Qualifying Exam

See Chapter IV, heading Doctor of Philosophy, subheading Qualifying exam

See Chapter IV, heading Doctor of Philosophy, subheading Program Regulations

Once the examination/defense has been setup by the Graduate Program Assistant, the Chair is responsible for following each program's specific process for the complete examination experience (e.g. questioning process from public attendees and examining committee, avoidance of asking own questions, following the time requirements, etc.). This process needs to be followed as precisely as possible to ensure fairness across all students within the program.

However, it is possible for the student and/or advisor to request a modification or accommodation to the process. All requests must be made to the Examination/Defense Chair who is responsible for ensuring that the process is fair to all students. Accommodations are possible as long as these are managed by the Defense/Examination Chair. If you have a defense/examination coming up and would like to discuss an issue related to the process, please discuss this with your Defense/Examination Chair with as much advance notice as possible to allow this person to discuss with relevant others if necessary (e.g. Department Chair, Grad Studies) and/or to arrange the modifications.

Look for "Area-specific qualifying exam" below CONTENTS for area-specific guidance if it exists.

Area-specific Qualifying Exam NACS PHD

In NACS, the qualifying exam is done after students have successfully written and defended the proposal for their PhD thesis.† The qualifying exam must be successfully passed by the end of the semester 5 of the PhD program (or the end of semester 7 for students who entered the program without a Masters).

The specific procedures and requirements for the NACS qualifying exam are discussed below.

Objectives and Format

The overall objective of the qualifying examination process is to assess the student's knowledge of their subject area and related fields. To this end, the NACS qualifying exam comprises:

1. a written component in which the student creates an application for an NSERC Discovery grant,

2. an oral component in which the student answers questions based on the application, and

3. an evaluation of the student's ability and promise as a researcher.

This format has a number of advantages. First, it will allow students to spend time critically appraising the literature in their research area. Second, it will provide students with experience summarizing information and developing hypotheses based on the primary literature and previous findings from their

laboratory work. Third, it will give them experience in the preparation of a broad-based proposal (i.e., one with short- and long-term objectives) with a defined format, budget and deadline.

It is important that the research program proposed in the application does not overlap with the research program proposed for the PhD thesis; however, it may continue and extend the work of the PhD thesis. Instead it is meant to describe a program of research that will be conducted over a 5-year period after completion of the PhD program. Other planned research to be conducted prior to PhD completion, especially research planned in collaboration with others, should also be excluded from the application. There is a section in the NSERC proposal that allows candidates to describe their past progress, where it is permissible to talk about past research, thesis research and any other research that is currently underway or planned. In general, this past progress section should be no more than 1 page long, and the bulk of the proposal should involve a 5 year plan for new (future) research that represents the candidate's own independent work. Because the qualifying paper is an exam, it is not permissible to create it in collaboration/consultation with anyone else.

Successful completion of the qualifying exam requires a satisfactory evaluation by the examination committee on all three components: written, oral, and research evaluation.

Area-specific Qualifying Exam: Committee Creation NACS PHD

The Qualifying Examination Committee cannot be established until the PhD Advisory Committee is in place and on record with the Graduate Program Assistant. The Qualifying Exam Committee consists of five members:

- The committee chair, who is responsible for scheduling all exam related meetings, and facilitating each meeting. For NACS qualifying exams, the chair is typically the faculty member serving as the NACS Area Graduate Representative.

- At most two members of the PhD Advisory Committee

- Additional members from the regular graduate faculty on campus, so that the total number of committee member including the chair is five.

- Normally, at least one of the qualifying examination committee members must be from outside the department in which the student is registered. That person may be a member of the advisory committee.

To form the committee, the student’s advisor will email the proposed committee members to the Graduate Program Assistant and then, if there are no problems, to the Department Chair for final approval. Once approved, the advisor will acquire a Qualifying Examination Committee Appointment Form from the Graduate Program Assistant, complete the form, and resubmit to the Graduate Program Assistant. At this point, and not before, the Qualifying Examination process can start. The Graduate Program Assistant will pass instructions to the Chair of the Qualifying Examination on how to proceed.

Area-specific Qualifying Exam: Written Component NACS PHD

For this exam, candidates will be required to do Notice of Intent (NOI) and a full application (Form 101, including free form sections) for an NSERC Discovery grant. The NACS area has created templates for the NOI and Form 101 (links below).†You will also need to provide the four free-form sections listed below.

a) NACS template for Notice of Intent

b) NACS Exam Form

- Budget Justification

- Highly Qualified Personnel Training Plan

- Research Proposal

- Reference List

NSERC has very strict and detailed instructions for the creation of the proposal and notice of intent, including specific formatting instructions for free-form sections. These instructions are detailed on the NSERC website. In addition to reading these instructions carefully, it is important to learn how to write a good application, and to identify the merit indicators that NSERC uses to evaluate applications:

PhD Qualifying Exam: Timeline

1. The qualifying exam committee must first be formed. The names and signatures of the committee members must be documented on a form made available by the graduate secretary

2. Next there is a preliminary meeting (Meeting #1) at which the committee and the candidate discuss the overall plan, the scope of the proposal, and possible directions for the program of research.

3. Based on the discussion at Meeting #1, the candidate will compose a Notice of Intent for the NSERC Discovery Grant (NOI), which summarizes the research to be proposed. Students will have 2 weeks to complete their NOI and send it to the qualifying exam committee.

4. The committee will be given 1 week to read the NOI, and then a meeting will be scheduled (Meeting #2). At this meeting, the committee will give the candidate feedback about the notice of intent. It is important to note that Meeting #2 is the last time that the student will be able to get feedback and guidance from the committee on their proposal and plan of research; it is permissible, though, for candidates to ask subsequent questions of the Chair if they are unclear about procedure.

5. After Meeting #2, candidates work independently to create a full Discovery grant application (Form 101, including free-form sections). Students will have 4 weeks to complete their Form 101 and send it to the qualifying exam committee. For guidance, students are encouraged to read past successful NSERC applications provided by faculty.

6. The oral examination will occur within 2 weeks from submission of Form 101. Within these two weeks, the committee will send their feedback to the committee chair. Most importantly, each committee member will provide a judgment of whether the written component was completed satisfactorily, as well as a basis for this judgment. The committee chair will then collate the judgments to make a decision about whether the written component was completed successfully or not. On the day of the oral exam,

the chair announces the decision to the student and the committee, and provides the detailed comments of committee members. There are several possible outcomes:

- If the entire committee (or all but one member) judges the written component to be satisfactory, then the oral examination will proceed.

- If two or more members judge that the written component was not completed satisfactorily, then the student fails and the oral examination will not proceed. However, students will be given a second attempt to pass the written exam. The date for the second attempt will be negotiated with the student, but it should normally begin within 6 months of the first attempt. The second attempt begins at stage 2 of the procedure listed above, although the research program to be proposed will most likely be an improved version of the failed program rather than a completely different program.

- If the student is on their second attempt to pass the exam, and the revised written component is deemed unsatisfactory, then the exam is a failure. At this time, the student will be asked to leave the program.

Area-specific Qualifying Exam: Oral Examination NACS PHD

The oral exam will constitute Meeting #3 between the candidate and the committee. Unlike a thesis defense, the qualifying exam oral does not begin with a student presentation. The oral, normally 1-2 hours in duration, is instead reserved for questions and answers between the committee and student.† During this time, the candidate will be given an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the literature, the rationale for the hypotheses, the expected results, the pitfalls of the proposed research, an understanding of alternative approaches to the question and analysis of the results, and an ability to communicate the significance of the findings. At the end of the question period, the candidate will be asked to step out of the room while the committee deliberates. During the deliberation process, each committee member provides an independent judgment of whether the oral component was completed satisfactorily (note: abstention = unsatisfactory). If all, or all but one, agree that the oral was satisfactory, then the student passes the oral component of the exam.

- If the oral is judged as unsatisfactory by two or more members, then the student fails the exam. However, students will be given a second attempt to pass the oral component. The date for the second oral will be negotiated with the student, but it should normally be within 4 weeks of the first oral. The second oral will be based on the written component that has already been deemed satisfactory by the committee.

- If the second oral is judged as unsatisfactory by two or more members, then the student fails the exam. At this time, the student will be asked to leave the program.

Area-specific Qualifying Exam: Evaluation of the Student's Ability and Promise as a Researcher

Once the student has passed the written and oral components of the qualifying exam, the committee will evaluate the student's ability and promise as a researcher (note: the thesis advisory committee has already approved the thesis proposal). This evaluation is made during the deliberations following the oral exam. To aid this evaluation, the committee will be presented with a report (Qualifying Examination Research Evaluation) written in advance by the candidate's advisor, and a research portfolio sent in advance by the candidate to the Chair of the Qualifying Exam Committee. This portfolio should contain an up-to-date curriculum vitae, as well as electronic copies of publications, conference presentations, or other significant research contributions by the student. These documents are used during the deliberations following the oral exam to assess if the student has the potential to complete a PhD level research project. If all, or all but one, agree that the student has potential to complete a PhD level research project, then the student passes the qualifying exam. If not, then the student will be asked to leave the program. After deliberations, the candidate will be called into the room and informed of whether they passed the exam.

Read more about the Qualifying examination requirements in the University Graduate Calendar.

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