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PhD Comprehensive Examination Guidelines

March 2011

Rationale

The Faculty of Graduate Studies states that the Comprehensive Examination is intended to test the student's understanding of the chosen field of study as a whole, demonstrating adequate breadth and depth of knowledge.

The PhD Comprehensive Examination is jointly administered by the MD/PhD Program and the hosting department. The MD/PhD Program will take whole responsibility of the student's Comprehensive Examination. Alternatively, the hosting department may wish to take over the primary responsibility for organizing the Comprehensive Examination. If the hosting department has a different examination format, the MD/PhD examination format will supersede the hosting department format. The MD/PhD Program will ensure that all the requirements and timelines of the Comprehensive Examination are met.

Timing

Towards the end of the first year of studies in the MD/PhD Program, and not later than 15 August, the student will provide to the Graduate Advisor of the hosting department and the MD/PhD Program Director a Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) research grant proposal summary (~ one page) of his/her planned research which has been approved by the Thesis Research Supervisory Committee. It is expected that the student has had at least one Thesis Research Supervisory Committee meeting before the submission of this research proposal summary.

Following completion of all required course work, students in the MD/PhD Program will be required to pass an oral Comprehensive Examination during Year 2 or 3 (at the latest) of the 7-year MD/PhD Program. By university regulations, students are normally expected to complete their comprehensive examination within 24 months from the date of initial registration, but no later than within 36 months. A student who is not admitted to candidacy within a period of three years from the date of initial registration will be required to withdraw from the Program. Extension of this period may be permitted by the Dean of Graduate Studies in exceptional circumstances.

The basic requirements for a student to be admitted into candidacy are:

- all required graduate coursework has been successfully completed
- the student has passed the Comprehensive Examination
- the Thesis Research Supervisory Committee has certified that the thesis proposal has been approved.

Examination Format and Research Proposal

The Comprehensive Examination format consists of two parts:

- the student is required to write a CIHR style research grant proposal in an area of their research
- an oral examination.

A major part of the oral examination is based on the CIHR style research grant proposal submitted by the student prior to the Comprehensive Examination.

At least 6 months prior to sitting the Comprehensive Examination, the student must meet with his/her Thesis Research Supervisory Committee and present the summary page of their PhD thesis proposal, including all the aims of the project, for final approval that the proposed project meets the standard for a PhD thesis. At this meeting, the aims must also be presented to the Thesis Research Supervisory Committee in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, reviewing progress so far and experiments to be done. Students should have already received preliminary approval of the thesis project during the first supervisory committee meeting, at the end of the first year of the MD/PhD Program (see above – “Timing”).

At least 6 weeks prior to the date of the Comprehensive Examination, a draft of the CIHR-style proposal that will serve as the written component of the examination must be submitted to the MD/PhD Program Director. The Director will provide feedback as to whether the draft proposal meets requirements for basic elements of a CIHR-style application. Once the Director has approved this draft, the student may proceed to the comprehensive exam, using a polished version of this proposal to submit to the examining committee.

The format of the Research Module of the CIHR Operating Grant application to be completed by the student is available from the MD/PhD Program office.

The proposal should include the following pages from the CIHR Operating Grant Application:

Research Module

- Page 4 – “Abstract suitable for press release”, i.e. in lay language (3/4 page)
- Page 8 – “Summary of research proposal”, “Research proposal” (maximum 10 additional pages).
Page limits do not include references, tables, charts, figures and photographs.

The intent of the Comprehensive Examination is to ensure that the student has adequately prepared for the proposed thesis research and can gain maximum benefit from this experience. The Comprehensive Examination will primarily focus on areas directly or indirectly related to the proposed PhD thesis research, but will also test the student’s understanding of the chosen field of study as a whole, demonstrating adequate breadth and depth of knowledge.

The student is required to follow the general Comprehensive Examination format and guidelines and specific requirements of the Thesis Research Supervisory Committee, including required readings and area of topics for the Comprehensive Examination.

Comprehensive Examination Committee

The Comprehensive Examination Committee consists of

- a Chair;
- a university examiner within the same graduate department or program;
- a university examiner in a different graduate department or program;
- minimum of two members of the PhD Thesis Research Supervisory Committee other than the research supervisor.

The MD/PhD Program Director or the Graduate Advisor of the hosting department (if it is the expressed wish of the hosting department to take primary responsibility for the examination) selects an impartial chair (not a collaborator of the research supervisor) for the Comprehensive Examination. Normally, the Chair of the Comprehensive Examination is selected from the MD/PhD Committee. The research

supervisor is expected to provide a list of possible examiners to the MD/PhD Program Director or the Graduate Advisor of the hosting department. The Research Supervisor will attend the Comprehensive Examination to ensure the fairness of the examination procedures. He/she may provide questions at the discretion of the Chair of Examination.

Organizing the Examination

The MD/PhD Program Director or the Graduate Advisor of the hosting department (if it is the expressed wish of the hosting department) is responsible for contacting the faculty selected for the Comprehensive Examination Committee, and for arranging the date, time and location of the Comprehensive Examination. It is also the responsibility of the MD/PhD Program Director or the Graduate Advisor of the hosting department to send out memos and instructions to all members of the Examination Committee at least one month before the examination.

In the event the hosting department is responsible for organizing the Comprehensive Examination, the Graduate Advisor of the hosting department should inform the MD/PhD Program Director of the composition of the Examination Committee and date/time/place of the exam when it has been finalized.

Once the Examination Committee has been set up and announced, the student will meet with each member of the Examination Committee at least two months before the examination to obtain their guidance regarding preparation for the examination.

Once the date, time and place of the examination has been set up, at least three weeks before the examination the student will deliver the research proposal to the members of the Examination Committee, the Thesis Research Supervisory Committee, the MD/PhD Program Director and the Graduate Advisor of the hosting department. The examiners are asked to read the proposal before the examination, and ask questions on the proposal at the examination. If weaknesses are found in the proposal, a review of the proposal with the student before the examination is recommended. This feedback gives the student an opportunity to bolster perceived weaknesses in the research proposal.

Quorum

The examination may begin only after a quorum is present.

The quorum consists of:

- Chair
- 2 University Examiners
- 2 members of the Supervisory Committee

It is the responsibility of the Research Supervisor to ensure that there will be a quorum.

Examination Procedure

The Chair should follow this procedure:

1. Announce that the meeting has been called for the Comprehensive Examination for the PhD degree.
2. Request the candidate to present a 20-minute synopsis of the proposed research thesis.
3. Call upon members of the Examination Committee to question the candidate. It is the responsibility of the Chair of the Examination Committee to determine at the time of the examination that the questions are appropriate.
4. Question period is expected to be 1 to 1.5 hours. Total examination time is expected to be 2-3 hours.
5. Request that the candidate leaves the room prior to discussion of the Examination.

Grading

It is the responsibility of the Chair of the Examination Committee to determine at the time of the examination whether questions are appropriate. At the end of the examination, the student will be asked to leave the room. The Comprehensive Examination will be graded as **Pass/Fail** and an evaluation of "Pass" must be unequivocally agreed to by the Examination Committee. The Chair of the Examination Committee will make final recommendations based on the advice of the Examination Committee.

The student will normally have two attempts at successfully completing the Comprehensive Examination. In the event the student fails at the first attempt, he/she will normally be re-examined by the same Examination Committee following a period of time where he/she will be allowed to make up deficiencies. If the student is not successful at the second attempt, he/she may be required to withdraw from the program.

Results

The result of the examination will be documented in writing, on a report form signed by the Examination Committee. The student will be notified by the Chair of the examination result. In the event the hosting department is organizing the examination, the Graduate Advisor of the hosting department will notify the MD/PhD Program Director of the examination result in writing.

The MD/PhD Program Director will recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies that the student be admitted to candidacy.

For additional information, please contact:

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