

# Guide to Oral Examination of HDR Theses

James Cook University

## *1. Introduction*

The James Cook University (JCU) introduced oral examination to enhance both the examination process and the higher degree by research (HDR) candidate experience at JCU. The oral examination provides candidates with an opportunity to discuss their research directly with recognised experts who have been appointed as their examiners and helps them establish stronger ties and networks across their discipline of study.

These guidelines provide details on the purpose, format, and conduct of the oral examination. The guidelines are relevant to all HDR candidates, staff, and external parties involved in the examination of any higher degree by research student. All HDR students submitting their thesis from 1 July 2025 are required to undertake an oral as part of their examination.

## *2. Objectives*

The main objectives of the oral examination are to:

- establish that the candidate fully understands the work and its wider implications,
- provide the candidate with an opportunity to reply to criticism or challenges,
- enable the examiners to clarify issues in the thesis which may be unclear,
- help the examiners to decide on the nature and extent of any corrections or revisions which may be required, and to clearly communicate these to the candidate,
- authenticate the contribution made by the candidate to the thesis and ensure that the examiners have a clear understanding of the contribution of others to the thesis.

The oral examination may include assessment of the candidate's ability to:

- demonstrate detailed knowledge of the thesis,
- locate their research in the broader context of their discipline,
- demonstrate the originality of the thesis and the contribution it makes to state of knowledge in the field,
- defend the methodology and conclusions of the thesis,
- display awareness of the limitations of the thesis.

## *3. Role of the oral in the examination outcomes*

The outcome of the oral examination together with the assessment of the written thesis will inform the examiners' joint recommendation regarding the award of the HDR qualification being sought by the candidate. Examiners will focus their questions on issues and concerns raised in their written reports that were provided to the Candidate prior to the oral examination. During the oral examination the Candidate may rebut some or all the feedback with sound academic argument and justification or may concede that further revision would enhance the thesis.

#### *4. Key roles and responsibilities of the Convenor*

An independent member of the academic staff will be appointed as the Convenor of the Examination. The Convenor is not an examiner but rather a person who coordinates, oversees, and facilitates the oral examination process.

Convenors are normally drawn from senior academic staff on a voluntary basis and will be expected to have attended the Convenors of Oral Examinations Workshop. A Convenor does not have to be drawn from the same College as the candidate but should have sufficient disciplinary knowledge to be able to assist in formulating the outcome recommendation. Convenors can be drawn from staff, including Emeritus and adjunct positions. Where possible, the Convenor of the Examination should be the Chair of the candidature milestones.

The Convenor is responsible for ensuring that:

- a. the process is made clear to all participants and progresses smoothly,
- b. the examiners have the chance to ask any questions they may have about the thesis and to discuss other matters related to the research,
- c. irrelevant questions are not asked,
- d. the student has adequate opportunity to defend their work and to answer any questions or respond to criticisms,
- e. the student is treated fairly and respectfully and not subjected to undue stress,
- f. consensus about an examination result is reached and clearly communicated.

#### *5. Typical oral examination process*

##### **5.1. Timing**

- a. The timing of the oral examination should be established once the examiners are nominated, and the thesis is submitted for examination. It will normally be set for approximately seven weeks after the thesis is submitted. Depending on the location of the examiners, the oral examination may take place outside normal business hours, but every effort should be made to hold the event during reasonable hours for everyone involved.
- b. The oral examination must not be held until both examiners' reports on the thesis have been received by the Graduate Research School and passed on to the Convenor of Examiners and candidate, at least 2 weeks prior to the examination date.
- c. When the examiners' reports indicate that the thesis is not of an acceptable standard to progress to the oral examination, the oral examination may not take place as scheduled. In such cases, the Dean may require the candidate to revise the thesis for re-examination.

## **5.2. Participants**

The oral examination is attended by:

- a. the Convenor of the Examination;
- b. the candidate; and
- c. the two examiners (in person or via video conference)
- d. in consultation with the candidate, the Primary Advisor, and others who are there as observers; and where the Primary Advisor may only participate for matters of clarification as directed by the Convenor.

## **5.3. Venue**

The oral examination will normally be held on a JCU campus with at least the Convenor and the student attending in person. In some cases, the Dean of Graduate Research & Researcher Development (the Dean) may allow the oral examination to be conducted at an alternative location or allow a remote student to attend via video conference. For examiners, attendance via video conference is acceptable, however, Colleges may wish to consider the broader value of examiners attending in person.

## **5.4. Arrangements**

- a. The GRS will coordinate arrangements for the oral examination and notifies all parties.
- b. Once approved by the Dean to proceed to oral examination, the Graduate Research School will distribute the examiners' written reports to the Convenor, the student and the Advisors when both reports are received, at least 14 days before the oral examination. The student and the supervisors will not be sent the recommendation.
- c. The Convenor may choose to contact the examiners before the oral examination, especially when issues and disagreements have been identified in the preliminary reports and for the purpose of agreeing an agenda for the oral examination.
- d. The student and the advisors are not permitted to engage in any correspondence with the examiners before the oral examination commences. Any dialogue with the examiners must be via the Convenor or the Dean.

## **5.5. Duration and format**

The oral examination is intended to be a stimulating, professional, and constructive intellectual exchange. A typical oral examination may take up to 2 hours which includes:

- a. a pre-meeting of the Convenor and the examiners before the oral examination lasting approximately 10-20 minutes,
- b. a brief presentation by the student lasting approximately 10 minutes,
- c. the oral examination, with questions from the examiners on substantive issues,
- d. a closed meeting following the oral examination in which the Convenor will facilitate a consensus decision with examiners,
- e. feedback to the student on the recommendation the examiners will be making to the

Dean and the requirements they will be asking the student to consider. The typical duration and format as described above may vary from case to case. The Convenor will advise the Dean of any likely significant variations to the standard format as soon as practical so that the student is informed in a timely manner.

#### *6. Examination outcomes*

- a. Once the oral examination has concluded, the Convenor and the examiners will confer in private, and the examiners will decide on their joint recommendation to the Dean regarding the award of the degree.
- b. Before the oral examination concludes, a list of revisions or amendments to the thesis must be produced and a consensus recommendation made. The list should be written by the Convenor and agreed by both examiners. The list of amendments may augment those already identified in the examiners' written reports on the thesis or may replace some or all the issues in the examiners' written reports. The recommendation should take account of both the written thesis and the oral component of the examination. The possible outcome recommendations are.
  - a. Pass with no amendments
  - b. Pass with amendments completed to the satisfaction of the College Dean or delegate
  - c. Repeat the oral examination
  - d. Revise and resubmit the thesis for examination
- c. If the examiners disagree about the result and a consensus cannot be reached, if the examiners recommend outcome c or d, or where the Convenor holds significant concerns about the process through which the recommendation was attained, the Dean should be advised and may determine that an adjudicator or other form of referee is required.
- d. In exceptional circumstances, where additional consultation between examiners is required before the report can be finalised, the final report may be submitted within 2 working days of the oral examination.
- e. Following their deliberations, the Convenor and examiners may verbally communicate their recommendation and any required corrections or revisions to the student. This is not an opportunity for the student to challenge the recommendation. If consensus recommendation cannot be reached between the examiners about a joint recommendation, no immediate feedback will be provided to the student or supervisors.

The official outcome of the examination will be communicated to the student and Primary Advisor following consideration by the Dean.