

## Guidelines for the Defence of the Thesis

### Introduction

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 student's experience. The oral defence provides 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.

These guidelines provide details on the purpose, format and conduct of the oral defence.

The guidelines are relevant to all research degree students, staff and external parties involved in the examination of any research degree student.

### Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the University of Otago, the Victoria University of Wellington and The University of Auckland in New Zealand for the provision of information and for permission to draw from and adapt their guidelines and procedures to the University of South Australia's (UniSA) purposes.

### 1. Objectives of the oral defence

The main objectives of holding an oral defence are to:

- a. provide the 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 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 student an agreed, single, set of corrections or revisions required to be made before the award of the qualification can be made.

It is not the purpose of an oral defence to test the student's command of spoken English.

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

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 student.

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 Examinations and HDR Academic Quality Panel.

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 3 months prior to their thesis submission.

### **3. Key roles and responsibilities of the Chair of the oral defence**

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.

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 Division as the PhD student. A supervisor or ex-supervisor of the student being examined shall not be appointed as Chair and neither shall anyone who has worked closely with the student or who has a close personal relationship with them.

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;
- c. irrelevant questions are not asked;
- d. the student has adequate opportunity to defend their work and to answer any questions or criticisms;
- e. the student is treated fairly and not subjected to undue stress;
- f. consensus about an examination result is reached and clearly communicated.

### **4. Typical oral defence process**

#### **4.1. Timing**

- 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 to twelve weeks after the thesis is submitted. 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' reports on the thesis have been received by UniSA.
- c. When the examiners' reports indicate that the thesis is considerably substandard, or when there is significant variance in the examiners' recommendations about the standard of the work, the oral defence may not take place as scheduled. Nevertheless, the student retains the right to have an oral defence. If a referee is required, the appointment will follow the process of appointing examiners.

#### **4.2. Participants**

The oral defence is attended by:

- a. the Chair;
- b. the student; and
- c. the two examiners (via video conference)

The student's supervisors may also be present should the student agree to their being present.

Even if the student has indicated that their supervisors should not attend the oral defence or where the supervisors have decided not to attend, the student's supervisors may be present for the purpose of hearing the examiners' decision and any feedback the examiners may have for the student.

Other people, including technical support and administrative personnel may be present, at the discretion of the Chair.

### **4.3. Venue**

The oral defence will normally be held on a UniSA campus with at least the Chair and the 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.

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.

### **4.4. Arrangements**

- a. Student and Academic Services, with the administrative support of the student's primary Division and/or School, makes arrangements for the oral defence and notifies all parties.
- b. Student and Academic Services sends the examiners' reports to the Chair, the student and the supervisors when both reports are received, at least 10 working days before the oral defence. The student and the supervisors will not be sent the recommendation.
- 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 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.

### **4.5. Duration and format**

- a. The oral defence is intended to be a stimulating, professional and constructive intellectual exchange. A typical oral defence session will take up to 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 student (and, if they choose to attend, the student's supervisors) on the recommendation the examiners will be making to the University and the requirements they will be asking the student to consider.
- b. The standard format of the oral defence might include:
  - i. a brief overview of the thesis by the student (a formal presentation is not required);
  - ii. questions from the examiners on substantive issues;
  - iii. other questions;
  - iv. free discussion.

The above typical duration and format may vary from case to case. The Chair will advise the Student and Academic Services of any likely significant variations to the standard format as soon as practical so that the student is informed in a timely manner.

#### **5. Examination result**

- a. 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 as regards the award of the degree for which the thesis has been submitted, in accordance with the [Academic Regulations for Higher Degrees by Research](#).
- b. Following their deliberations, the Chair and examiners may verbally communicate their recommended result and any required corrections or revisions to the student. This is not an opportunity for the 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 student or supervisors.
- c. 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 of the examiners and agreed between both examiners. The final report should take account of both the initial examination of the thesis and the oral defence and be submitted to Student and Academic Services. In exceptional circumstances, where additional consultation between examiners is required before the report can be finalised, the final report may be submitted within 2 working days. One examiner will be nominated to finalise the report.
- d. 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 or other form of referee is required.
- e. Once Student and Academic Services sends the final examination report to the principal supervisor and the student, copying the REPL and Associate Dean: Research Education, 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.

A flowchart of the oral defence process described in these guidelines is provided in Appendix A.

## Appendix A. Defence of the Thesis flowchart

