

Graduate Research Training Policy Review 2024: Explanatory memorandum

Feedback on the proposed revisions to the Graduate Research Training Policy is welcome until Friday 26 April 2024, via <https://forms.office.com/r/2sShqg7m1f?origin=lprLink>

Academic Board, via its Higher Degrees by Research Committee (HDRC), has undertaken a major review of the *Graduate Research Training Policy* ([MPF1321](#)) and the *Supervisor Eligibility and Registration Policy* ([MPF1322](#)). The review has been conducted by a working group of HDRC established for that purpose, with broad representation drawn from senior academic staff from across the University, professional staff responsible for graduate research administration, and the Graduate Student Association. The terms of reference for the review included improving the clarity, useability, and fitness for purpose of the policies and reflecting the requirements for the viva voce and other policy changes endorsed by the Board since late 2022.

Input to the Review

Feedback on the existing policies was sought from graduate research supervisors and professional staff in May-June 2023, with 178 respondents providing feedback. Of the respondents, 70% were graduate research supervisors and 21% professional staff, with the remainder being graduate researchers or other members of the University community.

Respondents identified structural issues such as policy statements that are inconsistent, unclear or difficult to implement; gaps in the connection between MPF1321 and MPF1322; statements that conflict with other policies; content gaps; and inconsistent use of terms. Some respondents sought more detail on processes and decision making.

Policy issues issued raised by respondents included:

- Insufficient information on joint PhDs and joint institutions
- The need for clarity on conflict-of-interest statements and cross-referencing to the *Managing Conflicts of Interest Policy* ([MPF1366](#))
- More clarity on eligibility to be registered as a principal supervisor; the distribution of responsibilities between supervisors and advisory committee chairs; and the roles of advisory committee chairs and committee members
- Supervision during Study Away
- Consequences for, and processes to be followed when, candidates do not meet confirmation requirements
- Co-authorship requirements for incorporating published material in theses
- Approval to proceed to examination where the candidate and supervisors disagree about the readiness of the thesis
- Complex examination rubrics

The HDRC Policy Working Group considered this feedback while critically reviewing the policies. Substantive policy changes were discussed initially with the Committee of Graduate Research Associate Deans, and then tested in a series of meetings in November 2023 with each faculty's graduate research leadership team, the Graduate Research Managers Advisory Group and the Graduate Student Association.

Some of the feedback received was outside of the scope of MPF1321/ MPF1322 or was related to university systems or other processes. The following issues have been noted for future consideration by the HDRC or referred appropriately:

- Replace the term 'At Risk' with a more positive term to improve use of the process - referred to HDRC re [MPF1363](#)
- The length of time taken to conclude an unsatisfactory progress process – referred to HDRC re [MPF1363](#)

- The process for supervisor performance review – referred to Pro Vice-Chancellor (Graduate and International Research)
- Detail on kinds of leave, including gender-affirming care – referred to Pro Vice-Chancellor (Graduate and International Research)
- Desire for improved usability of the candidature management system – referred to the Graduate Research Business Product Group.

New Policy Structure

The review proposes the consolidation of MPF1321 and MPF1322 into a single *Graduate Research Training Policy* to address the gaps between the two policies. The revised policy has also been streamlined for improved readability:

- *Section 4 – Policy* - contains only high-level policy principles for graduate research training and supervision
- *Section 5 - Procedural principles* – contains mandatory policy requirements, organised to follow the candidature lifecycle. Mandatory processes identified in the procedural principles will be housed on the Graduate Research Hub and hyperlinked from the policy
- *Section 6 – Roles and responsibilities* – is now a high-level summary of responsibilities organised by role
- *Schedules* – have been added to consolidate examination criteria and rubrics for doctoral degrees (Schedule 1) and Master Research (Degree) (Schedule 2); eligibility for supervision and advisory roles and supervisory loads (Schedule 3); and advisory committee responsibilities (Schedule 4).

The *policy*, its *schedules* and linked *processes* together form the principles and mandatory requirements and processes for graduate research training and supervision. They may be supported by *guidelines* (advisory and explanatory statements offering detail for best practice) and *work instructions* (systems and workflow responsibilities for administering processes).

Processes will be published on the [Graduate Research Hub](#) and maintained under the authority of the Pro Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for graduate research. Processes will be published for:

- Confirmation
- Completion seminar
- Preparation of graduate research theses
- Examination of doctoral degree by thesis (without viva)
- Examination of doctoral degree by viva
- Examination of master’s degrees
- Citation (for graduation)

With the exception of the Examination of doctoral degree by viva process, the process documents have not been included with the consultation materials. Information relating to these processes are currently available in the current MPF1321 and on the Graduate Research Hub and will be migrated once the revised policy takes effect. There are no substantive changes proposed for these existing processes as part of this revised policy.

The *Courses, Subjects, Awards and Programs Policy* ([MPF1327](#)) defines the types of degrees provided by the University. The University offers the Doctoral Degree (Research) and Doctoral Degree (Professional), collectively doctoral degrees. The Master Degree (Research) includes the Master of Philosophy and named Master by research degrees (e.g. Master of Fine Arts).

Substantive Policy Changes

Responsibilities and authority

While Academic Board and HDRC are responsible for academic quality oversight, they should not make decisions on individual cases. To align with practices across the sector the Pro Vice-Chancellor for graduate research will oversee some operational processes and decide on waiver and exceptional requests for individual candidates (including those related to examinations) within the remit of the policy.

Supervision and supervisory loads

The current upper limit for supervisory load is seven full-time equivalent (7 FTE) enrolled graduate research candidates unless a higher load is approved by the dean. The minimum supervision load per candidate is not stipulated, nor is there guidance on how to divide supervision load between supervisors. This has resulted in:

- Some supervisors supervising a very large number of candidates, which can lead to poor outcomes
- Some candidates having very large supervision teams, which can be difficult for the candidate to manage
- Some principal supervisors have a low percentage load for their candidate (eg 10-20%), which is inconsistent with them taking the primary role in supervision.

Benchmarking of policies across comparable institutions showed highly variable standards for the number of candidates a staff member may supervise at a given time, for example 6-8 candidates, or 5-6 FTE, or variable limits according to registration and experience levels. Currently, less than 4% of University of Melbourne supervisors supervise more than 10 graduate researchers.

The following changes are proposed:

- A maximum total number of 10 graduate research candidates (head count rather than FTE) can be supervised by a supervisor at any given time
- Supervisors may request approval from the relevant dean to waive this limit
- A minimum supervisory load of 40% for the principal supervisor, and a requirement that they hold the highest load for supervisors of the candidate
- A minimum load for co-supervisors (including external supervisors) of 20%. Note that others may contribute to the candidate's program – for example by becoming advisory committee members.

By implication, supervisory teams of more than four (4) will require the relevant dean's approval.

Waivers for existing supervision arrangements for currently enrolled graduate researchers, or new candidates who enrol prior to the 31st of June 2025, will not be required. More details on the transition to this policy are listed below under the heading "Implementation".

Late submission

In 2017, provisions were introduced for candidates to be granted a late submission period where there are compelling research-related or compassionate circumstances, replacing the older 'lapsed' status (only available to students confirmed as of December 31, 2017).

This amendment has now been tested in practice, and refinements to the late submission provisions are needed for it to work optimally and equitably. For example, there is no guidance in policy as to the length of late submission period that should be granted (just a maximum), and there is different practice across faculties about whether candidates remain enrolled during the late submission period or are placed on leave. Given that late submission is provided due to unexpected circumstances beyond the candidate's control, it is reasonable that the candidate would have ongoing access to supervision during the late submission period. The following changes are proposed:

- The initial late submission period will be six months, although candidates may request a different duration based on their circumstances. The chair of the late submission panel can provide further extensions to late

submission, up to the maximum submission date – two years for doctoral degrees and one year for Master Degree (Research)

- Candidates given a late submission period will remain enrolled during late submission and maintain access to university services such as a student email account and library access, as well as an advisory committee and ongoing supervision
- Late submission panels will no longer include an HDRC committee member but will instead include a member of a different faculty nominated by the Pro Vice-Chancellor for graduate research
- The administrative requirement to seek approval for a 10-business day extension to the maximum submission date to cover unforeseen minor delays has been removed. If a thesis is not received for examination by the maximum submission date (ie by the end of the maximum late submission period) – plus 10 business days, candidature will be terminated.

The Academic Board (in meeting 03/2023) approved the proposal that a late submission period be pre-approved for candidates who undertake an approved internship, of an equivalent duration to the internship. This will be incorporated into the policy.

Oral examination (viva)

Examination by viva is now the international standard for doctoral degrees. Extensive discussions have led to the position that this will become the standard for Doctoral Degree (Research) at the University of Melbourne, providing candidates with a valuable opportunity to engage in direct discussion with examiners.

The proposed viva examination workflow is shown in Appendix 1 and preliminary FAQ in Appendix 2 of this document.

- For Doctoral Degree (Research) candidates who commence from 1 January 2025, the award of doctoral degrees will be based on assessment of candidate's capacity to design and conduct a body of original research, and to communicate this research through both a thesis (including creative outputs where appropriate) and an oral deliberation (viva).
- Examination by thesis only (including creative outputs) will be phased out, but with waivers available for exceptional circumstances.
- Candidates who commenced prior to 1 January 2025 may opt into examination by viva, once the supporting organisational structures are ready to support this.
- To be equitable across both modes of examination, the current provision that examiners remain anonymous will be removed, as candidates who undertake the viva will know the identity of their examiners.

Doctoral examination outcomes

The outcome of a doctoral degree examination, whether by thesis only or by viva, will be Pass (P), Pass with minor revision (PR), Major revision (MR), or Fail (F) as shown in Table 1 of Schedule 1.

Removal of the third examiner

The use of a third examiner resulted frequently in unintended outcomes. Specifically, the examination report of the original examiner who recommended Major Revisions or Fail could be ignored entirely, in cases where the third examiner's report was more favourable. This undermines the examination process and makes it possible for errors in the thesis to go unresolved. Referring to a third examiner also makes the examination process complex and time-consuming. These proposed changes aim to streamline the process while honouring the integrity of the examination process.

The third examiner will be removed entirely from all examinations and the rubric for reconciling examiner recommendations is revised as shown in the policy at Table 2 of Schedule 1 for doctoral degrees and Table 2 of Schedule 2 for Master Degree (Research).

For doctoral degrees:

- Where Major Revision is recommended by at least one examiner, the outcome will now be Major Revision and the revised thesis will be returned to the examiner(s)
- Where one examiner recommends a Fail, the examiners must now reach a consensus through a discussion moderated by the chair of examiners. Where consensus is not achieved, an unconflicted adjudicator is appointed to address the area of conflict
- The adjudicator does not act as a third examiner, but only addresses the areas where examiners disagree
- The Pro Vice-Chancellor for graduate research will determine an outcome based on the examiners' reports and the adjudicator's assessment of the areas of disagreement.

Master Degree (Research) examination

Master Degree (Research) candidates will continue to be examined by thesis only (including creative outputs) and will not be examined by viva. Under the current policy Master Degree (Research) candidates receive an outcome (Pass, Pass with Minor Revisions, etc.), a numeric mark, and a grade (H1, H2A, etc.). The numeric mark is important for graduates to be assessed for scholarship eligibility if progressing to a PhD. The requirements for an examination outcome that might include seeking of revisions do not align with the grading schedule for numeric marks. In cases where the candidate is asked to make revisions to the thesis, the original numeric mark remains the final mark, which provides no incentive for the candidate to make any revisions. Examiners will continue to provide a numeric mark and grade (H1, H2A etc), and the following changes are proposed:

- Examiners no longer provide an outcome (Pass, Pass with Minor revisions, etc.)
- Candidates will no longer be required to revise their thesis
- Where a thesis is passed (with a grade of 65% or more), the thesis as submitted will be the version submitted to the University Repository
- The use of the third examiner will be removed from Master Degree (Research) examinations:
 - The average of the examiners' marks will be used where both examiners recommend a grade of H1 (80%-100%), or another passing grade and their scores are within 10 marks of each other, or both recommend Fail (0%-64%). Otherwise, if the examiners marks differ by 10% or more, the chair of examiners will act as a moderator to seek to achieve consensus of the mark within a 10% difference
 - If consensus is not possible, an unconflicted adjudicator, external to the University of Melbourne, will be appointed to resolve the areas of conflict between the two examiners
 - The pass mark will remain at 65%. Where a thesis is failed, the final numeric mark will be the average of the examiners' numeric marks, rather than 64%
- The final two categories in the current scale (0%-49%) and (50%-64%) will be merged into a single category of Fail.

Authorship of material incorporated into theses

Currently, co-authored papers can only be incorporated into a thesis if "the candidate wrote the first draft of the publication and contributed more than 50% of the content of the publication". This may prevent candidates from incorporating sections of publications that are their own work into their thesis or who have published with multiple co-authors from incorporating the publication into their thesis.

It is proposed that the 50% requirement be replaced with a requirement that the candidate has made a substantial contribution to the publication and that they must state their actual contribution to the publication in the preface of the thesis. This will, for example, permit two candidates to include the same paper in their theses if they have both made substantial contributions to the paper.

Other changes of note

- Eligibility to be a principal supervisor has been clarified: an eligible supervisor must, within the last five years at any University, have supervised or co-supervised (at a minimum supervisory percentage load of 20% for the duration of the candidature) at least one candidate to successful completion. If they do not meet the prior completion requirement, the Dean may approve their eligibility if the supervisor identifies a suitably experienced supervisor as a mentor and develops and complies with a supervision mentoring plan.
- Advisory committee chairs must be academics/honorary fellows at the equivalent of Level C or above and have had three prior completions.
- Conflicts of interest in supervision have been clarified to identify those that must be avoided: that is, that a supervisor cannot be in a close personal relationship with the advisory committee chair or candidate, and that the advisory committee chair cannot be in close personal relationship with a candidate.
- The importance of the independence of the advisory committee chair and their role in mediating conflict between the candidate and the supervisors has been made explicit.
- Requests to change supervisors are to be endorsed by the advisory committee chair (rather than by the principal supervisor), to avoid the principal supervisor blocking a candidate's requested changes from further consideration.
- Supervisory agreements are to be completed within three months of commencement, rather than the current six.
- Mandatory training, including Research Integrity Online Training (RIOT), must be completed by 6 months EFT (i.e., by pre-confirmation for doctoral degrees and by confirmation for Master Degree (Research)). The list of mandatory training will be held on the Graduate Research Hub, and from 2025 will also include Graduate Researcher Respect training.
- Provision has been made for late course conversions: doctoral candidates transferring to a Master Degree (Research) who have completed more than the Master Degree (Research) maximum course duration may be granted an extension of the maximum submission date by the Pro Vice-Chancellor for graduate research.
- A new section will be added to confirm that internships can only be taken during candidature when an internship agreement is in place; supervisor approvals are in place; and the candidate has completed mandatory research integrity training.

Implementation

Subject to Academic Board approval, the revised policy will take effect from 1 January 2025. Transitional arrangements will be put in place for supervisors who currently have more than 10 candidates under supervision to avoid disruption to supervision of current candidates. The transition will be managed via the Committee of Graduate Research Associate Deans, with communications to supervisors later in 2024.

Resourcing and administrative arrangements for the viva will be developed during 2025-2026, in preparation for vivas to commence at scale from 2027-2028.

Feedback

Feedback can be provided via <https://forms.office.com/r/2sShqg7m1f?origin=lprLink> by COB Friday 26 April 2024.

Authorised by

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8 April 2024

Appendix 1: Viva examination workflow

THESIS SUBMISSION AND VIVA PREPARATION

1

Candidate registers their intention to submit thesis

This occurs two months prior to submission, triggering notification to the principal supervisor to nominate examiners.

2

Supervisor nominates examiners

Supervisor indicates availability of examiners for viva, as well as attendance at live performance or exhibition if applicable.

3

Appoint a viva chair

Nominated by the chair of examiners.

4

Candidate submits thesis

The candidate submits their thesis.

5

Examiners receive the thesis

The graduate research office provides the thesis to the examiners.

6

Viva chair schedules the viva

The viva chair confers with the examiners, and schedules the viva within three months of thesis submission.

VIVA

7

Examiners submit preliminary reports

Examiners send preliminary reports to the examination office. Examiners form a reserved view of result prior to the viva, but reserve determination of preliminary result until after the candidate's presentation and defence concludes.

8

Viva is held

Viva is conducted by videoconference unless all examiners are in Melbourne during the scheduled viva. The viva chair, two examiners and the candidate are present; no supervisors are present. Examiners question and discuss the thesis with the candidate, moderated by the viva chair. If an examiner is unable to attend the viva on short notice, the examiner present can act as proxy to present questions. Maximum time allowed is two hours.

9

Examiners confer and achieve consensus

On conclusion of presentation and discussion, the candidate is excused to a breakout room/waiting room, while examiners confer on outcome of the viva. Examiners are expected to achieve consensus on Pass/Fail and agreement regarding revisions. If examiners have different provisional results, the viva chair moderates for consensus. If consensus cannot be reached, the result is withheld and an adjudicator appointed. The adjudicator evaluates the examiners reports, and the thesis, and makes a recommendation to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, who makes the final decision on the examination outcome.

10

Candidate is informed of outcome

The candidate is invited back into the viva venue, and is informed of outcome (P, PR, MR, F) or Results Withheld. Verbal summary of required revisions are provided. Revision period is agreed upon:

Pass (minimal type/format errors) [6 weeks]

Pass with Minor Revision [2 months]

Major Revision [12 months]

11

Examiners submit final report

Within one week of the viva, examiners co-author and upload a final report representing viva discussion, viva outcome, and all revisions required. The chair of examiners has revision oversight, and approves release of the report to the candidate and the principal supervisor.

12

Candidate makes revisions

The chair of examiners notifies the graduate research exam manager when revisions are accepted. The candidate and the principal supervisor are notified of the examination outcome. This completes examination by viva.

13

Examination complete

Thesis lodged.



The viva examination

A summative examination of the candidate's thesis, with four result categories:

- Pass (P)
- Pass with Minor Revision (PR)
- Major Revision (MR)
- Fail (F)



Process for candidates enrolled before introduction of the new policy

Once processes have been established, candidates enrolled prior to this policy publication have the option to select examination by thesis or examination by viva.



Protocols for thesis with creative outputs or complex file types

Specific protocols for thesis with creative outputs and thesis with complex file types (sometimes referred to as 'non-traditional research outputs') will be developed to ensure that examiners and the candidate have access to all thesis components at the time of examination by viva.

Appendix 2: Viva examination FAQ

Why should we have a viva?

Examination by viva voce (oral examination, hereafter referred to as viva) is now the international standard for doctoral degrees. The viva is designed to enhance the examination of the PhD and the experience of the candidate. It provides an opportunity for the candidate to engage directly with their examiners who are world experts in their field and, in doing so, develop networks in their research area.

What are the objectives of the viva?

The viva is intended to be a generative intellectual discussion that is conducted in a professional manner.

The objectives of the viva are to:

- a. provide an opportunity for the candidate to present their research while enabling examiners to clarify concerns with the thesis;
- b. provide an opportunity for the candidate to discuss their research in detail with examiners who are leaders in their field;
- c. assure examiners that the research presented is the candidate's own and to clarify the candidate's contribution to any collaborative research;
- d. facilitate the examiners reaching an agreement on an examination outcome;
- e. enable communication of the examination outcome to the candidate on the day, including where relevant an indication of required revisions to the thesis.

Whilst the viva will be conducted in English, the format is structured to ensure fairness and equity for all candidates, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This is achieved by focusing on their ability to explain and respond to questions on their research, rather than on linguistic proficiency.

What is the role of the viva in the examination process?

The assessment of the thesis (which may include creative outputs) and the verbal discussion of the thesis during the viva together inform the examiners' joint recommendation of the examination outcome.

The outcomes are: Pass; Pass with minor revisions; Major revisions; Fail.

What form will the University of Melbourne viva take?

There are many different models for conducting vivas internationally. Extensive international benchmarking was undertaken to design a viva that best fits with our needs and aligns with developing practice in Australia.

In this model, both examiners write independent preliminary reports which are reviewed by the chair of examiners before the viva. A recommended outcome is not made in these reports. Both reports are shared with examiners and the viva chair before the viva. The candidate and supervisors do not see the preliminary reports before the viva.

The viva is attended by the viva chair, two external examiners, and the candidate. It is conducted online via teleconferencing (unless all participants are in Melbourne at the scheduled time).

The viva will consist of:

- A pre-meeting (approx. 30 mins) of the viva chair and examiners to discuss conduct and order of questions.
- The oral discussion (approx. 90 mins, up to a max of 2 hours), including: a brief overview of the thesis by the candidate (not a formal presentation); questions from examiners; free discussion.
- Discussion facilitated by the viva chair in which examiners reach consensus on the outcome of the examination. The candidate is not present.
- Verbal feedback to the candidate, including the outcome and details of revisions required.

- Post-viva meeting in which examiners draft the brief final report in which examination outcome and details of any required revisions are clearly outlined (candidate not present). The combined final report and the two individual preliminary reports are later sent to the candidate by the Examinations office.

In exceptional circumstances, the viva chair may make alternative arrangements for the viva. Examiners and the candidate may refer to creative outputs during the viva.

Why will supervisors not attend?

This has been extensively debated as part of the consultation process.

Supervisors currently have no role in the examinations process. This will not change. The viva chair ensures the professional conduct of the viva, and the combined final examiners' written report will detail all required changes.

The absence of the supervisor reflects concerns around the potential impact of unequal power relations between candidate and supervisor, and between the supervisor and examiners (for example, where the supervisor is senior to the examiner/s). Even if the supervisor was not allowed to speak, their presence and body language could affect the process.

While some argued that the supervisor's presence may act as a support to the candidate, the potential negative influence was deemed to be of greater risk. Others suggested that the supervisor's professional development would benefit by being present. However, the primary concern lies with the candidate rather than the supervisor.

Who is the viva chair? And what is their role?

The viva chair will be a senior member of academic staff, who meets the criteria for acting as an advisory committee chair but who has no association with the candidate or their work (e.g. they are not the candidate's advisory committee chair). They must not have a conflict of interest with the examiners, supervisors or the candidate.

The viva chair must ensure the professional conduct of the viva. They will ensure that:

- appropriate questions are asked
- the candidate has the opportunity to respond to questions
- the candidate is treated fairly and without undue stress
- consensus is reached between the examiners on a single examination outcome (the policy sets out the steps to take where this is not achieved)
- the outcome, including any required revisions, is communicated clearly to the candidate.

What happens if the examiners cannot agree on the outcome?

It is expected that the examiners will come to a consensus on the outcome. In situations where this is not achieved, the PVC responsible for graduate research will appoint an external adjudicator who will receive the thesis and both examiners' preliminary reports. The adjudicator will examine the area of disagreement and recommend an examination outcome. They will provide their own short (max 2 page) report that supports their recommendation to the PVC.

Will the viva be recorded?

Yes, the viva is recorded via teleconference. The recording is kept confidential, and only made available in specific circumstances. The recording will not capture the discussions between examiners before and after the viva during which the questions and outcome are deliberated.

Will the viva still go ahead if both examiners suspect it might fail?

Yes. The candidate has the right to discuss their research. Preliminary outcomes are not given before the viva.

Do candidates still do a completion seminar?

Yes, candidates are still required to give a public completion seminar within the six calendar months before submission. The completion seminar requirements remain the same (that is, viva chair and examiners do not attend). This seminar is an excellent opportunity for the candidate to receive feedback and to practice responding to questions on their thesis.

When will the new viva policy come into effect?

Examination by viva will be mandatory for all candidates who commence from 1 January 2025.

Candidates who enrolled before 1 January 2025 may opt to be examined by viva from 1 January 2026 (or sooner if administrative arrangements are in place). We encourage candidates to take up this option.

Doctoral degree (professional) candidates and Masters degree (research) candidates will not be examined by viva.