

ACADEMIC COUNCIL REPORT

ACTION REQUESTED:

Decision
Recommendation
Discussion/Direction
Information

DATE: 27 June 2023

FROM: School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (SGPS)

SUBJECT: Revised Thesis Oral Examination for Master's and Doctoral Candidates Policy

MANDATE:

- Under the Policy Framework, Policy Owners must consult with deliberative bodies before presenting draft policy instruments to the approval authority for approval
- The GSC has a mandate of maintaining the academic standards set by Academic Council and to serve as a deliberative body for academic policy instruments
- Under the Policy Framework, changes to academic items which are editorial in nature are presented to the deliberative body and Academic Council for information; changes to the Academic Calendar are presented to the appropriate standing committee of Academic Council for information

EDITORIAL/AMENDMENT:

- With the implementation of the new Doctorate of Education (EdD) program, some policy language is not inclusive of this program, specifically the use of 'PhD' only. Editorial amendments are being made to replace any use of the term 'PhD' with 'doctoral' in the Thesis Oral Examination for Master's and Doctoral Candidacy policy to ensure it is clear that it is applicable to all doctoral students.

CONSULTATION:

Deliberative Body: GSC April 2023 and May 2023 for information

Academic Council: June 2023 for information

NEXT STEPS:

- The Graduate Academic Calendar text will be updated with the new doctoral language effective Fall 2023. Updates will also be made to reflect the change on the SGPS

website, handbooks and any relevant forms, as applicable.

SUPPORTING REFERENCE MATERIALS:

- Revised Thesis Oral Examination for Master's and Doctoral Candidates Policy (tracked changes)

Classification Number	ACD 1520
Framework Category	Academic
Approving Authority	Academic Council
Policy Owner	Dean, Graduate Studies
Approval Date	February 23, 2021
Review Date	February 2024
Supersedes	Academic Regulations, Graduate Academic Calendar 2020-21

THESIS ORAL EXAMINATION FOR MASTER’S AND DOCTORAL CANDIDATES POLICY

PURPOSE

1. The purpose of this Policy is to outline the requirements and outcomes of the oral examination for the master’s and doctoral thesis.

DEFINITIONS

2. For the purposes of this Policy the following definitions apply:

“**Candidacy Examination**” means an oral presentation by a graduate student for the purpose of evaluating the student’s research proposal, knowledge of the research field and background preparation.

“**Conflict of Interest**” means a conflict between a person’s duties and responsibilities with regard to the examination process, and that person’s private, professional, business or public interests.

“**Graduate Program Director**” means academic administrators with a Graduate Faculty Appointment within an academic unit and help to ensure the success of the Program and its students.

“**Graduate Faculty Appointment**” means a faculty member with an academic appointment at the University who has been approved to participate in a graduate Program in one of the three categories: Graduate Faculty, Associate Graduate Faculty or Emeritus/Emerita Graduate Faculty.

“**Program**” means a complete set and sequence of Courses, combination of Courses, and/or other units of study, research and practice, the successful completion of which qualifies the candidate for a formal credential (degree with or without major; diploma), provided all other academic and financial requirements are met.

“**Research Supervisor**” means a faculty member with a Graduate Faculty Appointment that oversees a graduate student’s research and academic progress towards successful completion of the student’s Program.

“**Transcript**” means the complete report of a student’s academic record.

SCOPE AND AUTHORITY

3. This Policy applies to graduate students completing a research Program for which an oral examination is required, examining committee members, Graduate Program Directors and all others involved in an oral examination.
4. The Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies or successor thereof, is the Policy Owner and is responsible for overseeing the implementation, administration and interpretation of this Policy.

POLICY

Master's candidates whose Programs require a thesis and doctoral candidates are required to defend their completed thesis orally in front of an examining committee.

5. General

- 5.1. Candidates are expected to follow the advice of their Research Supervisor(s) and their supervisory committee in establishing when their work is ready for examination. Normally, the student's Research Supervisor authorizes the student to begin the oral examination process.
- 5.2. In exceptional circumstances, candidates may request that the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies arrange for an examination of the thesis/dissertation or other work without the support of the Research Supervisor(s) and supervisory committee.
- 5.3. It is the candidate's responsibility to ensure that all materials are prepared and assembled appropriately. Candidates should consult their Research Supervisor(s) and the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for specific guidelines and procedures on the preparation and presentation of thesis/dissertation materials.
- 5.4. Candidates should arrive on time. Should the candidate anticipate being late for the defence, they should contact the chair/supervisor as soon as possible. The Chair of the Examining Committee has the authority to delay the start of the exam for up to 30 minutes. However, a sudden illness or emergency that does not allow the exam to begin will result in an adjournment/re-scheduling.

6. Examining Committee

The examining committee evaluates the academic merit of each student who defends a thesis and decides whether the candidate has satisfactorily passed the oral examination.

6.1. Master's Candidates

- a) For master's candidates, the examining committee consists of:
 - All members of the supervisory committee; and,
 - One thesis examiner;
- b) The committee is chaired by the Graduate Program Director or designate.
- c) Normally, the committee will be confirmed at least 4 weeks prior to the proposed defence date.

6.2. Doctoral Candidates

- a) For doctoral candidates, the examining committee consists of:
 - The external examiner;
 - One university examiner; and,
 - All members of the candidate's supervisory committee (including the Research Supervisor(s)).
- b) The committee is chaired by the Graduate Program Director or designate.
- c) Normally, the committee will be confirmed at least 8 weeks prior to the proposed defence date.

7. Thesis, External and University Examiners

7.1. Master's Candidates

The thesis examiner is appointed by the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies upon recommendation of the Graduate Program Director. A curriculum vitae for the recommended examiner and a written rationale must be provided.

- a) The master's thesis examiner has expertise that is relevant to the thesis subject matter and normally is a faculty member at the University with a Graduate Faculty Appointment, although examiners external to the University may be appointed.
- b) Thesis examiners should not have been a thesis examiner for another master's student with the same supervisor within the same academic year.

7.2. Doctoral Candidates

The university and external examiners are appointed by the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies upon recommendation of the Graduate Program Director. A curriculum vitae for each recommended examiner and a written rationale must be provided.

a) University Examiners

- University examiners should hold the rank of full or associate professor (or equivalent) if they are at a university, or of comparable expertise and standing if not at a university.
- The university examiner has expertise that is relevant to the thesis subject matter and normally is a faculty member at the University with a Graduate Faculty Appointment.
- University examiners may have been the candidacy examiner for the same student's Candidacy Exam.
- University examiners should not have been a university examiner for another [PhD-doctoral](#) student with the same supervisor within the last year.

b) External Examiners

- should hold the rank of full or associate professor (or equivalent) if they are at a university, or of comparable expertise and standing if not at a university.

- An external examiner for a PhD-doctoral dissertation is a well-qualified, objective and experienced individual who has considerable direct knowledge in the field of study of the subject matter.
- External examiners will not have been associated or affiliated with the University during the last six years through any type of employment or adjunct or visiting position nor have any plans to do so in the immediate future.
- External examiners should not have been an external examiner for another PhD-doctoral student with the same supervisor within the last two years.

7.3. Conflicts of Interest for Examiners

Conflicts of Interest must be avoided for all examiners. Conflicts of Interest include real, perceived or potential conflicts. Examiners must not be closely linked with either the candidate or the Research Supervisor in a personal, financial or research capacity. Key examples of Conflicts of Interest are set out below:

- a) Examiners should not have had any direct contact with the candidate as a graduate student, nor have any plans to collaborate with or employ the candidate in the immediate future.
- b) Examiners must not have been teaching or supervising a spouse, family member or relative of the candidate or of the supervisor within the last six years. Correspondingly, supervisors also must not have been teaching or supervising a spouse, family member or relative of examiners within the last six years.
- c) Examiners should not have been closely professionally affiliated with a supervisor, as a result of having been a supervisor or a trainee of the supervisor; or having collaborated, published or shared funding with the supervisor within the last six years; or having plans to collaborate in the immediate future.
- d) Should the candidate's dissertation contain chapters or sections of previously published works, an examiner shall not have been involved in the review or editing of this material in any capacity.

7.4. Thesis, External and University Examiner Report(s) for Master's and Doctoral Candidates

- a) The examiner(s) shall prepare a report of their assessment of the candidate's thesis and send it to the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies or designate 10 calendar days before the scheduled exam date.
- b) The Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies may postpone the final examination if the examiner's report is not received by this deadline.
- c) The dean or designate will distribute copies of the report to all other members of the examining committee. The content of the report is confidential and must not be discussed with the candidate prior to the final examination.

- d) Depending on the content of the report, the examining committee and the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies may meet to determine whether or not to proceed with the final examination.

8. Approval for the Oral Examination

- 8.1. Before an oral examination can be scheduled, the supervisory committee must make a recommendation of thesis readiness to the Graduate Program Director and Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (no more than one negative vote and/or abstention). This recommendation must be made no less than three months prior to the date set for examination.
- 8.2. In research-based Programs, normally, all coursework will be completed prior to scheduling a student's oral defence.
- 8.3. Once the supervisory committee has declared the thesis is ready for examination, an examination thesis copy must be sent to the examining committee.
 - a) For master's candidates, the examination copy of the thesis must be approved and submitted at least 4 weeks prior to the proposed oral examination.
 - b) For doctoral candidates, the examination copy of the thesis will normally be approved and submitted at least 8 weeks prior to the proposed oral examination.

9. Responsibilities of the Chair of the Examining Committee:

- 9.1. Ensure that all necessary arrangements are made for the oral examination;
- 9.2. Ensure the thesis is sent to the master's thesis examiner, university examiner and doctoral external examiner;
- 9.3. Ensure the examination date is set; and,
- 9.4. Ensure the relevant documents needed at the time of the examination are prepared.

10. Examining Committee Attendance at the Defence

- 10.1. Normally, all examining committee members must attend the defence.
- 10.2. The chair of the examining committee must be physically present during the oral examination.
- 10.3. At least one member of the supervisory committee must be physically present.
- 10.4. Normally, no more than two members of the examining committee, including the master's thesis examiner and doctoral external examiner, may attend the defence remotely.
- 10.5. If a member of the examining committee finds that they are unable to attend the oral examination in person or remotely via synchronous participation, the Graduate Program Director should secure a suitable replacement.
- 10.6. Should a suitable replacement not be found, the member is asked to submit their questions or concerns to be read by the examining committee chair at the defence and they will not

be permitted to vote in the deliberation phase. Doctoral and external examiners are not permitted to submit questions in lieu of participating at the defence.

- 10.7.** If an examining committee member is late to the defence, the Chair of the Examining Committee has the authority to delay the start of the exam for up to 30 minutes before cancelling the defence.
- 10.8.** In extraordinary circumstances, the examination will be rescheduled if one or more members of the examining committee are unable to attend.
- 10.9.** In the case of online Programs, alternate arrangements will be permitted.
- 10.10.** In extenuating circumstances, the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies may approve alternate arrangements.

11. Phases of the Thesis Defence

11.1. The Presentation Phase

This is the oral presentation by the candidate. This short presentation, of approximately 20 minutes, summarizes the main arguments and findings of the work.

- a)** Normally, the presentation is an open event that can be attended by all interested parties; however, extraordinarily, the presentation may be closed to a restricted audience, or no audience, for reasons of confidentiality, safety or intellectual property.
- b)** In some cases, committee and audience members may be asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement.
- c)** The chair of the examining committee, in consultation with the Graduate Program Director and the Research Supervisor, will determine whether the defence is open or closed.
- d)** The reasons for closing a defence are to be provided in the chair's report to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

11.2. The Question Phase

This is the second component of the defence. In all cases, the candidate must answer questions from the examining committee.

- a)** The chair will determine whether the audience is allowed to stay for the question phase of the examination and, if they do stay, whether they are permitted to participate in questioning the candidate.
- b)** The chair shall limit the amount of time for questions from the audience, if applicable, and may continue with questions from the examining committee after the audience has left the room.
- c)** Questions must be related to the work done by the student for the thesis and be based on knowledge directly related to the material.
- d)** Only speakers recognized by the chair may ask questions, and the chair controls the order and flow of questioning.

- e) The chair can also ask questions.

11.3. The Deliberation Phase

This is the third major part of the defence.

- a) When the question phase is over, the student is asked to leave the room and members of the examining committee determine the outcome of the oral examination.
- b) All decisions of the examining committee are made by majority vote.
- c) In the case of co-supervision, co-supervisors collectively have one vote.
- d) A non-voting advisor is not permitted to vote.
- e) The chair of the examining committee is a non-voting member, unless the chair's vote is needed to break a tie.

12. Outcomes of Completion of the Oral Examination

12.1. A student's thesis defence includes both an oral presentation and an evaluation of the written thesis.

- a) An overall grade of Pass or Fail is assigned, encompassing both components, and will appear on the Transcript.
- b) During the oral examination, the examining committee will evaluate and render separate decisions for the oral presentation and question phase, and for the written thesis.
- c) The examining committee will render one of two decisions about the oral presentation and questions phase:
 - Acceptable; or,
 - Not Acceptable.
- d) The examining committee will render one of four decisions about the written thesis, following the oral examination:
 - Acceptable without revisions;
 - Acceptable with Minor Revisions;
 - Major Revisions Required; or,
 - Not Acceptable.
- e) In order to receive a grade of pass, the examining committee must be satisfied with the written thesis and that the student has demonstrated their ability to present the material and answer questions.

12.2. Oral Presentation is Acceptable

- a) An evaluation by the committee of Acceptable means that the student's subject-matter knowledge, as demonstrated by the oral presentation and ability to answer questions is acceptable.

12.3. Oral Presentation is Not Acceptable

- a) An evaluation by the committee of Not Acceptable means that the student's subject-matter knowledge as demonstrated in the oral presentation and ability to answer questions is not acceptable. This determination should be made in exceptional circumstances.
- b) The examining committee will determine specifically what requirements are being put in place to address the identified deficiencies.
- c) Requirements may include, but are not limited to:
 - a full re-examination;
 - a question session with examining committee;
 - any other reasonable means of demonstrating the student's ability to orally present material and answer questions, as agreed upon by the committee.

12.4. Written Thesis is Acceptable without Required Revisions

- a) An evaluation by the committee of Acceptable without Required Revisions means that the thesis is acceptable without any further editorial work.
- b) When the written thesis is so evaluated, the defence is given a grade of Pass, provided that the decision rendered on the oral presentation is "Acceptable" and that the written thesis document is submitted to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.
- c) Any minor discretionary edits (e.g., spelling, grammar, table numbering) that are made before the final thesis is submitted must be approved by the Research Supervisor and cannot alter the thesis in any substantial way.

12.5. Written Thesis is Acceptable with Minor Revisions

- a) An evaluation by the committee of Acceptable with Minor Revisions means that there are no fundamental changes to the thesis required by the committee.
- b) Minor revision requirements are changes or additions that normally should be able to be accomplished within four weeks.
- c) The supervisor will normally be tasked with approving these revisions, but the chair may designate other member(s) of the committee to supervise the edit if this will expedite the process.
- d) A maximum of two examiners can supervise minor revisions. The examiners and the rationale for their selection will be recorded on the chair's report.
- e) When the written thesis is found "Acceptable with Minor Revisions", the defence is given a grade of Pass when all criteria below are satisfied:
 - The revisions to the written thesis have been approved;

- The oral presentation is deemed either acceptable or any noted deficiencies have been addressed; and,
- The completed thesis document is submitted to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

12.6. Written Thesis Requires Major Revisions

- a) A thesis that has the potential to be acceptable after major revisions will be evaluated as Major Revisions Required.
- b) Any revisions so mandated must be able to be completed within a maximum of six months.
- c) A thesis can be evaluated as Major Revisions Required only once.
- d) The committee shall decide how the revised thesis will be examined.
- e) Re-examination options include the following:
 - a full repeat of the oral exam;
 - an oral defence without an audience in front of the examining committee, or a subset of the examining committee;
 - or editorial supervision by the supervisor and a second reader.
- f) The decision on re-examination should factor in the examining committee's decision regarding the oral presentation.
- g) In the case of a re-examination, there must always be two examiners at minimum (normally including the supervisor) for major revisions. The examiners and the rationale for their selection will be recorded on the chair's report.
- h) Although a subset of the examining committee can approve major revisions, a full examining committee (optionally including a master's thesis examiner and doctoral external examiner) must determine that a revised thesis is not acceptable and receives a grade of Fail.
- i) The defence is given a grade of Pass when all criteria below are satisfied:
 - the revised thesis has been submitted within six months;
 - the revisions to the written thesis have been approved;
 - the oral presentation is deemed either acceptable or any noted deficiencies have been remedied to the satisfaction of the committee; and
 - the completed thesis document is submitted to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

12.7. Written Thesis is Not Acceptable

- a) The examining committee may evaluate a thesis as Not Acceptable if it does not meet the standards for the discipline or the area of study.
- b) A thesis can be evaluated as Not Acceptable in the first attempt at a defence if it is found to be fundamentally flawed and beyond revision in six months.

- c) In this type of case, the outcome of the oral presentation does not impact the overall evaluation, as the committee will have decided that there is no reasonable prospect of success with a revision of the written thesis.
- d) Detailed reasons for failure must be submitted by the chair of the examining committee to the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, the Graduate Program Director and the candidate within two weeks.
- e) The thesis is given a final grade of Fail.

13. Transcript Notation

- 13.1. Upon acceptance of the student's thesis, the title of the work and date of approval are recorded on the Transcript.

MONITORING AND REVIEW

- 14. This Policy will be reviewed as necessary and at least every three years. The Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, or successor thereof, is responsible to monitor and review this Policy.

RELEVANT LEGISLATION

- 15. This section intentionally left blank.

RELATED POLICIES, PROCEDURES & DOCUMENTS

- 16. Graduate Academic Calendar
 - Responsibilities of Graduate Program Directors, Faculty Advisors, Research Supervisors and Graduate Students policy
 - Graduate Faculty Appointments Policy
 - Graduate Student Supervisory Committee Policy
 - Doctoral Candidacy Examination Policy
 - Graduate Submission of Thesis, Project or Major Paper Policy