

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Discussion paper on oral examination and assessment

All members of the University community and ANU Colleges and their committees are invited to comment on the role of oral examination in the assessment of higher degree research candidates. Although the consultation period is relatively short, the issues have been discussed extensively by the Higher Degree Research Working Party, which included College representatives. The timeframe will enable other revisions of the legislation arising from the Report to be made in time for 2007.

The Higher Degree Research Working Party has recommended (section 6.1):

That the Rules [pertaining to Higher Degree Research] include an oral examination as an option for examination of a PhD candidate's thesis. The option could be sought by the student, any of his or her supervisors or their examiners. The impression that an oral examination be associated only with failure, or with revision and resubmission should be removed. The oral examination will need to continue to be available to a candidate whose thesis is recommended for failure.

This issue has particular relevance as the University moves in to the College structure and addresses the appropriateness of current forms of assessment for new media and thesis formats.

The Working Party's recommendation arose from the concern that the current University rules and policies suggest that oral examination occurs only in cases where the candidate was at risk of failing the degree: the Working Party wanted to alter the negative association that currently exists because the oral examination is typically taken as an option only when there is a possibility of failure or of revision and resubmission of thesis.

Those preparing submissions may wish to address the following matters.

- What should be the role, if any, of oral examination for PhD candidates at the ANU?
- If oral examinations do have a role, should they be compulsory or optional? If they are optional who should invoke the option (candidate, supervisory panel, panel of examiners, College Dean) and how should this be done?
- What should be the relationship between the written thesis and the written report of the examiners to the oral examination? Three possible models are:
 - The oral examination is conducted by a jury consisting mainly of the candidate's supervisors after submission of the thesis. Under this model, the result is normally clear before the oral examination, which has a largely ceremonial function.
 - The oral examination is a form of 'approval/endorsement to submit' the written thesis. Following the oral examination, the assessing panel provides the candidate with a written report outlining where additional work is required before the thesis is submitted. The assessment panel for the oral examination would comprise the supervisory panel and other member(s) either internal or external to the university.
 - External assessors review a written thesis and provide the candidate with a written report on the written thesis and questions to be addressed at the oral examination. Some or all of the assessors participate in the oral examination, together with a senior academic from the candidate's university and the Chair of the candidate's supervisory panel. The assessment panel makes a recommendation on the outcome to the candidate's university. In cases where the initial examination of the written material indicates that significant revisions are required, the oral examination can be delayed to allow for those revisions to be undertaken.