



Procedure for Examination of Research Degrees

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1. Purpose

This procedure supports the *AQAE011 Research Degree Policy* which articulates the principles, standards and requirements for the assessment and completion of research degree at Atlantic Technological University (ATU). The purpose of this document is to describe the procedure for the examination of Master's Degree (Research) at Level 9 and Doctoral Degree at Level 10 at ATU. The procedure details the steps involved in completing the examination process and attendant responsibilities.

2. Scope

This procedure applies to any student who embarks on a programme of study in ATU leading to the award of a Master's Degree (Research) at Level 9 or a Doctoral Degree at Level 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The procedure also applies to those responsible for the management and assessment of research degrees in ATU, including supervisors and examiners.

This document does not apply to the Structured Research Masters in ATU. *AQAE066 Procedure for Monitoring and Examination of Structured Research Master's Degree* describes the procedure for the examination of Structured Research Master's degrees in ATU.

3. Reference Documents

- National Framework for Doctoral Education Revised (2023)
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) *Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes* (2020)
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Research Degree Programmes* (2017)

4. Procedure

4.1.1 Notification of Intention to Present for Examination

At least three months in advance of submission of the thesis, the principal supervisor (on behalf of the supervision team) and the student together forward a completed *AQAE059_001 Notice of Intention to Present for Examination Form* to the office of the Chief Officer of Research, Innovation & Engagement.

Included on the form are the following details:

1. A fully completed and signed notice of intention to submit for examination form.
2. Confirmation that required ECTS have been achieved.
3. Names of the proposed examiners.

The office of the Chief Officer of Research, Innovation & Engagement will liaise with the Quality Office to ensure that the appointment and approval of Examiners are fulfilled as per *AQAE014 Procedure for External Examination*.

To submit a thesis for examination the student must be registered, appropriate fees paid in full and have completed all training requirements.

4.1.2 Thesis Presentation Guidelines¹

1. For a Level 9 Research Award the thesis should not normally exceed 40,000 words excluding bibliography and appendices but inclusive of the table of contents, figures/illustrations/tables, footnotes.
2. For a Level 10 PhD Award the thesis should not normally exceed 80,000 words excluding bibliography and appendices but inclusive of the table of contents, figures/illustrations/tables, footnotes.
3. For a Level 10 Professional Doctorate Award the thesis should not normally exceed 50,000 words excluding bibliography and appendices but inclusive of the tables of contents, figures/illustrations/tables, footnotes.

The student should initially submit one electronic copy of the thesis to the office of the Chief Officer of Research, Innovation & Engagement who will forward to the examiners and the Chairperson of the *Viva Voce* process.²

In the case of a thesis, which is accompanied by an exhibit or artefact produced or developed by the student, which forms a significant part of the submission, the principal supervisor arranges appropriate and convenient access to the exhibit or artefact for the purpose of assessment by the examiners. The artefact should remain at ATU (either with the supervision team or in the library) following completion of the examination process.

The title page shall contain the following information:

- The full title (and subtitle, if any)
- The volume number and total number of volumes, if more than one
- The full name of the candidate, followed, if desired, by any degree and/or professional qualification(s). This must be the registered name, as on the student's

¹ Details on thesis format may vary according to discipline area

² An e-thesis submission process may become available in ATU in due course. A soft copy may be requested.

ID card. Shortened versions or names translated into other languages will not be accepted.

- The qualification for which the thesis is submitted
- The name(s) of the supervisor(s), name of Department, School and Faculty, component discipline(s),
- The month and year of submission.
- Signed declaration.
- ATU University logo.

The title should describe the content of the thesis accurately and concisely. The 'Table of Contents,' which should not be over-detailed, shall immediately follow the title page. The thesis should be in typescript or print (12-point type) on A4-size paper single-sided. Line-spacing should be one-and-half; text must be left justified with a left-hand margin of 4 cm.

More compact formats, with smaller font sizes, are usually appropriate for certain sections, such as footnotes, bibliographies and appendices. Pages must be numbered consecutively, with page numbers located centrally at the bottom, and chapter headers at the top of each page. Diagrams, graphs, photographs and tables should be properly numbered and located in relation to the text.

An abstract not exceeding 300 words should be provided as an integral part of the thesis and should precede the main text. The abstract should be typed in single spacing and indicate the author and title of the thesis in the form of a heading.

4.2 Research Degree Examiners

A minimum of two examiners, at least one of whom shall be external to ATU, will be appointed to examine a research degree. Where the student is also a member of staff of ATU, an examiner must be appointed from outside the university to fulfil the role of internal examiner. The procedure for nominating and approving research degree examiners is set out in *AQAE014 Procedure for External Examination*. Prior to the nomination and approval of examiners, the principal supervisor will have assessed the examiners' willingness and ability to act as examiners for the research.

Once approved, the examiners will receive relevant ATU Policies and Procedures from the Quality Office. Examiners are normally expected to carry out their duties within three months of receipt of the thesis.

4.2.1 Criteria for Appointment as Examiner

The **internal examiner** must:

1. Normally be an ATU staff member (academic/ research) unless student is a member of ATU staff.

2. Be independent of the research project, the supervision team, and the student (for example cannot be a line manager).
3. (Can) have served as a member of the Confirmation Assessment Panel.
4. Hold a qualification equal to or higher than the level of award being examined.
5. Have relevant experience in the in the general area of the student's research.
6. Have successfully supervised research students to completion at the level of the award being sought by the student. Where this cannot be facilitated within ATU, a further external examiner will be appointed to fulfil the duties assigned to the internal examiner.

In addition to examining the thesis, the internal examiner has an administrative role in maintaining contact as appropriate with the office of the Chief Officer of Research, Innovation & Engagement on behalf of the other examiner(s) regarding assessment. The Chair assumes this responsibility if both examiners are external to ATU.

The **external examiner** must:

- i. Be independent of the university, the student and the supervision team and shall not have acted previously as the student's supervisor or adviser or be a supervisor of another student at the university.
- ii. Be an academic or recognised expert from outside academia.
- iii. Hold a qualification equal to at least or higher than the level of award being examined.
- iv. Have successfully supervised research students at the level of the award being sought by the student.
- v. Ideally have experience of examining research degree students at the level of the award being examined.
- vi. Be experienced in research as a specialist in the topic(s) to be examined.

Repeat appointments, clusters of appointments from specific HEI departments or research units and other conflicts of interest should be avoided.

4.2.2 Duties of the Examiners

The duties of the internal and external examiners for Research Degrees are to:

1. Complete an examination of the submitted student work e.g., thesis or published papers together with performance recordings where appropriate.
2. Communicate with other examiners after one month of receipt of the student's thesis.
3. Review the submission independently and prepare preliminary observations/recommendations on the submitted work and submit to the Chairperson in advance of the *viva voce* (normally only conducted in the case of Level 10 research degrees).

4. Attend the defence of the thesis, a *viva voce* examination (normally only conducted in the case of Level 10 research degrees). This will take place usually in the campus where the student is located, but may, in some circumstances, and by agreement, take place in another location, or using remote meeting facilities.
5. Attend any other assessment event that the Chairperson of the *viva voce* deems necessary.
6. Conclude the assessment, including *viva voce*, within three months of receipt of the student's thesis.
7. Assist the university in any matters relating to an examination appeal requested by the student.
8. Refrain from engaging in direct communication or correspondence with the student or the supervision team in the period between appointment and the *viva voce*.
9. Ensure the confidentiality of communication, examination and documentation pertaining to research degrees at ATU.
10. Return the copy of the submitted work and a report using the AQAE059_002 *Examiner Report (Research Degree)* on their assessment and observations, recording one of the five listed assessment categories/ recommendations (section 4.4.4).

4.3 Final Examination

4.3.1 Purpose

Students must successfully complete all elements of the research degree programme to be awarded their degree by ATU. All candidates presenting for final examination must confirm that required ECTS have been successfully acquired. For Level 10 candidates intending to submit their final thesis, a Confirmation or Transfer process must also have been completed.

The purpose of the final examination of a research degree is to assess the research output produced by the student for its suitability for the award of the degree. Please see Appendix 1 on the Assessment Criteria Award Standards Level 9 and Level 10.

4.3.2 Viva Voce

The *viva voce* (often referred to as the viva) is a formal oral examination, or oral defence, which forms part of the examination. All Level 10 research degrees are examined by a *viva voce* following submission of the thesis (or equivalent). Level 9 research degrees do not have to complete a *viva voce* unless requested to do so by the examiners.

An independent Chairperson (Chair) will be appointed by the office of the Chief Officer for Research, Innovation & Engagement to chair the *viva voce*. All Chairs must undergo *Viva Voce* training provided by ATU. Criteria for appointment of Chair are as follows:

1. be a member of academic/research staff of ATU.

2. independent of the research student, supervision team, collaborating or sponsoring institution (s) if applicable, and the Examiners.
3. have completed ATU training on chairing research examinations.
4. have a qualification of at least the level sought by the student
5. have experience of successfully supervising research degree students to completion at this level and/or have experience of examining at this level.

The role of the Chair is to manage the *viva voce* and to ensure that it is undertaken in a rigorous, fair, reliable, courteous, and professional manner, and in accordance with relevant university regulations. The Chair can provide advice on these regulations as required. The Chair shall have no role in determining the result.

4.3.3 The *Viva Voce* Examination

The *viva voce* examination panel comprises the Chair, an internal examiner and at least one external examiner. The arrangements for the *viva voce* shall be made by the office of the Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement including agreeing a suitable date and venue in consultation with the examiners, the Chair, the principal supervisor and the student. In attendance at the *viva voce* are the Chair, the Examiners, the supervision team as appropriate, and *with the agreement* of the student, an observer (for example a Chair completing training or an examiner new to the process).

The *viva voce* examination must be conducted rigorously, fairly and reliably and should only be undertaken by individuals with relevant qualifications and experience. It will normally take place within three months of submission of the work presented. It will usually be conducted in English except by agreement with the student, principal supervisor and the examiners.

The supervision team may be present at the *viva voce* but do not participate unless requested to do so by the examiners or the Chair. In certain circumstances, the principal supervisor may be consulted for clarification purposes only.

The Chair should ensure that the external and the internal examiners have had the opportunity to confer prior to the *viva voce*. Issues to be raised at the examination will have been identified including any problematic areas. The aim is to ensure that these are adequately explored in the dialogue between candidate and examiners. The Chair will also agree a broad plan for the *viva voce* including who will ask questions and in what order. During a *viva voce*, it is normally the case that the discussion is led by the external examiner.

At the beginning of the *viva voce*, the Chair will introduce the examiners to the student, briefly explain the purpose of the examination and the procedures to be followed. The examiners will have read the thesis thoroughly. During the examination process the examiners will explore the quality of the written thesis, as well as the student's ability to articulate and defend their research. The Chair endeavours to ensure a fair and constructive dialogue between the examiners and the student.

The student will be invited to make a presentation of maximum 15 minutes before the examiners begin with their questions. This will be followed by a dialogue with the examiners asking questions of the student. Either the student or the Chair can suggest a break after every one hour as necessary. The minimum duration of a break is 15 minutes. *AQAE012 Reasonable Accommodations Policy for Students with a Disability* outlines the framework for ensuring equal access and opportunities in teaching, learning, and assessment.

At the end of examiner questioning, the student will be offered an opportunity to add any further details and clarify any emerging issues as appropriate. Once the viva voce is finished, the student and supervisors are invited to leave. The examiners will then confer in the presence of the Chair and reach a decision. When the decision is reached the Chair will bring the student and supervisors back to the meeting room. The external examiner will then inform the student of the outcome.

4.3.4 Examination Outcomes

Level 9 Examination Outcomes

Following examination of the work, the internal examiner returns the copy of the submitted work together with *AQAE059_002 Examiner Report (Research Degree)* to the office of the Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement and to the Faculty office. In the case of a Level 9 award where no *viva voce* examination takes place, both examiners confer to agree a recommendation.

1. Recommended – no revisions required.
 - the student submits one hard copy of the final thesis along with *AQAE059_003 Thesis Completion Form* to the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement. The cover the thesis must bear the title of the thesis, candidate's name, degree awarded and the year of submission.
2. Recommended - subject to minor revisions.
 - revisions should be clearly detailed and forwarded by the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement to the student and principal supervisor who can discuss the approach to completing the revisions
 - revisions are typically carried out within three months
 - revisions must be certified as satisfactory by the internal (and/or the external) examiner using the *AQAE059_004 Thesis Revisions Completion Form*
 - once revisions are deemed satisfactory by the internal examiner, the student submits one hardbound copy of the final thesis and the principal supervisor completes and submits the *AQAE059_003 Thesis Completion Form* to the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement.

3. Recommended - subject to major revisions

- revisions should be clearly detailed and forwarded by the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement to the student and principal supervisor who can discuss the approach to completing the revisions
- the student will work closely with the supervision team to revise the thesis
- revisions are typically carried out within six months
- once the revisions are complete, the student resubmits the thesis with revisions to the office of the Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement who forwards to the internal examiner
- revisions must be certified as satisfactory by the internal (and/or the external) examiner using the *AQAE059_004 Thesis Revisions Completion Form*
- once revisions are deemed satisfactory by the internal examiner, the student submits one hardbound copy of the final thesis and the principal supervisor completes and submits the *AQAE059_003 Thesis Completion Form* to the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement

4. Not recommended.

- The student in consultation with the supervision team may apply to PRAC for a renewal of registration, indicating an intention to (re)submit for examination after a minimum of six months.

Level 10 Examination Outcomes

Following examination of the work, the examiners return the copy of the submitted work together with *AQAE059_002 Examiner Report (Research Degree)* to the Chair (no later than two weeks). The Chair will submit this report to the office of the Chief Officer Research Innovation & engagement and to the Faculty office. The latter forwards the report to the principal supervisor and the student. The report contains the examiners' assessment and observations and should clearly indicate where revisions, if any, are required. They can also offer advice, if appropriate, on opportunities for further dissemination of the work. The report also includes one of the following recommendations:

1. Recommended – no revisions required.

- the student submits one hard copy of the final thesis along with *AQAE059_003 Thesis Completion Form* to the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement. The cover the thesis must bear the title of the thesis, candidate's name, degree awarded and the year of submission.

2. Recommended – subject to minor revisions.

- revisions should be clearly detailed and forwarded by the Chair to the student and principal supervisor who can discuss the approach to completing the revisions

- revisions are typically carried out within three months of the *viva voce* and forwarded to the examiners via the Chair
 - revisions must be certified as satisfactory by the internal (and/or the external) examiner using the *AQAE059_004 Thesis Revisions Completion Form*
 - once revisions are deemed satisfactory by the internal examiner, the student submits one hardbound copy of the final thesis and the principal supervisor completes and submits the *AQAE059_003 Thesis Completion Declaration* to the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement.
3. Referred for major revisions without full re-examination.
- revisions should be clearly detailed and forwarded by the Chair to the student and principal supervisor
 - the student will work closely with the supervision team to revise the thesis
 - revisions are typically carried out within six months from the date of the *viva voce*
 - once the revisions are complete, the student resubmits the thesis with revisions to the office of the Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement who forwards to the internal examiner
 - revisions must be certified as satisfactory by the internal (and/or the external) examiner using the *AQAE059_004 Thesis Revisions Completion Form*
 - once revisions are deemed satisfactory by the internal examiner, the student submits one hardbound copy of the final thesis and the principal supervisor completes and submits the *AQAE059_003 Thesis Completion Form* to the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement.
4. Referred for substantial revisions with full re-examination - revise thesis and resubmit.
- revisions should be clearly detailed and forwarded by the Chair to the student and principal supervisor
 - the student will work closely with the supervision team to revise the thesis
 - revisions are typically carried out within six months from the date of the *viva voce*, and there may be fee liabilities (please see *ATU Fees Policy*)
 - the examiners may decide that 12 months is required to complete the revisions
 - once the revisions are complete, the student resubmits the thesis to the office of the Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement who will reconvene the examinations committee (examiners and Chair)
 - the original examiners will re-examine the thesis, unless exceptional circumstances relating to their availability pertain
 - examiners may invoke recommendations 1, 2, 3 or 5 at the end of the examination process.
 - if further revisions are deemed necessary as per recommendations 2 or 3, once such revisions are deemed satisfactory by the internal examiner, the student submits one

hardbound copy of the final thesis and the principal supervisor completes and submits the *AQAE059_003 Thesis Completion Form* to the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement.

5. Not recommended - the examiners may recommend that the work be submitted for a lower award.

4.3.5 Postgraduate Research Examination Board

Once the examination process is concluded, the outcome is forwarded to the Faculty office by the office of the Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement where the result is recorded on the Exam Broadsheets. This is considered at the next meeting of the Postgraduate Research Examination Board who will review the result and the *AQAE059_002 Examiner Report (Research Degree)*. The membership of the board is as follows:

Chair	Appointed by office of Registrar & Chief Academic Officer
Dean of Faculty (or nominee)	
Member of the office of Chief Officer Research, Innovation & Engagement	
Head of Department where student is registered	
At least one supervisor for each student being considered	
Examiner (s)	
Recording Secretary provided by office of Registrar & Chief Academic Officer	

Having considered the recommendations of the examiners, the final determination of the result is a matter for the Examination Board. The Chair will submit the Board's recommendation to Academic Affairs manager to allow release of results.

If the outcome of the examination is 'Not recommended', the student will receive a transcript for any taught modules completed during the programme.

4.3.6 Appeal

A research degree student may appeal the outcome of the examination process through the *AQAE033 Procedure for Recheck, Review and Appeal*.

5. Documents Related to this Procedure

5.1.1 Policy

- *AQAE011 Research Degree Policy.*
- *AQAE009 Recognition of Prior Learning Policy.*
- *AQAE005 Marks & Standards Policy.*
- *AQAE012 Reasonable Accommodations Policy for Students with a Disability*
- *ATU Fees Policy*

5.1.2 Procedures

- *AQAE014 Procedure for External Examination.*
- *AQAE033 Procedure for Recheck, Review and Appeal.*
- *AQAE066 Procedure for Monitoring and Examination of Structured Research Master's Degrees.*

5.1.3 Forms

- *AQAE059_001 Notice of Intention to Submit.*
- *AQAE059_002 Examiner Report Research Degree.*
- *AQAE059_003 Thesis Completion Form.*
- *AQAE059_004 Thesis Revisions Completion Form.*
- *AQAE059_005 Temporary Restriction of Access (if student requires this).*

6. Measurement of Effectiveness of this Procedure

The procedure will be reviewed every three years to assess trends in research degree outcomes and completion across the University.

7. Revision History

Revision No	Description of Change	Approval Date
000	New Procedure. Approved by Academic Standards and Policy Committee of Academic Council	20/05/2025

Appendices

Appendix 1 Assessment Criteria Award Standards Level 9 and Level 10

1.1 Assessment Criteria for the Degree of Master's by Research

To be awarded a Master's by Research, a candidate must demonstrate that they have met the following criteria:

- Contribute to understanding or knowledge
- Demonstrate an understanding of methodologies appropriate to their chosen field and an appropriate depth and breadth of understanding of the relevant field(s) of study
- Relate knowledge of particular topics to the broader field of study involved and of presenting such knowledge in a critical and scholarly way.

Evidence as to whether these criteria are met will be found in the thesis.

1.2 Assessment Criteria for Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

To be awarded a PhD, a candidate must demonstrate that they have met the following criteria:

- Demonstrate a capacity for original and critical thought
- Made a significant contribution to knowledge and scholarship
- Display an appropriate depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding of the relevant field(s) of study in the thesis and at the *viva voce*
- Gained significant expertise with respect to basic and advanced methodologies and techniques
- Presented a thesis with the appropriate structure and written style
- Completed work that is suitable for publication.

Evidence as to whether these criteria are met is found in the thesis. The *viva voce* confirms that the required standards have been achieved.