

MASTER'S THESIS EXAMINATION POLICY

Section	Graduate Research School
Contact	Dean, Postgraduate Research
Last Review	October 2024
Next Review	October 2027
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Purpose:

To provide a coherent set of guiding principles to underpin master's student thesis examination practices at Massey University, and to assist students, supervisors, and examiners in the successful, timely completion of a master's thesis. The policy aims to ensure fair, transparent and robust processes across all master's research degrees by thesis or by coursework and thesis to achieve equity and excellence in postgraduate student research. The policy is also designed to help prevent difficulties and disputes, and to assist in their resolution should they arise.

Context:

Master's degrees are structured in three principal ways:

- Master's degrees by thesis or primarily by thesis, following a bachelor's honours or postgraduate diploma, are usually 120 credits and normally consist of a research project presented as a thesis or creative work worth at least 90 credits.
- Master's degrees by coursework and thesis, following an undergraduate degree, are 180 or 240 credits and include a research project presented as a thesis or creative work worth at least 90 credits.
- Master's degree by coursework only, following an undergraduate degree.¹

Graduates with master's degrees, whether by research, courses or a combination, should have highly specialized knowledge; research skills, critical thinking and creativity that can be applied to existing or emerging problems; and a growing autonomy as a developing specialist or researcher.

This policy is designed to guide the assessment of master's by research which also require students to demonstrate skills in planning, executing and developing a piece of original research. Graduates with master's by research degrees should be able to apply research skills learned during their degree studies to new situations and problems as they emerge,² and demonstrate critical reflection and contextualization of their research. When achieved to an appropriate standard, the research project, presented in the form of a

¹ CUAP Handbook 2023 <https://www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/sites/default/files/uni-nz/documents/CUAP%20Handbook%202023.pdf>

² CUAP Handbook 2023 <https://www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/sites/default/files/uni-nz/documents/CUAP%20Handbook%202023.pdf>

thesis or creative work worth at least 90 credits³, should prepare students for successful doctoral research.

The examination of research theses or creative works of 90 credits or above is required in the completion of some master's degree qualifications at Massey University. Examiners will evaluate a thesis or creative work, including the student's understanding of the relevant literature and context of the research; the methods and techniques used; the results and their interpretation or application; and the conclusions reached. The thesis or creative work should demonstrate skills in identifying and solving problems through careful research planning, implementation and communication, as well as the student's capacity for independent thinking.

Thesis examiners play a vital role in providing feedback and assessing the outcome of master's research. Massey University is committed to providing academic guidance, advice, and support for each research student throughout the examination process.

This policy should be read alongside the [Assessment and Examination Regulations](#) published in the Massey University Calendar, and alongside the relevant degree regulations. In any situation where this policy is inconsistent with those regulations, the regulations will prevail.

This policy outlines the processes for preparation, submission, and examination of the thesis component of master's qualifications. The roles and responsibilities of students, their supervisors, and examiners in the examination process are explained. The policy also seeks to ensure high quality, robust, and independent examination of theses and creative works by master's students; acknowledge disciplinary methods and expressions of research; and build research supervision capability and capacity.

Policy:

All master's students who complete a thesis or creative work (of 90 or more credits) are required to participate in a final assessment, which involves the evaluation of their research by two examiners independent of the research. At least one of these examiners must be external to the university.

All thesis examinations will be managed by the Graduate Research School and Ethics (GRSE). Students are required to submit their thesis for assessment online via the student management system (portal) for assessment.

³ Assessment and Examination Regulations 81(a) defines research reports and dissertations as research comprised of up to 60 credits. Regulation 83(a) defines master's theses or creative works as 90 or more credits.

Appointment of Examiners:

All master's theses will be examined by two examiners, at least one of whom is external to the University. The examiners must be able to provide a fair and impartial assessment of the thesis and should have research experience and standing in the field of the thesis; have no significant conflict of interest or commitment, or other significant personal, professional, or contractual relationship with the student; and must not have been a supervisor of the thesis at any time.

- The external examiner will be from outside the University and the supervisory team, usually based in Aotearoa New Zealand, but may be based overseas.
- The internal examiner will usually be a member of the academic staff of the University and will not be a member of the supervisory team. Where there is no suitable internal examiner, it is possible for two external examiners to be appointed.

The thesis examiners will be nominated by the student's main supervisor, after consultation with the supervisory team and the student, prior to and no later than two weeks after submission of the thesis. The student is consulted to ensure avoidance of conflicts of interest or commitment, and to enable the student a voice in the process, but the final nomination is the responsibility of the main supervisor and should remain confidential until the end of the examination process. The nomination must be approved by the thesis course coordinator. Careful consideration should be given well in advance of the expected submission of the thesis for examination to ensure not only that examiners have expertise appropriate to the subject of the thesis, also that they are willing to examine the thesis and submit an examination report in a timely fashion, as required below. Where the main supervisor does not nominate suitable examiners, the thesis course coordinator may be requested to nominate suitable examiners.

The independence of the examiners will be ensured by using the [Conflict of Interest in Examination Guidelines](#) to raise awareness of what might constitute a conflict of interest, whether real or perceived, and how to minimize the risks associated with conflicts of interest. When making the nomination of examiners to the thesis course coordinator, the main supervisor must comment briefly on the suitability of each examiner and must also confirm that there is no relationship between either examiner and any member of the supervisory team or the student that might reasonably be considered to impair an examiner's ability to examine the thesis independently and objectively.

Where an examiner is unwilling or unable to continue in that role or fails to perform the duties of an examiner in an appropriate and timely manner, the Dean, Postgraduate Research may work with the main supervisor and thesis course coordinator to appoint a suitably qualified replacement examiner.

Submission of Thesis:

Before the thesis is provided to the examiners, the student and their main supervisor will confirm that the thesis embodies original work carried out by the student in accordance with regulations. The student and supervisor confirm that the research has only been used for the master's degree of current enrolment and the thesis meets recommended word counts, ethical and, if any, contractual requirements of external organisations. The main supervisor also indicates the standard of the thesis, any commercial potential or sensitivities, the need for an embargo and whether examiners have been nominated to assess the research.

Process of examination:

To ensure the independence and robustness of the examination process, and the outcome, the supervisors will not be involved in the thesis examination. This means that after nominating the examiners, the supervisors will have no further contact with the examiners regarding the thesis during the examination process. In the period between the examiners' appointment and completion of the examination process, the student and members of the supervisory team must not discuss any matters relating to the thesis, or the composition of the examination panel, with the examiners. All communications regarding the thesis examination must be through the Graduate Research School. For creative practice examinations, the Graduate Research School will work closely with the College which will facilitate the examination of the creative work, including some communication with examiners as deemed necessary and appropriate, and following the examination guidelines for creative practice examinations.

The supervisors will not have any input into the decision about the outcome of the exam.

An examiner is required to assess a thesis presented for examination against the following criteria.

- The thesis must:
 - be the student's own work undertaken by the student during their enrolment.
 - demonstrate advanced knowledge about a specialist field of inquiry or practice.
 - apply new skills or techniques to existing or emerging problems in the field of inquiry or practice.
 - be written at a standard generally acceptable to the discipline; and be written in English or in Te Reo.
- The thesis may contain:
 - creative works.
 - software, computer code, or models.
 - material that has been published during study with the student as either sole or joint author.

Colleges may provide discipline-specific guidance, for example, in the creative arts, to assist examiners. Discipline-specific guidance must be agreed between the College and Graduate Research School and will be provided to examiners by the Graduate Research School. Discipline-specific guidance should not contradict or conflict with general examination guidance, to ensure equity across programmes of study.

The examiners will independently and individually submit their confidential examination report and recommendation to the Graduate Research School.

Examiners will be asked to provide a confidential recommendation whether the thesis should be:

- Accepted, and the grade and mark⁴ that should be considered for it; or
- Failed.

Where examiners recommend that the thesis should be accepted, the examiners will indicate that the thesis be accepted

- Without emendations; or
- With very minor emendations, for example, typographical or formatting, that can be completed within 1-2 weeks and approved by the main supervisor.

Determining a final grade for the thesis

After receiving the reports and recommended grades from the examiners, the thesis course coordinator will review the reports and seek to finalise the thesis grade using the following processes:

- Where the two examiners' recommended letter grades are the same-, that grade will be awarded with the average⁵ of the two marks. For example, if 94 A+ and 90 A+ are recommended, the student will receive a final mark of 92 and grade of A+; where a 70 B and 73 B are recommended, the student will receive a final mark of 72 and grade of B.
- Where the two examiners' letter grades differ by letter grade, the final grade will be determined by first contacting the examiners, sharing both reports and recommended grades and marks with them, and seeking their consensus on the final grade and mark.
- If consensus between examiners cannot be reached, the Dean, Postgraduate Research, in consultation with the thesis course coordinator, will seek the advice of an independent assessor. The assessor will be provided with the thesis, the anonymised examination reports and recommended grades. The assessor will be required to provide a written report that evaluates the reports and recommended grades against the thesis. The assessor will recommend a final grade that cannot be outside the bounds set by the original examiners' grades.

The Graduate Research School and Ethics (GRSE) will formally notify the student of the result once this has been determined and will provide the student and main supervisor with copies of the examiners' reports. If minor emendations are required, the student must complete these to the satisfaction of their main supervisor.

For approval for the award of a master's degree, an electronic copy of the final version of the thesis, in PDF format, is submitted by the student to the University Library.

⁴ Following the University's published grading system.

⁵ The University applies the Swedish Rounding system to final grades.

Appeals:

Students may raise concerns informally through the academic complaint process by making the concern known to a staff member of the University (e.g., the main supervisor, thesis course coordinator, head of school or Dean, Postgraduate Research).

Students may appeal against the process or outcome of an examination in accordance with the Student Complaints and Grievance Procedures. Formal complaints are escalated to the Pro Vice-Chancellor for investigation.

Definitions:

Thesis course coordinator: an academic staff member with responsibilities for the coordination of theses within an academic qualification, school or College. This role may have other titles, including, but not limited to, postgraduate lead, postgraduate coordinator, thesis coordinator, programme director, associate dean, or director. The critical aspect of this role is academic leadership and decision-making regarding master's research theses.

External examiner: an examiner who is external to the University, usually based in Aotearoa New Zealand, but may be international, and not a member of the supervisory team.

Internal examiner: an examiner who is usually an academic staff member of the University and is not a member of the supervisory team.

Main supervisor: the supervisor who takes the primary responsibility for the provision of academic and administrative guidance to the student and who also acts as the coordinator of the supervisory team. The main supervisor assumes administrative responsibilities on behalf of the supervisory team (e.g., nomination of examiners)

Co-Supervisor/s: a person appointed to take substantial responsibility for provision of academic and administrative guidance to the candidate, under the coordination of the main supervisor.

Audience:

University Staff
Master's students
Master's thesis supervisors
Examiners of master's theses

Relevant legislation:

Official Information Act 1982
Privacy Act 2020

Related policies and procedures:

Assessment and Examination Regulations
Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching, and Evaluations Involving Human Participants
Code of Ethical Conduct for the Use of Animals for Research, Testing, and Teaching
Code of Responsible Research Conduct
Doctoral Supervision Policy
Intellectual Property Policy
Qualifications Policy
Thesis Embargo Policy