

Independent Chair Guidance

Appointment of an Independent Chair for research degree examinations

The Research Degrees Examination Board (RDEB) appoints Independent Chairs to attend oral examinations where circumstances are such that it is beneficial to the student or university to ensure that the examination is overseen by an experienced and independent chairperson. Such reasons may include the relative inexperience of both examiners, links with the student or supervisor, or a previous problematic examination.

The appointment of an Independent Chair is usually made when both examiners, whilst properly vetted and appointed in terms of academic expertise, do not have the required previous experience of examining research degree students to the level required by the university. In such cases, the role of the Independent Chair is to ensure that novice examiners are familiar with the regulations and to support them and offer advice.

An Independent Chair may additionally be appointed to benefit the student, in circumstances including the following:

- To provide the support and presence of an academic colleague in cases where a student's supervisor will not be attending the examination;
- To support students who are resubmitting following a previously unsuccessful examination, and are experiencing their second oral examination;
- To support students who are submitting for the first time, when previous progress by the student, or preliminary reports received prior to the oral examination, suggest that the result of the examination has the potential to be problematic.

Whilst it may be the case that an Independent Chair is appointed because of the potential for a problematic examination, the RDEB stresses that the appointment is designed to support all parties involved and should not be construed as an indicator of success or otherwise at the examination.

It is not expected that an Independent Chair would have read the thesis, nor is the Independent Chair allowed to ask any questions on the thesis.

Experience

An Independent Chair should be experienced in conducting research degree examinations but does not necessarily have to be expert in the field of the thesis, though it may sometimes be beneficial for them to have a basic understanding of the broad area of research.

Nomination

An Independent Chair may be nominated by the supervisor, the RDEB or the relevant faculty PGR committee. They may be a senior colleague from the same faculty or department but should not have had any supervisory role or have been involved in the upgrade examination of the student. In unusual circumstances, it may also be possible for a student to request an Independent Chair. Such a request must be supported by the faculty Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies. All nominations must be approved by the RDEB.

Role within the examination

At the examination it is expected that the Independent Chair would ensure 'fair play' and thus would:

- facilitate introductions between all present
- if required, explain the format of the examination
- ensure that the examination is conducted properly and in accordance with the Academic Regulations
- ensure that breaks are offered to the student if and when required
- ensure that the examination is halted in accordance with the regulations if the student becomes unwell or distressed, or if the examination is not being conducted to the satisfaction of the university
- if the oral examination is stopped, ensure that due process is followed. If the examiners have enough information to make a decision they can proceed; if not, the oral examination should be rescheduled following consideration by the RDEB
- facilitate discussion between the supervisor (if in attendance) and the examiners, should this be necessary, before or after the examination, to assist the examiners in reaching a decision
- advise the examiners that reports should be returned to the Research Degrees Examinations team (researchdegrees@kcl.ac.uk) within three weeks of the oral examination
- take notes on the conduct of the oral examination, where appropriate. Independent Chairs need not take notes on academic content

- provide assistance after the oral examination, if appropriate. This might include writing a report on the examination, or appearing at an appeal hearing
- report any concerns following the examination to the Research Degrees Examinations team directly.

Note: The supervisor can attend the examination as an observer, provided that the student has given prior consent. If present, the supervisor does not have the right to participate in the examination but may contribute if invited to do so by the examiners.

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