



Handbook for External Examining of Research Degrees

Purpose of Guidance

The handbook provides guidance and practical advice on external examining of research degrees. It sets out the expected standards and best practice for both External Examiners and University staff, recognising the diversity of contexts and practices across the University.

Scope: Guidance is not Mandatory

The handbook sets out the expected standards and best practice for both External Examiners and University academic and support staff. It is primarily for the information of External Examiners, but is also relevant for staff involved in postgraduate research assessment and administration.

Contact Officer Susan Hunter Academic Policy Officer Susan.Hunter5@ed.ac.uk

Document control

Approved:
03.03.15

Starts:
03.03.15

Equality impact assessment:
N/A

Amendments:
May 2019
April 2022

Next Review:
2026/27

Approving authority

Senate Academic Policy and Regulations Committee

Consultation undertaken

College Postgraduate Office staff, College postgraduate committees with responsibility for research degrees (including Graduate Schools), support services, External Examiner Project (taught), Researcher Experience Committee.

Section responsible for guidance maintenance & review

Academic Services

Related policies, procedures, guidelines & regulations

Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees
https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/pgr_assessmentregulations.pdf
Postgraduate DRPS
www.drps.ed.ac.uk/

UK Quality Code

UK Quality Code: External Expertise and Research Degrees

Guidance superseded by this guidance

Previous versions of this guidance

Alternative format

If you require this document in an alternative format please email Academic.Services@ed.ac.uk or telephone 0131 651 4490.

Keywords

External examiner, viva examiner, PhD examiner, MPhil examiner, PGR examiner, postgraduate research examiner, PhD examining, MPhil examining, PGR examining, postgraduate research examining, viva examining



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Introduction

This handbook is divided into two main parts; the first part “The External Examiner” covers the responsibilities and expectations of this role, and the second part explains the External Examining Process. The final section includes some information on fees and expenses and further contact details.

The handbook does not supersede the University’s regulations and should be read in conjunction with the postgraduate regulations set out in

- [The University’s Degree Regulations and Programmes of Study \(DRPS\)](#)
- [The Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees](#).

1 Welcome Statement

1.1

Thank you for agreeing to act as an External Examiner at Edinburgh. The University appreciates the commitment that you have shown in agreeing to undertake this role. The University recognises that External Examiners play a vital role in the maintenance of academic standards, and in ensuring rigorous and fair assessment processes.

1.2

This handbook aims to provide essential information to External Examiners to allow them to carry out their duties at Edinburgh. It includes information on External Examiners’ role and responsibilities as well as guidance on administrative and business process arrangements for thesis assessment, submission of reports and payment of fees and expenses.

1.3

External Examiners provide impartial and independent assessment and advice on postgraduate research degrees. External Examiners also provide invaluable independent feedback to the University on its postgraduate research assessment procedures.

1.4

Colleges are responsible for appointing External Examiners for postgraduate research degrees. The University’s regulations set out the requirements for appointment and this handbook gives a summary of details.



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The External Examiner

2 Role and Key Responsibilities

External Examiners are a fundamental part of the assessment process for postgraduate research degrees. They assess the written thesis against the criteria set by the University (see also section 9) and attend and participate in the oral examination (viva voce). Feedback to the College or School on the assessment process is also a key element of the External Examiner's role.

3 Summary of Key Responsibilities

- Assess the written thesis
- Attend the oral examination
- Complete and submit examiner report forms
- Provide an assessment of examination process
- Assess the resubmitted thesis, if required
- Attend the oral re-examination, if required
- Complete and submit re-examination report forms
- Provide an assessment of the re-examination process

4 Induction and Briefing

4.1

On approval, the College or School will send a formal letter of appointment to the External Examiner, indicating the name of the student to be assessed, School, degree, Internal Examiner(s) and Supervisor. The letter is copied to the Internal Examiner and Supervisor for information.

4.2

The College will ensure that each Examiner is sent a copy of the thesis, together with information on how to access the appropriate regulations, guidance and report forms.

5 Terms of Appointment

An External Examiner's appointment is for the period of assessment of the student's thesis. The period of assessment includes any thesis corrections or resubmission. External Examiners responsibilities begin once a student has submitted their thesis and continue until the examiners make their final award recommendation to the College.

6 Summary of What the External Examiner can expect from the University

Responsibility for provision of information is given in brackets after each category.

- Information and guidance on the University's assessment procedures and regulations (College Office, School Postgraduate Administrators)
- Key contact information (College Office)
- Information on the arrangements for the oral examination (Internal Examiner, College Office, School Postgraduate Administrators)



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- Information and guidance on the relevant forms for completion in relation to the assessment, examination and expenses (College Office)
- Prompt payment of fees and expenses, once the necessary, complete paperwork has been provided (College Office)

7 Qualifications and Expertise

7.1

It is the College Committee's responsibility to ensure that the External Examiner is competent to assess the degree. External Examiners should normally be experienced members of the research/scholarly community. External Examiners must have the requisite experience to examine the degree programme at the level at which it is offered. They need to meet the responsibilities set out by the College Postgraduate Committee and comply with quality and standards requirements.

7.2

The External Examiner is appointed for their specialist knowledge, whereas the Internal Examiner may be a generalist or an expert in only part of the subject matter of the thesis.

7.3

Advice for inexperienced External Examiners on the University's regulations and processes is available from the Internal Examiner and Non-Examining Chair (where appointed) of the oral examination.

The University's [Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees](#) set out the required qualifications and expertise.

8 Conflicts of Interest

8.1

No External Examiner shall be involved in any assessment or examination in which they have any private, personal or commercial interest, for example a current or previous personal, family or legal relationship with a student being assessed. No person who has held an appointment on the teaching or research staff, is a member of staff of an Associated Institution, or has been a student of the University, or who has been granted honorary status in the University, is eligible to act as an External Examiner until a period of four years has elapsed since the termination of the appointment or the status.

The University's [Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees](#) set out requirements on avoiding potential conflicts of interest.

8.2

On nomination, the proposed External Examiner has the opportunity to declare any conflict of interests that would compromise their role as External Examiner. If a conflict of interest arises during an External Examiner's term of appointment, the External Examiner may need to resign or the contract may need to be terminated unless the conflict of interest can



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be resolved. The External Examiner must keep the College informed of any changes in circumstances that may give rise to a conflict of interests.

8.3

The College Committee will consider potential conflicts of interest and decide on any further action. More information is available in the University's policy on conflict of interest.

- [University Conflict of Interest Policy](#)

8.4 Disclosure of intimate relationships

The University requires any member of staff, including External Examiners, to disclose an intimate relationship with any University of Edinburgh student (see [Policy on Disclosure of Intimate Relationships](#)).

9 Expected Standards for Postgraduate Research programmes of study

The grounds for the award of Postgraduate Research degrees are set out in the Degree Regulations and Programmes of Studies (DRPS). Guidance is also available on the University's expectations when students choose to include published articles in a thesis.

- [DRPS](#)
- [Including Publications in Postgraduate Research Theses](#)

10 Participation in Assessment and Examination Procedures

10.1 Thesis assessment

The normal expectation is that Examiners will read the thesis and submit their pre-viva report within a maximum time of three months. External Examiners are required to submit their initial, independent pre-viva report (Part I) form to the College after assessing the written thesis and within the timescale indicated (at least five working days before the viva). (See also section 13.)

10.2 Oral Examination (Viva Voce)

External Examiners must participate in the oral examination to carry out their role and responsibilities (see section 13).

10.3 Re-Examination

When required, External Examiners also have a role in the re-examination process (see also section 14).



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The Examining Process

11 Nomination and Appointment of Examiners

11.1

Each student undertaking a research programme is assessed by at least one External Examiner and one Internal Examiner. *If a candidate is a member of staff of the University, then the College will appoint at least two External Examiners.* Colleges may also appoint a second External Examiner in particular cases, for example if the thesis topic is interdisciplinary.

11.2

The Head of School in the organising School or Institute initiates the recommendation for appointment of External Examiner(s) in consultation with the student's Supervisor(s). Schools should use the appropriate form to make nominations for Examiner appointments.

11.3

Schools should submit nomination forms to the College prior to the date of submission. This allows time for College Committee approval and for sending the appropriate correspondence to the Examiners. The College or School office will confirm appointment to the Examiners and the student.

11.4

External Examiners for research degrees are treated as self-employed and universities are not required to deduct tax or national insurance – provided that the whole of the work is performed under a contract for services (that is, the External Examiner is treated as self-employed) in less than twelve months.

11.5

External Examiners from outside the UK may need to obtain a visa in order to visit the UK and the University will be able to advise on this. More information on the Permitted Paid Engagement route for visitor visas is available on the University website.

- [Visitors and Permitted Paid Engagement](#)

11.6

Supervisors advise students of the proposed Examiners' names. Students can notify their Supervisor if any problems are likely to arise if particular Examiners are appointed. The Head of School will take account of any comments but students have no right to determine the eventual recommendation, and therefore have no right to veto any particular appointment.

11.7

The Examiners are asked specifically to assess the thesis in terms of the grounds for the award of degree set out in the Regulations. The purpose of the examination is to allow the Examiners to establish that the thesis is satisfactory in the following regards:

- represents a coherent body of work; and



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- contains a significant amount of material worthy of publication or public presentation.

And that the student has demonstrated:

- capability of pursuing original research making a significant contribution to knowledge or understanding in the field of study;
- adequate knowledge of the field of study and relevant literature;
- exercise of critical judgement with regard to both the student's work and that of other scholars in the same general field, relating particular research projects to the general body of knowledge in the field; and
- the ability to present the results of the research in a critical and scholarly way.

12 Examiner Reports

12.1

At the University of Edinburgh, doctoral and MPhil degrees are examined through a two-stage process: assessment of the thesis followed by an oral examination (the viva). Examiners submit pre-viva (Part I) and post-viva (Part II) reports. Examiners should use University template forms to prepare their reports and submit reports within the timescale indicated by the School or College. The report forms are available online.

- [University Examiner report forms](#)

Preparation of Examiners' Independent Reports in Advance of Oral Examination – Part I Form

12.2

The College or School Office will notify examiners of the date of the oral examination. Examiners must complete and return their Part I report by the deadlines specified by the College or School Office, and at least by five working days prior to the date of the oral examination.

12.3

Each Examiner, having read the thesis, should prepare a preliminary, independent report in advance of the oral examination. Examiners should not consult on their pre-viva reports at this stage. The report should cover all relevant issues arising from the candidate's thesis that the Examiner wishes to highlight. The report should be prepared on the pre-viva (Part I) form provided.

12.4

Exceptionally, if the Examiners do find it necessary to consult before writing their pre-viva reports, they must note this and the reason(s) for consultation in their reports.

12.5

Examiners must include sufficient detail in their reports so that, after the oral examination, members of the College Committee can assess the scope and significance of the thesis and appreciate its strengths and weaknesses. Examiners should write their reports in



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terms that are intelligible to those who are not specialists in the particular field of the thesis.

12.6

The expectation is that Examiners will complete their preliminary reports (Part I) within three months of receipt of the thesis.

Submission of Examiners' Post-Oral Report Forms – Part II Forms

12.7

Following the oral, the Examiners submit a joint (Part II) report on the thesis. The Chair of the Oral Examination (Internal Examiner or Non-Examining Chair – see 13.3) is responsible for sending the Part II report to the College Committee. The College will provide the External Examiner with the recommendations available to them before the oral exam. The Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees specify the examiner recommendations.

- [Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees](#)

12.8

The completed Examiners' pre-oral examination (Part I) reports and Examiners' Recommendation (Part II) report form must together provide sufficiently detailed comments on the scope and quality of the work to enable the University to satisfy itself that the criteria for the award of the degree have been met.

12.9

The post-oral examination (Part II) report includes a "Critique for the student", which must be completed.

12.10

The post-oral report must be completed and returned to the College within two weeks of the oral examination.

12.11

The Chair of the oral examination should ensure that the post-oral examination report gives a full account of the Examiners' views. In the event of the Examiners failing to reach a consensus, the Examiners' post-oral report should state this along with an indication of the area of disagreement. In the unlikely event of Examiners failing to reach agreement, they may make separate recommendations, which will be subject to arbitration by the College Committee.

12.12 College Committee confirmation of decision

The College Committee will consider the reports and recommendations from the Examiners and, on the basis that the requisite criteria are satisfied, will recommend that the degree is awarded.



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13 Oral Examination (Viva Voce)

13.1

An oral examination is required for all doctoral and MPhil candidates. Examiners may use the oral examination to establish a student's knowledge of the field of their research, to establish the extent of any collaboration and to confirm that the work is the student's own. Through the oral examination, the Examiners are assessing jointly whether the thesis, and the student's defence of it, satisfy the requirements and regulations for the award of the degree. Further details on the operation and regulation of oral examinations are available in the [Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees](#).

13.2

The Internal Examiner is responsible for making all necessary arrangements for the oral examination. Graduate Schools may support the Internal Examiner in making arrangements but the Internal Examiner is responsible for ensuring appropriate arrangements are in place. The Internal Examiner is also responsible for ensuring that the External Examiner is properly consulted on these arrangements.

13.3

The Internal Examiner is responsible for chairing the oral examination. In some circumstances, the College may appoint a Non-Examining Chair, for example if the Internal Examiner is acting for the first time, or is a member of honorary staff or Associated Institution staff member. If appointed, the Non-Examining Chair's role is to attend and chair the oral examination and ensure that due process is carried out.

13.4

The Examiners should discuss their independent (Part I) reports before the start of the oral examination.

13.5

Supervisors may attend the oral examination as observers with the consent of the student and Examiners. If the Supervisor does attend, they may not comment and must leave the examination with the student. Supervisors do not participate in the discussion and decision of the examiners.

13.6

Although there is no formal limit, oral examinations normally last for around two to three hours and should be a positive experience for the student.

13.7

At the end of the oral examination, and if they have agreed a recommendation, the Examiners may tell the student what their views are. However, they must stress that their view is a recommendation to the College Committee and not a final decision. The College Committee acts as the Board of Examiners for postgraduate research degrees and has the power to modify or, exceptionally, to overturn the Examiners' recommendation.



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13.8

The oral examination will be held in Edinburgh, and the Examiners, Non-Examining Chair (where appointed) and the student are required to be physically present. However, under some circumstances, the oral examination may be conducted remotely, for example by video conferencing. The authority for any such decision lies with the College Committee as set out in the University's policy on oral examination by video link.

- [PhD by Research oral examinations by video link](#)

13.9

The University does not expect examiners to wear academic robes for oral examinations.

14 Corrections and Re-Examination

14.1

Internal Examiners will approve any corrections where the Examiners recommend minor corrections to the thesis or that an additional oral exam is needed. However, External Examiners may also request to have approval of corrections.

14.2

Where the Examiners recommend that resubmission of a thesis is required, they must write a detailed statement of the aspects that require revision. Examiners will only judge the resubmitted thesis against this written statement. A student is permitted only one opportunity to resubmit their thesis.

14.3

When the College Committee confirms a resubmission recommendation, the College Office must ensure that the student receives a written statement of any revisions to the thesis and the timescale for completing the revisions as set by the Examiners. The Supervisor is responsible for confirming with the student their understanding of any required revisions.

14.4

The College Committee must approve the written statement and the aspects of the thesis that require revision. The approved statement and revisions cannot subsequently be altered without the College Committee's agreement.

14.5

The student is responsible for presenting the resubmitted thesis to the School or College Office. The School or College Office will provide each Examiner with a copy of the revised thesis.

14.6

Having read the thesis, the Examiners should prepare new independent reports on the Examiner's Report Resubmission (Part I) form and complete further Examiners' Resubmission Recommendation (Part II) and Assessment of Examination Process Examiner's comments (Part III) forms at the appropriate times.



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14.7

Examiners cannot make further criticism of other material or aspects of the thesis passed as satisfactory at the first examination.

15 External Examiner Comments Reports – Post-Viva Feedback

External Examiner comments are sought after the conclusion of the examination process via the Assessment of Examination Process form. Comments are requested on the examination process generally and Examiners are invited to comment on any other relevant aspects. Receipt of this form triggers the payment process for External Examiner fees and expenses. Any major themes or trends arising from Part III forms, and from Schools' review of data on research student progression and completion, should be considered for inclusion in the School annual quality assurance report to Senate Quality Assurance Committee.

16 Confidentiality, Data Protection and Freedom of Information

16.1

The student holds copyright as author of all work submitted for examination. Each student must grant the University the right to publish the thesis, abstract or list of works, and/or to authorise its publication for any scholarly purpose with proper acknowledgement of authorship.

16.2

A thesis may contain personal data, and as such, External Examiners will be treated as Data Processors under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) legislation. During the assessment process, the Examiners must treat the thesis in a manner that ensures appropriate security of the personal data, including protection against unauthorised or unlawful processing and against accidental loss, destruction or damage, using appropriate technical measures, such as setting up encryption for personal devices.

16.3

The Examiners' initial, independent (Part I) reports remain confidential to the College but can be requested under Freedom of Information. However, Examiners should note that students receive post-viva (Part II) reports after the meeting of the relevant College Committee.

16.5

External Examiner reports and any correspondence engaged in by the External Examiner in connection with their External Examiner duties are disclosable in line with the University's freedom of information obligations.

16.6

Requests for the disclosure of any restricted reports made directly, and separately, to the Head of College or the Assistant Principal, Academic Standards and Quality Assurance will be judged on a case-by-case basis in line with the University's freedom of information



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and data protection obligations.

- [Request handling procedures](#)
- [Data Protection Policy](#)

16.7 Use of data by External Examiners

External Examiners have access to confidential information and must ensure that personal data are always held securely and are not disclosed to any unauthorised third party either accidentally, negligently or intentionally.

16.8 Return of Thesis

Following completion of the examination and the submission of the part two reports, Examiners must not retain electronic copies of the thesis. All electronic files relating to the thesis should be deleted as soon as the examination process is complete.

17 Notification of concerns

17.1

The External Examiner may raise concerns regarding the examination process with the Internal Examiner, the School or College Office. The Assessment of Examination Process (Part III) form also provides a mechanism for reporting on the examination process.

17.2

If concerns are unable to be resolved within the scope of the examination process for an individual thesis, the External Examiner may raise these with the relevant Head of College.

17.3

External Examiners have the right to raise any matter of serious concern with the Assistant Principal Academic Standards and Quality Assurance, who acts on behalf of the Principal, if necessary, by means of a separate confidential report. The Assistant Principal Academic Standards and Quality Assurance will respond in writing, outlining any actions to be taken as a result.

17.4

Where an External Examiner has a serious concern relating to systemic failings in the academic standards of a programme or programmes, and has exhausted all procedures internal to the University, including the submission of a confidential report to the Assistant Principal Academic Standards and Quality Assurance, they may invoke the QAA's concerns scheme or inform the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.



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Fees and Expenses Information for Examiners and Staff

18 Examiners Fees and Expenses

18.1

Information concerning expenses for examining research theses is set out within the University's Guidelines for Reimbursement of Expenses. The College Office will be able to provide advice on fees and claiming expenses.

18.2

The University pays fees in pounds sterling or equivalent to the External Examiner's bank account within 30 days of receipt of the Assessment of Examination Process (Part III) forms (see also section 15) and bank account details. The College is responsible for instructing Accounts Payable to arrange to pay the fees.

18.3

Reasonable expenses incurred in connection with an External Examiner's duties, including travel, printing, accommodation and/or subsistence costs, should be itemised on an expense claim form. Expense claims will not normally be accepted in any other form and certainly not without all receipts attached. Bank account details are required in order to pay expenses. The Examiner expense claim form is available from the College Office.

18.4

The College Office processes expenses, although College may delegate this responsibility to Schools. Expenses are normally processed immediately upon receipt of the Assessment of Examination Process (Part III) form, so long as the expense form is completed fully and correctly and the appropriate receipts are attached.

Payment of Fees and Expenses

18.6

Fees

External examiners for research programmes will be paid via Accounts Payable. Further guidance on the payment to External Examiners for fees and for the reimbursement of expenses is available on the Finance website.

18.7

Expenses

Payment of expenses can be made *before* the payment of fees. Expenses claimed must be in accordance with the University's expenses policy and as agreed with the School.

- [University Expenses Policy](#)



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19 College contact information

- [College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences](#)
- [College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine](#)
- [College of Science and Engineering](#)

28 April 2022