Guidelines for supervisory committee meetings for progress assessment

For all continuing MSc or PhD students, progress must be assessed and approved by the student's supervisory committee through regularly held "Progress Meetings". Deadline dates for Progress Meetings are assigned to students by the graduate program assistant, and must occur no later than 12 months after the previous progress approval. Note that the PhD Graduate Research Candidacy Examination (MBB 806) also involves committee members and progress assessment, but is not identical to a Progress Meeting in format or purpose.

The objective of progress approval is to confirm that the student's academic development is in keeping with expectations for students at a comparable training level in the chosen research discipline. Aspects to be assessed typically include not only progress in original research (the thesis project itself) but also technical skills, theoretical knowledge, and written and oral communication skills.

Note: student interaction with committee members is not intended to be restricted to Progress Meetings. Indeed, the department encourages students to seek guidance from committee members whenever needed, either one-on-one or assembled in informal meetings.

Prior to the meeting

One week prior to the meeting, circulate to the committee four documents:

1. an up-to-date Biographical Profile, signed by the student and senior supervisor

2. a written summary of the progress made in the thesis project
   The suggested length of the report is ~5 single-spaced pages, not including Figures and relevant references. The report should include:
   • a title
   • an abstract
   • background information pertaining to the research area; include useful figure(s) as needed; state hypotheses and specific aims
   • description of the results obtained during the last year, and interpretations
   • future directions (proposed research) with estimated timelines

3. the Committee Comments & Student Response from the most recent Progress Meeting, or from the 1st committee meeting for students in Year 2 of SFU graduate study. These would have been circulated in the previous year but a duplicate copy should be made available electronically to the committee.

4. a Senior Supervisor's Assessment, signed by both the senior supervisor and the student. This should be written by the senior supervisor and discussed with the student before signing. It should summarise the supervisor's evaluation of the student's success in meeting training expectations, referring to the previous year's Comments & Response, highlighting notable strengths or weaknesses, and suggesting goals for the coming year.
During the meeting

During the meeting, the student will deliver an oral presentation to the committee, explaining the project background, aims, approaches, outcomes (including data collected over the past year) and significance. The presentations, together with questions/comments by the supervisory committee, vary in duration, but are typically ~1.5 – 2 hrs. A suggested use of the meeting time would be: < 1 hr presentation, 0.5 hr questions from the committee, 0.5 hr discussion of progress and plans future work. It is suggested that the student’s presentation time be focused on progress made since the last meeting.

At the meeting, the student will receive oral comments from the committee on recommendations for the coming year and its significance, feasibility and suitability for that student. Notably, the discussion should explicitly include any of the following administrative milestones that are anticipated in the coming year:

- transfer from MSc to PhD program
- undertaking the MBB 806 PhD Candidacy Exam
- submission of the MSc or PhD thesis for defence
- if applicable, planned leaves of absence
- if applicable, need for significant changes in research direction (e.g. a new project)

At the end of the meeting, the student should leave the room (but remain nearby) to provide faculty members the opportunity to discuss matters pertinent to the meeting.

The student is expected to bring to the meeting the Meeting feedback form (preferably on a laptop) so that the form may be filled in by the committee members at the meeting. The comments and suggestions will then be discussed with the student. It is the student’s responsibility to then ensure that the forms be returned to the committee within one week. The senior supervisor, as a member of the committee, may use this form to comment on revisions to the Senior Supervisor’s Assessment that may have arisen during the Progress Meeting. Approval of administrative milestones discussed in the meeting must be indicated on the form from each committee member.

Following the meeting

Once the student has read the comments and suggestions in the Progress Meeting feedback form, they must compose a brief Response (~1 page) that outlines measures to be taken to meet any concerns raised during the meeting; if there were no concerns, the student’s Response could simply be an outline of the experimental and educational priorities to be pursued during the academic year. The student may wish to discuss this response with their supervisor. Finally, the student must compile into a single PDF file the following: (i) their response; (ii) the senior supervisor’s comments; (iii) each of the committee members’ response. The compiled document is then sent to all supervisory committee members, and graduate program assistant.
FAQ on Progress Meetings:

1. I've just started grad school, and I heard I have to have a "committee meeting". What am I expected to prepare in such a short time?

   The first committee meeting for incoming students is not considered a "Progress Meeting" but is intended to allow new graduate students to introduce the project to the committee members. See the separate Guidelines for First Committee Meeting.

2. How important is the written progress report?

   Very important! If the student does not submit a professional level progress report in time (1 week before the meeting) the student maybe asked to reschedule the meeting. Producing a clearly written report (free of grammatical and spelling errors and in the format described above) is a major and essential part of the progress assessment.

3. Is it possible to "fail" a Progress Meeting? What happens then?

   Yes it is possible.

   If you fail to submit the required Comments & Response documents to the graduate program assistant, your registration for the following term may be subject to an administrative block.

   If your Supervisory Committee feels that your progress has not been satisfactory, they may request a follow-up Progress Meeting to be held after a period of less than the customary 12 months, with specific performance benchmarks to be met. If the measures taken in response are judged inadequate in that follow-up Progress Meeting, you may be asked to withdraw from your program.

4. I'm defending my thesis this term but I got a notice that I'm supposed to have a Progress Meeting.

   Note, it is not necessary to submit a progress report if you are defending your thesis the same semester the report is due. It may, however, be a good opportunity to meet with your committee and get their approval to write your thesis and prepare to defend. If you fall into this category, please inform the program assistant.

5. One of my committee members can't attend my meeting. Can my meeting be cancelled?

   The absence of one committee member is not acceptable as a reason to cancel your Supervisory Committee Meeting. In such a case, your committee meeting needs to go ahead. Send the absent committee member a copy of the report (via email) and then that committee member will email you and copy the graduate program assistant (mbb@sfu.ca) with their recommendation. The absent committee member's email will be attached to your progress report as an official recommendation.

6. Is MBB 806 the same as a committee meeting? If I don't pass it, can I try again later?

   No, they are not the same. One or two terms before you plan to enroll in MBB 806, you must have a satisfactory Progress meeting where you obtain permission from your committee to attempt MBB 806. If MBB 806 is not then successfully completed, depending on performance you may be asked to withdraw from graduate studies or prepare for completing an MSc degree (courses, thesis and defence); in some cases you may be allowed to attempt MBB 806 again within an agreed time.

7. I'm in the PhD program but my career plans have changed. Can I still earn a MSc degree?

   The following needs to be submitted to apply for a transfer to the MSc program from the PhD program: the completed Transfer from a Doctoral program to a Master’s program Application Form (http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/dean-gradstudies/admin/forms/Transfer%20PhD%20to%20Masters.pdf);
a letter from the student to the Dean of Graduate Studies stating why they are requesting this transfer, a letter from the Senior Supervisor to the Dean of Graduate Studies stating that your Supervisory Committee agrees with this transfer and why (they should also state what the plan and timeline are for finishing up your MSc degree), and lastly a copy of your unofficial transcript.

8. **I'm in the MBB MSc program and would like to transfer into the PhD program. What should I prepare in order to apply for transfer and what is the deadline? If I'm unsuccessful, can I try again later?**

Students intending to transfer from MSc to PhD must successfully complete all transfer requirements by the 6th term. Transfer from MSc to PhD requires the following: a) a copy of the student’s unofficial transcripts showing at least 9 graduate level credits, which must include MBB 806 with a grade of B plus or higher; b) completed [Transfer from a Master’s program to a Doctoral program Application Form](http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/dean-gradstudies/currentstudents/Registration/TransferMastersToDoctoral.pdf); c) a Letter of Reference from your Supervisor citing that the student’s Supervisory Committee agrees to the transfer and all committee members sign the reference letter; the Supervisor should also explain why this student should transfer and what their project will be); and d) lastly a written summary of intended PhD research. Return all the above documents to the Graduate Program Assistant for processing.

Submit your transfer package **at least 2 weeks** before the intended term you want to become a PhD student (*i.e.*, if you want to become a PhD student in the Fall 2017 semester, submit your documentation by mid-August 2017).

Lastly, if your request is unsuccessful, you can submit your request again, especially if the reason you were denied has been resolved.