

# UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO GRADUATE PROGRAM IN GEOGRAPHY

## PHD COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

### REQUIREMENTS AND PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

#### 1. Nature of the Examination

The Comprehensive Examination will be held in public. The aim of the Comprehensive Examination is to confirm that the Student has adequate knowledge in the chosen field of study and has identified a major research issue to be pursued in the Thesis research. The Examination includes both a written and an oral component. Normally the Examination involves the Student writing answers to a question or questions over a period of three weeks. The answer(s) will not exceed 10,000 words, excluding the bibliography, abstract, figures and tables. In the oral component of the Examination, which normally lasts no longer than three hours, the Student defends the written document. The topics to be covered and the format of the Examination are determined by the Student's Comprehensive Examination Committee, in consultation with the Student. With the approval of the UW Graduate Program in Geography, alternative formats for the Comprehensive Examination process may be permitted, provided they meet the objectives of the Comprehensive Examination.

##### a. The Comprehensive Examination Committee

The Comprehensive Examination Committee normally will consist of the Student's Advisor and three additional Examiners, one of whom will be from outside the UW Graduate Program in Geography. The evaluation committee must consist of at least two members of the UW Graduate Program in Geography. No more than 1 committee member can hold adjunct status. The Committee will be determined through consultation among the Student, the Student's Advisor and the Graduate.

##### b. Duties of the Comprehensive Examination Committee

In consultation with the Student, the Comprehensive Examination Committee will determine the chosen field of study for the Comprehensive Examination. The advisor and student will normally convene a meeting of the Comprehensive Examination Committee no later than the end of the second term of registration to determine the chosen field of study and the overall scope, content and format of the Comprehensive Examination. If this is not possible, the student should meet individually with members of the committee prior to the setting of the question. The Committee, on the initiative of the Advisor, will write and approve the question or questions to be given to the Student for the written part of the examination.

It is the responsibility of the Advisor to give the question or questions to the Graduate Program Office for preparation of the Comprehensive Examination announcement. The announcement is given to the Student and the members of the Comprehensive Examination Committee. The announcement is also displayed on the Graduate Notice Boards at both universities.

For three working days after the Student has received the Comprehensive Examination question, the Student may consult and seek clarification of the question with members of the Comprehensive Examination Committee.

After completing the written answer to the Comprehensive Examination question, the student must provide an electronic PDF copy of the response to the Graduate Program Office for distribution to the members of the Comprehensive Examination Committee. Paper copies are only required at the request of a committee member and must be provided by the student.

It is the responsibility of the Comprehensive Examination Committee to read and evaluate the answer to the written question or questions, and to attend on the day and time of the oral component of the examination to examine the Student. The Comprehensive Examination Committee must render a decision on the capabilities of the Student to continue studies at the graduate level and undertake the PhD Thesis research.

#### c. Date of the Comprehensive Examination

The Comprehensive Examination will normally be completed by the end of the fourth term of registration in the doctoral program. This assumes continuous registration once admitted into the program; an equivalent time-frame, based on terms of registration, should be calculated by a part-time PhD Student. The dates for the written and oral components of the Examination will be established by the Student in consultation with the Advisor, the other members of the Comprehensive Examination Committee and (submitted to) the Graduate Officer (for approval). Students must register for the Comprehensive in the term in which they begin the Comprehensive examination process.

The written component normally takes three weeks. The Student should select an appropriate time-frame to write the Examination, a period when other commitments are at a minimum.

The date for the oral component of the Examination should be set by the advisor when the dates for the written part are determined. Normally the oral component will be held no earlier than two weeks and no later than four weeks after the written answers are submitted to the Comprehensive Examining Committee. All members of the committee must be present during the examination, either in person or via telephone or internet link. If this is not possible it is the responsibility of the Advisor to find an alternative to attend the exam and read the questions from the absent member. The alternate must be knowledgeable and has the same authority to provide input on the decision as any other committee member who is present

#### d. The Chair of the Comprehensive Examination

The Chair of the Comprehensive Examination is to be determined by the Graduate Program Office. The Chair of the Comprehensive Examination cannot be the Student's Advisor, is not a member of the Comprehensive Examination Committee, is not involved in discussion of the content or the format of the Comprehensive Examination, and does not have a vote in the Comprehensive Examination decision.

It is the responsibility of the Chair to ensure that the conduct of the Comprehensive Examination conforms to the guidelines presented in this document, and that all requirements of the Examination are met. In case there is an appeal by the Student of the Comprehensive Examination decision, the Graduate Officer shall not serve as Chair of the Comprehensive Examination.

After the Examination, the Chair of the Comprehensive Examination will indicate the decision of the Examiners on the PhD Comprehensive Examination Report Form; will ensure that any conditions related to the decision are clearly written on the Report Form; and will deliver the Report Form to the Graduate Officer of the appropriate department without delay. The Graduate Officer will copy the Report Form and submit the original to the Graduate Program Administrator. The Graduate Officer will then ensure that any written conditions have been subsequently implemented before successful completion of the Comprehensive Examination is reported to the ENV Assistant to the Associate Dean.

## **2. Decisions in the PhD Comprehensive Examination**

When the Chair has determined that the Examiners have asked all their questions, the Student will leave the room and then the Chair will:

- i) ask the Examiners in turn to indicate verbally their evaluation of the written and oral parts of the examination; and
- ii) call upon each Examiner to vote as to whether or not the Student has adequate knowledge in the chosen field of study and has identified a major research issue to be pursued in the Thesis research, as demonstrated in the written and oral parts of the examination.

Evaluating both the written and oral components of the examination, the members of the Comprehensive Examination Committee will vote with regard to one of the following three outcomes:

### **Passed**

The candidate successfully completed all requirements of the examination.

### **Passed Conditionally**

The candidate will be considered to have completed the exam successfully upon having satisfied conditions established by the examining committee. The conditions shall:

- Be communicated to the student in writing;

- Contain the date by which the conditions must be satisfied;
- Identify the member(s) of the examining committee responsible for determining that the conditions have been met. Normally, this determination will be made by at least one member of the committee other than the student's supervisor or cosupervisors.

Failure to satisfy the conditions within the designated time limit shall result in an outcome of Re-examination.

### **Re-examination**

The candidate will be required to repeat the exam. In this case, the student shall be provided written communication that identifies the deficiencies in the exam that led to this outcome and the deadline by which the re-examination must take place. In the case of re-examination it is anticipated that the committee membership will be the same as the initial committee. Any change in membership must adhere to committee guidelines and be approved by the student's Associate Dean Graduate Studies or delegate.

When a candidate is re-examined, the outcomes are limited to:

#### **Passed**

**Exam Unsuccessful:** the candidate will be deemed to have failed to satisfy the program's comprehensive exam requirement. In this case, the student shall receive written communication identifying the deficiencies in the exam that led to this outcome.

The outcome of the exam is determined by the majority vote of the examining committee. The following rules govern the voting process:

- In the case where the student is co-supervised, the co-supervisors' votes shall count collectively as one vote. In the case where co-supervisors vote for different outcomes, these votes shall count as 0.5 votes for each outcome
- After the discussion, if all but one of the Examiners agree on a decision, the decision shall be that of the majority. When the one dissenting vote is that of the Examiner from outside the Waterloo-Laurier Graduate Program in Geography, the Chair of the Comprehensive Examination must report the occurrence to the Program Director
- If two Examiners cannot reconcile their votes with the other members of the Comprehensive Examination Committee, the case must be referred to the Program Director who will, following appropriate consultation, ascertain what is needed to reach a consensus, and the Student shall be advised that a decision is pending. The Director will make a recommendation to the ENV Associate Dean.

Any appeal by the Student concerning a negative evaluation should be taken to the appropriate appeals committee of the university in which the Student is registered.

### **3. Absence of a Member of the Comprehensive Examination Committee**

If, after the date for the oral component of the Comprehensive Examination has been set, an Examiner cannot be present for a legitimate reason, it is the responsibility of the Examiner to inform the Graduate Officer and the Advisor of the situation. The Examiner who will be absent must prepare and submit to the Graduate Officer a series of written questions to be addressed to the Student at the oral examination. An evaluation of the written answer, according to the decision criteria (above), must also be given. It is the responsibility of the Advisor to find an alternative to attend the exam and read the questions from the absent member. The alternate must

be knowledgeable and has the same authority to provide input on the decision as any other committee member who is present.

If a member of the Comprehensive Examining Committee does not appear at the oral component of the examination, the oral examination must be delayed until that person is present. The Chair should use departmental facilities to attempt to contact the absent Examiner and ascertain the probable time of arrival of the missing Examiner. If the absence involves re-scheduling the examination to another day, the Chair of the Comprehensive Examination Committee must inform the Graduate Officer, and also the ENV Associate Dean in the appropriate university as to why the Examination has been rescheduled.

#### **4. Academic Integrity Concerns**

If, after the date for the oral component of the Comprehensive Examination has been set but the Examination has not yet begun, any member of the examining committee has significant concerns regarding academic integrity violations in the written document, the member will contact the ENV Associate Dean, who will then assess the allegation. If the vetting cannot be completed prior to the scheduled date of the oral component of the examination, the oral exam shall be postponed until a clear decision has been made on possible academic integrity violations. If no violation is deemed to have occurred, the exam shall be rescheduled to the satisfaction of the student, the supervisors, and the examining committee. This rescheduling of the exam shall be considered a valid extenuating circumstance to extend the examination deadline.

If an academic integrity violation is believed to have occurred during the oral component of the comprehensive exam, the person suspecting the violation shall ask the chair to pause the exam. The concerns identified shall be communicated to the chair (only) who will then determine the course of action. If the Chair believes that uncertainty exists regarding the concerns identified, the Chair may determine that the exam shall continue and the potential academic integrity violation will be vetted after the completion of the exam. If the Chair believes that the suspected violation is likely to be valid or that the alleged occurrence precludes a fair evaluation of the candidate, the Chair shall then suspend the exam until a determination can be made as to whether an academic integrity violation has occurred

#### **5. Time-Lines, Actions and Responsibilities for the PhD Comprehensive Examination Before the Comprehensive Examination**

The results of these actions are recorded on the Ph.D. Student Reporting Form.

- a. The Student must complete all course requirements as set by the Student's Ph.D. Committee.  
**Responsibility:** Student
- b. The Advisor and the Student should identify potential members for the Comprehensive Examination Committee. The four members of the Committee should meet the

requirements outlined in Section 1 of this document. The names should be submitted to the Graduate Officer for approval.

**Responsibility:** Advisor, Student and Graduate Officer

- c. The Advisor and the Student should convene a meeting of the Comprehensive Examination Committee to discuss the chosen field of study and the overall scope and general content and format of the Comprehensive Examination.

**Responsibility:** Advisor and Student

- d. Identify the date and time the Comprehensive Examination question to be given to the student. (The Graduate Officer and Program Administrator will be given three working days notice before the student collects the question).

**Responsibility:** Advisor, Student and Graduate Officer

- e. Identification of the Chair for the Comprehensive Examination Committee; booking of the room for the oral examination.

**Responsibility:** Graduate Program Office

- f. Preparation of the Comprehensive Examination question; submission of the question to the Graduate Officer. The Supervisor will confirm that all members of the committee will participate in the exam or an alternative will be appointed by the Supervisor.

**Responsibility:** Advisor, Comprehensive Examination Committee and Graduate Officer

- g. Preparation and distribution of the Comprehensive Examination announcement.

**Responsibility:** Graduate Program Office

## Written Examination

- a. **Day 1**

The Graduate Program Administrator provides the student with an electronic copy of the question(s).

**Responsibility:** Graduate Program Office

- b. **Days 1-3**

For three working days after the Student has received the Comprehensive Examination question, the Student may consult and seek clarification of the question with members of the Comprehensive Examination Committee.

**Responsibility:** Student and Comprehensive Examination Committee

- c. **Day 21**

The Student submits one electronic pdf copy of the answer to the Comprehensive Examination question to the Graduate Program Office.

**Responsibility:** Student

- d. **Day 22**

The Graduate Program Office distributes the copies of the Comprehensive Examination answer paper to the Examiners. Note that one copy of the paper is retained in the Graduate Program Office where it may be consulted.

**Responsibility:** Graduate Program Office

e. **Days 22-35**

The Comprehensive Examination paper is read and evaluated by the Comprehensive Examining Committee.

**Responsibility:** Comprehensive Examination Committee

f. **Days 36-50**

The oral component of the comprehensive Examination will normally take place during the two to four week period after the Student has completed the Comprehensive Examination paper.

**Responsibility:** Student and Comprehensive Examination Committee

### **Oral Examination**

a. At least one day prior to the oral examination, the Graduate Program Administrator provides the PhD Comprehensive Examination Report Form and examination guidelines to the Chair of the Comprehensive Examination.

**Responsibility:** Graduate Program Administrator

b. The Chair will ensure that the oral examination conforms to the following guidelines:

- The Chair introduces the Student and the members of the Comprehensive Examining Committee.
- The Chair will remind the Candidate of procedures regarding the order of questions and the limit on the number of questions.
- The chair invites the Student to give a 15-20 minute overview of the main observations and conclusions that were presented in the written paper. The Student may use overheads, slides or other visual aids to clarify the presentation.
- If necessary, the Chair should indicate when 20 minutes have elapsed. The Student should then draw the presentation to a conclusion. If the Student continues beyond the 20 minutes, this should be viewed in a negative manner when assessing the oral examination.
- The Chair then invites questions from the Comprehensive Examination Committee. Questioning normally starts with the External member of the Committee, continues with the other Committee members and concludes with the Advisor. Each person asks a series of questions related to the paper submitted by the Student. Other questions may be asked to confirm that the Student has adequate knowledge in the chosen field of study and has identified a major research issue to be pursued in the Thesis research. In the first round, each individual would normally question the Student for no more than 15 minutes.
- After the first round of questions, there is chance for the members of the Committee to ask additional questions or points of clarification if they wish to. The second round of questions is normally shorter than the first.
- The Chair then determines if there are any further questions for the Student from the Comprehensive Examination Committee to aid them in reaching a decision on the examination result.
- When the Comprehensive Examination Committee completes its questions, the Chair

- will then invite questions from the audience.
- When all questioning is complete, the Chair asks the Student and the audience to withdraw while the Committee undertakes its deliberations.
  - Following the guidelines listed in Section 2 - Decisions in the PhD Comprehensive Examination (above), the Committee reaches its collective decision on the combined written and oral components of the examination.
  - When the decisions have been made, the Chair asks the Student to return to the examination room and advises the Student of these decisions. Members of the Committee sign the appropriate forms.
  - The Chair ensures that any conditions related to the decision are clearly written on the Report Form and delivers the Report Form to the Graduate Officer. This concludes the oral examination.

### **Notification of the Comprehensive Examination Result**

- a. The Graduate Officer will copy the Report Form and submit the original to the Graduate Program Administrator.  
**Responsibility:** Graduate Officer
- b. The Graduate Officer ensures that any written conditions have been subsequently implemented before successful completion of the Comprehensive Examination is reported to the Graduate Program Administrator.  
**Responsibility:** Graduate Officer
- c. The Graduate Program Administrator submits the milestone completion form to the GSPA which is then added to the Student record prior to program completion.  
**Responsibility:** Graduate Program Administrator