

**Policies and Procedures for
Advising and Submitting a PhD Dissertation
and Scheduling and Conducting the Oral Defence**

The dissertation is the culmination of a candidate's program. All PhD candidates are required to complete an original dissertation that makes a significant contribution to the existing knowledge in their field. If dissertation research involves humans, approval must be obtained from the WLU Research Ethics Board; if it involves animals, approval must be obtained from the WLU Animal Care Committee (details are available from the WLU Office of Research Services).

In order that the dissertation may be subject to the scholarly criticism of all members of the university community, it is placed on display in the Graduate Studies Office two weeks prior to the oral defence. Also, the oral defence is open to any member of the university community.

Structure of the Dissertation Advisory Committee
and the Dissertation Examination Committee

Dissertation Advisory Committee

Each Dissertation Advisory Committee (DAC) must consist of:

- a Dissertation Advisor (DA), who is a member of the Graduate Faculty of the University and who normally will be a full-time faculty member in the academic unit/program of the candidate; and
- at least two other members of the Graduate Faculty of the University. Normally, if there are only two other members, both will be from the academic unit/program of the candidate. If there is a fourth member of the DAC, normally this member will be from outside the academic unit/program of the candidate.

After the candidate has completed the requirements for the comprehensive examination(s) or paper(s), and in consultation with the candidate, the DA recommends the members of the DAC to the graduate coordinator/program director. Once the DAC has been approved by the graduate coordinator/program director or the appropriate committee within the academic unit/program, the approval of the Dean of Graduate Studies must also be obtained. All members of the DAC must review and approve the dissertation proposal. All members of the DAC must also review a complete draft of the dissertation prior to the oral defence and verify that it is ready to go forward for defence.

Dissertation Examination Committee

The Dissertation Examination Committee (DEC) must consist of all the members of the DAC and an external examiner who is "arm's length" from the candidate and the DA (see Selection of the External Examiner, and Guidelines for Determining "Arm's Length" of External Examiners, below). If the DAC does not include a member who is from outside the academic unit/program of the candidate, such a person must be nominated and approved for membership on the DEC no later than when the external examiner is nominated (this person would then function as an "internal/external" examiner).

Note: Although there is allowance for flexibility across academic units/programs with regard to whether a faculty member from outside the academic unit/program of the candidate is a member of the DAC as

well as the DEC or is appointed only to the DEC as an “internal/external” examiner, there must be consistency within academic units/programs in this regard.

Selection of the External Examiner
and Scheduling of the Oral Defence

Completion of the Dissertation Defence Form by the DAC: Proposing Three Dates and Three Potential External Examiners for the Oral Defence

After all of the DAC members have agreed that the dissertation is ready for defense, they and the candidate must complete the pertinent sections of, and sign, the PhD Dissertation Defence form. The PhD Dissertation Defence form includes the nomination of three potential external examiners, the nomination of an “internal/external” examiner (if there is not already a member of the DAC from outside the academic unit/program of the candidate), and the determination of three proposed dates for the oral defence.

In nominating external examiners, the DAC members must generate a list of three nominees, ordered in terms of preference. The nominees must be:

- recognized authorities on the subject of the dissertation;
- normally, a senior Associate or Full Professor; and
- “arm’s length” from the candidate and the DA (see Guidelines for Determining “Arm’s Length” of External Examiners).

In considering potential external examiners, the DAC should remember that, normally, those nominated as external examiners must currently reside in Canada or the United States (consideration will be given to scholars from other countries if travel expenses are within the \$1000 limit, if the academic unit/program agrees to cover extra expenses, or if it is deemed acceptable for the examiner to participate in the defence by teleconference or videoconference).

In the determination of proposed dates for the oral defence, it must be kept in mind that it may take two to three weeks to confirm one of the proposed external examiners as a suitable and willing nominee, and that copies of the dissertation, along with the PhD Dissertation Defence form, must be submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies at least seven weeks in advance of the defence. Thus, proposed dates for the defence should be at least nine to ten weeks from when committee members sign the Dissertation Defence form and make proposals for the external examiners.

When it is necessary to nominate an “internal/external” examiner, the DAC should ensure that this person is a member of the Graduate Faculty of the University, has expertise related to the subject of the dissertation, is willing to serve in this capacity, and is available to attend the oral defence on the proposed dates. Although the “internal/external” examiner is not required to submit a written report on the dissertation, this person should be informed that if he or she has any significant concerns about the quality of the dissertation this should be communicated to the DA prior to the defence.

Determination of One Nominee for External Examiner and Submission of the Dissertation and the Dissertation Defence Form to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

It is the responsibility of the academic unit/program of the candidate to determine one nominee for external examiner who is willing and available to serve in this capacity. Normally, this is done either by

the DA or the graduate coordinator/program director. Those nominated as external examiners should be contacted one by one, in the order of preference indicated by the DAC, until one of the nominees has agreed to the nomination. The potential external examiner(s) should be:

- given basic information about the dissertation (e.g., the abstract),
- asked if they are willing to be nominated as an external examiner,
- asked if they are available on the proposed dates for the oral defence (if not, other possible dates may be discussed with the nominee, the DAC, and the candidate),
- informed that the WLU Dean of Graduate Studies will contact them to confirm their selection as external examiner.

Once a nominee for external examiner has been determined, the final section of the PhD Dissertation Defence form should be completed and a current CV obtained from the nominee should be attached. Then, at least seven weeks prior to the anticipated defence date, the PhD Dissertation Defence form and two copies of the dissertation must be submitted to the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies. It should also be ensured that all members of the DAC, and where appropriate, the “internal/external” examiner, have received a copy of the dissertation. The candidate is responsible for ensuring that the dissertation is submitted in the format required by the current WLU Thesis Format Guidelines.

Confirmation of the External Examiner and Scheduling of the Oral Defence by the Faculty of Graduate Studies

The Dean of Graduate Studies will review the information submitted about the proposed external examiner to ensure that he or she is a suitable nominee (and where necessary, the Dean will also approve the appointment of the “internal/external” examiner). The Dean of Graduate Studies will then contact the nominee for external examiner to:

- confirm an arm’s length relationship with the candidate and the DA;
- inform him or her of the honorarium (\$100), the travel expense policy, and the limit on travel expenses;
- confirm his or her willingness to read the dissertation, to submit a written evaluation and preliminary vote (per the decision categories) at least ten days prior to the proposed examination date(s), and to attend the oral examination (teleconference or videoconference may be considered as an alternative);
- issue a formal invitation to be the external examiner and determine the date of the oral defence.

Once the external examiner is confirmed, the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies will:

- send a copy of the dissertation to the external examiner, ensuring it is received at least five weeks prior to the defence date;
- arrange for an impartial chair for the defence (the chair must be a member of the graduate faculty of WLU, be from outside the academic unit/program of the candidate, and not have taught the candidate);
- send a notice of the date, time, and place of the defence to the Chair of the defence, the graduate coordinator/program director, the candidate, and all members of the DEC, and announce the defence to the University community (Note: if more than one person cannot attend the oral defence, either in person or via teleconference or videoconference, the defence may be rescheduled);
- ensure that travel arrangements for the external examiner are taken care of;

- send a copy of the dissertation to the Chair of the Defence one week prior to the defence date, along with the external examiner's preliminary report and guidelines for the dissertation defence;
- forward a copy of the external examiner's preliminary report to the graduate coordinator/program director and all members of the DAC, one week prior to the defence (if it is determined that the defence will proceed, the DA should share with the candidate any significant criticisms contained in the report; however, the candidate may only see the report after the defence, with the agreement of the external examiner)
(Note: failure to receive the external examiner's report ten days prior to the proposed examination may result in the postponement of the oral examination.)

The Dissertation Defence

The defence is normally of two to three hours duration and is conducted by an impartial chairperson (the Dean of Graduate Studies, or delegate).

Procedures for When a DEC Member Can Not Attend the Dissertation Defence

It is expected that all members of the DEC will attend the dissertation defence, either in person or via teleconference or videoconference. In the unusual event that one member of the DEC knows in advance that he or she cannot attend the defence, he or she must submit a written report, with questions and a preliminary vote (per the decision categories), to the Dean of Graduate Studies at least one week before the defence. The Dean of Graduate Studies will ask the Chair or a member of the DAC to read the questions of the absent member during the rounds of questioning in the defence and to share the preliminary vote of the absent member during the "in camera" committee deliberations. Only if the absent member is the External Examiner will the preliminary vote count toward the decision. If two or more members of the DEC inform the Dean of Graduate Studies in advance that they cannot attend the oral defence, it may be rescheduled.

In the case of an unexpected absence of the Chair or a DEC member, the person who is going to be delayed or who cannot attend must, if possible, telephone the Office of Graduate Studies (ext. 3127) as soon as possible. If any member of the DEC will be delayed not more than one hour, the Office of Graduate Studies will inform the Chair, the candidate, and the other DEC members that the defense will be delayed for this period of time. If a DEC member is unable to attend, questions to be addressed to the candidate are to be dictated over the telephone, along with a confidential vote (per the decision categories).

If the Chair or a DEC member do not appear for the defence and do not contact the Office of Graduate Studies within one-half hour, or when the Office of Graduate Studies has been notified of the Chair's or DEC member's unexpected inability to attend, the following procedures are to be implemented:

- A representative of the Office of Graduate Studies will inform the candidate, the Chair of the defense, and the DEC of the unexpected absence;
- If the DA is unable to attend, another member of the DAC will be appointed as Acting Advisor by the Chair, after an in-camera discussion with members of the DEC;
- If the Chair is unable to attend, the Office of Graduate Studies will arrange for a replacement within one (1) hour;
- If the External Examiner is unable to attend, the questions and vote of the External Examiner will be delivered to the Chair, who will represent the External Examiner, ask the questions dictated

or provided in the report by the External Examiner, and share the External Examiner's preliminary vote during the in-camera deliberations (and this vote will count in the determination of a decision);

· If a member of the DAC is absent, but is able to dictate questions to be addressed to the candidate, the Chair will be provided with and ask the member's questions. The Chair will share the absentee member's preliminary vote during the in-camera deliberations, but this vote will not count in the determination of a decision.

The examination is to be postponed and re-scheduled as soon as possible *only* if the candidate or *two* or more members of the DEC do not appear.

Guidelines for Conducting the Dissertation Defence

Any member of the university community is entitled to attend the defence, but the Chair has the authority to exclude persons whose conduct disturbs the defence procedures. Non-members of the university community may attend but must receive the permission of the candidate, the DA, and the Chair of the defence.

1. Once all members of the DEC are present, the Chair will ask the candidate and all other attendees to leave the room. The Chair will then conduct an "in camera" meeting to:
 - a) remind the members that the candidate is being examined on both the written dissertation and the oral defence;
 - b) remind the members of the time frame for the defence (normally 2-3 hours duration);
 - c) decide in which order members will ask questions--the External Examiner is always the first to question the candidate, the committee member from outside the academic unit of the candidate is usually the second to question, and the DA is usually the last;
 - d) decide how many rounds of questions (normally, 2-3) will be used before other attendees can ask questions, and decide a rough limit on the number of questions or the time allotted to each member for each round of questions;
 - e) agree on any other procedures that might be required for the defence.The Chair will then invite the candidate and other attendees back into the room and inform them of the procedures that have been decided upon.
2. The Chair will ask the Candidate to present an oral summary of the dissertation (15-20 minutes) to begin the defence.
3. The Chair will ask the External Examiner to commence the rounds of questioning (in the absence of the External Examiner, the Chair will ask his or her questions).
4. When the members of the DEC have no further questions, the Chair will offer other attendees an opportunity to direct questions to the candidate.
5. Upon the conclusion of all questions, the Chair will ask the candidate and others to leave the room. The Dean of Graduate Studies, the Dean of the candidate's Faculty, the departmental chair, and the graduate coordinator/program director are permitted to stay and observe the "in camera" deliberations of the DEC; however, they may not participate in the discussion except by invitation and they have no vote.

6. The Chair will conduct an “in camera” meeting of the DEC to:
 - a) summarize the decision categories (see below);
 - b) review the voting procedures (see below);
 - c) ask all members, beginning with the external examiner, to summarize their evaluation of the written and oral presentation, indicate their vote, and identify any major and/or minor modifications they would like the candidate to complete before the final draft is submitted;
 - d) assist the Committee to reach consensus both on a final category, the changes that must be completed, who will review the changes, and the date by which the changes should be completed (this information must be recorded on the Record of Dissertation Defence form);
 - e) if the candidate meets criteria for a Medal for Academic Excellence (see criteria, below), discuss whether the candidate is to be nominated (if nominated, the reasons for the recommendation must be recorded on the Record of Dissertation Defence form);
 - f) have members of the DEC sign the Record of Dissertation Defence form.

7. The Chair will then invite the candidate back into the room and:
 - a) inform the candidate of the committee’s decision,
 - b) offer the DEC members the opportunity to provide feedback to the candidate on both the written dissertation and the oral defence,
 - c) review the revisions that are to be made to the dissertation and finalize the time frame for doing so,
 - d) have the candidate fill out and/or sign the necessary forms (i.e., Theses Non-Exclusive License form, ProQuest Subject Code Form).

Note: The defence is public and the Chair has the responsibility to ensure that high standards of conduct are exercised by those in attendance. Thus, the Chair has the right to exclude persons whose conduct disturbs the defence or to stop and reschedule the defence, if necessary.

Voting Procedures

If all but one member of the DEC agree on a decision category (see below), the decision shall be that of the majority. Where two dissenting votes are cast, discussion must continue to arrive at a decision on which there is consensus (i.e., no more than one dissenting vote). When consensus is reached, all members of the DEC should sign the Record of Dissertation Defence form. As discussed above, if a DEC member is absent but has provided a preliminary vote, this vote will be shared with the committee during the in-camera deliberations, but the vote will count in the determination of a decision only if it is that of the External Examiner.

Decision Categories for the Dissertation Defence

The following are the decision categories that are available to the DEC:

1. **Accepted:** The dissertation is accepted but may require minor typographical and/or minor editorial corrections to be made to the satisfaction of the DA.

2. **Accepted with minor modifications:** The dissertation requires minor changes in substance or major editorial changes, which are to be made to the satisfaction of members of the examining committee designated by the committee. The examining committee’s report must include a brief outline of the nature of the changes required and must indicate the time by which the

changes should be completed. Normally, such changes should be completed within four weeks of the date of the examination.

3. **Accepted with major modifications:** The dissertation requires more substantive changes, but will be acceptable when these changes are made to the satisfaction of those members of the examining committee designated by the committee. The examining committee's report must include a brief outline of the nature of the changes required, and the date by which the changes are to be completed.
4. **Decision deferred:** The dissertation requires modifications of a substantial nature, the need for which makes the acceptability of the thesis questionable. The examining committee's report must contain a brief outline of the modifications expected and should indicate the time by which the changes are to be completed. The revised dissertation must be resubmitted for re-examination. Normally, the re-examination will follow the same procedures as for the initial submission. Normally, the same examining committee will serve. A decision to defer is open only once for each candidate.
5. **Rejected:** The dissertation and/or defense are not acceptable. The committee must report the reasons for rejection. A candidate whose doctoral dissertation has been rejected is required to withdraw from the PhD program.

Note: If the examining committee is not prepared to reach a decision at the time of the dissertation defense, it is the responsibility of the Chair to determine what additional information is required by the committee to reach a decision, to arrange to obtain this information for the committee, and to call another meeting of the committee as soon as the required information is available. It is also the responsibility of the Chair to inform the candidate about the delay.

Criteria for Nomination for a Medal for Academic Excellence

The criteria for nominating a candidate for a Medal for Academic Excellence are:

- normally, a minimum overall grade point average of 10.5 in course work;
- normally, a minimum of A- in any course;
- the majority of the DEC members, which must include the External Examiner, consider the dissertation to be outstanding.

Guidelines for Determining "Arm's Length" of External Examiners

An external examiner must be at "arm's length" from the candidate and the DA. Arm's length means not being a close friend, a regular or current collaborator, a former supervisor, or a former colleague. It also means not being in a conflict-of-interest position with regard to the candidate or DA and not having a vested interest in the outcome of the oral defence.