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.

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