



The British
Psychological Society

Guidelines for Assessment of the PhD in Psychology and Related Disciplines

April 2017

April 2017

ISBN: 1-85433-470-1

ISBN 13: 978-1-85433-470-1

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First version published April 1995 by UCoSDA, which was produced with Financial Assistance from the Economic and Social Research Council and Association of Heads of Psychology Departments.

Second version published January 2000 by the British Psychological Society.

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Preface

There are a number of reasons why publication of these revised guidelines for the assessment of PhDs is both necessary and timely:

- (a) Compared with the undergraduate degree there is a general lack of guidance and nationally agreed standards for the examining of PhDs.
- (b) Mechanisms of quality assurance are coming under increasing scrutiny by bodies such as The Funding Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE), and external examiners at all levels are seen as playing a crucial role in this. It is important to ensure that the assessment procedures in place for PhDs are defensible and will bear external scrutiny. Departments are, therefore, encouraged to refer to the QAAHE Code of Practice in addition to these guidelines.
- (c) The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) guidelines on research training specify recommended levels of training provision within a training outlet. Although outlets can provide documentary evidence in support of their claims to be providing certain levels of training, PhD examiners are the only ones who can offer a regular independent check on the final effectiveness of training within an outlet, through their involvement with the specific products of this training (i.e. the theses and other outputs of candidates).
- (d) Although our primary remit is the Psychology PhD, we believe that guidelines produced for Psychology examiners would have wide relevance for a range of disciplines in the natural and social sciences. Psychology spans a uniquely wide range of approaches from the physiological through the computational to the social and qualitative. Guidelines for psychology examiners will, therefore, have to be of very broad generality to cope with this range.

Psychologists have a professional interest in many aspects of the assessment process. This is an updated version of the guidelines, the original document being published by The Universities' and Colleges' Staff Development Agency (UCoSDA) in 1995 and the second by the British Psychological Society (BPS) in 2000.

Introduction to the Guidelines

These guidelines are recommendations for good practice within UK Universities., they are in no way binding on institutions or individuals. Where the guidelines conflict directly with institutional regulations, then such regulations must prevail. Examiners using these guidelines are, however, encouraged to draw institutions' attention to points at which institutional regulations appear to be at variance with good practice.

Section 1:

The purpose of assessment of the PhD

- 1.1 The primary purpose of PhD assessment is to determine whether the candidate is competent as an independent researcher in the discipline.
- 1.2 The principal evidence of such competence is a written report of the research undertaken. Some elements of the research should be of publishable quality.
- 1.3 The research report is normally in the form of a thesis, but may also take other forms, such as a collection of research articles. (In these guidelines we shall use the term 'written submission' to include theses and all alternative forms of written materials.)
- 1.4 An important characteristic of a written submission at the doctoral (as opposed to the Master's) level is that it demonstrates the researcher's ability to advance progressively a research programme as new questions emerge by, for instance, modifications of the methods being used, or by the appropriate application of a variety of ideas, methodologies, or research traditions.

It should show evidence of being a significant contribution to knowledge and the capacity of the candidate to pursue further research without supervision. The thesis should, therefore, contain material worthy of publication.

- 1.5 Nonetheless, in the light of 1.1, other forms of evidence are appropriate. These will almost always include the ability of the candidate to defend his or her research in an oral examination (see also Section 5).
- 1.6 Extenuating circumstances of any sort should never cause an examining board to award a PhD in a case where the evidence submitted is not of an adequate standard.
- 1.7 The examination board does, however, have a serious responsibility to suggest ways in which a candidate might be assisted to address the deficiencies of the research, taking into account all relevant circumstances, for re-submission at a later date (see also Section 6).

Section 2:

The selection of examiners

2.1 Number of examiners

- 2.1.1 It has been normal practice within the UK to appoint two examiners, one internal and one external to the institution in which the candidate is registered.
- 2.1.2 The practice in most countries other than the UK is to have at least three examiners, at least two of whom will be external to the candidate's institution. Whilst recognising that custom and financial constraints will incline most institutions to favour the existing UK practice, there are clear advantages in appointing more than two examiners where feasible, at least one of whom must be external.

2.2 Constitution of the examination board

- 2.2.1 The examination board should be considered as a team, the members of which should possess skills and backgrounds which complement one another.
- 2.2.2 The examination board must possess among its members the expertise necessary to assess adequately all aspects of the candidate's research. Where the research crosses boundaries between normally separate research areas, it may be necessary to appoint more than one external examiner.
- 2.2.3 The examination board must have sufficient experience of examining at the doctoral level. Normally the members of the board should have previously examined at least two PhDs between them. If this is not the case, then justification for selecting a particular examiner needs to be obtained.
- 2.2.4 All members of the examination board should normally be willing to read the candidate's written submission and convene the oral examination within three months of receipt.
- 2.2.5 Sensitivity to the candidate's background should inform the composition of the examination board where possible. For instance, consideration could be given to the gender balance of the examination board. Considerations of relevant expertise, however, should always remain paramount.
- 2.2.6 Prior relationships between the examiners and the candidate, and also between the examiners and the supervisor, should be carefully considered in order to ensure that the examination board possesses an adequate degree of autonomy and detachment.

- 2.2.7 Where the candidate is a member of the academic staff, there should always be a minimum of two external examiners. This may also apply to part-time members of staff who are in the fourth year of their PhD studies, when considered appropriate.
- 2.2.8 There are advantages in the appointment of an additional independent internal chair of the examining board, who would be an experienced examiner with no direct involvement or necessary expertise in the research area of the candidate, but whose main concern would be the good conduct of the examination process and the dissemination of good practice.

2.3 Internal examiners

- 2.3.1 There should normally be one internal examiner, who is a member of the candidate's institution, but who may be drawn from another department if appropriate.
- 2.3.2 The internal examiner should possess a PhD or other evidence of a similar level of scholarship, and should normally have recent supervisory experience of PhD candidates.
- 2.3.3 No member of the candidate's supervisory team should be an examiner.
- 2.3.4 A member of the candidate's supervisory team other than the principal supervisor may act as internal examiner where no suitable alternative can be found, provided that an appropriate level of autonomy and detachment can be maintained.

2.4 External examiners

- 2.4.1 An external examiner should possess a PhD or other evidence of a similar level of scholarship, and should normally have been principal supervisor of at least one successful PhD student.
- 2.4.2 Ideally, an external examiner should have had prior experience as an internal examiner (but see 2.4.3).
- 2.4.3 An external examiner may be drawn from any country, and need not be an employee of an HE institution provided that he or she is active in the discipline and is engaged in relevant scholarship. All examiners should, however, be fluent speakers and readers of English.
- 2.4.4 An external examiner should have expertise of direct relevance to the candidate's research. One external examiner should have sufficient relevant knowledge and experience to take the lead role in the examining team.
- 2.4.5 An external examiner should not frequently examine in the same department, where this is likely to impinge on his or her autonomy.

2.4.6 In cases where there is no appropriate internal examiner, at least two external examiners must be appointed.

2.5 Mechanism for constituting the examination board

2.5.1 In order to facilitate their involvement in the examination process, the candidate should normally be invited to discuss with the supervisor possible members of the examination board, and should normally be offered the chance to give his or her comments on individuals suggested. The candidate's comments should be given serious consideration. The candidate should not, however, be offered right of veto over any proposed examiner. The discussion between the candidate and the supervisor should result in the drawing up of a shortlist, after which the candidate should have no further input to the decision-making.

2.5.2 Examiners should, where possible, avoid contact with the candidate between the appointment of the examination board and the oral examination. In no circumstances should there be discussions between the candidate and the external examiner(s) regarding the research or the examination. Any canvassing of an examiner by the candidate should immediately be reported by that examiner to the relevant institutional authority.

Section 3:

Preparation for the examination

3.1 Training of examiners

- 3.1.1 Examiners should normally receive a copy of these guidelines on appointment, and be expected to conduct themselves in accordance with them.
- 3.1.2 An examiner undertaking a role for the first time (whether as internal or external examiner) is strongly recommended to undertake appropriate preparation for this role. This may be accomplished in a variety of ways, such as:
- discussing this role with a more experienced colleague before embarking on the examination process;
 - participating in ‘mock’ vivas which are organised for postgraduate students;
 - sitting in on a real oral examination as observer;
 - reading relevant publications, e.g. Higher Education Academy (HEA) *A Handbook for External Examining* (2012)
 - attending training events for examiners organised at local or national level.

3.1 Training of the candidate

- 3.2.1 Candidates should be made aware of the existence of these guidelines and provided with an opportunity to consult them at an early stage in their PhD training.
- 3.2.2 Candidates should be given every encouragement to write and speak about their research at regular intervals during the PhD training. At the very least, every candidate should give a formal research presentation to the home department towards the end of the writing up period.
- 3.2.3 It is good practice to give candidates some experience of observing or participating in ‘mock’ oral examinations during the programme of PhD training.
- 3.2.4 Candidates should clearly understand that a supervisor’s agreement to making a written submission is not to be taken to mean that, in his or her view, the submission is of PhD standard. They should also understand that examiners may come to a different view from that of the supervisor about the merit of the work. The decision to submit must ultimately remain the candidate’s alone.
- 3.2.5 In the case of the PhD by publication, it is recommended that a supervisor is appointed to advise the candidate concerning the submission and the preparation of the supporting review. In these guidelines, it is assumed that such an individual exists. If not, then the institution should appoint an individual who will undertake the functions suggested for the supervisor in these guidelines.

Section 4:

Assessing the written submission of the candidate

4.1 The purpose of assessment

The essential task of all examiners is the same: to make an independent critical study of the work submitted. Examiners should be capable of separating issues of ideology and value, on which they may take opposing positions to one another and to the candidate, from issues of research competence within a recognised tradition. Differences in ideology or value between examiners and candidates should not be allowed to influence judgements about the competence of the research.

Whilst the following guidance notes apply to the assessment of both the PhD by thesis and the PhD by publication, specific guidance on the assessment of the PhD by Publication is detailed in Appendix 2.

4.2 Criteria to be used in assessing the written submission

4.2.1 In arriving at a judgement on the research competence of the candidate, examiners may find it useful to consider nine major attributes of a submission which may be independently assessed. Four of these attributes relate to the overall characteristics of the work, and five relate to specific sections of it.

4.2.2 The four overall attributes are:

- presentation and clarity,
- integration and coherence,
- contribution to knowledge,
- originality and creativity.

4.2.3 The five sectional attributes are:

- review of relevant literature,
- statement of the research problem,
- methods of enquiry adopted,
- analysis of data,
- discussion of outcomes.

4.2.4 Appendix 2 contains non-exhaustive brief notes of guidance for examiners concerning criteria to be applied when assessing each of the nine attributes above.

4.3 Agreeing and weighting the criteria

- 4.3.1 A submission may be adequate even though it displays weaknesses in some areas. Examiners should exercise their judgement, allowing strengths in some areas to compensate for weaknesses in others. The oral examination can provide a good opportunity for candidates to enlarge on strengths of the submission, if compensation is being considered.
- 4.3.2 Although differential weighting of attributes is appropriate, some attributes are clearly more important than others. A submission could not easily be judged adequate if the method or data-analysis sections were seriously deficient. On the other hand, a submission which lacked high levels of creative originality should not, on that basis alone, be deemed inadequate.

Section 5:

The oral examination

5.1 Functions of the oral examination

- 5.1.1 The oral examination is important, and it serves different functions for candidates of differing qualities.
- 5.1.2 If the written submission is judged to be adequate, the oral examination primarily serves an educational function in providing the candidate with the opportunity to defend the thesis by means of high level debate with expert examiners, and in such cases a poor performance in the oral examination (for instance, through extreme nervousness) will not normally lead to the degree being withheld. In such cases, the oral examination may, therefore, serve as a 'rite of passage', and as a demonstration of the candidate's ability to present the contents of the research programme in an alternative format such as a short formal oral presentation.
- 5.1.3 If the written submission is judged not to be adequate in one or more respects, the oral examination gives an essential opportunity for examiners to explore in detail general points of uncertainty, such as the autonomy of the candidate, the way in which the research relates to the research activities of the supervisor, issues related to the candidate's technical and reporting competence, and mastery of the theoretical context. It also provides an essential means of exploring points of difficulty in the research programme or its reporting.
- 5.1.4 Even where the written submission is good there may, however, be cases in which the oral examination brings to light information which might incline the examiners to refer or fail the thesis. For instance, a candidate may display such lack of detailed knowledge of the material in the oral examination as to cast doubts on the degree to which the research is the candidate's independent work.

5.2 Preparation for the oral examination

- 5.2.1 Candidates should be encouraged to remain engaged with their research material during the months prior to the oral examination by, for instance, re-reading their written submission, giving talks on their research, or preparing material for publication, as appropriate. They should also be encouraged to continue reading new relevant material as it is published.
- 5.2.2 Candidates should ensure that data be made available to examiners in advance or on the day of the viva, wherever practical.

- 5.2.3 The examiners should arrange to confer with one another before the start of the oral examination in order to consider that will be raised during the examination, agree the broad strategy and who will pose each question.

5.3 Conduct of the oral examination

An oral examination is normally held on the premises of the institution which is awarding the degree. It may only be held elsewhere by prior formal institutional approval.

- 5.3.1 The oral examination must be seen to be fair and, therefore, care must be taken that 'due process' is followed.
- 5.3.2 The examination should assess the thesis and determine that the candidate is indeed the author of the written materials submitted, and has a thorough understanding of the theoretical framework, issues, methods, and statistical analysis.
- 5.3.3 It is the responsibility of the examination board to attempt to put the candidate at ease, by, for example, starting with general comments or questions, and/or by making positive points about the submission.
- 5.3.4 The candidate must bring his or her personal copy of the written submission to the oral examination. Written submissions should, where permissible, be in loose-bound form to facilitate subsequent corrections.
- 5.3.5 It is good practice for candidates to come to the oral examination, if it is necessary, with their own list of typographical and other errors.
- 5.3.6 The presence of the supervisor at the oral examination is a matter for the institution to decide.
- 5.3.7 An oral examination should normally last for no less than one hour and will typically be of between two and three hours' duration. Where it is apparent that the examination will extend considerably beyond two hours, the candidate can request a break as and when required.
- 5.3.8 At the end of the examination the candidate should always be asked to leave the room while the examiners confer.
- 5.3.9 Where the examination board comprises three or more members, and when disagreement between examiners cannot be resolved by discussion, a vote should be held, with the majority view prevailing, provided that at least one external examiner takes the view of the majority.

- 5.3.10 Where there is only one external examiner, or where the examination board comprises only two members, then in cases of irresolvable disagreement between examiners, a further external examiner should be appointed. This examiner, who should possess the qualifications laid down in Section 2.4, shall have the right to request a second oral examination. This examiner should have no formal contact with either the candidate or the other examiners before submitting his or her independent report, and should likewise be given no indication of the views of other members of the examination board.
- 5.3.11 After the necessary discussions, which should not be unduly protracted, the candidate (and supervisor if involved) should be recalled and told in clear terms what the examiners will recommend to the University. The candidate should also be told that he or she will receive a written list of any revisions to be undertaken within a stated period of time.
- 5.3.12 The candidate should be reminded by the Chair that the recommendation of the examiners is exactly that – a recommendation. Such recommendations can be, and on rare occasions have been, rejected by the relevant University Committee. The candidate should be advised to await formal written communication from the University before taking any major steps.

5.4 After the oral examination

- 5.4.1 The examiners should write the joint report together or, after detailed discussion and by agreement, one examiner should write the report and send it on to the other(s) for amendment and signature.
- 5.4.2 The joint report should reflect the examiners' assessment of both the written submission and the candidate's performance at the oral examination.
- 5.4.3 In line with current practice, recommendations should follow the guidelines of the institution and will usually take one of the following forms:
- Immediate award of the degree.
 - Award after minor amendments have been made to the satisfaction of the internal examiner or whichever member of the Panel the institution deems appropriate. This would be appropriate where the corrections requested are mainly of a presentational type, or where a very small amount of material is involved.
 - Re-submission to all examiners after revision (with detailed advice about requirements). This would be appropriate where the examiners judge that a modest amount of rewriting or new work would yield a satisfactory outcome. In some circumstances, a second oral examination may be considered appropriate.
 - Formal submission for a lower degree (with or without amendments). This would be appropriate where the examiners judge that, although the research had some merit, substantially more or different work would be required to meet the standards of a PhD.

- Rejection with no right of re-submission. This would be appropriate where the research had such fundamental flaws as to be incapable of improvement to a level commensurate with a postgraduate qualification.

5.4.7 The internal examiner is the link back to the supervisor and should provide the supervisor with detailed information about the outcome of the examination.

5.4.8 If a second oral examination is requested by an examination board, then it is desirable to retain the same examiners, unless there are clear and explicitly stated reasons for not so doing.

Section 6: Appeals by the candidate against the outcome of the examination

- 6.1 Institutions will have guidance on its appeal process including details of extenuating circumstances, mitigating circumstances, special circumstances, impaired performance and so on.

Appendix 1

British Psychological Society. *Code of Ethics and Conduct*. UK: Leicester.
Please visit www.bps.org.uk to download the current version.

British Psychological Society. *Code of Human Research Ethics*. UK: Leicester.
Please visit www.bps.org.uk to download the current version.

Appendix 2:

Criteria for assessing PhD theses in psychology

General attributes

1. Presentation and clarity

- The reader should be able to read the text without difficulty.
- The text should be clear and ‘tell a story’.
- The submission should be ‘user friendly’. The reader should be able to find his or her way around the submission, locating tables and figures, and being able to cross-reference with ease. A numbering system for chapters, sections, and, sometimes, paragraphs can be very helpful.
- The style should be economic without unnecessary duplication or repetition.
- The bibliography and/or reference list should be complete and accurate.
- It should be possible to gain easy access to tables and figures relating to particular passages in the text, and to examine both data and commentary without effort.
- The submission should be no longer than necessary. It is usually best practice to set a limit of approximately 80,000 words, depending on the institutional regulations.

2. Integration and coherence

There should be logical and rational links between the component parts of the thesis. In some cases coherence will be achieved by a series of empirical studies or analyses which build one upon the other in an elegant and compelling fashion. Such a submission will have a true intellectual coherence – a ‘golden thread’ – in which all parts seem necessary and all parts are inter-related. In other words, there will be an intellectual wholeness to the submission. Such a submission will be outstanding, but this will not be an attribute of every adequate submission.

3. Contribution to knowledge

A submission should contain research of sufficient scientific rigour, approximately equivalent in quantity and quality to at least two articles of a standard acceptable to a fully refereed journal scanned by Psychological Abstracts. Where candidates have already had portions of their PhD work accepted for publication in such journals, this is prima facie evidence of an adequate standard. Alternatively, the submission should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of a book or research monograph which could meet the standards of an established academic publisher operating a system of critical peer review for book proposals and drafts.

3. Originality and creativity

The research and the written submission should be the candidate’s own work. However, the degree of independence shown may vary according to the research topic, since in some instances students will be working as part of a larger team,

while in other instances they will be completely on their own. A candidate should show an appropriate level of independent working. Provided that evidence of independent working is available, research assistants working on sponsored projects should be able to obtain PhDs by presenting appropriate portions of such projects.

General attributes

5. Review of relevant literature

Candidates should demonstrate that they have detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues. There should not be undue dependence on secondary sources.

The literature review should be more than a catalogue of the literature. It should contain a critical, analytic approach, with an understanding of sources of error and differences of opinion. The literature review should not be over-inclusive. It should not cover non-essential literature nor contain irrelevant digressions. Studies recognised as key or seminal in the field of enquiry should not be ignored. However, a student should not be penalised for omitting to review research published immediately before the thesis was submitted.

A good literature review will be succinct, penetrating and challenging.

6. Statement of the research problem

The literature review should have revealed some questions or issues which call for further investigation. Ideally, the problem to be tackled in the research should emerge naturally and inexorably from the literature review.

The research problem may arise as a result of past work which needs to be improved upon. It may be that there is a crucial test which will help to decide between competing theories. The candidate may:

- be proposing a novel theoretical or methodological slant on a topic;
- have created an interesting intellectual friction by bringing together hitherto unrelated fields or topics;
- or have developed a new area of application for a method or theory.

A clear and succinct statement of the research problem should be made, together with a set of specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

There should be some sense that the problem which has been identified is worthwhile.

7. Methods of enquiry adopted

Since determination of the most appropriate methodology is not always a straightforward matter, candidates should justify the methods chosen, with an appropriate rationale in each case.

A project may have a mixture of methodologies, suited to the changing needs of the project as it develops. There may, for instance, be initial semi-structured interviews yielding qualitative data, which can be analysed in a sensitive fashion to yield the building blocks for a more quantitative approach. Or, alternatively, the student may start out with an established quantitative methodology, decide it is inappropriate, and then move to qualitative methods to elicit new questions or issues. There are many variants. Potential alternative methods should be rejected on the basis of a reasoned case.

Candidates should be able to demonstrate that the methods used have been chosen through a conscious process of deliberation; and that the criteria for, and advantages and disadvantages of, particular choices of method are well specified.

There should be a sense of planning. This should include a reasoned consideration of the analytic techniques that the methods chosen will require.

8. Analysis of data

- The analytic methods used (quantitative or qualitative) need to be justified and need to be shown to be sufficient for the task.
- Any problems arising in the analysis should be recognised and tackled appropriately.
- Candidates should show sensitivity to problems of reliability, measurement error, and sources of bias.
- Candidates should understand the assumptions behind the methods of analysis used.
- Where appropriate, candidates should demonstrate imagination and creativity in identifying and analysing emergent properties of the data which may not have been foreseen.
- The analyses should be clearly linked to the explicit hypotheses, predictions, or questions which formed part of the stated research problem.
- Candidates should be able to demonstrate judgement in the presentation of key summary data within the body of the text, assigning primary data and data of secondary importance to appendices.
- The data should be presented in a well-structured way, so that a clear presentational sequence unfolds.
- In sum, candidates should be able to demonstrate WHY each particular analysis was conducted, HOW the analysis was done, and WHAT the analysis tells us about the data.

9. Discussion of outcomes

- The discussion should summarise, without undue repetition, what has been achieved in the research project.
- It should evaluate the project's contribution to the research area.
- Links should be drawn between the candidate's own work and the work reviewed in the literature review.

- The main findings should be interpreted and related to theory (and practice where appropriate).
- The candidate should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the research process as a whole. This reveals what the candidate has learned during the course of the work.
- In many cases it will be appropriate to include a section in which the candidate discusses the limitations of the research design and methodology in the light of knowledge acquired whilst undertaking the research, and outlines alternative or additional approaches which might be pursued.
- There should be some pointers to future work, either by the candidate or by others.
- An attempt should be made to identify issues which require further clarification.

10. PhD by publication

In cases where the submission is a collection of publications, all the above criteria apply, but the following additional ones should be included:

- a. The publications should constitute a coherent programme of research and make a significant contribution to knowledge.
- b. The publications should contain sufficient details so that the examiners can evaluate the research, particularly the underlying methodology.
- c. Papers/articles should be published (or in exceptional circumstances accepted for publication) in recognised peer refereed journals.
- d. The candidate should normally be first or sole author on all submitted publications. Where the candidate is not sole author, evidence should be provided to enable examiners to judge the extent of the candidate's independent contribution to the research.
- e. The publications must be contextualised within a critical review, not previously published elsewhere, which summarises and places in context the individual published studies, showing how they constitute a coherent research programme, and drawing attention to theoretical and methodological implications of the programme taken as a whole. This review should normally be of substantial length, of between 10,000–40,000 words.

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