Notes for Examiners of Master's Theses

Reference: Master's Thesis Regulations

Thank you for agreeing to examine a Victoria University of Wellington Master's candidate's thesis.

These notes summarise the key points that examiners need to know about the Master's thesis examination process at Victoria University of Wellington. For more information about specific Master's programmes, please visit our webpage for Master's Examiners: https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/masters-examiners

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About the Examiners

A Master's thesis is examined by two examiners who have expertise and standing in the field of study.

- At least one examiner must be an "**external examiner**", usually a member of the academic staff of another university or similar institution, typically from New Zealand or Australia.
- The other examiner (the "**internal examiner**") will normally be a member of the Victoria University of Wellington academic staff.

Conflicts of interest

The appointment of examiners is subject to the University's Conflicts of Interest Statute. Current or former supervisors, or those who have any other significant personal, professional or contractual relationship with the *candidate*, may not be appointed as examiners. If during the examination process you discover a potential conflict of interest or any other problem, please inform the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Research (FGR) via the Faculty of Graduate Research Examinations Team at fgr-exams@vuw.ac.nz

The examination should be completed independently: examiners should not discuss the thesis with the supervisor(s) or the candidate until the examination process is complete. Any consultation between examiners (e.g., to mediate a divergence in examiners' grades after reports have been received) should be conducted through the Postgraduate Research Coordinator for the School.

Confidentiality

We expect examiners to consider the thesis confidential during the examination process and to not share the thesis following the examination without permission from the candidate.

Expectations of a Master's thesis

A Master's thesis is the outcome of independent research, scholarship and/or creative activity conducted under supervision and having a value of at least 90 points (90 points is ¾ of a normal academic year's work). A candidate pursuing a course of study for the degree is expected to complete the work for the degree and submit the thesis for examination within 12 months of full-time (or equivalent) enrolment unless an extension has been approved.

The thesis shall present the results obtained by the candidate in an investigation relating to some branch of the subject being presented or, as appropriate, a review of the literature relating to some special problem that may be combined with an investigation of some aspect of this problem. For works of design, creation or performance, the student should include a written commentary on the work. It is expected that in all instances a thesis will demonstrate that the student can plan, carry out, and draw conclusions from the data they gather. There is no requirement that the thesis contain publishable results.

Length of thesis

The length of a 90-points Master's thesis must not exceed 30,000 words (35,000 words in Law). The length of a 120-point Master's thesis must not exceed 40,000 words (50,000 words in Law). Occasionally, a candidate may have received approval to exceed the word limit. If this is the case, you will be informed when you are sent the thesis.

Examiner's report

Each examiner is asked to return an examination report by the agreed due date (usually within five weeks of receiving the thesis).

In your report, please include your opinion, supported by comment, on the quality of the thesis. Your report, in its entirety, is shared with the candidate when they receive the result of their examination. **Please not include any recommended grade or percentage in your report itself**, because the final grade or percentage awarded may differ from your recommendation.

Outcome and grade recommendation

You are asked for your outcome recommendation under one of the following alternatives:

i. the thesis be accepted unconditionally;

ii. the thesis be accepted subject to minor amendments (e.g., to put right typographical errors or an inadequate bibliography);

iii. the thesis is of value, but needs substantial revision and resubmission. Note that if the thesis is resubmitted it will be re-examined by the same examiners unless there are exceptional circumstances, and the highest grade that may be awarded is a C minus.

iv. the thesis be rejected as unsatisfactory and that the candidate be advised that revision and resubmission will not be permitted

In addition to the outcome, you are required to recommend a grade and a percentage (**the grade and percentage must *not* be included in the Examiner's report itself**).

The grades used at Victoria University of Wellington are set out below, with corresponding percentages and indicative characteristics for guidance. The characteristics are intended to assist you in grading the thesis. These characteristics should not be rigidly interpreted. You will use your professional judgment to contextualise the characteristics of the thesis you are marking, and also to the weight or importance you assign to each. Do not treat the characteristics as a checklist against which "ticks" are accumulated. Your professional judgment is valued in drawing together the

strengths and weaknesses of the thesis; it is possible, for example, that a thesis may demonstrate that "*the whole is greater than the sum of the parts".* It is also important to give credit to positive features that are not covered by the indicative characteristics.

<table>
<tr><th>Grade</th><th>%</th><th></th><th>Indicative characteristics</th></tr>
<tr><td>A+</td><td>90–100%</td><td>Outstanding performance</td><td rowspan="3">A thesis in the A range is a sustained, coherent contribution that:
demonstrates broad understanding of the subject, including current debates;
demonstrates clear evidence of a scholarly stance, including a high level of independent and critical thinking;
demonstrates evidence of effective synthesis of ideas;
demonstrates coherence between theoretical position, methodology and questions;
demonstrates thorough investigative research, high level problem-solving and/or high level creative performance;
demonstrates the student's ability to critically evaluate their own research in the context of the existing body of literature;
may demonstrate originality in topic, method, theoretical development, creative practice or findings and conclusions (this would be expected at A+ level);
may include material of publishable quality (this criterion differs by discipline);
may include work that is exceptional or highly original in one area, but not fully realised or consistent in other sections/elements—such work may reach A-standard;
is presented to a consistently high standard.
The boundaries between A+, A, and A- may be dependent on the sustained excellence of the thesis. An A+ will be excellent throughout and is likely of publishable quality.
A student performing at this level is clearly capable of doctoral research.</td></tr>
<tr><td>A</td><td>85–89%</td><td>Excellent performance</td></tr>
<tr><td>A–</td><td>80–84%</td><td>Excellent performance in most respects</td></tr>
<tr><td>B+</td><td>75–79%</td><td>Very good performance</td><td rowspan="3">B grade theses are sound and compelling, and demonstrate evidence of critical thinking and an understanding of a significant body of knowledge. Work at this level also:
provides a logical overall argument;
selects and applies suitable methods;
gathers original data (where applicable) and analyses it in a careful and coherent manner;
provides evidence which clearly supports its findings and arguments;
may in parts be more descriptive than evaluative or synthesised;
may not fully realise the possibilities of the research data/findings;
includes discussions and/or conclusions which show some appreciation of the significance of the findings;
may make fewer or weaker links to existing research, theoretical concepts or creative practice than would be expected in A-grade work;
is presented to a generally high standard but may contain noticeable errors in referencing, punctuation, grammar and/or spelling.
The boundaries between B+, B, and B- may be dependent on the overall performance or significant strengths/deficiencies in specific areas. A student performing at the B+ level may be capable of doctoral research. Those at the B level and below are unlikely to succeed at higher levels.</td></tr>
<tr><td>B</td><td>70–74%</td><td>Good performance</td></tr>
<tr><td>B–</td><td>65–69%</td><td>Good performance overall, but some weaknesses</td></tr>
<tr><td>C+</td><td>60–64%</td><td>Satisfactory to good performance</td><td>A thesis in the C range:
demonstrates understanding and analytical ability at a level that is clearly beyond undergraduate level;
presents an overall argument, but may not be fully developed or consistent in its application;
outlines a research plan and applies appropriate methods;</td></tr>
</table>

C	55–59%	Satisfactory performance	• demonstrates competence in the formulation, conduct and analysis of an independent piece of research; • is generally sound but may be uneven or limited in some respect; • may demonstrate limited evidence of synthesis and critical engagement with literature; • is likely to focus more on description than analysis of findings • has appropriate, but limited, evidence in the support of its findings and arguments; • is competent in its presentation, but may have numerous, obvious errors of referencing, punctuation, spelling and/or grammar. The boundaries between C+, C, and C- may depend on the quality of individual thesis aspects. The strengths of a C grade thesis outweigh the weaknesses.
C–	50–54%	Adequate evidence of learning	
D	40–49%	Poor performance overall, some evidence of learning	A thesis in the D range demonstrates fundamental deficiencies in one or more expected elements: • the work is superficial, inaccurate and/or poorly organised; • arguments are absent, illogical, or not supported by evidence; • research literature, theory or methods are presented ineffectively, inaccurately or in an unreflective way; • the work is poorly supported by existing literature; • lacks breadth and depth; • lacks cohesion across the thesis; • interpretation is minimal or flawed; • presentation is poor with numerous errors of referencing, punctuation, spelling and/or grammar. The weaknesses of a D grade thesis outweigh the strengths.
E	Below 40%	Well below the standard required	An 'E' thesis does not meet the standard expected of a research student.

Amendments

If the thesis is acceptable, but contains minor or typographical errors, the student may make the necessary changes before the work is deposited in the library.

The grade for the thesis is for the document as it is submitted for examination. Editorial changes will have no impact on the grade awarded.

Examiners should refrain from recommending significant amendments to a thesis that has otherwise passed. A thesis that achieves a B or C grade may well have substantial scope for improvement, but it is the thesis that was graded that is deposited in the Library, not the thesis that might have been had the student achieved an A grade.

The School Research Committee, after considering the examiners' reports, determines whether or not amendments are compulsory, and the School Research Committee is responsible for arranging for an appropriate person to check and approve any compulsory amendments.

Official Information Act 1982 and Privacy Act 1993

Examiners' reports are expected to provide constructive and useful feedback to candidates. The University expects that examiners' reports will automatically be released to candidates in their entirety.

If you provide any confidential information outside your report (whether by email or other means), you need to be aware that the University is subject to the provisions of both the Official Information Act and the Privacy Act. Opinion from both the Ombudsman and the Privacy Commissioner indicates that any information that pertains to the thesis would be considered to be personal information about the candidate. The candidate could request access to it under the Official

Information Act. If such a request is made, the University must establish whether or not there is a reason to withhold the confidential comments under the provisions of the relevant Act.

Decision on final grade

The School Research Committee will consider your report and your grade recommendation alongside the report and recommendation of the other examiner. Where the examiner or supervisor is on the School Research Committee, they should not take part in this consideration. Where there is disagreement between the examiners on the grade, the School's Postgraduate Coordinator will contact the two examiners to ask them to come to an agreement. It is normal that the two examiners are able to come to a considered and mutually acceptable recommendation on a final grade. If you and the other examiner are unable to agree, then the School Research Committee has a range of options for determining a final grade, including, but not limited to making an informed decision based on the Committee's own reading of the two examiners' reports; asking an expert referee to consider, independently, the merits of the two examiners' reports; asking a third examiner to provide a report on the thesis; and consulting the supervisor.

Distribution of reports

Once the result of the examination has been confirmed, your examiner's report will be made available simultaneously to the candidate, the supervisor(s), and the other examiner. Reports will be released with the names of the examiners.

Conclusion of the examination

When the final grade has been approved, you will be notified of the outcome.

Appeals

Candidates have the right to appeal their grade. If this happens, it is normally handled by the School Research Committee without the need to reconsult the examiners, but occasionally a School Research Committee will contact an examiner for further information. The process for appeals can be found in Master's Thesis Regulations paragraphs 13.4.i–13.4.m.

Contact

For further information, email the Faculty of Graduate Research Examinations Team at FGR-Exams@vuw.ac.nz