

## **DSC Portfolio Guidelines for Project-based Higher Degrees by Research**

### **University Guidelines**

All candidates undertaking project-based research and their supervisors should be directed to, or provided with, a copy of the University guidelines on project research at induction.

### **1. General Guidelines**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

While several Schools in the DSC Portfolio have developed effective guidelines and information packages relating to project based research, other Schools are less advanced. As a dynamic area, project research presents specific challenges for supervision, progress management, administration and assessment. These guidelines are designed to—

- Supplement University guidelines
- Provide a basis for standardized administration of project-based HDR across the Portfolio
- Provide a basis for the development of School guidelines for candidates, supervisors and examiners.

Schools are encouraged to develop their own guidelines, for project-based research in accordance with University and Portfolio guidelines.. It is particularly important for Schools to provide students, supervisors and examiners with information pertinent to the examination process. The Portfolio guidelines are to be used as a basis for the Schools' own information packages.

#### **1.2 Definition of Project Research**

RMIT University distinguishes between project and thesis based research for Higher Degrees. A thesis or dissertation is an extended, logically constructed, coherent and integrated argument designed to answer a specific research question or questions. The thesis or dissertation presents its arguments through well-established epistemological and methodological conventions. While a thesis is normally presented as a bound paper product, there may be opportunities for students to present their thesis in a non-conventional form such as in a digital form.

Project research employs a greater variety of epistemological and methodological heuristic modes. In particular, it employs creative, design and professional practice modes of research. While seeking to answer specific research questions, project research presents its findings through a range of media. At RMIT these media include fiction, visual arts, dance, music, design drawings and models, biography, web and other digital forms, musical performance and other forms of display and exhibition.

#### **1.3 Project Exegeses**

Doctoral students undertaking Higher Degrees by Research project are required to complete an exegesis of their work for examination, along with the creative, design or professional practice project. The exegesis must be between 20-40,000

words. An exegesis is essentially an ‘exposition’ of the project and the processes by which it has been formed (see below). It may take the form of writing, diagrams, images and models, which are components of a Durable Visual Record.

Schools also have the option of requiring an exegesis (or comparable documentation such as work notes, diaries, working diagrams, musical scores etc) for the Masters award. This, however, is not a university requirement. Schools which are requiring Masters students to complete an exegesis must provide details about this requirement as part of the induction process.

Information about the exegesis must also be provided to examiners as part of their general information package regarding the examination process, including criteria for assessment (see below).

#### **1.4 Stages of the Project Degree**

Schools should provide information to candidates about each of the following stages of candidature--

- Application, checking credentials and assessing the application, enrolment
- Formal induction—commencement of candidature
- Completion of formal methods training in first semester of candidature
- Formal proposal and confirmation of enrolment
- Progress reporting
- Assessment of readiness to submit
- Submission
- Revisions (where required)
- Formal archiving of project, exegesis or Durable Visual Record (as required by School)

#### **1.5 Progress Reporting and ‘At Risk’ Processes**

The University requires effective progress reporting for all HDR programs. Schools must have an effective system of progress reporting. Ideally, these reports should be provided on a semester basis. The progress reports should provide students with quality feedback on the progress of their projects and exegesis (where applicable). A candidate will be deemed ‘at risk’ (of not completing their program successfully) under the following circumstances—

- Having not completed a formal confirmation of the candidature within 6 months (Full Time Equivalent) of enrolment
- Two consecutive ‘unsatisfactory’ progress reports
- Failure to submit for examination by the required date, unless an extension has been granted
- Other criteria deemed appropriate by the School

The University has formal ‘at risk’ processes which require the School to intervene in the candidature. The School postgraduate co-ordinator (or equivalent) should interview the ‘at risk’ candidate and the supervisor independently in the first instance. The candidate should work with the co-ordinator and the supervisor to establish criteria for returning the candidature to ‘satisfactory’ progress. If this

is not achieved the School may pursue 'exclusion' processes in accordance with University regulations.

### **1.6 Ethics Approval**

No research by RMIT staff or students involving humans as subjects will be allowed to be conducted unless that experimentation has the prior written approval of the Portfolio Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee. The Design and Social Context Human Research Ethics Subcommittee (DSC HRESC) is directly responsible to the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) which in turn is responsible to RMIT University Council.

Where a project involves human subjects, supervisors and candidates should consult the human ethics guidelines. These guidelines will indicate whether a project requires ethics approval. Interviews with human subjects will almost always require approval. When in doubt, candidates should always err on the side of caution. Candidates should complete an ethics form, which is available is available from the Portfolio website [www.rmit.edu.au/dsc/hr-ethics-subcommittee](http://www.rmit.edu.au/dsc/hr-ethics-subcommittee).

Ethics issues may apply to researching sensitive issues (e.g. death, disability, cross-cultural research, or controversial areas (e.g. euthanasia), even when subjects are being 'represented' as opposed to 'interviewed'. In these cases, creative and design researchers may need to seek specific releases from represented subjects, especially where subjects are to be identified. In these cases an ethics application should be presented to the Portfolio Ethics Committee.

Project researchers may also need to seek advice on disclosure of identity issues.

### **1.7 Scope and Size of Project**

University policy determines the maximum length of a thesis based Masters as 50,000 words; for a doctoral dissertation it is 105,000 words. There are no word limits prescribed for project based creative, design or professional practice projects in Masters or PhD programs.

Schools should develop their own guidelines for writing-based projects and for exegeses **in accordance with University regulations.**

The Portfolio formally determines, however, that the heuristic and productive scope of project-based Masters and PhDs by research *should be comparable* to dissertation based awards. In terms of productive outcomes, Schools should ensure that their candidates are working within a manageable framework. For writing projects (fiction, scripts, biography etc), the total wordage, for example, should not greatly exceed the maximum wordage of PhD and Masters by thesis. Where a candidate seeks to complete a text that exceeds by more than 50% the maximum word length for thesis based awards, the candidate should seek formal approval from the Senior Supervisor and the School's Higher Degrees Committee. The candidate must explain the exceptional circumstances of the project.

Where candidates are required to complete a written exegesis, Schools should observe the word limits recommended by the University. Where Schools require

an exegesis for a Masters candidate, the wordage should not exceed half the requirements of the PhD exegesis. That is, a Masters candidate should not be required to complete an exegesis of more than 10-20,000 words.

Candidates and examiners should be informed of all word lengths requirements determined by Schools. Examiners should have this information prior to their agreement to examine.

### **1.8 Student Appeals**

Students are able to appeal decisions made by the University and Schools, including 'at risk', 'exclusion' and exam classifications. Schools should make this information available to students as part of their formal induction.

## **2. Exegesis and Related Documentation**

University regulations require that a formal exegesis should be submitted as part of the examination for the award Doctor of Philosophy by Research Project. The Exegesis should be between 20-40,000 words.

### **2.1 Definition of Exegesis**

An exegesis is essentially an 'exposition'. It is distinguished from a thesis, which is generally defined as a coherent, extended and integrated argument written according to strict conventions. While an exegesis may exhibit these same qualities, there is greater flexibility about the way the 'exposition' may be developed and presented. A project contributes to new knowledge through creative, design or 'reflection' on a professional practice. The exegesis should be substantively connected to the project, answering the critical question--

How has the project work been formed and developed?

An exegesis may be presented through words, images (Illustrations, diagrams, photographs, digital recordings etc) or objects. It may integrate various forms of documentation such as the Durable Visual Record (DVR) and work notes. University policy, however, requires that for a PhD by project at least 20,000 words of the exegesis documentation be written.

### **2.2 List of Possible Exegesis Topics**

Schools should provide candidates with clear instructions on how to write an exegesis, the purpose of the documentation and how the exegesis is to be examined. **This information should be written explicitly into School guidelines and directions to students and examiners.**

In situating the work within this framework, the exegesis *may* explore the following strategies and issue. (Note: these are suggestions only and not mandatory).

- Introduction and background to the research question. An introduction should include a discussion of the central research question(s) [and/or objectives] and rationale for the project. The introduction should also clearly identify the objectives of the exegesis itself, including the central issues to be addressed. All exegesises should have an introduction, which covers these issues.
- Theoretical and conceptual issues. For example, if the work is an exploration of notions of 'grief', the exegesis may incorporate a discussion of conceptual

or theoretical literature. These discussions should be related directly to the project work.

- Historical context. The creative work, design project or reflection on professional practice will be situated historically and culturally. A candidate may wish to explore the project in terms of the history of ideas, technology, techniques, and the discipline. The exegesis may also examine the project in terms of a cultural context--current political, social, ethnic or semiotic context. Culture in this sense refers to a symbolic (meanings, rituals, mythologies etc) environment.
- Technical issues and problems. These technical problems may be associated with the physical properties of a medium; they may be managerial or organizational (e.g. moving people on and off a stage); or they may be more expressive (e.g. how to achieve a particular effect). The emphasis here is on addressing technical issues, and resolving them.
- Technological issues. This may refer specifically to developments and demands of specific technologies that facilitate the project. For example, the project may involve the development of specific software or 'tools' that are necessary to advance and achieve the project objectives.
- Ethics and ideology. Some projects deal directly with questions of ethical and ideological issues. However, projects may also encounter issues relating to consent, permissions, releases and broader cultural issues around representation.
- The disciplinary field. Some projects may work through and contribute directly to a clear disciplinary development. Candidates may wish to explore their work within the broader scope of the discipline and the evolution of that discipline. For example, in graphic design, which is an emerging academic field, candidates may identify the ways in which their work contributes to the evolution of the disciplinary field.
- Substantive issues affecting content. Substantive issues may relate to an existing body of literature or theoretical framework. However, some projects may generate ideas and 'knowledge' that can be articulated in an exegesis. While there may be dimensions of the creative or design project that cannot be 'reduced' to written language, other aspects of the project may be available to substantive discussion. In particular, candidates may be able to discuss their work in terms of new ideas or new fields of imagination and creativity. Candidates may be able to track the evolution of the work and the ideas, noting particular phases of development and revelation. Candidates may be able to map and record the changes and developments of their work. Candidate may also be able to demonstrate how an engagement with content relates to their overriding research question(s).

### **2.3 Exegesis and Examination**

These are only suggestions. However, School guidelines should make clear to students and examiners

- The purpose of the exegesis
- The components of the exegesis

- Assessment criteria

Within this framework, Schools will have flexibility in the ways they deploy the exegesis dimension of the project-based research. Schools, however, should specify very clearly to candidates, supervisors and examiners precisely how the exegesis is to be used and assessed. The assessment process should clearly address the ‘relationship’ between the exegesis and the other *practice* dimension of the project (performance, exhibition, drawings, fictional text etc).

This relationship *may* include a specific ratio in the assessment score. For example, Schools may wish to prescribe a percentage score for the exegesis and practice dimension (e.g. 20:80). This ratio could vary, depending on the specific candidate and project. Schools could determine, for example, that a particular candidate’s project has a very strong exegesis dimension; a higher percentage could be applied to the assessment criteria (e.g. 35:65). For other candidates, the exegesis may be less important and a lower percentage might apply (e.g. 15:85)

**Example**

The following table is an example of how assessment of the exegesis may be calculated.

The Ratio for this project is 20:80 (ie 20% for the exegesis; 80% for theart object, performance, practice component). Examiners should identify how successfully the exegesis explains the ways in which the work is formed and develops in terms of the following 'issues'.

<b>ISSUE</b>	<b>WEIGHTING /20</b>
1. Introduction (compulsory)	5
2. Conceptual and theoretical framework (compulsory for PhD)	10
3. Historical and cultural context	
4. Technical issues	
5. Technological issues	
6. Ethical Ideological issues	
7. Disciplinary field	
8. Substantive issues affecting content	5

**3. Project Examination**

University guidelines for examiners should be provided to students at induction. Schools should provide specific information about their own specific examination processes to candidates also at induction. (Schools developing processes should refer to the documentation provided by the School of Architecture and Design, School of Education, and the School of Creative Media.)

### **3.1 The Role of Chair**

Schools must ensure that Chairs of examination are trained, fully briefed and are experienced in project based examination processes. It is recommended that prospective chairs are mentored into the role by more experienced staff. As outlined in the University policy and guidelines, a Chair should ensure that examinations are conducted in accordance with the candidate's specific research question and the School's specific processes and assessment criteria. This includes School determinations on communication between candidates and examiners, and between examiners (see University guidelines on project examination).

### **3.2 Classification of Examination Result**

Examiners should complete the examination reports according to the prescribed classifications. The University Examination Sub-Committee will provide the final classification for candidature. Candidates should be informed of their rights to appeal.

Where Schools have only used two examiners and there is a split decision, a third examiner must be appointed. Schools **must** make provision for the third examiner. Where Schools wish to manage the examination process through two examiners only, they must make contingency plans for the participation of a third examiner in case there is a split decision. The candidate must be informed of these contingency plans.

In the case of a 'Deferred for Major Revisions' classification, the project (and exegesis) where specified will be re-presented for examination, usually to the original panel. Schools **must** make provisions for re-examination. Schools must have contingency plans for the possibility of a deferred result.

Where a deferred result does not necessarily require a full re-mounting of the exhibition, Schools must make clear to the original examiners how the re-examination will proceed. Criteria for assessment must be provided in relation to the new circumstances of the examination.