request for a suspension of College regulations, which needs to be sought by the candidate's supervisor prior to any examination arrangements being made. Any enquiries about this should be addressed in the first instance to Student Administration.
- d) It is a regulatory requirement that a student's viva is either recorded (audio) or is conducted in the presence of an Independent Chair. The examiners will be informed in their appointment letter which method will be used and will be provided with the relevant practical guides. Further details for supervisors are available at <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/ecampus/academicsupport/examinations/researchdegrees/supervisors.aspx> and further details for examiners are available at <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/ecampus/academicsupport/examinations/researchdegrees/examiners.aspx>.
- e) The lead supervisor is encouraged to attend the oral examination as an observer provided that the candidate has not indicated that his/her supervisor should not be present. The examiners will be informed if that is the case.
- f) No persons other than the examiners, the candidate, the Independent Chair (if applicable) and one supervisor may be present at an oral examination.
- g) The examiners should indicate in the appropriate place on the yellow Decision Report Form the date of the oral examination and whether or not the supervisor and/or an Independent Chair were present.
- h) 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 this. The examiners should discuss prior to meeting the candidate the strategy they propose to adopt during the oral examination and, at its outset, outline this to the candidate.
- i) During the oral, the examiners should seek to establish whether all the requirements for a thesis submitted for the PhD have been met (as set out in the [Research Degree regulations](#)) and that the thesis is genuinely the work of the candidate.
- j) If the examiners have any doubts that the thesis is genuinely the work of the candidate, they should contact Student Administration.
- k) 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/her research and to defend the thesis. It is recommended that, during a long oral examination, examiners should allow short breaks at appropriate points.
- l) The supervisor, if present, does not have the right to participate in the examination but may contribute if invited to do so by the examiners.
- m) Where a candidate feels that his/her academic performance on the date of the oral examination may be substantially affected by unexpected medical or other personal circumstances, the student should

inform the examiners of his/her situation no later than the start of the oral examination so that they can make a decision on whether or not to proceed. The examiners may require the student to submit evidence of his/her condition to Student Administration within seven days.

- n) If the candidate becomes so unwell or distressed during the oral examination that he/she is unable to proceed, the examiners should, in consultation with the candidate and supervisor / Independent Chair (if present), decide whether or not to continue the oral examination. If they do continue, they should note in their Final Joint Report that the candidate was unwell. If they decide not to continue, they should determine whether sufficient evidence has been provided to allow a decision to be taken or whether it will be necessary to hold the oral examination on another occasion.
- o) If the candidate makes comments to the examiners which put them under moral pressure (e.g. alluding to the consequences of failure for him/her), or offers any kind of incentive to the examiners to pass him/her, the examination should be terminated and a report made to the Head of Academic Development via Student Administration.
- p) In addition to examining the candidate orally, the examiners have the discretion to examine the candidate by means of written papers or practical examination. This provision is rarely invoked and examiners are asked to contact Student Administration if they wish to do so.
- q) At the conclusion of the oral examination, the candidate and the supervisor (if present) should withdraw and the examiners should initially confer together on the result in private. If an audio recording has been made of the viva, care should be taken to ensure that the recording is stopped before this discussion takes place.
- r) The examiners have discretion after the initial private discussion to consult the supervisor, irrespective of whether he/she was present at the oral, particularly if they have doubts relating to the appropriateness of the decision made.
- s) It is recognised that the examiners may wish to advise the candidate orally and informally of their decision at the conclusion of their deliberations following the oral, particularly if their decision is that the candidate has passed or will pass subject to making minor amendments to the thesis. Examiners are advised to exercise particular care if they do this; it is important to make clear to the candidate that the result is not formal and final until the candidate has been notified by letter by the Royal Holloway Student Administration. This notification will be sent once the examiners have submitted their written reports and all other requirements have been satisfied (see section 7 below).

## 5 The Result of the Examination

- a) The options open to the examiners in determining the result are set out in the [Research Degree regulations](#). In summary, they are:
  - i. Pass the level entered for.
  - ii. Pass, subject to minor amendments to be completed and checked by one or both of the examiners within 3 months.
  - iii. Pass, subject to amendments to address errors of substance or omission to be completed and checked by one or both of the examiners within 9 months.
  - iv. Not pass, but candidate is allowed to re-write the thesis and resubmit it within 12 months (MPhil) / 18 months (PhD) for examination. An oral examination need not be held on re-entry.
  - v. Not pass, but be allowed to re-take a written paper(s) or practical examination (rarely used – see 4.o.)
  - vi. Not pass, but be allowed to submit to a further oral examination within 18 months on the same thesis.
  - vii. Fail PhD, but either has met the requirements for the MPhil or might, after revision of the thesis during a 12 month period, be able to meet the requirements for the MPhil.
  - viii. Outright fail. No further entry to the PhD or MPhil degree will be allowed.
- b) Examiners should not consider option (vii) unless they have first considered and rejected as inapplicable the preceding options and similarly should not consider option (viii) unless they have previously considered and rejected as inapplicable all the preceding options.

- c) It is suggested that, if it is decided that amendments to the thesis are required before a Pass can be awarded, the most appropriate outcomes would be:
- Minor amendments (see option ii above) – for a small number of typographical errors, spelling mistakes, adjustment of grammar or style in a few sentences or paragraphs, and corrections to references and diagrams, and other more extensive corrections as long as they do not require major reworking or re-interpretation of the intellectual content of the thesis.
  - Errors of substance or omission (see option iii above) – for the correction of more widespread errors, adjustment of grammar or style in one or more chapters. This might be to clarify or amplify the argument, or analysis, or to correct or extend references, or some rewriting of one or two chapters.
  - Representation of thesis in a revised form (see option iv above) - for major alterations in structure or argument, correction and addition of references. Additional research may be required.

## 6 Reporting the Result of the Examination to Royal Holloway

- a) A yellow Decision Report form and a Final Joint Report form will be sent to the Internal Examiner with the thesis. The examiners are required to complete and sign the yellow Decision Report form, indicating which of the decisions they have made. In addition, they are required to write a Final Joint Report giving the grounds on which their decision is based.
- b) The Final Joint Report should have regard to the requirements of a thesis for the MPhil/PhD as set out in the [Research Degree regulations](#).
- c) The examiners may require the candidate to make specified minor amendments to their satisfaction within three months or specified amendments to address errors of substance or omission to their satisfaction within nine months. The amendments required should be set out clearly on the List of Amendments form (sent to the Internal Examiner with the thesis) within two weeks of the oral examination. The examiners (or one of their number nominated by them) may send this form directly to the candidate or attach it to the yellow Decision Report form that is sent to Student Administration within two weeks of the oral. Student Administration will then advise the candidate of the amendments required. If amendments are required, the candidate is asked to liaise directly with the examiner who has been nominated to check the amendments. They should ascertain whether the nominated examiner would prefer to receive the amended thesis electronically or as a hard copy.
- d) If the examiners decide to refer the candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis for the PhD in 18 months, they should indicate on the Final Joint Report form in what ways the current thesis fails to satisfy the requirements for the PhD degree and should indicate clearly, although not necessarily in detail, the revisions which they consider should be made.
- e) If the candidate has been asked to revise and resubmit the thesis within 18 months, the examiners should indicate one of the following on the yellow Decision Report form:
- i. They will definitely require an oral on the resubmitted thesis
  - ii. They have agreed that it will definitely not be necessary to conduct an oral on the revised thesis
  - iii. They wish to reserve their position until they have read the revised thesis.
- f) If the examiners decide that the criteria for the MPhil have been, or might be satisfied by a PhD candidate, they should indicate on the Final Joint Report form:
- i. the basis for their decision not to allow resubmission for the PhD
- and**
- ii. should indicate in a positive way how the requirements for a thesis for the MPhil (set out in the regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees) are satisfied
- or**

- iii. 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.
- g) Please note that 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 to be awarded as compensation for a failed PhD.
- h) If the examiners' decision is to fail the candidate outright, they should indicate the basis for their decision to reject all the other options open to them.
- i) The examiners are asked to agree between themselves at the end of the oral examination the arrangements for drafting and finalising their Final Joint Report and for sending it, the List of Amendments (if applicable) and their copies of the thesis (unless it has been given to the candidate to make minor amendments) to Student Administration.
- j) It is important for the candidate that the examiners complete the yellow Decision Report form and send it, together with their Final Joint Report and List of Amendments (if applicable) to the Royal Holloway Student Administration within two weeks of the oral examination. 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 Student Administration to discuss the situation.
- k) If the examiners have indicated on the yellow Decision Report form that they require the candidate to make amendments, a further form will be sent by Student Administration to the examiner named on the yellow Decision Report form or to the internal examiner if both examiners are to check the thesis. This form is to be used to certify that the criteria for the degree have been reached and the minor amendments have been completed satisfactorily.
- l) Once Student Administration has received the examiners' reports indicating that the candidate has reached the necessary standard, this decision is sent to the Faculty Dean, together with a copy of the report forms, for approval. The date of the MPhil/PhD award is the first of the month following this approval.
- m) Examiners have the right to make comments in confidence in a separate report to the Royal Holloway Student Administration.

## **7 Notification of the Decision to the Candidate**

- a) For those candidates who have reached the necessary standard to pass the MPhil/PhD, official notification of their award will be sent to them once the decision has been approved by the Faculty Dean and the candidate has submitted the necessary copies of their finalised thesis (one hard bound copy to Student Administration and one electronic copy via [Pure](#)).
- b) For those candidates who are asked to resubmit their thesis for examination, official notification of the examiners' decision will be sent to them once the decision has been approved by the Faculty Dean.
- c) In both cases, a copy of the yellow Decision Report form and the examiners' Final Joint report form are sent to the candidate with the official notification of outcome. A copy of the Preliminary Report forms will not normally be made available to the student. Copies of all the examiners' reports are also forwarded to the candidate's department for their records.

## **8 The Examination of Candidates who are Resubmitting**

- a) Unless it is impossible for them to do so, it is usual that the original examiners will examine the candidate on re-entry whether to the PhD or to the MPhil.
- b) In examining a re-entry candidate, the examiners should have regard to the report they made on the first examination, copies of which will be sent to them with the resubmitted thesis.
- c) Examiners have discretion about whether or not to hold an oral examination on a revised and resubmitted thesis but will need to have regard to any statement they have made about this on the yellow Decision Report form and in their Final Joint Report on the original examination.

- d) When the revised thesis is dispatched to the examiners, the supervisor is asked to contact the examiners to ask if an oral is required and, if so, to arrange as necessary.
- e) Examiners are asked to write their independent preliminary report on the resubmitted thesis before conferring with their co-examiner. Please note that preliminary reports are always required for a resubmission examination regardless of whether a second viva is held and must be written and submitted to Student Administration prior to examiners conferring on the resubmitted thesis.
- f) Apart from the possibility of not holding an oral examination, the re-entry examination for the PhD is subject to exactly the same regulations and procedures as the original examination. All the decisions set out in the [Research Degree regulations](#) for the original examination are open to the examiners except for:
  - o Pass, subject to amendments to address errors of substance or omission to be completed and checked by one or both of the examiners within 9 months
  - o a further referral to revise and resubmit the thesis within 12 (MPhil) or 18 (PhD) months for examination

## 9 If the Examiners are not in Agreement or Require Further Assistance

If the examiners are unable to reach agreement, their reports shall be referred to the College Board of Examiners Executive Committee, which shall determine the action to be taken.

## 10 Examiners' Fees and Expenses

- a) The examination fee for MPhil/PhD examiners is stated in the invitation letter and is paid to each examiner following the initial examination and following any subsequent re-entry examination after a referral. Payment is authorised automatically on receipt of the examiners' Final Joint Report and Decision Report forms.
- b) Examiners may claim travel and other expenses in accordance with the 'Guidelines on PhD/MPhil Examiners' Fees and Expenses'. Claims should normally be submitted to Student Administration at the conclusion of the examination. The expenses claimed will be paid once the Final Joint Report and Decision Report forms have been received.

## 11 Equal Opportunities

All examinations of Royal Holloway are subject to Royal Holloway's Equal Opportunities Policy (<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/ecampus/documents/pdf/codesandregulations/eopolicystatement.pdf>) All candidates are subject to the same academic criteria and requirements.

## 12 Appeals Procedure

Appeals against the examiners' decision must be submitted in writing by the candidate to the Head of Academic Development within one month of the date on which the candidate was formally notified of the outcome of the examination. Further information is available at:

<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/ecampus/academicsupport/appeals/home.aspx>.

**If you have any concerns or wish to seek advice at any stage in the examination process, please do not hesitate to contact the Royal Holloway Student Administration:**

**Student Administration  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
Egham Hill  
Egham  
Surrey  
TW20 0EX**

**Telephone: 01784 414647  
E-mail: [researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk).**

<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/ecampus/academicsupport/examinations/researchdegrees/home.aspx>