

# Guidelines for Graduate Examinations in Pathobiology

Revision 29-Mar-2020

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## **Qualifying examinations**

- The exam chair is encouraged to contact the student soon after agreeing to be 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 or it can take the form of a reading list.
- The exam chair leads the short pre-exam meeting
  - 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.
  - Students normally answer one of two questions from each examiner, but this approach is not mandated.
  - During the pre-exam meeting, please remind examiners of suggested oral exam etiquette, as [appended at the end of this document](#).
- Written examination
  - If the exam is written remotely, it will be done using Courselink (the course is OVC QE 2020) and Respondus Lockdown. This will be set up by the GPA and verified by the exam chair.
- Oral examination
  - For examinations conducted as a webconference:
    - The GPA provides the exam chair with telephone numbers of the student and each examiner in case of technology failure.
    - The student may have one person in the room for moral and technical support, but this person cannot help the student to respond to questions from the examiners in any way.
    - The GPA initiates the webconference, and then assigns the exam chair and the student as webconference co-hosts at the start of the exam prior to leaving the meeting.
    - The examination should not be recorded.
    - The examination will normally be open to non-examiners (such as other graduate students). Non-examiners must mute their microphone and webcam and not use the messaging/chat function (i.e. visitors should not be seen or heard, apart from the indicator of them being present).
    - If students wish to draw a diagram as part of their oral answer, this can be done on paper

(and then displayed to the webcam) or using a whiteboard tool in the videoconference. See instructions in "Special procedures" below.

- For the deliberation, the student and all non-examiners must leave the call. The student will be contacted to rejoin the webconference when the deliberation is complete.
- Students may bring an unmarked paper copy of their written exam answers, and may make short notes during the exam for organizing their response. However, other notes are not permitted (for example, no paper files, electronic files, or web access). For webconference exams, the chair may ask the student to show the environment of the room, and the front and back of paper materials, via the webcam to confirm that unpermitted materials are not present.
- 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.
- Students may become fatigued toward the end of the second round, so the chair should aim to limit the examination to two hours.
- Deliberation:
  - Examiners only (see above, re: webconference exams). In situations when the advisor is not a member of the examination committee, the advisor may be permitted to observe.
  - The committee considers the candidate's performance in the oral exam and the written exam as well as 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; 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.
  - Either the advisor or the exam chair may 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](#).
- For examinations conducted as a webconference:
  - The GPA provides the exam chair with telephone numbers of the candidate and each examiner in case of technology failure.
  - The candidate may have one person in the room for moral and technical support, but this person cannot help the student to respond to questions from the examiners in any way.
  - The GPA initiates the webconference, and then assigns the exam chair and the candidate as webconference co-hosts at the start of the presentation prior to leaving the meeting.
  - The examination should not be recorded unless requested by the candidate.
  - The presentation and defence will normally be open to non-examiners (such as other graduate students). Non-examiners must mute their microphone and webcam and not use the messaging/chat function (i.e. visitors should not be seen or heard, apart from the indicator of them being present).
  - For the short question period following the candidate's presentation, the audience may ask questions via the messaging/chat function, and either the exam chair or the candidate should briefly summarize the question before the candidate provides a response.
  - In the defence, if the candidate wishes to draw a diagram as part of their oral answer, this can be done on paper (and then displayed to the webcam) or using a whiteboard tool in the videoconference. See instructions in "Special procedures" below.
  - For the deliberation, the student and all non-examiners must leave the call. The student will be

contacted to rejoin the webconference when the deliberation is complete.

- The candidate normally brings a paper or electronic copy of the thesis. The candidate is permitted to bring other notes to the examination and briefly consult these notes during the examination, and may make short notes during the exam for organizing their response.
- Either the advisor or the exam chair may introduce the candidate at the beginning of the presentation.
- The Graduate Program Assistant (Jessie Beer) will normally initiate webconference-based exams, or for in-person exams will contact the external examiner by webconference. However, the exam chair should arrive at the webconference or the room 10 minutes before the exam.
- 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 by the chair of the examination: 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 them 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.

### **Tasks for the exam chair**

- Please see below for a description of the “Role of the chair and the examiners”.
- Unusual situations or special requests from the student should be discussed with the Graduate Coordinator and/or Department Chair.
- The Chair serves to administer and ensure the proper conduct of the examination. The Chair is expected to exercise full control over the proceedings.
- For qualifying exams:
  - The exam chair is encouraged to contact the student soon after agreeing to be chair, to ensure that the examiners have given the student guidance about the topics and scope of the exam, and the student understands how the examination is conducted.
  - Lead the short pre-exam meeting, finalize the written exam materials, and send the document to the GPA. Verify the written exam in Courselink.
- For final exams/defences:
  - Determine if the advisor or the exam chair will introduce the candidate.
  - Introduce and thank the examining committee and give an overview of the exam structure. State where the External Examiner is from, and thank them on behalf of the university. Introduce the candidate with a brief background, or have the advisor introduce the candidate.
  - Act as moderator for questions from the audience after the presentation.
  - The Chair does not participate directly in questioning the candidate during the examination.
- For all exams:
  - Review the [Graduate Calendar](#), with respect to the criteria for success in a PhD, DVSc, MSc or GDipl exam.
  - Bring the forms that require signatures (for face-to-face exams); the Graduate Program Assistant (Jessie Beer) will provide these in advance.
  - 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.
  - Direct the steps of the examination and ensure the exam proceeds in a timely manner; encourage examiners to stay on schedule. Direct the audience to follow the norms of the exam.
  - The GPA should provide the exam chair with telephone numbers of the student and each examiner in case of technical failure.
  - Lead the deliberation. In cases where the examination was not successful, provide a written summary of the main points of the deliberation to the Graduate Program Coordinator, and support the advisor and GPC in providing advice to the student.
  - Communicate the exam outcome to the student. Details are often communicated by the advisor after the exam.

### **Role of the Chair and Examiners**

- 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.

- See “Unforeseen circumstances and technology failure”, below.
- 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 and technology failures**

- **Webconference technology failure.** At the exam chair's discretion, an exam in progress can be stopped and rescheduled if technical difficulties prevent the student, chair or one examiner from participating. If the student, chair or more than one examiner becomes unavailable and the issue cannot be resolved quickly, the exam must be terminated and rescheduled. Before this occurs, every attempt should be made to proceed with the exam. This may include:
  - Mute video feeds to reduce bandwidth
  - The examiner can provide questions by the chat/message function if their audio is not clear, and the student repeats the question to ensure it is understood
  - End the videoconference and restart it
  - One or more participants join the meeting by telephone instead of internet.
- **Absence of an examiner.** In unforeseen circumstances where a Committee member is unable to attend the qualifying examination or final 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 questions to be asked during the defence have not been received, the examination should be postponed.
- **Unprofessional behaviour.** If during the examination the behaviour of either the candidate or an examiner is unprofessional, the Chair should provide a warning. If the unprofessional behaviour continues, the Chair should stop the examination and report the situation to the Graduate Coordinator.

### **Special procedures**

- Student use of a whiteboard in Zoom. If the student is given access to Zoom as a co-host, they should be able to freely use the Whiteboard sharing feature. Otherwise, do the following:
  - Exam chair as host selects 'Share' and then 'Whiteboard'
  - Student as a participant in the meeting must click on 'View Options' and then when the drop down menu appears, they would select 'Request Remote Control.'
  - Exam chair as meeting host grants student remote control and then the student can access the whiteboard. As soon as the exam chair clicks on their mouse once again, the student loses the remote access and the host can end the whiteboard session.

### **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 (e.g., 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 questions can be confusing for the student. Ask an important question, and follow that single line of questioning.