

The Doctoral Oral Examination

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What is the Doctoral oral examination?

The oral examination is an integral part and culmination of the Doctoral process at the University of Canterbury. The oral examination has two main purposes:

- It is a formal examination at the end of which a recommendation is made to the Dean of Postgraduate Research (DPGR) as to whether the Doctoral degree should be awarded or not. This recommendation includes details of any amendments that are required to be made before the final version of the thesis can be submitted and the degree conferred. The oral examination comes after the examination of the written thesis and allows the examiners to probe further the research reported in the written thesis.
- It is an opportunity for discussion of the candidate's research, its applications and further directions in a constructive and supportive manner.

What is the mode of the oral examination?

The oral examination can either take place in a face-to-face setting or via a video-link. The mode for each examination is specified on the Nomination of Examiners Form and should be discussed with the candidate, supervisors, oral chair and oral examiner and decided upon at the time of submission of a thesis for examination. A video-link will typically be used if some participants are unable to be in Christchurch for the oral examination or if it enables the oral to be held sooner.

Some departments/schools require candidates to give a public presentation of their research. This does not, however, form part of the formal University examination process.

When is the oral examination held?

The oral examination is held after the written reports have been received from each of the independent thesis examiners. The date for the oral examination is set at the time of the submission of the thesis for examination and is specified on the Nomination of Examiners Form and should be discussed with the candidate, supervisors, oral chair and examiners. The Postgraduate Office will notify the candidate and supervisor by email when the examiners have acknowledged receipt of the thesis and will confirm in that email the date of the oral. Very occasionally the oral has to be rescheduled due to unforeseen circumstances (e.g., examiner illness); all parties will be notified as soon as possible if it becomes necessary to reschedule an oral examination.

Once the examiners reports and recommendations have been received the Dean of Postgraduate Research reviews them notifies the chair of the oral examination if the oral can go ahead as scheduled. In some cases (< 10%) the examiners' recommend major amendment of the thesis and re- submission prior to an oral examination being held. If this

occurs then the candidate and supervisor will be contacted by the oral chair and the Dean of Postgraduate Research to discuss this process.

Who is present at the oral examination?

The following people are to be present at the oral examination (either in person or via video-link):

- The Oral Chair: the chair is a senior member of the UC academic staff who is responsible for organizing the oral examination, maintaining the integrity of the oral examination process and acting as a neutral chair at the examination. The oral chair is nominated at the same time as the thesis examiners.
- The candidate
- The Senior Supervisor: if the senior supervisor is unavailable then another member of the supervisory team may attend in his/her place. The supervisor can participate in the examination only to the extent permitted by the oral chair – s/he is not to act as an advocate for the candidate or to answer questions on behalf of the candidate
- Oral examiner: one of the two examiners is nominated as the oral examiner. The second examiner will not normally attend the oral examination.

Observers:

- The candidate is permitted to invite up to two persons to attend the oral examination as observers. These support persons cannot participate in the examination in any form.
- An academic who has not acted as an oral chair may be present as an observer of the oral chair as part of their academic development. This person is would not normally be expected to participate in the examination.

What is the structure of the examination?

There is no set format for the oral examination and there may be different norms in different academic disciplines. Supervisor(s) and/or the oral chair should offer the candidate some guidance in advance as to the structure of the oral. The following stages are fairly typical:

- the candidate is initially invited to present a brief overview of the research reported in the thesis. This provides an opportunity for the candidate to highlight the main points and contributions of the thesis research and to address some of the issues raised in the examiners' reports
- the oral examiner is invited to ask questions of the candidate – some of these question will have been signalled in the examiner's written report
- either the oral examiner or the supervisor present will be asked to put the questions submitted by the non-present examiner
- at the end of the questioning the candidate is invited to make any final comments
- the oral chair will make notes throughout the examination to enable him/her to provide the Dean of Postgraduate Research with a report on the examination and to compile a list of any required amendments to be made by the candidate.

How should a candidate prepare for the oral examination?

The chair of the oral examination will release the examiners reports to the candidate and his/her senior supervisor 3-7 days before the oral examination. Each examiner will have completed an examiner's report and recommendation: see <http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/postgraduate/phd-and-doctoral-study/examiners/phd-examiners/> and may also have submitted a separate report on the thesis. On the report form each examiner will detail any necessary amendments to the thesis (often minor typographical or grammatical errors), will list questions/topics for discussion at the oral examination as well as make any additional comments (e.g., advice for publication, future research, application of the reported findings). These comments will provide the candidate with a good idea about the issues that will be considered in the oral examination, although the examiners can also ask questions not listed in the written reports. The oral chair will

ensure that the questions listed by the external examiner who is not present at the oral examination are put to the candidate during the oral examination. A candidate should discuss the examiners comments (and his/her responses) with his/her supervisors prior to the oral examination.

What are the possible outcomes of the examination?

At the end of the oral examination the oral chair and the oral examiner ask everybody to leave the room (or disconnect from the video-link) while they discuss the outcome of the examination. The oral chair is required, on behalf of the examiners, to make a recommendation to the Dean of Postgraduate Research. The recommendation options are detailed below.

- (a) the candidate be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
- (b) the candidate be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy subject to satisfactory completion of amendments specified below.
It is recommended that completion of the amendments occur by _____ and that they be approved by _____
- (c) the candidate be invited to revise and resubmit the thesis for re-examination
- (d) the candidate not be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy but be awarded instead an appropriate Master's degree
- (e) no degree be awarded to the candidate

Once the oral chair and oral examiner have decided on their recommendation they will invite the others back in to the room, or will reconnect by video-link, and notify the candidate of the recommendation to be made. The most common outcome is recommendation (b) – that the candidate be awarded the degree subject to the satisfactory completion of a number of amendments. The nature of these amendments will be discussed with the candidate at the end of the oral examination and will also be sent to you by the Postgraduate Office, as detailed below.

Very occasionally the oral examiner and oral chair are unable to decide on a recommendation and may require further time, and may wish to consult with the non-present examiner. In such cases the oral chair will advise the candidate and give an indicative timeframe for reaching a decision.

What happens after the oral examination?

The Oral Chair submits the final Examiners Report Form to the Postgraduate Office who then contact the candidate as soon as possible to formally advise of the outcome of the Doctoral examination process. If a candidate has to make amendments to the thesis prior the PG Office will forward the list of amendments provided by the Oral Chair and provide the candidate with information as to the process for submitting the amended thesis for sign-off and the date by which the amendments are to be submitted.

Before becoming eligible to graduate the candidate must deposit the final revised version of your thesis in the University Library – the PG Office will advise the candidate as to how to do this – and ensure that all other University requirements have been met (e.g., payment of all fees). Once a candidate is eligible to graduate s/he will be advised of the process to apply to graduate, either in person at one of the UC graduation ceremonies in April or December or *in absentia*.

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

