

University of Cape Town



GUIDELINES FOR THE EXAMINATION OF A PhD THESIS

Doctoral Degrees Board

The degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is a research degree, undertaken under supervision for a minimum two-year registration period, although most frequently three to five years. Normally, the candidate has previously been admitted to and completed a master's degree, although there are exceptions. The PhD degree is awarded solely on the basis of the thesis (*Refer to Rule GP5.1*).

The prospective candidate's application (which must include a satisfactory research proposal) is subject to the approval of the Doctoral Degrees Board (DDB) (*Refer to Rule GP4*).

The University requires that the thesis must constitute a substantial contribution to knowledge in the chosen subject and may embody only the original work of the candidate with such acknowledged extracts from the work of others as may be pertinent (*Refer to Rule GP6.3*).

The thesis may incorporate creative work integral to the overall argument. Creative components of this nature must have been accepted by the DDB at the time of considering the candidate's proposal.

Candidates may elect to submit a PhD with the inclusion of published material (authored or co-authored by the candidate) with the prior written approval of the Doctoral Degrees Board (*Refer to Rule GP6.7*).

A candidate may choose to submit their thesis for examination if their supervisor does not support the submission of the thesis (*Refer to Rule GP5.2*).

A. EXTRACTS FROM THE RULES FOR THE PhD DEGREE

(a) General

The degree of Doctor of Philosophy is awarded based on supervised research (*Refer to Rule GP5.1*).

(b) Presentation and style of thesis

Literary and other data presentation must be satisfactory (*Refer to Rule GP6.5*).

A PhD thesis may not be more than 80 000 words in length. For all PhD theses, including those that incorporate creative work, the length must be at least 40 000 words. In certain cases, the Dean may give a dispensation to this rule (*Refer to Rule GP6.8*).

For theses incorporating creative work, the creative component must lend itself, in principle, to examination, and to revision and resubmission. Where the thesis incorporates a creative component, this must be integral to the thesis, and the thesis must be coherent (*Refer to Rule GP6.3*).

Where a thesis includes material that has been published or prepared for publication, the thesis must nonetheless show an acceptable academic style, scholarly content, and coherence as a unified work with

a satisfactory introduction (normally including a significant literature review that goes beyond the reviews contained in the published material), statement of thesis, and conclusion (which includes discussion of the work as a whole). It should be obvious to the reader how the inclusion of the publications contributes to fulfilling the thesis requirements (*Refer to Rule GP6.7*).

(c) Content

The text of the thesis must be prefaced by an abstract that outlines its contribution to knowledge (*Refer to Rule GP6.4*).

A candidate may, subject to the prior written approval of the supervisor, publish a part or whole of the work done under supervision for the degree before presenting the thesis for examination (*Refer to Rule GP7*).

In presenting a thesis, a candidate shall declare the extent to which the thesis represents their work, both in concept and execution.

Where multi-authored published material is included, the candidate's specific contribution should be clearly identified and explicitly stated. The extent of the candidate's involvement in the published studies must be clearly demonstrated to establish that the candidate has contributed sufficient intellectual input to qualify for the degree, as outlined in section "B" below (*Refer to Rule GP6.7*).

B. THE PhD THESIS AS A CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Examiners should be guided by the requirement that the thesis makes a substantial contribution to knowledge of the subject and demonstrates independent critical ability in the analysis and interpretation of either known or newly discovered material (*Refer to Rule GP6.3*).

C. ABSTRACT

An abstract is sent to the examiners for their information, together with a letter of invitation to examine (*Refer to Rule GP6.4*).

D. EXAMINERS

A minimum of three examiners is appointed, all external to the University of Cape Town. 'External' means there can be no significant or formal association between an examiner and UCT, including current or recent employment at the University in teaching and/or research in a full-time, part-time or honorary capacity, or through direct involvement with the thesis, the research for the thesis, or the student.

All examiners should be of high international standing with relevant and significant academic experience. At least two examiners should be international (i.e., outside South Africa). Only one examiner per institution should be appointed. In exceptional cases, no more than one examiner may be appointed who does not have a PhD themselves, in which case the supervisor must provide a strong motivation, including evidence of international standing and expertise. Where the examiner's nominations deviate from the expectations, a strong motivation will need to be provided by the supervisor. The supervisor(s) is/are excluded from examining

All examiners should have appropriate expertise in a field closely related to the thesis topic. In the case of multi-, trans-, and inter-disciplinary work, the Faculty Doctoral Committee of Assessors (DCoA) must satisfy itself that an appropriate mix of examiners in those disciplines will be capable of examining all aspects of the thesis.

Examiners who have a clear conflict of interest should not be nominated. An examiner should preferably not have had prior contact with the candidate's work. Where there has been prior contact between a candidate and an examiner nominated by a DCoA, this must be reported by the DCoA to the DDB. The nomination of examiners should not be discussed with or disclosed to the candidate, and there may be no contact between examiners and the candidate while the thesis remains under examination¹.

Supervisors may contact prospective examiners to ask if they are available for nomination and to establish that no conflict of interest exists. This should be done in consultation with the HoD. It is advisable that the supervisor contacts the prospective examiners before nominating them for appointment, as this helps avoid delays later. Provided that three examiners have agreed to examine, only three names need to be submitted. A supervisor may nominate up to two alternate examiners if they wish to do so.

E. COMMITTEE OF ASSESSORS (DCoA)

Each Faculty has a Doctoral COA (DCoA). This body consists of permanent core members, who have proven experience as supervisors and examiners, the Dean, the Head of the relevant Department, and, if required, one or two members with experience in the subject area of the thesis. The supervisor is a non-voting member. The role of the DCoA is to interpret the examiners' reports and not to act as examiners themselves. In the case of a joint degree, a joint DCoA relevant to the partner institution may be formed and make a recommendation to the two respective partner institutions. See section I below for further details.

F. EXAMINER'S REPORT ON THE THESIS

Examiners are requested:

1. To submit electronically a detailed report on the thesis. The report is an essential part of the examination process since it explains the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis and should be consistent with and provide detailed supporting evidence for the summary recommendation (2 below).
2. To complete the recommendation form by marking one of the following options:

Option	Examiner Recommendation
i	The candidate should be awarded the degree and <u>no further corrections</u> to the thesis are required.
ii	<p>The candidate should be awarded the degree <u>subject to the required corrections</u>. The corrections required are:</p> <p><i>My suggestions are indicated in my report. These corrections do not alter the substance of the thesis in any fundamental manner and therefore major reworking or reinterpretation of the intellectual content of the thesis is not required.</i></p>

¹ An exception is made in the case of a joint degree where the partner institution requires the candidate to know the identity of their examiners, for example, in a viva voce (i.e., oral defence) process

iii	The candidate should not be awarded the degree but should be invited to address my substantive concerns and <u>to revise and resubmit</u> the thesis for re-examination. In this case: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Either <i>I am prepared to re-examine.</i> • Or <i>I am not prepared to re-examine.</i>
iv	The candidate should <u>not be awarded</u> the degree as the thesis has no prospect of meeting the requirements.

G. THESIS INCLUDING PUBLICATIONS

It is generally accepted that elements of a thesis may already be published, and where content has been included verbatim, candidates are expected to apply for permission as outlined in Rule GP 6.7 in the [General Rules and Policies](#) (Handbook 3). The University of Cape Town asks that examiners critically engage with any published material as they would with the unpublished sections of the thesis.

The thesis, whilst including publications or submitted manuscripts, is not simply a compilation of relevant publications. It must be a thematically coherent, substantive, and scholarly discourse, presented as a composite body of work with all the necessary elements to make it comparable to a PhD presented traditionally.

- A PhD examiner has to be satisfied that a candidate has formulated appropriate research questions and mastered the relevant methodologies, analytical, and presentation processes necessary to answer such questions in a discipline-specific, scholarly, defensible way – publications alone cannot be adequate to demonstrate this aspect of a candidate's work.
- The main aim(s) and answer(s) to the research questions must be apparent, and they must permeate the thesis as a whole. Even though there are publication(s) included, the thesis must nonetheless show acceptable academic style, scholarly content, and coherence as a connected account with a satisfactory introduction, statement of the thesis aims, and conclusion.

H. PROCEDURE ON RECEIPT OF EXAMINERS' REPORTS

When the examiners' reports on a candidate's thesis are submitted to the relevant DCoA for consideration and recommendation to the DDB, the DCoA should interrogate each report and make every effort to reach a recommendation.

The DCoA must recognise that on receiving the DDB's recommendation, the candidate is required to address (through correction or rebuttal) all comments and criticisms from all three examiners.

If, in applying their minds, the DCoA cannot reach consensus or needs advice on an appropriate recommendation, they may co-opt up to two additional subject experts (non-voting) to the DCoA to assist them.

Reports of the DCoA should be sufficiently comprehensive to convey to the DDB the reasons for their recommendation.

In cases of significant disagreement amongst examiners, the report of the DCoA shall include a formal record of its decision conveying its reasons for the recommendation.

If the reason for the DCoA's failure to reach consensus, after following the process and deliberation as outlined in the above paragraphs, relates to suspected bias by a dissenting examiner or to an examiner's report being insufficiently justified, the DCoA may recommend that the report be set aside and a fourth examiner appointed. Alternatively, if the reason for the DCoA's failure to reach consensus, after following the process and deliberation as outlined in the above paragraphs, relates to different assessments reflected in or outcomes proposed in well-justified examiners' reports, the DCoA may recommend the appointment of an external assessor. The task of the external assessor is to read the thesis (or relevant parts thereof) together with all examiners' reports (without examiners' names) and advise the DCoA on the respective merits of the examiners' reports, their recommendations and any other aspect(s) specifically requested by the DCoA. An external assessor can also be appointed where, following the initial examination of the thesis, an examiner who recommends that the thesis should be revised and resubmitted for examination is either unavailable or unwilling to re-examine it. In these circumstances, the task of the external assessor is to check/verify whether the candidate has adequately addressed the examiner's comments or concerns in the revised version of the thesis.

A candidate may be required to present themselves for an oral examination in exceptional circumstances, following the approval of the Doctoral Degrees Board.

Candidates must not be given any hint of the result or of the examiners' names until the DDB has reached a final decision on the result or has explicit permission to do so.

I. REPORT TO CANDIDATES AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF EXAMINERS' REPORTS

When the examination has been completed and the DDB has decided whether to award the degree, it is the University's practice to make the contents of the examiners' reports available in full to the candidate. However, discretion to vary this practice rests with the DDB.

If the decision of the DDB is to award the degree, it is the University's normal practice to disclose the names of the examiners to the candidate, on condition that the examiners agree to this being done.

J. EXAMINATION PROCESSES AND PRINCIPLES IN THE CASE OF EXAMINATION OF A JOINT ("CO-TUTELLE") DEGREE BETWEEN PARTNER INSTITUTIONS

UCT allows for joint examination in the case of a Joint or collaborative doctoral degree. In essence, the Joint (sometimes referred to as 'co-tutelle') degree allows students to pursue a single research topic resulting in a single thesis undertaken under joint supervision (i.e., 'co-tutored', hence 'co-tutelle') from two appropriately accredited institutions. The degree certificate (accompanied by a diploma supplement) is either issued as a single document carrying the signatures of both collaborating institutions or issued by each collaborating institution with a statement that the qualification is conferred in conjunction with another institution. Such may be separately examined by each contributing institution, or it may be jointly examined. This section outlines the guiding principles pertaining to joint examination.

In these cases, a framework Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreeing to a broad collaboration between UCT and the partner institution normally exists, and, importantly, a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) supplementary to this must be agreed. The MOA outlines the specific activity(ies) of the student and may refer to arrangements, including the proposal, ethics, supervision, progress requirements, tenure at each institution, funding and travel arrangements, and how examination of the thesis will be undertaken. For convenience (e.g., where more than one student may be covered in a joint/co-tutelle agreement) it may be appropriate to append such detail reflecting arrangements for an individual student to the MOA as an individual doctoral agreement

(IDA).

For examination, the process must reflect the principle that both institutions' examining authorities (in the case of UCT, the DDB) must be satisfied that the required standard and requirements of their respective institutions have been met and they are the final and issuing authority in the awarding of the doctorate. However, in reaching this decision, it is acceptable and recommended that a joint examination process and Committee of Assessors is agreed and outlined in the MOA (or IDA) in order to avoid unnecessary duplication of examiners or a situation in which the candidate is in effect examined twice. Thus, the thesis is examined jointly and not by each institution independently, and the procedures to be followed are agreed upon up front, and not left undecided until the time of thesis submission.

In applying the above principle, it is recognised that it may be possible for one institution to be satisfied and award the degree, whereas the other may not. This must be allowed for, as must potential scenarios such as where one institution may require further work on the thesis, and the other not.

(a) The Joint Committee of Assessors (JCOA)

UCT and the partner institution may establish a JCOA, which is responsible for the examination process and makes a recommendation on the outcome to the examining authorities at both institutions (in the case of UCT, the DDB). Their role is to deliberate over and interpret examiner reports. In cases where a viva voce forms a part of the examination process, their role is also to consider and decide that a written thesis may be defended (and the date for the oral defence finalised) and to consider and produce the final examiner reports following a candidate's performance in the oral defence. The DDB must approve members of the JCOA and be satisfied that the membership typifies UCT practice as outlined in section E but includes appropriate members from the partner institution. Supervisors and examiners may be non-voting members and be present during deliberations (i.e., the JCOA may deliberate and interact directly with examiners, typically following an oral defence, where such is the normal practice of the partner institution). Representation from both institutions on the JCOA should be equal and jointly chaired by UCT and the partner institution, or by a single Chairperson agreed upon by the JCOA.

(b) Appointment and composition of the examiners

The supervisors (from both UCT and the partner institution following discussion) may nominate at least three examiners as outlined in section D, above. In the case of joint degrees, UCT recognises that practices regarding the number and status of examiners may vary between institutions. Thus, it is possible that the requirement of the partner institution may be different to that of UCT. For example, they may require two external examiners and one internal examiner. This should be taken into account and accommodated so long as the principle of having three external (to UCT) examiners is upheld (e.g., the internal examiner at the partner institution may act as the third UCT external examiner). Similarly, the requirements that the examiners are of appropriate standing and relevance in the field and are neither conflicted nor in direct contact with the thesis work of the candidate must be upheld. Neither supervisors nor co-supervisors at either partner institution may be appointed as examiners, although, as outlined above, they may participate as non-voting members of the JCOA. If the typical practice of a partner institution is to include an internal 'examiner' who is not an expert in the field to act as a moderator or co-ordinator to ensure university processes are followed, such a person would not be considered an external examiner at UCT (as they are not an expert in the field).

Whereas in the case of normal UCT doctoral examination processes, the identity of the examiners is confidential to the student until after the examination is final and examiners have agreed to disclosure, UCT accepts that the identity of examiners may be disclosed prior to the completion of examination, typically in cases where the partner institution requires an oral defence of the thesis to an examination panel.

(c) The examination process and nature of the examiner's reports

UCT processes require examiner reports providing sufficient detail and reasoning to give the candidate/JCOA

the specifics of where the shortfalls are, if any, and showing an in-depth critique of the thesis. This should be no different in the case of joint examination, and recommendations should be made in accordance with section F. However, UCT does recognise and will allow for such reports to be finalised for submission to the JCOA following the oral defence, if necessary, especially in cases where modification to the thesis has occurred prior to oral defence. Thus, in some cases of joint examination processes requiring an oral defence, it is accepted that candidates may have sight of examiner reports and may include corrections/modifications to their thesis before the decision to declare the thesis defensible. In other cases, the student may be expected to finalise the corrections/modifications to the thesis following the oral defence and in accordance with recommendations of the JCOA and DDB.

If it is the practice of the partner institution to award the degree immediately following the oral defence and deliberation by the assessors, UCT would not prevent this. UCT, however, would never instantly confer a degree, and the JCOA's recommendation always needs to be considered by the DDB, who would determine the final outcome of the joint examination and may require further corrections/modifications to the thesis before final acceptance.

The MOA (or IDA) should include guidance on the timelines for submission, revision, acceptance for defence and the actual defence, such that students are not disadvantaged by either (or both) institutions' processes. The examination process must not be open-ended, and the timeframe must be agreed upon by both partner institutions.

31 August 2011

Revised 10 October 2017

Revised 25 April 2019

Revised 19 February 2020

Revised 7 October 2020

Revised 26 March 2021

Revised 20 August 2021

Revised 16 November 2021

Revised January 2025