



**Guidance Notes for a Research Degree Examination**  
**(MPhil, PhD or Doctorate in an Area of Professional Practice).**

**These notes are supplementary to and should be read in conjunction with the University's Regulations for the Award of the University's Degrees of Master of Philosophy, Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor in an Area of Professional Practice, a copy of which is provided to all Examiners and the Chair of the examining team.**

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 Examiners should not hesitate to contact the Doctoral Research College (DRC) if they require clarification of these guidance notes and procedures or any aspect of the Regulations. The DRC can be contacted on [DoctoralResearchCollege@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:DoctoralResearchCollege@bcu.ac.uk).
- 1.2 Examiners are asked to read these notes and the University's Research Degrees Regulations before completing the Preliminary Report Form - RESEXMPRELIM. Examiners will be provided with a copy of the Regulations by the DRC.
- 1.3 Throughout these notes for guidance where the term "oral examination" is used it should be deemed to apply equally to an "approved alternative examination".
- 1.4 All correspondence between the examiners and the University regarding the arrangements for the oral examination and the communication of the examiners' recommendations should be sent via the DRC.

**2. The Oral Examination - General**

- 2.1 All candidates will normally be examined orally on the programme of work and on the field of study in which the programme lies, but exceptionally the University may have approved an alternative form of examination (see regulation G8.3). Where the University has approved an alternative form of examination, examiners will be advised of this and the nature of the examination.
- 2.2 The oral examination will be chaired by a member of academic staff who is independent of the candidate, has experience in the supervision and examination of research degrees and an understanding of the University's research degree regulations and policies. The chair may be nominated by the Faculty Research Degrees and Environment Committee (FRDEC) from a Faculty other than that in which the candidate's study is located.
- 2.4 The normal expectation is that research degrees viva examinations will take place on University premises and that all participants will attend the examination at the University. Remote attendance by an examiner or the candidate will therefore be permitted only in *exceptional* circumstances and a justification for the proposed arrangements would need to be submitted to FRDEC. Please refer to Annex 1 for full details of requirements in these circumstances.
- 2.4 The thesis shall be sent to the examiners by the DRC and should not be accepted directly from the candidate or a member of the supervisory team.

### **3. Conduct of the Examination**

- 3.1 Arrangements (i.e. date and venue) for the oral examination will be made by the Faculty's Research Degrees Co-ordinator, or nominee, in liaison with the DRC, and not by a member of the candidate's examining team or the Chair.
- 3.2 Research degree candidates should have no involvement in the nomination of their examining team, including the Chair, or in the arrangements of their examination and should have no contact with their examiners or Chair, in relation to the examination, prior to the examination or following the examination until the award is formally approved. Faculties should ensure the candidate is not known to any member of the examining team, or the Chair, to an extent where the independence or integrity of the examination could be jeopardised.
- 3.3 A period of at least six weeks should normally be allowed between the submission of the thesis to the DRC (in the Research Office) and the oral examination taking place.
- 3.4 The oral examination should take place in a suitable meeting room and steps should be taken by the Faculty Research Degrees Co-ordinator, or nominee, to ensure that the examination will not be affected by interruptions or undue levels of noise.
- 3.5 If at short notice the Chair, the candidate or any member of the examining team cannot be present at the oral examination, the oral examination must be rescheduled.
- 3.6 Where a participant becomes unavailable, and time permits it, alternative examination arrangements may (depending on the circumstances) be submitted to FRDEC for approval, which may be by Chair's Action.
- 3.7 A formal preliminary private meeting of the examiners and the Chair will be scheduled by the DRC, to take place prior to the oral examination, to permit discussion of the thesis and the drawing up of an agenda for the oral examination. Supervisors or other university staff (other than examiners) are not permitted to attend the preliminary meeting.
- 3.8 Approximately one week prior to the oral examination, the DRC will provide the Chair with the relevant forms / information, including:
  - A copy of the preliminary report of each examiner – form RESEMSPRELIM;
  - A copy of the current university regulations relating to research degrees;
  - Blank copies of the examiners' recommendations form – RESEXMREPORT);
  - A supplementary expenses claim form to be passed to the external examiner/s.
- 3.9 The candidate's supervisor/s may attend the oral examination, in an observer capacity only, with the prior agreement of the candidate. Supervisors are not permitted to participate in the discussion between the examiners and the candidate (unless specifically invited to do so by the Chair – please refer to section 3.10 of these notes) and must withdraw prior to the examiners' deliberations on the outcome of the examination. The supervisor/s may, with the agreement of the candidate, be permitted to attend the feedback session following the examiners' deliberations.
- 3.10 A candidate's supervisor, who is attending the oral examination as an observer may, in exceptional circumstances, be invited by the Chair of the examination to provide clarification on a specific issue required by the examiners. A supervisor may not otherwise comment on any other aspect of the candidate's thesis or contribute to any other aspect of the oral examination.

## Recommendations

- 3.11 At the end of the oral examination, the Chair should ask the candidate (and his/her supervisor, if attending) to withdraw so that the examiners may deliberate privately on the outcome and agree their recommendation. The permissible recommendations are set out in section G13 of the Regulations.
- 3.12 The Chair will assist the examiners in reaching, where possible, a unanimous agreement on the outcome of the examination in accordance with the University's regulations.
- 3.12.1 Where examiners feel that the thesis (and, where applicable, any included creative work) already meets the standard for the award but that the thesis would benefit from changes of a minor nature the recommendation should be the granting of the award subject to minor amendments<sup>1</sup>. It is to be noted that the default timeframe for such minor amendments to be made is 6 weeks, but the examining team has discretion to extend this period up to a maximum of 6 months, and is required give justification for this on the RESEXMREPORT pro forma.
- 3.12.2 Where examiners feel that the thesis (and, where applicable, any included creative work) has in general reached the standard required for the degree, but consider that the candidate's thesis requires some major amendments and corrections the recommendation should be the granting of the award subject to major amendments<sup>2</sup>. It is to be noted that the default timeframe for such major amendments to be made is 6 months, but the examining team has discretion to extend this period up to a maximum of 12 months, and is required give justification for this on the RESEXMREPORT pro forma.
- 3.12.3 Where examiners feel that the thesis does not yet meet the standard for the award, the recommendation should be resubmission. The examiners have the option of recommending resubmission either with or without a further oral examination. For a re-examination of a resubmitted thesis, the option of recommending a further resubmission is not available to examiners, although in the case of a PhD the examiners may recommend that the thesis be resubmitted for the award of MPhil. In the case of re-submission examiners may recommend that the award be granted subject to minor amendments.
- 3.13 The Chair will lead the informal feedback session to the candidate and ensure that the candidate is given clear information about the examiners' recommendations and the formal follow-up procedures. The examiners may indicate informally their

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<sup>1</sup> Minor amendments should be corrections or changes which the examiners feel would improve the presentation of the thesis and would include for example correction of typographical, spelling or stylistic errors; slight reordering of, but not significant amendment to, content; amendments to the abstract; changes to the presentation of diagrams, charts or tables; correction of errors in referencing; or minor changes which are intended to provide clarification. Minor amendments should not involve significant rewriting or significant changes to the way research outcomes are presented; should not require the student to provide additional content or undertake significant restructuring of content; and should not necessitate any reanalysis of existing data, collection or additional data or any further research being undertaken. If examiners feel that changes of this nature are required to bring the thesis up to the required standard, and the required changes are therefore substantive, then the recommendation should be resubmission.

<sup>2</sup> Major amendments should be corrections or changes to improve the content, analysis or clarification, but when the originality of the central thesis is recognised. Major amendments can involve rewriting or significant changes to the way research outcomes are presented; might require the student to provide additional content or undertake restructuring of content; and might necessitate reanalysis of existing data, but should not require any further research being undertaken. If examiners feel that changes of this nature are required to bring the thesis up to the required standard, and the required changes are therefore substantive, then the recommendation should be resubmission.

recommendation on the result of the examination to the candidate but the Chair should make it clear to the candidate that this feedback is provisional only, that any recommendation is subject to the approval of the University's Research Committee, and that a formal written report on the outcome will be sent to the candidate by the DRC.

### **Following the oral examination:**

3.14 Following the oral examination, the Chair will ensure that all paperwork is completed correctly and returned promptly to the DRC:

- The RESEXMREPORT form must be completed and then signed by all examiners and the Chair.
- Where regulations G13.4.2 or G13.4.3, apply (i.e. the award is made subject to minor or major amendments or the candidate is invited to resubmit) it will be the responsibility of the Chair to co-ordinate the production of a comprehensive list of the required amendments and to ensure that the list is approved by all of the examiners and submitted to the DRC within one month of the oral examination.
- Where the examiners cannot reach an agreed decision, the examiners must complete and sign a separate RESEXMREPORT form to indicate their recommendation. In this circumstance, it will be the responsibility of the Chair to complete a report on the examination process and make a recommendation to FRDEC on the possible outcome. The Chair must then ensure that all reports are returned to the DRC following the viva.

3.15 Where a candidate is required to make minor or major amendments (i.e. where regulations section G 13.4.2 applies), the examiners should agree at the viva (and on the RESEXMREPORT form) which examiner/s are to scrutinise the revised thesis. The nominated examiner/s will be required to submit an independent report on the revised thesis.

3.16 Where a candidate is required to resubmit their thesis for the award (i.e. where regulations section G 13.4.3 applies), all the examiners are required to examine the resubmitted thesis. Each examiners will be required to submit an independent report on the resubmitted thesis. Upon receipt of the examiners' independent reports on the resubmitted thesis, the Independent Chair will, in consultation with the DRC, determine whether or not further discussion is required between examiners. Where all examiners are of the opinion that the amendments required following the initial viva voce examination have been met and that the award should be conferred, a further discussion or meeting would not be necessary. In cases where there is a divergence in examiners' opinions on the resubmitted thesis, or all examiners feel that the original amendments had not yet been fulfilled, then the Independent Chair would, in consultation with the DRC, determine whether further discussion between the examiners was necessary at this stage - in order for them to arrive at a mutually agreed set of further requirements if appropriate - and what form the discussion should take (electronic / campus-based etc.).

3.17 Following the completion of examination procedures and conferment of the award, copies of the preliminary reports of examiners are provided to the Faculty's Director of Research as part of the faculty's / University's monitoring procedures.

### **4. Summary of Responsibilities of the Examining Team**

#### **Independent Chair**

**General:**

- 4.1 The Chair will be independent both of the candidate's supervisory team and examining team and will be experienced in the supervision and examining of research degree candidates. Although the Chair may have knowledge of the candidate's academic field, s/he is not selected on the basis of subject expertise.
- 4.2 The Chair must ensure that s/he is familiar with the Research Degrees Regulations and examination procedures.
- 4.3 Whilst the Chair will be provided with a copy of the thesis at the same time as the examiners, the Chair will not be required to read the thesis being examined and thus will not be required to complete the formal preliminary report.
- 4.4 The Chair will remain impartial throughout the preliminary discussion and the oral examination and will not act as an advocate for the University, the Faculty or the candidate.

**At the preliminary meeting:**

- 4.5 The Chair will not contribute to the academic examination of the thesis, but will assist the examiners in the preliminary meeting in the drawing up of an agreed agenda for the oral examination.

**During the oral examination:**

- 4.6 The Chair will explain to all present at the examination the status and role of the participants and the process to be followed.
- 4.7 The Chair will ensure that the candidate is introduced to each member of the examining team.
- 4.8 The Chair will endeavour to develop and maintain an environment in which the candidate will be able to perform to the best of his/her ability and one in which the candidate is treated with appropriate courtesy.
- 4.9 The Chair should intervene in the examination process if s/he judges that fairness to the candidate is at risk.
- 4.10 The Chair should ensure that the examination adheres to the agreed agenda and that all the issues raised by the examiners at the preliminary meeting are covered during the oral examination.
- 4.11 The Chair, in exceptional circumstances only, may invite the candidate's supervisor (if in attendance) to provide further clarification on a point relating to procedural aspects of the candidate's thesis, if this is required by the examiners and cannot be provided by the candidate.
- 4.12 The Chair will ensure compliance with University procedures, protocols and regulations, providing guidance on the University's regulations, where necessary.

**Following the oral examination:**

- 4.13 The Chair is responsible for leading the private discussions of the examiners after the oral examination, steering the team towards a conclusion and recommendation, and leading the feedback to the candidate.
- 4.14 The Chair will co-ordinate the completion and return of paperwork to the DRC and ensure that a confirmed list of required amendments is produced should this be required (see 3.14).

### **Internal and External Examiners**

The responsibilities of examiners include:

- 4.15 To read the candidate's thesis with care and to submit a preliminary report on the appropriate form (RESEXMPRELIM) within the required timescales. The preliminary report should be written without consultation with the candidate, his/her supervisors, the other examiners or the Chair of the examining team. The independent preliminary report of each examiner should conclude with a short summary containing a provisional recommendation, but if an examiner wishes to suspend judgement until after the oral examination this should be indicated. The completed and signed preliminary reports must be sent to the DRC at least one week before the oral examination is due to take place. The oral examination cannot take place until the preliminary reports have been received.
- 4.16 To attend and participate in the examiners' preliminary meeting and the oral examination.
- 4.17 To contribute to the maintenance of an environment in which the candidate will be able to perform to the best of his/her ability and one in which the candidate is treated with appropriate courtesy.
- 4.18 To attend the feedback session to the candidate at the end of the oral examination and where appropriate to explain detailed points to the candidate in the feedback
- 4.19 To complete and sign the Examiners' Recommendation Form (RESEXMREPORT)) immediately after the completion of the oral examination, to confirm agreement with the outcome of the examination as cited on the form.
- 4.20 As appropriate, to contribute to the production of a list of required corrections and/or list of deficiencies in the thesis and to formally confirm agreement with the list.
- 4.21 If the candidate is asked to make minor or major amendments, the examiners will agree on which of the examining team should be responsible for scrutinising the amendments (see 3.15). If the candidate is required to resubmit, all examiners will be involved in the re-examination of the resubmitted thesis (see 3.16).

**Guidelines for the remote attendance of participants in Research Degree Viva Voce Examinations**

**1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The normal expectation is that research degrees viva examinations will take place on University premises and that all participants will attend the examination at the University. Remote attendance by an examiner or the candidate will therefore be permitted only in exceptional circumstances and a justification for the proposed arrangements would need to be submitted to FRDEC.
- 1.2 The arrangements for all examinations must be approved by FRDEC. In cases where remote participation is proposed, this shall include approving the proposed arrangements for remote attendance.
- 1.3 Where remote attendance is proposed, all parties (including the candidate and examiners) must agree to the proposal.
- 1.4 Faculties will be expected to consider any time differences, which may necessitate changes to the format of the examination (e.g. having the preliminary meeting of the examiners on the day preceding the examination) or may mean that remote attendance is not a viable option. Faculties should also take into account any sensitivities or security issues relating to the content of the thesis that might make this mode of attendance inappropriate.
- 1.5 Where the need for remote attendance arises only after the examination arrangements have already been approved, a change to the examination arrangements must be approved by FRDEC (or by FRDEC Chair's Action) before the viva takes place.

**2 Remote Attendance by the Student**

- 2.1 Students are normally expected to attend the viva at the University irrespective of their mode of study, fee status or normal place of domicile. Agreement for a candidate to participate remotely will therefore only be granted in exceptional circumstances. Circumstances which might be accepted as grounds for allowing remote attendance by a candidate include serious health or personal problems, or other exceptional circumstances which make it very difficult or impossible for the candidate to travel to the viva. The fact that a candidate is a distance learning or international student normally based abroad, and/or the costs of travelling to attend the viva, would not in themselves be considered grounds for allowing remote participation
- 2.2 A research degree candidate participating in their viva examination from a distance should do so in as controlled environment as is feasible (for example local British Council offices, local University or equivalent) supervised if possible by an appropriate Invigilator. In all cases the candidate and examiners will be based in suitably quiet and confidential environments so they would not be interrupted in the course of the examination. The platform used to conduct the exam and membership of the examination group will normally be managed by an experienced DRCO. These arrangements should be stipulated on the RESEXMARRS-VC form and must be approved by FRDEC.
- 2.3 The Invigilator should normally be identified on the RESEXMARRS and should be present for the whole examination process as described below. The principal role of

the Invigilator is to ensure that the probity and security of the examination process is not compromised and to act as a liaison with the examiners and with technical support staff. The invigilator must be independent of the candidate and their research study and must not be a member of the supervisory team. The Invigilator must have sufficient command of the English language to enable them to communicate, as necessary, with the Chair and the examiners and the technical staff at the University. The Invigilator must not contribute to the academic discussions between the candidate and the examiners during the examination. When a suitable invigilator is not available, student ID checks will be undertaken at the outset of the viva with one of the supervisors, and the candidate will need to demonstrate the probity and security of the examination process in relation to the suitability of their working space and their equipment and internet connection.

- 2.4 If circumstances permit, a candidate's supervisor may be present with the candidate under the terms normally permitted by the University's regulations for attendance by supervisors. No persons other than the candidate and the Invigilator (and if applicable the supervisor) should be present during the viva. Supervisors are not permitted to participate in the discussion between the examiners and the candidate (unless specifically invited to do so by the Chair) and must withdraw prior to the examiners' deliberations on the outcome of the examination.
- 2.5 The Faculty must ensure that the Invigilator is fully briefed on the University's expectations and regulations. All formal discussion and liaison with the venue and the invigilator regarding the arrangements for the examination and any financial arrangements will be undertaken by staff of the University and not by the candidate.
- 2.6 The candidate will be expected to meet any additional costs arising from their remote attendance at the viva, including any costs involved in the use of facilities and invigilation.

### **3 Remote Attendance by an Examiner**

- 3.1 Examiners are normally expected to attend the examination at the University and agreement for remote attendance by an examiner will therefore only be granted in exceptional circumstances.
- 3.2 Agreement to an examiner participating by remote attendance will only be granted if it has been confirmed that the examiner has access to an appropriate venue with the necessary technical facilities. The technical facilities must be tested by the Faculty prior to the viva (see section 5).
- 3.3 Where agreement is given to an examiner participating remotely all the University's other expectations and requirements of examiners will pertain. This shall include the requirement to submit a preliminary report to the DRC in advance of the examination and to contribute to the final recommendations of the examiners including, depending on the examiners' recommendation, the drawing up a list of required minor amendments or a list of deficiencies in the thesis.

### **4 Technology**

- 4.1 The mode of technology used to enable remote attendance should be fit for purpose (high quality, reliable and enabling real-time, face to face discussion) so as to ensure a high quality experience for all participants in the viva process; and to ensure that the confidentiality and probity of the examination process can be assured.



- 4.2 Technical support should be organised in advance and should be readily available in situ to resolve any technical issues that may arise, before and during the examination. Planning in relation to technology should be detailed in the RESEXMARRS form and should include a contingency plan that specifies the steps that will be taken in the event of technological failure. The candidate and the Examiners (and, where appropriate, the Invigilator) should be aware of these alternative proposals prior to the viva taking place.
- 4.3 The technical facilities and arrangements for the viva must be approved in advance by the Independent Chair of the viva. If the Independent Chair is not satisfied with the facilities then s/he has the right to require adjustments to be made and/or may require that the viva be rearranged. If in the opinion of the Chair the arrangements are unsuitable and the identified problems cannot be remedied within a reasonable time then s/he may propose to the Chair of FRDEC that the viva should not be conducted using remote participation.
- 4.4 Where possible the candidate should be given an opportunity to practice the use of the facilities so that they have experience of comparable conditions to those that will pertain at the viva.
- 4.5 In the event of technical failure during the viva the Independent Chair will take responsibility for proposing alternative arrangements. The nature of any alternative arrangements will depend on the particular circumstances and timing but may involve temporarily adjourning the viva to allow technical problems to be resolved, arranging alternative facilities or rearranging the viva for another date. The Chair will confirm the alternative arrangements with the examiners, the candidate, the Faculty and the DRC.

## **5 The Viva**

- 5.1 It is the responsibility of the Faculty to oversee the organisation of the viva examination including negotiating local practicalities for remote attendance, timings and liaison with the DRC and arranging for appropriate technical assistance before and during the viva.
- 5.2 Contact details, email and phone numbers for those individuals attending remotely should be provided by the Faculty for the Independent Chair prior to the viva.
- 5.3 All examiners' preliminary reports should be circulated by the DRC at least one week in advance of the planned event, using an appropriate, secure online platform, to enable the examining team to engage in a meaningful pre-viva meeting. The pre-viva meeting should commence at least one hour prior to the viva start time.
- 5.4 As stated above, a candidate attending remotely must normally be accompanied by an appropriate Invigilator who remains present throughout the process. The Invigilator will bring the candidate into the room at the start of the examination, take them out of the room at the end and remain present for the examiners' discussion. The Invigilator will then bring the candidate back in to the room for feedback.
- 5.5 If the candidate has a disability this should be declared on the Candidate's Declaration Form at the time of submission of the thesis. The Faculty should liaise with the University's Student Affairs (Enablement and Wellbeing) department to ascertain any special arrangements that may be necessary to support the candidate with the viva and any additional arrangements necessary to take account of the participation by the candidate or an examiner remotely.
- 5.6 The Independent Chair will collate the detail for and produce the final examiners' report and circulate to the examining team. An email confirmation from an External Examiner

attending remotely will be sufficient evidence of approval of the report and will act in lieu of a signature.

- 5.7 An audio visual exam record of the conduct of the exam will be created (wherever the technology employed allows this to be achieved). This record will be handled in line with GDPR requirements and will only be used to demonstrate the probity and security of the examination process and that the technology had functioned as designed. The record will be destroyed once the outcome of the viva has been approved.