

# The University Of British Columbia



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## **IRES' GUIDELINES:**

### **PROCEDURES FOR COMPREHENSIVE EXAM AND DISSERTATION PROPOSAL**

In order to advance to candidacy, PhD students are required to pass a comprehensive exam, defend their dissertation proposal and all required coursework must have been successfully completed. The comprehensive exam and dissertation proposal processes should, as with every other process in RMES, be student driven, and conducted in dialogue with their supervisor and supervisory committee.

#### **The Comprehensive Exam**

##### ***Purpose***

All PhD students are required to pass a comprehensive exam given by members of their supervisory committee. The purpose of the exam is to provide students the opportunity to demonstrate general competency in their field(s) of study. It allows the supervisory committee an opportunity to assess the student's knowledge of the literature in his/her field(s) of study, to evaluate the student's preparation for doctoral level study, and where appropriate, to judge whether the student's knowledge is sufficient to teach undergraduate or graduate courses in the field.

##### ***Scope***

The purpose of the exam is to allow the student to develop a comprehensive understanding of the literature in her/his field(s) of study and the areas in which the thesis topic is structured, including its theory(ies), methods, past and current debates, anticipated future trajectories of the field(s), and context (e.g., geographic, political, cultural, demographic, biophysical or bio-spatial, etc.). In order to demonstrate scholarly breadth and contextual understanding, the scope of the comprehensive exam should be wider than the specific topic in which the student is doing research. The exam is not designed to query the specifics of the student's proposed research and should not be used to do so.

In RMES, a key goal of the comprehensive exam is to ensure that the student is able to articulate the interdisciplinary nature of her/his work. This includes providing a clear indication that the student understands and can meet the standards of evidence and scholarship in his/her topic-area, and has the ability to reconcile or work across fields where appropriate.

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## ***Readings***

The reading list, generally speaking, should include approximately 15 to 30 critically important items (peer-reviewed articles, books, etc.) in each of three fields. The numbers of fields and readings within each field indicated here are meant as a rough guide only. The number of fields may vary up or down, at the discretion of the committee, and the number of readings will be lower when books are involved and higher when the key readings are mostly book chapters and articles.

The reading list should be prepared in conjunction with the student's committee, and be appropriate to the agreed upon format of the exam (see below). In some cases, most of the material will be assigned by the supervisor and/or committee; in other cases it will be a product equally or more fully of the student's investigations and own literature searches, although the results must be vetted by the committee. Regardless, the preparation of the reading lists should be seen as part of the student's learning process. Each student is expected to acquire good knowledge of the major currents of thought in each list, and of all the readings included in the lists.

## ***Format***

All exams must have both a written and an oral component.

### *The written component*

The student should arrange for a committee meeting approximately four to six months in advance of the expected exam date. At this meeting, the student and committee should agree to the scope, format, readings, and timing of the comprehensive exam and the proposal as per the guidelines listed below. Committee members should assign and/or give suggestions for readings (see below) as well as clearly articulate any other preparation for the exam.

The format of the written portion will be set by the committee, in discussion with the student. The exam can be either: **A.** "stand-alone" work; or **B.** part of the dissertation proposal. The time line will differ between the two formats (see below), but in either case the exam must cover the issues under Scope (above).

A. When the written portion of the comprehensive exam is "stand-alone" work it can consist of:

- i. A series of take-home papers with the deadlines for each or all papers to be set by the committee, though not to span more than one semester; or
- ii. An 'in situ' exam wherein the student has one day for each of three papers

The take-home papers (option A.i. above) can be of several forms including:

- A critical literature review – based on broad questions posed by the student's committee (sufficiently broad to allow the exam to test in part the student's ability to conceptualize or frame an argument and develop it accordingly); or

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- A research proposal<sup>1</sup> – consisting of a fully fleshed-out research proposal for the research topic agreed to by the committee; or
- A course syllabus or annotated bibliography – in this case one of the three papers can be substituted by a fully-developed course syllabus (where appropriate when a teaching career is anticipated) OR an extensively annotated bibliography that might serve as a database for the student’s research and teaching, if and only if the bibliography also includes substantive notes on readings so as to indicate full comprehension of the works studied and the different intellectual contributions and debates across the list.

The “in situ” exam (option A.ii. above) can be of several forms including those in which the students sit a ‘blind’ exam, where questions are provided at the beginning of the exam and no supporting notes, literature or linked support materials are allowed through to ‘open book’ exams where the questions are also provided at the beginning of the exam day(s), but where students may bring relevant literatures and notes with them to the exam.

B. When the written portion of the comprehensive exam is part of the student’s dissertation proposal it should be in a critical literature review style – based on broad questions related to the student’s research, however sufficiently broad to allow the exam to test in part the student’s ability to conceptualize or frame an argument and develop it accordingly. In such cases, the combined written portions of the comprehensive exam and dissertation proposal should be in the realm of 15000-25000 words, wherein approximately two-thirds of this total addresses the above criteria/scope for the comprehensive exams, and one-third addresses the proposed research itself (see section on dissertation proposal below). This length is meant to be illustrative only, and is not to be taken as a definitive test of sufficiency.

## *The oral component*

During the oral portion of the exam the student is expected to be able to discuss key subject areas or fields of research that are related to his/her own field(s) of study, by answering questions posed by the examination committee (see below) based on the written part of the exam.

Once the student has submitted the written portion of his/her comprehensive exam, the examination committee should schedule the oral examination, again usually within two to three weeks of completion of the written proportion. Additional time can be requested on behalf of the committee, but should be avoided if at all possible and should not exceed four weeks beyond completion of the written exam.

The oral exam itself is to begin with a brief introduction by the Chair, with the exam protocol being outlined. The student is expected to present a 15-20 minute overview of the written portion of the exam. Each member of the Examination Committee is then to be given approximately 15 minutes for questions, ending with the supervisor. Each

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with the dissertation proposal (see below)

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committee member is to be given the opportunity for a second round of questions, not to exceed five minutes each.

The examination committee must assess the student's performance on the combined written and oral comprehensive exam as "pass," "conditional pass," or "fail." Following the oral examination, the committee is to hold an in-camera session and the candidate is to be asked to retire from the room. The pass/fail decision is to be made by simple majority of the votes cast by members of the examination committee. In the event of a conditional pass, the committee may require amendments, revisions or conditions for a passing grade. The committee must then determine the arrangements for ensuring that the conditions are met.

The Chair will then recall the candidate to the meeting and announce the result of the voting. The Chair is to send written notification of the decision made by the examination Committee to the Director of IRES with copies to the Graduate Advisor and the Graduate Secretary.

A candidate who fails the first attempt must pass a second examination that is to be scheduled to take place within six months of the first examination. Failure to pass a second examination will result in the student being required to withdraw from the graduate program.

## *Oral examination committee*

The examination committee for the oral portion of the student's comprehensive exam is, in most cases, the same as the student's supervisory committee. The examination committee must consist of three or more members. All members of the supervisory committee must be included; at least two should be present in person, while the rest may participate by phone or video-conferencing as necessary. If a member of the student's committee other than the core supervisor(s) is not available because of leave, the exam may proceed. If more than one member is not available, substitutions may be made in exceptional cases but must be approved by the Graduate Advisor. Given university approval, the committee may include other qualified individuals without faculty status (e.g., postdoctoral fellows, research associates, or faculty from other universities).

## **The Dissertation Proposal**

A PhD student is required to submit to IRES a dissertation proposal that has been accepted by his/her supervisory committee.

### *Contents and Format*

The dissertation proposal is meant to be comparable in structure and style with those normally expected of pertinent research funding agencies. While format may be somewhat variable across funding agencies and research foci, the attributes of a good proposal are defined for our purposes as follows:

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1. **FRAMING:** Set a broad context for your general area of inquiry, in terms of the real-world challenges that it addresses (citations desired) and the relevant academic approaches, theories, and contributions (citations expected).
2. **QUESTIONS:** Phrase research questions and (as appropriate) hypotheses.
3. **RELEVANCE:** Put your Questions (2) in context of academic literature and real world application (citations expected). Why is your chosen question timely and important to the field and to the broader world? (Note that in your actual proposal it is often rhetorically effective to put this section before the statement of your research question so that it seems as if your chosen question is the consummate, natural question to ask.)
4. **METHODS:** Express methods you will use to address your Questions (2) (cite relevant work as appropriate). These should be do-able within your time-frame and given available resources.
5. **WORKPLAN/BUDGET:** Provide a rough workplan and budget. The workplan should document the major steps in your methods and roughly when they occur in time. The budget should identify the major line items associated with your methods and approximately how much they would cost. (For admissions proposals, we do not expect formal quotes or precise times or values.)
6. **IMPLICATIONS:** Briefly discuss expected implications of your work, for the academic and non-academic worlds. What academic theories will your work contribute to? What future research will it enable or guide? What real-world decisions might be informed by your work?

## *Procedure*

Regardless whether the proposal is coupled or decoupled from the comprehensive exam, it must be approved by the core supervisor and at the supervisory committee. Ideally, the proposal should be vetted and defended in a formal committee meeting, but evidence of electronic conversation or minutes of meetings that reflect suggestions and comments aimed at revision, followed by accepted completion of revisions, are sufficient. In the event of a conflict within a committee, the proposal should be referred to the Graduate Advisor who will seek out a departmental examiner in order to resolve any questions pertaining to departmental standards.

Following the successful completion of the comprehensive exams and proposal, including all written and oral portions, the student will advance to candidacy, provided that all course work has been completed.

## **Timelines**

The timeline of the comprehensive exam and dissertation proposal will depend on whether the student is following option A or B for the written portion of the exam.

For option A (a “stand-alone” work), the student will normally complete their comprehensive exam by the middle of their second year of PhD studies. In exceptional

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cases, it is acceptable for students to delay, for example because the lead supervisor of the student's research is on leave, or because the student wishes to complete a field season or preliminary investigation so as to better understand, define, or delimit his/her PhD research. An elongated timeframe must be approved by both the supervisory committee and the RMES Graduate Advisor. The student is expected to complete their dissertation proposal in the semester that follows the exam.

Students who, in consultation with their committees, elect option B (where the written part of the exam forms part of the dissertation proposal), will be expected to have submitted their proposal and completed the oral component of the exam by the end of the second year of studies. Again, when written exemptions are granted for preliminary field seasons, the timeframe will vary. It is also the case that more time is warranted, and can be granted with the permission of the supervisor, when a student wishes to use the comprehensive exams as substantive 'thought' pieces of the kind that necessitates extra labour and time to mature intellectually. This option is particularly important to programs such as IRES where the interdisciplinary endeavor is a significant departure for the student and/or involves considerable exposure to literatures heretofore unfamiliar to the students.

It is the responsibility of the supervisor to make sure that the student is aware of possible risks (such as financial constraints) that may be caused by delaying the comprehensive exam. Minutes should be taken from the meeting in which such issues are discussed and agreed upon and submitted to the Graduate Secretary who is to file the information in the student's file.

The requirements above are the same for Master's students who transfer to a PhD program after their first year, that is, the period of time they spent as a Master's student is included in the expected 24-month timeframe. A PhD student who has not passed his/her comprehensive exam and proposal defense within 48 months of full-time study will be required to withdraw from the program.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This deadline applies to second examinations in the event of a failed first examination.