

# Information for Examiners of PhD and Doctorate Theses



## Requirements for award of PhD Degree

All PhD candidates are required to submit a written research thesis. The thesis may be submitted in whole or partial fulfilment of the requirements for award of the degree. Depending on the department, the candidate may also be required to complete coursework or to prepare a composition, presentation or other creative work. The title page of the thesis will indicate whether the thesis is being submitted in full or partial fulfilment of the requirements. Candidates who have published their work during candidature may include the actual publications as part of their thesis, along with chapters that are written specifically for the thesis, provided they are the primary author. Whatever the format, the written thesis must be presented as a unified whole and address a significant research question and should pass examination for the degree to be awarded. The information in this document concerns only the examination of the written thesis. Information for examining creative components is available in the additional information for examiners. The thesis title page and abstract will include details of any creative work that is included.

Examiners should note the trend across the Australian University system to insist on research topics that can realistically be completed in 3-4 years as this may affect the nature and length of a thesis in some cases. A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements may also be shorter than one submitted for examination by thesis alone. Irrespective of these considerations, the quality of all written theses should be of international standard.

Candidates are asked to aim to write a thesis of 80,000 words, exclusive of words in tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices. Footnotes are included as part of the word limit. Candidates may write up to 100,000 words without seeking special permission.

## Requirements for award of Doctorate Degree

The requirements for the award of a Doctorate are the same as for the PhD with a few exceptions as follows:

Name of Doctorate	Course Length	Thesis word length
Doctor of Medicine (MD) or Doctor of Medical Science (DMedSc)	3 years full-time or 6 years part-time	50,000-80,000 words and may not exceed 100,000 words
Doctor of Medical Science by Compilation of Published Papers	Represents the outcome of 3 years full-time or 6 years part-time equivalent advanced research	50,000-80,000 words and may not exceed 100,000 words
Doctor of Education (DEd)	3 years full-time or 6 years part-time	55,000 words (approximately)

## Standard of examination

The PhD is a careful, rigorous and sustained piece of work demonstrating that a research “apprenticeship” is complete and the holder is admitted to the community of scholars in the discipline. By contrast, the DEd, which is also a careful, rigorous and sustained piece of

work, demonstrates how an issue, problem, or experience that arises in the work environment of the holder of the degree, has been subject to research and scholarship that transforms that issue, problem or experience, and effectively enhances professional practice.

The PhD or Doctorate degree signifies that the holder has undertaken a substantial piece of original research conducted and reported by the holder under proper academic supervision and in a research environment for a prescribed period, usually three to four years. The thesis must provide evidence that the candidate is capable of independently conceiving, designing and carrying to completion a research program or project. The candidate should uncover new knowledge either by the discovery of new facts, the formulation of theories, the development of new interpretive arguments/frameworks, innovative critical analysis, and/or the innovative reinterpretation of known data and established ideas. Candidates should be able to express themselves with precision, clarity and conciseness and should be able to demonstrate writing proficiency and composition skills. Only in exceptional circumstances are candidates allowed to use paid editorial assistance from an outside source.

In order to pass examination, and thus qualify as the basis for the award of the degree, the thesis should have the following attributes:

- demonstrate authority in the student's field and show evidence of command of knowledge in relevant fields;
- demonstrate a thorough grasp of the appropriate methodological techniques and an awareness of their limitations;
- make a contribution to knowledge that rests on originality of approach and/or interpretation of the findings and, in some cases, the discovery of new facts;
- demonstrate the candidate's ability to communicate research findings effectively in the professional arena and in an international context;
- demonstrate an understanding of, and commitment to, research ethics and integrity;
- be a careful, rigorous and sustained piece of work demonstrating that a research apprenticeship is complete and the holder is admitted to the community of scholars in the discipline.

It is crucial that examiners consider the candidate's thesis solely on its merits as an independent piece of supervised research irrespective of whether or not the thesis adopts an approach which may be considered as not falling within the mainstream or established research paradigm for the discipline, and irrespective of whether or not the candidate's approach to the research is the same as that which the examiner might have used in such a study.

### **Nomination of examiners and conflict of interest**

The University of Melbourne requires its graduates to achieve at a high international level. To ensure maintenance of that standard examinations often involve at least one international examiner, examiners from The University of Melbourne are not permitted, and only one examiner may come from a Victorian institution. Because of Australia's isolation and size, an examination process has evolved that does not normally include a visiting examiner or viva voce. It is important that conflicts of interest are avoided. To be eligible to examine a thesis there should be no conflict of interest of either a personal, professional, or commercial nature with the candidate, or the supervisor/s or The University of Melbourne within the last five years, or in the near future. Significant or formal association between the examiners and The University of Melbourne includes 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. Examiners who have a readily apparent conflict of interest should not have been nominated as an examiner. There should be no contact with the candidate while the thesis remains under examination.

## **The nature of the examination**

Following consultation with experts in the field of research, two external examiners are appointed by the Chair of the Research Higher Degrees Committee under delegated authority of the Academic Board. A Chair of Examiners (a member of the University, normally the Head of Department or nominee) is also appointed.

Examiners are normally provided with an electronic copy of the thesis and the thesis should not be distributed to any third party or released publically. The external examiners are requested to submit written reports without consulting each other and are asked to complete an online form to submit a report and to make a recommendation on the thesis. The details of the circumstances in which these are normally used and the outcomes are listed below in the 'Examiner Recommendations' section.

Depending on the examiners' recommendations the examination may be completed with or without their further involvement. Where the examiners substantially agree that the thesis should be passed subject to clarification or amendment, the Chair of Examiners normally ensures compliance. Where there is a substantial difference of opinion between the examiners as to whether the thesis should be passed, a third examiner will be appointed who is external to the University. A third examiner examines the thesis independently without being informed that there are extant reports or disagreement. The Chair of Examiners provides advice to the Chair of the Research Higher Degrees Committee based on the majority recommendation of the examiners.

## **Legislation and Policy of the Academic Board**

Graduate Research Training Policy (MPF1321)

<https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1321>

Preparation of Graduate Research Theses Rules

<http://gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/preparing-my-thesis/writing-the-thesis>

Research Integrity and Misconduct Policy (MPF1318)

<https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1318>

## **Role of the Chair of Examiners**

The Head of Department (or nominee) normally acts as Chair of Examiners, unless the Head of Department is a candidate's supervisor. A candidate's supervisor is not permitted to act as Chair of Examiners. The Chair of Examiners makes recommendations to the Chair of the Research Higher Degrees Committee based on the reports submitted by the external examiners, but does not have a vote in deciding the outcome of the examination and does not submit a report on the thesis.

The Chair of Examiners may act as a conduit between examiner, supervisors and candidate 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 with the candidate, the candidate's supervisors, or any other party. 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 Graduate Research Examinations Office for counsel on all matters pertaining to the regulations and statutes.

## **Time for examination**

The Research Higher Degrees Committee is anxious to ensure that the examination process be completed as quickly as possible. Examiners are asked to complete the examination within six weeks and not exceeding eight weeks and a six week due date is set when the thesis is sent. Examiners who find themselves unable to complete their examination within this period are asked to inform the Graduate Research Examinations Office immediately and provide an estimate of when they expect to be able to do so. Where a lengthy delay is envisaged, the Committee may prefer to appoint an alternative examiner.

Once the examination is concluded examiners will be notified in writing and examiners are then welcome to contact the candidate, except for matters relating directly to the examination process.

## **Examiner Payment**

A payment is made on receipt of the recommendation and detailed written report. Please note that the payment will only be made once the External Examiner Payment Request form (Australian resident examiners) or Western Union online form (non-Australian resident examiners) is completed and received.

## **Examiner's report**

Each examiner is asked to submit a detailed independent report online and make a recommendation on the thesis. In their comments, examiners are requested to include comments on both the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis.

The Research Higher Degrees Committee is aware that both theses and examiners' reports can differ substantially in their format and style, but the Committee would appreciate each examiner's opinion, where appropriate, with respect to the following questions:

- does the candidate show sufficient familiarity with, and understanding and critical appraisal of, the relevant literature?
- does the thesis provide a sufficiently comprehensive investigation of the topic?
- are the methods and techniques adopted appropriate to the subject matter and are they properly justified and applied?
- are the results suitably set out and accompanied by adequate exposition and interpretation?
- are conclusions and implications appropriately developed and clearly linked to the nature and content of the research framework and findings?
- has/have the research question/questions been tested or explored according to disciplinary norms?
- is the literary quality and general presentation of the thesis of a suitably high standard?
- does the thesis as a whole constitute a substantive original contribution to knowledge in the subject area with which it deals?

The style or format for the report has not been prescribed as we understand this can vary between examiners and disciplines. Examiners may wish to structure their report around the points above, or instead around a chapter-by-chapter account of the thesis. Comments with respect to potential publishable content within the thesis and a list of errata can also be provided where appropriate. Reports generally range anywhere between one and ten pages in length, depending on the scope of any changes required.

The Research Higher Degrees Committee would welcome any other comments of a general nature that may be of assistance to the Committee, the candidate and the supervisors.

It is normal practice to release as much of the examiners' reports to the candidates as possible. Examiners' names are not released until the conclusion of the examination and only if the examiners have agreed. **The written report must therefore be created using a blank document that does not reveal the examiner's identity.** Any material that is not to be released to the candidate should be so marked and submitted as a separate document. While the University will protect the identity of any examiner who has requested that their identity be withheld from the candidate, the Freedom of Information legislation may override this option.

The examiner's report should only be submitted to the Graduate Research Examinations Office via the online form and not to any other person. Examiners who have queries about the online Thesis Examination System can review the Frequently Asked Questions for Examiners or contact the Graduate Research Examinations Office.

### **Examiner recommendations**

Examiners are required to make a recommendation and provide written comments online via a link provided by the Graduate Research Examinations Office. Comments are required for all recommendations, and specifically form one component in the consideration of PhD candidates selected for the *Chancellor's Prize for Excellence in the PhD Thesis*. In order to be considered for the *Chancellor's Prize for Excellence in the PhD Thesis* we anticipate an examiners recommendation to be either Recommendation 1 or Recommendation 2. Examiners of a *Doctor of Medical Science Thesis by Compilation of Published Papers* have three options from the recommendations listed below (either 1, 2 or 5). Examiners make a recommendation by ticking the box beside one of the following:

**Recommendation 1** - be awarded the degree without further examination or amendment required by me.

The examiner is satisfied that any errors or omissions do not warrant amendment and that the award can be made credibly on the thesis as presented. Sometimes examiners who make this recommendation include a list of suggested amendments for the candidate to use when publishing the material.

**Recommendation 2** - be awarded the degree without further examination, subject to inserting in the thesis the minor corrections and/or additions as I have specified to the satisfaction of the Chair of Examiners, without further reference to me.

This recommendation is usually selected when the examiner detects minor problems such as inconsistencies in terminology, ambiguities in text or figures, or referencing problems. The issues are not normally specific to the field under consideration so the Chair of Examiners can determine whether the candidate has complied adequately by using the notes supplied by the examiner. Examiners often make this recommendation even where they take issue with a candidate's subject-specific interpretations but accept the validity of a divergent view. In such cases they normally include criticisms for the candidate to consider before submitting the material for publication.

**Recommendation 3a** - be awarded the degree subject to revising part or parts of the thesis as I have specified to the satisfaction of the Chair of Examiners, without further reference to me (*not available for a Doctor of Medical Science Thesis by Compilation of Published Papers*).

This recommendation is selected where the examiner concludes that corrections to small sections of the thesis will not suffice to clarify lapses in coherence or logic and that those sections will need to be rewritten. The problems do not affect the substantive conclusions of the thesis and the examiner is of the opinion that compliance can be determined by the Chair of Examiners.

**Recommendation 3b** - be awarded the degree subject to revising part or parts of the thesis as I have specified, and subject to my satisfaction (*not available for a Doctor of Medical Science Thesis by Compilation of Published Papers*).

This recommendation is selected where the examiner concludes that corrections to small sections of the thesis will not suffice to clarify lapses in coherence or logic and that those sections will need to be rewritten. The problems do not affect the substantive conclusions of the thesis but the examiner is of the opinion that the Chair of Examiners may not be able to determine compliance because the changes may impact on subject-specific interpretations.

**Recommendation 4** - not yet be awarded the degree but be permitted to resubmit the thesis in a revised form for re-examination. Areas requiring major amendment are identified in my attached report (*not available for a Doctor of Medical Science Thesis by Compilation of Published Papers*).

This recommendation is made where the examiner concludes that the thesis contains flaws that have the potential to affect its substantive conclusions and render it inadequate for award of the degree. If, however, the examiner is also of the opinion that with additional specified rewriting or work the thesis could potentially fulfil the requirements of the degree, this recommendation provides a pathway by which the candidate can rectify the deficiencies. In cases where a candidate is permitted to revise his or her thesis for further examination, the regulations require that, if possible, the examiners of the original submission re-examine the revised thesis.

Note that when a revised thesis is resubmitted for a second examination, examiners will be provided with the reports of all original examiners for their reference.

**Recommendation 5** - not be awarded the degree and not be permitted to submit for re-examination (*listed as Recommendation 3 on the Form to Accompany Examiner's Report for a Compilation of Published Papers for a Doctor of Medical Sciences thesis*).

This recommendation is only made when the examiner is of the opinion that the thesis has substantive, irredeemable flaws in scholarship or logic that render it inadequate as a basis for award of the degree.

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