

# **GUIDELINES FOR MASTER'S BY RESEARCH THESIS**

## **IN THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE AND HEALTH SCIENCES**

**(THESE GUIDELINES ARE FOR RESEARCH MASTER'S (100% RESEARCH) PROGRAMMES  
ONLY, AND NOT FOR MASTER'S WITH STRUCTURED COURSEWORK, MODULE, OR  
RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT COMPONENTS)**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This document is meant to guide students, supervisors, programme leaders, and Heads of academic environments. The Guidelines should be consulted in conjunction with formal provisions governing master's degrees provided in the rules related to the "Degree of Master" in the Stellenbosch University (SU) Yearbook (Part 1) and the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) Yearbook (Part 12 of the SU Yearbook). Please read this document in conjunction with the two sets of formal provisions. Supervisors and students are responsible for familiarising themselves with the contents of this document.

## 2. APPLICATION AND REGISTRATION

- 2.1 All prospective master's students must apply to the relevant programme on the university's website: [www.maties.com](http://www.maties.com). South African applicants should do so before the end of September every year, and international applicants before end August.
- 2.2 Applications are processed by the Central Applications Office (CAO) and liaison between the academic environment and the CAO is coordinated by the Centre for Academic Administration (CAA), Tygerberg campus ([fmhsregistration@sun.ac.za](mailto:fmhsregistration@sun.ac.za)).
- 2.3 Academic environments must consider all applications for admission to their programmes in alignment with the programme admission criteria only once the application status has been set to '**Reviewed**' on the SunStudent platform.
- 2.4 The Head of the environment/programme coordinator is responsible for confirming that an applicant to a master's programme may be accepted, declined, or waitlisted. For this purpose, the head or postgraduate coordinator contact the responsible CAA staff member and copy both [fmhsregistration@sun.ac.za](mailto:fmhsregistration@sun.ac.za) and [tyg-phd@sun.ac.za](mailto:tyg-phd@sun.ac.za). The CAA, Tygerberg campus, notifies applicants of their application outcome in writing via SunStudent.
- 2.5 The appointment / approval of a supervisor is the responsibility of the head of the academic environment (who may delegate this task appropriately). Supervisors must ensure that they can cope with the number of students they accept, and the heads of academic environments should monitor supervision loads.
- 2.6 Registration will take place once the application has been accepted and the student has accepted placement.
- 2.7 New master's degree candidates have two opportunities annually to register – preferably before 31 March, or if prior permission has been granted based on highly exceptional circumstances, for commencement in the second semester, during the course of July each year.
- 2.8 Continuing master's degree candidates should register before 7 February each year. Late registrations will be penalised. Students who fail to re-register annually will not be allowed to engage in academic activities until they have completed their annual registration.
- 2.9 Continuing master's degree candidates should register **before the final first semester registration day** as published in the SU Almanac each year. Students who fail to re-register annually will not be allowed to engage in academic activities until they have permission to register late and completed their annual registration. Late registrations will be penalised with a late registration fee.
- 2.10 All students are required to complete and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with their supervisors and co-supervisor(s) on arrival. A signed MoU applies for the duration of the degree programme, but should be renewed if changes are made to the supervision team or by mutual agreement.

### 3. PROTOCOL AND ETHICS APPROVAL

- 3.1 Recommended protocol format (recommended length is no more than 10 pages):
- a) Title page (including names and affiliations of supervisors, collaborators, consultants etc)
  - b) Introduction
  - c) Literature Review
  - d) Methods
  - e) Ethical considerations
  - f) Anticipated outcomes and benefits
  - g) Budget
  - h) Timeline
  - i) Reference List
- 3.2 All protocols must be approved by the relevant supervisor(s) before the head of the academic environment signs off on submission for ethics approval.
- 3.3 **ALL** research projects for master's studies **MUST** obtain ethics approval (**online application**) from the relevant SU Research Ethics Committee (REC) **BEFORE** the project may begin. Should the master's research project be part of a larger study that has valid, up-to-date ethics approval, then follow the relevant guidelines for adding the master's student to the project. Please consult the [Ethics Application Guide for Postgraduate Students](#) and the directives of the relevant REC.

### 4. SUPERVISORS

- 4.1 It is a **requirement**, as per the Faculty Board decision of 1 November 2018, that all primary supervisors should have co-supervised previously at least at master's level; and that all first-time supervisors/co-supervisors should attend a training course within two years of joining the FMHS, or within two years of completing an advanced degree (M or D) that would make them eligible for master's or doctoral supervision.
- 4.2 The supervisor must consider their own availability when accepting postgraduate students.
- 4.3 In the event that a supervisor is unable to continue in this role, for whatever reason, arrangements must be made with the head of the academic environment and the executive head of the department concerned, and every student thus affected should be informed accordingly in writing, after which alternative arrangements must be made. Such instances should be recommended to the Committee for Postgraduate Research (CPR) through the relevant Postgraduate Programme Committee (PPC) for approval.
- 4.4 Removal of a supervisor, for whatever reason, must be motivated by the head of the academic environment to the PPC, for recommendation to the CPR, for approval.
- 4.5 In cases where the nature of the topic or research methodology requires expertise in more than one area, consideration must be given to involving a co-supervisor(s) with the appropriate qualifications and experience.
- 4.6 It is recommended that students have at least one co-supervisor to ensure continuity in case of any challenges experienced by the main supervisor.
- 4.7 The supervisor must ensure that, sufficient project funding is available for the study, and where appropriate, that the required equipment, materials, and laboratory, computer, and library facilities are available or accessible.
- 4.8 The supervisor assumes responsibility for the scientific merit and standard of the research work that is to be performed.
- 4.9 The supervisor must be knowledgeable in terms of all the provisions governing the handling of the protocol, the research, and the submission of the thesis, as well as the examination thereof.
- 4.10 Feedback on the progress of the student should be provided to the PPC on a regular basis.
- 4.11 For further information regarding the relationship between the supervisor and student, please refer to the MoU.

## 5. FORMAT OF THESIS

- 5.1 For the examination, a candidate must submit work in the form of a thesis. The term "thesis" is the only officially recognised term for referring to the product of the research done for a (100% research) master's degree.
- 5.2 The candidate must compile a thesis made up of chapters - one of which may be an article, with evidence that the candidate is able to:
- Plan research;
  - Apply the literature study to the research;
  - Apply elementary analytical principles (quantitative or qualitative);
  - Interpret the data and draw meaningful conclusions; and
  - Conclude a project.
- 5.3 The candidate must demonstrate that they have developed a capacity for independent, critical judgement, ie that they are able to rationally discuss the methodology, and literature, and newly acquired knowledge.
- 5.4 Both primary and secondary research are acceptable.
- 5.5 Research must be consistent with the following definition:  
On the basis of clearly formulated problems and through the methodical gathering and systematic processing of data, all efforts must be made to gain insights through which:
- Scientific knowledge can be expanded; and/or
  - The application possibilities of theoretical knowledge can be scientifically developed; and/or
  - Techniques, systems, processes, or methods for practical use can be developed or improved in a scientifically planned and well-grounded way.
- 5.6 In the upper half of the second page of the thesis, the candidate shall place and sign the following text:

English set wording:

### **DECLARATION**

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date

Afrikaans set wording:

### **VERKLARING**

Deur hierdie tesis elektronies in te lewer, verklaar ek dat die geheel van die werk hierin vervat, my eie, oorspronklike werk is, dat ek die alleenouteur daarvan is (behalwe in die mate uitdruklik anders aangedui), dat reproduksie en publikasie daarvan deur die Universiteit Stellenbosch nie derdepartyregte sal skend nie en dat ek dit nie vantevore, of in die geheel of gedeeltelik, ter verkryging van enige kwalifikasie aangebied het nie.

Datum

- 5.7 Abstracts of not more than 500 words each are to be placed directly after the title page and the author's declaration. Abstracts must be included in the language of the thesis at the time of submission for examination. Though this is not compulsory, the thesis may also include translations of the abstract into the remaining two languages of the university. In the case of a joint degree, the abstract must also be included in another relevant language, if so stipulated in the joint agreement.

5.8 **A conventional thesis should fulfil the following minimum requirements:**

- a) **Declaration** of the nature and extent of the contributions of the candidate and of collaborators;
- b) A **Table of Contents** with accurate page references;
- c) An **Abstract**;
- d) An **Introduction**, preferably not more than one page in length, briefly defining the topic of the research;
- e) A **Literature Review**, which focuses on the specific, demarcated area, elucidating the topic of the study, and which may culminate in a **problem statement and/or hypothesis and/or research question**;
- f) The **Aim of the Investigation**, which develops logically from the literature review and which may serve as the **motivation** for the study;
- g) The **Methodology** and **Materials** (experimental animals, patients, tissue culture, therapeutics, participants, etc);
- h) The **Results** or findings after applicable analysis, elucidated by clearly comprehensible tables, diagrams, graphs, etc, with appropriate annotations;
- i) The **Discussion**, in which the results are succinctly argued and interpreted in the light of the literature review;
- j) The **Conclusion**, in which the findings, the interpretation thereof, and unresolved issues are concisely summarised. The chapter may close with a set of **recommendations** suggesting new approaches, applications, or future research directions; and
- k) The **Bibliography** in accordance with any acknowledged style.

5.9 An **article format thesis** comprises a submission-ready, submitted, accepted, or published manuscript for an approved peer reviewed subject journal (ie one that appears on the list of subject journals approved by the Department of Higher Education and Training) with the candidate as principal author. In addition, the article format must include (at least) the following:

- a) A **Table of Contents** with accurate page references;
- b) **A Summary** - It is important to illustrate the overall purpose, methods, results, and conclusions of the study (or studies) in a brief summary.
- c) **An Introduction** - The central research theme, background literature, problem statement, research question and possible hypothesis (hypotheses), including the study aims, must be discussed in the introductory chapter. Any unnecessary repetition of aspects explored in the publishable article should be avoided.
- d) The **Article**, as published, submitted or prepared ready for submission.
- e) A **Conclusion** - In this important final chapter the candidate must critically consider all data in deciding:
  - i. To what extent preliminary hypotheses were proven correct/incorrect, or the research question was answered;
  - ii. Whether or not the study aims were achieved;
  - iii. What the overall conclusions were; and
  - iv. Which fields of research could be explored in future.
- f) The **Bibliography** in accordance with any acknowledged style (at the end or after each original chapter).

5.10 All master's theses should be edited to a high standard of polished presentation, before they are submitted. Should professional editing be required, editing costs are the responsibility of the candidate.

## 6. EXAMINATION

- 6.1 A candidate for a master's degree must – with the supervisor's permission – notify the Tygerberg Doctoral Office **AT LEAST SIX MONTHS BEFORE THE DATE OF SUBMISSION** of the intention to submit a thesis for examination. The intention-to-submit form is available on the website of the Tygerberg Doctoral Office, [at this link](#).
- 6.2 The relevant PPC is responsible for the nomination of examiners for approval by the CPR **AT LEAST SIX MONTHS BEFORE SUBMISSION FOR EXAMINATION**. The standard nomination form is available on the website of the Tygerberg Doctoral Office, [at this link](#).
- 6.3 The supervisor may propose the names of two independent examiners (one internal and one external) to the PPC to be presented for acceptance by the CPR.
- 6.4 An independent examiner is someone who has not been involved in the planning, or in conducting any aspect, of the research, analysis or writing of the thesis. A person is therefore independent if they were not involved in the realisation of the thesis in any way; and they are independent of the study, the student, and the supervisor.
- 6.5 An internal, independent examiner is a person who is a member of staff or has a formal affiliation with the university.
- 6.6 An external, independent examiner is a person who is not on the university's staff establishment, or on the joint staff establishment, and has no other formal affiliation with the university. Extraordinary and honorary staff and research fellows of the university do not qualify to be appointed as external examiners (but will be considered as internal examiners).
- 6.7 When the examiners' names are submitted (**with nomination forms and CVs**) to the CPR and to the Faculty Board for approval, the following information and documentation concerning each proposed examiner must be furnished:
- The person's current post;
  - The person's academic and professional qualifications;
  - An abridged curriculum vitae of the person; and
  - A brief statement on the person's previous experience as an examiner.
  - It is a requirement that the same examiners are NOT appointed too often.

## 7. SUBMISSION

- 7.1 To submit a 100% research master's thesis for examination, the main, internal supervisor emails the signed dissertation release form, final approved thesis, Turnitin report, and the final supervisor mark, to the Tygerberg Doctoral Office at [tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za](mailto:tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za).
- 7.2 A thesis will NOT be accepted unless it is accompanied by the **Release Form** signed by all the relevant parties.
- 7.3 No hard copies are required for submission. The University offers facilities for the optional printing and binding of theses. Full information on these facilities can be obtained from SunMedia.
- 7.4 Examiners must be allowed a set period of preferably six weeks within which to assess the thesis and submit the Standard Report Forms and comprehensive reports to the Tygerberg Doctoral Office.
- 7.5 Examiner reports are forwarded from the Tygerberg Doctoral Office ([tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za](mailto:tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za)) to the supervisor for sharing comments with the (co-supervisor/s and) student in an anonymised manner, and for overseeing the necessary corrections, where required.
- 7.6 The written examination, including any resubmission via the Tygerberg Doctoral office ([tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za](mailto:tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za)), must be completed before the oral may proceed. The final thesis should be shared with the examiners.

## **8. GUIDELINES FOR DISPUTES**

### **8.1 Where both examiners pass the thesis, but with more than 20% variation in marks**

- a) In cases where both examiners pass the thesis, but there is a 20% or greater variation in marks between the two examiners, this will automatically be flagged by the Tygerberg Doctoral Office and will activate the option for the student to dispute the variation. (NOTE: a separate process applies to cases where one examiner fails a thesis.)
- b) The Tygerberg Doctoral Office will contact the student, with a copy to the supervisor, and will offer the student the option to initiate a dispute. This will make clear that initiating the dispute process might cause a delay in finalising the examination (and therefore also the date of graduation). The dispute process must be completed before the oral examination can be conducted. Furthermore, the student cannot withdraw the dispute once the process has been initiated. Disputing the variation will not necessarily mean that a higher mark will be accepted, as a lower mark might be the outcome at the conclusion of the dispute process.
- c) The student must confirm in writing whether they choose to pursue the dispute or not.
- d) In cases where the dispute is not taken up, the marks awarded are regarded as the final marks from the two examiners and no further dispute may be declared.
- e) In cases where the dispute is taken up, the Tygerberg Doctoral Office will inform the Vice Dean: Research and Internationalisation, who is Chairperson of the CPR, of the dispute.
- f) The Tygerberg Doctoral Office will inform the two examiners, on behalf of the Vice Dean: Research and Internationalisation, that a dispute has been declared because of a large variation in marks. The examiners will be requested to have a collegial mediated discussion (in person or electronically, arranged by the CPR to review the reasons for, and try to resolve, the large difference. This may lead to one or both examiners offering to change their mark (either upward or downward as applicable after the discussion) to decrease the variation to below 20%.
- g) Where one or both of the examiners offer(s) to change their mark, either upward or downward, so that the variation becomes less than 20%, this will be regarded as the final mark from the examiner and no further dispute may be declared.
- h) If this does not lead to a solution (ie where neither examiner is prepared to change their mark), the average will be taken as the final mark.

### **8.2 Where one examiner fails or rejects the thesis**

- a) In cases where one of the two examiners reject the thesis, the Chairperson of the CPR will nominate an additional examiner after consultation with the head of the relevant environment, in order to obtain an additional opinion. If the third examiner also rejects the thesis, the student fails. If the third examiner passes the thesis, the final thesis mark is calculated as the average of the original pass mark and the mark of the third examiner, whereas the second examiner's mark is disregarded. The oral examination is thereafter held with only the two passing examiners.
- b) The final results of the examination must be conveyed to all examiners in writing. If an examiner's failure/rejection result is not accepted as a result of the above process, he/she should be informed in writing of the process and final result.

### **8.3 Where both examiners fail the thesis**

In cases where the thesis is failed by both examiners, the CPR must appoint an ad hoc committee to review the reports of the examiners and to report to the next meeting of the CPR. The ad hoc committee must consist of the two examiners and two members of the CPR as nominated by the Chair. After the ad hoc committee has dealt with the reports, the supervisor must carry out the decisions of the ad hoc committee, if applicable, before reporting to the CPR.

## 9. ORAL EXAMINATION AND SUPERVISOR REPORT

- 9.1 A PPC may determine the formula, in terms of which the final mark is calculated for a specific programme. Although an oral examination on the thesis has to take place, the PPC may determine the portion of that mark that is contributed by the oral across each programme.
- 9.2 Once the written examination of the thesis has been completed with a pass mark, the supervisor arranges an oral examination. An oral examination is conducted by the examiners, and has an important quality assurance function. Examiners are notified in advance of the oral examination in which they are required to participate. The two examiners are to be invited to the oral examination. It is preferable that both examiners attend the oral, however, a maximum of one examiner may be excused from the oral if timely finalisation of the result will otherwise be prevented. An examiner who is unable to attend must give written permission for the oral to go ahead in their absence, or be given the opportunity to examine the candidate at another time.
- 9.3 During the oral, the student is expected to demonstrate expert knowledge of the study before the examiners ask relevant questions. The relevant PPC decides on the format, content, and outcome of the oral examination. However, the supervisor and co-supervisor(s) may only observe and may not participate in the process.
- 9.4 After the oral examination, the supervisor should compile a report, where applicable, together with the co-supervisor(s), to provide insight into the process that culminated in the realisation of the thesis, and to record the details of the examination including the oral (Template available from the Tygerberg Doctoral Office). This report is submitted to the research master's examination officer at [tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za](mailto:tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za).

## 10. FINALISATION OF MARKS

- 10.1 The Tygerberg Doctoral Office coordinates the examination process of master's degrees by thesis (only). All examination reports for internal and external examiners of 100% research master's degrees are processed via email address [tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za](mailto:tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za).
- 10.2 Academic environments may determine the weight distribution of the assessment opportunities (ie written thesis, oral examination) in a specific programme.
- 10.3 Following the oral, the supervisor report is submitted to [tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za](mailto:tyg-thesis@sun.ac.za). The Tygerberg Doctoral Office submits the final supervisor report and all examiner reports to the Vice Dean: Research and Internationalisation, for approval of the result.
- 10.4 Once all aspects of the examination have been completed, the thesis is to be uploaded on SunScholar via the e-thesis nomination system and with the assistance of the supervisor or administrator in the academic environment.

## 11. GRADUATION

- 11.1 For possible graduation **in December**, candidates must submit their theses **before or by 30 August** of the same year; and  
For possible graduation **in March**, candidates must submit their theses **before or by 30 November** of the preceding year.
- 11.2 A graphic representation of the timelines to submission is available on the website of the Tygerberg Doctoral Office, [at this link](#).
- 11.3 Supervisors are encouraged to notify students of these deadlines.

ENDS.