

# Guidance on the Conduct of Research Degree Examination and Related Matters (3EX)

## Birkbeck Graduate Research School

1. Examinations for research degrees are administered centrally within the College. The details of the office which administers these arrangements are set out below. If you have any concerns or wish to seek advice at any stage in the examination process, [please do not hesitate to contact](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/research/bgrs/contact-us) [us](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/research/bgrs/contact-us).

## Eligibility to Examine

1. Examiners are appointed on the basis that they have had no direct involvement in the candidate's research or close connections with either the candidate or supervisor which might inhibit a completely objective examination.
   1. Examiners are asked to inform the Birkbeck Graduate Research School (BGRS) if they have had any connections with the candidate or supervisor which would give the College cause to reconsider the appropriateness of their appointment. Any connections so notified will be considered by the relevant body in the College in consultation, as appropriate, with the supervisor.
   2. These connections could be either personal or professional. Of the latter it is considered, for example, that an examiner who has played a significant role in advising the candidate during their research degree is inappropriate, particularly so where the advice has led to the joint publishing of papers by the candidate and examiner.
   3. It is accepted that examiners will usually be acquainted with the supervisor, and sometimes the candidate: this is not in itself a bar to acting as examiner.

## Independent Chair

1. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate for the viva to be chaired by an independent member of academic staff. The role of an Independent Chair is to attend the oral examination and ensure that it is conducted fairly and in accordance with the University Regulations. A procedure and guidance for independent chairs is [available here](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/registry/policies/guidance-strategies-procedures-and-codes).

## Timetable for Examination

1. The thesis will be dispatched electronically to examiners unless there is a specific request for a paper copy.
2. In the interests of the candidate, the College expects that the examination will be completed and all examiner reports submitted to us **within three months of the dispatch of the thesis** to the examiners. If there is difficulty in completing the examination within this timescale, it is essential that you inform the BGRS immediately.

## Preliminary Independent Reports

1. Each examiner is required to write an independent preliminary report after reading the thesis but before conferring with the co-examiner. Birkbeck does not have a prescribed form for this – the format is at the discretion of the examiner. Typically the preliminary report identifies particular areas which the examiner believes should be explored with the candidate during the oral examination, and, if possible, a tentative recommendation for the result of the examination. Tentative recommendations should not be indicated to the candidate in advance of the oral examination, which is an integral component of the examination.
2. The examiners should exchange their preliminary reports with each other before conducting the oral examination. They must be submitted to the College at the conclusion of the examination process.

## Examiner queries

1. If the examiners have any queries about the thesis which they wish to raise with the supervisor in advance of the oral examination, they are at liberty to do so. If the examiners have queries about the College’s requirements for the award of PhD, or about the regulations, they should contact the BGRS. Please note that all matters relating to the examination are confidential and examiners should not contact any third party other than the supervisor, as provided for in the regulations and this guidance. Otherwise, all queries must be pursued through the BGRS.
2. As stated in the College’s MPhil/PhD regulations, the thesis must consist of the candidate’s own account of their investigations, the greater proportion of which must have been undertaken during the period of registration under supervision for the degree. The part played by the candidate in any work done jointly with the supervisor(s) and/or fellow research workers must be clearly stated by the candidate and certified by the candidate and supervisor. If appropriate, a Statement of Contribution will be provided for work done jointly with the supervisor(s) and/or fellow research workers.

## Reasonable adjustments

1. The educational needs provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act require institutions to make reasonable adjustments for candidates with physical and learning difficulties, including in their assessment. Examiners will be advised of any special arrangements for a candidate with their appointment letters. If examiners are informed directly by the supervisor or candidate of any disability, even in confidence, they should seek the advice of the BGRS, in order that they might be properly briefed.

## Oral Examination (*Viva*)

1. An oral examination must be held, other than in those circumstances for which provision is made in the regulations (i.e. regulation 15.iii on resubmission of a thesis following referral).
2. When the thesis is dispatched to the examiners, the candidate’s supervisor\* is asked to contact the examiners and the candidate to arrange and confirm a mutually convenient time and means to hold the oral examination.

*\*or other person designated by the College to undertake this task*

1. The College makes no special requirements about where the oral examination is held (other than a normal requirement that it be held in London). An appropriate room can be booked within the College if necessary.
2. Where necessary an oral examination can take place online – in accordance with *guidance for online research degree vivas*. Any enquires about this should be addressed in the first instance to the BGRS who will provide guidance about consent and relating to practical requirements.
3. A principal supervisor may attend the oral examination as an observer provided that the candidate has indicated that they are content for the supervisor to be present.
4. With the exception of arrangements required in order to provide reasonable adjustments in relation to the Disability Discrimination Act (see paragraph 8), no persons other than the following may be present at an oral examination:
   1. the examiners
   2. one principal supervisor
   3. the candidate
   4. an Independent Chair (if required)
5. The purpose of the oral examination is to assess the candidate on the subject of the thesis, and, if the examiners see fit, on subjects relevant thereto. Prior to meeting the candidate, the examiners should discuss the strategy they propose to adopt during the oral examination and, at its outset, outline this to the candidate.
6. During the oral examination the examiners should seek to establish whether all the requirements for a thesis submitted for the MPhil/PhD have been met (these are set out in the Regulations for MPhil and PhD Degrees), and that the thesis is genuinely the work of the candidate.
7. If the examiners have any doubts that the thesis is genuinely the work of the candidate, they should contact the BGRS.
8. There are no set requirements about the conduct of oral examinations, or about their duration, but they should be conducted in such a way that the candidate has adequate opportunity, encouragement, and time to explain their research and to defend the thesis. It is recommended that, during a long oral examination, examiners should allow one or more short breaks at appropriate points.
9. The supervisor, if present, does not have the right to participate in the examination, but may contribute if invited to do so by the examiners.
10. If the candidate becomes so unwell or distressed during the oral examination as to be unable to proceed, the examiners should, after such consultation with the candidate and supervisor as is possible at that time, decide whether or not to continue the oral examination. If they do opt to continue, they should note in their final report that the candidate was unwell. If they decide not to continue, they should determine whether sufficient evidence has been provided to allow a decision to be taken, or whether it will be necessary to hold the oral examination on another occasion.
11. If the candidate makes comments to the examiners which put them under moral pressure (e.g. alluding to the consequences of failure), or offers any kind of incentive to the examiners, the examination should be immediately terminated and a report made to the BGRS.
12. In addition to examining the candidate orally, the examiners may have the discretion to examine the candidate by means of written papers or practical examination. This provision is rarely invoked and examiners are asked to contact the BGRS if they wish to do so.
13. At the conclusion of the oral examination the candidate and supervisor should withdraw, allowing the examiners to confer together on the result in private. If present, the Independent Chair should remain as they confer, but will not contribute to the discussion of the candidate’s academic performance. They should only offer advice on the regulations, if asked to do so.
14. The examiners have discretion, after the initial private discussion, to consult the supervisor irrespective of whether they were present at the examination, particularly if they have doubts relating to the appropriate decision to be made.
15. It is recognised that the examiners may wish to advise the candidate orally of their decision at the conclusion of their deliberations following the examination. Examiners are advised to exercise particular care if they do this, and always to make clear to the candidate that the result is not formal and final until their written report and all other requirements have been satisfied.

## The Result of the Examination

1. The options open to the examiners in determining the result are set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees. The regulations that apply forthe candidate were sent to the examiners along with the thesis and were approved in June 2017. In summary, these are:

### Pass without amendments.

1. **Conditional pass with minor amendments**.

This may only be offered on one occasion per candidate. Amendments are to be completed and submitted to be checked by the supervisor and/or one or both examiners within a time period specified by the examiners, up to a maximum of six months\*\*.

### Major revisions and resubmission for examination.

This may only be offered on one occasion per candidate. The candidate will be allowed to re-submit a revised thesis within eighteen months for a PhD Degree, or twelve months for an MPhil degree. On re-submission the thesis shall be re-examined by the same examiners

- and it is at the examiners’ discretion whether the student will be required to sit a further oral examination.

1. [When submitting for PhD] **Offer of MPhil**, or offer of MPhil after up to six months’

revisions.

1. **Fail without option of resubmission**. No further entry to the PhD or MPhil degree will be allowed in relation to the current course of study.

*\*\*The amendments required should be set out clearly in writing, and be provided within two weeks of the oral examination*

1. Examiners should not consider option (v) unless they have first considered and rejected as inapplicable the preceding options. Options (ii) and (iii) may each be offered to a candidate only once – if the candidate fails to meet the requirements of the examiners by revising their thesis within the time allowed, they will be withdrawn from the degree. However, a candidate can be offered resubmission (iii) and then be asked to complete minor corrections on their resubmitted thesis (ii).

# Reporting to the College on the Examination

## Requirements for all examinations

1. **All reports must be submitted within two weeks of the oral examination.** If, for any reason this is not possible, one of the examiners should contact the BGRS to discuss the problem.
2. The examiners are asked to agree between themselves at the end of the oral examination the arrangements for drafting and finalising their joint report, and for returning all reports and paperwork to the BGRS.
3. Along with the thesis, one of the examiners (generally the internal) will be provided with a form (1EX-17). Following the examination, the examiners are required to complete and sign this form indicating which of the available outcomes they have agreed upon**.** They are also required to write a joint report giving the grounds for their decision. The joint report should be on a separate sheet and should include the candidate’s name and thesis title in the heading, and the signature of both examiners and the date at the end.
4. The report should have regard to the requirements of a thesis (see the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees). It should not cross-refer to the examiners’ preliminary reports if the examiners wish that these not be provided to the candidate (see paragraph 36). Preliminary reports must be provided to the College whether or not the examiners’ wish these to be provided to the student.
5. Examiners may identify issues for the College to consider as part of their joint report; these may be comments on the College’s regulations, examination processes or any other matter relating to the examination. Examiners are asked to identify these issues clearly, in a separate section of their report. Examiners also have the right to make comments in confidence in a separate report to the College (see the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees). Such reports will normally be forwarded immediately to the authorities of the College.

## Further guidance for particular outcomes

1. If the examiners decide to refer the candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis within eighteen months (iii), they must indicate how the current thesis fails to satisfy the requirements for the PhD degree, and clearly outline the revisions needed for it to do so. They can indicate on the result form 1EX-17 if the candidate definitely will or will not need to sit a second oral examination, or reserve this decision until after they have read the resubmitted thesis.
2. If the examiners decide that a candidate entering for a PhD has only satisfied the requirements for MPhil, or could do so with up to six months of revisions (iv), they must:
3. explain their decision not to allow resubmission for the PhD, and
4. indicate in a positive way how the requirements for the MPhil have been satisfied, or might be satisfied on completion of revisions within six months.

*(The MPhil Degree of this University is an award in its own right, and may not be awarded unless the criteria for that degree are satisfied. It is not awarded as compensation for a failed PhD).*

1. If the examiners’ decision is to fail the candidate outright, they should indicate the basis for their decision to reject all other options open to them.

## Notification and awarding of the Candidate

1. No official notification of the result of the examination can be issued to the candidate or to any other authority until the reports have been received and processed and, where appropriate, the final decision confirmed and authorised by our Research Student Sub-Committee.
2. A copy of the examiners’ joint report is routinely sent to the candidate when they are officially informed of their result by the BGRS. Candidates are generally sent the examiners’ preliminary reports as well, though the examiners can ask that these are not provided by indicating where appropriate on the 1EX-17 form. It should be noted that, in the event of their appealing against the examiner’s decision, the candidate would be allowed to see these regardless.
3. In order for the degree to be awarded to the candidate, the BGRS must have received the examiners’ reports and an electronic copy of the corrected thesis.

## Examination of Candidates offered resubmission within eighteen months

1. It is expected that the original examiners will examine the thesis, and if required, conduct a second viva following resubmission.
2. In doing so, examiners should have regard to the report they made on the first examination, copies of which can be made available to them.
3. Examiners have discretion on whether or not to hold an oral examination on a revised and resubmitted thesis, but should have regard to any statement they have made about this in their joint report on the original examination.
4. Apart from the possibility of not holding an oral examination, the resubmission examination for PhD is subject to the same rules and procedures as the original examination. All options set out in the Regulations for the MPhil and PhD Degrees are open to the examiners, except for (iii) to again refer the candidate for resubmission.

## Examination of Practice-based degrees

1. The form of the retainable documentation submitted by a candidate who is undertaking practice/performance research should be considered in the light of the principles and conditions below. Practice/Performance based PhD theses should include:
2. All required pages detailed in the Birkbeck College Regulations for the degree of MPhil and PhD [e.g. abstract, table of contents, bibliographies]
3. Rationale for submitting the thesis in an alternative format and an account of how the thesis format has been constructed
4. Discussion of the context of the research which should incorporate sections/chapters defining the rationale of the investigation and the strategy employed during the research as demonstrated in the thesis
5. Discussion of methodology, detailing the methods employed during the research and a detailed critical analysis of those methods and the information they provided
6. Presentation of the research in a format suitable for recognition in its field and/or in conventional thesis chapters as in the standard PhD thesis
7. Summary/conclusion drawing together the various outcomes of the research into a coherent synthesis and indicating directions for future work
8. References, evidence and appendices must be supplied in an adequate form of retainable documentation.

Minimum Word length for theses in alternative formats is not stipulated. It will have been agreed in each case with Departmental Graduate Panels in keeping with the aims and composition of the thesis and its mode of practice-based research. The upper limit is 100,000 words, as in standard PhD theses.

## If the Examiners are not in Agreement or Require Further Assistance

1. Where examiners are not able to agree upon a result, a third examiner can be appointed through the usual College process (see section 1, Eligibility to Examine). In such circumstances, the examiners should contact the BGRS for advice in the first instance.

## Examiners’ Fees and Expenses

1. A fee of £150 is paid to each examiner following the initial examination and if required, following one subsequent resubmission examination. Payment is conditional on receipt of all relevant reports (joint report, 1EX and preliminary reports) and provision of details required to arrange payment, including a BACS form and satisfaction of right to work checks as required by payroll and HR. Examiners external to the College may claim travel and other expenses in accordance with the relevant schedules. Claims should be submitted to the BGRS at the conclusion of the examination, but may be submitted earlier when advance payment for tickets has been necessary.

## Appeals Procedure

1. The College has a Procedure for the Consideration of Appeals by Candidates for Research Degrees, which is available upon request from the BGRS.