

## **PhD Thesis Proposal: Information for Students**

### **Background**

The PhD thesis proposal is the student's plan for their thesis research, and forms an important part of the evaluation for progression to thesis research. A positive outcome of the evaluation means that the proposal is acceptable and that the Curriculum and Examinations Committee agrees that the candidate is competent to proceed with the plan under the supervision of the thesis committee.

The thesis proposal must be the student's independent work in which the student makes an original contribution to the development of the research question, design of the research, and review of the literature. In the course of developing the proposal the student is expected to discuss the intended research with the thesis supervisor. The supervisor should advise the student on what is possible in the research unit, and discuss the scientific questions, the relevant existing work, and the research design and methods.

Students must write the thesis proposal in their own words. In referring to the work of others correct citation and attribution of sources is essential. Plagiarism by copying or paraphrasing is strictly forbidden and if established may lead to a fail without further examination. For guidelines on correct citation and attribution refer to the resources for Professional Development on this topic.

The student's supervisor and proposed Thesis Committee must read the proposal before it is submitted. The student's Thesis Committee may give feedback on one draft of the proposal and allow the student to make necessary revisions before submission. When satisfied that the plan is achievable and that the research goals are appropriate, the supervisor and committee members indicate formal agreement by signing the cover page. The proposal is then submitted for examination. The student must defend the proposal in an oral examination.

### **Format and content**

It is part of the student's training in research to prepare a concise, rigorous, and scholarly thesis proposal and present it in the correct format. There is no strict length requirement for the thesis proposal. It is anticipated that most students will need 8,000-10,000 words (about twenty pages of text) to adequately explain the motivation and goals of their project, review the relevant literature, and describe progress to date. However, concise proposals are encouraged, and a proposal of 5,000 words, which covered all these points, would be perfectly acceptable. The proposal should contain the following sections:

1) **Front page.** This should include the name and logo of the OIST Graduate University, the words "PhD Thesis Proposal", the title of the thesis proposal, and the names of the student, primary supervisor (and co-supervisor if there is one).

- 2) **Abstract.** This should be a single paragraph of not more than 500 words, which concisely summarizes the entire proposal.
- 3) **Introduction and Literature Review.** This should include a statement of the problem, the overall aims, and background to the research including a review of relevant existing work (literature review). The literature review should be a concise, scholarly review of the literature explaining the background to the proposed research. The review should provide the context for the aims of the proposed research in relation to existing work on the topic.
- 4) **Research Plan.** This should begin with the specific aims of the research and provide a concrete plan for completion of the research including the design and methods. This section should include an explanation of how the methods will address the aims and the significance of the results for the field.
- 5) **Progress Report.** This should be a report on the research achievements of the student in the laboratory of the proposed supervisor during Preliminary Thesis Research. The report should not duplicate material previously submitted for evaluation as part of a previous degree, but may include work completed during rotations at OIST. The report may include examples of results obtained with the methods proposed. It is understood that results may not be available in projects requiring, for example, development of methods, sample preparation, or recruitment of participants, in which case other evidence of progress should be reported.
- 6) **Bibliography.** The bibliography should include all references cited in the text and should not include references that have not been cited. In preparing the bibliography, students may use any of the conventional styles of referencing that include the titles of articles, such as the Harvard, Vancouver or ACS systems. However, the style chosen must be used consistently and correctly throughout, both for in-text citations, and formatting of bibliographic entries.
- 7) **Appendices.** These are optional and should only be used if necessary.

The examiners commit to read the proposal, but the Curriculum and Examinations Committee reserves the right to require students to rewrite excessively long, or poorly constructed, thesis proposals, without forwarding them to examiners. The student cannot assume that the examiners will read the optional appendices.

The complete doctoral thesis proposal document must be submitted to the Graduate School by the due date as nominated by the Dean (an example of the standard deadlines relating to examinations activities is included above). Earlier submission may be required in order to provide the thesis proposal to the examination panel no later than four weeks (28 days) prior to the oral defense. An emergency exception to the standard due date deadline can be granted by the Dean on the basis of a written request from the supervisor.

## **Extract from OIST Policy Library concerning progression to PhD thesis research**

### **5.3.11.3 Evaluation for progression to PhD thesis research**

The purpose of evaluating qualification for progression to PhD thesis research is to determine whether the student has an adequate fundamental knowledge in the field or fields of study relevant to the thesis topic, and can organize, apply and convey that knowledge effectively. The Curriculum and Examinations committee will make this evaluation taking into account the completed program of study and the student's performance in courses and rotations at OIST, the thesis proposal, and the candidate's performance in an examination. The thesis proposal forms an important part of the evaluation. The thesis proposal must be the student's independent work and clearly show the original contribution of the student to the research question. The evaluation may occur when requested by the candidate and normally before the end of the second year of study, and at the latest within 12 months of the start of Preliminary Thesis Research. When evaluating the candidate the Curriculum and Examinations committee will consider the following materials:

1. The student's PhD Thesis proposal. The requirements for the proposal are separately described (5.3.7).
2. A report from the examining panel as separately described (5.3.11.4).
3. The student's academic record at OIST.
4. Write-ups of Rotations.
5. An Endorsement of the thesis proposal from the proposed thesis supervisor, the student's academic mentor, and other members of the intended thesis committee, on the prescribed [Thesis Proposal Submission Cover Sheet](#)
6. Further material deemed relevant to the evaluation.

The Curriculum and Examinations committee will reach one of the three decisions listed below and record the decision in the student's academic record:

- i. Passed. The candidate is advanced to candidacy. The committee may require additional course work or stipulate minor revisions to the thesis proposal.
- ii. Deferred. This outcome is possible only if the student's academic preparation is sufficient, and the thesis proposal is not acceptable in its present form but could be acceptable pending major revisions. The thesis proposal must be re-examined in a second oral examination after which the committee must reach a decision of either passed or failed. The committee will stipulate a deadline for submission of a revised

proposal and date of re-examination. If the candidate fails to resubmit by the deadline the outcome will change to fail.

- iii. Failed. This is the outcome when academic preparation is not sufficient or the thesis proposal is not suitable for re-examination, or has not met the required standard on re-examination. No re-examination is allowed in the case of a fail outcome.

Procedures for appeal against the outcome of the evaluation are separately described (5.3.11.6).

#### **5.3.11.4 Examination and defense of thesis proposal**

An examining panel comprises three members: an external examiner, an internal examiner, and a chair appointed by the Curriculum and Examination committee. The examining panel will conduct a three-hour oral examination that will include a defense of the thesis proposal. The examining panel will include an External Examiner who is expert in the field of the proposed thesis and external to OIST. Normally the examination will be conducted in person at OIST but if this is not possible the Dean may permit electronic participation by audiovisual link. The Curriculum and Examinations Committee appoints the External Examiner taking into account nominations provided by the proposed supervisor. Similar conflicts of interest precaution apply as outlined in **5.3.13.3.1 Conflicts of interest in examinations** (see below). The examining panel also includes an OIST faculty member familiar with the out-of-field postgraduate courses taken by the student at OIST, who is appointed by the Curriculum and Examinations committee. A member of the Curriculum and Examinations committee nominated by the Dean will chair the examining panel. The examining panel will not include the proposed thesis supervisor or student's mentor.

Half of the examination will be an oral defense of the thesis proposal. The student will be required to demonstrate the necessary advanced knowledge and understanding to undertake the proposed thesis research, and show their original and independent contribution to the proposal. The other half of the examination will cover fundamental knowledge in the field or fields of the proposed thesis research. The candidate should demonstrate fundamental knowledge of sufficient scope and depth to provide a secure foundation. The examining panel will take into account the recommendations of the proposed thesis supervisor concerning the scope and depth of the knowledge required, which will be communicated to the examiner and student through the Curriculum and Examinations Committee. On the advice of the Committee the oral examination may be supplemented by a written examination conducted before the oral examination.

### **5.3.11.5 Exit with MSc (“Non-continuation” outcome of evaluation for progression).**

A student who, after evaluation for progression to PhD thesis research, fails to meet requirements for progression to PhD thesis research may submit a thesis for consideration for award of the MSc degree in accordance with Article 39, paragraph 3 of the University Rules.. An MSc may be awarded if the candidate has successfully completed the following minimum requirements:

- i. at least 30 points (20 from courses, 10 from research work),
- ii. submission of a thesis describing their own research work at a level judged to be suitable for the award of MSc by a panel of examiners including at least one external examiner.

There is a time limit in such cases. The student must achieve the necessary course credits and submit their MSc Thesis for examination within six months of being informed of the outcome of the Evaluation.

The examining panel will include an external examiner, an internal examiner, and a chair appointed for this purpose by the Curriculum and Examination committee. The examiners will examine the written thesis and submit a report within 3 months of receipt of the thesis, including a recommendation of either “passed” or “failed”. The Curriculum and Examination committee reviews the recommendation and considers whether all academic requirements for the award of the degree have been satisfied. In the case of a “pass” outcome the procedures for conferment of the degree (5.3.15.1) shall be followed. In the case of a “fail” outcome the Individual Student Record shall be updated with an entry on the next day, stating that the outcome is “fail”. At the time when the individual Student Record is updated, the candidate is sent a letter advising of the outcome.

### **5.3.11.6. Appeals procedure**

A student who has failed the qualifying examination (or MSc thesis examination) may lodge an appeal. Grounds for appeal include incorrect application of the procedures, but objections to the evaluations in the assessment by the examiners, the decision of the Curriculum and Examinations Committee, and the composition of the examining panel are not a basis for appeal. The qualifying examination is a confidential process, and this confidentiality must be maintained throughout any appeals process. The appeal must be in writing, include a concise statement of the reasons for the appeal, and be lodged with the Manager, Academic Services, within 28 days of the date of the letter advising the outcome of the qualifying examination. The appeal will be referred to the Dean of Faculty Affairs, who will determine the course of action to be undertaken, taking into consideration the grounds for the appeal stated by the candidate. This may include a review of the examination process.

The Dean of Faculty Affairs will determine the outcome of the appeal as either:

- i .The procedures for the qualifying examination were applied correctly, and the appeal is unsuccessful.

- ii . The procedures for the qualifying examination were not applied correctly, but the variation in procedures did not influence the outcome of the examination, and the appeal is unsuccessful.
- iii . The procedures for the qualifying examination were not applied correctly, and the variation in procedures did influence the outcome of the examination, and the appeal is successful. In this case, the Dean of Faculty Affairs will determine further action to be taken, which may include re-examination.

The outcome of the appeal will be determined within 28 days of the date the written appeal was received by the Office of Academic Services

#### **5.3.13.3.1 Conflicts of interest in examinations**

The CEC will not appoint examination panel members who have or appear to have conflicts of interest. For OIST faculty members, a conflict of interest is deemed to exist if the faculty member is involved in the supervision of the thesis research of the candidate, or is collaborating in the research project of the candidate. For non-OIST faculty members a conflict of interest is deemed to exist if they:

- iii. Are involved in the research
- iv. Have current collaborations with members of the thesis laboratory, or previous collaborations in the past 5 years.
- v. Have had prior or ongoing contact with the supervisor that may appear to compromise objectivity, such as having been in the same department as the supervisor, having been a thesis or postdoctoral supervisor (or vice versa), or having joint publications or grants with the supervisor in the past 5 years.
- vi. Have had prior contact with the candidate that may appear to compromise objectivity, such as having been in the same department as the candidate, having supervised the candidate in academic or project work, or having joint publications or grants with the candidate at any time.

# Examination for Progression to Thesis Research

