Conducting Master’s and Doctoral Oral Thesis Examinations in the Absence of Participants: A Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic
Queen’s University
School of Graduate Studies
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Background

This document is intended to provide guidance for graduate departments and programs at Queen’s University when faced with an unexpected and last-minute illness or related occurrence experienced by a person scheduled to attend a Master’s or Doctoral Oral Thesis Examination. These guidelines were first developed in 2009, when the University was making a variety of contingency plans in the event that the H1N1 virus affected the operations of the institution.

It was updated in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary goals of this revised contingency plan are to protect the health of all participants and to conduct oral exams as scheduled, if possible.

Issue

A great deal of planning by students and at the departmental and program levels and School of Graduate Studies occurs to ensure that Oral Thesis Examinations are able to proceed smoothly. Rescheduling an Oral Thesis Examination may compromise the student’s academic deadlines or future employment and impose the financial penalty of having to register and pay tuition for another term of study.

The guiding principle of planning for Master’s and Doctoral Oral Thesis Examinations is that all reasonable efforts should be taken to ensure that the Oral Thesis Examination is held as scheduled. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Oral Thesis Examinations may still be held in-person as long as the university remains open and only large gatherings are prohibited. However, thesis defences held in person should observe sound public health practices, including hand washing before and after the event, no physical contact among participants and social distancing.

Procedures

As a general matter, Oral Thesis Examinations should be held in-person with all participants present if that is deemed feasible and safe. If one or more participants cannot attend in person, the following procedures must be followed:

1. Examiner absence: In the event that a faculty member of an Examination Committee cannot attend the Oral Thesis Examination in person owing to COVID-19 or other extenuating circumstances that prevent their attendance, one of the following alternate arrangements should be made by the Department Head/Program Director, the Graduate Coordinator, or another delegated departmental faculty member:
• Determine if another faculty member can serve on the committee and attend the Oral Thesis Examination at the scheduled meeting time (in the case of the Chairperson, any internal departmental member, or the internal-external, can serve in their place).
• Determine if the examiner who cannot attend in person could participate in the Oral Thesis Examination remotely via teleconference or videoconference (for example, via Skype™ or Zoom™). If so, these arrangements must be made by the Department or Program in question.
• If the above two alternative modes of participation are not possible for the examiner, a comprehensive report including questions for the candidate and an indication of which outcome category the examiner would place the thesis in must be provided by that examiner to the Chairperson. The Chairperson will ask another member of the committee to read the report and pose the questions at the oral examination on the missing examiner’s behalf.

For a Master’s Oral Thesis Examination, one of these appropriate steps can almost always be implemented entirely by the department. There may be cases where additional constraints may require the approval of the School of Graduate Studies (SGS); for instance, if it is proposed that a faculty member who is not also a member of the SGS serve on the committee to allow the examination to proceed as scheduled.

For a Doctoral Oral Thesis Examination, any changes to examination committee structure or timing of the exam should be approved by an Associate Dean of SGS.

In the case where none of these alternatives is viable, or if most of the examination committee members are unable to attend in person, the Oral Thesis Examination should be rescheduled without delay, to be held as soon as possible.

2. Student Absence: Students must attend their Oral Thesis Examination in person. In the event that the student cannot attend in person when it is scheduled owing to COVID-19 or other extenuating circumstances, the examination should be rescheduled without delay to be held as soon as possible. If any delay would cause adverse consequences or undue hardship for the student, approval of the School of Graduate Studies should be sought for the Oral Thesis Examination to be held with the student participating remotely.

3. Lockdown/Closure: In the unlikely event that Queen’s University has entered a lockdown/closure period, the School of Graduate Studies will by default require any Oral Thesis Examination to be postponed and rescheduled without delay to be held as soon as possible. If any delay would cause adverse consequences or undue hardship for the student, approval of the School of Graduate Studies should be sought for the Oral Thesis Examination to be held with all participants joining remotely.
Procedures for Holding Thesis Examinations Remotely

With the approval of the School of Graduate Studies, the graduate department/program can make arrangements for the Oral Thesis Examination to proceed with all parties including the student participating remotely (for example, via Skype™, or Zoom™). Requests for remote Examinations will be addressed by the relevant SGS Associate Dean. Permission to proceed in this way is granted on a case-by-case basis upon request by a graduate student’s supervisor or other department/program administrator (such as, the Graduate Coordinator or the Department Head) to the School of Graduate Studies. Before such approval may be sought, agreement of all participants in the Examination, including the student, committee members, and the head of the department/program (or equivalent) must be documented. All other policies and guidelines of the School of Graduate Studies pertaining to the Oral Thesis Examination, remain in effect.

Other actions may be required and will be implemented in accordance with the University’s particular established protocols.

Contact

For further information about these guidelines or assistance, please contact the appropriate Associate Dean of the School of Graduate Studies.