

# Higher Degree by Research Procedures - Examinations

## Section 1 - Purpose and Context

(1) These Procedures establish the required processes for examinations for Higher Degree by Research (HDR) programs at Western Sydney University.

(2) The accompanying [Higher Degree by Research Examinations Handbook](#) outlines the possible outcomes for a HDR examination.

## Section 2 - Definitions

(3) For the purposes of these Procedures, definitions that apply can be found in the [Higher Degree by Research Policy](#) and [Policy DDS Glossary](#), in addition to the following:

- a. Director, HDR and Honours means the academic program director for the Master of Research.
- b. Written Work means a thesis or exegesis as specified for a particular degree noting that:
  - i. a Thesis embodies the results of a candidate's original research and is submitted for external examination against international standards
  - ii. an Exegesis is a written work that supports an exhibition or a creative piece of work. It is a critical interpretation or explication of text, a project or creative work. It has a critical part to play in contextualising the research project in the field of enquiry. The exegesis outlines the reasoning behind the research and the underpinning methodology thus explicating the nature and conduct of the research that has underpinned the creation of the performances.
- c. External Examiner means a person appointed to examine a HDR thesis who is not an employee of the University at the time when invited to examine the thesis (see Part C for other requirements of external examiners).
- d. Master of Research Program is a Master Degree (Research) at [Australian Qualifications Framework](#) (AQF) Level 9 comprising Stage One and Stage Two studies.

## Section 3 - Policy Statement

(4) Refer to the [Higher Degree By Research Policy](#).

(5) The Dean, Graduate Studies and Researcher Development (Dean, GS & RD) may consider exceptions to these Procedures on a case-by-case basis.

## Section 4 - Procedures

## Part A - Thesis Requirements

(6) The requirements for specific HDR programs, are outlined in the [Online Handbook](#) and on the [Higher Degree Research webpage](#).

(7) The examinable work for a HDR program must be the candidate's own account of the work undertaken and may consist of a single written work, or a combination of written work with work in other media (including exhibition, performance, novel, film, video, computer program). The written work may be a thesis or exegesis, as specified for a particular program.

(8) The language of expression and analysis must normally be English and reach a satisfactory standard of literary presentation. With the written approval of the Faculty/Institute HDR Board, candidates may also submit:

- a. in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island language, or
- b. in a language other than English when their project is in a modern language.

(9) A candidate may not submit as the main content of the thesis any work or material which has been previously submitted for any degree.

(10) Candidates must submit their work through the University's preferred plagiarism checking system. There must be no evidence of plagiarism to the satisfaction of the Director, HDR and Honours.

(11) Any use of artificial intelligence (AI) including generative AI in any aspect of the research, including all examinable work, must be in accordance with University's [Use of Artificial Intelligence Policy](#) and guidelines and acknowledged and described in the written work.

(12) In exceptional cases, or as appropriate within a discipline, work done conjointly with other persons may be included in the examinable work. The Faculty/Institute HDR Board must approve the inclusion and extent of the conjoint work.

(13) The candidate will indicate in the thesis the sources of information and the extent to which the candidate has used the work of others. The submission will include:

- a. a 300-word abstract
- b. a statement of authentication signed by the candidate to the effect that the work is original and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other institution
- c. declarations, which may include:
  - i. an acknowledgement of the contribution to the work of any professional copy editors, or the use of generative AI
  - ii. an acknowledgement of the support of any funding including scholarships
  - iii. contributions from donors
  - iv. any conflicts of interest.

(14) If the thesis contains material that is previously published or submitted for publication, an authorship attribution must be submitted as part of the final thesis submission. It should indicate the name and publication details of the published work, as well as specify the candidate's and all other author contributions noting that:

- a. if the publication in which the work has previously appeared has a convention about author order, then you need to include this information after each relevant attribution statement (for example, where a journal requires that the lead author must be corresponding author)
- b. this only applies where the candidate has made a substantial contribution to the paper. Minor contributions to

published works should not appear in the main body of your thesis – these can only be included as appendices

- c. the candidate must obtain permission to reproduce copyright material where the right to reproduce has not already been granted as part of the publication process by the copyright holder. If copyright on third-party material has been assigned to a publisher, permission must be sought, in advance of submission, to reproduce the work in the thesis.

(15) Any components of the thesis in other media will be submitted in a form approved by the Director, HDR and Honours.

## **Part B - Submission for Examination**

(16) HDR theses must be approved for examination by both the Supervisory Panel and the Director, HDR and Honours or equivalent, prior to its submission to the Graduate Research School (GRS).

(17) Examination will be refused where the thesis is not deemed ready for examination, including where the thesis does not meet a suitable standard of format or presentation.

(18) Where examination is refused, the candidate will be asked to remain registered and to take further academic advice from their Principal Supervisor. The candidate may choose to refer the matter to the relevant Faculty/Institute HDR Board for determination. The candidate is required to pay overtime tuition fees if applicable.

(19) Where examination has been refused and referred to the relevant Faculty/Institute HDR Board, and the Faculty/Institute Research Board is unable to reach agreement, the matter will be referred to the Research Committee for a determination. The Research Committee will take any of the following options:

- a. determine the thesis is acceptable for examination
- b. refuse the examination and ask the candidate to remain registered and to take further academic advice from their Principal Supervisor
- c. recommend the Faculty/Institute HDR Board consider initiating a Show Cause for failure to make academic progress during the period of candidature (refer to the Higher Degree by Research Procedures – Progress).

(20) Where a candidature has lapsed and the candidate subsequently wishes to submit a thesis for examination, they must seek approval of the relevant Faculty/Institute HDR Board. Where the request is approved the candidate must register for at least one research quarter.

## **Part C - Examiners**

### **Requirements for Examiners**

(21) Two external examiners are required to examine all theses. All examiners must:

- a. hold qualifications at the level of, or the equivalent to that which they are examining, and be recognised academic or research leaders in their discipline
- b. be external to the University and have not been an employee of the University within the five years prior to the examination
- c. not be a previous supervisor of the candidate
- d. have not co-published with the candidate or any of their supervisors in the last five years
- e. be a respected cultural language speaker (for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander language submissions)
- f. comply with the [Integrity Compliance and Reporting Policy \(Conflicts of Interest, Gifts, Benefits\)](#).

(22) A maximum of one examiner from any one institution can be nominated.

## Nomination and Appointment

(23) The Principal Supervisor will nominate two external examiners and one reserve examiner following discussion with co-supervisors and seeking the views of the candidate ensuring there is no conflict of interest (Refer to the [Integrity Compliance and Reporting Policy \(Conflicts of Interest, Gifts, Benefits\)](#)).

(24) For theses covering significant Indigenous studies content (by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous candidates), attempts should be made to secure a qualified (academically and/or culturally) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person as a reviewer.

(25) The examiners must be approved by the relevant Director, HDR and Honours or equivalent, following endorsement by the relevant Faculty/Institute HDR Board or equivalent.

(26) The composition of the examination panel must remain confidential from the candidate at all times until the completion of the examination process, or prior to the oral examination in the case where there will be an oral examination.

(27) At the conclusion of the examination process each examiners' name may be disclosed to the candidate subject to the examiners' approval.

## Part D - The Examination

(28) The examiners will be asked to assess the work to determine if the thesis meets the requirements of the particular degree as follows:

- a. the thesis:
  - i. for a Research Master's program the thesis demonstrates advanced knowledge of research principles and methods applicable to a field of research and critically responds to or reflects the current knowledge in the field of research
  - ii. for a doctoral or MPhil program, the thesis makes an original contribution to the field of research through the generation of new knowledge or the application of knowledge in a new way
- b. the methods adopted are appropriate to the subject matter and are appropriately applied
- c. the research findings are suitably set out, accompanied by adequate exposition, and are discussed critically in the context of the field of research
- d. the literary and language quality, and general presentation is completed to the expected standard for the degree.

(29) Each examiner is required to advise regarding their progress in writing to the GRS within six weeks of the date of receiving the thesis for examination.

(30) If advice is not received at the six week point, the examiner will be advised that they have a further two weeks to submit their examination report.

(31) The GRS will report to the relevant Faculty/Institute HDR Board on the progress of examination provided by examiners.

(32) Examiners may be replaced if their examination report is not received within eight weeks unless the examiner is given leave to report late by the relevant Faculty/Institute HDR Board.

(33) An oral thesis examination will be scheduled by the School or Research Institute in consultation with the candidate at least one week after examiners reports are received by the GRS. Refer to the Oral Examinations part of these procedures.

## Access to Examiners' Reports

(34) Candidates will be given a copy of each examiner's report at the completion of the examination process. The names of the examiners will be withheld until one week before the oral examination. Candidates must not attempt to contact the examiners at any stage of the examination process. Examiners will be informed that this information may be requested by candidates under [Right to Information \(GIPA\)](#).

## Part E - Examination Results and Award of the Degree

(35) Upon receipt the GRS will make the examiner reports available to the Principal Supervisor, after any oral examination.

(36) The supervisors will complete a report addressing the examiners' comments.

(37) The Supervisor report is submitted by the Principal Supervisor to the Faculty/Institute HDR Board where the examination is reviewed to determine if:

- a. re-examination is required, or
- b. amendments to the thesis are required.

(38) Where re-examination is required, the candidate will be notified of the outcome and the GRS will initiate a re-examination process.

(39) Where amendments are required, the candidate will be directed to address the examiners' comments and submit their revised thesis to the Faculty/Institute HDR Board.

(40) Once the thesis has been corrected to the satisfaction of the Faculty/Institute HDR Board (or if no amendments were required), the thesis will be submitted (with and without tracked changes) with a table of examiner comments and the related amendments/responses to the Faculty/Institute Research Board.

(41) The Faculty/Institute Research Board may require further revision or re-examination.

(42) Once satisfied that all examiner comments have been addressed, the Faculty/Institute Research Board submits the recommendation to the Research Committee for approval of the conferral of the degree when satisfied that all requirements have been met. Refer to [Student Administration Policy - Recognition of Academic Excellence Procedure](#).

## Oral Examination

(43) All PhD students who commence from 1 January 2025 must complete an oral examination (sometimes known as oral defence or viva voce) in addition to submitting their PhD thesis to complete their degree. PhD students who commenced prior to this date can choose to voluntarily opt in to complete an oral examination in consultation with their supervisory panel.

(44) The oral examination forms part of the overall assessment of a HDR candidate's ability to carry out a research investigation. It is used to assess both the candidate and the thesis submitted for the award of the HDR degree. In particular, the oral examination:

- a. establishes that the candidate fully understands the work and its wider implications
- b. provides the candidate with an opportunity to reply to criticism or challenge
- c. enables the examiners to clarify issues in the thesis which may be unclear
- d. helps the examiners to decide on the nature and extent of any revisions which may be required
- e. authenticates the contribution made by the candidate to the thesis

f. ensures that the candidate has a clear understanding of the contribution of collaborators to the thesis.

(45) The oral examination panel is comprised of:

- a. the Director, HDR and Honours or nominee and
- b. examiners – examiners may participate in person or using video conferencing. The examination may proceed with the approval of the Dean in exceptional circumstances with one examiner and comments from the second examiner if the attendance of both examiners is not possible (all reports must be taken into consideration)
- c. for theses covering significant Indigenous studies content (by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous candidates), Director, Indigenous Research or another Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander scholar is invited onto the panel.

(46) The supervisory team does not form part of the examination panel but may observe.

(47) Examiners are asked to assess the candidate's performance in the oral examination against the following quality measures:

- a. the candidate demonstrated detailed knowledge of the thesis
- b. the candidate demonstrated an understanding of their research in the broader context of their discipline
- c. the candidate was able to defend the methodology and conclusions of the thesis and display an awareness of any limitations
- d. the candidate effectively communicated the results of the research in terms of impact and application of new knowledge
- e. the candidate as an individual demonstrated a substantive and independent contribution to the discipline.

## **Examination Outcomes**

(48) The following outcomes are available to the Faculty/Institute Research Board:

- a. candidate is awarded the degree without further changes or examination
- b. candidate is advised to make further changes
- c. candidate is awarded the degree, without further examination, after required changes to the thesis have been made to the satisfaction of the Faculty/Institute Research Board
- d. Candidate is permitted to repeat the oral examination component in response to the comments and recommendation of the oral examination panel (one re-attempt only)
- e. Candidate is permitted to submit for re-examination (one re-examination only)
- f. Candidate is awarded an MPhil (for a PhD re-examination only) as the candidate has not demonstrated a contribution to knowledge that is of sufficient significance or originality for a PhD but fulfils the criteria for an MPhil
- g. Candidate is awarded a Fail as the thesis is not of the appropriate standard for the award of any Higher Degree by Research and/or the candidate has not adequately met the expectations for the oral examination component and no further re-submission options are available under these procedures.

## **Repeating the Oral Examination**

(49) Where a candidate is provided the opportunity to repeat the oral component of the examination, this must be undertaken within three months of notification.

(50) The oral examination will be repeated with the original examination panel, whenever possible.

(51) If a member of the examination panel is unable to participate in the repeat of the oral examination, a

replacement member will be nominated by the Primary Supervisor and appointed by the Director, HDR and Honours.

(52) The thesis and oral examination is then resubmitted to the Faculty/Institute Research Board.

## **Thesis Amendments**

(53) Candidates who are permitted to resubmit their thesis with amendments have three months to complete the amendments and may request an extension of up to three months (Total of six months).

(54) A candidates failure to successfully resubmit their thesis amendments within the permitted timeframe will result in termination.

## **Re-Examination**

(55) Candidates who are permitted to revise their thesis and repeat the examination process will have up to 12 months to resubmit and may request an extension of up to six months (total 1.5 years).

(56) Both the written component and oral component (where applicable) of the examination process are repeated.

(57) If either of the original examiners is unable to continue to participate, a replacement examiner will be nominated by the Primary Supervisor and appointed by the Director, HDR and Honours or HDR Director.

(58) Examiners will be sent the revised thesis, the examiners' original reports (including oral examination report if applicable) and the candidate's response to the examiners' comments.

(59) Where the examiners disagree on the examination outcome following revision of the thesis, the Director, HDR and Honours or HDR Director may appoint a third examiner nominated by the Primary Supervisor. This examiner is appointed to provide an independent assessment of the thesis and will not be provided with the original examiners' reports. All three reports will then be considered by the Faculty/Institute Research Board in determining an examination outcome.

(60) A candidates failure to resubmit their thesis for examination within the permitted timeframe will result in termination.

## **Master of Research Examination**

(61) Theses submitted by MRes candidates will be assessed by two examiners consistent with the criteria in Part C.

(62) Three examiners, one of whom will be a reserve examiner, will be nominated by the Principal Supervisor following discussion with the supervisory panel and the views of the candidate have been sought. Examiners must be endorsed by the relevant Faculty/Institute HDR Board. Candidates are not to be advised of the identities of the examiners until the examination and results process is completed, and only with the relevant examiner's approval.

(63) Examiners must be asked to provide a numerical score and a written report.

(64) Where the marks from the two external examiners differ by 15% or less (that is, by 15 marks or less), the examiner reports and recommendation are sent to the relevant Faculty/Institute HDR Board for endorsement.

(65) Where the marks from the two external examiners differ by more than 15% (that is, 15 marks), the examiner reports and recommendations are sent to the relevant Director, HDR and Honours or HDR Director for a review where:

- a. the review panel will comprise the relevant Director, HDR and Honours or the HDR Director (Chair), and two nominated academic experts in the field
- b. the composition of the panel will be discussed with the Principal Supervisor

- c. the review panel will make an independent recommendation based on the reports from the two external examiners, and feedback from internal examiner
- d. the panel can only recommend a mark between the two marks given by the external examiners
- e. the recommendation from the review is then sent to the relevant Faculty/Institute HDR Board for endorsement.

(66) The final result is determined by averaging the numerical score of the examiners.

(67) A numerical score of at least 50% is required to qualify for award of the degree.

(68) If candidates receive a final result that is less than 50%, they may be given the opportunity to revise and re-submit in order to improve their result, but can only receive a maximum score of 50%.

(69) Candidates who wish to lodge their thesis with the University's Library (Library) may do so after making any revisions or corrections recommended by examiners and after approval by the Faculty/Institute Research Board.

(70) Final results will include a numerical score that can be used to rank graduates applying for scholarships and/or further research degree admission.

(71) The final result will be determined by the Faculty/Institute HDR Board and forwarded to the Research Committee for approval before the candidate is notified of the outcome.

### **Thesis Availability Post Examination**

(72) In order to graduate a candidate must, upon notification of the awarding of the degree, submit a completed Right of Access Form. This is in addition to any requirements outlined in the [Student Administration Policy - Recognition of Academic Excellence Procedure](#).

(73) An electronic copy of the thesis will be made available through the University Library unless other arrangements have been approved by the Dean, GS & RD.

(74) On request of the candidate, the Dean, GS & RD may determine in exceptional cases that the thesis will not be made available until after the expiry of a period, which shall not normally exceed one year, unless otherwise determined by arrangements in place under the [Intellectual Property Policy](#).

## **Section 5 - GUIDELINES**

- a. [GRS Forms, Policies and Guidelines webpage](#).
- b. [HDR Knowledge Articles](#).
- c. The Institute of Professional Editors Ltd - [Guidelines for Editing Research Theses \(25 Feb 2019\)](#).

## Status and Details

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## Glossary Terms and Definitions

**"Program"** - A program of study consisting of at least four subjects or 40 credit points leading to an award of the University (Foundation Studies Program, Undergraduate Preparation Program, Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Undergraduate Certificate, Associate Degree, Bachelor Degree, Bachelor Honours Degree, Graduate Certificate, Postgraduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma, Postgraduate Diploma and Masters by Coursework Degree) which when successfully completed is conferred on the graduand by the Board of Trustees.