

Notes on the Conduct of Oral Examinations for the Guidance of External Examiners



SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
ROSE M. SILVA
THESIS COORDINATOR

thesis@queensu.ca
Tel (613) 533-6000 x77313
Fax (613) 533-6015

PART I: INTRODUCTION OF CANDIDATE, PROCEDURAL MATTERS AND READING OF THE REPORTS

- 1) At the oral, when the examiners and the candidate have been introduced to each other, the candidate is asked to withdraw briefly, but to remain close to the examination room.
- 2) The Chair then reads aloud the examiners' reports in this order:
 - a) Examiner external to the University (Ph.D., some Masters' exams);
 - b) The "internal-external" examiner;
 - c) The second departmental reader;
 - d) The head of the department or his or her representative, and e) The supervisor(s).

With lengthy reports, the Chair may read a summary of the reports that has met with the approval of the examiner concerned.

The Chair asks if there are any general questions that the examiners wish to discuss before the candidate enters.

PART II: THE ORAL THESIS EXAMINATION

- 3) The candidate is recalled. If required by the department/program, the candidate gives a brief exposition (no longer than 20 minutes) of his or her thesis. Otherwise, the Chair normally opens the oral thesis examination by asking a broad general question.
- 4) Questioning then follows in the order set out in Part II, 2), above. On average, Ph.D. oral thesis examinations run for 2 hours or slightly more. Each examiner, therefore, has a rough quota of 20-25 minutes, but the Chair must exercise his or her discretion rather than enforce this allotment in any mechanical fashion. The examiner external to the university is usually allowed as much time as he or she wishes, which is one reason the external examiner goes first. The Chair may help to guide the time limits that he or she feels are reasonable. Often the supervisor has fewer questions than the other examiners and may provide the candidate opportunity to tie up any loose ends from previous questions.
- 5) While each examiner, in turn, holds the right to question, he or she may allow supplementary questions from other examiners during his or her allotted time, when appropriate. The oral thesis examination may, therefore, temporarily take a more discursive

form. The Chair should ensure that each examiner has his or her own quota of time without excessive interruption.

- 6) At the conclusion, the Chair asks each examiner, in turn, if he or she has any supplementary questions and, if not, the candidate is asked to withdraw along with any visitors.

PART III: DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF THE THESIS AND THE ORAL THESIS EXAMINATION

- 7) On the candidate's withdrawal, the Chair calls for a discussion of the written thesis and the defence of the thesis in the oral thesis examination. Although unanimous decisions are usually reached, **a vote of two or more examiners normally results in an outcome in a lower category.** For example, if the vote is two to refer and three to pass, the outcome is referred. If the vote is two to fail and four to pass, the outcome is failed, **except in the special case of failure due to an unsatisfactory oral thesis examination, which is described below, under FAILED.** Each member of the examining committee listed in Part II, 2), above must cast a vote for one of the outcome categories outlined on the next page. Only these members of the examining committee have a vote in deciding the result of the oral thesis examination. The Chair may use his or her position to guide the examining committee in reaching a decision, but he or she is not a voting member of the committee. The external examiner is present to assure universal standards and an examining committee should not disregard his or her opinion unless it is certain that it knows better. However, the external examiner's vote carries the same weight as that of any other member of the committee.

The outcome of the oral thesis examination is based on the acceptability of both the thesis and the defence of the thesis at the oral thesis examination. The purpose of the oral thesis examination is to ascertain that the student is able to adequately present and defend the thesis and its underlying assumptions, methodology, results and conclusions in a manner consistent with the degree being sought. At the oral thesis examination the examining committee will reach one of the 3 decisions listed below and record it on the "Thesis Examination Results" form. The 3 decisions are **Passed, Referred or Failed.**

PASSED: A thesis is passed if it is acceptable in its present form or pending minor revisions, and its defence at the oral thesis examination was satisfactory. A thesis may be passed if no substantive changes are required. Changes in the form of corrections of typographical or grammatical errors, minor modifications to the thesis, editorial revisions to improve clarity and revisions to clarify results, findings or conclusions, or the like, may be recommended with a thesis classified as passed. A list of the required revisions must be provided by the Chair to the student and the supervisor, and the completion of the revisions must be certified to the School of Graduate Studies by the thesis supervisor or other designated person.

REFERRED: A thesis is referred if it is not acceptable in its present form or pending minor revisions, but could be acceptable pending major revisions. For example, a thesis will be referred if it requires substantive changes such as rewriting a chapter, reinterpretation, reanalysis or recalculation of data or findings, or additional research in order to attain acceptable standards of coherence and integrity in argument and presentation. The committee may decide to reconvene the examining committee and hold another oral thesis examination of the revised thesis.

The examining committee may also use the referred category if it determines that the oral thesis examination itself, either separate from or in conjunction with the written thesis, is unsatisfactory. This means that the student did not adequately present and defend the thesis and its underlying assumptions, methodology, results and conclusions in a manner consistent with the degree being sought. **In such cases, a second oral thesis examination must be held, and the committee must then return a decision of either passed or failed.**

In all cases of referral, the nature of the revisions and/or additional work, and/or the deficiencies associated with the oral thesis examination, must be specified in writing by the Chair to avoid dispute or ambiguity. **When outlining the revisions and/or additional work required, and/or the holding of a second oral thesis examination, the Chair must be as specific as possible. These comments will be passed on to the candidate in a letter from the School of Graduate Studies as revisions and/or improvements that must be met for the thesis to be reconsidered.**

Any outlined revisions must be certified by the Chair or delegate as having been completed satisfactorily. Usually, this certification is delegated to at least two members of the Committee. In all cases of referral, the examining committee continues to exist until it has agreed that the thesis outcome is either *passed* or *failed*.

NOTES ON THE "REFERRED" CATEGORY

1. If the committee returns two or more votes for referred it may hold another examination after the candidate has carried out further research and/or rewritten the thesis, but normally not more than one year later.
2. Candidates have up to twelve months to complete revisions to their thesis but should be encouraged to do so as soon as possible. In cases where the thesis has to be re-submitted to the examining committee, and/or a second oral thesis examination has to be held, this has to be done no later than twelve months from the date of the first oral examination.
3. **A thesis that has been defended by oral thesis examination can be submitted once more only in revised form. A candidate whose thesis and/or defence of the thesis at the second oral examination, does not satisfy the examining committee on the second submission will be failed (see Failed, below.)**

FAILED: Failure can occur in two ways:

1. A thesis is failed if the document is unacceptable to the discipline even with substantive revisions. If the committee returns two or more votes of Failed on the basis of the document, this means that the committee recommends that the student be required to withdraw on academic grounds.
2. Failure may also result from an unacceptable second oral thesis examination, where the student was manifestly unable to adequately present and defend the thesis and its underlying assumptions, methodology, results and conclusions in a manner consistent with the degree being sought. **A decision of Failed on the basis of the second oral thesis examination requires agreement by the majority (more than half) of the examining committee.**

When the examining committee has reached a decision, the Chair notes the result on the **“Thesis Examination Result”** form and asks each examiner to sign it and check the appropriate box. The Chair then signs the form. The student is recalled and the Chair informs the student of the result, including details of any revisions required.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- 8) **It is permissible to note corrections on your copy of the thesis.** Alternatively, examiners may hand in lists of typographical and stylistic errors to the candidate or supervisor after the oral examination. The candidate is responsible for carrying out all the required corrections to the thesis. The nature of any required revisions will be specified in the "Thesis Examination Result" sheet and the completion of these revisions will be certified to the School of Graduate Studies as directed in paragraph 7 above.

At the conclusion of the oral examination, the examiners return all copies of the thesis to the candidate.

- 9) Only members of the examining committee shown in 3) above have a vote in deciding the result of the examination. The Chair may use his or her position to guide the examining committee in reaching a decision, but he or she is not a voting member of the committee. The external examiner is present to assure universal standards, and an examining committee should not disregard his or her opinion unless it is certain that it knows better. The external examiner, however, has only the same voting power as any other member of the committee.
- 10) **Examiners are to be present at and for the duration of the examination. Any exceptions must be arranged with and approved by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies prior to the examination.**

NOTE ON VISITORS AT EXAMINATIONS:

Regulation 8.6 in the Calendar of the School of Graduate Studies states who may attend and present questions at the oral examination, and the procedure to be followed. Normally these arrangements are made **BEFORE** the examination.

These notes are supplementary to General Regulations 8.6 in the calendar of the School of Graduate Studies, to provide standard administrative practice in the conduct of examinations of theses. *(Revised July 2014)*