



OVERVIEW:

A “Candidacy” Exam aims to test if the students possess 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) ensure the student's progress on route to completion of the PhD, and (c) determine if the student should proceed with the PhD or complete/ remain in the MSc program.

The exam is a culmination of student’s preparation for achieving PhD candidacy. Prior to 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 Graduate Coordinator in order for the student to advance towards the exam.

EXAM COMPONENTS:

The exam will comprise of two parts: a written proposal and an oral exam/proposal defense.

Written Submission: The format of the proposal will be similar to that of a modified, according to the nature of research, Tri-Council grant application. Thesis 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 below.

The proposal should be submitted to all members of the examination committee, including Chair, and to RSI (rsi.admin@utoronto.ca) 4 weeks prior to the first examination meeting. Members of the examination committee (but not Chair) will review the written document and draft sample questions to be discussed at the initial meeting. The examination committee and chair will convene for the initial meeting – without the student present – to:

- Summarize the assessment of the written document, and
- Decide on sample questions (between 3 to 6) to be provided to the student in their preparation for the oral examination

If the written component is not successful, 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 meeting, the Chair will complete Part 1 of the [Candidacy/Transfer Examination Completion Form](#).

Oral Examination: The oral examination meeting will take 2 hours. It will contain a short (8-10 min) presentation focused on the high-level overview of the proposal, followed by Q&A. While the questions might

cover material that arise 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 proposed research.) The students are allowed to prepare visual materials (e.g., additional slides) for the examination that could assist in their response to questions outside the direct relation to the research proposal.

Following the completion of the oral examination, the committee will vote on the oral examination results. At the meeting, the Chair will complete Part 2 of the [Candidacy/Transfer Examination Completion Form](#).

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 had been identified by the examination committee to the student and determine a time for further preparation and re-examination. The same committee will be reconvened no later than 3 months later to carry out the re-examination.

TIMELINE AND STEPS TO EXAM COMPLETION:

All students **MUST** successfully complete both the written and oral components of the exam within **18 months** (and no later than 24 months) of registration in order to continue in the PhD program. In rare cases, a 12-month extension can be granted with written permission from the RSI Graduate Coordinator. A written explanation for the delay must be included in the student file and documents in the supervisory committee form.

Students who do not successfully defend the proposal after the first attempt may 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.

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 (including a second attempt, if required). In the event that the student is unsuccessful and wishes to appeal the decision, the student should follow SGS Guidelines for [academic appeals](#).

Any deviations from the proved timeline must be discussed and approved by the RSI Graduate Coordinator 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 to proceed to examination towards PhD candidacy.
- A comprehensive examination committee must be struck and approved.

Approximately 2 months before the oral exam:

- Written component of the comprehensive examination should be completed and submitted to the examination committee.

Approximately 1 month before the oral exam:

- Examination committee provides summary assessment of the written document and sample questions for the oral examination.
- Upon approval of the examination committee, the student may continue on to the oral examination.

QUALIFYING EXAM COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND ROLES:

The exam will be conducted by an examination committee (EC) struck specifically for each student.

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 Q&A during the oral examination.
2. **Members of the Supervisory Committee:** will participate in the exam. During the examination, *the supervisor(s) will refrain from commenting on the quality of the document as well as the process and will not vote on the results of the examination.* The remaining members of the committee (minimum of two) will vote.
3. **External Examiner:** This member of the examination committee is selected in consensus with the student and supervisory committee, involving the RSI Graduate Coordinator, if questions arise. The Examiner must be a member of the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) who is an expert in the research area proposed but has not been involved with the thesis and is at arms-length to the research of 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 proposal is at the discretion of the supervisor and the supervisory committee.

Preparation of the student for the oral component of the exam should occur without help of the supervisor or committee members.

EVALUATION:

Written Submission

PASS (no additional action)

FAIL (major revisions required – resubmission of document to examination committee prior to the oral examination. 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 (no additional action)

FAIL (2nd oral examination 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 second examination may be designated to 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 examination committee will inform the RSI Director (rsi.director@utoronto.ca) indicating that they do not recommend the student's continuing candidacy in the doctoral program. The Director will take further actions with the SGS following these [guidelines](#).