The role of independent non-examining chairs

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Intended learning outcomes for I/Cs

- Know the nature of the role as newly specified in the 2010 regulations.
- Consider the actions & good practice required by that new role.
- Wrestle with some of the typical challenges and dilemmas inherent in the role.
- Recognise the ambassadorial nature of the role.
- Explore collegial responsibility for promoting PGR programmes within the University.
Background

- GSC Review of Independent Chairs-Feb 2010
- Academic Board (Jan 2010) approve Student Regulations for research degree students; and (June 2010) changes to University Academic Regulations for all research degrees.
The Regulations/Framework 2010

- Each oral examination shall have an independent ‘non-examining’ Chair, whose role will be to facilitate a professional and authoritative setting for the examination, and to ensure that the assessment process is conducted rigorously, equitably, appropriately, fairly and consistently, according to the University’s regulations and procedures. The Chair shall have a neutral role and take no part in the actual assessment of the student or submission. The Chair will advise the examiners on the University’s research degree regulations, procedures, policy and practice, and provide a report (in standard format) to the relevant University Committee (GSRDC) on the conduct of the examination.

(MPhil/PhD Regulation section 9.5; Professional Doctorate section 4.5.6 Examination paragraph 2 h).
PGR Code of Practice

37 Assessment processes are clear, and are operated rigorously, fairly, transparently, consistently and supportively.
The Independent ‘non-examining’ Chair shall be nominated by the relevant School Committee (SRC) and appointed by the relevant University Committee (GSRDC) when the examiners are appointed, and must satisfy the following criteria:

- is a current member of the University’s academic staff or Emeritus Professor;
- has **successfully supervised to completion** at least one research degree student (PhD or Professional Doctorate);
- Has **experience of examining for the degree being examined**;
- Has **experience of management of staff**;
- Has **sufficient experience and seniority to command respect** and, if necessary, intervene in the oral examination; and….

(MPhil/PhD Regulation section 9.5; Professional Doctorate section 4.5.6 Examination paragraph 2 i).
The Regulations/Framework 2010

- Is **independent**. Independence means that the Independent Chair:
  - has not previously acted as a **member of the student's supervision team**;
  - confirms before appointment that they have **no informal/personal connection with the student, and no conflict of interest**, which might prejudice the independence of the examination.

(MPhil/PhD Regulation section 9.5; Professional Doctorate section 4.5.6 Examination paragraph 2 i).
The Independent ‘non-examining’ Chair facilitates the examiners reaching a consensus recommendation.

If a consensus to make an award is not possible, the examiners provide separate reports which should clearly indicate the examiners’ individual recommendations and the reasons for these. The Independent Chair will also be required to report on why a consensus was not possible.

The Graduate School Research Degrees Committee may then appoint new examiners.

(MPhil/PhD Regulation section 10.6-7; Professional Doctorate section 4.5.6 Examination paragraph 3 g-h).
What do they mean in practice?

- Chair nominated by School from I/C College (comprising Graduate School Research Degrees Committee plus School nominees)
- All Chairs have significant experience (specified in the appointment criteria)
- Chairs are normally drawn from School of student
- All Chairs are independent
  - Not supervisors
  - No prejudicial personal/informal connection or conflict of interests
Do you have a say in the actual assessment?

- No

- But you facilitate a professional & authoritative setting for the exam;
- You seek to facilitate the examiners reaching a consensus;
- You always provide a report to GSRDC on the conduct of the exam
- In an appeal, reports are particularly significant
Responsibilities of the independent ‘non-examining’ chair.

- At least three months before the end of the active research, agree to be nominated as I/C by the School
- Confirm availability for the examination, to the Graduate School
- **Two months prior to examination (normally)** receive the following documentation from Graduate School Administrator:
  - A letter confirming the appointment of the two examiners and yourself
  - A copy of the relevant Regulations / Framework
  - A copy of the ‘Notes for Examiners of Research Degree Candidates’
- **Six weeks prior to examination (normally)** receive the following documentation from Graduate School Administrator:
  - An email indicating time/venue of examination and the following attachments: copies of relevant Regulations / Framework and ‘Notes for Examiners of Research Degree Candidates’
Responsibilities of the independent ‘non-examining’ chair.

- **At the pre-examination meeting with Examiners** receive the following documentation from Graduate School Administrator
  - Copies of both ‘A’ forms (preliminary reports from Examiners)
  - Copy of thesis (or portfolio)
  - Copy of blank ‘B’ form (duplicate, if required)
  - Copy of the relevant Regulations / Framework

- Meet the examiners, and in the introductory conversation, set the tone for facilitating a professional and authoritative setting for the exam, on behalf of the University

- Explain your role to the examiners

- Be a strong ambassador of the University (which includes both your academic School and the Graduate School)
Responsibilities of the independent ‘non-examining’ chair.

- **At the examination**
  - Welcome candidate (and Principal Supervisor if in attendance)
  - Do the introductions, describe the examination process (i.e. opportunity to defend work and prove it is their own, develop further ideas, test knowledge of background information and demonstrate oral skills) and indicate that the examiners and yourself have been appointed in accordance with the University Regulations / Framework.
  - Indicate their neutral role to candidate (including having no part in the assessment process).
  - Invite (external) examiners to take over.
  - Be vigilant with respect to style of questioning and “should intervene in favour of candidate in cases where, for instance, the questioning of an examiner appears to be unduly aggressive or confrontational, or otherwise inappropriate”.
  - Ensure candidate has the opportunity to respond to all questions posed by the examiners.
  - May wish to rephrase a question, or invite examiner to rephrase, where it appears that the candidate has not understood it fully.
  - Ensure that if the viva extends beyond 2 hours, the candidate is offered a break and refreshments.
Responsibilities of the independent ‘non-examining’ chair.

- **At the examination**
  - When examiners have concluded their discussion with candidate, ensure that there are no more queries and ask the candidate whether he/she has anything more they would like to add or ask.
  - Draw the proceedings together and outline the next steps i.e. candidate (and Principal Supervisor) to leave room, recommendation to be arrived at by examiners, and candidate and Principal Supervisor to attend to hear the examination outcome.
  - Invite candidate (Principal Supervisor) to leave the room while examiner discussions take place.
  - Offer guidance to examiners, if requested, on interpretation of Regulations/Framework.
  - Ensure ‘B’ form completed in sufficient detail and signed by examiners and yourself.
  - Contact Graduate School Administrator who will invite Principal Supervisor to attend feedback if they are not already in attendance.
Responsibilities of the independent ‘non-examining’ chair

- **At the examination**
  - Wait until Principal Supervisor arrives and then invite candidate to return to the examination room.
  - Inform candidate of *recommendation of examiners*.
  - Then, explain that Graduate School Research Degrees Committee will receive the recommendations at its next monthly meeting to decide the outcome; and to determine the time allowed for the student to complete any amendments (normally 12 weeks for minor; 6 months for major).
  - A letter will be sent to the candidate giving formal notification of the outcome of the examination and information on what to do next after that monthly meeting.
  - Complete your report on the examination, using the standard form for Independent Chairs

**NOTE:** Graduate School Research Degrees Committee, on behalf of Academic Board, approve examination outcomes (or not).
Significant Regulation/Framework changes from 1st September 2010 – Examination Outcomes

A. Award the degree.

B. Award the degree, subject to:
   - Either minor corrections being carried out to the satisfaction of a nominated examiner(s);
   - Or major corrections being carried out to the satisfaction of a nominated examiner(s);

C. Require a re-submission for the degree, including a further oral examination, and with the work re-submitted within a maximum period of twelve months from the date of the first examination.

D. Recommend the award of a lower degree, with or without further amendment to the thesis, in accordance with the criteria and requirements of that lower degree.

E. Fail.

NOTE: Clause C) above is not applicable in the case of a re-submission (MPhil/PhD Regs 10.3; Prof Doct Regs 4.5.6-3c)
Significant Regulation/Framework changes from 1\textsuperscript{st} September 2010 – Examination Outcomes

- **Minor corrections** - may take the form of i) the correction of typographical, spelling and grammatical errors and ii) limited revisions of material in the thesis/dissertation that the examiners specify in detail and which in their judgement is necessary for the thesis/dissertation to reach an acceptable standard. This latter category can include limited revisions not central to the thesis/dissertation, omissions, and improvements to the argument which do not materially alter the conclusions.

- **Major corrections** - are matters which are in excess of minor corrections but not, in the opinion of the examiners, sufficient to require the candidate to revise and re-submit. Such modifications may involve a major re-write of sections or significant clarification and amendment of arguments. The award of the degree is withheld until the examiners confirm that all corrections have been completed.

(MPhil/PhD Regs 10.3 footnotes; Prof Doct Regs 4.5.6-3c footnotes)
Significant Regulation/Framework changes from 1st September 2010 – Examination Outcomes

- The relevant University Committee (GSRDC) will, in each case, determine the timescale and deadline for the minor or major amendments required by the examiners (normally 12 weeks or 6 months respectively) taking into account the scale of the amendments required.

- The examiners’ report states in detail the reasons underlying the recommendation and provides the evidence to substantiate their conclusion; and, where appropriate, lists the alterations and/or additions required to the work.

(MPhil/PhD Regs 10.9 & 10.4; Prof Doct Regs 4.5.6-3f & 3d)
Significant Regulation/Framework changes from 1st September 2010 – Examination Outcomes

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- The Graduate School Research Degrees Committee may then appoint new examiners.

(MPhil/PhD Regs 10.6 & 7; Prof Doct Regs 4.5.6-3g & 3h)
Changes to committee TOR

- GSC Exams Panel now called Graduate School Research Degrees Committee
- Meets monthly on scheduled dates to decide on examiners’ recommendations re exam outcomes
- Quoracy = 4
- Powers otherwise unchanged, i.e.
- Holds delegated responsibility from Academic Board for PGR exams and awards
Other Regulation/Framework changes from 1st September 2010

Satisfactory & timely progression

- Students are required to complete their research programme, and all progression points within the designated timescale, and to demonstrate timely academic achievement at the appropriate level throughout the programme. The University will require the student to withdraw if he/she does not meet the required academic standard or meet the formal progression requirements in a timely manner.

(MPhil/PhD Regs 5.3; Prof Doc Regs 4.5.4 – section 8)
Other Regulation/Framework changes from 1st September 2010

Supervision

- The Supervisory team monitors the student’s progress and assesses whether timely academic achievement at the appropriate level has been demonstrated. Supervision includes both monitoring and assessing sustained progress throughout the programme in the course of routine supervision, and also the annual monitoring process according to the requirements set by the relevant Committee (SRC).

- They will meet (or make contact) with the student on a monthly basis and have responsibility for the overall management and quality assurance of the student’s supervision; for monitoring timely student progress towards the academic level required of the award; and for feeding back to the student both formally and informally their assessment of student performance.

(MPhil/PhD Regs 5.2 & 7.1)
Supervision

- Students’ progress is monitored by the Supervisory team throughout the research component as work progresses, to ensure timely academic achievement at the appropriate level required by the award. Supervision includes both monitoring sustained progress throughout the programme on a monthly basis, and the annual monitoring process according to the requirements set by the relevant School Research Committee.

- Supervisors …meet with the student on a monthly basis. A member of the University's permanent staff appointed to the team will be designated with responsibility for the overall management and quality assurance of the student’s supervision and progression; for monitoring and feeding back to the student both formally and informally their assessment of student performance. Where students are remotely located and face-to-face meetings are not possible, monthly ‘contacts’ will be conducted by other means (e.g. telephone).

(Prof Doct Regs 4.5.4. – 2; and 4.5.3)
What is “Doctorateness”? 

The degree of PhD is awarded to a student who has:

- undertaken a piece of supervised research;
- critically investigated and evaluated an approved topic resulting in an independent and original contribution to knowledge and understanding (i.e. worthy of publication and peer review by the academic community);
- successfully completed training in, and demonstrated an understanding of research methods appropriate to the field;
- submitted the work for examination presented to a professional standard;
- defended the submission by oral examination to the satisfaction of the examiners

(MPhil/PhD Regs 1.2)
What is “Doctorateness”?  

Professional Doctorate…  

- …results in an original contribution to knowledge and practice within the profession, elements of which will be worthy of publication. It will also demonstrate understanding of the general area within which the research lies & the student’s ability to translate ideas into a form understandable by and meaning for to the professions.  

- The tone of the oral examination will allow full expression to the professional dimension of the work.  

(Prof Doct Framework/Regs 4.5.1. – 9 & 6)
In summary:

The role of the independent non-examining chair in the *viva voce* examination is to:

- facilitate a professional/authoritative setting for the exam
- safeguard the candidate’s interests
- ensure adherence to the Regulations/Framework
- report on the conduct of the exam
- be responsible for
  - the way the *viva voce* examination is conducted
  - completion of the associated paperwork i.e. a signed copy, by both examiners and yourself, of the ‘B’ form containing both a detailed examiners’ report and a recommendation.