SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

SGS 006

Guidance Note for Proposal Defense (or Upgrade)

1. Purpose

The purpose of the proposal defense is to *upgrade* students into Ph.D. candidature.[1] On successful completion of the defense, the doctoral student is confirmed and upgraded to a **Ph.D. candidate.**

The defense or upgrade exercise will assess the student's progress, preparedness, knowledge, and ability to complete the Ph.D. program within a reasonable time frame. It will include an assessment of the student's demonstrable academic and research competence and preparedness to undertake the rigors of doctoral study at AUN.

This guidance contains the criteria, procedures, and potential outcomes of the upgrade process.

2. Criteria

A student shall be upgraded to the status of a Ph.D. candidate based on the following criteria:

a) A demonstrated commitment to pursuing research at AUN that will lead to the award of the Ph.D. degree.
b) Satisfactory progress on the work so far.
c) A demonstrated awareness of the context of the study.
d) Completion of relevant literature review and a detailed bibliography.
e) Formulation of a viable hypothesis or research question(s) that could be completed within an acceptable time frame for the Ph.D. program.
f) Satisfactory development of relevant technical, research, and generic skills in the use of relevant software for the research.
g) Formulation of a viable doctoral completion plan.
h) Careful consideration of the ethical dimensions of the project, including approval from the AUN IRB (in cases of research involving human subjects).

In addition to these minimum criteria, the student must meet any other requirements by their department and/or School. The above criteria are assessed based on the contents of the upgrade report in conjunction with the upgrade viva.

3. Procedure

3.1 Management and Oversight

The management and oversight of the upgrade process is the responsibility of the respective School's Graduate Programs Coordinator (GPC) in collaboration with the AUN Graduate School.

[1] In this document, *proposal defense* and *upgrade* are used interchangeably.

At the request of the student and the confirmation of the supervision committee, the GPC will initiate the process and appoint the **Upgrade Panel** in consultation with their Dean.

The GPC should confirm that the student has completed his/her doctoral plan of study and deposited the same with the Graduate School and that the student has successfully completed all course work and required Skills Development or Graduate Research workshops. Finally, the GPC must confirm from the Graduate or the Registry that the student is in registration status.

3.2 Time Frame

The AUN Graduate School Regulations require that the upgrade can only be done after a successful comprehensive examination.

3.3 Components of the Upgrade Assessment

The proposal/upgrade defense is implemented through

a) a written report from the student, and
b) a 'mini' viva, outlining the work accomplished so far, and a discussion of further work that will now lead to a successful dissertation along with a very specific timeframe.

These components will be carefully considered by the assessment panel.

A student cannot submit for an upgrade without having a supervision committee duly appointed by the AUN's Doctoral Dissertation Board. The student must draft their Upgrade Report in consultation with their supervisors.

3.3.1 Contents of the written report

Whilst it is recognized that the exact nature of the report will depend on discipline, in general, all transfer reports must include the following sections:

i. An introduction that provides the context of the work.
ii. Research questions and/or hypotheses.
iii. A competent literature review.
iv. A section on methodology.
v. A substantial discussion of the objectives of the study and how they plan to meet each objective.
vi. A plan and timetable for the remainder of the work.
vii. AUN IRB approval or evidence of application for IRB approval (for research involving human subjects).
viii. A bibliography.

The above report must be accompanied by a note by the lead supervisor recommending the student for the upgrade. It should typically be submitted in advance of the upgrade viva to the Defence Panel and the Student.

The Upgrade Report, including all sections, must not exceed 100 pages in length including the bibliography, and will normally take the format of a 'mini-dissertation' based on the sections outlined above. It should be 15,000 – 25,000 words (excluding references). *Note that all written work submitted to the Graduate School will undergo plagiarism check.*

3.3.1.1 Suggested Format and Style

Every attempt should be made to balance the length of the above sections. For example, the literature review should not constitute 90% of the report. A suggested layout could be as follows:

a. Front matter (table of contents/figures, etc) and introduction (including research questions/hypotheses, objectives, etc): 25 pages,
b. literature review: 25 pages
c. methodology: 10 pages,
d. discussion and future work: 5 pages,
e. bibliography: 5 pages.

Students are strongly encouraged to start work on the literature review section of their work as early as possible in their Ph.D. journey, preferably in their first semester as a component of course work.

3.3.2. The 'Mini Viva'

The purpose of the oral defense or 'mini viva' is to ascertain that the student is prepared for doctoral research. The mini viva must always be considered alongside the student's upgrade report and the Principal Supervisor's commendation note. Students should consider the mini viva as an opportunity to discuss and defend their ideas with internal experts at the early stage of their work. It should be an opportunity to receive constructive feedback on the work done so far and to set a clear agenda for the remaining work.

3.3.2.1 The Panel

The mini viva panel should be made up of a minimum of two members of academic staff from the candidate's department. There should be a representative from the Graduate School which should either be the Dean or a designated academic staff, which should be external to the student's department. The School's GPC must be in attendance and should oversee the process. **If the student is supervised by the GPC, the Dean of the school or someone designated by the Dean should oversee the process.**

4. Attempts and Outcomes

4.1 Attempts

There are three possible upgrade attempts. If the student fails at the first attempt, the second should be in the following semester. The period between attempts should normally be no more than 6 months and not less than three months.

For part-time students, the period between attempts should normally be no more than 10 months.

It is expected that most students will successfully upgrade on the first attempt. After the third unsuccessful attempt, the student will be withdrawn from the program with a transcript.

4.2 Outcomes

The potential outcomes of the first upgrade attempt are:

i) Pass: The student is recommended for an upgrade to the status of a Ph.D. candidate.

ii) Referred: The student is referred to a specific date, with specific criteria to meet, for a second attempt *and* a second viva.

iii) Referred without viva: The student is referred to a specific date, with specific criteria to meet, for a second attempt but without the need for another viva.

If the student fails the third attempt, the following outcome applies:

iv) Advised to Withdraw: The GPC recommends a Formal Termination of Doctoral Study on the Grounds of Academic Shortfall to the Dean of Graduate School.

A written joint report on the outcome should be jointly signed by the Chair of the Upgrade Panel and the GPC and submitted to the Graduate School. The Graduate School will formally notify the Academic Registry and the student, supervisors, and the Departmental Chair.

A standard template for the Upgrade Panel Report is attached. Note that this report does not replace the GPC's feedback to the student which should be in copy of the supervisors, the Departmental Chair and the Dean.

5. Complaints

If a student is not satisfied with the outcome of the upgrade exercise and wishes to make a complaint, the student should first approach his/her principal supervisor and/or the Graduate Support Coordinator for advice. After that, he/she should follow the complaint procedures outlined in the Graduate Catalog.