RESEARCH HIGHER DEGREE EXAMINATION POLICY AND PROCEDURE

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1 PURPOSE

1.1 This policy and procedure describes and regulates the examination process for Research Higher Degrees (RHD) at CQUniversity, with a focus on:

- providing a framework to achieve rigour, quality and fairness in all examinations
- national best-practice, as described in the Australian Council of Graduate Research's (ACGR's) Good Practice Principles for Graduate Research Examination and Good Practice Guidelines for Disclosing and Managing Interests, and

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- ensuring CQUniversity compliance with the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (Cwlth).

2 SCOPE

2.1 This policy and procedure applies to:

- all candidates enrolled in an RHD at CQUniversity, including Masters by Research, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Education, Doctor of Professional Studies, Doctor of Philosophy (by Portfolio), Master by Research (Offshore) and Doctor of Philosophy (Offshore)
- registered RHD supervisors
- all individuals invited to participate in an RHD examination for a CQUniversity candidate, and
- School of Graduate Research employees (with respect to administrative processes).

3 POLICY STATEMENT

3.1 This policy and procedure is written in accordance with the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (Cwlth) (section 1.4(6)), which states that:

"Assessment of major assessable research outputs for higher degrees by research, such as theses, dissertations, exegeses, creative works or other major works arising from a candidate's research incorporates assessment by at least two assessors with international standing in the field of research, who are independent of the conduct of the research, competent to undertake the assessment and do not have a conflict of interest, and:

a) for doctoral degrees, are external to the higher education provider, and

b) for masters degrees by research, at least one of whom is external to the higher education provider."

Thesis examination as an assessment of learning outcomes

3.2 Theses will be assessed in terms of how well the candidate has met the requirements of the relevant degree, consistent with the expectations of the Australian Qualifications Framework. Thesis examiners will be supplied with a copy of the Australian Qualifications Framework for this purpose. Specifically,

Material being assessed for the award of an Australian Qualifications Framework Level 9 Research Masters Degree will be evaluated against the following criteria:

- demonstration of expert, specialised cognitive and technical skills in a body of knowledge or practice
- demonstration of an ability to analyse critically, reflect on and synthesise complex information, problems, concepts and theories
- demonstration of an ability to research and apply established theories to a body of knowledge or practice, and
- demonstration of an ability interpret and transmit knowledge, skills and ideas to specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Material being assessed for the award of an Australian Qualifications Framework Level 10 Doctoral Degree will be evaluated against the following criteria:

- demonstration of expert, specialised cognitive, technical and research skills in a discipline area
- demonstration of an ability to engage in critical reflection, synthesis and evaluation
- demonstration of an ability to develop, adapt and implement research methodologies to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice
- demonstration of an ability to disseminate and promote new insights to peers and the community, and
- demonstration of the generation of original knowledge and understanding to make a substantial contribution to a discipline or area of professional practice.

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3.3 Thesis assessment is also intended as the primary mechanism by which a candidate will demonstrate application of generic research knowledge and skills, being:

- a detailed understanding of the specific topic of their research, within a broad understanding of the field of research
- capacity to scope, design and conduct research projects independently
- technical research skills and competence in the application of research methods, and
- skills in analysis, critical evaluation and reporting of research, and in presentation, publication and dissemination of their research.

3.4 All University employees and candidates involved in RHD thesis examination should have an awareness of the national best-practice Principles of Graduate Research Examination, as released by the Australian Council of Graduate Research.

4 PROCEDURE

Thesis submission

4.1 All theses submitted for examination must include a statement of originality incorporating an acknowledgement of others' contributors, editorial assistance, copyright provisions and other relevant approvals. A thesis will not be released for examination without these materials in place. For further guidance, candidates are directed to the Research Higher Degree Theses Policy and Procedure.

4.2 Normally, a candidate will submit a thesis for examination with the endorsement of the supervisory panel, as demonstrated by the signatures on the Thesis Submission Form.

4.3 In certain circumstances, a candidate may submit a thesis for examination without the endorsement of the supervisory panel. Such a thesis will not be accepted unless the candidate has signed an acknowledgement outlining:

- an awareness of the reason/s for the supervisor's lack of endorsement of the thesis
- an awareness of the range of examination outcomes that are possible, and
- personal responsibility for the thesis result, including responsibility for any tuition fees applicable during a thesis revisions period.

4.4 Resubmission of a thesis with post-examination revisions must occur within the designated timeframes for each examination category (refer to section 4.30). Where the candidate requires further time, a special case for consideration may be approved by the Dean School of Graduate Research.

Chair of Examination panel

4.5 To be eligible to Chair an Examination Panel, an individual must be a University employee who holds registration as a principal supervisor, and has tenure at least as long as the expected duration of the examination. The Chair must hold a Research Doctorate (or other qualification equivalent to the Australian Qualifications Framework Level 10) and be a senior discipline expert with sufficient experience to be able to ensure rigour and quality within the examinations process.

4.6 The Chair is not an examiner and is not required to provide an examination report.

4.7 The Chair of an Examination Panel will be nominated by the relevant Postgraduate Research Coordinator, in consultation with the Deputy Dean Research.

Number of examiners

4.8 Thesis submitted for all RHD courses require a minimum of two external examiners, and at least one reserve external examiner.

4.9 Where examiners are unavailable or unresponsive to a request to examine, that examiner will be stood down and a reservist will be substituted to help ensure a timely examination process.

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4.10 The University reserves the right to appoint the reservist as a third examiner for the purposes of:

- ensuring the examination panel has an appropriate depth and breadth of disciplinary expertise for the topic under examination, and
- providing additional information to assist in moderating the examination results (e.g. where the first two examiner's reports are divergent).

Where the latter case applied, a third examiner would be introduced prior to the initial examination outcome being released to the candidate.

Eligibility of examiners

4.11 An individual may be or appointed as an examiner where they have:

- an appropriate disciplinary and academic background of relevance to the thesis content
- international standing in the field of research, and
- evidence of recent research activity, as demonstrated by peer-reviewed publications output, receipt of research funding and/or research training activity.

4.12 An individual would be expected to hold a Research Doctorate Degree (or equivalent to a Level 10 award under the Australian Qualifications Framework) in order to be appointed to an Examination Panel for either masters or doctoral level candidates.

4.13 In exceptional circumstances, an examiner without a Research Doctorate may be acceptable, where it can be shown that they or possess equivalent professional experience. For example, this may occur in the Doctor of Professional Studies, where it is expected that the individual holds recent, relevant and substantial industry-based experience in the field of study. Such exceptions must be approved by the Dean School of Graduate Research as well as the Chair of the Examination Panel.

4.14 Examiners should have a basic understanding of the Australian research training context and be able to demonstrate participation in research training (sometimes also known as research education).

4.15 Examiners must be external to the University. Emeritus Professors, adjuncts and honorary employees of the University are considered ineligible. Previous employees of the University may be considered eligible where a significant time period has elapsed (for example, five years), and where it is clear that the employee has not had previous interaction with the candidate and/or work being examined.

4.16 Current or previous supervisors of the candidate cannot be appointed as examiners.

4.17 Consideration will be made of the balance of expertise, and independence of examiners, across the panel. Generally, more than one examiner for a given thesis will not be appointed from the same institution, particularly if from the same unit (e.g. faculty or research centre).

Nomination and appointment of examiners

4.18 The principal supervisor, in consultation with the supervisory panel, is responsible for nominating examiners. At minimum, this will include the two examiners plus at least one reserve examiner.

4.19 The nomination of examiners should be submitted to the School of Graduate Research for approval by the Dean School of Graduate Research, who may consult with the Deputy Dean Research, Postgraduate Research Coordinator or Chair of Examination Panel, in considering such approvals.

4.20 In the event that a thesis is being-examined, the process for nomination and appointment is as per sections 4.11 to 4.17.

4.21 The nomination and appointment of examiners should be done in confidence. Supervisors may request that the candidate provide a list of examiners that are unsuitable (e.g. because of conflicts created by co-authorship); however, other than this, the candidate should not have any role in identifying or nominating prospective examiners. Participation of the candidate in the nomination process may result in one or more examiners being stood down.

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Responsibilities of examiners

4.22 Examiners have a responsibility to:

- familiarise themselves with the requirements of the University's examinations process and the expectations of the Australian Qualifications Framework, for the degree being examined
- conduct the examination in a fair, rigorous and timely manner
- declare any conflicts of interest of relevance to the examination (refer to sections 4.50 to 4.52)
- provide a clear recommendation to the School of Graduate Research in respect to the category of examination outcome, and support this with a written report providing evidence for the decision, and
- respond to requests from the Chair of the Examination Panel.

Contact with examiners

4.23 Once nominated examiners have been approved, the candidate and any members of the supervisory panel must not contact, or communicate with, the examiners until the examination has concluded. If contact is made, the examiner's report will be disqualified and another examiner appointed. The exceptions to this are

- cases where the contact is made unknowingly and anonymously (e.g. the reviewer is an editor for a publication lodged by the candidate), or
- cases where the candidate is required to undertake an oral defence.

4.24 If an examiner wishes to clarify something about the submission, then this will be done by written request through the Chair of Examiners, and not directly with the candidate or supervisory panel.

The examination process

4.25 The examination process will follow the steps outlined in the Appendix. This Appendix also describes the roles and responsibilities of different parties throughout the examination process, together with an indicative timeline for each step.

Timeliness of the examination period

4.26 Candidates and supervisors are advised that the expected time for an examination, from receipt of the submitted thesis to release of the moderated report to the candidate, is approximately 12 weeks.

4.27 Delays in the examination process can be introduced by:

- incomplete nomination forms
- tardiness and/or unresponsiveness of examiners in providing an outcome, and/or
- the need to invite reserve examiners.

4.28 The School of Graduate Research will make every effort to achieve a timely examination outcome. This will include regular engagement with appointed examiners, the introduction of a reserve examiner where one or more original examiners have become unresponsive, and rapid processing of examination reports and moderation outcomes.

Categories of examination outcomes

4.29 Candidates may receive one of five possible examination outcomes, which are labelled and defined as per below:

No amendments: except for minor textual errors and/or minor corrections to referencing, the thesis is suitable for immediate conferral.

Minor revision: the thesis is suitable for conferral once the author has addressed nominated passages, textual errors, referencing corrections. These actions should largely be able to be undertaken independently by the candidate.

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Major revision with internal review: the thesis requires new data collection, new or revised data analysis, substantive rewriting of one or more chapters, or a large volume of stylistic/presentation errors. These revisions are likely to require ongoing input from the supervisory team.

Major revision and external re-examination*:* where the revisions are substantive and require re-examination by technical experts.

Fail: the thesis is not suitable for conferral, even after extensive revisions.

4.30 As per the Research Higher Degree Course Rules, Research Higher Degree (Offshore) Course Rules, and Doctor of Philosophy by Portfolio Course Rules, a candidate who receives either:

- major revision with internal review, or
- major revision and external re-examination

will be required to re-enrol for a minimum period of six calendar months.

The candidate is responsible for meeting any applicable tuition costs associated with a period of re-enrolment to action major revisions.

Procedures for a thesis requiring re-examination

4.31 Where a thesis has undergone major revisions and an external re-examination is necessary, the following will apply:

- where all of the original thesis examiners have indicated a willingness to re-examine, they will be invited to form the Re-Examination Panel. In this instance, the examiners will be made aware that the thesis is being submitted for re-examination
- where one or more of the original thesis examiners are unwilling or unavailable, nominations for new examiners will be sought from the principal supervisor, as per section 4.21. These examiners will also be notified that the thesis is being submitted for re-examination.
- The re-examiners will receive only a copy of the revised thesis document and/or other items forming the main body of the thesis work (i.e., the materials that would be lodged with the University on final conferral). They will not be supplied with a copy of the table of revisions, covering letters or any supplementary materials; and they are not provided with a copy of the examination reports from the original submission. The re-examiners will be asked to assess this material against the relevant Australian Qualifications Framework descriptors relevant to the degree being sought, without consideration of any prior materials submitted by the candidate.

4.32 A research thesis which is undergoing external re-examination, after major revisions have been actioned, is eligible for only one of three examination outcomes:

No amendments: except for minor textual errors and/or minor corrections to referencing, the thesis is suitable for immediate conferral.

Minor revision: the thesis is suitable for conferral once the author has addressed nominated passages, textual errors and/or referencing corrections.

Fail: the thesis would require major revisions before being suitable for conferral.

4.33 Where, following consideration of the reports of the Examination Panel, it is determined that the thesis does not meet the standard expected for the [doctoral] degree, but the research is of suitable merit, the Chair of Examiners may recommend to the Dean, School of Graduate Research that a Master of Research degree be awarded. The award of the Masters' degree is subject to the acceptance of that degree by the candidate and any such conditions as specified by the Dean, who will consult if necessary with the Vice-President (Research).

Moderating and releasing the examination outcome

4.34 The School of Graduate Research will not provide progress updates regarding the examination to the candidate or supervisor unless specifically requested. Where requested, the only information that will be provided is the number of examination reports received, and prospective timelines for receipt of outstanding reports. No information can be released in regards to the contents of the examination report/s or the examiners.

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4.35 An examination must be conducted on all materials formally submitted by the Candidate for the examination. Assessment reports that have been prepared based on incomplete materials will not be considered.

4.36 When both examination reports are available, the Chair of the Examination Panel will receive the requisite number of examination reports, and provide a moderated outcome for consideration by the Dean School of Graduate Research.

4.37 In case of difficulty in reaching moderated examination outcome, the Dean School of Graduate Research, in consultation with the Chair, may:

- request additional information from any examiner, either in written format or via an interview
- appoint a third external examiner, or
- seek an expert consultation with a senior member of the University, or other expert as appropriate.

Where expert consultation is sought from a University employee or other expert, it is not expected that this would attract an honorarium payment.

4.38 The School of Graduate Research will advise the candidate of the recommendation of the examination outcome. The examination outcome advice will be sent to the candidate and supervisory panel, and will comprise:

- the examination report from each examiner, containing the proforma as well as any narrative report received (these materials will be redacted to preserve the anonymity of examiners, as required)
- copies of any marked-up theses, if applicable
- comments from the Chair of the Examination, if applicable
- a moderated examination statement from the Dean School of Graduate Research, describing the examination outcome and any additional conditions placed on the revisions period.

4.39 The Dean School of Graduate Research reserves the right to redact the examiner's comments prior to release to the candidate and/or supervisory panel. Where this occurs, recipients will be notified that the report has been provided in an abridged format.

Oral defence

4.40 An oral defence (also known as the viva voce) is not mandatory at the University. However, at the request of the Chair of the Examination, the candidate and/or the Dean School of Graduate Research, the candidate may be required to:

- conduct an oral presentation explaining the thesis findings, context, and contribution to the research discipline area, and/or
- participate in an interview to confirm that all revisions have been completed to the satisfaction of the Chair.

4.41 If required, the oral defence will serve the purpose of confirming or moderating the outcome of the thesis revisions process. The presentation itself does not attract a separate assessment report. Such an interview may take place physically, or by tele- or video-conferenced means.

Undertaking revisions

4.42 The candidate is responsible for preparing a revised thesis together with a table of point-by-point responses to the examiner's comments, obtaining the endorsement of the principal supervisor and submitting it to the School of Graduate Research.

4.43 In responding to revisions, the candidate should clearly indicate an amendments made, and a rationale for adopting (or not adopting) the recommendations provided in the examination report.

4.44 Candidates should note that, on its own, having published sections of the thesis in a peer-reviewed format is not an adequate defence for not actioning suggested changes.

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4.45 Where a candidate receives a result of 'major revisions', the principal supervisor is required to submit a covering page to the School of Graduate Research, detailing the revisions made and the overall impact of these on the cogency and original contribution of the thesis (appropriate to the degree being sought).

Conferral of award

4.46 The Chair of the Examination Panel will consider the revised thesis submission for suitability for award of degree. This process will entail a review of the academic standing as well as procedural compliance with the Research Higher Degree Theses Policy and Procedure and any other appropriate University regulation.

4.47 The Chair of the Examination Panel may seek an expert consultation with a senior member of the University, or other expert as appropriate, in order to determine suitability of the thesis for award.

4.48 Where are thesis is not deemed to adequately meet the requirements, the candidate may be asked to undertake further revisions. The Chair of the Examination Panel may also request that the candidate participate in an interview to discuss the revised thesis.

4.49 A thesis that has been accepted as satisfactory will be recommended to the Dean School of Graduate Research (or Vice-President (Research) where the Dean School of Graduate Research is unavailable or has a conflict of interest) for conferral of award, using the standard proforma.

Avoiding conflicts of interest

4.50 Members of the Examination Panel (including examiners and the Chair) must declare any real or perceived conflict of interest (either professional, personal or commercial) exists between the individual, the candidate and/or the supervisory panel. The Dean School of Graduate Research will determine whether such a conflict results in ineligibility to serve on the Examination Panel.

4.51 All parties are encouraged to consult the Australian Council of Graduate Research's Guidelines for Disclosing and Managing Interests, which provides assistance in identifying major and minor types of conflict. This document is available on the University's Learning Management System (Moodle) Research site and can be provided to external reviewers on request.

4.52 Where the Chair of the Examination Panel, or Dean School of Graduate Research, becomes aware of a conflict of interest during the examination and/or prior to the release of the examination outcome to the candidate, the examiner may be stood down and/or their report may be considered ineligible.

Examinations undertake in-confidence

4.53 In the event that a thesis contains sensitive or potentially patentable research results, the University will ensure that examiners sign an appropriate confidentiality agreement prior to examining the thesis. The University will take whatever other action is necessary to protect patentable material contained in theses in a way which will not introduce undue delay in the awarding of the degree.

Payment of honoraria

4.54 Examiners, not including the Chair, will be eligible to receive an honorarium payment consistent with the rates applied for the examination of research theses, as published by Universities Australia from time to time. The honoraria will be paid only after receipt of an examination report (and would be offered to any examiner who has supplied a report, even if that report is later set aside).

Thesis awards

4.55 Annual awards are made available for RHD candidates who receive outstanding commendation during their thesis examination. Refer to the Research Higher Degree Thesis Awards Procedure for more information.

Appeals and complaints

4.56 A candidate, supervisor or examiner who has reasonable grounds for dissatisfaction with any formal decision made under this policy or procedure may lodge an appeal by written request to the Dean School of Graduate

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Research, within 28 days of date of issue of the decision. If the candidate or supervisor can demonstrate that the process was not followed or that new evidence is available, they may lodge a further internal appeal with the Vice-President (Research).

4.57 With regards to matters relating to academic assessment, a candidate who has reasonable grounds for dissatisfaction with any formal decision may appeal to the Academic Appeals Committee. Information regarding the Academic Appeal process and timeframes for students to submit an Application for Academic Appeal can be found in the Academic Appeals Policy and Procedure.

4.58 Students who have a complaint may make a complaint in accordance with the Complaints Policy and Procedure.

4.59 The University recognises the importance of providing an appeal process, and prompt and fair complaint resolution procedures for candidates, without victimisation for initiating or participating in the settlement. The candidate's enrolment will be maintained (without additional tuition liability) while the complaint and appeal processes are underway.

4.60 Any candidate not satisfied with the outcome of their internal appeal may appeal the decision by referring the matter to the Queensland Ombudsman or to a court or tribunal with an appropriate jurisdiction.

5 RESPONSIBILITIES

Compliance, monitoring and review

5.1 The Research Committee is responsible for ensuring compliance with this policy and procedure.

Reporting

5.2 Reporting on the University's RHD examination outcomes is presented through the Research Committee.

Records management

5.3 Employees must manage records in accordance with the Records Management Policy and Procedure. This includes retaining these records in a recognised University recordkeeping information system.

5.4 University records must be retained for the minimum periods specified in the relevant Retention and Disposal Schedule. Before disposing of any records, approval must be sought from the Records and Privacy Team (email records@cqu.edu.au).

6 DEFINITIONS

6.1 Terms not defined in this document may be in the University glossary.

7 RELATED LEGISLATION AND DOCUMENTS

Doctor of Philosophy by Portfolio Course Rules

Good Practice Guidelines for Disclosing and Managing Interests in Graduate Research (Australian Council or Graduate Research)

Good Practice Principles of Graduate Research Examination (Australian Council of Graduate Research)

Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (Cwlth)

Research Higher Degree Course Rules

Research Higher Degree (Offshore) Course Rules

Research Higher Degree Theses Policy and Procedure

Research Higher Degree Thesis Awards Procedure

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8 FEEDBACK

8.1 Feedback about this document can be emailed policy@cqu.edu.au.

9 APPROVAL AND REVIEW DETAILS

Approval and Review	Details
Approval Authority	Academic Board
Delegated Approval Authority	Research Committee
Advisory Committee	N/A
Required Consultation	N/A
Administrator	Dean School of Graduate Research
Next Review Date	02/07/2023

Approval and Amendment History	Details
Original Approval Authority and Date	Executive Committee of Academic Board 20/12/2016
Amendment Authority and Date	Executive Committee of Academic Board 20/12/2016, Research Higher Degrees Executive Committee 20/10/2017; Research Higher Degrees Committee 7 December 2017; Research Higher Degrees Committee 07/11/2019; Dean, School of Graduate Research 15/11/2019; Research Higher Degrees Committee 02/07/2020; Dean, School of Graduate Research 23/07/2020; Editorial amendment 01/04/2021; Dean School of Graduate Research 27/05/2023; Editorial amendments 13/03/2024.
Notes	This document consolidates and replaces the Examination Panel (EdD Theses) Guidance Procedures, Examination Panel (Masters' Theses) Guidance Procedures, Examination Panel (PhD Theses) Guidance Procedures, Nomination of Examiners for Research Higher Degree Theses Procedures and Examination Panel (DBR Portfolio) Guidance Procedures.

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10 APPENDIX: ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND INDICATIVE TIMELINES DURING THE EXAMINATION PROCESS

	Candidate	Supervisory Panel	Chair of Examination Panel	Examiners	Dean School of Graduate Research	School of Graduate Research	Vice-President (Research)	*Indicative Timeline**
Lodge the intention to submit	☑	☑				☑		*4 weeks prior to intended submission date*
Prepare and submit thesis	☑	☑				☑		*[Submission date]*
Submit nominations for examiners		☑				☑		*Within 2 weeks of lodging the intention to submit*
Check and release thesis for examination					☑	☑		*Within 1 week of receipt*
Approve and appoint examiners			☑^		☑			*Within 1 week of receipt*
Invite examiners						☑		*Within 1 week of approval*
Undertake examination				☑				*Within 6 weeks*
Follow-up with examiners (if required)						☑		*Within one week of the report becoming overdue*
Collate examination reports						☑		*Within 1 week of receiving all reports*
Moderate Review Reports and Provide Initial Outcome to the Dean School of Graduate Research			☑			cc'ed		*Within 1 week of receiving all reports#*
Review moderated reports and provide outcome to the candidate						cc'ed		*Within 1 week of receiving all reports*
Action revisions as required	☑	☑	☑					*From 3-12 months*
Consider thesis revisions for recommendation of award			☑					*Within 2 weeks of receiving the submission*
Confer award					☑		☑	*The Vice-President (Research) may confer awards where the Dean School of Graduate Research is unavailable.*

^ If consultation is required.

Complex examination outcomes requiring further consultation with the examiners or others may take longer.

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