

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Faculty of Medicine

Responding to Examiners' Reports: Guidelines for Higher Degree Candidates

Introduction

The following guidelines have been prepared to facilitate responses by higher degree (research) candidates to reports, on theses, provided by examiners. In providing this information, some reference is necessarily made to courses of action commonly adopted by the Higher Degree Committee. However, the Guidelines are not intended to provide an account of the Committee's decision making process, nor is the Committee necessarily constrained by procedures described below. The legal standing of higher degree examination processes and the rules governing award of higher degrees are set out in the University Calendar and the Faculty of Medicine Handbook. The guidelines set out below are for information only.

Examiners' reports

Examiners' reports are the property of the University. Copies of reports are provided to candidates for information and, in some cases, to allow candidates to respond to recommendations contained therein.

Examiners' reports should be regarded as 'professional-in-confidence' communications. All aspects of the higher degree examination process are confidential. Examiners' reports should not be copied, nor the content discussed with anyone apart from the candidate's supervisor, co-supervisor, the Co-ordinator of Postgraduate Studies and the Head of School.

Candidates are prohibited from contacting, or otherwise communicating with any examiner until their final standing has been determined. Any such contact by a candidate may be regarded as academic misconduct.

Recommendations by examiners

Each examiner of a higher degree thesis is requested to provide a report as the basis for nominating one of six possible recommendations to the Higher Degree Committee. One recommendation is 'that the degree be awarded'. When all examiners are of this opinion, no response by the candidate is required. In such circumstances, examiners' reports are provided to the candidate for information only.

Apart from the circumstances just described, examiners' recommendations necessitate responses from candidates. Recommendations by examiners almost invariably specify actions to be taken in relation to the original submission. Actions proposed by examiners in relation to the original submission extend from correction of typographic errors through to the initiation of additional studies the results of which are to be incorporated into a revised submission. The respective recommendations by examiners variously allocate responsibility for assessment of a corrected or revised thesis to the Head of School or the Higher Degree Committee or the examiners. Appropriate responses by candidates vary accordingly.

Beyond the scope of recommendations just described, an examiner may recommend 'that the degree be not awarded and that the candidate be not permitted to resubmit'. Adoption of this position by an examiner is extremely rare, and generally restricted to the most serious of circumstances (such as an accusation of plagiarism or fraudulent data). Candidates in this position will be advised directly by the Higher Degree Committee. These guidelines are not applicable.

Regardless of recommendations made by the Heads of School, or by examiners, the final course of action, and determination of each candidate's standing, is the responsibility of the Higher Degree Committee.

Responding to examiners' reports

All communications from the candidate in response to examiners' reports should be addressed to the Head of School, and forwarded to the Head of School via the supervisor (or co-supervisor in the absence of the latter).

As a general guide, examiners' reports may be regarded as reports prepared by reviewers in relation to a journal submission. In common with reviewers, examiners' reports vary greatly in terms of the alterations proposed to the original submission. Changes may extend from spelling corrections through to reorientation of much, if not the entire, scientific presentation. Of options available to candidates, adoption of the examiner's specified changes is the path which most readily facilitates successful conclusion of the examination process. Nonetheless, in common with the authors of manuscripts, candidates may dispute examiner's assessments. A commitment to refuting an examiner's assessment should involve due consideration of the examiner's standing as a recognized authority in the field. Any attempt to refute the argument offered by an examiner must be professionally argued and rigorously justified.

In responding to examiners' reports, candidates are strongly encouraged to work in close collaboration with their supervisor and co-supervisor.

Typographical corrections or minor changes to the satisfaction of the Head of School.

Changes specified by the examiner should be made to the thesis. The Head of School should be provided with a list of the changes specified by each examiner, each matter being followed by an indication of the change that has been made to the thesis. In respect of typographic and similar errors, an overall statement to the effect that 'the errors noted by the examiner have been rectified', is adequate. Brief argument should be provided in respect of single matters which, in the view of the candidate, do not warrant any correction or change.

Changes to the satisfaction of the Higher Degree Committee or re-submission to examiners.

When one or more examiner requests changes to the satisfaction of the Higher Degree Committee, or re-submission of the thesis in a modified form after additional experimentation or study, the Higher Degree Committee must determine, on the basis of a recommendation of the Head of School, the course of action to be followed. In general, the Higher Degree Committee assesses the adequacy of changes to a thesis by reference to an opinion from the examiner after he/she has been provided with the revised thesis.

If one or more of the accompanying examiner's reports are in this category, the candidate may indicate to his or her supervisor that the substance of the examiner's recommendations provide an adequate basis for revision of the thesis. The candidate should then await formal advice from the Head of School in relation to the decision by the Higher Degree Committee. Upon receiving this advice, the additional work proposed to be undertaken should be initiated. Upon completion, the modified thesis should be provided to the Head of School together with an explanatory letter indicating how the examiner's requirements have been met.

As indicated above, an examiner's recommendations for major changes or resubmission, may be disputed. A candidate may seek to refute the case advanced by an examiner. Argument on this basis should be addressed to the Head of School. It is the prerogative of the Head of School to bring such argument before the Higher Degree Committee. A commitment to the course of action outlined in this paragraph should only be taken in consultation with a supervisor. In this context, the following matters should be given careful consideration.

The Higher Degree Committee accords authority to examiners' reports. Examiners of higher degree theses are appointed on the basis of nominations by respective supervisors. Such nominations are required to be agreed by the Head of School and are finally endorsed by the Higher Degree Committee on the basis of a background statement indicating how the nominated examiner's professional standing and expertise are appropriate to such an appointment. Retrospective argument, that an examiner's perspective is limited, inappropriate or prejudiced, is difficult to sustain.

Most theses necessitate appointment of examiners from different fields. It is recognized that the perspective and expertise of individual examiners, reporting on the same thesis, is distinct. Generally speaking, it is totally inappropriate to seek to use the report of one examiner in an attempt to negate argument from another. Argument to the effect that a section of the thesis is acceptable cannot usually be sustained simply on the basis that the other two examiners either had no problem with it, or specifically commended the same section of the thesis.

Finally, by comparison with the option of immediately initiating additional research or study to permit modification of the thesis as requested by the examiner, submission and consideration of rebuttal argument by the candidate takes time. The outcome may well be to require the course of action specified by the examiner.

Any submission to the effect that the recommendation of an examiner should not be followed must be provided to the Head of School as soon as possible after the candidate has received the examiners' reports. The submission should address argument advanced by the examiner, and provide a concise indication, on a point-by-point basis if appropriate, as to why the extent of change requested is not valid. The results of any such submission, if it is endorsed by the Head of School and considered by the Higher Degree Committee, will be advised to the candidate by the Head of School.

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Approved by Higher Degree Committee – 9 June 1999