

MPLS Guidance Notes for Examiners for Research Degrees
Checklist and Key Timelines

1. – Before the viva:

- ☐ Respond to the formal invitation – the research degrees team cannot release the thesis until both examiners have formally accepted the invitation to examine.
- ☐ Order paper copies if needed – if you require a paper copy of the thesis, this can be ordered via the Research Degrees Examiner Portal.
- ☐ If a remote viva is required, request approval from the Director of Graduate Studies – in exceptional circumstances, permission can be requested for any or all of the candidate and examiners to attend the viva remotely via video call. All examiners and the student must agree in writing to remote attendance by any party at the viva.
- ☐ Arrange viva date – inform the candidate of the viva date **within one month**. Examiners are normally expected to complete the whole examination process **within three months** from receipt of thesis. The viva should not normally be held less than four weeks after receipt of the thesis, unless approved by the Director of Graduate Studies (in which case the research degrees team should be informed).
- ☐ Add the viva details to the Research Degrees Examiner Portal no later than 10 days before the viva, this will inform the Research Degrees Team and the Gazette.
- ☐ If applicable, familiarise yourself with the [MPLS divisional guidance](#) relating to how COVID has disrupted the candidate's research.

2. – The viva:

First Examination:

- ☐ Hold the viva (this is a mandatory requirement for all candidates submitting a thesis).

Resubmitted thesis following reference back:

- ☐ Examiners to discuss whether a further viva is required **after** they have reviewed the resubmitted thesis.
 - ☐ Hold another viva
 - ☐ Dispense viva (see note)

Examiners should only dispense from a second viva if they have satisfied themselves in the first examination that the candidate possesses a good general knowledge in their field of learning and are at the standard necessary of a DPhil. If recommending further major corrections or reference back for resubmission or the award of the degree of M.Sc (Res) a further viva is always required.

Viva length: an oral examination should normally be a **minimum of one hour and a maximum of three hours**.

3. – After the viva:

- ☐ For Minor Corrections Recommendations – provide the list of corrections to the student at the viva, or at the **latest within two weeks** of the viva and complete the minor corrections information within the Exam Report Task in the Examiner Portal;
- ☐ After the Submission of Minor Corrections – if they have been completed satisfactorily upload the joint report to the Research Degrees Examiners Portal **within one month**;
- ☐ For All Other Recommendations - upload the joint report to the Research Degrees Examiners Portal **no later than one month after the viva, and ideally within two weeks**.

The following page provides a checklist of the report requirements.

Note: Please refer to the Additional Notes at the end of this document for further information.

Examiner Report Content Checklist

The joint report should provide sufficient information to enable both the relevant Director of Graduate Studies and the Associate Head for Research Degrees to understand the basis for the examiners' recommendation. Reports that do not meet this requirement may be returned to the examiners for amplification, leading to inevitable delays in the candidate receiving their result.

1. – If recommending award of the degree the report should include:

- ☐ the date of the viva and its approximate duration;
- ☐ an outline of the structure of the thesis;
- ☐ a statement of the scope and content of the thesis aimed at a non-specialist (this might take the form of a brief summary of each chapter or section of the thesis, including a short description of the key theoretical or experimental approaches used or developed), and how the results and conclusions make “a significant and substantial contribution in the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls” (see section 6.1(ii) in the University's Memorandum for Examiners);
- ☐ evaluative comments on the strengths/achievements as well as of the limitations, weaknesses and omissions of the thesis;
- ☐ a statement and description on the candidate's performance in the oral examination;
- ☐ comments on the candidate's explanations for any deficiencies in the thesis;
- ☐ a statement that the examiners believe the student to be the true author of the thesis;
- ☐ comments on whether the work has been published or is of publishable quality;
- ☐ a clear statement confirming the recommendation on the outcome of the examination; (e.g., “We are clear that the candidate's thesis and performance in the viva meet the standard required for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy” or, “ We recommend the candidate should carry out major corrections to their thesis”)
- ☐ If minor corrections have been completed: include a statement that minor corrections have been completed to the satisfaction of the examiners.

For the Award of the degree of DPhil: as prescribed in the Examination Regulations the examiners should also jointly report:

- ☐ that the candidate possesses a good knowledge of the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- ☐ that the candidate has made a significant and substantial contribution in the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- ☐ that the thesis is presented in a lucid and scholarly manner;
- ☐ that in their opinion the thesis merits the degree of Doctor of Philosophy; and
- ☐ that the candidate has presented a satisfactory abstract of the thesis

For the Award of the degree of MSc by Research: as prescribed in the Examination Regulations the examiners should also jointly report:

- ☐ that the candidate possesses a good knowledge of the field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- ☐ that the candidate has shown competence in investigating the chosen topic;
- ☐ that the candidate has made a worthwhile contribution to knowledge and understanding in the field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- ☐ that the thesis is presented in a lucid and scholarly manner; and
- ☐ that it merits the award of the Degree of Master of Science by Research.

2. – For **major corrections** the joint preliminary report should include, all of the relevant points from 1 above and:

- ☐ a detailed description of the major corrections required;
- ☐ a clear statement to confirm that the corrections being requested will not alter the substance/outcome or conclusion of the thesis, and will also not involve the student doing any substantial research and/or experimental work to accommodate these changes.

Examiners should not add any statement to the report confirming that the candidate should be awarded the DPhil when recommending major corrections. This should only be confirmed once the major corrections have been submitted and reviewed and both examiners are in agreement that the corrections have been completed satisfactorily.

Review of major corrections – following submission of major corrections, if recommending the award of the degree, **a new report is required on the revised thesis** and should include all the points from 1 above and:

- ☐ a clear statement and description of how the major corrections have now been addressed.

3. – For **reference back** the report should include, all of the relevant points from 1 above and:

- ☐ a clear statement of what is wrong with the thesis, indicating clearly and precisely how the thesis falls short of the required standard and how the candidate should revise it to remedy these defects.

On resubmission a second viva may be necessary so **you must not waive** the need for a second viva in the report.

Following submission of the revised thesis, if recommending the award of the degree, the report should include all the points from 1 above and:

- ☐ a clear statement and description of how the revisions requested have now been addressed.

Note: Any lists of minor or major corrections should be attached as an appendix to the report.

It would be helpful if you could complete and return this checklist with your joint report, to ensure that you have covered all the points in the report.

Important Information for Examiners in the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division Additional Notes of Guidance for D.Phil. and M.Sc. by Research

The Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division would be grateful if examiners observe the following additions to the standard instructions contained in the University's 'Memorandum for Examiners for D.Phil. or M.Sc. by Research'.

1. The thesis

The examiners must consider only the copy of the thesis issued to them via the Research Degrees Examiner Portal. If you still require a hardcopy, you can request this via the portal, and this will be arranged for you. Under no circumstances can the examiners use a copy of the thesis supplied directly by the candidate or supervisor.

- [Guidance for Examiners on taking into account the impact\(s\) of the pandemic](#)

Where a student's research was disrupted by COVID-19, it is possible for them to have this taken into account in their final viva examination. The student will still need to meet the qualitative requirements, but examiners can take into account the impact of the pandemic on the volume and/or type of research produced.

2. Early vivas / Remote vivas

Examiners should expect to be in possession of the thesis for a minimum of four weeks prior to the viva date. If a viva earlier than this date has been requested for exceptional reasons, and both examiners are willing to conduct it, the internal examiner must seek permission from the relevant Director of Graduate Studies.

In exceptional circumstances, the Director of Graduate Studies has the power to grant permission for any or all of the candidate and examiners to attend the viva remotely via video call. External examiners are most likely to request remote attendance, but it is also possible for internal examiners and the student to attend remotely. All examiners and the student must agree in writing to remote attendance by any party at the viva.

3. Timetable for examination and report

Examiners are normally expected to complete the examination and submit their joint report within three months of receipt of the thesis.

No corrections required

- if the thesis is entirely satisfactory and no corrections are required, the joint examiners' report should be uploaded to the Research Degrees Examiner Portal no later than one month from the date of the viva, **and ideally within two weeks** of the date of the viva. A reminder to return the report may be sent two weeks from the date of the viva.

Minor corrections

- the examiners' requirements should be reported to the student at the viva or, at the latest, within **two weeks** of the viva taking place;
- the notice of minor corrections information should be added to the Exam Report task in the Examiner Portal as soon as the corrections have been provided to the student either at/or following the viva;
- the candidate is permitted **two months** to complete the minor corrections;
- on receipt of the completed minor corrections, examiners should aim to upload their joint report to the Research Degrees Examiner Portal within **one month**.

Major corrections

- the examiners should upload their joint preliminary report to the Research Degrees Examiner Portal no later than one month from the date of the viva, **and ideally within two weeks** of the date of the viva. Examiners should **not** provide the candidate with a copy of the report or required corrections. This will be sent to the candidate via the examination schools, once it has been approved by the Board.

Reference back, or recommending the award of a lower degree

- the examiners should upload their joint report to the Research Degrees Examiner Portal no later than one month from the date of the viva, **and ideally within two weeks** of the date of the viva. Examiners should **not** provide the candidate with a copy of the report or required revisions. This will be sent to the candidate via the examination schools.

4. Guidance on examination outcomes

Examiners with any doubt as to the appropriateness of minor corrections as against major corrections, or major corrections as against reference back should feel free to consult the relevant Director of Graduate Studies, Graduate Studies Officer or Graduate Studies Assistant, if this would be helpful.

On examining the candidate if the examiners are clear that the candidate does not possess a good general knowledge in their field of learning and are not at the standard necessary of a DPhil, then a further viva must be held when the revised thesis is submitted, to allow the examiners to determine this. This should be the case for any major corrections or reference back outcomes.

When selecting the appropriate recommendation, examiners should ensure that their joint report clearly sets out what the candidate is required to do for all the options that are being offered to them, for example, if the examiners select the option, 'reference back for the D.Phil. or award of M.Litt./M.Sc. subject to minor corrections', the examiners should outline in the report what the candidate is required to do to resubmit for the DPhil, as well as specifying what corrections the candidate would be required to do if they decided to accept a lower award subject to minor corrections.

Outcomes:

a) Minor corrections

Minor corrections should normally cover typographical errors, spelling mistakes, incomplete or inconsistent references or equations, and factual mistakes. It may include very limited rewriting of the introduction and/or conclusion to clarify the aims, scope or findings of the thesis. Such corrections should not affect the substance of an argument or a conclusion in the thesis, and they should not indicate a candidate's lack of grasp of the regular procedures for presenting research in his or her subject. Examiners must provide a list of corrections to the candidate within two weeks of the oral examination. The candidate is allowed two months to make these corrections. It normally requires only one examiner (usually the internal) to approve minor corrections. The joint report must **not** be uploaded until the corrections have been satisfactorily completed and checked. Examiners should also include a statement at the end of their report to confirm that these have been made to their satisfaction.

b) Major corrections

Major corrections should not alter the substance/outcome or conclusion of the thesis. It should not involve the student doing any substantial re-analysis, research and/or experimental work to accommodate these changes. For example, candidates should not be asked to conduct any major experiments under these corrections. However, they may be asked to repeat an experiment to correct an error. **If any re-analysis is required such that it is not clear if the major outcome or primary conclusions will remain the same, then the option of reference back would be more appropriate (please consult the DGS if it would be helpful).** Major corrections may involve some re-writing or re-working of the thesis i.e. revision of one or more chapters. The candidate is allowed six months (from the point at which the candidate receives the list of major corrections) to make these changes. Examiners will need to upload a preliminary report to the board with a detailed description of the major corrections required. If the recommendation is approved by the board, both examiners will be required to review the revised thesis, which may involve holding a further viva. Examiners should **not** provide the candidate with a copy of the report or required corrections. The student and supervisor will be sent a copy of these once the recommendation has been approved by the Board.

c) Reference back

Where corrections of a more significant nature are required, for example where the student is required to carry out new research/experimental work that might alter the arguments or conclusions, then it is necessary to refer the thesis back for re-examination. Such revisions should be reassessed by both examiners appointed by the Board (normally the same examiners will be appointed). A formal statement of the deficiencies in the thesis should be attached to the report. **This**

statement should not be communicated directly to the candidate (or their supervisor). The Division takes a considerable interest in the wording of the statements of deficiencies. On occasion it asks examiners to expand or clarify certain points before the statement is formally transmitted to the student with the Division's decision on their candidature. Difficulties can sometimes occur on resubmission, and if there is a dispute it is important for the Division to know exactly what corrections the examiners have requested. Moreover, it is equally important for any new examiner to know what their predecessor required, in the event that the latter does not serve in this capacity for the resubmission, as can happen from time to time.

In referring back a thesis for re-examination examiners are asked to indicate broadly the amount of time they would expect it to take a candidate working full-time to make the corrections to bring the thesis up to an acceptable standard. In making referrals, examiners should take into account the likely availability of facilities in departments to enable candidates to continue their research or repeat experiments. It is important not to pre-empt the report on a resubmitted thesis by indicating in the report that a second viva may not be necessary. In the event of a second referral, the [Examination Regulations](#) are clear that a second viva is mandatory.

Resubmission of thesis

On resubmission of the thesis, students should submit a separate report indicating the specific changes made. For students in the MPLS Division the word limit for the accompanying report is 2,000 words.

5. The examiners' joint report

It should be noted that in the MPLS Division the D.Phil. and M.Sc. examiners' reports are sent for approval to the Director of Graduate Studies of the relevant department or sub-department, and then to the Associate Head for Research Degrees for approval on behalf of the Divisional Board. The purpose of divisional scrutiny is not to question or overturn the academic judgment of the examiners, but primarily to confirm that the examiners have provided a sufficient justification for their recommendation, and to check if there are any points in the report which might indicate some concern about the department's provision of doctoral training which the Division should raise with the appropriate Director of Graduate Studies. This final approval step is essential for quality assurance purposes. The report should therefore provide sufficient information to enable both the relevant Director of Graduate Studies and the Associate Head for Research Degrees to understand the basis for the examiners' recommendation. Reports that do not meet this requirement may be returned to the examiners for amplification, leading to inevitable delays in granting the candidate leave to supplicate.

i) Presentation of reports

All reports should be typed and not hand written, and printed in a legible font size (e.g. Arial 11 point).

Lists of minor or major corrections should be attached as an appendix to the report.

ii) Length of report

Examiners are asked to provide a reasonably full statement of the scope and content of the thesis (it is usual to give a brief summary of each chapter/section of the thesis) and to highlight the most significant outcomes of the research. The Division recognizes that the appropriate length may vary according to the subject and quality of the thesis. It welcomes the writing of concise and clear reports, but it expects that these would typically be of the order of one page in length for the case where a positive recommendation is made, and any minor corrections are straightforward. In cases where there are significant major corrections or reference back for resubmission is recommended, it is likely that a longer report will be necessary.

iii) Content of the report

As stated in the University's Memorandum of Guidance for Examiners the report should be "as far as possible expressed in terms that are intelligible to those who are not specialists in the particular field of the thesis". It should thus be written in a style that would be accessible to academics in any of the MPLS Division's departments.

The Associate Head for Research Degrees does not generally receive a copy of the abstract of the thesis at the same time as the examiners' report. The Division does not need to see the candidate's own evaluation and summary of their achievements (normally aimed at the specialists) but rather the examiners' evaluation of the work.

The report will not be considered to be sufficient if it only indicates the area in which the research was conducted (e.g. “the candidate presented a thesis about the synthesis and characterization of fluorine-containing molecules”); rather the report should summarize the specific achievements of the candidate’s research presented in the thesis and explain how the results and conclusions make “*a significant and substantial contribution in the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls.*” If the work is of publishable quality, or if it is known to have already been published, this should be indicated in the report.

Examiners are also asked to note that, as well as giving an informative report on the subject matter and on the strength and weaknesses of the thesis, a statement about the candidate’s performance in the viva should also be included within their report. This should make clear that the examiners believe the thesis and the research reported on to be the candidate’s own work, and report on whether the candidate understood its contents. The date of the viva and an estimate of the duration of the viva should be included.

Please ensure that the recommendation on the outcome of the examination is noted as clearly as possible in the written joint report. An example of such a statement is provided below:

“We are clear that the candidate’s thesis and performance in the viva meet the standard required for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy”.

The statement may be enlarged upon to clarify the examiners’ views, for example to indicate if the candidate’s thesis and performance in the viva exceeded the standard, as the examiners consider appropriate.

Major Corrections

If major corrections are being recommended, the joint preliminary report to the board, in addition to the above, should include a detailed description of the major corrections required. The report should also include a clear statement to confirm that the corrections being requested will not alter the substance/outcome or conclusion of the thesis, and will also not involve the student doing any substantial research and/or experimental work to accommodate these changes.

- *Review of major corrections*

Following the submission of major corrections, if recommending the award of the degree, examiners are asked to submit a new report describing the revised version of the thesis, following the guidelines given in 5 (iii) above, and section 1 of the Examiner Report Content Checklist.

6. Further information

Full advice on the University’s examination requirements can be found in the “Memorandum for Examiners for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy” and the “Memorandum for Examiners for the Degree of Master of Science (by Research)” which should have been sent to you by the University’s Research Degrees Examinations Office. If you do not have a copy of the relevant note, please contact researchdegrees@admin.ox.ac.uk.