REGULATIONS FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

All candidates for the PhD degree in the Department of Biology are required to pass a comprehensive examination designed to reveal a broad knowledge and understanding of the student’s field. At least eight (8) weeks before the date of the examination, the supervisory committee will identify 4-6 specific fields (topics) on which detailed questions will be asked; these fields will reflect the student’s chosen area of research. The committee may elect to make some of the topics more general and some of the topics highly specific to the actual research area. The student will be notified, in writing, of these topics; it is recommended that appropriate textbook chapters and/or review papers be specified. Normally, members of the supervisory committee will comprise the PhD proposal examination committee but, at the discretion of the committee, other faculty members from Biology or other departments may be invited to participate. The Associate Chair (Graduate Studies) or delegate may attend a comprehensive examination as non-voting participant on request of the committee or student.

The primary objective of the examination is to evaluate the candidate's understanding and knowledge of areas related to his/her research field; therefore, the student will be expected to show detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the selected topics. A secondary objective of the examination is to identify areas of weakness that may be filled by appropriate course work or additional reading. The competence with which the student answers questions on the selected topics will be the main basis for evaluating the performance in the examination. The committee may ask general questions in fields that were not previously identified to the student; the candidate’s responses to these questions will contribute to the overall evaluation but will not necessarily determine the ultimate pass/fail decision.

The examination must be completed within at least seven terms of the student’s initial enrolment in the PhD program; it should not take place in the first two terms of enrolment. A delay of an examination beyond the initial seven term period requires permission of the Associate Dean (Graduate Studies).

If the PhD proposal examination is successful, the date and topics for the comprehensive exam should be discussed at this meeting to ensure timely completion of this milestone. The date for the comprehensive exam should be noted on the PhD Advisory Committee Report. The topics can also be communicated to the student at this time. A Comprehensive Exam Meeting Request Form will be included in the folder for the PhD proposal examination and can be completed at this meeting. If this form is not completed at the time of the PhD proposal examination, the graduate student is responsible for obtaining the form (available on the forms page, https://uwaterloo.ca/biology/graduate-studies/program-information/forms) and submitting it to the Biology Graduate Office with the date, time, and topics for the exam. A chairperson for the exam will be assigned by the Biology Graduate Office.
The format of the exam is variable, but usually the chairperson will invite each member of the examining committee to question the candidate for 15-20 minutes; a second or third round of such questions is common but usually for shorter duration. Immediately after the examination, the candidate will leave the room. The decision regarding the success or failure of the candidate should be taken only after discussion of the candidate’s performance by all examiners. The purpose of the discussion is to evaluate the overall performance, and to identify weak areas in which re-examination and/or remedial work is required. The decision regarding the category into which the exam falls shall normally reflect the majority opinion of the committee.

In the case of a conditional pass, the supplementary program of study should be discussed and decided upon. Options include written assignments, coursework, presentation of a seminar, or whatever the committee feels would be useful and appropriate. These conditions must be completed within one calendar year of the conditional pass. Students who fail to meet these conditions will be required to withdraw. Completion of the supplementary program of study must also be communicated to the Biology Graduate Office within this timeline.

In the case of a deferred decision, an approximate date for a second examination should be scheduled, and the form and scope of that examination should be decided upon. The second exam may be written rather than oral. Justification for the second examination will vary, but might include unacceptable performance on one or more topics with excellent performance on others, or enervating nervousness. A general unsatisfactory performance should not be grounds for re-examination. The decision cannot be deferred a second time. A second examination must be completed within one calendar year of the unsuccessful attempt. Students who fail to meet these conditions will be required to withdraw.

In the case of Failure, the student will be required to withdraw from the program.

The chairperson of the examination shall record the decision, including the nature of remedial work, or the form and time of another examination if appropriate, on the examination report. They should also inform the student as to the outcome of the examination.

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