

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Graduate Research School



Higher Degree Research
Doctoral and MPhil
GUIDE FOR EXAMINERS

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for agreeing to act as an examiner for one of our higher degree research (HDR) candidates.

We appreciate the contribution of external examiners in maintaining our standards of excellence in research training.

Western Sydney University allows theses to be presented in different formats. Examinable work may include a thesis, exegesis, overarching statement, dissertation, portfolio, or a combination of these formats.

The Graduate Research School provides this guide to assist examiners of higher degree research submissions for the awards:

- Master of Philosophy (MPhil)
- Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
- Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA)
- Doctor of Cultural Research (DCR)
- Doctor of Education (EdD)

These guidelines explain what is expected of the candidate and your contribution in assessing their work and presenting your findings, including later sections with advice for assessing specific awards or thesis types.

Please read these guidelines carefully and if you have any further questions, contact the Graduate Research School via email: grs.exams@westernsydney.edu.au

During every graduation ceremony, Western Sydney University HDR candidates hold pride of place. Their journey is always one of trials, exhilaration and deep learning. Your valuable input makes the culmination of this journey possible.

Once again, thank you for your generosity in examining the work of our candidates.

Best regards,

Dean, Graduate Research School

EXAMINATION PROCEDURES

COMMUNICATION DURING THE EXAMINATION PROCESS

Please conduct all communication about the examination process, including queries about completing an examination, through the Graduate Research School HDR Candidature Team:

grs.exams@westernsydney.edu.au

We will endeavour to respond to you within two business days. **You must not contact the student under examination or their supervisors at any stage during the process.**

TIMEFRAME OF EXAMINATION

We are mindful that candidates are eagerly awaiting their results, so we encourage examiners to respond as soon as possible.

As such, we request that you please read the thesis and return your full Examiner's Report to the Graduate Research School **within six weeks** of receipt of the work. The requested due date is included on the Examiner Report form.

If you are unable to complete the report by the due date, please contact the Graduate Research School promptly as it may be possible to grant you an extension of time.

If you are unable to complete the report, an alternative examiner will be appointed. Please notify the Graduate Research School as soon as possible to minimise disruption to the candidate.

CONFIDENTIALITY

It is essential to maintain confidentiality of the examiners and examiners' reports during the examination process.

It is Western Sydney University policy that at the conclusion of the examination process the candidate will be given a copy of each examiner's report.

Doctoral candidates may choose to also complete an oral thesis examination in consultation with their supervisors. If a candidate has opted in to an oral examination, you will be advised of this when you are contacted to confirm your availability as an examiner, noting that in this case the names of the examiners will be provided to the candidate before the oral examination.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Western Sydney University is committed to promoting the ethical use of generative AI in line with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

Candidates are required to declare any use of AI technologies in their research. Examiners should carefully consider all relevant declarations and acknowledgments related to the use of gen AI when reviewing and assessing candidates' thesis submissions.

To maintain the confidentiality of the thesis content and examination process, examiners are strictly prohibited from uploading any candidate's thesis to AI platforms and/or using generative AI tools to generate any part of their examiner report.

ELECTRONIC THESES

Candidates at Western Sydney University submit their thesis electronically as a PDF document.

At the conclusion of the examination and when all conditions have been met and the degree awarded, an electronic copy of the thesis will be lodged with the [Western Sydney University Library](#) for the use of the wider research community.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The use of independent thesis examiners is essential to maintaining the quality and integrity of the examination process.

You cannot proceed as an examiner if, within the past five years, you have conducted research or published with the candidate or their supervisor, or have been an adjunct or employed by Western Sydney University.

Other actual, potential, or perceived conflicts may also arise; the University's [Integrity Compliance and Reporting Policy](#) provides indicative (but not exhaustive) examples, and our approach is benchmarked against [ACGR best-practice guidelines](#).

If you identify any conflict of interest, you must notify the Graduate Research School HDR Candidature Team (grs.exams@westernsydney.edu.au) as soon as possible.

HONORARIUM

You will be awarded an honorarium following the completion of the examination process.

If you are an Australian taxpayer, you will need to also provide one of the following:

- An invoice or claim for payment if you do not hold an ABN (complete and return the form provided).
- An invoice if you hold an ABN and are not registered to collect GST.
- A tax invoice if you hold an ABN and are registered to collect GST (you will need to add 10% GST to the honorarium).

If you are unable to quote an ABN, PAYG tax will be deducted at the maximum rate as prescribed by law.

If you are not an Australian taxpayer, you will need to provide both of the following:

- An invoice or claim for payment (complete the template provided).
- A Statement by a Supplier form (complete the form provided).

Alternatively, you can choose to waive your fee and Western Sydney University will direct it instead to our Student Welfare Fund to support the journey of future HDR candidates.

EXAMINER'S REPORT

You are required to return an Examiner Outcome online form that includes two components:

- A written report of a **minimum of two pages** (template provided); and,
- A recommendation of an overall outcome.

Examiners are strictly prohibited from uploading any candidate's thesis to AI platforms and/or using generative AI tools to generate any part of their examiner report.

WRITTEN REPORT

Your examination report must be sufficiently detailed and comprehensive to:

- provide an explanation of your overall recommendation on the outcome of the examination; and,
- assist the candidate to bring the thesis to an acceptable standard for the degree. The information you provide should help them in their pursuit of future research, publications, and career.

The report should be a minimum of two pages and constructively comment on both the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, with detailed examples provided where possible.

Please remember: Research degrees are pass/fail. Your comments and recommendation should provide guidance on what needs to be done to bring the work to pass level.

While we encourage critical engagement, we also remind examiners of the stressful position candidates find themselves in and request the use of respectful and constructive language.

Please include all substantial recommendations, feedback and advice about the direction of the thesis in the Examiner's Report. Avoid referring to notes that you have made directly on the thesis and instead include these directly in the report. If you feel it is warranted, you may submit a confidential addendum to Western Sydney University : grs.exams@westernsydney.edu.au.

You may provide additional feedback by directly making notes on the electronic thesis document, but please be aware that these are only made available to the candidate and may not be reviewed by the supervisory panel.

Where changes should be made to the examinable work before it is regarded as passable standard for the award of the degree, examiners are asked to specify whether the changes are **mandatory or recommended**.

The final outcome for the candidate will be determined by the University's relevant HDR Board based on an assessment of the examiners' reports. All examiners' recommendations are given critical consideration.

If you recommend that changes be made, it would be helpful if you could provide an estimate of how long it will take the candidate to complete the changes.

EXAMINATION OF PUBLISHED PEER-REVIEWED OUTPUTS

The thesis may contain chapters that have already undergone peer review and been accepted for publication. You are requested to examine this material and provide feedback, but please limit required changes to substantial matters that warrant publication of a correction.

Please also keep in mind the conventions of the publishing journal when providing feedback.

RECOMMENDATION

You are required to make a preliminary recommendation of one of the following outcomes, recorded on the Examiner's Report Cover Sheet.

Outcome	Explanatory Notes
A	The degree be awarded as submitted or following minor revisions of a simple, editorial nature as identified by the examiners. This recommendation is appropriate for addressing occasional typographic or grammatical errors and for cosmetic formatting issues.
R	Before the degree is awarded the candidate is required to undertake rewriting that is of greater magnitude than minor editorial changes (as identified by the examiners), to the satisfaction of the Faculty/Institutes HDR Board. This recommendation is appropriate where substantive yet straightforward changes to the text are required, including the addition or removal of whole sentences, other revisions that change the intended meaning for a portion of text and pervasive typographic or grammatical errors.
X	The candidate is required to revise and resubmit for further examination within a specified time. This recommendation is appropriate where the examiner has concerns regarding the quality or integrity of the work and/or inferences drawn from it and, therefore, the thesis is not able to be assessed in its current state. This category is to be used when the thesis shows some merit that may, with a moderate amount of work, be sufficiently improved for re-submission. The examiner, in the written report, should give clear guidelines as to the deficiencies in the work. The revisions recommended in these comments will be the sole basis of the ensuing re-examination. Within 12 months, original examiners will be contacted regarding availability for re- examination. If an original examiner is no longer available, a new examiner will be appointed. A thesis that has undergone major revision after previous examination may not be recommended for this outcome a second time.
F	The degree is not to be awarded. This recommendation is appropriate when the examiner has concerns about the quality or integrity of the work that cannot be addressed through reasonable revisions.

AVAILABILITY OF EXAMINERS' REPORTS

The Examiners' detailed feedback is made available to the candidate after a brief review by the Principal Supervisor. The candidate will prepare a response to this feedback with the support of the supervisory panel.

ORAL THESIS EXAMINATION

Doctoral candidates may choose to also complete an oral thesis examination in consultation with their supervisors. If an oral examination is to be conducted, you will be advised when first contacted to ask your availability to examine.

The oral examination forms part of the overall assessment of a HDR candidate's ability to carry out a research investigation. It is used to assess both the candidate and the thesis submitted for the award of the doctoral degree.

In particular, the oral examination:

- establishes that the candidate fully understands the work and its wider implications
- provides the candidate with an opportunity to reply to criticism or challenge
- enables the examiners to clarify issues in the thesis which may be unclear
- helps the examiners to decide on the nature and extent of any revisions which may be required
- authenticates the contribution made by the candidate to the thesis
- ensures that the candidate has a clear understanding of the contribution of collaborators to the thesis.

Examiners are asked to assess the candidate's performance in the oral examination against the following quality measures:

- Candidate demonstrated detailed knowledge of the thesis.
- Candidate demonstrated an understanding of their research in the broader context of their discipline.
- Candidate was able to defend the methodology and conclusions of the thesis and display an awareness of any limitations.
- Candidate effectively communicated the results of the research in terms of impact and application of new knowledge.
- Candidate as an individual demonstrated a substantive and independent contribution to the discipline.

THE PANEL

The Oral Examination will take place by videoconference. The panel is comprised of:

- the Associate Dean, HDR, the HDR Director or another member of the Professoriate serving as Chair, and
- the two examiners of the written thesis.

For theses covering significant Indigenous studies content, the Director, Indigenous Research or another Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander scholar is invited onto the panel.

At the conclusion of the oral examination, you and the other examiner will arrive at a final recommended outcome by consensus. You will also prepare a joint statement regarding any additional amendments that are required and/or any amendments stated in your original report that are no longer needed.

REPEATING THE ORAL EXAMINATION

A candidate is permitted to repeat the oral examination component in response to the comments and recommendation of the oral examination panel (one re-attempt only).

Where a candidate is provided the opportunity to repeat the oral component of the examination, this must be undertaken within 3 months of notification with the original examination panel, whenever possible.

EXAMINATION OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (PHD) THESIS

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is awarded in recognition of original, independent and successful research of international standard in the discipline. The period of candidature for the PhD is three to four years full-time, or the part-time equivalent. A PhD candidate should make a substantial original contribution to knowledge in the form of new knowledge or significant and original adaptation, application and interpretation of existing knowledge.

There is no fixed word limit for the PhD thesis, however, most disciplines have an expectation of approximately 80,000 words, with 100,000 words usually considered an upper limit.

The thesis may be based on a comprehensive critical review of literature, empirical research, creative work or other systematic approach embedded in a field or discipline, and/or may be based on advanced and sustained critical reflection and analysis of professional theory and practice.

Most theses will be structured in one of two ways:

- a single body of text that is structured like a monograph in linear format, conforming to what one might consider a traditional thesis; or
- a compilation of chapters each addressing a discrete research project, but each also related to the overarching aim of the entire research program. Those chapters would typically be published **or** submitted/in preparation for publication. These would be accompanied by a general introduction and a general discussion that represents the program as a single body of work.

The candidate will normally be the first author for any included published papers, with rare exceptions. For example, Country may be the first author in a published paper with significant Indigenous studies content.

The candidate will include a declaration in the thesis explicitly acknowledging their contributions to each chapter, as well as other individuals who contributed to one or more key elements in a substantial way if relevant. It will also include a declaration on how artificial intelligence (AI) was used in the work and how the outputs of AI were critically evaluated.

BASIS OF PHD THESIS EXAMINATION

In assessing the work, you are asked to determine if:

- The thesis as a whole makes an original contribution to the knowledge of the subject with which it deals;
- The thesis provides a sufficiently comprehensive study of the topic appropriate to the degree in the discipline area, or in related interdisciplinary areas;
- The methods adopted are appropriate to the subject matter and are appropriately applied;
- The research findings are suitably set out, accompanied by adequate exposition and are discussed critically in the context of the discipline; and,
- The quality of English expression and general presentation has been completed to a high standard.

EXAMINATION OF MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY (MPHIL)

The Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degree is aimed at the research skills development of the candidate, with particular emphasis on research methodology appropriate to the field of study. The period of candidature for the MPhil is one to two years full-time, or the part-time equivalent.

The program is intended to provide candidates with the opportunity to develop their potential for research, enhance their skills in problem identification and specification, and their ability to develop and present solutions.

There is no fixed word limit for the MPhil thesis, however, most disciplines have an expectation of approximately 40,000 words, with 80,000 words usually considered an upper limit.

BASIS OF EXAMINATION

In assessing the work, you are asked to determine if:

- The thesis as a whole makes a contribution to the knowledge of the subject with which it deals at research masters level. It is not expected that originality will be at the level of a doctorate;
- The thesis provides a sufficiently comprehensive study of the topic appropriate to the degree in the discipline area, or in related interdisciplinary areas;
- The methods adopted are appropriate to the subject matter and are appropriately described and applied;
- The research findings are suitably set out, accompanied by adequate exposition and are discussed critically in the context of the discipline; and,
- The quality of English expression and general presentation has been completed to a high standard.

EXAMINATION OF DOCTOR OF CREATIVE ARTS (DCA) / PRACTICE-BASED THESIS

BACKGROUND TO THE DEGREE

The Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA) aims to provide professional artists with recognition of both their practice and the contribution they make to professional and scholarly knowledge. The period of candidature for the DCA is three to four years full-time, or the part-time equivalent. The DCA candidate develops knowledge through practice, undertaking the development of a body of original creative work within the chosen discipline. It is a program of advanced research embedded in the artist's professional practice and aims to develop graduates who are:

- Technical and conceptual innovators in their arts discipline;
- Committed to research and development as a means of solving problems;
- Familiar with new technology and its applications;
- Knowledgeable in theoretical foundations and demonstrate highly developed skills in the application of theory to practice and creative reflection;
- Effective and advanced communicators at all levels;
- Able to articulate a broad vision of practice and practice-led research and its relationship to social, cultural and community needs; and,
- Able to contribute to the advancement of policy and practice in the creative arts.

There is no fixed word limit, however, most disciplines have an expectation of an exegesis of approximately 30,000 words which provides theoretical context for and critical analysis of the original creative work. The relative weighting of the exegesis as a component of the submission for examination is at least 30% of the total, with the creative work constituting no more than 70%.

ASSESSABLE WORK

A candidate presenting a body of creative work is required to present the exegesis concurrently, except where the body of creative work is a public performance or exhibition, in which case the candidate is required to submit the exegesis no later than three months after the final event.

The submitted thesis should show evidence of significant conceptual development, as demonstrated in an exhibition, performance, writing, screening or publication during the period of candidature.

Examination will incorporate commentary on both the creative component and the exegesis but recommendations of examiners for any additional work described in examination outcome options A, R, X or F can only apply to the exegesis.

EXAMINATION OF DOCTOR OF CULTURAL RESEARCH (DCR)

The Doctor of Cultural Research (DCR) provides extended and advanced training in professional fields where projects and investigations are more applied in nature and more obviously oriented to professional practice. The period of candidature for the DCR is three to four years full-time, or the part-time equivalent.

All DCR candidates are required to produce an examinable portfolio of work comprising an overarching statement and evidence of up to six components of sustained scholarly activity. The portfolio should give evidence of significant conceptual development. It should also demonstrate the professional capacity of the candidate through their ability to focus academic work of a high level of competence with practical relevance leading to the better understanding of significant problems in practice.

OVERARCHING STATEMENT

The overarching statement serves as an introduction to the portfolio. It makes reference to the research events and explains the research components in terms of their temporal sequence and interdependence, and their contribution to the candidate's personal and professional development, and to the field of scholarship. The overarching statement will be approximately 10,000 words.

EVIDENCE OF SUSTAINED SCHOLARLY ACTIVITY

This section involves up to six components of research and output within defined focus areas, conducted during the period of enrolment, as outlined below:

- Up to three projects, each generating a report of approximately 10,000 words, for a total word count of approximately 30,000 words. (Note: it is possible for the candidate to only undertake one project and produce one report, which would need to be approximately 30,000 words).
- Also required are three to four peer-reviewed, or prepared for peer review, articles or academic outputs (or equivalent, including newer publication formats to be agreed upon), each of approximately 8,000 words.

If more than one project is undertaken, the first project might involve foundation work in contemporary issues and theoretical literature of relevance to the candidate's work environment, with an emphasis on broad, critical perspectives. Later projects will be particular studies, mainly generated from the candidate's workplace, addressing specific problems or issues in that context. There may be overlap between the topics for different projects, given that they will all come from a common field of interest, but the resulting reports should bring out the differences in emphasis and conclusions. As a totality these topics should be sufficiently complementary, so that the total research endeavour is a cumulative one, though in some circumstances, where the evidence dictates, some later conclusions may challenge ones from an earlier stage.

There is a general expectation of the portfolio being a minimum of approximately 60,000 words.

ASSESSABLE WORK

The examiners are asked to assess whether the portfolio meets the usual criteria required of higher degree research, that is, it must represent a substantial original contribution to knowledge in the subject area and provide evidence of originality through the discovery of new facts or the exercising of independent critical ability or the application of knowledge in new contexts.

EXAMINATION OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EDD) THESIS

The Doctor of Education (EdD) provides advanced research training in a professional field where projects and investigations are applied in nature and explicitly oriented to professional practice. The period of candidature for the EdD is three to four years full-time, or the part-time equivalent.

The EdD equips candidates to be critical consumers and generators of practice-led research and research-led practice, emphasising engagement with the relationship between research, scholarship and professional practice.

There are various areas of study available under the EdD including:

- Policy studies in education;
- Curriculum studies;
- Learning and teaching;
- Socio-cultural studies; and,
- Educational leadership and change.

The EdD portfolio requires candidates to produce an examinable portfolio of work accomplished during their candidature. The portfolio comprises of four components (including three substantive components and an evidence-based narrative). Each component must include evidence and a scholarly paper.

The EdD program requires students to:

- attend and actively participate in a specific number of on-campus events, seminars, workshops, conferences and visits;
- present at approved conferences; and,
- compile a portfolio that demonstrates evidence of research scholarship at a doctoral standard.

ASSESSABLE WORK

The examinable portfolio will be a written work, but allows for the inclusion of other communication mediums such as film, video or online resources. The examiners are asked to make an overall judgement about the scope and quality of the work contained within the portfolio and to indicate the extent to which its cumulative nature warrants a doctoral degree. The work should meet the usual criteria required of doctoral research, that is, it must represent a substantial original contribution to knowledge in the subject area and provide evidence of originality through the discovery of new facts or the exercising of independent critical ability or the application of knowledge in new contexts.

Research output includes:

- three (3) substantive research components (comprising 15,000 to 25,000 words each) that reflect the structure of the degree and/or research engagement with professional practice; and,
- an evidence-based narrative (10,000 to 15,000 words) of personal, professional and scholarly development.

Each of the three substantive research components will focus on a specific aspect of the candidate's professional practice and reflect engagement with relevant theory, literature and research. These components may address different and discrete work-related activities or be aspects of sequential and ongoing professional pursuits.

Each research component will comprise two parts:

- Evidence of the development of professional workplace-related practices or products that are based on research and/or scholarship, intellectually rigorous and provide evidence of critical thinking to identify the research niche. This might include: evaluation of an existing, or implementation of a new, practice or program; or the production of a report, video, curriculum, strategic plan, or website. Where these practices or products are not text-based, they will be supported by a written exegesis (10,000 - 15,000 words).
Each of the three professional work-place related and research-based practices or products will be developed for a clearly articulated purpose and for a specific audience.
- A scholarly paper intended for public dissemination that contextualises the first component within the relevant literature, empirical research, theory and policy as appropriate to the candidate's research (7,000 - 10,000 words).
Each of the three scholarly papers will have undergone a process of development with peers and supervisors.

The narrative of personal, professional and scholarly development serves as both an introduction to the portfolio and as research-based evidence of the contribution and impact of the candidate's work on professional practice in the field. The narrative will:

- make reference to the three substantive components involving scholarly engagement with professional practice; and,
- describe and reflect on these components in terms of: their temporal sequence and interdependence; their engagement with specific theories, research methods and/or bodies of scholarship and literature; their contribution to the candidate's personal, professional and scholarly development; and their contribution to the candidate's work context and their profession.

