Graduate Research Examinations Procedure - Appointment of Examiners

Section 1 - Key Information

Policy Type and Approval Body	Academic – Academic Board
Accountable Executive – Policy	Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research)
Responsible Manager – Policy	Senior Manager, Graduate and Global Research
Review Date	18 March 2027

Section 2 - Purpose

(1) This Procedure outlines the conditions and processes for the nomination, approval and appointment of all examiners for graduate research degrees, consistent with any legislative and other requirements. The special procedures for the appointment of examiners for higher doctorates are outlined in the Higher Doctorate Policy.

(2) The Board of Graduate Research (BGR) determines the conditions under which graduate research examiners are appointed. The appointment of examiners is administered by Graduate Research School (GRS).

Section 3 - Scope

(3) Refer to the Graduate Research Examinations Policy.

Section 4 - Key Decisions

Key Decisions	Role
Nomination of at least three examiners	Principal Supervisor
Approval and appointment of the two examiners and the reserve examiner	School Director of Graduate Research (or nominee)
Endorsement of examiners	Candidate
Appointed examiners accept appointment to examine the thesis and/or artefact	Examiners
Setting aside an examination report	Chair, BGR

Section 5 - Policy Statement

(4) This Procedure forms part of the Graduate Research Examinations Policy which governs its application.

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Section 6 - Procedures

Part A - Role of Examiners

(5) Examiners are appointed to make an independent assessment of the quality of a thesis and any research artefacts in the practice-based mode of submission.

Part B - Number of Examiners

(6) Two examiners are required to examine a Masters by research or doctoral thesis.

(7) Prior to the commencement of the examination, supervisors are required to nominate three examiners for each examination to provide for circumstances in which the timelines for examination, as outlined in the Graduate Research Examinations Policy, have been exceeded by an examiner, or a first examiner is unable to examine the thesis for any reason.

(8) If an examiner withdraws or declines an invitation before or while the examination is underway, supervisors may be required to nominate a further examiner.

Part C - Qualifications of Examiners

(9) All examiners must normally hold an equivalent degree, or possess equivalent professional experience, to the degree they are examining and be internationally recognised experts in the research area of the thesis.

(10) No examiner of a doctoral or Masters by research thesis may be a student at La Trobe University.

(11) All doctorate examiners must be external to La Trobe University. Honorary staff of the University may not normally be appointed as examiners for a La Trobe University doctoral thesis.

(12) At least one of the examiners of a doctoral thesis must be resident outside Australia unless the examination includes a requirement to attend an exhibition, performance or other event in person. To provide for circumstances in which a nominated international examiner may not proceed with the examination, two out of the three nominated examiners for a doctoral thesis must be resident outside Australia, unless approval has been given by the School Director of Graduate Research (DGR) (or nominee) after reviewing the principal supervisor’s justification provided in the Appointment of Examiners (AOE) form.

(13) Both the examiners of a Masters by research thesis may be Australian residents.

(14) One examiner of a Masters by research thesis may be a La Trobe University staff member, or honorary La Trobe University staff member.

(15) To provide for circumstances in which a nominated external examiner is not able to proceed with the examination, two out of the three nominated examiners for a Masters by research thesis must be external to La Trobe University and may not be an honorary staff member of the University.

(16) Any nominations that do not meet these requirements must be accompanied by a case in the principal supervisor’s justification in the AOE and the DGR may request a further review from the Chair, BGR.

Part D - Avoiding Conflict of Interest in the Selection of Examiners

(17) A thesis must be examined without actual or perceived bias or preferential treatment. All doctoral thesis examiners and external Masters by research examiners must be independent of La Trobe University typically for the

last 5 years.

(18) Any real, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest (COI) with the candidate, the supervisors(s), the other examiner(s) or the University of a personal, professional, or commercial nature must be avoided:

a. No one who has been a supervisor or a co-supervisor of the candidate, or who has been a member of a candidate's progress panel or in any way associated with the candidate's research project or associated work such as publications or grants, shall be appointed as an examiner.
b. Individuals who have co-authored publications, or have been a co-investigator of a grant, or in other ways closely collaborated with a supervisor within the last five years, may not normally be nominated as examiners. In smaller disciplines, where this may be difficult to avoid, the principal supervisor must justify the selection of any co-author or co-researcher as an examiner in the AOE.
c. No examiner may belong to the same department (or equivalent) of a university or institution as any other examiner of a given thesis.
d. Any potential or perceived COI must be declared by the candidate and principal supervisor. Examiners will also be asked to declare any potential or perceived COI and confirm that they are fully qualified to examine the thesis.
e. If a COI is discovered during or after the examination, the Chair, BGR may set aside one or both examiners' reports and a replacement examiner(s) will be appointed by the Chair.

(19) COIs must be managed in accordance with this Procedure, the Conflict of Interest Policy , and the Australian Council of Graduate Research Conflict of Interest in Examination Guidelines.

Part E - Process for Selection, Appointment and Communication with Examiners

(20) One month before the anticipated submission of the thesis (or at least three months in the case of practice-based degrees where an exhibition or performance is involved) the candidate submits a Notice of Intention to Submit form.

(21) The GRS then sends a link to create the AOE form to the principal supervisor.

(22) The principal supervisor will discuss with the candidate the identity of potential examiners to be nominated to ascertain whether there are any conflicts of interest and to provide an opportunity to raise any other concerns regarding the potential examiners, including that they are appropriate given the topic and nature of the research in the thesis. There is no obligation to nominate any examiners that a candidate may recommend (see the Graduate Research Examinations Policy).

(23) The principal supervisor approaches nominees on an informal basis and receives confirmation that they are prepared to be nominated.

(24) The principal supervisor completes the AOE form with the names of at least three examiners, which includes at least one more examiner than is needed in the first instance. Supervisors may indicate which of the nominations is their preferred reserve examiner, but should not communicate this to the nominees. The principal supervisor must indicate on the AOE form that they have consulted with the candidate and advised them of the identity of the examiners to ascertain whether there are any conflicts of interest and to provide an opportunity to raise any other concerns regarding the nominated examiners. Supervisors should also include justifications for any recommendations that do not meet the requirements outlined in these Procedures. From this point on, the candidate and supervisor(s) must have no further contact with the nominated examiners (including reserve examiners) relating to the examination of the thesis until the Board of Graduate Research has recommended an outcome or they are invited to do so by a Graduate Research Examination Panel.

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(25) The principal supervisor submits the AOE form to the School Director of Graduate Research (DGR) (or nominee) to review nominations and approve the examiners and determine which examiners will be officially invited in the first instance and which will be the reserve. In the case of a thesis with an exhibition or performance, all three nominees, subject to meeting all the necessary criteria, will be invited to review the exhibition or performance.

(26) The DGR returns the approved AOE form to the GRS.

(27) The GRS notifies the candidate and supervisors of the approved examiners. The candidate or supervisor has 10 working days from the notification to raise any concerns regarding the approved examiners for review by the Chair, BGR.

(28) The DGR, or GRS, may request that the Chair, BGR review where questions of COI or suitability of examiners are raised and approve the appointment of examiners outside of the normal scope of this procedure.

(29) The GRS will send official letters of invitation, with separate instructions for the degree that they are examining, to the selected examiners:

a. outlining the conditions of the examination;
b. providing an estimated timing of the thesis submission;
c. informing them that the supervisory team and candidate are aware of their identity;
d. seeking confirmation that there is no conflict of interest with any member of the supervisory team or candidate;
e. seeking confirmation that they are qualified to examine the thesis; and
f. advising whether they are a reserve examiner, including advice about the situations in which they may be required, and the different timelines involved in the examination.

(30) Examiners must indicate their acceptance of the invitation to examine within the nominated time frame, confirm there is no conflict of interest with any member of the supervisory team or the candidate, and that they are qualified to examine the thesis.

(31) Where a thesis contains culturally or legally sensitive material, or if there are intellectual property agreements in place, or there are commercial-in-confidence agreements with industry partners, the candidate or principal supervisor may request that the examiners be asked to sign and return a non-disclosure agreement. If, on request, a nominated examiner is unable to do so, a new examiner may be sought.

(32) Where the submission of a thesis is delayed by more than one month from the date initially advised to examiners, the GRS will inform the approved examiners.

(33) In all cases when a reserve examiner is required the GRS will contact the reserve examiner to ascertain their availability to examine the thesis. Where the reserve examiner is unavailable or does not respond, GRS will contact any additional approved nominees or request additional nominees from the principal supervisor for approval from the DGR.

(34) In circumstances where an examiner has been replaced by another examiner due to tardiness, and the original examiner's report is subsequently received, the late report will only be considered should the examination warrant a reserve examiner according the Graduate Research Examination Policy.

Part F - Confidentiality of the Examination Process

(35) The identity of approved examiners will be made known to the candidate to ensure:

a. there is no accidental communication between a candidate and an examiner during the examination process regarding the examination of the thesis; and

b. there is no COI between the candidate and examiner; and
c. the candidate is satisfied that the examiner is appropriate given the topic and nature of the research in the thesis.

(36) The candidate and members of the supervisory team must have no contact with approved examiners regarding the examination of the thesis until the BGR has recommended an outcome or are invited to do so by an Examination Panel. Where contact with an examiner has occurred without permission from the Board of Graduate Research or Examination Panel, that examiner's report will be disregarded and set aside as prescribed by the Graduate Research Examinations Policy.

(37) Examiners must have no contact with each other in relation to the examination during the initial examination period and must provide independent examination reports. Only if the examiners are invited to convene an Examination Panel in the case of a deferred thesis to approve a revision plan, or to provide a joint recommendation in the case of divergent independent examination reports or in the re-examination of a deferred thesis, they may only have contact with each other as members of the Examination Panel, chaired by the School Director of Graduate Research (or nominee) per the Graduate Research Examinations Policy.

(38) Where the Board of Graduate Research determines that the thesis should be classified as deferred and the candidate given up to twelve months (Full-Time Equivalent) to revise (see the Graduate Research Examinations Policy and the Graduate Research Examinations Procedure - Revise and Resubmit for details of how revisions are determined) and re-submit the thesis for examination, this is communicated to the candidate and supervisor. In this case, the candidate will receive direction from a Graduate Research Examination Panel and their supervisor in relation to revisions, but should have no communication with the examiners unless invited to do so by the Examination Panel.

Section 7 - Definitions

(39) Nil.

Section 8 - Authority and Associated Information

(40) This Procedure is made under the La Trobe University Act 2009.

(41) Associated information includes:

a. Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021
b. Australian Qualifications Framework 2013

Status and Details

Status	Current
Effective Date	19th March 2024
Review Date	18th March 2027
Approval Authority	Academic Board
Approval Date	19th March 2024
Expiry Date	Not Applicable
Responsible Manager - Policy	Rebecca Lubansky Senior Manager, Graduate and Global Research
Enquiries Contact	Graduate Research School

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