PhD Examinations – procedure, roles and responsibilities

This set of notes is to clarify the various roles and responsibilities within PhD examinations, especially of the Internal Examiner and the Exam Advisor in relation to the viva. They should be regarded as guidance to recommended practice within the Department of Physics and complimentary to the existing University Regulations that are sent to all examiners and available on the university website.

1. **Summary of roles**

   **External Examiner**  Independent, recognised expert in the field.
   
   **Duties:**
   - Examine the thesis
   - Produce independent report
   - Lead questioning in the viva
   - Make recommendation for award of degree, or otherwise
   - Specify corrections if required

   **Internal Examiner**  Member of Dept. not directly connected with student’s work, but with knowledge of the general field.

   **Duties:**
   - Arrange the viva*
   - Act as host to the External Examiner*
   - Examine the thesis
   - Produce independent report
   - Ask additional questions in the viva, ensuring that the student has opportunities to positively demonstrate their knowledge
   - Make recommendation for award of degree, or otherwise
   - Specify corrections if required
   - Check minor corrections have been made.

   **Exam Advisor**  Member of Dept. not connected with student’s work.

   **Duties:**
   - Read examiners’ independent reports
   - Chair and introduce the viva
   - Act as student’s supporter
   - Advise on University regulations and examination protocol
   - Facilitate examiners’ deliberations in reaching a decision
   - Produce brief report of the viva.

   * NB Some University paperwork suggests that organisation of the viva is a responsibility of the Exam Advisor; however, unless there are two external examiners, in Physics this is the responsibility of the Internal Examiner (who gets the fee).

   Two External Examiners must be used where the candidate is a member of staff, or where there is not a suitably qualified Internal Examiner in the relevant research area. The University previously required two externals for WPRF students, but this is no longer the case.

2. **Purpose of the viva**

According to the Regulations the purposes of a PhD viva are to enable the Examiners:

- *a*) to clarify any ambiguities in the thesis,
- *b*) to satisfy themselves that the thesis is the candidate’s own work,
- *c*) that the candidate is familiar with the relation of his/her work to the field of study
- *d*) and that his/her knowledge and appreciation of adjoining fields in the subject are up to the standard expected for the award of the appropriate degree.

Furthermore, the viva should be an opportunity for the student to demonstrate their knowledge and be part of a celebration of their achievements. It is most definitely not an opportunity for the examiners to demonstrate their own knowledge.
3 Before the viva

The supervisor should arrange one or more mock vivas as practice before the real thing.

Both the Internal Examiner and the Exam Advisor should have read the relevant sections of Guide to Examinations for Higher Degrees by Research (at least Part III).

The two Examiners should have read the thesis and produced independent reports. These reports should include a recommended outcome, subject to performance in the viva, and indicate the major areas that the examiners wish to explore in the viva. This does not prevent other topics being discussed, but it would be unusual to subsequently penalise a candidate on the basis of issues not mentioned in the independent report (unless these only became obvious in the viva, e.g. that the thesis was not the candidate’s own work – see 2a above).

The independent reports should be given to the Exam Advisor in advance of the viva. Although the University guidelines suggest at least a week; most Exam Advisors would probably accept a shorter time, but not five minutes before the viva starts.

The Exam Advisor does not need to read the thesis, but should read the independent reports noting the examiners’ recommendations and issues of concern.

If required, the examiners may approach the supervisor for information prior to the viva and should do so if considering any outcome other than a pass with minor corrections.

4 During the viva

The Exam Advisor will chair the viva, introduce the candidate to the examiners, explain the format and purpose of the viva, the probably duration and their role as an advisor.

Normally the Exam Advisor will then merely observe proceedings and make brief notes of how the candidate is performing. These notes should become more extensive if problems arise or the candidate appears to be struggling.

The Exam Advisor may intervene if, for example, the candidate misunderstands a question, by asking an examiner to rephrase it, gets bogged down on a particular point, by suggesting the exam moves on becomes distressed, by calling for a break in proceedings and having a private discussion with the candidate before deciding to continue, postpone or abandon the viva.

The Exam Advisor may also remind the Examiners of the time and ensure that all issues raised in the individual reports have been addressed.

At the end of the viva the candidate must be given the opportunity to make any additional comments. They should then be told to expect the result after the examiners have had a short discussion.

The Examiners are free to discuss whatever areas of research from the thesis, and in the general area, they desire as set out in 2 above. However, they need to bear in mind the need to cover any issues raised in their individual reports and to highlight the nature and scope of any corrections (other than typographical) that will be required.

At the start of the viva the candidate may well be nervous, so some easy introductory discussion is often a good idea. Often examiners will just “go through the thesis”, but this usually means starting with background material which is (a) not necessarily that familiar to the candidate, many will find themselves getting confused over items of undergraduate physics which they have forgotten, (b) not the most important area to focus on for the key pass/fail decision and (c) may leave insufficient time for the final chapters of the thesis, which probably contain more original or controversial work. Candidates are likely to be more familiar with methodology, since they spent most time doing it, and this provides a good test that they actually did the work.

If a candidate does get stuck at some point, examiners should consider how important it is to their overall recommendation in pressing the issue or whether just to move on.

In the unlikely event that plagiarism is suspected, whether whilst reading the thesis or later, the examination process must be stopped and a full investigation performed according to the University guidelines.
After the viva

The Examiners should agree a final recommendation and write a brief joint report, containing their joint recommendation.

If the outcome is not clear and unanimous the Exam Advisor should facilitate a discussion between the examiners, referring to notes made during the viva and the individual reports as appropriate. Whilst the Exam Advisor may help the examiners find a recommendation consistent with the candidate’s performance, he/she is not to make that decision and does not have a “casting vote”. In the unlikely event of a genuine disagreement between the two examiners the Exam Advisor should record this in their report and the University will appoint an external adjudicator.

Where only typographical corrections are required it is acceptable to recommend the degree be awarded on the expectation that these errors will be corrected before the thesis is hard bound and deposited in the library.

Where Minor Corrections are required these should be specified in writing. Minor Corrections should be interpreted as any changes that can be made to the thesis within a month without requiring additional research. Minor Corrections, other than typographical errors, would normally all have been discussed with the student during the viva.

The award of a lower degree can be recommended (usually MPhil, or in extreme MSc), but there is no option to insist a candidate resubmits, or makes corrections, for a lower degree – examiners must decide on either resubmission for a PhD or to award the lower degree. Note that awarding a lower degree may well trigger an appeal unless the candidate accepts that their work can not be brought up to the required standard within one year, so the Exam Advisor should ensure that a full record of events is available.

If resubmission is recommended the areas and extent of the required revisions must be set out in writing and must have been discussed during the viva. Again a full record is required.

The candidate should be told what the recommendation is as soon as possible, i.e. not after the examiners have enjoyed a lengthy lunch, although the details of required corrections could wait. This is also an opportunity to give positive feedback to the candidate on their research and performance. The Exam Advisor should be present to explain University procedures regarding corrections and resubmission. The required corrections should be supplied in writing to the candidate, as a courtesy copied to the supervisor, and included with the final report sent to the Graduate School.

It is the Internal Examiner’s responsibility to inform and provide feedback to the supervisor. Checking that Minor Corrections are completed is the responsibility of the Internal Examiner.

The Exam Advisor must write a report of the viva and send this along with the examiners’ reports to the Graduate School. The content of this report is clearly outlined in the University’s notes for guidance sent to advisors and will normally be very short when the recommendation is to award the degree with only minor corrections. If there were problems during the viva or a resubmission or failure are being recommended the report must be much more detailed.