

Candidacy Examination Policy

A “Candidacy” Exam aims to assess whether the student possesses the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to successfully complete the PhD program. **The overall purpose of the candidacy exam is to evaluate the student’s knowledge base and readiness to formulate and defend - in writing and orally - the rationale, underlying theoretical concepts/constructs, methods, and implications of their dissertation work presented in the form of a thesis proposal.** Additional goals of the exam are to (a) provide the student with constructive feedback on the proposed research, (b) assess the student's progress on route to completion of the PhD, and (c) determine if the student should be allowed to proceed with the PhD.

The exam is a culmination of student’s preparation for achieving PhD candidacy. Prior to taking the exam, the student must achieve the following milestones:

1. Complete all required coursework with minimum grade of B.
2. Complete all required supervisory committee meetings (one every 6 months), demonstrating satisfactory progress.

Any deviation from these milestones must be discussed and approved by the Associate Director in order for the student to advance toward the exam.

EXAM COMPONENTS:

The exam will comprise of two parts: a written proposal followed by an oral defense of the proposal. The written proposal needs to be approved by the examination committee before the student will be allowed to proceed to the oral defense.

A. Written Proposal

The content and format of the written proposal will be similar to that of a Tri-Council grant application as determined by the nature of the research project. This means that the proposal normally should include at minimum the content components as described in the [Thesis Proposal Guidelines](#).

Written proposals are normally approximately 12-15 pages single-spaced, excluding list of references and relevant attachments (e.g. data forms, consent forms etc.). Specific formatting requirements are indicated in the Thesis Proposal Guidelines document.

The proposal should be submitted to all members of the examination committee (see below), including the Chair, for their review, 4 weeks prior to the first examination meeting. A copy should also be submitted to RSI (rsi.admin@utoronto.ca) at the same time.

The Chair of the examination committee will convene the initial meeting of the committee (without the student) to:

- Assess the written proposal and decide whether the student will be allowed to proceed to the oral examination (see below)

If the proposal is accepted, decide on sample questions (between 3 to 6) to be provided to the student as preparation for the oral examination.

- If the written proposal is not accepted, the committee will provide detailed written feedback on the proposal document and approve a new timeline for the examination. The student will not be able to proceed to the oral examination until the written document is approved.
- At the initial meeting, the Chair will complete Part 1 of the [Candidacy/Transfer Examination Completion Form](#)
- The Chair is responsible for submitting the completed form (Part 1) to rsi.admin@utoronto.ca and sharing with the student following the meeting

B. Oral Proposal Defense

The oral examination meeting will take approximately 2 hours. It will contain a short (8-10 min) presentation by the student providing a high-level overview of the proposal. This is followed by questions from the members of the examination committee. While the questions might cover material that arises from the written submission, they can also cover matters not specifically addressed in that submission. For example, examiners may address matters related to the broad theoretical context of the student's research program and dig deeper into the background knowledge required to complete the proposed research.

The student is allowed to prepare visual materials (e.g., additional slides) for the examination that could assist in responding to questions.

Following the completion of the oral examination, the student will be asked to leave the meeting and the committee will vote on the outcome of the oral examination. At the meeting, the Chair will complete Part 2 of the [Candidacy/Transfer Examination Completion Form](#).

If the oral examination is deemed successful, the student will be admitted to candidacy status in the PhD program according to the policies of the School of Graduate Studies.

If the oral exam is deemed unsuccessful, the specific details to be addressed will be identified and summarized for the student in a report prepared by the exam committee Chair. Following the oral examination meeting, the supervisor will meet with the student and discuss the specific list of revisions or topics to be re-examined that have been identified by the examination committee and determine a time for further preparation and re-examination. The examination committee will be reconvened no later than 3 months after the initial examination to carry out the re-examination. Normally the examination committee will maintain the same membership. Any changes to the examination committee need to be approved by RSI.

TIMELINE AND STEPS TO EXAM COMPLETION:

All students must successfully complete both the written and oral components of the exam within **18 months** of registration in order to continue in the PhD program.

Students who do not successfully defend the proposal after the first attempt may be allowed to have one additional opportunity to successfully present and defend their research proposal, and this must be accomplished before the end of Year 3 of the program.

In rare cases, a 12-month extension can be granted with written permission from the RSI Graduate Coordinator. A written rationale for the delay must be included in the student file and documented in the supervisory committee form.

RSI will recommend to SGS that the student's registration in the PhD program be terminated should the student fail to successfully complete the exam by the end of Year 3, or the end of the approved extension period (including a second attempt, if required). In the event that the student is unsuccessful and wishes to appeal the decision, the student should follow RSI and SGS Guidelines for [academic appeals](#).

Any deviations from the timeline must be discussed and approved by the RSI Associate Director and documented in the student file.

Approximately 3 months before the oral exam:

- A supervisory committee must meet and approve the student progress through the program (see milestones above) and recommend proceeding to examination towards PhD candidacy.
- A comprehensive examination committee must be struck and approved.

Approximately 2 months before the oral exam:

- The written proposal should be completed and submitted to the examination committee.

Approximately 1 month before the oral exam:

- Examination committee meets and assesses the written proposal.
- Upon approval of the examination committee, the student may proceed to the oral examination. The student will be provided with sample questions for the oral examination

QUALIFYING EXAM COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND ROLES:

The exam will be conducted by an examination committee (EC) struck specifically for each student. In addition to the Chair, the examination committee will have a minimum of 3 voting members.

1. **Chair:** is a delegate member of RSI/ SGS who is expected to run the examination proceedings. The Chair does not vote and is not required to review the written proposal or participate in the questioning during the oral examination.
2. **Members of the Supervisory Committee:** will participate in the examination. The members of supervisory committee (minimum 2), with the exception of the supervisor, vote on the outcome. During the examination, the supervisor(s) can participate in the questioning and deliberations of the written proposal and the student's oral defense but does not vote on the outcome.
3. **External Examiner:** the external examiner is selected in consensus with the student and supervisory committee, and approved by the RSI Associate Director. The Examiner must be a member of the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) who is an expert in the research area proposed, has not been involved with the thesis, and is at arms-length to the student's supervisor.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE INVOLVEMENT:

The supervisor as well as other members of the supervisory committee are naturally involved with shaping of the thesis research of every student. Prior to the examination, 2 or more committee meetings are expected to take place, where the proposal may be discussed. Commenting and editing on the drafts of the written proposal is at the discretion of the supervisor and the supervisory committee.

However, preparation by the student for the oral component of the exam, including presentation and questioning, should occur independently without help from the supervisor or supervisory committee members.

EVALUATION:

The candidacy examination is evaluated on a Pass/Fail basis.

Written Submission

PASS: No revisions to the written proposal are required and the student is allowed to proceed to the oral examination.

FAIL: The student is not allowed to proceed to the oral examination of the proposal. Revisions are required and the written proposal needs to be resubmitted. The examining committee will notify the student in writing of the required changes. The examination committee will reconvene to review changes and determine its acceptability. If acceptable, the student will proceed to the oral examination.

Oral Examination

PASS: The student is granted Candidacy Status according to the policies of the School of Graduate Studies.

FAIL: A second oral examination is required, to be held within 3 months of the initial examination. If the failure in the oral examination resulted primarily from weakness in a specific area, the examination committee may decide that the second examination should cover only that area of weakness. The Chair of the examining committee will notify the student in writing of the scope of the next examination.

In the event that the student is unsuccessful on the 2nd examination (either the written or oral component), the Chair of the examination committee will inform the RSI Associate Director that the committee does not recommend that the student be granted candidacy status in the doctoral program. In that case, the student normally will not be allowed to continue their registration in the PhD program.

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