



# **School of Postgraduate Studies PhD Examination Regulations**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL INFORMATION

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The document which follows describes regulations for the conduct of PhD by research examinations at RCSI and should be read by PhD students, their external and internal examiners, their supervisors, thesis committees and independent chairpersons of *viva voce* examinations. Administrative staff involved in any stage of the PhD examination process are advised to familiarise themselves with these regulations. These examination regulations, including responsibilities of all involved, are in accordance with best practice and follow recommendations described in “*Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities*” by the Irish Universities Quality Board, 2009 (reference 1). In addition, these regulations follow the “*Standards for PhD Education in Biomedicine and Health Sciences in Europe*” ORPHEUS-AMSE-WFME, 2012 (reference 2).\*

The regulations apply to all PhD students registered at RCSI, whether the student is full time or part time and regardless of the home institution of any co-supervisor involved in the project. Specific additions to the regulations may apply to Co-Tutelle PhD students who should refer to the relevant Co-Tutelle agreement for details. All PhD candidates must be examined by thesis and in a *viva voce* examination, which must take place in RCSI with all parties to the examination being present in the same physical location and which is conducted in the presence of an independent chairperson.

Any deviation from these regulations may only be considered in exceptional circumstances and must be agreed in writing with the Head of School of Postgraduate Studies. This School is the RCSI facilitator for the PhD examination process.

\*ORPHEUS: Organisation of PhD Education in Biomedicine and Health Sciences in the European System; AMSE: The Association of Medical Schools in Europe; WFME: World Federation for Medical Education.

### 1.1 DEFINITION OF A PHD

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A PhD is defined as a higher degree awarded following the completion and successful examination of a thesis which describes a substantial body of original research and successful examination of a candidate in a *viva voce* examination. The research must make a distinct contribution to the field of study, must be publishable in peer-reviewed journals and must have been conducted following ethical guidelines. The thesis must be presented to a professional standard and according to published guidelines and must demonstrate the originality of the research, the candidate’s knowledge of the field and evidence of critical judgement. The minimum time requirement for completion of a PhD is normally three years’ full time or five years part time.

The award of PhD is made at level 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), reference 3; this is equivalent to level 8 in the European Qualifications Framework (EFQ), reference 4 and is Bologna third cycle compliant.

A successful level 10 award requires that PhD candidates produce a large volume of work and acquire skills in the following indicators: breadth and kind of knowledge; range and selectivity of know-how and skill; context, role, learn to critique and insight competencies. See appendix 1 for details of these indicators, which are taken from the NFQ publication “*A Guide to Designing University Awards for Inclusion in the National Framework of Qualifications*” (reference 5).

See appendix 2 for further information on PhD definition.

## **1.2 THE EXAMINATION PANEL**

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In RCSI each PhD candidate is examined by thesis and *viva voce* examination by one external examiner (two in the case of RCSI academic staff) and one internal examiner, all in the presence of an independent chairperson.

## **1.3 ACADEMIC STANDARDS**

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In order to set and maintain the highest standards for our higher degrees it is imperative that suitably qualified external and internal examiners are nominated and appointed. In combination, the internal and external examiners must have sufficient expertise, knowledge and understanding of the relevant fields; this is particularly important where the thesis topic is inter-disciplinary. The role of the chairperson is to ensure that regulations are followed and that the procedure operates smoothly and fairly.

## **1.4 CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

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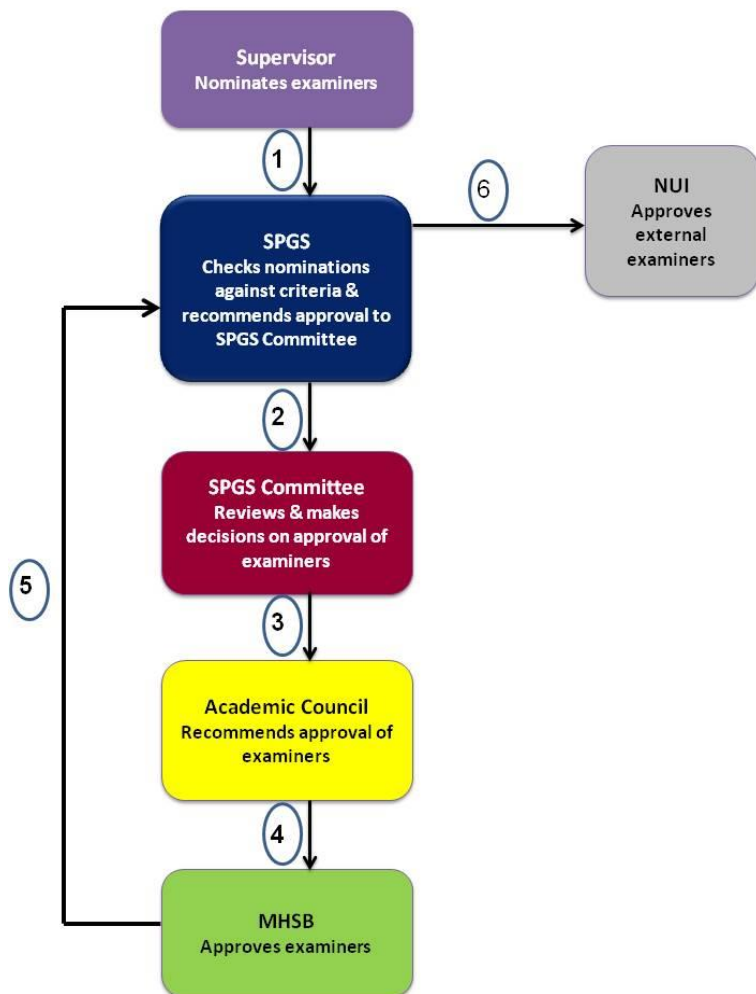
Thesis examiners must examine, and be seen to examine, the candidate and the thesis without prejudice or conflict from any direction. If a reasonable person not involved in the examination process would consider that the presence of a particular examiner could cause concern regarding bias either to the candidate's advantage or disadvantage, then such an examiner is deemed unsuitable. Supervisors must take all reasonable steps to avoid recommending examiners whose relationship with the supervisor, student or RCSI Department, whether personal or professional, could be viewed as preventing an impartial judgement of the thesis and the candidate. It is the responsibility of examiners to declare any potential conflict of interest when asked to examine a candidate. If the School of Postgraduate Studies Committee perceives a potential conflict of interest in an examiner nomination, it will nominate an alternative examiner or seek expert guidance to do so.

## 2. THE EXAMINATION PROCESS

The examination process involves nomination and appointment of examiners and a chairperson; thesis submission examination and *viva voce* examination; approval of recommendation by RCSI and NUI Examination Boards; graduation; and, should the situation arise, an appeals process.

### 2.1 NOMINATION AND APPOINTMENT OF EXAMINERS

All examiners must meet the specified criteria as set out in section 3 of these regulations. All PhD examiners are appointed following (i) nomination by the supervisor, (ii) recommendation by the School of Postgraduate Studies Committee, (iii) recommendation by Academic Council and (iv) approval by RCSI Medicine and Health Sciences Board. In addition, external examiners are subject to approval by the Senate of the National University of Ireland (NUI), which makes the official appointments. In order to allow sufficient time for this process the supervisor must nominate examiners at least six months prior to thesis submission. In the event of the supervisor being unable to recommend a suitable examiner, the School of Postgraduate Studies Committee may suggest an appropriate person who fulfills the required criteria.



**Figure 1: Examiner nomination process**

Note: Non-approval of examiners at any point requires a repeat of some or all of the steps in the process.

## 2.2 THESIS SUBMISSION AND REPORTS

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After the candidate has completed the thesis s/he submits three soft bound copies to the School of Postgraduate Studies accompanied by a *PhD Examination Entry* form. The School of Postgraduate Studies, having checked that registration requirements have been met, fees have been paid in full and examiners have been approved, sends one copy of the thesis to each examiner with a letter outlining the process for the examination. The examiners are allowed six weeks in which to examine the thesis and are required to submit independent reports on the *Thesis Report* form seven days before the *viva voce* examination. If either examiner requests an electronic copy of the thesis in order to examine it, s/he may request it through the School of Postgraduate Studies. The School of Postgraduate Studies exchanges examiner reports between the examiners prior to the *viva voce* examination.

## 2.3 VIVA VOCE EXAMINATION AND REPORTS

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The persons present at the *viva voce* examination are the candidate, the external examiner, the internal examiner and the independent chairperson. The supervisor may attend as an observer but his/her attendance is at the candidate's discretion. However, if the supervisor does not attend s/he must be available by phone or in person before, during and immediately after the *viva voce* examination. If the supervisor is present for the *viva voce* examination, s/he acts as an observer only and cannot contribute unless the examiners seek his/her clarification on a question. From time to time, the Head of School of Postgraduate Studies may wish to appoint an observer. This may include attendance by a completely independent PhD supervisor as part of their own training as an advisor to students, as an internal or external examiner and/or as a *viva voce* examination chairperson. No more than one such person can attend any particular *viva voce* examination.

After the School of Postgraduate Studies has sent the thesis copies to the examiners, it makes the arrangements for the *viva voce* examination and appoints an independent chairperson. The *viva voce* examination consists of a presentation, for example by PowerPoint, on the PhD project by the candidate of no longer than 20 minutes' duration, followed by questioning by both examiners on the content of the presentation, the thesis and related matters. Candidates must take a copy of their thesis into the oral examination and refer to it as appropriate. It is recommended that the *viva voce* examination including the presentation should last no longer than three hours. The chairperson should allow opportunities for breaks as necessary.

On the mutually agreed date of the *viva voce* examination, the examiners and the chairperson have a meeting in the designated Examination Room before the *viva voce* examination starts. The examiners identify issues to be raised in *the viva voce* examination, agree the broad strategy (e.g. who will ask which questions and in what order) and confer with the chairperson on points of procedure.

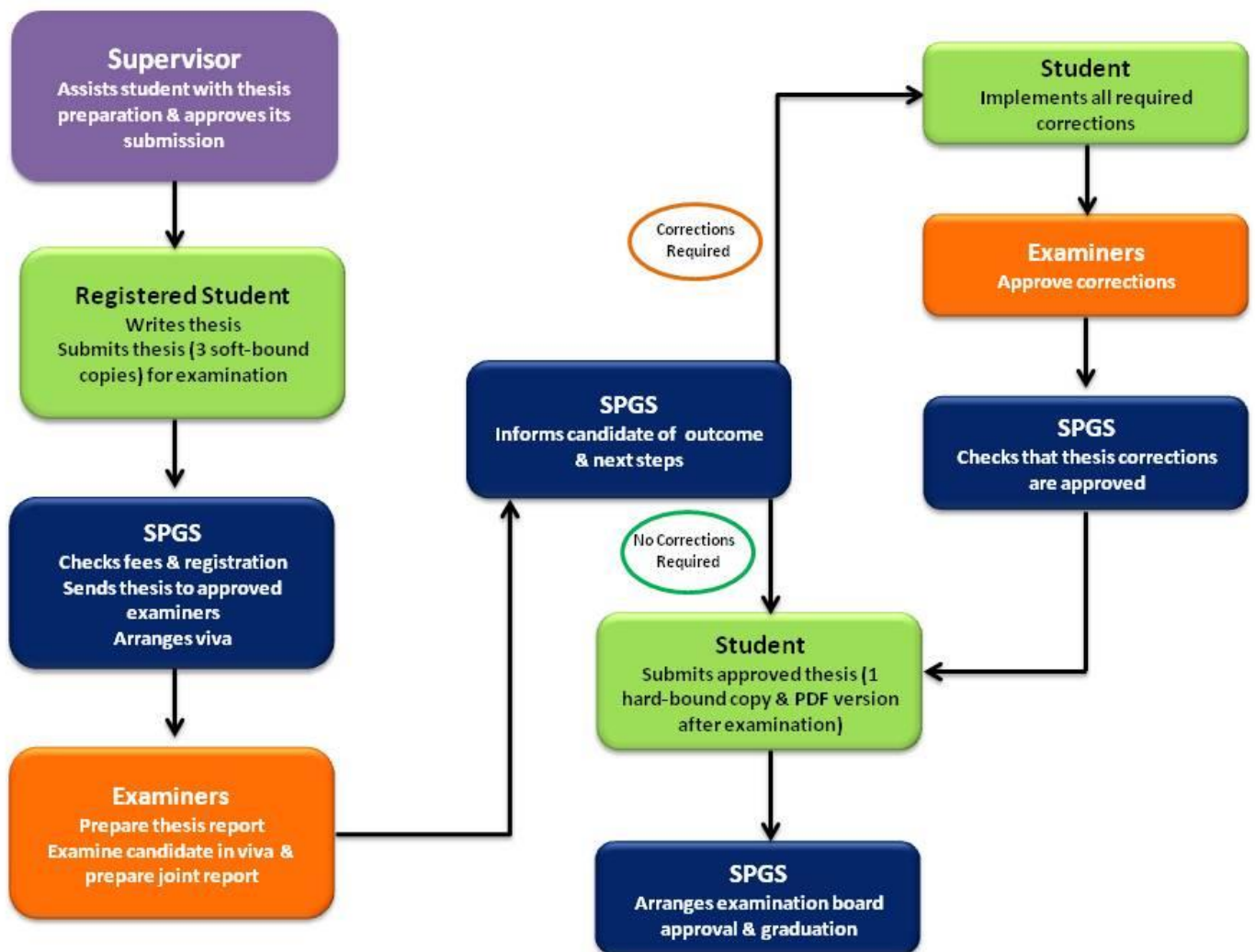
When all parties are prepared, the chairperson invites the candidate into the room and completes the introductions. The chairperson asks the candidate to commence their presentation. The examiners do not normally ask questions during the presentation, after which the examiners' questions begin. After completion of the questioning, the chairperson asks the supervisor, if present, to leave the room and gives the candidate an opportunity to mention anything additional in their thesis defence. After this, the chairperson asks the candidate to leave the room and the examiners deliberate and agree on their recommendation. The chairperson calls the candidate back into the room and tells him/her what the examiners recommend. The supervisor may be present for the recommendation, but this is at the discretion of the student.

Neither the candidate nor the supervisor may be present for the examiners' meeting prior to the *viva voce* examination, after the questioning when examiners deliberate on the result or when the joint examiners report is being written.

The *viva voce* examination must take place in a neutral setting and location considered to be appropriate. This should not be in the supervisor’s office or a public area such as a coffee station.

The *viva voce* examination may not proceed without all the examiners being present. In the event of an examiner’s or the candidate’s unexpected absence, for example due to illness, the examination must be postponed to another date.

On completion of the *viva voce* examination, the examiners complete a *Joint Examiners Report* form giving their recommendation on the outcome of the examination and their comments on the thesis and the candidate’s performance at the *viva voce* examination. Examiners must select one of the categories of award on the form (see details in section 5: Categories of Decision). The examiners usually write their joint report after the candidate has been advised of the result and before exiting the examination room. If a detailed report is required, this can be submitted (by email) after the *viva voce* examination but must be within four working days.



SPGS = School of Postgraduate Studies

**Figure 2: Examination process**

## 2.4 EXAMINATION BOARDS AND GRADUATION

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When all reports have been submitted by the chairperson to the School of Postgraduate Studies, the Postgraduate Programmes Manager writes to the candidate informing him/her of the recommendation. Copies of all three examiner reports are included with the letter, which outlines the next steps including the deadline for submission of a revised thesis. If minor corrections are required, the internal examiner must approve these; in the case of major corrections or a referral, both examiners must approve them. Examiners submit their approval in writing (by email) to the School of Postgraduate Studies. When the thesis has been approved, the candidate submits one hard bound copy to the School of Postgraduate Studies and one PDF version for inclusion in the RCSI repository. The School of Postgraduate Studies makes the necessary arrangements for approval of the examiners' recommendation at the relevant Examination Boards and for the candidate to graduate at the next available RCSI conferring. The degree conferred is awarded by RCSI and NUI.

## 2.5 CANDIDATE'S RIGHT OF APPEAL

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A candidate has the right to appeal the decision of the examiners. To do so they should follow the RCSI Appeals Procedure, which is available on the School of Postgraduate Studies area of Moodle.



### 3. CRITERIA FOR APPOINTMENT OF EXAMINATION PANEL

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The selection of the PhD examination team reflects on the reputation and credibility of the specific examination; of RCSI's standards in delivering PhDs; and of the reputation more generally of the academic community in delivering and impartially examining its highest primary research degree. Thus every appointment must be made to ensure and protect this credibility – potential appointees who might otherwise be very suitable should be considered with the wider reputation of the PhD *viva voce* examination process as the priority.

*“Collectively, competent examination boards must have substantial experience of PhD examinations, have sufficient expertise of the relevant fields for inter-disciplinary projects, and, where feasible, are not composed entirely of one sex.”* IUQB Guidelines, 2009 (reference 1).

#### 3.1 CRITERIA FOR APPOINTMENT OF EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

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External examiners for PhD theses must:

- Be chosen from outside NUI Universities/Colleges and their associated teaching hospitals\*; they should also be chosen from outside the 3U partnership.
- Be experienced in research in the general area of the candidate's thesis, be specialists in the topics to be examined and have recent peer-reviewed publications in that area.
- Hold the position of at least Senior Lecturer at University level and normally hold a PhD degree or an equivalent or higher degree.
- Hold a current university appointment, not honorary or emeritus.
- Have previous experience of acting in this capacity for PhD degrees.
- Not have acted as an external examiner in RCSI within the preceding three academic years.
- Not have a conflict of interest - this includes, but is not restricted to, the following:

Having published with the candidate or the candidate's supervisor within the three years preceding the examination.

Holding or having held a grant with the candidate or the candidate's supervisor within the three years preceding the examination.

Having the supervisor act as external examiner for any member of his/her research group, including himself/herself within the three years preceding the examination.

Currently serving as a member of staff at RCSI in any capacity.

Having been a member of staff at RCSI within the three years preceding the examination.

Having been a higher degree graduate of RCSI within the three years preceding the examination.

Being related to the candidate, supervisor or internal examiner.

Having any involvement with the research project.

\* Travel expenses for PhD external examiners in excess of the equivalent of economy class from the UK or mainland Europe must be borne by the RCSI supervisor.

### 3.2 CRITERIA FOR APPOINTMENT OF INTERNAL EXAMINERS

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Internal examiners must:

- Be members of academic staff at RCSI and should normally hold a PhD degree or equivalent.
- Hold at least the position of Lecturer or its equivalent.
- Have general expertise of the research area of the thesis.
- Be experienced in research and have recently published in peer-reviewed journals.
- Be sufficiently independent of the supervisor.
- Be independent of the candidate and the external examiner.
- Be familiar with RCSI higher degree regulations and have attended thesis examiner training.
- Not be the candidate's PhD thesis supervisor.
- Not have a conflict of interest - this includes but is not restricted to the following:
  - Having published with the candidate within the three years preceding the examination.
  - Having a personal relationship with the candidate, supervisor or external examiner.
  - Having any involvement with the research project.
- Not have acted in this capacity more than once previously in the same academic year.
- Not be registered for a higher degree by research at RCSI or elsewhere.
- Not be a postdoctoral research fellow or visiting member of staff at RCSI.

### 3.3 CRITERIA FOR APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT CHAIRPERSONS

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Chairpersons are nominated by the School of Postgraduate Studies and should:

- Be members of academic staff at RCSI who hold a higher degree by research.
- Hold at least the position of Lecturer or its equivalent.
- Be familiar with regulations and procedures governing the PhD *viva voce* examination.
- Not be a supervisor of the candidate.
- Not have a conflict of interest relating to the project, the candidate under examination or either examiner.

## 4. RESPONSIBILITIES OF STAKEHOLDERS

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The roles and responsibilities of the School of Postgraduate Studies, external examiners, internal examiners, independent chairpersons and candidates are outlined below.

### 4.1 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE SCHOOL OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

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The School of Postgraduate Studies is the RCSI facilitator of the PhD examination process. It liaises with candidates, supervisors, examiners and, in the case of viva voce examinations, the independent chairpersons to ensure progress through the steps involved in an expeditious manner.

The School of Postgraduate Studies is responsible for the following:

- Ensuring that RCSI thesis examination regulations are fit for purpose and followed for each *viva voce* examination.
- Facilitating smooth operation of the administration surrounding the examination procedures, including the following:

Advertising examiner nomination deadlines in ample time.

Reviewing examiner nominations and seeking their approval at the School of Postgraduate Studies Committee, Academic Council and Medicine and Health Sciences Board.

Applying to the NUI for approval and appointment of the external examiner.

Informing the internal examiner of approval of his/her appointment.

Informing supervisors of the outcome of examiner nominations after approval by the above governance.

Advising students of deadlines for thesis submission.

Sending theses to the approved examiners within a reasonable time.

Informing examiners of the RCSI regulations and deadlines for submission of reports.

Arranging the *viva voce* examination after a thesis has been distributed to the examiners, including booking an appropriate room on campus.

Nominating the independent chairperson for the *viva voce* examination.

Assisting external examiners in any travel and accommodation requirements according to *RCSI Travel Policy*.

Advising students of procedures for the *viva voce* examination.

Informing the candidate of the examiners' recommendation and outlining the next steps.

Processing examiner payments and expense claims and forwarding them to the RCSI Finance Department after receipt of all necessary documentation from the external examiner.

Arranging RCSI and NUI examination board approval of successful candidates.

Forwarding candidate details to the RCSI Examinations Office for preparation of parchments.

Forwarding candidate details to the RCSI Communications Department for graduation.

Ensuring that internal examiners, chairpersons of *viva voce* examinations and supervisors know and are encouraged to avail of training in relation to their respective roles.

Collecting the views of all stakeholders on the examination process.

## 4.2 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

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The role of the external examiner is to examine the thesis and the candidate in a *viva voce* examination in an objective manner, to liaise with the internal examiner and the chairperson, to ensure that RCSI regulations are followed and that the work is of the required standard. The sole purpose of the external examiner's visit to RCSI is to conduct the *viva voce* examination. To avoid familiarity being prejudicial to objective judgement, a person is not allowed to act as external examiner more than once in a three-year academic period. Exceptional circumstances that may justify contravention of this regulation must be justified to the Head of School of Postgraduate Studies.

Once an external examiner has agreed to examine a thesis, s/he should:

- When contacted by the School of Postgraduate Studies, agree on a suitable date for the *viva voce* examination.
- Direct any questions about the examination process to the School of Postgraduate Studies, RCSI [postgraduateschool@rcsi.ie](mailto:postgraduateschool@rcsi.ie)
- Read the thesis in its entirety within the required timeframe and assess the work presented in the thesis by the candidate.
- Prepare a written report on the thesis using the *External Examiner Report PhD Thesis* form and return it to the School of Postgraduate Studies at least 7 days prior to the date of the *viva voce* examination. The external examiner is allowed 6 weeks for the examination of a thesis.
- Liaise with the internal examiner, only if necessary, when preparing the thesis report.
- Not share any thesis examination reports with the supervisor or the candidate in advance of the *viva voce* examination.
- Not contact the supervisor in relation to the thesis examination.
- Attend the *viva voce* examination in person and agree with the internal examiner, in the presence of the chairperson, about the manner in which it is to be conducted.
- Assess the performance of the candidate in the *viva voce* examination.
- Ensure that for the award of PhD the candidate demonstrates an adequate depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding of the field of study.
- Ensure that the candidate has gained expertise in basic and advanced methodologies and techniques.
- Ensure that the candidate can demonstrate that the work presented is his/her own.
- Conduct the *viva voce* examination in a rigorous, but non-aggressive manner, giving the candidate the opportunity to fully defend his/her thesis.
- Determine if the appropriate standard has been reached to merit the award of PhD and agree findings and category of award with the internal examiner (see *Definition of PhD*).
- Inform the candidate of the recommended outcome on completion of the *viva voce* examination.
- Write a joint report with the internal examiner on the thesis and the performance of the candidate at the *viva voce* examination using the *Joint Examiners' Report on PhD Viva* form. Make clear which examiner corrections, if any, the candidate is required to make in order to have their thesis approved. Return this, via the independent chairperson, to the School of Postgraduate Studies as soon as possible after the *viva voce* examination.

- Where major corrections or a referral are required, confirm in writing to the School of Postgraduate Studies that any required corrections to the thesis, as a result of examination, are implemented.
- Submit required bank account information and an expenses claim to the School of Postgraduate Studies as soon as possible after the *viva voce* examination.

### 4.3 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF INTERNAL EXAMINERS

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The role of the internal examiner is to examine the thesis; to examine the candidate in a *viva voce* examination; to liaise with the external examiner; to liaise with the School of Postgraduate Studies on points of procedure; and to ensure that consistently high academic standards are maintained. This is particularly important with respect to generic aspects such as quality of the writing and layout of the thesis as well as the general approach adopted.

Once an internal examiner has agreed to act in this capacity, in cooperation with the external examiner where appropriate, s/he should:

- When contacted by the School of Postgraduate Studies, agree on a suitable date for the *viva voce* examination.
- Direct any questions about the examination process to the School of Postgraduate Studies, RCSI, [postgraduateschool@rcsi.ie](mailto:postgraduateschool@rcsi.ie)
- Read the thesis in its entirety within the required timeframe and assess the work presented in the thesis by the candidate.
- Prepare a written report on the thesis using the *Internal Examiner Report PhD Thesis* form and return it to the School of Postgraduate Studies at least 7 days prior to the date of the *viva voce* examination.
- Liaise with the external examiner, only if necessary, when preparing the pre-*viva voce* examination thesis report. If liaising with the external examiner, this must be documented.
- Attend the *viva voce* examination in person and agree with the external examiner, in the presence of the chairperson, about the manner in which it is to be conducted.
- Assess the performance of the candidate in the *viva voce* examination (with the external examiner in the leading role).
- Ensure that the candidate demonstrates an adequate depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding of the field of study.
- Ensure that the candidate has gained expertise in basic and advanced methodologies and techniques.
- Ensure that the candidate can demonstrate that the work presented is his/her own.
- Conduct the *viva voce* examination in a rigorous but non-aggressive manner, giving the candidate the opportunity to fully defend his/her thesis.
- Determine if the appropriate standard has been reached to merit the award of PhD and agree findings and category of award with the external examiner (see Appendix 2: *Definition of PhD*).

- Write a joint report with the external examiner on the thesis and the performance of the candidate at the *viva voce* examination using the *Joint Examiners' Report on PhD Viva* form. Return this, via the independent chairperson, to the School of Postgraduate Studies as soon as possible after the *viva voce* examination.
- Not share thesis or *viva voce* examination reports with the supervisor or the candidate in advance of the *viva voce* examination.
- Where major or minor corrections or a referral are required, confirm in writing to the School of Postgraduate Studies that any required corrections to the thesis, as a result of examination, are implemented.

#### 4.4 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF SUPERVISORS

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Supervisors are advised to nominate examiners at least six months before the candidate is due to submit his/her thesis. This is to ensure sufficient time for recommendation for approval by the School of Postgraduate Studies Committee to Academic Council and thereafter to Medicine and Health Sciences Board. When this process is completed, appointment of external examiners is made by the National University of Ireland.

It is the responsibility of the RCSI supervisor to:

- Nominate to the School of Postgraduate Studies suitable persons for appointment as examiners using the *Application to Appoint PhD Examiners* form. Supervisors must provide a brief up-to-date CV of the external and internal examiners using an approved template as part of the nomination submission.
- Nominate for appointment as examiners only persons who are likely to examine within a reasonable time-frame. The judgment of the supervisor in this regard is very important, as taking an excessive period of time to conclude the examination is not acceptable and is unfair to the candidate.
- Ensure that nominations for the appointment of examiners allow adequate time for recommendation, approval and appointment.
- Obtain the prior agreement of the recommended examiners that they are prepared to act in their respective capacities.
- Ensure that the School of Postgraduate Studies is informed of any change in address or circumstances of either examiner.
- Ensure, as far as possible, that candidates are not unduly delayed in the submission of their theses and be aware of any fees implications for students who are delayed in submitting their thesis.
- Ensure that the thesis meets standard scientific format and is of the required quality.
- Ensure that the thesis is written according to School of Postgraduate Studies and NUI guidelines including *RCSI Thesis Presentation Guidelines* and conforms to ethical standards and good research practice.
- Not recommend for appointment as external examiner a person who has acted in this capacity in RCSI within the preceding three academic years. This is to avoid a situation where familiarity could, or could be perceived to, prejudice objective judgement. Exceptional circumstances that may justify re-appointment of the same person as external examiner within this timeframe must be clearly outlined to the Head of School of Postgraduate Studies.

- Not contact either examiner about the thesis examination once their appointments have been approved.
- Ensure that all necessary approval(s) from Research Ethics Committee(s) are clearly described.
- Ensure that the candidate includes in their Thesis Acknowledgement Section the source of funding for their research and refer candidates to any specific acknowledgement required by the funding agency.
- Ensure that any IP/patent/commercialisation potential in the thesis is protected by informing the School of Postgraduate Studies in advance of submission and ensure that the following paragraph is included in the request to potential external examiners to examine a thesis. *“The contents of the thesis under examination are confidential and should not be disclosed, or disseminated in any way, to any third party other than to staff of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland or an external examiner appointed for the purpose of examining the thesis. If you agree to examine the proposed thesis, please respond to this request (by email) indicating that you agree to maintain confidentiality of its contents.”*
- If not present at the *viva voce* examination, be available to address any questions that may arise before, during or after the *viva voce* examination.
- If present at the *viva voce* examination, take notes as required to assist with corrections later and provide clarification if required by the examiners.
- Liaise with the internal examiner, if required, in seeking clarification of any required corrections after the *viva voce* examination.
- Assist the candidate in completing any required corrections after the *viva voce* examination.
- Co-sign, with the candidate, the *Copyright and Thesis Distribution Request* form to indicate approval of any embargo (up to 24 months) on the final, approved hard-bound and PDF versions of the thesis.

#### 4.5 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF CANDIDATES

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Candidates must take ownership for the preparation, submission and defence of their thesis. It is in their interests to maintain a good working relationship with their supervisor(s) to ensure that they complete their thesis in the required timeframe and defend it to the best of their ability.

- A candidate must be a registered RCSI student and must have been on the register for a minimum of three years full time or five years part time.
- All fees must have been paid for each year of registration.
- If a candidate is longer than four years full time on the register, s/he must have successfully applied to re-register for a PhD. An equivalent part-time period of six years on the register applies.
- The research must have been completed under RCSI supervision.
- The candidate must obtain the agreement of the supervisor for the thesis to be submitted for examination.
- The research described in the thesis must be the candidate’s own personal effort.
- The research must not have been used to obtain a degree in RCSI or elsewhere by the candidate or someone else.
- Where content presented in the thesis is the result of collaborative research this must be duly acknowledged in the text, clearly indicating how much of the work is the candidate’s own.

- The candidate must take reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and, to the best of his/her knowledge, does not breach copyright law, and has not been taken from other sources except where these have been cited and acknowledged within the text.
- The candidate must include in their Thesis Acknowledgement Section any source of funding for their research and refer to the funding agency for specific wording that may be required.
- The candidate must include in the relevant section, details of any Research Ethics Committee(s) approval and/or animal license required for the research.
- The candidate must submit three soft bound copies of the thesis plus one completed *PhD Examination Entry* form to the School of Postgraduate Studies, RCSI.
- The candidate must include a *Candidate Thesis Declaration* in each copy of their soft bound thesis and sign each copy on submission.
- The candidate may not contact either examiner at *any* stage during the examination process.
- The candidate must attend the *viva voce* examination in person and defend his/her thesis to the best of their ability.
- The candidate must deliver a 20-minute presentation, for example by PowerPoint, on the work of their thesis at the beginning of the *viva voce* examination adhering to the *Guidelines for PhD Viva Presentation*.
- The candidate must complete any required corrections to the satisfaction of the examiner(s) within the allotted timeframe.
- The candidate may contact the internal examiner only when submitting a revised thesis. If there is uncertainty about thesis corrections, the supervisor should liaise with the internal examiner, but not the external examiner, to seek clarification.
- The candidate is responsible for ensuring that the thesis is submitted in the appropriate format; normally electronic copies of the thesis are not accepted for examination. If either examiner requests an electronic copy in order to examine the submitted thesis, the School of Postgraduate Studies will arrange this.
- The candidate must insert the RCSI standard *IP Declaration* on only one page at the beginning of each soft-bound copy of the thesis.
- The candidate must remove the RCSI standard *IP Declaration* from the final, approved version of the thesis, which becomes the public record of the thesis.
- The candidate must include a *Candidate Thesis Declaration* in their hard-bound copy of the approved thesis and sign it on submission.
- The candidate must complete the *Copyright and Thesis Distribution Request* when submitting the approved, hard-bound version of their thesis. This thesis copy should be bound in RCSI maroon, pantone 208.
- The candidate must submit a PDF version of the approved thesis for inclusion in the RCSI repository. This version must include an electronic signature on the candidate thesis declaration.



## 4.6 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF INDEPENDENT CHAIRPERSONS

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Independent chairpersons play an important role in the *viva voce* examination process and are there to ensure that the *viva voce* examination is conducted according to RCSI regulations. Independent chairpersons must not take part in examining the candidate even when they, by coincidence, have expertise in the subject area of the thesis. To avoid familiarity being prejudicial to objective judgement, chairpersons should be independent of the supervisor, the candidate and the examiners.

Once an independent chairperson has agreed to chair a *viva voce* examination, s/he must:

- Read the thesis examiner reports before the *viva voce* examination and discuss any causes for concern with the Head of School of Postgraduate Studies or nominee before proceeding.
- Attend the pre *viva voce* examination meeting with the examiners and resolve any examination procedural questions that the examiners have before the candidate arrives (see section 2.2).
- Ensure that the internal and external examiners agree on the procedure for the examination of the candidate.
- Attend the *viva voce* examination in person on the agreed date, chair it according to RCSI procedures and record observations if necessary.
- Introduce the candidate to each examiner and explain the status and role of the independent chairperson and the reason for record taking.
- Introduce any other person present in the *viva voce* examination for the purposes of training or observing procedure.
- Outline clearly the role of a supervisor, if present, as an observer.
- Advise the candidate that the outcome will not be communicated until after the *viva voce* examination and that s/he should not infer any decision of the examiners on the basis of the discussion in the *viva voce* examination.
- Return all relevant notes and completed forms to the School of Postgraduate Studies after the *viva voce* examination.
- Ensure that an atmosphere exists in the *viva voce* examination which allows the candidate to perform to the best of his/her ability.
- Ensure that the *viva voce* examination is conducted in a fair, rigorous, reliable, consistent and non-aggressive manner.
- Intervene in the examining process only if s/he judges that the candidate is at risk of being treated unfairly, or if the behavior of any of those present is otherwise deemed as prejudicial to the conclusion of a successful of *viva voce* examination.
- Offer an interruption to the *viva voce* examination if circumstances warrant it, including the offer of a comfort break.
- Ensure that the supervisor, if present, leaves before the end of the *viva voce* examination when the candidate is offered an opportunity to add anything further in defence of his/her thesis, including the candidate's view on supervisor attendance.

- Ensure that the supervisor and candidate are not present during the examiners' deliberations.
- Ensure that the result is in full compliance with the RCSI and NUI regulations for the examination of a PhD degree.
- Ensure that any recommended corrections to the thesis are clearly outlined to the candidate, including the agreed deadline for their implementation. See section 9 Categories of Award.
- Ensure that the candidate is informed of the outcome of the *viva voce* examination informally, while making it clear that the result is subject to approval by the RCSI and NUI examination boards.
- Complete the independent chairperson's report on the *viva voce* examination and return it to the School of Postgraduate Studies as soon as possible following the *viva voce* examination.
- Provide to the Head of School of Postgraduate Studies, or nominee, any further required information in the event of a *viva voce* examination decision being inconclusive or in dispute.
- After the *viva voce* examination, obtain the views of the candidate and the examiners on the process and submit these to the School of Postgraduate Studies.

## 5. CATEGORIES OF DECISION

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Listed below are the possible outcomes of the PhD examination. One of these must be selected by the panel of examiners.

1. Award without corrections
2. Award pending minor corrections
3. Award pending major corrections without a second *viva voce* examination
4. Refer and permit submission of a revised thesis with a second *viva voce* examination
5. Reject but award a lower degree
6. Reject but award a lower degree subject to minor corrections
7. Reject with no recommendation for re-submission

Pointers for arriving at the above decisions are given below.

1. Award without corrections – examiners select this category if the thesis is satisfactory in every way and there are no corrections to be made.
2. Award pending minor corrections – examiners select this category if they are satisfied that the thesis meets the criteria for the degree but some minor corrections are necessary. Minor corrections include, but are not limited to, typographical errors, minor amendments to text, references or diagrams and/or minor re-interpretation of the content. A list of corrections and the revised thesis must be approved by the internal examiner within four weeks of the candidate receiving official notification of the outcome.
3. Award pending major corrections to be verified by both examiners – examiners select this category if the thesis contains typographical or other errors so numerous as to interfere with the smooth reading of the thesis; is defective in presentation or detail; or requires further research. A list of corrections implemented and the revised thesis must be approved by both examiners within six months of the candidate receiving official notification of the outcome. If the candidate has performed to the required standard at the *viva voce* examination, a second *viva voce* examination is not required.
4. Refer and permit submission of a revised thesis with *viva voce* examination – examiners select this category if the deficiencies in presentation, research detail, interpretation or analysis are sufficiently serious to prohibit an award being recommended and a second *viva voce* examination is required. The revised thesis must be submitted for re-examination by both examiners within twelve months of the candidate receiving official notification of the original outcome.
5. Reject but award a lower degree – examiners select this category in the case of work being of insufficient standard for a PhD but of sufficient standard for a specified lower degree for which a *viva voce* examination is not required. The candidate must submit a revised thesis with a new title page indicating that it is for a specified lower degree. The revised thesis must be approved by the School of Postgraduate Studies within four weeks of the candidate receiving official notification of the original outcome.

6. Reject but award a lower degree subject to minor corrections – examiners select this category in the case of work being of insufficient standard for a PhD but of sufficient standard for a specified lower degree after typographical and other specified corrections have been made. A *viva voce* examination is not required for a lower degree. The candidate must submit a revised thesis incorporating the required corrections and a new title page indicating that it is for a specified lower degree. The revised thesis must be approved by the internal examiner within four weeks of the candidate receiving official notification of the outcome.
7. Reject with no recommendation for re-submission – this category is recommended in the case of work which is insufficient for a PhD or for a lower degree.

## 6. DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

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In the event of the internal and external examiners not immediately agreeing on the outcome of the examination, they should try to resolve issues by reasoned, detailed discussion. The external examiner's view normally carries greater weight in such discussions. The role of the independent chairperson in facilitating an agreed decision on the day of the *viva voce* examination is very important. Concerns about practical issues such as travel plans of the external examiner and additional time required may need to be taken into account as early as possible.

If it is not possible for the examiners to reach a mutually agreed decision, they must submit separate reports to the Head of the School of Postgraduate Studies who must bring the matter to the attention of the School of Postgraduate Studies Committee. This committee will suggest an appropriate way forward, taking account of the individual circumstances of the case. Options may include the appointment of a second, RCSI and NUI-approved external examiner to assist in resolving the disagreement. However, this should be considered as a last resort option only and every effort should be made to reach a resolution as quickly as possible in order to minimise the impact of non-resolution on the student being examined.

## 7. THESIS AVAILABILITY POLICY

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It is RCSI policy that a thesis or dissertation produced in the pursuit of a higher degree by research should be made available publicly for the purposes of research or study. In addition, reasonable quotation from such a thesis or dissertation may be made provided that the source of the information is properly acknowledged. This policy applies to all forms in which the thesis or dissertation is made available, including electronic format.

### 7.1 RESTRICTIONS ON THESIS AVAILABILITY

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RCSI recognises that candidates or their collaborators in the research project may not wish to make the thesis or dissertation immediately available publicly. Circumstances that merit a restriction or embargo on the public availability of a thesis or dissertation include the following:

- Access will endanger protection of future intellectual property rights (including opportunity to publish or make patent application).
- The research uses personal sources and/or contains sensitive information that was obtained on condition that the information not be disclosed.
- It contains commercially sensitive material that will breach prior contractual arrangements with an outside organisation.
- Restriction on availability is necessary to ensure compliance with the law or protection of national interests or public safety.
- Where the embargo of a thesis or dissertation is due to requirements from a collaborating partner in the research, the length of time of the embargo should be determined and agreed between all relevant parties at the beginning of the research project.

The requirement for an embargo must be taken into consideration when recommending and appointing external examiners for the thesis or dissertation. It is the supervisor's responsibility to obtain the external examiner's agreement to maintain strict confidentiality regarding the contents of the thesis or dissertation. See section 3.1 Criteria for Appointment of External Examiners for further details.

### 7.2 MAKING A THESIS PUBLICLY AVAILABLE

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- A thesis or dissertation can be made available publicly after successful completion of the appropriate examination and graduation.
- The candidate is required to sign the *Copyright and Thesis Distribution Request*.
- The supervisor must counter-sign the restriction on distribution of thesis request.
- The candidate deposits a hard-bound copy and a PDF version of the final approved thesis in the RCSI Library via the School of Postgraduate Studies, RCSI.
- The request for restriction on thesis distribution must be attached to the title page of all hard-bound copies of the thesis.

## 8. SCHOOL OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES CONTACT DETAILS

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## 9. REFERENCES

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1. *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities* by the Irish Universities Quality Board (2009).

[http://www.iuqb.ie/info/good\\_practice\\_guides.aspx?article=a5b735f2-8618-4af8-8713-9bee30a780fd](http://www.iuqb.ie/info/good_practice_guides.aspx?article=a5b735f2-8618-4af8-8713-9bee30a780fd)

2. "Standards for PhD Education in Biomedicine and Health Sciences in Europe" a publication from ORPHEUS-AMSE-WFME

<http://www.orpheus-med.org/images/stories/documents/ORPHEUS-AMSE-WFME-standards-for-PhD-education.pdf>

3. National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

<http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/>

4. European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

[http://ec.europa.eu/education/pub/pdf/general/eqf/leaflet\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/pub/pdf/general/eqf/leaflet_en.pdf)

5. "A Guide to Designing University Awards for Inclusion in the National Framework of Qualifications: Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use and Assessment of Learning Outcomes"

[http://www.nfqnetwork.ie/A\\_Guide\\_to\\_designing\\_UNiversity\\_Awards\\_for\\_Inclusion\\_in\\_the\\_National\\_Framework\\_of\\_Qualifications/Default.132.html](http://www.nfqnetwork.ie/A_Guide_to_designing_UNiversity_Awards_for_Inclusion_in_the_National_Framework_of_Qualifications/Default.132.html)



## 10. RCSI THESIS EXAMINATION PROCESS DOCUMENTS AND FORMS

The following documents and forms are relevant to these regulations and are available on the School of Postgraduate Studies website at [www.rcsi.ie/schoolofpostgraduatestudies](http://www.rcsi.ie/schoolofpostgraduatestudies)

<b>Forms</b>	<b>See Section(s) in Regulations for Details</b>
<i>Application to Appoint PhD Examiners</i>	2.1 Nomination and Appointment of Examiners 4.4 Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisors
<i>PhD Examination Entry form</i>	2.2 Thesis Submission and Reports 4.5 Roles and Responsibilities of Candidates
<i>External Examiner Report PhD Thesis</i>	2.2 Thesis Submission and Reports
<i>Internal Examiner Report PhD Thesis</i>	2.2 Thesis Submission and Reports 4.3 Roles and Responsibilities of Internal Examiners
<i>Joint Examiners' Report on PhD Viva</i>	2.3 <i>Viva voce</i> Examination and Reports 4.2 Roles and Responsibilities of External Examiners 4.3 Roles and Responsibilities of Internal Examiners
<i>Independent Chairperson's Report on PhD Viva</i>	4.6 Roles and Responsibilities of Independent Chairpersons
<i>Copyright and Thesis Distribution Request</i>	4.4 Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisors 4.5 Roles and Responsibilities of Candidates
<i>Examiner CV template</i>	4.4 Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisors
<b>Declarations</b>	
<i>IP Declaration</i>	4.5 Roles and Responsibilities of Candidates
<i>Candidate Thesis Declaration</i>	4.5 Roles and Responsibilities of Candidates
<b>Guidelines &amp; Other Information</b>	
<i>Thesis Presentation Guidelines</i>	4.4 Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisors
<i>Guidelines for PhD Viva Presentation</i>	4.5 Roles and Responsibilities of Candidates
<i>Independent Chairperson's Viva Voce Examination Checklist</i>	4.6 Roles and Responsibilities of Independent Chairpersons
<i>Thesis Examination Frequently Asked Questions</i>	
<i>RCSI Travel Policy</i>	4.1 Roles and Responsibilities of the School of Postgraduate Studies
<i>RCSI Appeals Procedure</i>	2.6 Candidate's Right of Appeal
<i>Guidelines on Good Research Practice</i>	1.1 Introduction and General Information 4.5 Roles and Responsibilities of Candidates

## APPENDIX 1: NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS LEVEL 10 AWARD

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The doctoral degree is a major award of large volume at level 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications and its indicators comprise the details listed below, which are taken from “*A Guide to Designing University Awards for Inclusion in the National Framework of Qualifications: Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use and Assessment of Learning Outcomes*” (reference 5).

Knowledge breadth

- A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning.

Knowledge kind

- The creation and interpretation of new knowledge through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers.

Know-how and skill: range

- Demonstrate a significant range of principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials.

Know-how and skill: selectivity

- Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge.

Competence: context

- Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts.

Competence: context

- Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes.

Competence: learning to learn

- Learn to critique assess the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts.

Competence: insight

- Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them.

## APPENDIX 2: DEFINITION OF PHD

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The following are essential elements in the definition of a PhD.

**Ethical research:** if the thesis includes the use of information relating to humans or animals, including biological samples or data, full Research Ethics Committee approval must have been obtained in order for the work to have been completed. A statement to this effect must be included in the thesis.

**Originality:** the candidate must have demonstrated an ability to conduct an original research investigation and to test a hypothesis, which may be their own or that of someone else.

**Knowledge of the field:** the candidate must be able to connect their research hypothesis and theme to wider knowledge of the subject and they must demonstrate their familiarity with relevant published work on the topic, including work published since completion of the thesis.

**Publication:** the material in the thesis should be suitable for publication in a peer-reviewed, high impact journal relevant to the thesis topic. While it is preferable for the student to have published work from the thesis, it is not essential to do this in order to be successful in the PhD examination; however, the work presented must be publishable.

**Presentation:** the thesis must be written clearly and concisely and must follow standard scientific format. The normal length of a thesis is 80,000 to 100,000 words excluding tables, figures and appendices.

**Examination:** the candidate must be examined in a *viva voce* examination on the thesis topic and related subjects and the examination outcome must be successful. The examination is in two parts: the written thesis and the *viva voce* examination; success in both is required for the degree to be awarded.

