



## Doctoral Dissertation Oral Examination - Neutral Chair Responsibilities & Procedures

### A) Responsibilities

The College of Graduate Studies will approve an appropriate faculty member to serve as Neutral Chair of the Examination as based on the criteria in the [Graduate Policy and Procedure Manual](#). The Neutral Chair's Role and **Responsibilities** are as follows:

1. Represents the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies.
2. Moderates the Examination; ensures procedures are followed by the committee.
3. Brings copies of the following forms to the examination:
  - a. [Final Doctoral Dissertation Oral Examination – Neutral Chair's Report](#)
  - b. [Doctoral Dissertation Approval & Program Completion](#) form
  - c. [Voting Ballots](#), if in-person
  - d. [Final Oral Examination – Committee Member Report](#) form (can remain blank)
4. Ensures that once the examination starts, the door to the room remains closed, if in-person.
5. Ensures that all members of the Examining Committee are in attendance, whether in-person or remote, ten minutes prior to the start of the examination, and that all committee members remain present for the duration of the examination, including the student's presentation, questioning, and committee's deliberations. Any irregularities in this regard must be noted in the Neutral Chair's Report.
6. If an Examiner has failed to appear for the appointed start of the examination, the Neutral Chair will:
  - a. Contact the Examiner immediately to see if they are in transit and will arrive shortly.
  - b. If the Examiner arrives within the first 30 minutes, the Chair will poll other Examiners to determine if they are ALL able to stay for at least 3 hours commencing from that moment (taking into account time needed for the student's presentation, questioning, and the deliberation periods).
    - If the entire committee is able to stay for the duration, the Neutral Chair can start the examination.
    - If any committee member is unable to remain for the full duration, inform the Director of the College of Graduate Studies by phone at 250.575.2767 or email both [deanna.roberts@ubc.ca](mailto:deanna.roberts@ubc.ca) and [gradtheses.ok@ubc.ca](mailto:gradtheses.ok@ubc.ca) to notify the College that the examination has been postponed and the proposed new date.



7. If video conferencing is being used by an Examiner and fails for longer than 5 minutes, the Neutral Chair can connect with the remote member by telephone to complete the examination and the presentation elements can be shared by email.
8. The Neutral Chair is not required to read the dissertation, does not vote, and does not ask questions of the student regarding the dissertation or subject matter under examination.
9. The Neutral Chair moderates the examination and deliberations, ensuring that CoGS' policies and procedures are followed, and marks the "initial vote" recommendations on the Final Doctoral Dissertation Oral Examination – Neutral Chair's Report.
10. The Neutral Chair comments on the overall proceedings of the examination on the Final Doctoral Dissertation Oral Examination – Neutral Chair's report.
11. The Neutral Chair submits the Final Doctoral Dissertation Oral Examination – Neutral Chair's Report within two business days following the examination.
12. If an Examiner alleges academic misconduct during the examination or in the post-examination discussion, the Neutral Chair must:
  - a. Suspend the examination
  - b. Inform the Director of the College of Graduate Studies by phone at 250.575.2767 or email both [deanna.roberts@ubc.ca](mailto:deanna.roberts@ubc.ca) and [gradtheses.ok@ubc.ca](mailto:gradtheses.ok@ubc.ca).

## **B) Procedures during the Oral Examination**

1. The Examination starts with an introduction of the candidate and members of the examining committee by the Neutral Chair.
2. The Chair then announces the following:
  - a. No audio or video recording and/or pictures are to be taken during the exam.
  - b. The candidate will be given 30 minutes to present a synopsis of the dissertation.
  - c. The candidate may speak from notes and may use audio-visual equipment, but must not read the synopsis.
3. The candidate presents their synopsis. If the presentation exceeds 30 minutes, the Chair must intervene and announce that the presentation will now be stopped.
4. After the presentation, the Chair informs members of the audience that they may now leave the room should they wish to do so, and that those who remain must stay for the entire duration of the question period.



5. The Chair summarizes the procedure for the question period by:
  - a. announcing the duration and order of questioning as follows: two hours is allotted to the question period. Examining committee members will pose questions and receive answers from the candidate in the following order:
    - External Examiner
    - University Examiner
    - Examination Committee Members
    - Supervisor and/or Co-Supervisors as applicable
  - b. providing guidelines for the timeframe for each questioning session:
    - For a five- or six-member committee, each committee member has about 20 minutes in total to pose and receive answers to questions, usually apportioned into a first round of 15 minutes per examiner, and a follow-up round of approximately 5 minutes each.
    - For the External and University Examiners, this time frame is a guideline, but is flexible if more time is needed.
    - Larger committees mean that these time frames will be reduced by the Neutral Chair appropriately.
    - At the end of the second round, an opportunity for further questions can be given if time permits.
6. The Chair exercises discretion in managing the question period in order to ensure the candidate is given sufficient time and opportunity to respond to questions. The Chair may, for example, need to:
  - a. invite an Examiner who is delivering a lengthy preamble to pose their question;
  - b. curb hostile questioning;
  - c. stop any interventions by the Supervisor to assist the candidate in their responses; and/or
  - d. ensure that the conversation is conducted directly with the candidate rather than allowing committee members to talk amongst themselves.
7. The Chair ensures the student:
  - a. is given reasonable time to answer each question;
  - b. is given an opportunity to clarify the question whenever necessary; and
  - c. has understood the question. If the student understands the question but cannot answer, the Chair directs the committee to move onto the next question.
8. The Chair ensures that:
  - a. the Supervisor does not attempt to help the student in any way with the answers;
  - b. Examiners are not collaborating amongst themselves on questions;
  - c. Examiners' editorial comments on the thesis are not discussed at the oral examination; and
  - d. if time allows, questions may be invited from members of the audience.



9. The Chair announces that the question portion of the examination has now ended, and requests that the candidate and all individuals not on the examining committee leave the room prior to the in-camera discussion. (It is often the case that members of the committee may need to take a short break before the in-camera deliberations begin.) The Chair can invite the candidate to remain in the vicinity so that they can be invited back in to receive the committee's decision.

### C) Procedures during the In-Camera Deliberations

1. Before any discussion of the candidate's performance, the Neutral Chair:
  - a. passes out the ballots to each examination committee member;
  - b. reads the full list of possible recommendations to the Examiners.
2. If in-person, asks each Examiner to:
  - a. identify their "initial vote" on the secret ballot, recommending a pass, pass with minor revisions, pass with substantive revisions, or fail on the dissertation; and a pass or fail on the oral defense; and
  - b. deliver their secret ballot to the Neutral Chair.
3. If one or more Examiners is videoconferencing into the examination, after collecting the secret ballots, the Chair should receive the ballots of committee members attending remotely by one of the following means:
  - a. If the poll function has been enabled on Zoom, ensure that only the Chair has host privileges, and record the secret ballots submitted via the Zoom poll.
  - b. If the Zoom poll function has not been enabled, ask examiners attending remotely to submit their initial straw votes via a **private** message sent to the Chair by email.
  - c. If none of the above options is available, the Chair can ask examiners present in the room to step outside the room to enable the collection of ballots from remote Examiners, doing so one at a time to maintain confidentiality.
4. The post examination discussion begins with:
  - a. the Neutral Chair reading out the votes from each of the ballots on the dissertation;
  - b. recording the 1<sup>st</sup> round of initial votes onto the Final Doctoral Dissertation Oral Examination – Neutral Chair's Report.
5. If **consensus is not reached on the dissertation**:
  - a. after the 1<sup>st</sup> round of discussion, the Neutral Chair is to continue with up to 2 additional rounds of open voting to reach a consensus.\*
  - b. If after 3 rounds of discussion no consensus is reached, the Neutral Chair declares a hung jury and documents this outcome on the Chair's report.



- c. The Chair then instructs each committee member to download the [Final Oral Examination – Committee Member Report](#) from the CoGS website to record their final vote and submit along with a rationale for their recommendation to CoGS within 5 business days of the examination.

**6. a) Decision of Fail on the Dissertation:**

If the examining committee unanimously determines that the underlying research of the dissertation is not acceptable, and recommends a “unanimous fail” on the dissertation, the student is required to withdraw from the graduate program. No deliberations will be necessary at this time on the oral defence.

**b) Decision of Pass with or without Revisions on the Dissertation:**

If a consensus on the dissertation is reached by the examining committee on one of the following: pass, pass with minor revisions, or pass with substantive revisions, then the committee next discusses the outcome of the oral examination, choosing one of the following options:

- i. Unanimous Pass
- ii. Fail

**c) Decision of Fail on the Oral:**

If the examining committee unanimously determines that the oral dissertation examination is not acceptable, it recommends a failed oral defence to the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies. The final decision will be at the discretion of the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies. Should the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies uphold the recommendation of ‘fail’, the candidate will be allowed a second, final attempt to present an acceptable oral defence of the dissertation within three months of the first examination. For a retake of the oral examination, the composition of the examination committee, including the external examiner, will remain the same, but the Dean or the Dean’s designate will act as Neutral Chair for the second examination. If the student fails the oral retake, they will be required to withdraw from the graduate program.

**d) Decision of Pass on the Oral:**

**If consensus has been reached on the dissertation as well as on a pass of the oral examination, the deliberations are now concluded. The Neutral Chair**

- a. obtains the signatures of each Examination Committee member on the Doctoral Dissertation Approval and Program Completion form. The Supervisor’s signature should be withheld.
- b. The Chair indicates on the Dissertation Approval and Program Completion form whether the thesis should be nominated for a national award.
- c. If a decision is reached of **No Revisions** or **Minor Revisions**, the Chair hands over the Doctoral Dissertation Approval and Program Completion form to the Supervisor and instructs them not to sign the form until any required revisions have been completed, and when the revisions are approved, the Supervisor is to hand in the



signed form to the College of Graduate Studies as part of initiating final submission of the dissertation for the student.

- d. If a decision is reached of **Substantive Revisions**, the Chair asks the Supervisor and one additional Examiner to withhold their signatures until the revisions are completed. The Supervisor holds onto the Doctoral Dissertation Approval and Program Completion form in the interim.
7. After deliberation, the Neutral Chair:
- a. Recalls the candidate and, in the presence of the examining committee, informs the candidate of the recommendations that are to be made to the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies, while avoiding the implication that a final decision has been made.
  - b. Submits the Doctoral Dissertation Oral Examination – Neutral Chair’s report along with all ballots to the College of Graduate Studies within 2 business days of the exam.

**\*Please note:** if there is contention amongst the examiners, the Neutral Chair may use the written ballots for each subsequent vote, including the final vote.