



## Oral Defence of the Thesis in Research Degrees

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with Policy AB-58: [Research Degrees](#), and Procedure AB-58 P6: [Research Degrees Thesis Preparation and Examination](#).

### A. Introduction

1. In 2016 the University of South Australia introduced an oral defence of the thesis to enhance both the examination of the PhD and the research degree student's experience. The oral defence provides research degree students with an opportunity to discuss their research directly with the internationally-recognised experts who have been appointed as their examiners and also helps them establish stronger ties and networks across their field of study.

### B. Objectives of the oral defence

2. The main objectives of the oral defence are to:
  - a. provide the research degree student with an opportunity to defend their thesis and reply to criticism or challenges to their arguments while enabling examiners to clarify issues in the thesis;
  - b. provide the research degree student with an opportunity to discuss their work in depth with their examiners and to interact directly and in person with leaders in their fields of study;
  - c. facilitate the examiners reaching agreement on an examination result;
  - d. facilitate the examiners providing to the research degree student an agreed, single, set of corrections or revisions required to be made before the award of the qualification can be made.
3. It is not the purpose of an oral defence to test the research degree student's command of spoken English.

### C. Role of the oral defence in the examination process

4. The outcome of the oral defence and the assessment of the thesis together will inform the examiners' joint recommendation regarding the award of the PhD qualification being sought by the research degree student.
5. PhD students commencing from 1 January 2016 are required to undertake an oral defence as part of their thesis examination. Any exemptions from undertaking the oral defence must be approved by the Research Degree Examinations and Quality Panel.
6. Research degree students who commenced prior to 1 January 2016 may elect to undertake an oral defence as part of their thesis examination in consultation with their supervisor. Students who elect to undertake an oral defence should advise Student and Academic Services (SAS) at least three (3) months prior to their thesis submission.

### D. Key roles and responsibilities of the Chair of the oral defence

8. An independent member of the academic staff will be appointed as the Chair of the oral defence. The Chair is not an examiner of the thesis but a person who coordinates, oversees and facilitates the oral defence event.

9. Chairs are drawn from senior academic staff on a voluntary basis. A list of official Chairs is approved by the Research Degrees Committee. A Chair does not have to be drawn from the same Academic Unit as the PhD student. A supervisor or ex-supervisor of the research degree student being examined shall not be appointed as Chair and neither shall anyone who has worked closely with the research degree student or who has a close personal relationship with them.
10. The Chair is responsible for ensuring that:
  - a. the process is made clear to all participants and progresses smoothly;
  - b. the examiners have the chance to ask any questions they may have about the thesis and to discuss other matters related to the research; or in the case of a single examiner in attendance, the Chair has ensured the absent examiner's questions have been addressed to the satisfaction of the attending examiner.
  - c. irrelevant questions are not asked;
  - d. the research degree student has adequate opportunity to defend their work and to answer any questions or criticisms;
  - e. the research degree student is treated fairly and not subjected to undue stress;
  - f. consensus about an examination result is reached and clearly communicated. In the case of a single examiner in attendance, the attending examiner will make the decision but may wish to confer with the absent examiner before communicating the recommendation.

#### **E. Typical oral defence process**

11. Timing of the oral defence.
  - a. The timing of the oral defence should be established once the examiners are nominated and the thesis is submitted for examination. It will normally be set for eight (8) to twelve weeks after the thesis is dispatched. Depending on the location of the examiners, the oral defence may take place outside normal business hours, but every effort will be made to hold the event during reasonable hours for everyone involved.
  - b. The oral defence must not be held until both examiners' preliminary reports on the thesis have been received by UniSA which in the case of thesis by creative practice occurs following the viewing of the creative work.
  - c. When the examiners' preliminary reports recommend that the thesis is not of PhD standard and should be awarded a Masters by Research, or Failed, the oral defence will not take place as scheduled. Nevertheless, the research degree student retains the right to have an oral defence by request to the Research Degree Examinations and Quality Panel.
12. Participants of the oral defence.
  - a. The oral defence is attended by the Chair, the research degree student and the two (2) examiners (via video conference), noting the oral defence may go ahead with a single examiner in attendance.
  - b. The research degree student's supervisors may also be present should the student agree to their being present.
  - c. Even if the research degree student has indicated that their supervisors should not attend the oral defence or where the supervisors have decided not to attend, the research degree student's supervisors may be present for the purpose of

- hearing the examiners' decision and any feedback the examiners may have for the research degree student.
- d. Other people, including technical support and administrative personnel may be present, at the discretion of the Chair.
13. The oral defence will normally be held on a UniSA campus with at least the Chair and the research degree student attending in person. Where this arrangement proves impossible, the Dean of Graduate Studies may allow the oral defence to be conducted at an alternative location upon the recommendation of the Chair, in consultation with Student and Academic Services. Normally, the examiners will attend the oral defence via video conference due to their locations although if either is present in Adelaide at the scheduled time it would be beneficial if they participate in person.
14. Arrangements of the oral defence.
- a. Student and Academic Services, with the administrative support of the research degree student's primary Academic Unit, makes arrangements for the oral defence and notifies all parties.
  - b. Student and Academic Services sends the preliminary examiners' reports to the Chair, the research degree student and the supervisors when both reports are received, at least 10 working days before the oral defence. The research degree student and the supervisors will not be sent the preliminary recommendations.
  - c. The Chair can choose to contact the examiners before the oral defence, especially when issues and disagreements have been identified in the preliminary reports and for the purpose of agreeing an agenda for the oral defence.
  - d. The research degree student and the supervisors are not permitted to engage in any correspondence with the examiners before the oral defence commences. Any dialogue with the examiners must be via the Chair.
15. Duration and format of the oral defence.
- a. The oral defence is intended to be a stimulating, professional and constructive intellectual exchange. A typical oral defence session will take up to three (3) hours which includes:
    - i. a pre-meeting of the Chair and the examiners: 30 minutes before the oral defence;
    - ii. the oral defence: 90-120 minutes;
    - iii. a private meeting after the oral defence when the Chair will seek to facilitate a consensus decision with examiners;
    - iv. feedback to the research degree student (and, if they choose to attend, the research degree student's supervisors) on the recommendation the examiners will be making to the University and the requirements they will be asking the research degree student to consider.
  - b. The standard format of the oral defence might include:
    - i. a brief verbal overview of the thesis by the research degree student (a formal presentation is not required);
    - ii. questions from the examiners on substantive issues;
    - iii. other questions;
    - iv. free discussion.

- c. The above typical duration and format may vary from case to case. The Chair will advise Student and Academic Services of any likely significant variations to the standard format as soon as practical so that the research degree student is informed in a timely manner.
- d. Research degree students with a creative work can make reference to their creative work during the brief overview of the research, and draw on the durable record and other media during the overview or at any time during the oral defence.

#### **F. Examination result**

- 16. Once the oral defence has concluded, the Chair and the examiners will confer in private and the examiners will decide on their joint recommendation to the University regarding the award of the degree for which the thesis has been submitted, in accordance with Procedure AB-58 P6: [Research Degrees Thesis Preparation and Examination](#). In the case of a single examiner in attendance, the attending examiner will make the decision but may wish to confer with the absent examiner first.
- 17. Following their deliberations, the Chair and examiners may verbally communicate their recommended result and any required corrections or revisions to the research degree student. This is not an opportunity for the research degree student to challenge the result. In the event that agreement cannot be reached between the examiners about a joint recommendation, no immediate feedback will be provided to the research degree student or supervisors.
- 18. Before the examiners disband, a list of matters to be corrected and amended must be produced and a recommendation made for a final single result. The report should be written by the Chair or one (1) of the examiners and agreed between both examiners. The final report should take account of both the examination of the written thesis and the oral defence. In exceptional circumstances, where additional consultation between examiners is required before the report can be finalised, the final report must be submitted within two (2) working days. One (1) examiner will be nominated to finalise the report.
- 19. If the examiners disagree about the result and a consensus cannot be reached, the Dean of Graduate Studies should be advised, and may determine that an adjudicator is required, or that the case be referred to the Research Degree Examinations and Quality Panel.
- 20. Once Student and Academic Services sends the final examination report to the Principal Supervisor and the research degree student, copying the Research Degree Coordinator and Dean of Research (or delegate), usual regulations and processes regarding assessment outcomes apply. In the case of re-submission and re-examination (assessment option 4) after an oral defence has been held, a further defence is permissible if required by the examiners, and identified at the time of the initial oral defence meeting.

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**Figure 1. Defence of the Thesis flowchart**

