

Preparing for your PhD oral examination

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Agenda

- Entering for the examination and choosing your examiners
- Purpose of the examination
- What you can do before
- The examination itself
- After the examination
- Sources of information

Examination entry

- When you are nearing the end of your studies, you will need to formally enter for the Ph.D. examination.
- This involves completing certain forms, available from the college registry (they are also available electronically).
- The process is described in clause 11 of the Ph.D. degree regulations, available at:

http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/academic_regulations/Postgraduate_Research_Regulations.html

Description of thesis

- One of the forms is the 'description of thesis' form.
- This requires you to provide a brief abstract of your thesis.
- This should be similar to the abstract included in your actual thesis.
- It will most likely be shown to potential examiners to enable them to decide whether they wish to act.
- It is probably wise to get your supervisor to check the text before you complete the form.

Timing of examination entry

- Please take especial note of clause 11(1) of the regulations.
- This states that the entry form must be submitted 'at least two months before submitting the thesis, using the form issued for this purpose by the Academic Registrar'.
- This means that, if your thesis is nearly complete, you should enter for the examination as soon as possible.

Your examiners

- When you have completed the relevant parts, the forms will need to be passed to your supervisor, who must sign and complete it.
- This will involve your supervisor proposing an internal and an external examiner for you.
- The college will then vet the suggestions made by your supervisor (if necessary, changes may be made in the nominated examiners).
- These two examiners will conduct your oral examination.

Your examiners (continued)

- The external examiner is most important, and must come from a different university – he/she will be an expert in your thesis topic.
- The internal examiner comes from the University of London (possibly RHUL), and should also know your area.
- Neither examiner should have any direct links with you (e.g. co-authored papers, etc.), although they may have met you at a conference, heard you speak, ...

Binding and submitting your thesis

- Once you have agreed the final text of your thesis with your supervisor, you must submit two (occasionally three) copies to the college's Examinations and Research Degrees Office.
- These must be bound in accordance with the regulations.

Distribution of thesis

- The college will distribute a bound copy to your two examiners.
- This may take a little while!

Arranging the examination

- Once the thesis copies have been sent to the examiners, it is up to your supervisor to contact them and arrange a date and place for the oral examination.
- You *must not* contact the examiners.
- All contact with the examiners *must* go via your supervisor (or the college).

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Guidance to examiners ...

- The examiners are given written guidance; a copy of this guidance is available at:
http://www.london.ac.uk/research_degrees.html
- ‘The purpose of the oral examination is to examine the candidate on the subject of the thesis’.
- ‘During the oral the examiners should seek to establish whether all the requirements for a thesis submitted for the PhD have been met’ [as set out in the regulations].
- ‘There are no set requirements about the conduct of oral examinations [...] but they should be conducted in such a way that the candidate has adequate opportunity, encouragement and time to explain his/her research and to defend the thesis’.

What examiners will do ...

- They will typically ask questions on aspects of the thesis that:
 - are unclear;
 - may be incorrect;
 - are inadequately treated (e.g. missing references, incomplete discussions, inadequate conclusions or analysis, ...);
 - merit a more detailed or extensive treatment than has been provided in the thesis.

Just because there are shortcomings ...

- ... does not mean you will fail!
- No thesis is perfect! (Even mine!)
- Just because an examiner identifies an issue does not mean that you will fail – however, you may be required to make revisions (which may often be very minor).

What examiners will be looking for

- Most importantly, they will be looking for novel contributions to the field [refereed publications provide evidence of worth of research].
- The thesis must also be:
 - an integrated whole and coherent;
 - provide assessment of relevant background literature and its relationship to the research.
- The examination will help to test this.

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Get experience of presentations

- It is enormously important that you can discuss your research coherently.
- The examiners will expect you to be able to give comprehensible answers to detailed technical questions.
- This mainly comes from experience – hence you should get as much experience of presenting your research as possible (e.g. conferences, seminars, ...).

Mock examinations

- If your supervisor is willing, it can be very helpful to arrange for 'mock' examination prior to the real thing.
- Ideally, two members of staff (one of whom might be your supervisor) will act as the examiners in a session designed to replicate the oral examination.

Prepare a brief summary

- The conduct of the examination is completely in the hands of the examiners!
- DO NOT presume to tell them what should happen!
- However, they will often ask you to give a brief summary of your research at the beginning of the examination.
- You should therefore prepare such a summary **IN CASE IT IS NEEDED** (if they don't ask for it, then you must not try to force it on them).

Brief summary (continued)

- I would suggest preparing perhaps 6-8 PowerPoint transparencies.
- These should summarise the main findings of your thesis.
- Do not attempt to give introductory material – focus purely on what your contribution to the subject is.
- If possible, get your supervisor to check it before the examination.

Know your thesis!

- Most importantly of all, be familiar with the contents of your thesis, and what you believe to be the most significant results in it.
- If possible, also be aware of what the examiners might criticise, and try to have arguments in mind to defend it.
- If there is a long gap between writing it and the examination, read it through beforehand.

Be ready to answer 'stock questions'

- Examples of questions often asked include:
 - What result in your thesis do you think is the most important?
 - What are the main achievements of your PhD research?
 - Why did you choose to study topic X?
 - What next, i.e. what are the major outstanding questions arising from your research?
- A 'mock' exam may help with this.

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What the examiners do beforehand

- They will (obviously!) read your thesis.
- They must both prepare a written preliminary report which they must bring to the examination.
- They will meet beforehand and agree a procedure for conducting the examination.

What you should bring

- A copy of the thesis that is paginated identically to the copies the examiners have – by all means use yellow stickies to make it easier to navigate.
- Your brief summary of research findings (ready to present if you are asked).
- Notes of any issues relating to your thesis that have arisen or come to your attention since completing your thesis.
- A pen and paper to make notes (should that be necessary).

Who will be there

- Present at the examination will be the two examiners, you, and (possibly) your supervisor.
- Your supervisor can only be there if you want him/her present, and cannot say anything during the examination (unless asked by the examiners) – his/her role is as a monitor only.

The beginning

- The examiners should introduce themselves to you, and also briefly explain how they will conduct the examination.
- They may start by asking you to briefly summarise the findings of your thesis (as explained before) – but they may not!
- They will normally do their best to put you at ease at the beginning of the exam.

The main part

- The examiners will take turns to ask a series of detailed questions about aspects of the thesis.
- They may work through chapter by chapter, or they may work in a more thematic way.
- One examiner may take charge for a while, then the other, or they may interleave their questions.

What to do ...

- Try to stay relaxed and give yourself time to answer questions to the best of your ability.
- There is no time limit, so you should take as much time as you need to give a detailed answer to each question.
- If necessary refer to your printed thesis or to notes – it is not a memory test! Also, make notes if that seems appropriate.
- It is generally a good idea to try to demonstrate that you have a broad understanding of the topic by giving context to your answers.

What not to do ...

- If you do not know something **DO NOT TRY TO BLUFF**; just admit you don't know – any evidence of bullshitting will really annoy the examiners.
- Try not to lose your temper – the examiners are not being hostile, they will just try to test that you really understand the topic.
- You should be prepared to defend your ideas if they disagree – however, be ready to concede if they pursue an argument strongly.

The end

- When the examiners have asked all their questions, they will typically wrap things up by asking if you want to add anything to the answers you have given.
- If you realise that one of the answers you gave to an earlier question was inadequate, now is the time to provide any additional explanations.
- However, don't feel you have to say anything – normally everyone is tired out by now!

Deliberations

- You (and probably your supervisor, if present) will then be asked to leave while the examiners come to a decision.
- Go and have a cup of tea/coffee and try to relax – however, make sure the examiners know where to find you.
- They may take anything between 5 minutes and a hour to make their decision

The result

- Once the examiners have come to a decision, you will then be called back into the examination room.
- They will then tell you the result.
- If there is anything unclear about the result, please try to make sure you ask questions then and there.

What can happen?

- There are a number of possible outcomes! However, the main possibilities are:
 - Immediate pass (no changes required)
 - Pass subject to minor revisions being made within 3 months, where the examiners will provide details of the changes needed (either at the exam or soon after);
 - Not pass, but can resubmit with major revisions within 18 months, and a new exam may be needed;
 - Fail, possibly with the fall back award of an MPhil.

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Revisions

- Probably the most common outcome is ‘pass subject to minor revisions within 3 months’.
- In this case, the examiners will probably explain the main changes at the examination, and will promise to provide detailed advice either at the exam or soon afterwards.
- You should try to get the changes made as soon as possible, and get your supervisor to check them before passing them back to the examiner(s).
- Provide a summary of how you have changed the thesis to address the comments of the examiners.

Appeals

- If you fail, then you are able to appeal against the decision.
- However, the grounds for an appeal, and the method for an appeal, must follow the guidance given in the regulations.

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Web sites

- College regulations:

http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/academic_regulations/Postgraduate_Regulations.html

- Examination entry forms:

<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/registry/researchdegrees/>

- Graduate School:

<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Graduate-School/>

Background reading

- E. M. Phillips and D. S. Pugh, *How to get a PhD*. Open University Press, 2000.
- P. Dunleavy, *Authoring a PhD*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.