Lancaster University

EXAMINATION OF RESEARCH DEGREES

GUIDANCE NOTES for LLM/MA/MSc by Research degrees

1. INTRODUCTION

These are brief guidelines on the examination process for the degrees of MA, MSc and LLM by Research. They are intended to provide helpful information for research students, their supervisors, and the examiners, and should be read in conjunction with the relevant sections of the **Postgraduate Research Regulations** (these sections are identified throughout these guidelines). The Postgraduate Research Regulations form part of the University's Manual of Academic Regulations and Procedures (MARP).

All those involved in research degree vivas should familiarise themselves with the *Framework for the Research Degree Viva*, which is available as Appendix 4 to the Postgraduate Research Regulations. Staff in the Student Registry will be happy to assist if more detailed advice is needed.

2. THE EXAMINATION PROCESS

All research students submit a thesis for examination **(see Appendix 2 of the Postgraduate Research Regulations for information on the form, submission and deposit of the thesis.**

The student's thesis is assessed by examiners appointed specifically according to the student's area of study. As well as the assessment of the work itself, all students undergo an oral examination. It is on the basis of the examination of both the thesis and the student that the outcome of the full examination is determined.

Criteria for the award of the LLM/MA/MSc by Research degree

The degree shall be awarded on the examination of a dissertation embodying the results of the candidate's research. An oral examination will also be required. The work for the degree shall consist mainly of research and directed study; the candidate may in addition be required to undertake coursework, and the award of the degree may be conditional on satisfactory performance in this coursework.

A successful candidate for the degree of LLM/MA/MSc by Research shall display a convincing grasp of the techniques of research appropriate to the field of study on a scale which can be completed during one year, or at most two years, of full-time study or equivalent. The dissertation embodying the results of the research shall demonstrate evidence of originality, at least in the exercise of an independent critical faculty, and shall achieve a good standard of competence in argument and presentation. The dissertation shall comply with the requirements for the form, submission and deposit of MPhil theses except that the dissertation should not normally exceed 35,000 words (including any footnotes and appendices but excluding the bibliography

3. PURPOSE OF THE ORAL/VIVA VOCE EXAMINATION

The oral examination, or viva voce ("by live voice" examination) is a key part of the examination process and allows the examiners to explore with the student areas of interest, controversy, weakness, obscurity, etc., in order that they may then make an appropriate recommendation to the university. All research students must have a viva, regardless of the examiners' views on the quality of the thesis. In some cases the viva may do no more than confirm a favourable opinion already formed from the thesis; in other cases it will provide the candidate with the opportunity to compensate for weaknesses in the thesis or dispel examiners' reservations; in a minority of cases it may fail to do this and instead confirm the examiners' view that a recommendation other than approval should be made. It is, therefore, an important occasion for which students should be as well prepared as possible. Discussion may focus very specifically on sections of the thesis, research

methodology, lab work, etc, or may expand to look more generally at the field and the place of the thesis's contribution within it.

In summary, the viva voce examination allows:

- the student to defend their research and thesis, expanding or clarifying sections, providing more detailed background information, etc.;
- the examiners to obtain further clarification on the work undertaken and the content of the thesis;
- the examiners the opportunity to assure themselves that the thesis and its underlying research are the work of the student.

4. THE EXAMINERS

Most students have two examiners. There should always be at least one internal examiner - usually but not always from the same department as the student - and one external examiner. If a student has had a connection with the department or university beyond that of being a research student, i.e. as a member of staff or a research assistant, then a second external examiner is required. If a suitable internal examiner cannot be found or if only the supervisor would be suitable, then a second external examiner would also be required. At least one of the examiners, if not both, must have wide experience in the examination process for research degrees.

Examiners are nominated by the student's department, but must be approved by the body or officer with delegated authority from Senate[1]. Responsibility for recommending examiners varies - in some departments it is the role of the supervisor, in others the research director of studies, and in others the head of department. The member of staff responsible for nominating the examiners should, where possible, discuss the appointment with the student, but the student does not have the right to a choice or veto. There is a standard form to be completed and submitted to the Student Registry. From time to time, staff from the Registry may request additional details on behalf of the body or officer with delegated authority from Senate. This process can take time. It is therefore suggested that recommendations for the appointment of examiners should be made a month or so before the student is expected to submit their thesis for examination so that the thesis may be sent immediately to the approved examiners.

Internal Examiners

The internal examiner should normally be a member of staff from either the same department or an area cognate to the student's field of research. It is possible that the internal examiner will not be an expert in the precise field of research but will be acquainted with the broad area within which it falls. In addition, the internal examiner should normally hold a degree at least equivalent to that for which the student is being examined, and should be experienced in research, including having published. The student's supervisor should not normally act as the internal examiner. If the supervisor *is* nominated, then an additional examiner (internal or external) would need to be appointed as well.

[1] The *Senate Schedule of Delegations* details the body or officer with delegated authority to approve specific matters on behalf of Senate. This is updated on an annual basis.

External Examiners

The external examiner will normally be an experienced member of another university qualified (i) to assess the thesis within its own field and (ii) to compare its quality with work of research degree standard at other British universities.

The external examiner(s) should normally:

- be competent in the area of work being examined
- be experienced in research, including having published
- be experienced in the examination of research students.

The external examiner will normally be a senior academic from another institution, but from time to time it may be appropriate to appoint an examiner from outside the university sector. In such cases, the examiner must have at least an understanding of the examination process, and if they have not previously examined a research student, then the internal examiner must be widely experienced as an examiner.

The external examiner(s) should **not:**

- have any previous specific contact with the student;
- have had a formal connection with the student's department within the last 5 years;
- been a member of Lancaster staff within the last five years;
- have been a student of Lancaster University or one of its collaborative partners within the last 5 years;
- have examined more than four Lancaster University research students within the last 5 years;
- be a close relative or closely connected with any other party to the examination.

5. PREPARING FOR THE ORAL EXAMINATION

The Department

The viva normally should take place within three months of the submission of the thesis to the Student Registry (although it may sometimes take longer than this due to the examiners' other commitments). This allows adequate time for the examiners to read through the thesis and write the preliminary report. It is the responsibility of the student's department, usually undertaken by either the supervisor or postgraduate secretary, to liaise with the external examiner in order to organise the viva. Although the student is usually consulted about the timing of the viva, it is the student's responsibility to be available at the arranged time. The student should be given plenty of notice of the place, date and time of the viva. Given how difficult it can be to find a time suitable for all participants, this should be organised as soon as possible after examiners have been appointed. In-person vivas should normally be held at Lancaster. Online vivas, as laid out in Appendix 5 of the PGR regulations, may be used where appropriate and/or necessary.

The Student

The student should thoroughly review the thesis plus background research, experiments, analyses, etc. If possible and available, the student should first take part in a 'mock examination' organised by the supervisor in order to familiarise themselves with the process and likely content. Any queries the student has regarding the viva should be directed to their supervisor; there should be no contact between the student and the examiners.

The Supervisor

The supervisor should assist the student in preparing for the viva, including, if possible, holding a mock viva. The supervisor is also responsible for acting as a liaison between the examiners and the student.

The Examiners

Examiners need to read through the thesis and complete an initial independent report on it. Report forms are provided by the Student Registry. The initial report should be sent to the Student Registry at least one week before the viva. After the viva, the viva voce report form should be completed with details of the viva and the recommended outcome and sent to the Student Registry as soon as possible afterwards (normally within five working days of the viva).

The Student Registry

The Student Registry is responsible for sending out copies of the thesis to the examiners, along with the report forms, guidelines, and fees and expenses claim forms. When completed, report and expenses claim forms should be sent back directly to the Registry.

6. THE ORAL EXAMINATION (VIVA VOCE)

Attending the viva will be the student, the internal and external examiners and possibly, with the approval of the examiners, the supervisor (who may be present but may not take an active part in the examination). In addition, all vivas will either have an independent chair or will be recorded. **Information on the conduct of the viva is given in the *Framework for the Research Degree Viva*, which is provided as Appendix 4 to the Postgraduate Research Regulations. Appendix 5 of the regulations provides guidance on the conduct of the viva online.**

The guidance set out in the *Framework* is designed to protect the interests of all participants in the process, for any research degree examination leading to a Lancaster award (even when a viva voce is held away from Lancaster). In addition to the guidance in the *Framework*, the following comments can be made:

(a) The viva should begin punctually at the time arranged. If for an unforeseen reason (i.e. transport delays) the start of the examination must be delayed, then the student must be kept informed.

(b) When an independent Chair has not been nominated, the internal examiner acts as the convenor of the examination, introducing the external examiner to the student and explaining the procedures of the examination.

(c) Students should be told at the beginning of their viva that no information about outcomes will be provided until the end of the examination (viva), and that no conclusions should be drawn from this.

(d) The examiners should then give the student a general idea of what to expect regarding areas to be covered, issues to be resolved, etc.

(e) The main part of the examination will then take place, with questions and comments coming from both examiners (although not always in equal proportion). These can cover any aspect of

the thesis and research and the student should be prepared for it to be a wide-ranging, insistent, persistent, probing and forceful interrogation. Having said that, many vivas, particularly those where a positive outcome is in little or no doubt, are conducted in a friendly and helpful spirit. Students may occasionally feel under attack, but should bear in mind that this is, after all, a defence of a thesis. The examination should be conducted throughout with appropriate rigour, but also with courtesy.

(f) At the end of the viva, the student should be asked to withdraw for a few minutes while the examiners agree on the outcome, then be invited back to be informed of their decision. Where additional work is required (and most students are required to undertake at least some corrections), examiners must make it clear (i) precisely what their recommendation is and why they are making it, and (ii) the nature and scale of work (this can vary from mere textual corrections to substantial revision and rewriting), and time permitted. It is the responsibility of the internal examiner to provide as soon as possible, and within ten working days, a more detailed written summary of work to be undertaken following the viva. The summary should either be given to the student at the viva, or to the supervisor following the viva (a copy should be sent to the Student Registry for its records).

(g) If further work is required, the supervisor should act as the link between the examiners and the student. There should be no direct contact between the student and the examiners unless a second viva is held (which sometimes happens if the student needs to resubmit the thesis).

(h) Normally the examiners should return their copies of the thesis either directly to the student at the start of the viva, or as soon as convenient.

(i) In certain circumstances the viva may be conducted online **(see Appendix 5 of the Postgraduate Research Regulations).**

7. OUTCOMES OF THE EXAMINATION PROCESS

Each examiner formally makes their recommendation by submitting a report to the body or officer with delegated authority from Senate (currently the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Education), via the Student Registry. This may be an individual or joint report. Once a recommendation has been approved by the PVC Education, on behalf of Senate, then the Registry will write formally to the student to notify them of the outcome, provided that there are no outstanding debts.

The examination outcomes for the awards are stipulated in the Postgraduate Research Regulations (see section PR 4.4.4).

8. IF FURTHER WORK IS REQUIRED ON THE THESIS

Frequently students are expected to carry out some further work on their thesis, either minor or major amendments or sometimes a re-submission if there is a significant amount of work required.

The Student

The student will be given information in writing from the examiners on what work is needed. The level of detail will vary according to the type of work necessary (e.g., a list of typing errors, or a paragraph describing generally how to re-shape the thesis). The student can expect to receive some guidance from their supervisor, particularly in interpreting the examiners' comments. If *minor* amendments are required, the student must complete them within one month of receiving details of

the work to be done. If *major* amendments are required, the student must complete them within three months of receiving details of the work to be done. The student should submit the revised copy of their thesis to their supervisor to pass on to the examiner(s) for confirmation that the changes have been made as required.

Note: Where the outcome of the examination is that the award should be **made immediately** with very minor corrections required (i.e. typographical or presentational corrections) there is no requirement for these to be approved by the internal or the external examiner.

If the examiners recommended a *resubmission*, then the student has up to six months in which to resubmit their thesis, and is entitled to continued supervision and some access to facilities. Normally the same examiners are used, but from time to time a new examiner(s) may need to be appointed. The student should be prepared for a second viva, although one is not always held.

The Department/Supervisor

Contact between the student and the examiners should be avoided and the department/supervisor should act as the intermediary and if additional work is required the examiners should provide to the supervisor written guidance on the work to be carried out (unless this has been given directly to the student at the oral examination). The supervisor is expected to provide advice and support while the student carries out the changes required and the department should ensure that the student has access to the facilities needed to undertake the specified work. If minor or major amendments are required, the Student Registry will send to the supervisor a brief form for confirming that the student has made the required changes which the supervisor should pass to the examiner(s) along with the revised thesis.

If the student has minor or major amendments to make, when the changes have been made the student should hand in the thesis to the department/supervisor in order for it to be given to the examiner(s) for approval. Resubmitted theses shall follow the same rules for submission as the initial submission, as outlined in Appendix 2 of the Postgraduate Research Regulations.

The Examiners

If minor amendments are required, these must be approved by the internal examiner. If major amendments are required the examiners should decide whether they each need to review the revisions. Often it is decided that only the internal examiner need check the changes to ensure they have been carried out satisfactorily.

Once the examiner(s) receives the amended thesis, the changes should be checked carefully and, if satisfactory, the examiner(s) should confirm to the Student Registry that the amendments have been made as required. Informally the examiner(s) should let the supervisor know when the changes have been confirmed. When checking minor amendments, the examiner(s) should respond within one month of receiving the revised thesis; when checking major amendments, the examiner(s) should respond within two months.

If the examiners recommend that the student needs to resubmit their thesis, then they will be expected to undertake the re-examination of the thesis when the resubmitted version is ready. A new report on the thesis must be completed. It is up to the examiners to determine whether a second oral examination is necessary. In general, it is advised that a second viva should be held unless the resubmitted thesis needs no further work (the degree could be recommended immediately). If a second viva is held, then a report on that examination must also be completed.

After examining a re-submitted thesis (and holding a viva if they wish), examiners have a number of options. **Please see the Postgraduate Research Regulations (section PR 4.4.4).**

In the case of a resubmission where the examiners determine a second viva is not required/appropriate, and after the examiners have made their report, it is the responsibility of the internal examiner to inform the student of the result of the re-examination.

The Student Registry

The Student Registry will receive the report forms from the examiners with their recommendations. If either minor or major amendments are required, the Registry will contact the examiners seeking confirmation that the required changes have been completed satisfactorily.

9. AWARDING THE DEGREE

Once the examiners have sent in all the required forms and confirmed to the Student Registry that the degree should be awarded, the student must arrange for the final version of the thesis to be deposited with the University. **Regulations on the deposit of the thesis are given in Appendix 2 of the Postgraduate Research Regulations.**

No award will be made until Student Registry has received confirmation that the thesis has been deposited with the University.

The examiners' recommendations and reports are reviewed by the body or officer with delegated authority from Senate, who gives formal approval regarding the award of the degree. The Student Registry then writes to the student notifying them of the outcome, and if the degree has been awarded, provides initial details about the degree ceremony (held in December each year). The Registry will issue the degree certificate as soon as the degree award is approved.

10. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON REGULATIONS AND PROCEDURES

Disagreement between examiners

The Postgraduate Research Regulations contain the full information on the procedures to be followed in the case of a disagreement between examiners. In such cases a decision will be taken by the body or officer with delegated authority from Senate (currently the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Education). If this decision confirms the recommendation that no degree should be awarded, the student may appeal under the Academic Appeals procedures (see below).

Academic malpractice in research degree submissions

In the event that the examiners find evidence during the preliminary assessment of the thesis submitted for examination of a breach of the University regulations on academic malpractice, the *viva voce* examination should be postponed and the examiners should report their findings to the Deputy Head of Student Registry. In the event that the examiners find evidence during the *viva voce* examination of a breach of the University regulations on academic malpractice, the examiners should not make an award but should instead report on their findings to the Deputy Head of the Student Registry. Such a report should set out the evidence that academic malpractice has taken place and should normally include a recommendation for outright failure with no opportunity for resubmission or re-examination. Full regulations and procedures on academic malpractice can be found in the Academic Malpractice Regulations and Procedures section of MARP.

Academic Appeals

Students are not entitled to appeal against an academic judgement. However, it is recognised by the University that there are non-academic elements to assessment judgments which might have adversely affected the outcome and that there are occasions where students may wish to appeal against an assessment outcome on such grounds. Full details of the grounds under which students may lodge an appeal and of the appeals process are provided in MARP in the section on Academic Appeals.