Chairing a Graduate Examination in Pathobiology

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General

• The chair’s role is to ensure the exam is conducted fairly and according to the norms of the department and the University. The chair is not an examiner and does not vote.

• Unusual situations or special requests from the student should be discussed with the Graduate Coordinator and/or Department Chair.

• Bring the forms that require signatures; the Graduate Program Assistant (Jessie Beer) will provide these in advance. This package should also have a copy of the relevant pages from the Graduate Calendar.

• Review the Graduate Calendar, with respect to the criteria for success in a PhD, DVSc and MSc exam.

Qualifying examinations

• Contact the student soon after you have agreed to be exam chair, to ensure that the examiners have given the student guidance about the topics and scope of the exam. Each examiner must provide written advice that clarifies the topic areas and scope of their area of the examination. This advice must be provided to the student in writing, such as by email, no later than 2 months before the examination. For example, this may be a list of topic areas. A reading list is not required but is another way to define the scope of the examination.

• Chair the short pre-exam meeting
  o Examiners discuss proposed questions from each examiner, to ensure that the questions accurately reflect the general and specific topic areas, are appropriate for the time available for the written exam (about 1.5 hours per examiner), and do not overlap excessively.
  o Students normally answer one of two questions from each examiner, but this approach is not mandated.
  o During the pre-exam meeting, please remind examiners of suggested oral exam etiquette, as appended at the end of this document.

• Oral examination
  o Students may bring an unmarked paper copy of their written exam answers, but other notes are not permitted.
  o Typically, there is one round of questions with 15 or 20 minutes per examiner, followed by a shorter second round. Questions are not limited to those in the written part of the examination, but may cover any topic within the defined scope of the examination.
  o Students may become fatigued toward the end of the second round, so aim to limit the examination to two hours.

• Deliberation:
  o Examiners only. In situations when the advisor is not a member of the examination committee, the advisor may be permitted to observe.
  o Consider the candidate’s performance in the oral exam, the written exam, and the letter from the advisory committee that evaluates the quality of the student's research performance to date and of
the student's potential as a researcher. The weighting of these elements is determined by the examination committee, and there is no requirement to provide grades for the exam components.

- The candidate is deemed to have passed if no more than one of the examiners votes negatively. An abstention is regarded as a negative vote.
- Clarify whether it is the advisor or the exam chair who will provide detailed feedback to the student after the exam.

**Final examinations**

- Please see below for a description of the duties of the chair and the examiners.
- The candidate normally brings a paper or electronic copy of the thesis. The student is permitted to bring notes to the examination and briefly consult these notes during the examination.
- Determine in advance if the advisor or the exam chair will introduce the candidate
- The Graduate Program Assistant (Jessie Beer) will normally contact the external examiner by Skype. However, please check the room >10 minutes before the exam, to ensure everything is ok.
- Candidate’s presentation:
  - Start time is as advertised, without the 10-minute academic grace period. Please start on time and do not wait for more audience members to arrive.
  - Introduction: 5 minutes
    - Introduce and thank the examining committee and give an overview of the exam structure.
    - State where the External Examiner is from, and thank on behalf of the university.
    - Introduce the candidate with a brief background, or have the advisor introduce the candidate.
  - Presentation of research findings: MSc—25-30 minutes, PhD/DVSc 30-40 minutes.
  - After presentation, encourage up to 10 minutes for audience questions. Please ensure the presentation portion of the examination ends on time.
  - Invite members of the university community to the defence.
- Final examination, defence (no more than 2 hr 40 min for PhD, 1 hr 40 min for MSc):
  - The defence is open to all members of the University community, unless the candidate has arranged in advance for a closed exam.
  - Two rounds of questions. The order of examiners is normally: external examiner, grad faculty who is NOT on the advisory committee, advisory committee member (PhD exams only), advisor.
  - Time allowed for PhD defence. The defence portion of the PhD exam must not exceed 2 hours and 40 minutes. For the first round, the external examiner is given up to 25 minutes and other examiners are each given 20 minutes. Have a short break, then a second round of up to 10 minutes per examiner. Candidate becomes fatigued toward the end of the second round, so aim to limit the defence to two hours, if this is in the best interests of the candidate.
  - Time allowed for MSc defence. The defence portion of the MSc exam must not exceed 1 hour and 40 minutes. For the first round, up to 15 minutes per examiner. Have a short break, then a second round of up to 10 minutes per examiner.
  - Deliberation (normally less than 35 minutes):
    - Examiners only. In situations when the advisor is not a member of the examination committee, the advisor may be permitted to observe.
    - The members of the Examination Committee, including the External Examiner, report individually on the final examination and the thesis.
    - The candidate is deemed to have passed if no more than one of the examiners votes negatively. An abstention is regarded as a negative vote.
    - If there are minor changes in the written thesis, it is usual to give the required and requested changes to the candidate and advisor, for revision of the thesis. If there are significant changes
or disagreement between the advisor and another examiner, it can be required that you as Chair approve the changes before the thesis can be submitted. The usual procedure is to sign all forms at the time of the defence, but advise the Graduate Program Assistant (Jessie Beer) of the required approvals prior to submission of the thesis; alternatively a signature can be withheld and then added later once the thesis is approved by the exam chair.

**Role of the Chair and Examiners (from OGPS)**

- **Chair**
  - The chair of the examination committee is the official representative of the Assistant Vice-President (Graduate Studies). The chair serves to administer the examination according to the approved format of the program. The chair does not serve as an additional examiner.
  - It is the responsibility of the Chair to ensure that the oral examination is conducted in a professional manner.
  - The Chair must ensure that proper forms from the Office of Graduate Studies are available and duly completed and signed by the Examination Committee.
  - The Chair should ensure that adequate time is allotted to the candidate for presentation of research findings, and to the examiners for questions. It is also the responsibility of the Chair to ensure that examiners should adhere to the allocated time. The timing of the exam is discussed above.
  - In unforeseen circumstances where a Committee member is unable to attend the examination (e.g., due to sickness) either in person or by video/teleconference, the Chair will attempt to receive questions to ask on behalf of the absent member, to be answered by the student to the satisfaction of the examiners present. If this absent member is the External Examiner of a PhD thesis examination, and the written thesis Appraisal and/or questions to ask have not been received, the examination should be postponed.
  - If during the examination the behaviour of either the candidate or the examiner(s) is unprofessional, the Chair should provide a warning. If the unprofessional behaviour continues, the Chair should stop the examination and report to the Graduate Coordinator.
  - The Chair should ensure recommendations for revision of the thesis are completed, and should withhold their endorsement of the examination (through signing the Recommendation Form) until such time.

- **Examiners**
  - The examiners have the responsibility to review the thesis as outlined in the University Guidelines for thesis evaluation.
  - If an examiner feels that there is a major problem with the thesis, the examiner should inform the candidate in writing with a confidential copy only to the advisor and Graduate Coordinator. If the candidate and the examiner cannot resolve the problem before the oral examination, the Graduate Coordinator will act as facilitator. If there is no agreement, the examination can go forward at the student’s request, or postponed on the advice of the Graduate Coordinator.
Unforeseen circumstances

- Qualifying examinations: In unforeseen circumstances where a committee member is unable to attend, the Chair will attempt to receive questions to ask on behalf of the absent member, to be answered by the student to the satisfaction of the examiners.
- PhD final examinations: The Chair serves to administer and ensure the proper conduct of the examination. The Chair is expected to exercise full control over the proceedings and does not participate directly in questioning the candidate during the examination. In unforeseen circumstances where an examiner is unable to attend due to sudden illness, accident, etc., the Chair will attempt to receive questions to ask on behalf of the absent member, to be answered by the student to the satisfaction of the examiners.

Suggested points of oral exam etiquette

- Make questions concise and clear. Avoid saying the same thing multiple times using different words and a variety of embedded examples, unless the student doesn’t initially understand the question. It makes the oral question too difficult to follow. Simple direct questions are best.
- Allow students time to think of their answer (eg 15 seconds) before giving a prompt. Lack of an immediate response can mean that students are synthesizing a response, and new information at this time will interrupt this thinking. Students are welcome to make notes, or use the blackboard to present their ideas.
- Avoid constant interruptions; these derail the student’s ability to develop an answer. Allow a student’s oral response to gradually become focused on the question asked, instead of quickly interrupting if the initial part of the response is not as anticipated.
- Avoid tangential questions. When on a particular line of questioning, asking a tangential question or a series of tangential question can be confusing for the student. Ask an important question, and follow that single line of questioning.

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