Comprehensive Examination Checklist for Students/Supervisors

☐ See below for the “Comprehensive Exam Guidelines for Students”

☐ Meet with the Graduate Program Assistant to review process, timeline, expectations. Please note that the timeline is normally 10-12 weeks from submission of the proposal to the exam chair (GPC Chair or Designate) to the oral exam.

☐ Discuss with your committee and senior supervisor about expected timelines, selection of external examiner and chair for the comprehensive exam.

☐ Submit the completed “BPK 896 – PhD Comprehensive Examination Enrollment” form to the Graduate Program Assistant
http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/bpk/docs/grad/BPK896%20PhD%20Comprehensive%20Examination%20Approval%20Form%20Final(1).pdf

☐ Provide an electronic copy of your proposal to the Graduate Program Assistant (who will forward this to the Comprehensive Examination Committee Chair, along with guidelines for distribution to the examining committee).

☐ Approximately two-three weeks after your proposal is distributed, you will be forwarded a rating and comments on the proposal from your Examination Committee Chair. You will be required to respond accordingly (revisions and resubmit or proceed to oral defence).

☐ If resubmitting a revised proposal to your senior supervisor or examining committee, ensure that your revisions are clearly marked (track changes and/or redline) to indicate where the proposal has been revised to address comments from the examining committee.

☐ Confirm room and/or equipment booking with the Graduate Program Assistant.

Please note:

☐ External examiners for comprehensive examinations CANNOT be the external examiner you expect to have for your thesis defence.

☐ If you plan your comprehensive exam for the Fall semester, there are specific deadlines that need to be met to avoid scheduling conflicts in the run-up to the University closure over the Christmas Holiday period.

☐ If you expect that one or more of your examining committee will be attending via teleconference, you need to book this service through the Graduate Program Assistant.
Comprehensive Exam Guidelines for Students

Overview and Purpose of the PhD Comprehensive Exam

The purpose of the comprehensive exam is two-fold. One purpose of the exam is to help PhD students build their skills in important areas, including formulating their ideas and plans in the form of a research proposal, reviewing literature related to their area of research, and presenting and defending their ideas verbally. The second purpose of the comprehensive exam is to ensure that those students who continue in the PhD program are performing at the level expected of a PhD student. An additional value of the comprehensive exam process is that examiners may provide constructive suggestions regarding the research proposed.

PhD students who already have a MSc should normally expect to complete their comprehensive exam within the first 4 semesters. Those who transfer from the MSc program should complete the comprehensive exam within 6 semesters of enrollment, approximately 3 semesters following transfer.

Note: If you plan to schedule your comprehensive exams during the Fall semester, your proposal will need to be distributed to your approved committee by no later than September 30th.

The Examination Committee

The PhD Comprehensive Examination Committee consists of the student’s Supervisory Committee (3 or more individuals including the Senior Supervisor), plus an additional examiner who is external to the Supervisory Committee. Note: the external examiner for the student’s comprehensive exam cannot serve on the student’s thesis defence examining committee.

A Chair, the GPC Chair or designate, will also be present for the oral exam. The role of the Chair is to ensure that the oral exam procedure is followed and that questioning is fair and civil. The Chair does not ask questions, unless necessary for clarification. Whenever possible, for uniformity of process, the Chair of every comprehensive exam will be the GPC Chair.

Before proceeding with the comprehensive examination, the BPK 896 – PhD Comprehensive Examination Enrolment form must be completed and submitted to the Graduate Program Assistant at the start of the semester in which you intend to complete the Comprehensive Examination.

The Proposal

The proposal should reflect the work that has been agreed upon collectively by the student and supervisory committee members to form the dissertation research. Students are encouraged to seek guidance from members of their supervisory committee on the structure and content of the proposal. This may include review and discussion of drafts of the proposal prior to submission.

The research proposal will be written in the format of a grant application, with a maximum page limit of 11 pages, exclusive of reference list, tables, figures and appendices. Include pilot data if appropriate. It is not necessary to provide a budget. The CIHR Guidebook for New Principal Investigators (McInnes, Andrews and Rachubinski; http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/27491.html#6), has excellent tips on writing a
grant proposal. Kraicer’s ‘Art of Grantsmanship’ has additional proposal preparation advice and can be found at [http://www.hfsp.org/funding/art-grantsmanship](http://www.hfsp.org/funding/art-grantsmanship).

The proposal is written on the PhD candidate’s proposed thesis research. The PhD candidate must write the proposal independently, but can confer with the Senior Supervisor, supervisory committee members or other colleagues in formulating the aims and underlying plans of the proposal. It is appropriate for the proposal to draw on the knowledge and experience of both the student and the supervisory committee. This can include formulation of the research question(s), identification of essential background material, and collaborating on an outline of the proposal.

The proposal must be written as an original, new document in the words of the applicant. The student must ensure that there are no passages that too closely resemble those in the literature or other documents. For clarity, refer to the plagiarism area in Canvas Commons and the Library’s anti-plagiarism tutorial also in Canvas commons or accessed via [https://www.lib.sfu.ca/help/academic-integrity/plagiarism-tutorial](https://www.lib.sfu.ca/help/academic-integrity/plagiarism-tutorial) before beginning to write. Background and information contributed by others should be referenced appropriately, using any common referencing format. If you include diagrams from another source, cite them. For example, if including a pre-existing diagram that is commonly used in your laboratory, include a note in the figure legend such as: “Diagram courtesy of Dr. Bob Smith”, or “Adapted from a diagram made by Dr. Bob Smith”. You may use applications with spelling and grammar checking, but should not ask another person to edit your proposal. For example, the Supervisor or others may read drafts of the proposal and provide comments using comment balloons, but should not make edits to the text. The proposal should be sent to the Examination Committee when the Senior Supervisor has agreed that it is ready.

The examiners are to look for a thorough and factually correct background section, appropriate and realistic goals and a robust and appropriate experimental plan. Issues such as what tools are to be used, statistical power, proper referencing, and any other scientific considerations unique to the field of study, should be clear. The ideas must be scientifically legitimate and the plan described fully and justified appropriately, and be of a caliber expected of a PhD candidate.

**Rating, Comments, and Revisions**

Within two weeks of the proposal being circulated to the examining committee, examiners will provide a rating and comments on the student’s proposal to the Chair (see rating scheme below).

If the examiners all give ratings in the same category, the overall score will be the average of the ratings. If the examiners do not all give ratings in the same category, then the GPC Chair will communicate with the examiners to discuss the proposal and arrive at a consensus rating and an outcome. The consensus rating, individual scores and comments from each examiner will be provided to the candidate.

If the examiners determine that revisions are necessary, the student will be asked by the Chair to provide a revised proposal to the committee within one month of receiving ratings and comments from the Chair. This revised proposal should be prepared as a “red-lined” document, clearly indicating where revisions have been made in accordance with the comments and concerns raised by the examiners.
If no revisions are deemed necessary by the committee, the student may proceed to the oral exam within one week of receiving the ratings of the proposal from the chair.

The Oral Exam

The oral exam may include any materials the examiners feel are relevant to the candidate’s field of study. This includes knowledge directly or indirectly related to the field of study, literature related to the proposal itself or techniques used, as well as general knowledge expected of a scientist such as ethics, biohazard issues, etc. PhD candidates are encouraged to talk to their examiners ahead of time to identify general areas (but not specific questions) each examiner may focus on.

It is helpful for students to practice the oral exam format (including the question period) with lab-mates ahead of time. It is also good to practice answering questions and identifying when you know the answer, when you are uncertain or are speculating, and when you don’t know. During the exam, it is often useful to draw on the board to help explain an answer.

The oral exam begins with a 20-25 minute presentation by the candidate, which may be open to the public if the student prefers. It is followed by questioning, in a closed session, by each examiner, usually for ~20 minutes per examiner. This may be followed by an additional round of questioning if the examiners have remaining questions. At the end examiners and chair will meet in camera to confer about the outcome, and the candidate will subsequently be invited back to hear the outcome. The outcomes of the oral exam are:

- Pass
- Pass but with a written question, assigned readings or coursework required in a weak area
- Fail. The candidate must retake the oral exam within 1 semester or withdraw from the program. Inability to pass on a 2nd attempt necessitates withdrawal from the program.

Note: It is expected that oral exams will be conducted at the Burnaby campus, with all members of the examining committee present (including the Chair). If a member of the committee is unable to attend the oral defence in person, the student is expected to make arrangements through the Graduate Program Assistant for teleconferencing. In such a situation, it is expected that the member(s) not in attendance will provide the Chair with any questions or comments in writing prior to the defence in order to accommodate technical issues or difficulties.

A final grade of, satisfactory or unsatisfactory, will be determined for the BPK 896 - PhD Comprehensive Examination course and will be submitted by the Graduate Program Assistant. In cases where the examination, or its retake extends beyond the grade deadline for a semester, the student will receive a deferred grade (DE) until the work is complete.
Rating Scheme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.0 – 0.9</td>
<td>Unacceptable</td>
<td>Candidate is no longer eligible to continue in the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0 – 2.4</td>
<td>Substantive revisions required</td>
<td>Resubmission required. Candidate is asked to revise, normally within 1 month of notification. The revised proposal must achieve a rating of at least 3.5 for the candidate to continue in the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 – 3.4</td>
<td>Revisions required</td>
<td>Revise within 1 month of notification. Proceed to oral exam upon approval of revised proposal by all examiners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 – 3.9</td>
<td>Good, minor revisions required</td>
<td>Revise within 1 month of notification. Proceed to oral exam after approval of revised proposal by Senior Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.0 – 5.0</td>
<td>Superior proposal</td>
<td>Proceed to oral exam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Adapted from the CIHR Rating Scale for Operating Grants

Expected Timeline for the Comprehensive Exam Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week #</th>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Student emails the proposal to the Grad Chair, who forwards it to the examiners with instructions and the deadline date for marking it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Examiners are asked to mark the proposal within 2 weeks of receiving it. Examiners should provide a brief critique of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, as well as a rating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>If ratings are consistent, the result is transmitted to the student and Senior Supervisor. If scores are inconsistent, the GPC Chair confers with the examiners to agree on a consensus rating and an outcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1 month is allowed for revisions. Upon resubmission, return to Step C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>(8 with revisions) The oral exam is scheduled for 4 weeks from the acceptance of the proposal (exact time frame may be affected by examiner travel or vacations). Examiners need to make themselves available to talk to the student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>(12 with revisions) Oral exam.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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