

Candidacy Exam Information

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Purpose of the Candidacy Examination : The purpose of the PhD Candidacy Exam is to evaluate and confirm the suitability of the PhD student to undertake advanced research, as required in the PhD program.

Objectives of the Candidacy Examination : The PhD Candidacy Exam has three components: the candidacy report (research proposal), oral presentation and oral examination (see Section 6). Although the precise content of the examination is up to the examining committee, questions should not dwell solely on the proposal itself. Students are normally expected to demonstrate:

- a broad grasp of existing factual and conceptual knowledge central to the discipline within which the research is focused;
- an ability to think creatively and critically about questions related to their area of research;
- an awareness and appreciation of the significance of new discoveries in their area of research;
- a full understanding of key assumptions and technical complexities of relevant research methods (e.g., analytical, experimental, observational, statistical);
- sound knowledge of the biophysical and/or social characteristics of the organisms or systems on which they work.

Preparation: Students are advised to discuss the content of the oral examination with each member of the Candidacy Examination Committee prior to the exam. Some members may choose to indicate specific topics relevant to the student's research program that they plan to cover during the exam.

Time Lines: A general guideline for students preparing for the candidacy exam is as follows:

- 4-6 weeks prior to the exam: meet with supervisor and examining committee members to discuss oral exam;
- 2-3 weeks prior to the exam: schedule practice sessions with group;
- 2 weeks prior to the exam: submit candidacy exam report to committee members and the Graduate Administrator at grad.ales@ualberta.ca;
- 1 week prior to the exam: meet with committee chair to discuss exam format.

When to take the Candidacy: To become a formal PhD Candidate, a student must pass an oral Candidacy Examination. It is recommended that the PhD Candidacy Examination be taken before the end of the second year, when most, if not all, formal course work is completed, but should be taken no later than the end of the third year of a student's program (from FGSR Graduate Program Manual). FGSR requires that the exam be completed no later than 6 months prior to the final defense, although delaying the examination that long

basically defeats its original purpose. At the time of the Candidacy Examination the thesis proposal should be well defined.

Scheduling of Exam: FGSR notes it is the responsibility of the **supervisor** (not the student) to ensure that adequate time is allotted for scheduling examinations. FGSR requires that the Department recommend an Examining Committee four weeks prior to the examination.

Composition of Candidacy Exam Committee : The examination is conducted by the **supervisory committee plus two other arms-length examiners** and a Chair who is not an examiner.

- **The Chair:** Every examining committee must have a chair who is not a supervisor but is a member of the student's home department. The chair should have sufficient experience of graduate examinations to be able to allow the examination to be conducted in a fair manner, and is responsible for moderating the discussion and directing questions. It is the chair's responsibility to ensure that departmental and FGSR regulations relating to the final examination are followed. If the chair is not an examiner, then the chair does not vote. The FGSR encourages, and for doctoral examinations strongly recommends, that committee chairs not be examiners.
- **Examiners:** Examiners are full voting members of the examining committee. With the exception of the Dean, FGSR, the Dean of the department's Faculty, or a Pro Dean (Dean's representative), who may participate fully in the examination, *persons other than the examiners may attend only with the prior approval of the Dean, FGSR, the Dean of the department's Faculty, or the chair of the examining committee.* With the possible exception of the Pro Deans, all examiners must be either active in the general subject area of the student's research, or bring relevant expertise to the assessment of the thesis.
- **Arm's Length Examiners:** An arm's length examiner must not be (or have been) a member of the supervisory committee, or have been connected with the thesis research in a significant way. The examiner should not have been associated with the student, outside of usual contact in courses or other non-thesis activities within the University, nor be related to the student or supervisor(s).

Except in special circumstances (fully justified in writing to the Dean of the department's Faculty), an arm's length examiner should not be a close collaborator of the supervisor(s) within the last six years.

Arm's length examiners who have served on a student's candidacy examination committee do not lose their arm's length status as a result, and are eligible to serve as arm's length examiners on the student's doctoral final examination if the other conditions of being arm's length remain unchanged.

Every examining committee requires a minimum number of arm's length examiners: At least one for a master's final examination, at least two for a candidacy examination, and at least two for a doctoral final examination.

- **Attendance at Examinations:** In the absence of unforeseen circumstances, it is essential that all examiners attend the entire examination. Attendance means participation in the examination either in person or via Teleconferencing (see below). The only exception allowed is the External Reader for a doctoral final examination, who participates by providing a detailed report and a list of questions.

If the department has warning that any member of the examining committee cannot attend the examination, the department should contact the Dean, FGSR for advice. The situation will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, but it may be necessary that the examination be postponed and re-scheduled, or the examiner be replaced.

Except for the Dean, FGSR, the Dean of the department's Faculty, or a Pro Dean (the representative of the Dean, FGSR), who may participate fully in the examination, persons other than the examiners may attend only with the approval of the Dean, FGSR, the Dean of the department's Faculty, or the chair of the committee.

Visitors may not participate in the committee's discussion concerning its decision on the student's performance and must withdraw before such discussion commences.

Responsibilities of Supervisors, Examiners and Chair at Candidacy Examinations:

- *Supervisor* - Supervisors are responsible for selecting members of the Examining Committee who are knowledgeable in the general research field being undertaken by the student. The Supervisor contacts prospective Examining Committee members to ensure that they are willing and able to participate. The Supervisor works with the student to ensure that he/she is preparing appropriately for the exam; often this will entail having a practice exam session to give the student a better understanding of what to expect and the degree of detail to provide in the actual examination.
- *Examiner* - Examiners are nominated by the AFNS Department for approval by FGSR. Supervisors are responsible for recommending examiners and confirming they can attend the examination at the date and time selected by the supervisor.
- *Chair* - Candidacy examinations are chaired by a member of the AFNS Department and appointed by the Associate Chair, Graduate Programs. Where possible, chairs are chosen from within the student's research interest group. The Chair of the examination should not have had previous formal advisory contact with the student. Chairs have three primary responsibilities:
 - to maintain the interests and high standards of the Department,
 - to ensure a fair examination for the student and,
 - to ensure that all required courses to date have been completed, and any other outstanding requirements listed in the student's file have been met.

The Chair thus serves as a 'referee' who ensures fairness, balance and order during the examination. The Chair will moderate the examination and direct the questioning, as well as ensure that departmental and FGSR regulations are followed. The Chair does not vote on the outcome of the examination. The Chair drafts and signs the Report of the Candidacy Examination and then submits it to the Associate Chair. *Please see "Appendix II - A Brief Supplementary Explanation" at the end of this document for more details regarding the role of exam Chair.

Candidacy Exam Components : The PhD Candidacy exam has three components: the candidacy report, the oral presentation and the oral examination.

1. **Candidacy Report** – The student will prepare a Summary and Research Proposal on their research program, using the format of a Tri-Council Research Grant application (see below). This proposal must be handed in to the examination committee and Graduate Program Administrator at least one week prior to the scheduled exam date.

Note that the research proposal itself is not the sole focal point of the oral examination. It is intended as a document from which other questions relevant to the research area(s), as well as more general questions can be derived such that the objectives of the Candidacy Examination can be achieved.

Research Proposal - The student will describe:

- progress of research activities related to the proposal (include a GANT chart with estimated completion times for each research activity and final exam)
- objectives: both short and long term
- literature review pertinent to the proposal
- research design and methods
- anticipated significance of the work
- training aspect of the proposal (if appropriate)

- The proposal can be a maximum of 5 pages, single-spaced (maximum 6 lines per inch), with margins no smaller than of ¾ of an inch (1.7 cm) all around. If you use a type size measured in pts, it must be no smaller than 12 pts; if you use a type size measured in cpi, it must be no more than 10 cpi.
2. **Oral Presentation** - At the start of the exam, the student will be given **15 minutes** to introduce themselves and their research program, highlighting the objectives and progress of the Ph.D. research program. The presentation will be uninterrupted and will be limited to a maximum of 20 minutes. Presentation should consist of a maximum of 10 slides. This is NOT a research seminar.
 3. **Oral Examination** - The Examination Committee may conduct questioning based to some extent on the content of the proposal and oral presentation. However, it is the responsibility of the Examining Committee to broaden the line of questioning so that the general knowledge of the student in areas related to the research field is thoroughly examined. It is the responsibility of the examination chair to ensure that this objective is met. As a guideline, **the majority of the examination time should be spent dealing with issues other than the details of the proposal and oral presentation.**

Recommended procedure for Candidacy Examination :

- **Student and Committee Chair**: meet 1 week prior to examination to discuss format.

The examination:

- The **student** presents a 15 minute introduction summarizing the research progress.
- *In the absence of the candidate*, the **Chair** reviews the student's record with the committee.
- *In the absence of the candidate*, the **Chair** calls for questions on the above material (offers to circulate file to examiners).
- *In the presence of the candidate*, the **Chair** explains the objectives of the examination to the student (See Section 1).
- *In the presence of the candidate*, the **Chair** establishes an order of questioning (and scheduled breaks) prior to the start of the examination and confirms material to be examined. At the discretion of the Chair, the external examiner on the committee is given the opportunity to begin the questioning.
- The **student** is given the opportunity to ask questions or make requests before the examination begins.
- The oral examination is commenced, with questions from the **examiners**. Normally consists of one or two rounds. During the 1st round examiners are allowed 15-20 minutes each to question the candidate; during the 2nd round examiners are allowed 5-10 minutes each for questioning.
- At the conclusion of the examination, the **student** is given the opportunity to make a closing statement or ask closing questions.
- After the student has left the room, the **examiners** deliberate.
- A final decision is normally arrived at via discussion until a consensus is reached. Statements to be included on the Report of the Candidacy Examination would normally be discussed at this time.
- The student is advised of the final decision.
- The **Chair** of the examination will then draft, sign and submit the Report of the Candidacy Examination to the Associate Chair Graduate Programs, AFNS. (The Report of the Candidacy Examination form (Appendix I) will be provided to members of the Examination Committee at the beginning of the examination.)
- The student meets with the **supervisor** to discuss results of Candidacy Examination.

Outcomes of the Candidacy Examination : The final decision of the Examining Committee is recorded on the 'Report of the Candidacy Examination' form. Possible outcomes of the Examining Committee adjudication include:

- **Pass**. The performance was exemplary or acceptable, with no conditions. The student exhibited a strong command of all the areas examined and communicated information clearly.
- **Conditional Pass**. The performance, while generally satisfactory, was weak in certain areas. The Examining Committee will assign specific conditions (e.g., courses, readings, etc.) that the student must

satisfy. The Examining Committee must also specify a proposed timeline for satisfying the conditions. Once the conditions are met, the supervisor must inform the Associate Chair (Graduate Studies), in writing, so that the student's Change of Category can be processed. The following information is required with a recommendation for a Conditional Pass:

- the reason for this recommendation
- the details of the conditions
- the timeframe for the student to meet the conditions
- the approval mechanism for meeting the conditions (e.g. approval of the committee chair or supervisor, or approval of the entire committee, or select members of the committee)
- the supervision and assistance the student can be expected to receive from committee members.
- **Fail.** The performance was inadequate and the committee has doubts about the student's potential to improve. One of the following three options must be indicated:
 - Repeat Candidacy Exam
 - Change Category to M.Sc. Thesis-based or Course-based
 - Terminate Ph.D. Program

If the decision is Pass, department sends notification to FGSR indicating the successful completion of the candidacy. If the decision is Conditional Pass, the department holds the FGSR "Recommendation for a Change of Category" form until the conditions have been met.

If all but one member of the committee agree on a favorable decision (pass or conditional pass), the decision is that of the majority. If two or more dissenting votes are recorded, the case is referred to the Dean, FGSR who determines the subsequent course of action.

Report of the Candidacy Examination: In addition to determining the outcome of the examination, the Examination Committee should advise the Chair of the examination on appropriate comments to be made on the student's performance in specific areas listed on the 'Report of the Candidacy Examination' form. The student will receive a copy of the completed 'form,' along with the Chair of the examination and the Supervisor

If the student is not successful in the examination, the committee chair files a written report to the Dean, FGSR through the Graduate Program Administrator (copied to student, examiners, examining Chair and student's file).

Appendix I: [Report Form for the Candidacy Examination](#)

Appendix II: [The Role and Guidelines for Candidacy Examination Chairs](#)