Role of Chair of Examiners for a Graduate Research Thesis

The information is intended to assist you in your role as Chair of Examiners and should be used as a future reference.

Role of the Chair of Examiners

The Chair of Examiners fulfils an important role in maintaining the international reputation of the Institution in the award of its graduate research degrees. By virtue of their own specific discipline expertise, and independence from both supervisors and their students, a Chair of Examiners is ideally placed to:

- avoid the nomination of examiners with real or perceived conflict of interest;
- make recommendations regarding the appointment of examiners;
- make recommendations for the use of alternate examiners where necessary; and
- certify that students have complied with any specified conditions that must be met prior to the award of degrees.

A key responsibility for a Chair of Examiners is to make recommendations regarding the appointment of external examiners, in compliance with both the spirit and guidelines for selection, while avoiding any real or perceived potential conflict of interest. Recommendations from the Chair of Examiners are expected to result in thesis examinations that are academically robust, fair, impartial, and conducted with integrity in a timely way, preserving both the confidentiality of the examination process and protecting the rights of students in recognition of their original research.

Chair of Examiners Absence

Where the Chair of Examiners is absent from the University for long enough to delay the progress of the examination, another Chair of Examiners is to be appointed by the relevant head (or acting head) of department from senior academic members of the department. The latter will remain as Chair of Examiners until the end of the examination, unless otherwise advised). A student’s supervisor is not permitted to act as Chair of Examiners. The Chair of Examiners must be a registered as a Principal Supervisor at the University.

Thesis Submitted for Examination

All graduate research students are required to have met the minimum period of candidature, met the residency requirement, had their candidature confirmed, and presented their research findings at a public completion seminar in the six months prior to submitting their thesis for examination.

When submitting their thesis online the student certifies that the thesis comprises only the student’s original work, and that due acknowledgement has been made to all other material used. The supervisor and Chair of Examiners will be required to certify that the thesis is ready to proceed to examination and that it embodies the student’s own work. The online form also includes a section where examiners may be asked to maintain confidentiality of the thesis contents. Such a request may be required where there are research contracts with an outside organisation or other issues related to intellectual property.

Where the student’s supervisor considers the thesis to have significant shortcomings but may proceed to examination, or that the thesis should not be sent out for examination, the supervisor must provide a detailed outline of their concerns to the student. It is in the student’s interest to carefully consider and to seek advice as appropriate before submitting
the thesis for examination without their supervisor’s endorsement. Where the concerns raised relates to deficiencies in the thesis and the student elects to proceed to having the thesis examined, the Examinations Office will consider the supervisor’s concerns and will seek final consent from the student before commencing the examination. The examiners are not informed of any shortcomings while the thesis is under examination.

Where the student’s supervisor recommends that the thesis should not be sent out for examination, a subcommittee of the Research Higher Degrees Committee will be convened to consider submissions by the student and supervisor to determine whether the thesis will be forwarded for examination. If the student disagrees with the decision of the subcommittee the 

Appeals to the Academic Board Procedure will be available to the student.

Avoiding Conflict of Interest

It is crucial that all examiners act, and are seen to act, with integrity and in the academic interests of the institution and the discipline. It is therefore of fundamental importance that conflicts of interest be avoided.

The nomination of an examiner from within this University will not be approved, nor will an examiner who has had a formal association with the University within the past five years and/or during the examination. Formal association is normally interpreted as meaning employment at the University in teaching and/or research as either a full-time, part-time or sessional staff member, or in an honorary capacity or through direct involvement with the thesis (that is, through reading drafts or discussing the research).

Examiners nominated from areas where University of Melbourne graduate research students may be placed will not be approved, as listed in the Approved Outside Institutions.

It is encouraged that the Find an Expert site is checked as academic staff listed will be considered ineligible to act as an examiner. Refer to Find an Expert at: findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au. It is also strongly recommended that internet checks using the proposed examiners’ names and ‘unimelb’ as the search terms are used.

Examiners must be impartial and be free from bias either for or against the student. Where a nominated examiner is from within Victoria, assurance of independence is required. If there has been in the last five years, or will be in the near future, any formal association between the proposed examiners and the student, or the supervisor(s) or the University of either a personal, professional or commercial nature that may be considered as a conflict of interest, they should not be nominated.

Individuals who have directly collaborated in work with the student and/or with the student’s supervisor(s) should not be nominated as examiners, and individuals who have indirectly collaborated with the student and/or with the student’s supervisors may be appointed only if it can be clearly demonstrated that that there has been no direct relationship that would lead to an actual conflict of interest. For example, if the supervisor(s) and potential examiner have worked together with a small number of others on a paper or a grant application within the preceding five years, there is direct conflict of interest, and that individual may not be appointed as an examiner. On the other hand, where the relationship is one in which many individuals are engaged, such as may happen when papers or grant proposal arise from large multi-centre projects, if the supervisor and potential examiner have no direct contact with each other, the Chair of Examiners may make a submission to the Chair of the Research Higher Degrees Committee, that documents the relationship and then argues that there is no substantive conflict of interest.
All examiners should be asked to declare that they have no conflict of interest with the student, or the student’s supervisor(s), or the institution, of either a personal, professional, or commercial nature.

Failure to disclose conflicts of interest or cases where a conflict of interest might reasonably be perceived to exist may be considered grounds for research misconduct, as outlined in the Research Integrity and Misconduct Policy (MPF1318)

Thesis Examination
Examiners are requested to submit a written report on the thesis and to award a result from a scale of 1 to 5 recommendations within six weeks and not exceeding eight weeks. Examiners of graduate research students submitting under the Compilation of Published Papers category or under the Submission of Collection of Papers category are only given three recommendation options (either a pass, pass with minor amendments or fail). The examiners’ reports will be made available to the Chair of Examiners shortly after receipt of the reports and instructions and guidelines will accompany the reports.

Matrixes outlining the outcomes and actions as determined by the majority recommendation of the examiners, including where a third examiner is appointed, are available in the Graduate Research Training Policy (MPF1321): https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1321.1#section-5.102.

The Chair of Examiners reviews the examiners’ reports in consultation with the supervisors after providing them with copies of the reports, makes recommendations to the Chair of Research Higher Degrees Committee based on the reports submitted by the external examiners. The Chair of Examiners does not have a vote in deciding the outcome of the examination and does not submit a report on the thesis. The Examinations Office communicates the recommendations to the student and supplies them with copies of the examiners’ reports, edited for confidentiality.

The Chair of Examiners may act as a conduit between examiner, supervisors and student, or other parties where an examiner requires additional information. All aspects of the examination must otherwise be considered confidential and there should be no direct communication between the examiner and the student or the students’ supervisors or any other party while the thesis is being examined. Examiners may seek the advice of the Chair of Examiners on details of the examination relating to the particular thesis under consideration and its content or where additional written clarification may be requested. Examiners should contact the Examinations Office for counsel on all matters pertaining to policy and procedures. The Chair of Examiners may contact examiners about their assessment only after the examiners have returned their report on a student and then only to raise academic matters. They must not try to influence the examiner’s decision on the basis of personal matters in relation to the student, such as age, disability, sickness, difficulty in study etc.

If an examiner fails to submit a report within 12 weeks of dispatch of the thesis, they may be replaced and a new examiner appointed. The Examinations Office will consult with the Chair of Examiners in deciding whether an examiner should be replaced once a final 2 week deadline has been communicated.

When the examiners submit markedly different recommendations, the third examiner previously nominated will be appointed but only after consultation has occurred with the Chair of Examiners. The third examiner will examine the thesis independently without being informed that there are extant reports or disagreement. The Chair of Examiners is required
to provide advice to the Chair of Research Higher Degrees Committee based on the majority recommendation of the examiners.

If a second examination is required, the examiners appointed for this purpose are to be the persons who previously served as examiners for the first examination. The examiners will receive an anonymous copy of their co-examiner/s report/s on the original thesis so that they can clearly see what changes have been made to the resubmitted thesis on the basis of that report. Students will be invited to write a response to the examiners’ reports, and if provided, this will be sent to the examiners with the resubmitted thesis. The examiners will be asked to provide a recommendation of pass, pass with minor amendments, or fail.

If a replacement examiner is required for a resubmitted thesis, this examiner will be provided with the revised version of the thesis, along with a copy of the examiners’ reports on the original thesis and the student’s response. If the examiners of a revised and resubmitted thesis are unable to agree, or the result of the second examination is undetermined, a further examiner is appointed and this examiner will only receive the resubmitted thesis.

**Marking Requirements and Assignment of a Mark**

Examiners for Masters (Research) thesis are asked to recommend a mark to the Chair of Examiners. The final thesis mark will be calculated by the Examinations Office using the marking system approved by the Research Higher Degrees Committee. A mark is always calculated following the first examination of a thesis.

The determination of whether or not a thesis is passed is handled by the usual rules, and may include an assessment by a third examiner as part of the first examination. A third examiner may also be assigned in cases where the two initial examiners agree that the thesis should be passed, but differ widely in the mark they have recommended.

If the overall outcome of the first examination of the thesis is that it be revised for second examination, no marks are recorded in connection with the second examination, and the examiners will only be requested to recommend a pass, pass with minor amendments or fail. The mark assigned to a resubmitted thesis that is passed as a result of the second examination will be the mark calculated by combining the marks that arose as a result of the first examination.

In the case where one or more examiners select Recommendation 4 or 5 as the result of their first examination of the thesis, and the thesis is subsequently passed, the mark supplied by all examiners at the first examination will be combined to obtain the final mark for the thesis. If the final combined mark is more than 65% the mark is recorded. If the combined mark is less than 65% a result of 65% will be deemed to be awarded in order for the thesis to be passed.

**The Result**

The majority of theses require some form of amendment before the degree is awarded. Based on the written advice of the Chair of Examiners, following the procedures noted above, the Examinations Office informs the student of any corrections required and supplies the student with edited copies of the examiners’ reports. Students may only make changes to their thesis specified or implied by the examiners in their reports. Students are required to consult with their supervisors and the Chair of Examiners when addressing the examiners’ reports.

A thesis requiring corrections must be submitted to the Chair of Examiners within the time specified. Corrections and amendments to a thesis should be incorporated in the body of the text. If the student needs more time to finish the amendments, extensions of time may be sought.
Students are considered eligible to pass once the Examinations Office has received:

- A Completion of Degree Form from the Chair of Examiners stating that all corrections, additions and amendments and/or revisions specified by the examiners (if any) have been completed;
- One permanently bound copy of the thesis (on archival quality paper) incorporating any necessary amendments or revisions;
- Confirmation that an electronic copy of the thesis has been submitted on the University of Melbourne institutional repository;
- A 50 word citation (included in the Australian Higher Education Graduation Statement (AHEGS) to be issued by the University and to be read out at the graduation ceremony for PhD and Doctorate graduates). Note that citations are considered by a member of the Research Higher Degrees Committee.

Once these requirements have been fulfilled the student will receive a letter stating that they have successfully completed all the requirements for award of the degree and Masters (Research) students are also informed of the final overall thesis mark. The individual marks given by the examiners are not released.

Once the thesis is passed the Examinations Office will inform the student of the identities of the examiner(s) who recommend the thesis be passed, if no objection has been made by the examiner(s) for their identity to be revealed.

**Creative Arts Disciplines**

In the case of creative arts disciplines where a thesis consists of creative works and a dissertation, and where the creative work component includes performance or exhibition of visual art works, examiners will normally travel to the site of the performance or exhibition. Either two or three examiners will be appointed and the Chair of Examiners will also attend the performance or exhibition. In all cases a durable record of the performance or exhibition must be made and submitted with the dissertation.

The Chair of Examiners is responsible for taking into account the availability of examiners, scheduling of the student and supervisors, and selection and scheduling of the venue to ensure confidentiality is maintained. The Chair of Examiners may recommend that examiners attend the public performance or exhibition at different times to prevent their identification by the student. Where there is normally audience participation and interaction with the presenter during public performances or exhibitions, it is the responsibility of the Chair of Examiners to ensure that the student cannot inappropriately influence the examiners to affect assessment.

The student is required to submit an extended abstract of 500-1,500 words for a Masters or MPhil, or 1,000-3,000 words for a PhD, to the Chair of Examiners for forwarding to the examiners one week prior to the viewing, unless the dissertation is submitted around the same time as the viewing. Each examiner will be given the student’s dissertation within six months from the time of the viewing. The creative work and dissertation must be examined as an integrated whole.

** Relevant policy**
