

# Examiners for postgraduate dissertations

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*Institute of Linguistics*

## 0. Introduction

This document provides basic information about the role of examiners in the assessment of postgraduate dissertations. Postgraduate dissertations are assessed during a *viva voce* examination, in the presence of the members of the dissertation Committee.

The information presented here is intended as a set of guidelines, based on usual practice within the Institute of Linguistics. The practices outlined here are subject to University regulations, in particular:

- For Masters dissertations, the *General Regulations for University Postgraduate Awards, 2008*<sup>1</sup> and the bye-laws for the relevant Masters programme, namely: The *M.A. in Linguistics*<sup>2</sup> or the *M.Sc. in Language and Computation*.<sup>3</sup>
- For Ph.D. dissertations, the University's *Doctor of Philosophy – PhD - Regulations*<sup>4</sup> and the bye-laws for the *Ph.D. in Linguistics*.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Dissertation Committee

Every postgraduate dissertation submitted at the University of Malta is assessed by a dissertation Committee. A Committee is composed of the following members:

- *Chairperson*, whose role is to (a) convene the committee; (b) set the date for the *viva voce* examination; (c) ensure that reports by individual examiners are submitted in time; (d) compile a final report, following the *viva voce* examination, which summarises the views of the examiners as well as their final recommendations. The chairperson is also considered one of the examiners.
- *Internal examiner(s)*, who are selected from among the University faculty, and are present during the *viva voce*.
- *Visiting External examiner*, who is not a member of the University faculty and is present during the *viva voce*.

In addition, the Committee may also include:

- *Non-visiting external examiner*, who is not a member of the University faculty. The non-visiting external examiner is typically not present during the *viva voce*. Non-visiting external examiners are usually only selected in case the candidate whose dissertation is being

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.um.edu.mt/registrar/regulations/general>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.um.edu.mt/registrar/regulations/faculties/linguistics/ma-linguistics-bl-2010>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.um.edu.mt/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/218074/MScLanguageAndComputation2014.pdf](http://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/218074/MScLanguageAndComputation2014.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.um.edu.mt/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/53088/PhD-2008.pdf](http://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/53088/PhD-2008.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.um.edu.mt/registrar/regulations/faculties/linguistics/phd-linguistics-bl-2010>

assessed is or has been affiliated with the University of Malta in some capacity, whether on a part-time or full-time basis.

### **1.1 Presence of supervisors during *viva voce* examinations**

A candidate's PhD supervisors may also be present during the *viva voce*. However, they are not considered members of the examining Committee and may only attend as observers.

## **2. Examiners' reports**

All examiners, including the chairperson, are requested to send a report on the dissertation in advance of the *viva voce* examination, based on their reading of the dissertation. A deadline for reports to be submitted is usually set by the chairperson, in consultation with members of the Committee.

In case the Committee includes a non-visiting external examiner, the report is considered their primary contribution to the proceedings. The views expressed by the non-visiting external examiner in their report will be taken into account by the Committee in its final recommendations.

Examiners' reports usually focus on the following issues, though of course the structure and level of detail are at each individual's discretion:

1. An overall assessment of quality, together with a recommendation as to whether the candidate should pass or not, subject to any amendments. (See Section 4 below for details on pass/fail criteria).
2. A substantiation of this assessment with reference to:
  - a. Whether the work represents a significant contribution to knowledge in the candidate's chosen field of study;
  - b. The originality of the work;
  - c. The ability of the candidate to relate the subject matter of the thesis to an existing body of knowledge;
  - d. The appropriateness of the research methods used;
  - e. Whether the presentation (organisation and writing) are satisfactory.

Note that there is no specified length or level of detail for these reports. This is ultimately at the discretion of each individual examiner. However, the report should ideally contain sufficient detail to enable other Committee members to compare their own views to those contained in the report.

Following the viva, the chairperson will compile a single report with the recommendations of the Committee. The individual reports will also be attached to this report, which is then forwarded to the University Senate with the committee's recommendations.

### 3. Structure of the viva voce examination

All examiners will receive a hard copy of the dissertation well in advance of the actual date of the *viva voce*. Normally, the chairperson will also circulate a soft copy of the dissertation for convenience.

The *viva voce* usually takes place on University premises. The language used throughout is English. The duration is normally of one and a half to two hours. However, duration ultimately depends on the examiners involved and the candidate's performance.

During the *viva voce*, the committee members (apart from the candidate herself and the supervisors, should they wish to attend in an observers' capacity), are the visiting external examiner, the internal examiner(s), and the chairperson.

The examination typically proceeds as follows:

- The examiners convene and the chairperson asks each member to give an indication of the questions or issues that s/he would like the candidate to address. The chairperson may also determine the order in which examiners will address the candidate.
- The candidate is called in and the examination begins. Usually, the examination takes the form of a round-table discussion, during which the candidate is invited to answer questions or clarify any issues the examiners deem fit. While the chairperson will normally have asked examiners to identify these issues in advance, Committee members are at liberty to take up issues that arise in the course of the viva or follow up their questions with further discussion points. In case the Committee also comprises a non-visiting external examiner, the chairperson may also address issues raised in his/her report.
- At the end of the viva, the chairperson asks the candidate and supervisors to leave the room to give the examiners time to deliberate and reach consensus on their final recommendations.

Note that such examinations at the University of Malta are *not* public events.

### 4. Recommendations of the Committee

It is the task of the Committee, following the *viva voce*, to reach consensus on:

- Whether or not the candidate should be awarded the degree.
- Whether or not the candidate should be required to make amendments to the dissertation before submitting a final copy to the Institute. Note that if such amendments are required, the candidate will not be allowed to graduate before having made the amendments.

Note further that:

- In case the examiners agree that the candidate, on the basis of the dissertation and their performance during the *viva voce*, should be awarded the degree, it is nevertheless possible to recommend amendments. In this case, the amendments would be considered relatively

minor, and the candidate is given a period, ranging from a few weeks to a few months, to submit the final version. In such cases, the amendments will be approved by the Chairperson of the Committee before the final version is submitted.

- In some cases, candidates are requested to make major amendments, which involve substantial rewriting or additions to the dissertation. A candidate is usually given a longer period to make these amendments, especially where these involve addressing a new topic or carrying out additional analysis. In such cases, the candidate will be viewed as having failed to obtain the degree and a new *viva voce* will need to be carried out once the dissertation is resubmitted.

## 4.1 Degree classifications

A Ph.D. degree is only classified as a **pass** or **fail**.

In the case of Masters dissertations, examiners are requested to give a final mark, out of 100%, for the Dissertation. This contributes to the final classification of the Masters degree. For Masters, the following classifications are distinguished:

- Pass with Distinction (*Summa Cum Laude*)
- Pass with Merit (*Magna Cum Laude*)
- Pass (*Bene Probatus*).

Criteria for these classifications are described in the relevant regulations (see the Introduction). Note that the final classifications for Masters dissertations depend on both (a) the mark out of 100% agreed upon by the examiners for the dissertation and (b) other grades obtained during coursework followed by the candidate as part of the Masters programme.

## 4.2 Final report of the Committee

Following the *viva voce*, the chairperson will draw up a report summarising the proceedings and the principal views expressed by the Committee members, as well as their final recommendations. The examiners' individual reports will also be included to the final report.

## 5. Ethical considerations

The Institute of Linguistics takes the position that candidates for a postgraduate degree have a right to be informed of the composition of their examining Committee. While it is normal for candidates to have interacted in some capacity with members of the Committee prior to submission of their dissertation, especially when such members are part of the faculty of the Institute, it is advisable to avoid further interaction concerning the dissertation following submission. Examiners are also encouraged not to communicate with a candidate directly on matters relating to the dissertation. Should clarifications be necessary, they should be addressed through the Committee chair.