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**Guidelines for the Comprehensive Examination
Process for Doctoral Students in the
Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies Program**

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Doctoral students at University of British Columbia, Okanagan are required to advance to Candidacy **within 36 months** of the date of initial registration, as indicated in the policy contained in the Academic Calendar:

<http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/okanagan/index.cfm?tree=18,285,984,1168>).

All doctoral students in Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies (IGS) are required: first, to complete all required coursework; and then, to complete the comprehensive examination process. During this period, they are also required, third, to obtain approval of their dissertation proposal/prospectus. When all three requirements have been satisfied, the student is admitted to candidacy. This document is concerned with the comprehensive examination portion of advancement to candidacy.

A comprehensive examination is intended to test the student's comprehensive knowledge of the chosen field(s) of study and the student's ability to communicate that knowledge with thorough understanding. The student is expected to demonstrate mastery of the concepts, theories, methods, controversies, and recent advancements in the field as well as to demonstrate critical insights concerning how knowledge in their areas of study is being (and can be) advanced. The comprehensive examination is the primary mechanism by means of which academic mastery can be demonstrated and by means of which the committee judges the ability of the student to pursue advanced research at a doctoral level. It is therefore intended to be an academically useful tool and to be of the highest academic standard.

The IGS program comprehensive examination consists of a written component followed by an oral component.

1. Initiating the Process

Students are encouraged to meet with their Supervisory Committee members well before the beginning of the examination period (at least four (4) months prior) to discuss expectations they and their Supervisory Committee have concerning the examination format, structure, and content that is suitable to the areas of knowledge that will serve as the most important intellectual framework(s) for the subsequent dissertation research that the student will undertake. At this beginning point in the process, the Supervisory Committee will constitute the examining committee as described in section 3.7. The examination committee will set and judge this examination in a manner compatible with the guidelines laid out in this document and with College of Graduate Studies (CoGS) policies.

2. Purpose of the College of Graduate Studies (CoGS) Comprehensive Examination Guidelines

Supervising faculty members will make this document available to every doctoral student in order to facilitate informed discussion prior to initiation of the comprehensive examination process. The purpose of this document is to help ensure that there is:

1. Consistency in the design and delivery of the comprehensive examination within the IGS program,
2. Absence (and perceived absence) of bias, and
3. Overall fairness for all participants in the examination process.

The comprehensive examination process proposed for each student must be consistent with the interdisciplinary nature of the IGS degree and the requirements of CoGS. The IGS program supports the diversity inherent within interdisciplinary research between, across, and at the intersection of various disciplines by accommodating the range of requirements and formats best suited to the fields of knowledge within the diverse units, departments, and faculties associated with the IGS program at UBC Okanagan. Although academic units and programs participating in IGS are encouraged to accommodate flexibility in format and content of comprehensive examinations, they must at the same time ensure fairness and equity in the administration of the comprehensive examinations process. Specific comprehensive examination formats in the IGS program must, therefore, conform to the guidelines set out herein, including minimum and maximum lengths of the written component, the need for both a written and an oral component, the timing of the components, etc. Supervisory Committees are, accordingly, expected to make clear to the student a set of specific timelines for each stage of the comprehensive process, from initial planning, to study and

preparation, to fulfillment of each component or requirement. Clarifying such expectations will assist students and their supervisors in tracking the student's progress through the comprehensive examination process and in ensuring an equitable process for all IGS students.

Whatever specific disciplinary expectations regarding comprehensive examinations may exist, it is the responsibility of the Supervisory Committee to synthesize such expectations into a comprehensive examination that meets these expectations and that also meets the requirements of interdisciplinarity in the student's course of study.

3. Guidelines for the IGS Doctoral Comprehensive Examination

The remainder of this document outlines current best practices and required procedures for the comprehensive examination, including: purpose and scope, timing, examination format and procedures, examination committee composition and responsibilities, criteria for evaluation, and principles of the adjudication process. Once established, the examination committee in each instance has the responsibility to set, conduct, and adjudicate the comprehensive examination in a manner that is consistent with IGS program norms, the policies established by CoGS, and the overall standards of academic excellence at the University of British Columbia.

3.1 Purpose of the Examination

The overall purpose of the comprehensive examination is to provide an assessment of whether the student has developed:

- strong analytical, problem-solving, and critical thinking abilities
- the required breadth and in-depth knowledge of the discipline to make a claim to be a subject expert
- the required academic background and methodological skills for the specific doctoral dissertation research to follow
- the ability to conduct independent and original research
- the ability to communicate knowledge of the discipline to an educated audience

3.2 Examination Timing

It is important for the supervisor and the examination committee to specify for the student the precise timing of the comprehensive examination, including the earliest and latest dates by which the comprehensive examination is to be completed. Given the importance of the examination and the consequences of failure, students must be informed of the specific dates of their examination so that they have adequate time to prepare. Academic units and programs participating in IGS may, if they desire, schedule

regular dates on which the oral examinations take place, but must offer at least three such dates per calendar year, at intervals of **no less** than ten (10) weeks.

The examination should be held reasonably early in the student's period of study, with the process beginning immediately after coursework is complete, but at the latest at a time that allows for completion of any conditions that might be required by the Examining Committee in the circumstances of a conditional pass, or for re-examination if the exam is failed (and the committee agrees to a re-take [see 3.9.3]), within the College of Graduate Studies-mandated time period for advancement to candidacy (thirty-six (36) months from the start of the program). Accordingly, students should not be expected to spend a length of time preparing for and taking the examination that is inconsistent with these overall time constraints.

Students must have completed their course requirements, comprehensive examination, and dissertation proposal approval, and advanced to candidacy within the first thirty-six (36) months of their doctoral program. If, for some reason, the student has not completed these three requirements for advancement to candidacy within this 36-month time frame, but wishes to continue in their program, the supervisor must complete the [Request for Extension to Time Allowed for Advancement to Candidacy](#) form found on the College of Graduate Studies website. The granting of such extensions is not automatic: students may be required to withdraw from their program.

3.3 Examination Procedures and Format

The comprehensive examination consists of two components—a written component and an oral component—each with its own options. The student must successfully complete both components. The content of these two components will vary by program of study within the overall IGS program.

1. Written component. The specific format for the written component may be comprised of multiple phases, and is contingent on the needs and research intentions of the student and the norms of the disciplinary programs that are spanned by the dissertation research project that the student proposes to conduct. For a list of examples of equivalents in the written component, see Appendix A.
2. An oral component that tests the student's knowledge related to the topics above.

Given the wide variety of comprehensive examination formats available under the auspices of the IGS program, students in the program will—prior to or, at the latest, upon completion of their coursework—work with their Supervisory Committee to develop a comprehensive examination plan that articulates expectations of format,

structure, and content. The plan should include such aspects as reading lists or bibliographies, rationale for the design of the examination, descriptions of specific examination requirements, and a clearly articulated timeline specifying dates for the writing, submission, and adjudication of all components of the comprehensive examination process. While the supervisor and Supervisory Committee decide the scope of the examination, the interdisciplinary nature of the IGS degree makes consultation with the examinee advisable, if not imperative. Once the student's Supervisory Committee has finalized the comprehensive examination plan and identified the composition of the Examining Committee, the plan must be submitted to the academic unit or departmental graduate program of the student's supervisor for approval. The student's supervisor should ensure that this design and approval process is completed in a timely manner, and no later than two (2) months following the student's completion of coursework.

Once the approval of the comprehensive examination plan is obtained, final preparation for the examination can begin. The time period devoted to the various stages in the process, such as preparation, writing, and timed written or take-home examination(s) or project(s), as well as completion of the oral examination, will depend on the formats chosen and will vary according to the usual practices within the broad-based fields of knowledge in which the student is conducting training and research.

3.4 Written Component Preparatory Period

The preparatory period prior to the official start of the Comprehensive Examination is viewed as an intensive learning experience for students in which (as partially described in section 3.3) they are required to identify their specific area of research interest and to understand the broader academic context in which that area of interest is situated. Typically, this period occurs in roughly the first two (2) years of the student's academic program, and it may include course work, teaching, and research activities. The student should become fully immersed in the recent and past literature on the subject, and they should be challenged to reflect critically on that foundation of knowledge.

3.5 Written Component

Students and faculty should note several points regarding the written component of the comprehensive examination.

1. Students should meet routinely with their Supervisor and with Supervisory Committee members throughout their program of study, but this habit is particularly critical in the months leading up to the comprehensive examination.

2. Students will be given research questions, paper topics, or some other examinable task (as listed in Appendix A) that achieves the purposes of a comprehensive examination; this element is to be completed within a clearly articulated period of time that cannot exceed six (6) months.
3. There needs to be a significant period during the written component in which the student is not assisted by the supervisor, Supervisory Committee, or Examining Committee, but in which the student demonstrates independently her/his command of the material being examined. **This period must be clearly defined in the comprehensive examination plan, and is required for all options for the written component including examinable projects (Appendix A).**
4. Students who are writing timed or take-home written components will spend the majority of their preparation time completing the readings and discussing with members of their Supervisory Committee the intellectual and academic issues that arise in conjunction with the area(s) of study in which the students are acquiring expertise.
5. If the student and Examining Committee choose more than one type of submission for the written component (for example, a timed, written exam on a broad area followed by a course design project or take-home examination), students should complete and provisionally pass one type of submission before undertaking the next. Except in cases in which the Examining Committee judges a written component submission to be an outright failure, the Examining Committee will provisionally pass—and provide feedback on—each written component to enable the student to prepare for the oral component. Formal adjudication of the student's comprehensive exam performance will take place after the oral component, as described in 3.9 below.
6. A copy of each comprehensive examination plan containing all details of the comprehensive examination must be submitted to the appropriate Theme/Program Coordinator least one (1) week in advance of the agreed-upon start date for the written component. Academic units and programs should keep these examinations on file in permanently accessible paper or electronic format for future reference.
7. The examination committee of the student has considerable latitude in defining the scope and nature of the comprehensive examination, but the student should be informed what the expectations are. The specific format for the exam is partly contingent on the needs of the student, as assessed by

the Supervisory Committee of the student. The spirit of the comprehensive examination is to ensure that the breadth and depth of knowledge of the student are tested in ways that demonstrate mastery of one or more disciplines, sub-disciplinary areas, or fields of research, as well as the allied fields, that provide essential academic context for the interdisciplinary research that the student will conduct toward completion of a dissertation.

8. Once the writing is complete, examination committee members will be expected to read the submissions produced in the process within four (4) weeks of the student having submitted them to the examination committee.
9. Once all the examination committee members have read the submissions, the student will defend them in an oral examination. This step must be completed within six (6) weeks of the completion of the written phase of the examination, generally defined as when the papers, take-home examination, or other written materials that constitute the written component are submitted to the examination committee by the student.

3.6 Oral Component Format

If the examination committee deems satisfactory the written materials that the student has submitted, the comprehensive examination moves to the oral component according to the date set earlier in the process (but always within six (6) weeks of the completion of all elements of the written component). The oral component must be arranged by the supervisor and include all members of the examination committee. During this oral component (lasting from ninety (90) to one hundred twenty (120) minutes), members of the examination committee will raise questions pertaining primarily to the written component, but these questions may also extend to the full scope of the area represented by the comprehensive examination reading list or other materials under examination.

The student may be invited to give a short presentation (fifteen (15) to twenty (20) minutes) that summarizes the main points from the written answers, or the session may move directly into the two (2) or more rounds of questioning from the examination committee. The oral component is conducted in camera unless the student and all members of the examination committee agree to open it to the public.

The participants in the oral component includes all members of the examination committee, a neutral chair, and the student.

The neutral chair is any UBC faculty member who has not collaborated with and is not otherwise in a situation of conflict of interest with the student or the supervisor or co-supervisor(s) of the student. The responsibility of the neutral chair is to ensure that

CoGS and IGS policies are followed and that the oral component is conducted in a professional, impartial, and timely manner. In consultation with the examination committee at the outset of the oral component, the neutral chair determines the order of questioning, establishes the number of rounds of questioning, sets the approximate length of time each examiner has to question the candidate, and has the authority to intervene and move the process forward, if needed. The neutral chair is responsible for filing the appropriate post-exam paperwork with CoGS immediately after completion of the exam, which communicates to CoGS the decision of the examination committee (See Appendix B). The neutral chair need not be an expert in the subject area of the student.

It is the responsibility of the supervisor (in consultation with the student and examination committee members) to arrange for and schedule the oral component of the comprehensive examination, including room reservation, securing the participation of all members, and coordinating the attendance of the participants. If a member of the examination committee is unable to attend the oral examination, they must submit their questions in writing to the neutral chair at least twenty-four (24) hours in advance or attend via videoconference.

Under normal circumstances, the neutral chair, supervisor(s), student, and at least one (1) other member of the examination committee must be in attendance in person.

3.7 Composition of the examination committee

The examination committee will consist of at least three (3) members from the Supervisory Committee of the student and an external examiner, for a total of four (4) members. This minimum number includes the supervisor of the student. If the student has co-supervisors, they may likewise serve on the examination committee, but they thereby increase the membership of the examination committee to five (5), because at least two members of that committee must be neither the supervisor nor co-supervisor of the student. The total number of members may not exceed five (5).

Given the nature and operating premises of any interdisciplinary studies graduate program, including the UBCO IGS program, *under no circumstances may all members of the examination committee be from the same academic discipline.*

All members of the Supervisory Committee should be involved in approval of the design of the comprehensive plan as outlined in steps 3.3 and 3.4 above. It is expected that the composition of the Examining Committee will reflect collectively the expertise required in the areas to be examined, given that an interdisciplinary comprehensive examination will likely transcend the disciplinary boundaries of specific committee members.

The external member of the examination committee is a faculty member who is not from the same discipline (and, if possible, not from the same academic unit) as the primary supervisor of the student to be examined. They are in all respects a full, participating member in the examination, and are expected to bring pertinent academic expertise to the formulation and execution of the comprehensive examination. The external member of the examination committee can be the required member of the Supervisory Committee who is from an area outside of the supervisor's discipline (as set out in IGS Supervisory Committee guidelines), or they can be someone serving only on the examination and not the Supervisory Committee.

3.8 Criteria for evaluation

The criteria for evaluation need to be relevant to the stated purpose of the exam set out in Section 1.1 of this document. Assessment of student performance is based on both the written and oral components in combination, and the evaluation needs to be consistent with the stated purpose and objectives of the comprehensive examination (as outlined in Section 1.1 and elsewhere). Most especially: does the student demonstrate adequate preparation for undertaking doctoral level research consistent with the standards of the University of British Columbia?

Students must achieve a pass for both the written (wherever applicable) and the oral components of the examination in order to successfully pass their comprehensive examination.

3.9 Adjudication

After the oral component, the examination committee must deliberate *in camera* (absent the student) to work toward achieving consensus concerning the outcome of the examination. If consensus cannot be achieved, a process of secret balloting is used to gain a majority. The neutral chair is a non-voting participant who manages the secret ballots, reports the outcome to the examination committee and the student, and notes the necessity of any voting process in the reporting of the examination to CoGS. The neutral chair is also responsible for submitting to CoGS the final report (see Section 3.6) regarding the outcome and any/all conditions that are imposed on the student with regard to further advancement through the program (see Appendix B).

The possible outcomes for the comprehensive examination are as follows:

3.9.1 Unconditional Pass

The student passes without conditions.

3.9.2 Conditional Pass

If the student is given a conditional pass, the student passes with specific conditions imposed, which usually require additional work to demonstrate proficiency in areas of deficiency. Additional requirements must be specified with great clarity (i.e., the precise scope, expected standards, and time to completion). Typically, these requirements would be completed in —at most— a matter of three (3) months:

- The student may, for example, be required to successfully write a paper in an area in which the committee finds the student needs additional knowledge.
- The additional academic requirements are to be provided to the student in writing by the examination committee and to include expected standards of achievement and times for completion.
- If the student does not complete the conditions to the satisfaction of a majority of the members of the examination committee within the specified time frame, the examination is failed, and the steps outlined in section 3.9.3 commence.

The examination committee may decide that a short meeting consisting of committee members (including the neutral chair) and the student is required for final agreement that the conditions have been fulfilled.

3.9.3 Failure

If a student fails the written component of the comprehensive examination (before moving to the oral component) or is judged not to have performed satisfactorily overall (after the written and oral components have concluded), the examination committee must decide between two options:

1. Dismissal from the program (effective immediately).
2. Opportunity for re-examination:
 - a. The student is allowed one additional opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to perform to doctoral standards (If the student is allowed to repeat the examination, the student is to be informed immediately after the examination).
 - b. The conditions for repeating the examination are to be clearly defined, including the format, time frame, potential dates, and nature of the re-examination process, and the consequences of a second failure. All examination committee members must agree —preferably by consensus, but, if need be, by majority vote— to these conditions before a second re-examination process can begin.
 - c. A re-examination would typically have both written and oral components, but would not duplicate materials and knowledge that the student adequately addressed in the initial attempt.
 - d. The re-examination should be completed within four to six (4-6) months, **and** prior to the 36-month CoGS deadline for advancement to candidacy.

- e. The original membership of the examination committee (including the neutral chair) must remain unchanged for the re-examination.
- f. There is no opportunity in any IGS program for a third comprehensive examination round: Failing a comprehensive examination a second time will lead to dismissal from the program.

3.10 Recommendation for Advancement to Candidacy

If the student passes all components of the comprehensive examination process and has completed the necessary coursework in the program, the student will then complete the last step required for advancement to Candidacy by submitting a thesis prospectus for approval. Once that approval has been obtained, the student's Supervisory Committee completes the College of Graduate Studies [Recommendation for Advancement to Candidacy](#) form and submits it with the required signatures to the College of Graduate Studies.

3.11 Feedback

The assessment and reasons for the decision reached by the Examination Committee are to be documented and provided verbally to the student immediately after the *in camera* deliberation, as well as by way of a written report made available to the student within one (1) week of the oral component having taken place. Although this report should be communicated and signed by the neutral chair, the substance is to be written by the supervisor in collaboration with examination committee members. The document must include sufficient detail to allow the student to understand the decision, including identification of strengths and weaknesses, as well as any recommendations arising out of the comprehensive examination process.

In regard to the oral examination specifically, the student should be given feedback on their demonstrated comprehensive knowledge of the field, the quality of their presentation, the logical flow and clarity of their oral responses, and their overall ability to answer satisfactorily the questions posed to them during the examination.

3.12 Other Considerations

- The student's Supervisory Committee should confer to confirm the student's readiness for the examination **before** initiating the comprehensive examination process, keeping in mind at the same time the 36-month-to-candidacy requirement.
- The student may wish to conduct a "dry-run" with their peer group and/or supervisor to help prepare for the oral component.
- If desired, the student and committee may make the oral component open to the public.

- Should there be any complications associated with the comprehensive examination process, the student, supervisor and/or supervisory committee members should approach the appropriate graduate theme/program coordinator for advice and clarity concerning the relevant procedures.

3.13 Academic Misconduct

[UBC Policy 85](#) on Scholarly Integrity applies to all comprehensive work. Plagiarism and fabrication or falsification of research data will be considered academic misconduct.

If academic misconduct is suspected, including plagiarism or fabrication/falsification of data, the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies must be informed **immediately**. Concerns should be brought forward directly to the Dean of CoGS, without consultation with others. The examination must be suspended until such time as the Dean or their designate determines whether academic misconduct has occurred and what penalties will be applied. Depending on the Dean/designate's determination, the examination may proceed as scheduled, be rescheduled, or be cancelled. If academic misconduct is suspected, the examination must be suspended, and the College of Graduate Studies must be contacted immediately.

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Examples of Written Component Equivalents

Formats of the written component (see 3.3) can include:

- a. Completion of *at least* two extended research papers and *no more than* five papers. The total number of words across all papers shall not exceed thirty-five thousand (35,000) words, and it is recommended that no single paper should exceed fifteen thousand (15,000) words;
- or -
- b. One or more take-home examinations with set maximum word limits and set time limits for completion;
- or -
- c. Timed, written, on-campus examinations;
- or -
- d. One or more annotated bibliographies with set maximum word limits that do not exceed the limits set above for research papers;
- or -
- e. The design and preparation of undergraduate courses (including the creation of all teaching materials required to deliver the course)

Appendix B - Comprehensive Examination Report

For all IGS related forms, including the IGS Course Scheduling Form, please see our [Forms database](#).