

## Guidance on the Conduct of MPhil/PhD Oral Examinations

### 1 Eligibility to Examine

- a) Examiners are asked to inform the Head of Examinations and Research Degrees (researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk) if they have had any connections with either the candidate they are examining or his/her supervisor/adviser which you believe would make it desirable for Royal Holloway to reconsider the appropriateness of their appointment.
- b) These connections could be either personal or professional. For example, it is considered that an examiner who has played a significant part in advising the candidate is inappropriate as is an examiner who has collaborated with the candidate on a joint published paper. Please note that it is accepted that examiners will usually be acquainted with the supervisor, and sometimes with the candidate; this, in itself, is not a bar to acting as an examiner.

### 2 Timetable for the Examination

In the interest of the candidate, Royal Holloway expects that the examination will be completed and that the examiners will have submitted their final report and other relevant documents to the Examinations and Research Degrees Office, Royal Holloway within 3 months of the dispatch of the thesis to the examiners. If there is difficulty in complying with this request, the Examinations and Research Degrees Office (researchdegrees@rhul.ac.uk) should be informed.

### 3 Preliminary Independent Reports

- a) Each examiner is asked to write an independent preliminary report on the thesis (the Preliminary Report form is sent with the thesis). It is expected that this will be written by each examiner after reading the thesis but before conferring with the co-examiner about it. Typically the preliminary report identifies particular areas which the examiner believes should be explored with the candidate during the oral examination, and, if possible, a tentative recommendation, based on an assessment of the thesis, for the result of the examination. Tentative recommendations should not be indicated to the candidate in advance of the oral, which is an integral component of the examination.
- b) The examiners should exchange their preliminary reports with each other before conducting the oral examination. The Preliminary Report forms should be submitted to Royal Holloway two weeks before the oral examination.
- c) If the examiners have any queries about the thesis which they wish to raise with the supervisor in advance of the oral examination, they are at liberty to do so. If the examiners have any queries about the Royal Holloway's requirements for the award of the PhD and about the regulations, please contact the Examinations and Research Degrees Office. Please note that all matters relating to the examination are confidential and examiners should not contact any third party, other than the supervisor as provided for in the Regulations and this Guidance. Otherwise all queries must be pursued through the Royal Holloway Examinations and Research Degrees Office.
- d) The educational needs provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act require institutions to make reasonable adjustments for candidates with physical and special learning difficulties in their assessment. Examiners will be advised of any special arrangements for a candidate with their appointment letters. However, if examiners are informed directly by the supervisor or candidate of any disability, even in confidence, they should seek the advice of the Examinations and Research Degrees Office in order that they might be properly briefed.

## 4 The Oral Examination

- a) An oral examination must be held except than in those circumstances for which provision is made in the Regulations (i.e. on resubmission of a thesis following referral).
- b) When the thesis is dispatched to the examiners, the candidate's supervisor is asked to contact the examiners and the candidate to arrange and confirm a mutually convenient time and place to hold the oral examination.
- c) The oral examination should be held at Royal Holloway or in central London unless both the student and the College agree that it is expedient to hold the oral examination elsewhere. The Examinations and Research Degrees Office should therefore be contacted if it is proposed that the examination is to be held outside Royal Holloway or central London. The holding of an oral examination by telephone or by video-conferencing is not normally permitted, and any enquiries about this should be addressed in the first instance to Examinations and Research Degrees Office.
- d) The supervisor can attend the oral examination as an observer, provided that the candidate has not indicated that his/her supervisor should not be present (the examiners will be informed if that is the case). Individual supervisors follow different practices in regard to their attendance at oral examinations, some making it their practice routinely to attend, others not attending.
- e) The examiners should indicate in the appropriate place on the yellow Decision Report form the date of the oral examination and whether or not the supervisor was present.
- f) No persons other than the examiners, one supervisor and the candidate may be present at an oral examination.
- g) The purpose of the oral examination is to examine the candidate on the subject of the thesis and, if the examiners see fit, on subjects relevant to this. The examiners should discuss, prior to meeting the candidate, the strategy they propose to adopt during the oral examination and, at its outset, outline this to the candidate.
- h) During the oral, the examiners should seek to establish whether all the requirements for a thesis submitted for the PhD have been met (these are set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees), and that the thesis is genuinely the work of the candidate.
- i) If the examiners have any doubts that the thesis is genuinely the work of the candidate, they should contact the Examinations and Research Degrees Office.
- j) There are no set requirements about the conduct of oral examinations, nor about their duration, but they should be conducted in such a way that the candidate has adequate opportunity, encouragement and time to explain his/her research and to defend the thesis. It is recommended that, during a long oral examination, examiners should allow short breaks at appropriate points.
- k) The supervisor, if present, does not have the right to participate in the examination but may contribute if invited to do so by the examiners.
- l) If the candidate becomes so unwell or distressed during the oral examination that he/she is unable to proceed, the examiners should, in consultation with the candidate and supervisor (if present), decide whether or not to continue the oral examination. If they do continue it, they should note in their final report that the candidate was unwell. If they decide not to continue they should determine whether sufficient evidence has been provided to allow a decision to be taken or whether it will be necessary to hold the oral examination on another occasion.
- m) If the candidate makes comments to the examiners which put them under moral pressure (e.g. alluding to the consequences of failure for him/her), or offers any kind of incentive to the examiners to pass him/her, the examination should be terminated and a report made to the Head of Academic Development via the Examinations and Research Degrees Office.

- n) In addition to examining the candidate orally, the examiners have the discretion to examine the candidate by means of written papers or practical examination. This provision is rarely invoked and examiners are asked to contact the Examinations and Research Degrees Office if they wish to do so.
- o) At the conclusion of the oral examination the candidate and the supervisor (if present) should withdraw and the examiners should initially confer together on the result in private.
- p) The examiners have discretion, after the initial private discussion, to consult the supervisor, irrespective of whether he/she was present at the oral, particularly if they have doubts relating to the appropriateness of the decision made.
- q) It is recognised that the examiners may wish to advise the candidate orally and informally of their decision at the conclusion of their deliberations following the oral, particularly if their decision is that the candidate has passed or will pass subject to making minor amendments to the thesis. Examiners are advised to exercise particular care if they do this. It is important to make clear to the candidate that the result is not formal and final until the candidate has been notified by letter from the Royal Holloway Examinations and Research Degrees Office after the examiners have submitted their written report and all other requirements have been satisfied.

## 5 The Result of the Examination

The options open to the examiners in determining the result are set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD degrees. In summary, they are:

- i. Pass the level entered for.
- ii. Pass, subject to minor amendments to be completed and checked by one or both of the examiners within 3 months.
- iii. Not pass, but candidate is allowed to re-write the thesis and resubmit it within 12 months (MPhil) / 18 months (PhD) for examination by the same examiners (an oral examination need not be held on re-entry).
- iv. Not pass, but be allowed to re-take a written paper(s) or practical examination (rarely used – see 4n)
- v. Not pass, but be allowed to submit to a further oral examination within 18 months on the same thesis and by the same examiners.
- vi. Fail PhD, but either has met the requirements for the MPhil or might, after revision of the thesis during a 12 month period, be able to meet the requirements for the MPhil.
- vii. Outright fail. No further entry to the PhD or MPhil degree will be allowed.

Examiners should not consider option (vi) unless they have first considered and rejected as inapplicable the preceding options; and should not consider option (vii) unless they have previously considered and rejected as inapplicable all the previous options.

## 6 Reporting the Result of the Examination to Royal Holloway

- a) A yellow Decision Report form and a Final Joint Report form will be sent to the Internal Examiner with the thesis. The examiners are required to complete and sign the yellow Decision Report form, indicating which of the decisions they have made. In addition, they are required to write a Final Joint Report giving the grounds on which their decision is based.
- b) The Final Joint Report should have regard to the requirements of a thesis for the PhD (see the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees).
- c) The examiners may require the candidate to make specified minor amendments to their satisfaction within three months. The amendments required should be set out clearly on the List of Minor Amendments form (sent to the Internal Examiner with the thesis) within two weeks of the oral examination. The examiners (or one of their number nominated by them) may send this form directly to the candidate or attach it to the yellow Decision Report form that is sent to the Examinations and

Research Degrees Office within two weeks of the oral. The Examinations Office will then advise the candidate of the minor amendments required.

- d) If the examiners decide to refer the candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis for the PhD in 18 months, they should indicate to the candidate/supervisor in what ways the current thesis fails to satisfy the requirements for the PhD degree, and should indicate clearly, although not necessarily in detail, the revisions which they consider should be made.
- e) If the candidate has been asked to revise and resubmit the thesis within 18 months, the examiners should indicate one of the following on the yellow Decision Report form:
  - i. They will definitely require an oral on the resubmitted thesis
  - ii. They have agreed that it will definitely not be necessary to conduct an oral on the revised thesis
  - iii. They wish to reserve their position until they have read the revised thesis.
- f) If the examiners decide that the criteria for the MPhil have been, or might be satisfied, they should indicate to the candidate/supervisor:
  - i. the basis for their decision not to allow resubmission for the PhD  
**and**
  - ii. should indicate in a positive way how the requirements for a thesis for the MPhil (set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees) are satisfied  
**or**
  - iii. if they are recommending that the thesis be revised and resubmitted for examination for the MPhil degree, how the criteria for the MPhil might be satisfied.
- g) Please note that the MPhil Degree is an award in its own right and may not be awarded unless the criteria for that degree are satisfied; it is not awarded as compensation for a failed PhD.
- h) If the examiners' decision is to fail the candidate outright, they should indicate the basis for their decision to reject all the other options open to them.
- i) The examiners are asked to agree between themselves at the end of the oral examination the arrangements for drafting and finalising their Final Joint Report and for sending it, the List of Minor Amendments (if applicable) and their copies of the thesis (unless it has been given to the candidate to make minor amendments) to the Examinations and Research Degrees Office.
- j) It is important for the candidate that the examiners complete the yellow Decision Report form and send it, together with their Final Joint Report and List of Minor Amendments (if applicable) to the Royal Holloway Examinations and Research Degrees Office within two weeks of the oral examination. If, for any reason, it is not possible for the reports to be returned within two weeks of the oral examination, one of the examiners should contact the Examinations and Research Degrees Office to discuss the problem.
- k) If the examiners have indicated on the yellow Decision Report form that they require the candidate to make minor amendments, a further form will be sent by the Examinations and Research Degrees Office to the examiner named on the yellow Decision Report form or to the internal examiner if both examiners are to check the thesis. This form is to be used to certify that the criteria for the degree have been reached and the minor amendments have been completed satisfactorily.
- l) PhD degrees are formally awarded on the last day of each month. In order for the degree to be awarded to the candidate in a particular month, the examiners' reports and two copies of the corrected theses (one hard bound and one soft bound) must have been received by the Examinations and Research Degrees Office by the last day of the month in question.
- m) Examiners have the right to make comments in confidence in a separate report to Royal Holloway.

## **7 Notification of the Decision to the Candidate**

- a) If the examiners reach a unanimous decision and there are no unresolved anomalies, that decision will normally be conveyed to the candidate without prior reference to any other committee. No official notification of the result of the examination can be issued to the candidate or to any other authority until the reports have been received and processed and any anomalies resolved.
- b) A copy of the yellow Decision Report form and the examiners' reports are routinely sent to the candidate when he/she is officially informed by letter by the Examinations and Research Degrees Office of his/her result. Copies of the examiners' reports are also forwarded to the candidate's Department.

## **8 The Examination of Candidates who are Resubmitting**

- a) Unless it is impossible for them to do so, it is expected that the original examiners will examine the candidate on re-entry whether to the PhD or to the MPhil.
- b) In examining a re-entry, candidate the examiners should have regard to the report they made on the first examination, copies of which can be made available to them.
- c) Examiners have discretion about whether or not to hold an oral examination on a revised and resubmitted thesis, but will need to have regard to any statement they have made about this on the yellow Decision Report form and in their Final Joint Report on the original examination.
- d) When the revised thesis is dispatched to the examiners, the supervisor is asked to contact the examiners to ask if an oral is required and, if so, to consult as necessary.
- e) Apart from the possibility of not holding an oral examination, the re-entry examination for the PhD is subject to exactly the same rules and procedures as the original examination and all the decisions set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD degrees are open to the examiners. Although it is open to examiners to recommend a further referral to revise and resubmit the thesis, they are advised to be cautious about this and, in particular, to consider the currency of the research contained in the thesis if re-examined after a further 18-month period.

## **9 If the Examiners are not in Agreement or Require Further Assistance**

If the examiners are unable to reach agreement, their reports shall be referred to the College Board of Examiners Executive Committee which shall determine the action to be taken.

## **10 Examiners' Fees and Expenses**

- a) A fee of £150 (MPhil) / £200 (PhD) is paid to each examiner following the initial examination and following any subsequent re-entry examination after a referral. Payment is authorised automatically on receipt of the examiners' Final Joint Report.
- b) Examiners may claim travel and other expenses in accordance with the 'Guidelines on PhD/MPhil Examiners' Fees and Expenses'. Claims should normally be submitted to the Examinations and Research Degrees Office at the conclusion of the examination but may be submitted earlier where advance payment for tickets has been necessary.

## **11 Equal Opportunities**

All examinations of Royal Holloway are subject to Royal Holloway's Equal Opportunities Policy (<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Restricted/Codes/EOPolicyStatement.pdf>). All candidates are subject to the same academic criteria and requirements.

## **12 Appeals Procedure**

Appeals against the examiners' decision must be submitted in writing by the student to the Head of Academic Development within one month of the date on which the student was formally notified of the outcome of the examination. Further information is available at [http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/academic\\_appeals/Index.html](http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/academic_appeals/Index.html).

**If you have any concerns or wish to seek advice at any stage in the examination process, please do not hesitate to contact the Royal Holloway Examinations and Research Degrees Office:**

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