

MEMORANDUM FOR EXAMINERS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF LETTERS

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1 Timetable for the examination

Unless a specific date for the oral examination has been agreed beforehand, examiners are expected to complete the examination and submit their joint report as soon as reasonably possible (and normally within **three months** of receipt of the thesis). If this is impossible, they are asked to notify the Examination Schools of the reasons for delay. Candidates are advised that they may approach the Examination Schools if they have not been contacted by their examiners about the date of the viva within one month of submission of their thesis. The University is particularly concerned to avoid candidates facing lengthy delays during the examination process.

Viva examinations should not be held within four weeks of the examiners receiving their copies of the thesis.

However, if particular circumstances necessitate a viva examination to be held within one calendar month, notification should be sent to the relevant board, and the permission of the board (usually of the Director of Graduate Studies on behalf of the board) must be sought. Requests for vivas to be held fewer than 14 days after the thesis has been made available to the examiners will only be granted in the most exceptional circumstances. Further guidance is available in Annex D of the [Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees](#).

2 Duties of the examiners

These are prescribed in the **Examination Regulations** as follows:

- (i) to consider the thesis and the abstract of it submitted by the student, provided that they shall exclude from consideration in making their report any part of the thesis which has already been accepted, or is being concurrently submitted, for any degree or other qualification in this University or elsewhere and shall have the power to require the candidate to produce for their inspection the complete thesis so accepted or concurrently submitted;
- (ii) to examine the candidate orally, and also, if they think fit, by a written examination, in the subject of the thesis and in other relevant subjects;
- (iii) to report to the board through the Registrar¹;
- (v) to delete all digital copies of the thesis and return to the student any soft-bound copies of the thesis received from Student Registry.

The examiners **must only** consider the copy of the thesis issued to them by the Examination Schools for the oral examination. Any other copies obtained in either hard print or electronically should not be consulted. Under no circumstances can the examiners use a copy of thesis supplied directly by the candidate.

It is the responsibility of the internal examiner to complete and submit the GSO.9 form to give public notice of oral examination. The requirement to give notice is dispensed with if the viva is being held remotely via video call.

3 Subject of the thesis

A candidate must obtain the approval of the faculty board for the subject and title of the thesis. It can therefore be assumed by examiners that the faculty board considers the subject of a thesis to be *prima facie* a suitable topic for the degree in question.

4 Standard required

Examiners are asked to bear in mind that their judgement of the extent of the candidate's contribution to knowledge or understanding of the relevant field of learning should take into account what may reasonably be expected of a capable and diligent student after a minimum of one year or two years of full-time study.

¹ Examiners are reminded that under the Oxford examining system a single joint report is required signed by both examiners

5 The oral examination

5.1 Formal requirements

The purpose of the oral examination is three-fold;

- (i) to enable the examiners to assure themselves that the thesis is the candidate's own work;
- (ii) to give the candidate an opportunity to defend the thesis and to clarify any obscurities in it;
- (iii) to enable the examiners to assess the candidate's general knowledge in his or her particular field of learning.

A candidate submitting a thesis **must** be orally examined, except in the single case of a resubmission where the examiners recommend the award of the degree without reservation. In such cases a candidate may be dispensed from the oral examination by the board of the faculty concerned, provided that the examiners are able to certify that they are satisfied, without examining the candidate orally, that they can recommend to the board in the terms required that the candidate be given leave to supplicate for the degree of Master of Letters. Examiners should only make the decision once they have reviewed the revised thesis. A candidate **must** be orally examined, however, for the examiners to recommend further reference back or, in the case of second or subsequent examinations, outright failure.

The examination may be attended by any member of the University in academic dress. Non-members of the University may attend it only with the consent of both examiners. In the event that the examination is held remotely via video call, no party other than the examiners/assessors and the candidate may attend (with the exception of a support person permitted to attend as an adjustment for the candidate's disability). The relevant board has the power, either at its own discretion or at the request of the candidate, supervisor or department, to restrict access to a viva, without application needing to be made to the Proctors. Further guidance is available in Annex D of the [Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees](#). Where such a request is made and granted, the examiners will be informed prior to the oral examination, with details of any conditions imposed by the board.

5.2 Arrangements for the oral examination

Examiners are asked to take responsibility for all communications with each other, for arranging the oral examination and for notifying the candidate of the arrangements made. The candidate's address is the relevant college unless the candidate has otherwise indicated. Please let the candidate know the date of the oral examination **within one month** of receiving the thesis, even if the date is some time ahead, and publish notice of it (see form GSO.9 sent to the internal examiner). Publication of notice is not required if the examination is being held remotely via video call.

The oral examination should be held at Oxford in a suitable university or college building, unless the board (usually the Director of Graduate Studies on behalf of the board) gives special permission for it to be held elsewhere, or remotely via video call. It should, except in special circumstances, begin not earlier than 9am nor later than 5pm and may be held in term or vacation. Examiners wishing to explore the possibility of holding the examination remotely via video call should contact the relevant GSA. Further guidance on approving and holding remote vivas is available in Annexes D and E of the [Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees](#).

If, owing to illness or other urgent and unforeseen cause, an examiner is unable to attend the examination, it may be postponed to a later date. However, if it seems likely that postponement would be a serious hardship to the candidate, the Proctors should be notified since in appropriate circumstances they may authorise another member of the faculty concerned to attend the examination as a substitute.

All MLitt examinations are official examinations of the University, and internal examiners and candidates should therefore wear black gown, hood, square and subfusc for the examination. External examiners may, if they wish, wear the appropriate academic dress of their own university. However, in the event that the examination is being held remotely via video call there is no requirement to wear such academic dress.

Candidates will have been strongly recommended to take a copy of their thesis to the examination.

Where examiners are likely to want minor corrections completed before they make a positive recommendation, they are asked to have the lists of required corrections available to pass on to the candidate at the viva, or, at the latest, within two weeks of the viva taking place.

5.3 Conduct of the oral examination

Care should be taken to encourage candidates to feel at ease so that they can display their knowledge and abilities to best effect, and the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the thesis should be acknowledged and explored. At an early stage in the proceedings, candidates should be given an opportunity to explain precisely what their thesis is intended to achieve and wherein they see its significance as a contribution to knowledge. If there appears to be a major discrepancy between the candidate's aims and the content of the actual thesis, the reasons for the mismatch should be explored. Likewise candidates should be asked to explain their choice of title when there appears to be an imperfect correspondence with the contents of the thesis. Candidates should also be given the opportunity to explain any apparent failure to use important materials, whether primary or secondary, or neglect of relevant approaches or methodologies.

It is essential that where a thesis reveals significant deficiencies which might lead to a report that is not unequivocally favourable, a representative sample of these should be drawn to the candidate's attention, and specific time for explanation and defence should be allowed for within the oral examination.

Examiners are reminded that the oral examination is an integral part of the examination process for a research degree, with the specific purposes set out in paragraph 5.1., and care should be taken to avoid giving the impression at any time during the *viva voce* that the oral examination and the subsequent consideration of the examiners' report and recommendation by the faculty board are in any sense mere formalities.

Education Committee has agreed that the normal expectations relating to the length of an oral examination should be a minimum of one hour and a maximum of three hours.

5.4 Form and content of examiners' joint report

5.4.1 General

The joint report should be sufficiently detailed to enable members of the relevant graduate studies committee and faculty board to assess the scope and significance of the thesis and to appreciate its strengths and weaknesses. It should, as far as possible, be expressed in terms that are intelligible to those who are not specialists in the particular field of the thesis. Hence the joint report should include, preferably near the beginning, a statement of what the thesis purports to do, and an account of what it actually covers. Evaluative comments should be as full as possible and should include an indication of strengths as well as of limitations, weaknesses, and lacunae. The candidate's performance in the oral examination should receive comment. Candidates' explanations for any deficiencies in the thesis should receive appropriate mention.

5.4.2 Reports which are not unequivocally favourable

Recommendations which are not unequivocally favourable should be supported by full, reasoned explanations sufficient to enable the responsible graduate studies committee and faculty board to make a properly informed decision. A recommendation for referral should be accompanied by a clear statement of what is wrong with the thesis. In such cases, examiners should either include this statement within the report, or draw up a separate statement for the same purpose. In either case they should indicate clearly and precisely in what respects the thesis falls short of the required standard and how the candidate should revise it to remedy these defects. Prescriptions for revision should be stated as categorically and in as much detail as seems reasonable. Examiners should be aware that the full report will now be available to the candidate.

5.5 Examination of a resubmitted thesis

A candidate resubmitting a thesis must satisfy the examiners not only on the particular points made in the previous examiners' statement (see 5.4.2), but also that the thesis *as a whole* is of sufficient merit to qualify the candidate for the Degree of Master of Letters, and that he or she possesses a good general knowledge of the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis lies. It is technically a fresh examination, and the full range of recommendations is available to the examiners. An oral examination is required, which need not necessarily be confined to the points noted by the previous examiners, unless the examiners exempt a candidate from this requirement because they are able to certify that they can recommend the award of the MLitt without examining the candidate orally. However, in a case where the candidate has clearly made a substantially satisfactory response to those points, examiners should be particularly careful to justify any recommendation of an outcome less favourable than that envisaged in the previous examination.

Candidates resubmitting a thesis must include a separate report indicating the specific changes made to the thesis for resubmission. For students in the Humanities, Medical Sciences and Social Sciences Divisions and the Department for Continuing Education, the word limit for the accompanying report is 1000 words; for students in the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division, the word limit is 2000 words.

6 Recommendations available to the examiners

The various recommendations provided for in the Examination Regulations are set out on the joint report form (GSO.13) and examiners are asked to delete such sections of the form as do not apply. Further details of the available options are set out below.

6.1 Award of the degree of MLitt

The **Examination Regulations** prescribe that the faculty board shall in no case permit the candidate to supplicate for the degree of Master of Letters unless the examiners have jointly reported in the following terms:

- (i) that the candidate possesses a good knowledge of the field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- (ii) that the candidate has shown competence in investigating the chosen topic;
- (iii) that the candidate has made a worthwhile contribution to knowledge and understanding in the field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- (iv) that the thesis is presented in a lucid and scholarly manner; and
- (v) that it merits the award of the Degree of Master of Letters.

6.1.1 Corrections of minor errors in theses

If an otherwise satisfactory thesis contains minor errors, omissions or faults in presentation, such as would render it unsuitable as it stands for scholarly consultation, the examiners may make a favourable recommendation conditional upon the deficiencies being corrected by the candidate. Subject areas will of course differ as to what in practice constitutes a 'minor error'. In general, the definition encompasses typographical errors, mistakes or inconsistencies in references or equations, spelling errors or inaccuracies in transcription (whether in English or in foreign language citations), incomplete references to bibliographical items, and so on. Such errors should not affect the substance of an argument in the thesis, and they should not indicate a candidate's lack of grasp of the regular procedures for presenting research in his or her subject.

In making their judgement whether the errors in question can be treated in this way, or whether they more properly merit the referral of the thesis for re-examination, examiners should consider whether it is sufficient for the correction of the errors to be routinely certified, or whether an element of judgement is required. In the former case, the examiners may agree that it would be sufficient for the required corrections to be certified by one (normally the internal) examiner acting alone; that examiner then should delay endorsing the appropriate section of the joint report form and require the candidate to correct and return the thesis by some early date. However, the examiners should immediately complete a Minor Corrections Notice Form, noting the date when the minor corrections list was given to the candidate (which must be within two weeks of the oral examination) and also which examiner will be checking the corrections, and return it to the relevant [Graduate Studies Assistant](#). When the examiner is satisfied and has certified that the minor corrections have been made satisfactorily, the joint report may be returned to the relevant Graduate Studies Assistant without recalling the candidate. The signed joint report should not be submitted until the corrections have been satisfactorily completed (but see also paragraph 12). If on the other hand the thesis requires correction, amplification, extension or re-writing sufficient for the amended version to require an element of judgement as to whether the required amendments have been satisfactorily carried out, and hence necessarily the judgement of both examiners, then the examiners should normally recommend that the thesis be referred back for re-examination. This recommendation implies that the work, while potentially acceptable as an MLitt thesis, does not as it stands justify the award of the degree. **Examiners with any doubt as to the appropriateness of minor corrections as against reference back for resubmission should feel free to consult the relevant Director of Graduate Studies or [Graduate Studies Assistant](#), if this would be helpful.**

It is only in the case of minor corrections that the examiners may provide relevant guidance to the candidate at the oral examination. In cases involving reference back for resubmission, any information provided for the candidate must be included within the examiners' joint report, and only made available to the candidate following the faculty board's decision. No additional guidance or instructions should be provided for the candidate.

Examiners will understand that where they agree to recommend the award of the degree subject to the satisfactory correction of minor errors, **it is essential that the candidate is provided with the list of required corrections as soon as possible, and, at the latest, within two weeks of the oral examination.**

Candidates must complete minor corrections within one month of receipt of the list of minor corrections. They may apply to the relevant Graduate Studies Committee for an extension of one further calendar month.

6.2 Reference back for resubmission

If unable to report as at 6.1 above, the examiners have power, **after having completed the examination** (i.e. including the oral examination), to recommend that the faculty board should refer the thesis back to the candidate in order that the candidate may revise the thesis and present it for reexamination.

The examiners should consider this option if they are satisfied that the thesis does not merit the degree in question but see a clear prospect of the thesis being brought up to the standard required. In considering whether to recommend reference back, examiners should bear in mind that the amount of additional work expected of the candidate should not exceed that which a capable and diligent student could reasonably undertake within the three terms allowed for such revision. Reference back should *not* be recommended simply because it is felt that there is some prospect that the thesis might in due course reach the standard required.

Examiners who recommend that a thesis be referred back for resubmission are asked to supply, for transmission to the candidate, an agreed statement setting out the respects in which the thesis falls below the standard required for the degree and should be as specific and forthright as possible. Examiners may either submit a separate statement, or may, if they so wish, simply include such a statement in their joint report to the faculty board. Please be aware that examiners full reports will now be made available to the candidate. The candidate will be asked to seek any elucidation of the examiners' statement through the supervisor and not by direct communication with the examiners. Such correspondence should *not* however be started before the decision of the faculty board on the examiners' joint report is known.

Examiners will normally be expected to agree to re-examine in due course if they recommend reference back.

6.3 Outright failure [*not available on first examination*]

If the examiners for a second or subsequent examination are satisfied that the thesis is not of sufficient merit to qualify the candidate for the degree of MLitt, and do not consider that the thesis should be referred back again to the candidate for resubmission, they may recommend that the candidate's application for leave to supplicate be refused. The examiners should state **as fully as possible** the reasons why they are not prepared to recommend further reference back, bearing in mind the points made about this course of action in 6.2 above.

7 Examiners divided in their opinion

It is possible for examiners to disagree to a greater or lesser extent in their evaluation of a candidate's work. Hence it is desirable for the examiners to confer before the oral examination and, if significant divergences of opinion are identified, to devise a strategy to resolve these differences by agreed means and by careful structuring of the *viva voce* examination. Plainly it is best if examiners can reconcile their views and produce an agreed joint report and recommendation. If that proves impossible, however, and examiners cannot agree either on the recommendation or the main lines of a joint report, examiners should not hesitate to report the difference of opinion to the faculty board, explaining the nature of and reasons for their disagreement.

8 Communication with the supervisor

The examiners should **not** contact the candidate's supervisor in connection with the examination except for the elucidation of any comments about the candidate, the thesis or the examination provided by the supervisor which the examiners may have received from the faculty board. Any enquiries concerning the examination should be addressed in the first instance to the relevant Director of Graduate Studies, via the [Graduate Studies Assistant](#).

9 Communication with the candidate about the proposed recommendations

The examiners' joint report is confidential to the faculty board which alone has authority to act on the examiners' recommendations. Particularly in cases of possible difficulty, examiners should take care not to intimate to the candidate the content of their joint report or what they propose to recommend (see also paragraph 5.3). **Where examiners ask candidates to complete minor corrections before making a positive recommendation, candidates should be reminded that the final decision as to the outcome of the examination lies with the relevant divisional or faculty board.** Before the examiners' joint report has been considered by the faculty board, enquiries as to the outcome of the examination may be addressed via the [Graduate Studies Assistant](#) to the Director of Graduate Studies under the relevant faculty board (who may, of course, decide to divulge nothing until the joint report has been formally considered by the faculty board).

10 Return of thesis to candidate

After the viva, examiners should delete all digital copies of the thesis and return to the student any soft-bound copies of the thesis received from Student Registry. If examiners require a digital copy for the purpose of writing their joint report to the faculty board, they may retain them and delete them after the submission of the report.

11 Copyright and Confidentiality

The University and the candidate reserve the copyright and all other intellectual property rights on both the thesis and abstract. The contents of the thesis and the abstract are proprietary, and examiners must hold them strictly in confidence. No copies may be taken, and no disclosure of the contents may be made, without (in each case) the prior written permission of the University. The copyright in the examiners' joint report and in any statement under paragraph 5 above will be the examiners', but examiners must hold the contents of the joint report and statement strictly in confidence and not disclose them other than by submission of the joint report and statement to the University.

The examiners' full report will now be made available to the candidate. Examiners should also note that a copy of their requirements prior to resubmission, in the case of a candidate whose thesis has been referred back, will be transmitted – after the recommendation has been accepted by the relevant faculty board – to the candidate and his or her college. The examiners' joint report form should be endorsed accordingly.

12 Complaints about the conduct of examinations

As part of its quality assurance mechanisms and in keeping with national guidelines, the University operates a procedure under which research students can submit complaints about the *conduct of examinations*. The Proctors are responsible for investigating such complaints and, where a complaint is upheld, determining what should be done to rectify the matter. Candidates are told that complaints must be submitted to the Proctors within three months of notification by the Examination Schools of the outcome of the examination. *The Proctors have no remit to question the academic judgement of examiners*, but will consider complaints on grounds such as procedural irregularity, bias or inadequate assessment on the part of the examiners (e.g. in not allowing the candidate sufficient opportunity to defend the thesis during the viva), failure by examiners to take into account special circumstances (e.g. a candidate's medical condition). As part of the process of investigating a complaint, the Proctors will typically invite the examiners to comment on specific issues raised by the candidate or supervisor.

13 Returns to be made to the Examination Schools

After the viva, the following should be returned to the Research Degrees team at researchdegrees@admin.ox.ac.uk.

(i) Fees and expenses

Examiners should claim their fees and any appropriate expenses by returning the enclosed claim form (GSO.10). For clarification, the fixed-rate examiner's fee is paid specifically as a contribution to the work involved in reviewing the thesis, i.e. for overseas examiners it is for work carried out outside the UK. If for any reason travel expenses will be exceptionally higher than expected, please contact the Research Degrees Examination Office, so that approval can be sought from the Divisional Board. For full details please see the form.

Please note that the Research Degrees Examination Office cannot arrange accommodation for external examiners. However, the internal examiner/department or faculty/college may be able to help. Given that examiners are now required to approve any minor corrections which they ask a candidate to make prior to the submission of the examiners' joint report form, the claim form for fees and expenses may, in this circumstance only, be returned before the submission of the examiners' report. Examiners are asked to indicate on the form where this is the case.

14 Returns to be made to the relevant Graduate Studies Assistant after the viva

(i) Examiners' Joint Report

Examiners are reminded that where they wish to have minor corrections completed before making a positive recommendation, then these should be seen and approved before the report is submitted. **Otherwise examiners are asked to return their joint report no later than one month from the date of the viva, and ideally within two weeks of the date of the viva, if no corrections have been required. A reminder to return the report may be sent two weeks from the date of the viva.**

Full contact details for the Graduate Studies Assistants can be found at:

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/graduates/contacts/>