Research Degrees Examination Board

Operational guidelines

Introduction

1. The Research Degrees Examination Board (RDEB) makes the decision on the award of research degrees for the University. It assures the consistency of academic standards across faculties by scrutinising all research degree examiners’ reports. RDEB consists of a Chair, the Graduate Education Directors with responsibility for PGRs from the six faculties and a Secretary. The secretariat for RDEB is provided by the Academic Quality and Policy Office (AQPO). There will normally be six ordinary meetings of RDEB each academic year on the dates published at http://www.bristol.ac.uk/directory/exams/research-degree/research-exam-board/.

2. The aim of these guidelines is to describe the procedures undertaken under the RDEB remit. The guidelines do not constitute policy and, in all cases, the regulations and policies themselves take primacy over this document. The key point of reference for research degree examinations is Section 9 of the PGR Code (http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/pg/pgrcode/section9/).

Preparation for RDEB meetings

Receipt of examiners’ reports and other documentation

3. All examiners’ reports and, where appointed, Independent Chair reports, plus any additional documentation to be considered by RDEB, must be received electronically by AQPO (pgr-exams@bristol.ac.uk) by the published deadlines, which are normally two weeks in advance of each RDEB meeting (see http://www.bristol.ac.uk/directory/exams/research-degree/research-exam-board/).

4. Reports submitted after the deadline will only be considered in exceptional circumstances at the request of the appropriate Graduate Education Director and with the permission of the Chair.

5. For RDEB meetings that closely precede a degree congregation, written confirmation regarding outstanding errors of substance received between the deadline date for papers and the RDEB meeting date will be included as tabled papers, providing the initial examiners’ reports were previously considered, or will be considered at the meeting, by RDEB.

Scrutiny of reports and other documentation

6. There are two complementary elements to the scrutiny organised through RDEB. AQPO undertakes an initial quality check on the reports and other documentation, which is followed by the academic scrutiny performed by Graduate Education Directors and the Chair. AQPO will follow up on any questions raised through its quality check with relevant staff in advance of RDEB meetings. Graduate Education
Directors and the Chair may seek clarification prior to the RDEB meeting or may raise any points at the meeting itself.

7. The examiners’ reports must be:
   • completed on the appropriate template (available at http://www.bristol.ac.uk/directory/exams/staff/research-degrees-staff-information/);
   • presented in typescript;
   • sufficiently detailed in its assessment of the thesis and the oral examination to enable the Board to make an informed decision;
   • signed (either by hand or electronically) by the examiners and the Head of School (or nominee), or by an alternative senior member of the school’s academic staff if the Head of School or nominee is the candidate’s supervisor or has acted as an internal examiner; and
   • in the case of errors of substance, must have – either in the body of the report or as an attachment – sufficient detail to convey to RDEB and to the candidate the requirements of the examiners to bring the work up to the required standard.

8. The Independent Chair’s report must be;
   • completed on the appropriate template, with any comments being sufficiently detailed (template is available at http://www.bristol.ac.uk/directory/exams/staff/research-degrees-staff-information/);
   • presented in typescript; and
   • signed (either by hand or electronically) by the Independent Chair.

Circulation for RDEB

9. The agenda, any papers, the candidate lists and reports for RDEB will be made available at least one week in advance of each meeting.

10. Additional and updated information (including addenda, written confirmation of completed errors and revised reports) may be submitted as tabled papers at RDEB at the discretion of the Chair and Secretary.

Doctoral prizes

11. Each year, RDEB awards an annual prize to one candidate from each faculty for outstanding excellence in a doctoral dissertation. Nominations are made by examiners on their joint final report. At the first RDEB meeting of the year, a list of nominated doctoral candidates from the previous year will be presented. Graduate Education Directors will, prior to the meeting, decide which of the nominated candidates from their faculty will receive the prize and confirm the name at the meeting with a supporting rationale. AQPO will manage the communications and payment for the prizes. The students should not be informed of their prize informally.
Chair’s powers

12. For urgent matters, and with the authorisation of RDEB, the Chair may make decisions between meetings on behalf of the Board. All decisions will be reported to the next RDEB meeting.

RDEB meetings

13. RDEB consists of a Chair, the Graduate Education Directors with responsibility for PGRs from the six faculties and a Secretary, plus relevant AQPO staff. When a Graduate Education Director is unable to attend an RDEB meeting, it is normal practice to nominate another senior academic from the faculty to perform the role. In those cases, the Graduate Education Director will provide guidance and notes on the examiners’ reports for the nominee. The quorum for RDEB requires the Chair (or nominee), four of the Graduate Education Directors (or their nominees), and the Secretary (or nominee).

14. RDEB meetings have a formal agenda, which normally follows a standard structure:
   - Chair's business: Any items requiring report to RDEB from the Chair, including any actions taken under Chair’s powers since the previous meeting.
   - Agree minutes from previous meeting and consideration of the matters arising.
   - Consideration of candidates who have not completed the examination process or other unusual cases.
   - Consideration of the examiners’ recommendations: This will form the focus for most of the meeting.
   - Any other business: RDEB members may raise any pertinent issues.
   - The meeting concludes with a consideration of equal opportunities and whether there are any communication issues arising from the meeting.

15. For some meetings there may be additional papers, such as on doctoral prize nominations, on the RDEB annual report, or on plagiarism cases. These will be clearly indicated on the agenda and included in the paperwork.

Consideration of examiners’ reports

16. Graduate Education Directors will have prepared for the meeting by scrutinising the examiners’ report for their faculty and for a partner faculty. For their own faculty, they will go through the list of candidates in order and confirm examiner recommendations or highlight where there are points for discussion. Graduate Education Directors will raise any comments they may have on reports for their partner faculty when the relevant candidate list is discussed. Graduate Education Directors and the Chair may also comment on any reports from any faculty during discussion.

17. As a result of RDEB’s discussion, the Graduate Education Director may be required to follow up with an internal examiner (or Independent Chair) or with the school to investigate any concerns raised or to take action depending on the nature of the concern. In those cases, it may be necessary to defer the decision on the candidate
and for this to be done, once the concern has been resolved, by Chair’s powers after the meeting.

18. It is rare for a research degree candidate to have progressed as far as the examination stage and to fail. In cases where the examiners have recommended a fail, RDEB normally requests that the relevant Graduate Education Director undertakes an investigation to ensure that that adequate support and guidance has been provided to the candidate over their period of registration.

Plagiarism reports

19. RDEB will receive reports from panels that have been set up to investigate suspected plagiarism. The Board will consider the panel’s recommendation and will make the decision on any academic penalty to be imposed and, where appropriate, refer serious cases under the Student Disciplinary Regulations. Please refer to Annex 8 of the PGR Code (http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/pg/pgrcode/annex8/).

Following RDEB

20. Formal minutes for RDEB meetings are produced and actions will be taken forward and reported in the matters arising item at the next meeting. The candidate list will be updated and processed based on the Board’s decisions.

Award outcomes

21. Actions taken by AQPO following RDEB’s decision on awards are as follows:

A – unconditional award.
The candidate is sent an email, followed by a letter of certification confirming the award. The student is able to proceed to graduation.

B – awarded subject to the correction of minor errors.
The candidate is sent an email, followed by a letter of certification confirming the award, together with a letter asking that the minor errors be corrected within 28 days of the date of the letter. The candidate’s internal examiner (or Independent Chair) is sent a letter asking for written or e-mailed confirmation when the errors have been corrected. The candidate is able to proceed to graduation.

C – errors of substance.
The candidate is sent a letter stating that corrections are required and giving a deadline for completion, which is normally six months from the date of the letter. A copy of the examiners’ reports and any further information provided by the examiners will be enclosed. An email is also sent to the candidate’s University email address. The letter is copied to the supervisors and internal examiner (or Independent Chair). The candidate will not receive an award (or be able to proceed to graduation) until RDEB has received and approved written confirmation from the examiners that the errors have been corrected to the examiners’ satisfaction.
D – permitted to resubmit and G - permitted to re-submit for masters –
The candidate is sent a letter stating that a resubmission is required and giving the
deadline for when the work must be resubmitted, which is normally twelve months
from the date of the letter. A copy of the examiners’ reports and any further
information provided by the examiners will be enclosed. An email is also sent to the
candidate’s University email address. The letter is copied to supervisors and the
internal examiner (or Independent Chair). Following resubmission of work, the
candidate will be re-examined, normally by the original examiners. All award
outcomes, other than a further resubmission, are available to the examiners following
a re-submission. A re-examination fee is payable by the candidate.

E – unconditionally award a Masters by research to a doctoral candidate and F –
award a Masters by research to a doctoral candidate subject to the correction of
minor errors.
The candidate is sent an email, followed by a letter of certification confirming the
award, which includes a statement on the appeal process. The student is able to
proceed to graduation.

H - Fail
The candidate is sent a letter confirming the fail, which includes a statement on the
appeal process.

Deadline for receipt of resubmissions and corrected work

22. Candidates who have corrected errors of substance submit their corrected
dissertation directly to the internal examiner (or Independent Chair) by the agreed
deadline determined by RDEB for consideration by all examiners. If the candidate
has submitted the corrected dissertation but the examiners are not satisfied with the
corrections, the examiners may agree to allow up to four additional weeks for the
candidate to make further, minor modifications. The internal examiner (or
Independent Chair) must inform AQPO if the additional time has been given.

23. When the examiners deem that the errors of substance have been corrected to their
satisfaction, the internal examiner (or Independent Chair) is required to confirm in
writing to AQPO that all examiners are satisfied with the corrections. The expectation
is that the examiners will contact AQPO within one month after the deadline with the
confirmation. The internal examiner (or Independent Chair) will be contacted by
AQPO if the confirmation is not received for clarification on whether the candidate
has not submitted their corrected dissertation or whether the examiners are still
considering the corrections. If AQPO is informed that the corrections have not yet
been submitted by the candidate, the supervisor will be contacted to provide an
update on progress and, if necessary, asked to encourage the candidate to apply in
writing for an extension. Requests for extensions will be considered by RDEB (see
below). Where the corrections have not been submitted and an extension has not
been granted, the candidature for the degree will lapse.
24. Resubmissions should be submitted by the candidate to AQPO by the agreed deadline determined by RDEB. If a resubmission is not received by AQPO by the deadline, the internal examiner (or Independent Chair) and the supervisors will be contacted by AQPO to provide an update on progress and, if necessary, asked to encourage the candidate to apply in writing for an extension. Requests for extensions will be considered by RDEB (see below). Where the resubmission has not been received and an extension has not been granted, the candidature for the degree will lapse.

Extension requests for candidates with errors to complete or a resubmission

25. Requests for an extension should be made in writing by the candidate and sent to AQPO. The candidate must provide sufficient detail on the reason for the request and propose a new date for completion. The request will be considered by the relevant Graduate Education Director or by the Chair on behalf of RDEB.

26. A first request for an extension to correct errors of substance will normally be considered and, if appropriate, approved by the relevant Graduate Education Director. Where any extension, either from a first or subsequent request, will take the total time allowed for correction of errors to more than one year, permission will be considered by the Chair on behalf of RDEB.

27. Any request for an extension for a resubmission will be considered and, if appropriate, approved by the Chair on behalf of RDEB.

28. Where a candidate presents corrected work after their deadline without having asked for an extension to cover the period, or where a granted extension has expired, the relevant Graduate Education Director will investigate and report on the circumstances to RDEB before any award is made.

Deemed to have withdrawn

29. Where the candidate has exceeded the time allowed for the correction of errors of substance or for a resubmission, AQPO will communicate with the supervisors and the internal examiner (or Independent Chair) to ask whether the candidate has been in contact and whether the work is expected. AQPO will report on these cases to RDEB for consideration, and will present any correspondence from the candidate, supervisors or the internal examiner (or Independent Chair). RDEB will consider each case and may decide that the student is deemed to have withdrawn or may decide that further investigation is required. In some cases, it may be appropriate for RDEB to consider a request for an extension and, if further time is granted, this will normally be considered as a final deadline. The maximum completion period (in Section 4.3.2 of the PGR Code: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/pg/pgrcode/section4/) is also a factor here.
Outstanding University and/or examiner requirements

30. Awards are made by RDEB irrespective of whether candidates have outstanding tuition and/or bench fee debts. Awards made to debtors will stand and can be verified by the University at any time. Tuition and/or bench fee debts will however exclude the candidate from having their degree conferred. It is only after written confirmation from the Finance Office that outstanding debts have been paid that candidates may proceed to graduation and receive their certificate.

31. Where the candidate has minor errors to complete or has completed them but written confirmation from their internal examiner (or Independent Chair) has not been received by AQPO, the candidate may still proceed to graduation but will have their degree certificate withheld until the matter has been resolved.

32. Where the candidate has not deposited the final version of their dissertation with the Library, the degree certificate will be withheld until the matter has been resolved.

Confirmation of award and degree certificates

33. Candidates who attend a graduation ceremony will have their degree conferred and, provided all University and/or examiner requirements have been met, will receive their degree certificate at the ceremony, or posted to the candidate’s home address after the congregation if the degree has been awarded in absentia.

34. Any withheld certificates are kept securely by the Examinations Office and will be released to candidates when all University and/or examiner requirements have been met.

RDEB annual report

35. Each year, RDEB provides a report on its activities to Education Committee, via the University Academic Quality and Standards Committee. The report contains information on awards and on how effectively the examination procedures have been followed.

AQPO/October 2018