



SUBMISSION TO SENATE

Faculty	RESEARCH AND INTERNATIONALISATION		
Department	POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL		
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ITEM TITLE	Guidelines for implementation of the compulsory oral defence for doctoral students		
RECOMMENDATION: It is recommended that the guidelines for the implementation of an oral defence as part of the doctoral students' assessment process is considered and approved by Senate			
Background			
<p>At its meeting of the 16th of November 2022, Senate approved the proposed amendments to the Academic Regulations 2023. The proposal that an oral defence/viva voce should be a compulsory part of the academic requirements for a doctoral qualification was approved in principle, on the understanding that (i) the implementation thereof would apply to doctoral students who graduate from 2024 onwards and (ii) if it was already included in a faculty's rules, it would apply to doctoral students who graduated from 2023 onwards. It was also agreed that further discussion on the implementation challenges the faculties might experience with the introduction of oral defence/viva voce of doctoral qualifications, be held at the SHDC. At the SHDC meeting of the 2nd of February 2023, the Vice-Deans were requested to submit a summary of the faculties' implementation of the viva voce process to the next meeting. At its meeting held on the 2nd of March 2023, SHDC resolved that an institutional guideline on the viva voce requirement be developed and submitted to the next meeting for discussion. Profs Jansen van Vuuren and Moteetee drafted the guidelines which incorporated the processes from all the faculties, using the Faculty of Humanities' document as a starting point. A small task team consisting of Profs Barnes, Strydom, Meijboom, Jansen van Vuuren, and Moteetee then worked on the draft on a shared platform.</p> <p>At the SHDC meeting held on the 11th of April 2023, it was agreed that the first draft of the guidelines for the implementation of the compulsory viva voce be shared with the faculties for a wider consultation and be submitted to the next meeting for consideration and approval. The document was shared through SharePoint and comments were received from most of the faculties. The updated document was approved on condition that additional comments are incorporated. The final document is presented as Annexure A. The proposal is for an oral defence as opposed to a viva voce (oral examination).</p>			
RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (if any)			
No resource implications.			

Annexure(s) (if any)	Annexure A: Oral defence: Guidelines for implementation at Faculty level
Date of implementation	When approved

	Various structures and dates	
1	SHDC	11 April 2023
2	SHDC	4 May 2023

Annexure A

Oral defence: Guidelines for implementation at Faculty¹ level

The [Academic Regulations](#) stipulate that a *compulsory oral defence forms part of the academic requirements for a doctoral qualification*. In addition, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) [Doctoral Degrees National Report](#) (March 2022) recommended *that all institutions implement oral evaluation of doctoral degrees, since this is a key element of assessing achievement of the graduate attributes*. The implementation of such an oral defence is mandatory for doctoral students who will graduate from 2024 onwards. Where this requirement is already included in faculty rules and regulations, implementation is in effect for 2023. This document aims to provide a set of UJ guidelines to assist faculties in implementing the oral defence, and faculties should develop accompanying guidelines as appropriate for their specific domains.

As stated in the CHE Qualification Standard for Doctoral degrees (approved November 2018), doctoral candidates are *expected to undertake research at the most advanced academic levels culminating in the submission, assessment, and acceptance of a thesis. The defining characteristic of this qualification is that the candidate is required to demonstrate high level research capability and to make a significant and original academic contribution at the frontiers of a discipline or field. The work must be of a quality to satisfy peer review and merit publication*. These criteria are also stipulated in the [UJ Higher Degrees Policy](#).

An oral defence is widely implemented across national and international higher education institutions, and according to the CHE Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees, it is used as one means to:

1. Demonstrate the candidate's independence and competency related to their specific study field;
2. Demonstrate that the candidate has achieved an in-depth understanding of their research;
3. Demonstrate that the candidate has achieved a broad knowledge of the field of research;
4. Confirm a candidate's achievement of some (or all) of the graduate attributes, such as reflection, autonomy, and independent ownership of the work reported in the thesis;
5. Create an opportunity for doctoral candidates to engage with specialists in their respective fields;
6. Ascertain whether all the requirements for a doctorate have been met as stipulated in the National Qualification Framework (NQF).

Standard Operating Procedures

¹ Faculty includes the College of Business and Economics, and the Johannesburg Business School

This document outlines the general processes that should be adopted when conducting an oral defence for doctoral candidates and should be read with the faculty-specific documents. Failure to comply with the requirements for an oral defence will result in an incomplete result for the qualification; no qualification will be awarded unless all the requirements have been met.

The Non-Assessing Chair, approved by the Faculty Research Committee (FHDC) at the time of accepting the assessor nominations, organises the oral defence. The oral defence should typically be organised as a hybrid event (allowing for online and in-person participation).

The panel for the oral defence comprises:

- (i) the Non-Assessing Chair (an academic that is in no way involved with the study). The Non-Assessing chair is typically the Head of the Department/School or a Senior Academic in the host Department/ Institute/ School if the Head of Department is involved in the study;
- (ii) the assessors of the doctoral thesis; and
- (iii) the supervisor(s) (*ex-officio*) as observer(s).

At the point of determining the willingness of the assessors/examiners to serve in this capacity, the supervisor must inform the assessors of this requirement. Similarly, the Faculty Officer must indicate to the assessors, in a standard letter, that they will be required to participate in an oral defence as part of the examination process. The oral defence takes place during the assessment period.

If one or more of the examiners have failed the thesis, the supervisor(s), in consultation with the FHDC, must decide whether to continue with the oral defence, or whether to appoint an additional assessor, expert advisor, or arbitrator. If the decision is to appoint a moderator, the original thesis is shared with the moderator (before any corrections are made and before the oral defence).

The standard operating procedures for the oral defence are as follows:

1. The home department, working with the Non-Assessing Chair, is responsible for ensuring that the oral defence occurs is procedurally correct, and is completed in a timely manner;
2. The Faculty Officer will contact the assessors, at the point of the thesis submission, to arrange a time for the oral defence in consultation with the Non-Assessing Chair. The oral defence should be done virtually (even if some members attend in person), recorded, and stored for reference. The logistical arrangements for the defence should be handled within the home department;
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- handled within the home department;
4. Where the oral defence takes place after the assessors have completed their assessment, the Faculty Officer submits these reports to the Non-Assessing Chair and supervisor (s). These reports must make a recommendation² in line with the faculty assessment documents. These recommendations may be tentative and can be changed following the oral defence. The assessors' (anonymised) narrative reports are to be made available to the candidate prior to the oral defence.
 5. The panel includes:
 - (i) The doctoral candidate;
 - (ii) The Non-Assessing Chair;
 - (iii) At least two, but preferably all three assessors;
 - (iv) The supervisor(s) as *ex officio* observers. The supervisor(s) may be invited to offer a viewpoint or point of clarification. In rare instances, supervisor(s) may not be present due to being incapacitated, where students feel more comfortable not having their supervisor(s) present, or where a thesis was submitted without the supervisor's approval.
 6. The Non-Assessing Chair meets with the assessors (the supervisor(s) are present) immediately before the oral defence to explain the approach during the defence (as per a standard agenda), outline expectations, and highlight common themes among the assessor reports (highlight salient positives and negatives).
 7. The doctoral candidate will be required to provide a brief outline of their study and highlight the main findings and/or conclusions. This can be done either orally or using a mode of presentation (to be decided within faculties/departments).
 8. If a doctoral candidate is unable to attend the oral defence on the arranged date, due to exceptional circumstances, they must inform the Faculty Officer and Non-Assessing Chair by email within a reasonable timeframe, and a new oral defence date, as close to the original date as possible, will be sought.
 9. If an assessor is unable to attend the doctoral defence, they must inform the Faculty Officer and Non-Assessing Chair by email within a reasonable timeframe. The Non-Assessing Chair, in consultation with the Chair of the FHDC and/or the Vice-Dean, may decide to allow the defence to continue, provided two of the three assessors are present.
 10. Following the student's presentation/overview of the work, and under the guidance of the Non-Assessing Chair, questions and discussions take place to:

² The following results may be recommended by the individual assessors for a doctoral thesis (see section 15 in the [UJ Higher Degrees Administration](#)):

- (a) Approval of the thesis.
- (b) Provisional approval of the thesis with the understanding that the candidate has to make non-substantive corrections and improvements to the thesis to the satisfaction of the supervisor.
- (c) Recommendation that substantial amendments be made to the thesis in the light of deficiencies identified in the assessor's narrative report in which case the revised version must be submitted to the particular assessor for reassessment.
- (d) Rejection of the thesis in which case no reassessment is recommended or considered.

- (i) ascertain that the student is the author of the work;
 - (ii) determine what the student meant or intended by any part of the work;
 - (iii) confirm, through the questions and discussions, whether the work is of acceptable quality;
 - (iv) allow the student to reply to any concerns that the examiners may have relating to aspects of the work;
 - (v) explore points of interest for their own interest or the future plans of the student; and
 - (vi) offer guidance and advice the student for further development of this work and/or the student's career.
11. The oral defence should generally be between 60 minutes and 90 minutes in length.
12. The doctoral candidate is permitted to bring any material with them to the oral defence, including, but not limited to, a copy of their thesis and papers/manuscripts.
13. The doctoral candidate is not permitted to communicate with anyone outside the room by any means during the oral defence.
14. After the *oral defence*, the candidate must leave the room. The supervisor(s) remain to answer any questions that the assessors may have, or to provide clarity where requested. Following this, the supervisor(s) are excused from the process.
15. The Non-Assessing Chair facilitates a discussion on the merits of the candidate's work considering the engagement. The Non-Assessing Chair is responsible for producing a succinct report for submission to the FHDC on this discussion, indicating:
- (i) Whether the assessors were able to agree on a joint recommendation and the consensus outcome of the oral defence; or
 - (ii) Whether the assessors were unable to arrive at a joint recommendation, and the reasons for non-agreement.
 - (iii) The Non-Assessing chair will also record whether any of the assessors wished to change their initial recommendation.
 - (iv) The final report should be signed by all the assessors.
13. The revised documents must be submitted to the relevant Faculty Officer within a period to be determined by the FHDC.

It is not permitted to indicate to the student at the outset or during the oral defence, or at any time until SHDC has provided approval, whether the thesis is deemed worthy of a doctorate, although naturally qualitative assessments of the work ("very impressive", "rather confusing", etc.) and its component parts may and often will be offered.

Way forward and dispute resolution

If a joint recommendation is arrived at, then there is no need for the FHDC to invoke any procedure (in accordance with the [UJ Higher Degrees Administration](#) document) to resolve an impasse, and the FHDC may proceed to recommend awarding of the degree to SHDC, provided that it is satisfied with the fairness of the process and the rationality of the outcome.

If no joint recommendation is arrived at, then in terms of Table 2 in the [Higher Degrees Administration](#) document, the FHDC may invoke one of the appropriate procedures to resolve the impasse³.

³ The FHDC may (but is not obliged to) invoke one or more of the following procedures to resolve an impasse in the results of a doctoral study (in accordance with the Senate Higher Degrees Policy and Higher Degrees Administration: Structures and Processes):

- (a) request additional information from the assessors and/or supervisors; or
- (b) appoint an additional assessor to assess the thesis in the hope that the resulting report will resolve the impasse; or
- (c) invite an external expert to advise the FHDC; or
- (d) identify an independent arbiter to consider all the documentation pertaining to the assessment process, including the individual assessor's reports and present a decision to the FHDC;
- (e) initiate a facilitation process to reach a joint recommendation between assessors as per the Higher Degrees Administration: Structures and Processes;
- (f) any other procedure it deems appropriate.