

Guidelines for the Chair of a PhD Oral Examination

Date last modified: August 2013

The chair of the oral examination is responsible for maintaining the integrity of the oral examination process and acts as a neutral chair at the examination.

The chair is a member of the University's academic staff who is experienced as an oral examiner, nominated by the Department/School and appointed by the Dean of Postgraduate Research (DPGR).

- The involvement of a less experienced member of the academic staff as an observer through the examination process and oral examination, mentored by the chair, is encouraged prior to appointment as an oral chair.

The role of the Oral Examination Chair

Before the oral examination

- The date and mode (face-to-face or video link) for the oral examination is determined at the time of nomination of the thesis examiners (but may be modified later, if necessary, with the agreement of all participants and the DPGR).
 - The oral chair should co-ordinate discussions with the candidate, supervisor and examiners to determine a mutually convenient date for the oral examination.
- Once the examiners have acknowledged receipt of the thesis, the oral chair (and candidate) will receive email notification from the Postgraduate (PG) Office with confirmation of the agreed date for the oral examination.
 - Unless there is a problem (e.g., an examiner requests an extension of time to examine the thesis) the oral chair should not expect to hear from the PG Office until approximately 10 days prior to the oral examination when the DPGR will release the examiners' reports to the chair.
- If a face-to-face examination is being conducted, the chair should book an appropriate room for the oral. S/he should also liaise with the PG Office (postgraduate-office@canterbury.ac.nz) regarding any travel and accommodation arrangements for the oral examiner. Bookings can be made by either the PG Office or the host Department/School, but note that all travel bookings must be made through the official university travel agent.
 - The University will reimburse the oral examiner for all normal expenses (taxi fares, meals etc.) incurred in conducting the oral examination. Original receipts should be supplied to the PG Office within two weeks of the examination taking place.
- If a video-link examination is being conducted, the chair should book an appropriate venue with the necessary facilities. ICTS (videoconference@canterbury.ac.nz) can provide information regarding the suitability of various facilities on campus for holding an oral examination and can also provide technical support for the oral examination. The chair should also ensure that those who will not be at UC for the oral examination (usually the oral examiner, but occasionally the candidate) have access to appropriate video facilities – ICTS can test the connection in advance.
 - Skype should only be used if no other video-link facilities are available. If Skype is to be used this should be done through a video suite with a large-screen facility, rather than via a PC or laptop monitor.

On receipt of the examiners' reports

- Once both examiners' reports have been received, the DPGR will release these to the oral chair.
 - If both examiners recommend proceeding to oral examination, the chair will be advised by the DPGR that the oral can go ahead.
 - If one of the examiners recommends proceeding to an oral examination and one that the candidate revise and resubmit the thesis for re-examination prior to an oral examination, the oral chair is asked to contact the examiners to determine whether a consensus can be reached over whether to proceed to an oral examination. The oral chair is welcome to share each examiner's report with the other to facilitate this discussion. If consensus is to proceed to an oral examination, then the chair can proceed to finalize details for the oral examination as planned. If the decision is to invite the candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis prior to an oral examination, the DPGR is to be advised. The planned oral examination will be postponed and the DPGR will invite the candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis. The PG Office will inform the examiners of this outcome and invite them to act as examiners for the resubmitted thesis in due course.
 - If both examiners recommend that the candidate revise and resubmit prior to an oral examination, the oral chair will be advised that the planned oral examination is to be postponed. The DPGR will invite the candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis. The PG Office will inform the examiners of this outcome and invite them to act as examiners for the resubmitted thesis in due course.
 - If one or more examiners recommend the candidate not be awarded a PhD (or invited to revise and resubmit the thesis for re-examination) the DPGR will contact the oral chair and supervisors to discuss the outcome.
- The oral chair should release the examiners' reports to the examiners, candidate and senior supervisor no more than 10 days and no less than five days before the oral examination.
 - With the agreement of the Dean of Postgraduate Research, reports may be released more than 10 days or fewer than five days prior to the oral examination, if there is good reason for such (e.g., student and/or supervisor are overseas). The oral chair (or student or supervisor) should make a case to the Dean of Postgraduate Research under such circumstances.
 - If s/he wishes to do so, the oral chair may contact the examiners prior to the oral examination to clarify issues raised in the written reports. Unless otherwise indicated, the oral examiner will be responsible for determining the outcome of the oral examination but, if deemed necessary, the absent examiner can be consulted before or after the oral examination.
- The oral chair should contact the candidate, supervisor and oral examiner to reconfirm details (time and place) of the oral examination.
 - The oral chair may also wish to inform all participants of the planned structure of the oral examination. While there is no set format, the following are typical:
 - the candidate is initially invited to present a brief overview of the research reported in the thesis. This provides the candidate with an opportunity to relax and feel comfortable talking before the questions begin;
 - the oral examiner is invited to ask questions of the candidate;
 - either the oral examiner or the supervisor present is asked to put the questions submitted by the absent examiner (the supervisor is often preferred in order to involve somebody else in the discussion and to give the supervisor a role);
 - at the end of the questioning the candidate is invited to make any final comments.

At the oral examination

- Welcome all those present and inform them as to the structure of the oral examination:
 - remind any observers that they are not to participate in the examination or communicate in any way during the examination;
 - remind the supervisor that s/he may participate in the examination to the extent invited by the oral chair and should not offer any answers to the questions posed to the candidate during the examination;
 - inform those present that you will make notes throughout the examination, including recording any amendments identified as being required to be completed;

- inform those present that at the end of the examination the candidate and any observers will be asked to leave the room, or go offline in the case of a video-link oral exam, whilst the oral chair and examiner discuss the recommendation to be made.
 - The senior supervisor, or replacement, shall be present during the decision making at the conclusion of the oral examination but should **not** take part in the decision making, except to answer any questions from the oral chair or the oral examiner. At the request of either the oral chair or oral examiner the senior supervisor may be required to absent him/herself during the decision making.
 - If there is a less experienced academic observing the oral examination process, mentored by the oral chair, then s/he may remain present but not participate in these discussions.
- explain the possible outcomes at the end of the oral examination, which are in the form of a recommendation to the DPGR:
 - that the PhD be awarded;
 - that the PhD be awarded after specified amendments are satisfactorily completed;
 - that the candidate be invited to revise and resubmit the thesis for re-examination (including a second oral examination);
 - that the candidate not be awarded the PhD.
- The chair of the oral examination shall act as a neutral chair and should not act as an additional examiner and does not have voting rights, but may ask questions of the candidate. The chair shall:
 - ensure that there is opportunity for all the questions to be addressed and that the examination is conducted in a cordial and collegial manner. This may involve moving the examination forward from a given discussion point;
 - ensure that the questions posed by the absent examiner in his/her written report are put to the candidate;
 - ensure that the questions posed by the oral examiner have been addressed to his/her satisfaction;
 - make notes as to the performance of the candidate throughout the oral examination and record any outstanding issues to be addressed. These notes will assist with the completion of the Oral Examination Recommendation Form;
 - ensure that the candidate is given an opportunity to make any final comments;
 - invite all except the oral examiner to leave the room, or go offline in the case of a video-link oral examination;
 - discuss with the oral examiner the recommendation to be made to the DPGR.
 - The oral chair can invite the senior supervisor to participate in the discussions if s/he deems it appropriate, but, in doing so, it must be kept in mind that the supervisor has observer status and is not an examiner.
 - If deemed necessary, the absent examiner can be consulted before a decision is made regarding the recommendation to the DPGR. This is, however, an unusual situation.
- If the recommendation is that the PhD be awarded subject to satisfactory completion of amendments, the required amendments are to be documented for inclusion in the PhD Oral Examination Report Form.
 - agreement should be reached over who is responsible for checking that the amendments have been completed satisfactorily – this is typically either the senior supervisor or the oral examiner;
 - a date by which the amendments should be completed should be specified – this should be discussed with the candidate and supervisor when they re-enter the room.
- If the recommendation is that the PhD not be awarded, but that the candidate be invited to revise and resubmit the thesis for re-examination, the nature of the revisions required are to be documented for inclusion in the PhD Oral Examination Form.
 - a date by which the amendments should be completed will be specified – this will be discussed with the candidate and supervisor when they re-enter the room.
- The PhD Oral Examination Recommendation Form should be signed by the examiner(s) and supervisor(s) present and the oral chair.
- Once a decision has been reached, the candidate and any support persons should be invited back in to the room or the video link should be re-established.
 - If the oral examiner reaches a decision, the candidate may be immediately informed of that recommendation. In doing so the following should be highlighted:
 - The recommendation will be made to the DPGR who will confirm this as soon as possible following receipt of the PhD Oral Examination Report Form.

- The PG Office will send the candidate details of any amendments required prior to final submission of the thesis as soon as possible following receipt of the PhD Oral Examination Report Form.
- Should no decision be reached immediately following the oral examination, the chair should explain to the candidate that further time is required to determine the result. If possible, the chair should give the candidate an indication of the timeframe for notification of the examiners' recommendation.

Following the oral examination

- Complete and submit the PhD Oral Examination Report Form and the PhD Oral Examination Recommendation Form to the PG Office (postgraduate-office@canterbury.ac.nz) as soon as possible after the oral examination.
- Raise any remaining issues with the DPGR.

If you have any questions regarding the examination process or the oral chair's role, please contact your Department/School Postgraduate Coordinator or the Postgraduate Office (postgraduate-office@canterbury.ac.nz).

Checklist

In advance of the oral

- If the oral is being conducted in person - confirmed any travel arrangements and/or accommodation for oral examiner. The PG Office can assist: postgraduate-office@canterbury.ac.nz
- If the oral is being conducted via video-link – an appropriate IT facility has been booked and ICTS have tested the link with the remote site(s). ICTS can assist: <http://assist.canterbury.ac.nz>
- The date, venue and time of the oral examination have been re-confirmed with the candidate, supervisor and oral examiner.
- The examiners' reports have been released to the student, supervisor and examiners. This should occur 5-10 days in advance of the oral examination.
- The candidate, supervisor and oral examiner have been informed of the intended format and structure of the oral examination

At the oral

- The questions provided by the absent examiner have been asked of the candidate
- The oral examiner has asked all the questions s/he wishes to
- The candidate has been given the opportunity to make any final comments

At completion of the oral

- A recommendation has been determined and the candidate has been informed of this.
- Any required amendments, the date for their submission and the person responsible for the sign-off of the amendments, have been identified and the candidate has been advised.
- The PhD Oral Examination Form is signed by the examiner(s) and supervisor(s) present and the oral chair
- The PhD Oral Examination Form and the PhD Oral Examination Recommendation Form is completed and sent to the PG Office (postgraduate-office@canterbury.ac.nz)