

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
RULES AND PROCEDURE FOR THE EXAMINATION OF MASTER'S DEGREE
DISSERTATIONS

(Revised following BfGS 31 October 2023 and 23 October 2024.)

1. Approval and appointment of external examiners for dissertations.

The number of examiners appointed to examine a dissertation may vary depending on the credit value of the dissertation.

To support examiners' understanding of the range of variations in the structure of a master's degree and, in particular, in the research component, a faculty must make it explicit to examiners that a master's dissertation may vary in scope, depending on the credit value assigned to it, and a faculty guide must be provided so that what is required of the type of work they are asked to examine is well defined. Examiner must be alerted to the credit value of the student's work, and what is expected of such work.

The following are the minimum requirements for dissertations. These are organised by credit weight:

- i. For a **full dissertation**, two examiners from outside the University must be appointed per candidate. Where possible, three such possible examiners should be *nominated* by the HoD for approval, two of whom are appointed from the outset, and one kept as an alternate (i.e. the third should be approved as a reserve).
- ii. For a **minor dissertation of 120 or 90 NQF credits** two examiners are required per candidate, at least one of which must be from outside the University.
- iii. For a **minor dissertation of 60 NQF credits**, two examiners are required, one of which must be from outside the University. The examiner from outside the University may examine the dissertations of a group or of the whole class where this is appropriate. (Note: if an examiner examines a cohort, each individual student submission must be examined. Sampling from amongst the cohort is not permitted.)
- iv. For a minor dissertation of 60 NQF credits where instead of a unitary minor dissertation, two research outputs are produced (totalling the required 60 credits), two examiners are required, one internal and one external. Both the internal and external examiners may examine a cohort, or the full class or a set of non-unitary dissertations where this is appropriate. Sampling from amongst the cohort is not permitted.
- v. For examination of work submitted in fulfilment of the professional masters' research component, refer to the annexure.

An examiner from outside the University is ordinarily somebody who is external to the University. The examiner must have a qualification in a relevant field of study higher than, or at least at the same level as, the Masters programme being examined. In rare cases where it can be shown that no suitably qualified person outside the University can be found to examine a particular dissertation, Senate may approve the appointment of an examiner who is affiliated to the University but not involved in teaching/supervising the candidate. A full motivation establishing that there is no appropriate examiner outside UCT in the particular field is required in such cases and must be submitted to the Dean.

The examiners from outside the University may be from elsewhere in South Africa or outside South Africa whichever is more appropriate.

Examiners for dissertations are appointed by the Dean, or Faculty Board on behalf of Senate. Usually, nominations are circulated to the Committee of Assessors¹ for recommendation to the Dean and then published in the DC to obtain Faculty Board ratification. (The Dean ordinarily acts on behalf of the Board in approving examiners on recommendation of the CoA, and the names of the approved examiners must be published in the DC for ratification.)

In the case of the examination of a non-unitary minor dissertation of 60 NQF credits comprising two research outputs (each weighted 30 credits or 300 notional hours), examiner nominations may be considered by a relevant structure in the faculty, such as a sub-committee of the Higher Degrees Committee (HDC). The membership of this committee shall be approved by the faculty. This sub-committee should comprise a minimum of three members, excluding the Chair. Once appointed, this sub-committee may act in the capacity of CoA to recommend to the Dean the appointment of examiners of non-unitary dissertations.

In cases where an external examiner is used to examine a cohort or the full class, the nomination and approval of the examiner is done up front, and not in response to the student submitting for examination.

The candidate's supervisor may not examine the dissertation.

The candidate is not informed of the identity of the examiners until after the examination, and then only with their permission. The examiners may not be contacted about the dissertation by the supervisor/department while the dissertation is under examination.

2. Guidelines for dealing with possible conflicts of interest.

Examiners should both *be objective* and *be perceived to be objective*.

To ensure the perception of objectivity, no appointment should be made where there is a close relationship, or any familial relationship between student and examiner. It is important to avoid the perception that objectivity may be compromised. The perception that objectivity may be lost rather than proven via evidence that this is so, is sufficient to recommend that reciprocity be avoided.

¹ This could be a similar structure in a faculty that does not appoint Committees of Assessors for master's degree candidates. Whatever structure a faculty uses must have sufficient subject experts in the candidate's field to be able to judge the examinations, and to assess the examiners' reports.

Care should be taken to avoid appointing examiners who have been involved in the student's research and whose objectivity could thus be compromised or perceived to be compromised.

No external examiner should be appointed where there may be a conflict of interest between the supervisor and the proposed examiner.

3. Role and composition of the Committee of Assessors (CoA)

The role of the CoA is to assess. To do this, at least some of the members of the CoA must be sufficiently expert in the discipline to read and engage with the examiners' reports, and if necessary, to read the dissertation itself.

The CoA does not merely ratify the examiners' recommendations, or count votes, or settle on an average between diverging reports. It must be able to judge the worth of the examiners' reports, and if necessary, refer to the dissertation to do so. Where the CoA is able to assess, the need to appoint an assessor should be infrequent.

In assessing, the CoA may set aside a particular examiner's report if it finds that it is inadequate in a significant way.

It is thus recommended that the CoA be composed of a small group of *core members* to ensure consistency and continuity, as well as *expert members* appointed per candidate. In faculties with diverse disciplines a CoA that is not composed per candidate, may not be able to assess the reports of the examiners. A candidate is entitled to be assessed by experts in his or her discipline who are familiar with the literature as well as methodological and epistemological issues in the discipline.

In the case of the examination of a non-unitary minor dissertation comprising two research outputs each weighted 30 credits, the examiner reports may be considered by a special CoA sub-committee appointed by the faculty HDC or relevant structure, to assess the examination reports related to non-unitary dissertations. CoA members of such subcommittees should have adequate subject level expertise and should comprise a minimum of three members, excluding the Chair. Once appointed, this sub-committee may act in the capacity of CoA and make recommendations of the result to the FEC. However, the distinction between this subcommittee and the Committee of Assessors (CoA) remains clear, with the sub-committee acting as the CoA only for these specific submissions.

(Note: the result will be held on the record against a single 60-credit course, and each submission will contribute equally to the final mark posted, with a subminimum of 50% being required for each research component.)

4. Role of the supervisor in examination

The supervisor usually provides a non-evaluative report to the CoA on the supervision when the student submits the dissertation for examination. The supervisor may have no contact about the dissertation with examiners while the dissertation is under examination or prior to the result being decided.

The supervisor may be shown the examiners' reports and be invited to comment (along with the HoD) on these to the CoA. The supervisor may be invited to attend the meeting of the CoA to answer questions about the examiners' reports and defend a position, but the supervisor is not a *member* of the CoA for the candidate and should not be present when the CoA makes its decision. (Where he or she is a regular member of the CoA, he or she must recuse when the CoA considers any candidate he or she supervised, and this recusal must be recorded).

The supervisor may not be an examiner.

5. Role of an assessor

Where the CoA, having considered the reports of the examiners is not able to decide the result, it may appoint an internal or external assessor. The purpose in so doing is to seek an additional view to the view(s) of the CoA and examiners. Depending on the reason for the CoA not being able to reach a decision an assessor may be asked to do one or both of the following:

- *Assess the dissertation*
The assessor must read the dissertation and express a view as if he or she were an examiner
- *Assess the examiners' reports on the dissertation*
The assessor must read the dissertation and interpret the examiner's reports.

BfGS revision record:

15 February 2011

Revised November 2013 after the introduction of professional master's degrees

Revised May 2016. Reference to examination of professional master's research in a separate annexure

Revised September 2016 following discussion at SEC.

Revised Oct 2023 – enable the examination of two submissions in fulfilment of a 60-credit dissertation course.

Revised February 2024 – Post BfGS 31 October 2023 discussion

Revised December 2024 –Post SEC 8 April, 20 December discussion

Approved PC012025

SUPERVISION AND EXAMINATION OF RESEARCH IN THE PROFESSIONAL MASTER'S DEGREE

Annexure to the Rules and Procedures for the Examination of Master's Degree Dissertations

Preamble

The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) of the National Qualifications Framework (gazetted in August 2013) describes a Master's Degree (Professional) and includes in its requirements for the successful completion of the degree that:

'... a professional Master's degree must include an independent study component that comprises at least a quarter of the total credits, which must be at NQF level 9, consisting of either a single research or technical project or a series of smaller projects demonstrating innovation or professional expertise.'

1. Supervision of the professional Master's research project or projects

- 1.1. For the award of a general Master's degree, Rule GM3 requires advanced study, or an approved research project, under the guidance of a supervisor. The general Master's degree typically requires a supervised dissertation to be presented for examination. For the professional Master's degree, an independent study component that may comprise a series of smaller projects, including tasks, assignments, technical reports, designs, etc, is required.
- 1.2. The role of the supervisor in the professional Master's degree may differ from that of the supervisor in a general Master's Degree and alternative models of supervision, under the guidance of a University academic with the requisite expertise, may be agreed upon and made available to the student by the Department.

2. Examination of the professional Master's research project or projects

- 2.1. No person involved in the supervision of the professional Master's research project or projects may examine the project or projects.
- 2.2. Two examiners are required to examine each research project or projects in a professional Master's degree, one of which must be external to the University.¹ Provided that the course convenor has not supervised the research project, he or she may examine, as the internal examiner, the project or projects. The internal examiner must submit his or her examination report and recommendations together with the research projects to the external examiner for examination. The external examiner examines each project using the rubric and examiner's report provided to ensure the same standard is used for the allocation of marks by the two examiners. The examiners may examine the projects of a set of students or the whole class. 2.4
- 2.3. The two examiners' reports and recommendations must be submitted to the Head of Department or to a committee of assessors for consideration and a recommendation to the Faculty Examinations Committee.

2.4. Where a Faculty chooses, it may examine the research component of a professional master's degree in the same manner as a dissertation is examined.

¹ An examiner from outside the University is ordinarily somebody who is external to the University and has no current or recent affiliation to the University. An examiner from outside the University may be from elsewhere in South Africa or outside South Africa if it is appropriate in the circumstances.