UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

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Code of Practice for Assessment of Research Degree Theses:

This Code is for students entering the University from the 2003/04 academic session. It also applies to students who commenced their studies before September 2003 having replaced Sections 10 and 11 in the Code of Practice Admission, Monitoring And Assessment of Research Students for those .

1: Introduction

1.1 This Code of Practice sets out the processes and procedures for the assessment of research degree theses to be followed by all Schools.

1.2 Where a question of interpretation arises, reference should be made to the University's Regulations on Research Degrees that can be found at http://www.ppd.bham.ac.uk/policy/regs/currentregs/4.4.htm

1.3 It is recognised that the unit responsible for certain aspects of the assessment of research students varies for good reason across the University and may be either the Department or the School. For the sake of brevity the following Code of Practice refers only to the School (except when referring to those aspects of the procedures which are clearly a University-level responsibility). All references to the School should therefore be interpreted as referring to the Department or School in accordance with practice in the particular pat of the University concerned. The term "Head of School" should be interpreted as referring to "The Head of School or nominee".

1.4 The term "student(s)" in this Code should be interpreted as referring to students registered for qualifications that are designated as research degrees under the University's Regulations for Research Degrees.

1.5 The terms "viva voce" and "oral examination" are interchangeable. Throughout this Code, the phrase oral examination will be used.

1.6 This code applies to all students who submit a standard thesis for examination under the University's Regulations for Research Degrees. It also applies to students who make submissions comprising written work and other formats such as videos, CS, internet sites, portfolios of musical composition etc, that may be submitted as part of the final submission under the University's Regulations for Research Degrees.

1.7 Further copies of this document can be obtained from the Student Services Section of the Academic Office (AO) or at http://www.ppd.bham.ac.uk/polocy/cop/index.htm.

1.8 This document is published for information only and does not form part of any contract; the University reserves the right to make alterations without notice.

2: Nomination of Examiners

2.1 Students are required to submit to the Academic Office (AO) a "Notice of Intention to Submit a Thesis" form at least three months before they intend to submit their theses, in order that the nomination of examiners can be sought.

2.2 The receipt by the AO of a student's "Notice of Intention to Submit a Thesis" form will trigger the nomination process. However, it is expected that supervisor(s) and schools will have begun the process on an informal basis during the final stages of the completion of the thesis by the student. (see also paragraph 5.1(h) Code of Practice: Supervision and Monitoring of Progress of Research Students).

2.3 On receipt of this form the AO will send a "Nomination of Examiners for Research Degrees" form to the student's Head of School for their completion and approval. Where the latter is also the student's supervisor, the nomination should be approved by the member of academic staff within the School with responsibility for research students. The completed form should be returned with any supporting documentation, where appropriate, to the AO. If any section of the form is incomplete, it will be returned to the relevant Head of School or member of academic staff with responsibility for research students. If any exceptional cases have been made (see paragraph 4.1 of this Code) the AO will be responsible for transmission to the University's Postgraduate Committee for consideration.

2.4 Supervisor(s) should normally be consulted before the examiners are nominated. Students should be able to comment on the choice of examiners.

2.5 Those approving the nominations must ensure that the proposed examiners meet the criteria (see Section 4 of this Code).

2.6 Schools should ensure that the nominees have been asked informally to act as examiners, that they are aware of the University's timescale for the examination of theses (normally eight weeks

where an oral examination is to be held; six weeks in other cases) and also of the proposed date of submission of the thesis by the student. Schools should also ensure that nominees know what is expected of them as examiners, should their nominations be confirmed (see Appendix A of this Code). Nominees should be asked about their availability should there be unforeseen delays in the submission of the thesis.

2.7 The Senate formally appoints external examiners.

2.8 No formal letter of appointment will be sent to the examiners. The confirmation of appointment is included in a letter providing further details concerning the examination of the thesis. This letter accompanies the thesis when it is despatched to examiners, together with Guidance Notes on the Examination of Research Degree Theses.

2.9 Students are advised of the names of their examiners when theses are despatched to the examiners.

2.10 The "Nomination of Examiners for Research Degrees" form also contains a section for the nomination of a chairperson of the oral examination (see Section 5 and Appendix A of this Code). The nomination of a chairperson can be made at the same time as the nomination of the examiners. If not, then the nomination must be made in advance of the oral examination and the AO so notified.

3: Number of Examiners to be Appointed

3.1 At least one internal examiner and at least one external examiner should be appointed for each student, except where the student is a member of staff of this University. (Regulation 4.4.12(4)(i)

3.2 Where the student is a member of the staff of this University, at least one internal examiner and at least two external examiners will be appointed. *Note: This will require a change to regulations.*

3.3 Where no internal examiner can be appointed, for example in extremely specialised subject areas, two external examiners will be appointed. (see paragraph 2.24 of the Code of Practice: Supervision and Monitoring of Research Students)
Note: In these cases, the chairperson, who should have some knowledge of the subject area of the thesis in general terms, should undertake the administrative duties of the internal examiner, in addition to chairing the oral examination. (See also Section 5 and Appendix A of this Code)

3.4 Neither the lead nor the co-supervisor should be appointed as an internal examiner. (see paragraph 2.21 of the Code of Practice: Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Research Students)

3.5 Joint PhDs with partner institutions should be examined in accordance with the agreement signed with the partner institutions. However, this University's minimum requirements for the examination process must be met.

4: Criteria for the Nomination of Examiners

4.1 In the instance where a school might wish to nominate an examiner who does not meet the criteria below, an exceptional case, setting out the proposed examiner's particular suitability to examine the thesis concerned, curriculum vitae and research record, should be made in the appropriate section of the nomination of examiners' form. The case will be considered by the University's Postgraduate Committee.
The examiners should:

a) be specialists in the general subject area of the thesis; and
b) hold qualifications at least equal to the degree which they are examining, unless there is compensating academic or professional status or experience *(eg specialist in subject area of thesis and has published widely, but only has masters degree);* and
c) have good research experience, be research active and have published in peer reviewed publications; and
d) hold a current academic appointment within higher education, although appropriate persons from outside higher education (eg a senior scientist at a research institute or professional practitioner) or who holds a similar position which gives familiarity with research (and research degrees) may be appointed; and
e) have recent experience (within the last five years) of examining research degree theses and/or a clear understanding of the task to be undertaken; and
f) be from a minimum 3aRAE rated department (at least one examiner)

4.2 The examiners should not:

a) have had a substantial direct involvement with the student's work (unless it is a resubmitted thesis); or
b) be the student's lead or co-supervisor (see paragraph 2.21 of the Code of Practice: Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Research Students); or
c) be former members of staff of this University or former research degree students of this University, before a lapse of at least four years; or
d) be a probationer; or
e) currently be a student for a research degree.

4.3 External examiners should not be appointed on a regular basis such that their familiarity with the school might prejudice objective judgement
Note: The University's Postgraduate Committee will review external examinerships on a regular basis to ascertain the number of examinerships each examiner has held in a particular session and compare with previous sessions

4.4 The academic adviser could be appointed as the internal examiner. This should only be the case where the academic adviser has had no detailed and/or specialist academic investment in the content of the student's work, and has only been involved in providing general academic advice. The Head of School should ensure that, in circumstances where the academic adviser is appointed as the internal examiner, they are sufficiently independent (see paragraph 2.22 of the Code of Practice: Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Research Students).

4.5 The mentor could be appointed as the internal examiner. This should only be the case where the mentor has not engaged in any significant pastoral support for the student concerned. The Head of School should ensure that, in circumstances where the mentor is appointed as the internal examiner, they are sufficiently independent (see paragraph 2.23 of the Code of Practice: Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Research Students).

4.6 A person not on the University of Birmingham's payroll but holding an honorary University of Birmingham title may be appointed as an internal but not as an external examiner.
Note: In such cases, it may be appropriate for the chairperson of the oral examination to undertake the administrative duties of the internal examiner. (See also 3.3 of this Code.)

4.7 The original examiners should normally re-examine a thesis that has been resubmitted after revision. Schools will be asked by the AO to re-confirm the original examiners. Where examiners are no longer able to act, for example, following retirement, schools should nominate replacement examiners, using the appropriate form, and setting out reasons for the replacement(s). Examiners, in their letter of appointment, will be advised that if the thesis is subject to revision and resubmission and that, if for any reason, they are not re-appointed to re-examine the thesis, their reports will be made available to the examiners.

5: The Oral Examination

The Chairperson of the Oral Examination

5.1 The appointment of a member of academic staff to chair an oral examination is not only good practice, but is a protection mechanism for the student and the examiners, in instances, for example, of allegations of impropriety or bias on the part of the examiners. The presence of an independent chairperson is to reassure and make the student feel more at ease and during the course of the oral examination ensure that there is fair play, that intense and robust discussion is at an appropriate level and that there is sufficient sensitivity to equal opportunities issues. (see also Appendix A of the Code)

5.2 The chairperson should be independent in that he or she should not have had a substantial direct involvement in the candidate's work or have been involved in the appointment of the examiners. The formal nomination of the examiners on behalf of a school should not preclude the Head of School from chairing an oral examination. The chairperson must be impartial.

5.3 The chairperson cannot be the student's lead or co-supervisor or internal examiner (see paragraph 2.25 of the Code of Practice: Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Research Students).

5.4 The academic adviser could be appointed to chair the oral examination, but only if they have not had any detailed and/or specialist academic investment in the content of the student's work and has only been providing general academic advice. The Head of School should ensure that, in circumstances where the academic adviser is appointed to chair the oral examination, they are sufficiently independent (see paragraph 2.26 of the Code of Practice: Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Research Students).

5.5 The mentor could be appointed to chair the oral examination, but only if they have not engage in any significant pastoral support for the student concerned. The Head of School should ensure

that, in circumstances where the mentor is appointed to chair the oral examination, they are sufficiently independent (see paragraph 2.27 of the Code of Practice: Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Research Students).

The Oral Examination

The following is a set of guidance pointers for the arrangements for and conduct of the oral examination. (Regulation 4.4.12(5)).

5.6 *The Requirement to hold an Oral Examination is:*

i) obligatory for doctoral degrees (exemption only in exceptional circumstances and then, only with the approval of the University's Research Progress Board)

ii) at the discretion of examiners for masters degrees by research

iii) obligatory after a doctoral thesis has been resubmitted

5.7 *Arrangements for the Oral Examination*

i) It is the responsibility of the internal examiner (or the chairperson if two external examiners are appointed) to make the arrangements for the oral examination.

ii) The internal examiner should notify the chairperson, external examiner(s) and the student, in writing, giving at least two weeks' notice, of the date, time, place and names of those attending.

iii) The oral examination should normally be held in Birmingham. If not, approval must be sought from the University's Postgraduate Committee(1)

5.8 *Purpose/Aim of the Oral Examination*

The oral examination

i) provides the student with an opportunity to defend their thesis.

ii) assists the examiners in their decision as to whether or not the student has met the requirements for the degree

iii) examines the general field within which the subject of the thesis lies

iv) allows detailed discussion of the thesis

v) explores the ideas and theories proposed in the thesis

vi) clarifies points of ambiguity

vii) satisfies the examiners that the thesis is the student's own work

5.9 *Conduct of the Oral Examination*

i) The oral examination should be held in a suitable room1 without interruptions from others

ii) If any of those who should be attending are unable to be present, then the oral examination must be re-arranged. The chairperson, internal, external examiners and student must be present. No other person may attend except with the unanimous approval of the chairperson and examiners. Supervisor(s) should not be present at the oral examination, but should be available on the day.

iii) Time should be made available on the day of, and before the oral examination, for examiners to meet and discuss their preliminary reports (Examiners, who should keep a copy for themselves, should have already sent another copy to the AO) and to discuss the approach to the examination.

iv) The chairperson should introduce those present, putting them at their ease, explaining the form the oral examination will take and what happens afterwards. The chairperson will only intervene if there is a danger of misunderstanding, unfairness, bias or unprofessional behaviour.

v) Each examiner should contribute, but with the external taking the lead.

vi) There are no rules governing length. It is at the examiners' discretion to make the oral examination as long or short as they think necessary. Short breaks are permitted if necessary/requested.

vii) There may be intense questioning, but it should be non-aggressive.

viii) No-one, at any time, should indicate the likely outcome.

5.10 *After the Oral Examination*

i) The chairperson should ask student to withdraw.

ii) The examiners should deliberate.

iii) The examiners, through the chairperson, may invite the student and supervisor(s) to hear the recommendation (provisional only).

iv) The report should be completed and submitted, together with the thesis and the list of corrections or revisions (where appropriate), to the AO, ideally immediately after the

conclusion of the oral examination but, in any case, by the required date.

v) There must be formal approval of recommendations by the University's Research Progress Board, where appropriate.

vi) The student, supervisor(s) and Head of School will be formally notified by AO and sent copies of examiners' reports.

vii) The supervisor(s), in conjunction with the examiners, where appropriate, should provide advice to candidate concerning the corrections and/or revisions required to the thesis.

Notes:

1It is expected that the oral examination will be held at the University of Birmingham. If, in exceptional circumstances, it is held elsewhere or held by video conferencing or by telephone link, the following points must be taken into consideration when seeking approval from the University's Postgraduate Committee:

a) all parties must agree to the venue or video conferencing or telephone link, especially the student

b) facilities and conditions must be similar to those at the University of Birmingham

c) if video conferencing or telephone links are used to ensure that the quality of the sound links between locations have been tested; that time differences between the two locations do not disadvantage the student by the examination taking place at an inappropriate time of day or night

d) ensure that there are no interruptions, except in extreme emergency

e) no reason for the student to claim procedural irregularity on the grounds of a change of location or video conferencing or telephone line after the oral examination

f) the student's School or Department would be liable for any expenses incurred in travelling to the oral examination by all concerned, including the student, if the examiners requested a location outside the University of Birmingham

6: Report Form and Recommendations available to Examiners

6.1 Examiners are required to complete the following sections of the report form (Regulation 4.4.13):

a) an independent report before any oral examination is held. Examiners should note any matters that they may wish to raise at the oral examination. The reports are not made available to the student at this stage in the examination process; they act as an aide memoire to the examiners for the oral examination.

The report should address the following areas. However, the report should reflect the subject of the thesis with regard to the areas covered.

was the nature and purpose of the research made clear and was this substantially achieved?

to what extent does the thesis demonstrate that the student has an adequate understanding of the subject and knowledge of the literature?

has the student chosen the appropriate methodology for the study? Is the methodology then used effectively? Are the findings interpreted in a valid way?

is there coverage of recent and relevant literature in the field of study which shows critical appraisal and an original synthesis?

what evidence is there of independent critical and analytical skills, and the ability to evaluate evidence?

is there an understanding of the theoretical field associated with the study? is the linkage and balance between practical investigation and theory satisfactory?

is the thesis clearly written and presented? Is the style and structure of the thesis satisfactory?

to what extent does the thesis show evidence of originality and make a contribution to knowledge? Does it contain matter suitable for publication?

what is your view of the overall quality of the research described in the thesis?

is the synopsis an adequate summary of the work presented?

b) a separate or joint report following the oral examination. This should take into consideration the independent reports and the student's performance in the oral examination.

c) a final, where possible, agreed recommendation

d) guidance to candidates on corrections/revisions: detailed advice to the student in order that any corrections and/or revisions may be carried out satisfactorily.

6.2 The date by which the examination process should be completed and the reports submitted to the AO will be clearly stated in examiners' letters of appointment and on the first page of the report form. The reports should ideally be completed immediately after the end of the oral examination.

6.3 Copies of the reports will be made available to Heads of Schools, supervisor(s) and students in

order that they may benefit from examiners' comments and advice. The acceptance of an invitation to act as an examiner is on the understanding that examiners are willing to have their reports made available in this way. Where examiners have comments that they might wish to draw to the attention of the University's Postgraduate Committee, these should be raised separately from the report and sent directly to the AO.

6.4 Examiners will be advised of the definition of the standard required of the thesis for the degree for which it is submitted and of the range and definitions of recommendations available to them as defined in the regulations for the degree concerned. This is provided in the information sent to examiners with the letter accompanying the thesis for examination.

6.5 In cases where the examiners agree and an adequate report has been submitted and the recommendation is to award the degree or to award the degree subject to minor or major corrections, action to advise the student will be taken by the AO without reference to any academic authority.

6.6 In cases where the recommendation is for resubmission, or award a lower qualification or rejection, reports will be submitted for consideration and approval by the University's Research Progress Board. *Note: This is covered by the following extract from the Terms of Reference of the Progress Board "To determine decisions concerning progress and status of individual students, within and notwithstanding regulations". Does this give the Progress Board the power to overturn the decisions of the examiners and, if it does, should examiners be notified. Consultations are ongoing with the Legal Office.*

7: Failure of Examiners to Reach Agreement

7.1 Where examiners submit final recommendations that differ, the AO will ask them to confer to see whether they might reconcile their differences before any other course of action is taken.

7.2 If they are then unable to reach agreement, the student, supervisor(s) and Head of School will be advised that new examiners and a chairperson will be appointed and a completely new examination held (Regulation 4.4.12 (6)) The original examiners will also be advised that a new examination is to take place.

7.3 In such cases, two external examiners could be appointed if there is no suitable internal examiner. None of the original examiners can be appointed. The Head of the relevant School should not be appointed as the internal examiner.

7.4 The examiners should not see the reports of the original examiners and will be advised only that the original examination has been inconclusive.

7.5 The reports of the original examiners should be made available to the Head of the relevant School, the student and the student's supervisor(s), when they are advised that a new examination will be conducted. They should not discuss the reports with anyone else.

7.6 The thesis should not be amended in any way before the new examination by the new examiners is held.

7.7 If the new examiners submit recommendations that differ, the AO will ask them to confer to see whether they might reconcile their differences before any other course of action is taken.

7.8 If they are unable to reach agreement, an adjudicator should be appointed (Regulation 4.4.12(7)) as laid down by the Senate or delegated authority.

7.9 The adjudicator should make a recommendation in accordance with Regulations 4.4.14, 4.4.15 or 4.4.16 based on the thesis and the reports of the original and of the new examiners. The adjudicator should not have been the chairperson of the oral examinations. They should not normally conduct an oral examination.

Appendix A: The Examiners and the Chairperson of the Oral Examination

A Internal Examiner

The internal examiner is expected:

A.1 To ensure that the whole examination process is completed within the period allowed (normally, eight weeks where an oral examination is to be held; six weeks in other cases) and to submit reports as requested to the AO by the required date.

A.2 To liaise with the external examiner, supervisor(s), student and chairperson in order to arrange a suitable date for the oral examination, if held.

A.3 To notify the AO of any delays in arranging the oral examination.

A.4 To notify all those concerned in good time, normally at least two weeks in advance, of the date, time and place of the oral examination and the names of those who will be attending.

A.5 To refer oral examinations to be held outside the University of Birmingham to the AO to seek

approval from the University's Research Progress Board.

A.6 To make appropriate arrangements for the oral examination, including time to discuss the preliminary independent reports with the external examiner.

A.7 To ensure that report forms are submitted to the AO following the oral examination by the required date, including a clear specification of the corrections and/or revisions for onward transmission to the student, student's supervisor(s) and student's Head of School.

A.8 With the external examiner, through the chairperson of the oral examination, may invite the student and supervisor(s), to hear the recommendation (provisional only) (The official notification of the outcome, following approval by the University's Research Progress Board, where appropriate, will be by letter from the AO.)

A.9 To complete a 'Certification of Corrections' form in cases where a student has to make minor or major corrections to the thesis. (Note: This will be a joint responsibility with the external examiner where major corrections are required.)

B External Examiner

The external examiner is expected:

B.1 To submit reports as requested to the AO and to ensure that deadlines for examining theses are met.

B.2 To attend an oral examination, if held.

B.3 To complete a 'Certification of Corrections' form where the student is required to carry out major corrections. This is a joint responsibility with the internal examiner.

B.4 To complete a 'Certification of Corrections' form where the student is required to carry out minor corrections and two external examiners instead of an internal (normally their responsibility to complete the form) have been appointed.

C Chairperson

The following is a list of characteristics and duties of the chairperson:

C.1 a member of academic staff, with sufficient ability and maturity to ensure the proper conduct of the proceedings, who has examined research degrees in any University on previous occasions. They may be from a different School to the student. Once appointed, the AO should be notified.

C.2 some knowledge of the subject area of the thesis in general terms

C.3 no requirement to read the thesis

C.4 is not one of the examiners

C.5 undertakes responsibility for the administrative duties of the internal examiner in cases where no external examiner is appointed and two external examiners are appointed

C.6 introduces those present at the oral examination and puts everyone one at ease

C.7 ensures that those present understand the procedures which are to be followed

C.8 only intervenes if there is a danger of misunderstanding, unfairness, bias or unprofessional behaviour

C.9 at the end of the oral examination, asks the student to withdraw while the examiners deliberate, making it clear to the student that the chairperson is not an examiner and will not participate in the substance of the deliberations

C.10 if the examiners wish to advise the student and the supervisor(s) of their recommendations, to make sure this is undertaken in a professional way and with as little stress as possible for those concerned, that the student knows what is required of them and that this recommendation is provisional only - the student must await a formal letter from the AO

C.11 during the oral examination and deliberations to make brief notes concerning the conduct of the oral examination and to ensure that these are retained, for possible use in the future, for example, in the case of an appeal

C.12 to respond, either individually or as part of a School response to a student appeal