

Notes for Chairing and Conducting Oral Thesis Examinations



SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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These notes supplement the General Regulation *Thesis* (<http://queensu.ca/calendars/sgr/Thesis.html>) in the calendar of the School of Graduate Studies to provide standard administrative practice in the conduct of oral thesis examinations.

PART I: RECEIVING REPORTS AND OTHER DOCUMENTS

A copy of the thesis is delivered to the Chair a few days before the oral thesis examination. The Chair may use his or her judgement about how thoroughly to read it.

A file, with the examiners' reports and other paperwork for the examination, is delivered on **the working day** before the oral thesis examination.

If any two of the examiner's reports recommend that the oral thesis examination **not** proceed, the School of Graduate Studies informs the Chair several days prior to the scheduled date of the oral thesis examination. The Chair consults the supervisor and Head/ Director of the Department/Program who discuss with the candidate whether the oral thesis examination should proceed. The onus is on the candidate to make the decision whether the oral thesis examination will proceed or be postponed. If the candidate agrees that the oral thesis examination should be postponed, the Chair conveys to the candidate, through the supervisor, the nature of the revisions to the thesis that are advised in the negative reports. The candidate has the right to present the revised thesis later. At the subsequent submission of the thesis, the oral thesis examination must be held.

PART II: ATTENDANCE AT THE ORAL THESIS EXAMINATION

Oral thesis examinations are normally *open*, meaning that all members of the Queen's community (any faculty member, staff member, or student of the University) may attend. Visitors (anyone who is not a member of the Queen's community) may attend an open oral thesis examination if their attendance has been arranged by the candidate and the supervisor(s) and reported to the Head of the Department/Program, at least one week prior to the scheduled date of the oral thesis examination.

An oral thesis examination may be *closed*, meaning that only members of the Examining Committee may be present. Permission to have a closed oral thesis examination must be granted by an Associate Dean of the School of Graduate Studies prior to the scheduled date of the oral thesis examination.

Regardless of whether the oral thesis examination is open or closed, **only members of the Examining Committee may ask questions of the candidate, and only members of the Examining Committee may be present during the preliminary and post-examination sessions.**

At the time of the oral thesis examination the Chair of the Examining Committee shall have final authority to determine who is eligible to attend the oral thesis examination. Attendance at an open oral thesis examination may be limited due to room capacity.

The Chair of the Examining Committee may ask members of the Queen's community and all visitors to leave the examination after the oral presentation made by the candidate, in cases where a presentation is part of the oral thesis examination processes.

The Chair of the Examining Committee has responsibility for the conduct of the oral thesis examination, and has the discretion to exclude members of the Queen's community, and/or visitors, whose conduct disturbs the oral thesis examination processes.

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

1) The Chair should remind the candidate, the examiners and all attendees that cell phones or personal electronic devices are to be turned off, and not used at all for any purpose (e.g., texting or emailing) for the duration of the oral thesis examination. The Chair should also remind the candidate, the examiners and all attendees that recording of the oral thesis examination is not permitted.

The Chair should inform examiners and the candidate of the general procedures to be followed at the oral thesis examination. Two very important procedural matters that should be explained to examiners at the outset are:

- a. Examiners must be present for the duration of the oral thesis examination. Any exceptions should have been arranged with and approved by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies before the oral thesis examination. In exceptional cases when one examiner is not able to attend the oral thesis examination in person or remotely, he or she is normally asked by the School of Graduate Studies to supply written questions to be put to the candidate by the Chair or another member of the examining committee.
- b. All examiners are required to cast their vote for one of the 3 outcome categories, at the end of the oral thesis examination. Abstaining is not an option.

2) When the examiners and the candidate have been introduced to each other, the candidate is asked to withdraw briefly, along with anyone else who is not a member of the Examining Committee.

The Chair then reads aloud the examiners' reports in this order:

- a) Examiner external to the University
- b) Internal/external examiner
- c) Departmental reader
- d) Head/Director of the department/program or his or her delegate and
- e) Supervisor(s).

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

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

PART IV: THE ORAL THESIS EXAMINATION

- 1) The candidate is recalled. Other attendees may return to the room at this time as well.

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.

- 2) 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.
- 3) 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.
- 4) 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 anyone else who is not a member of the Examining Committee.

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

- 1) 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 III, 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.**

2) 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.

PART VI: COMPLETING THE ORAL THESIS EXAMINATION AND THE DOCUMENTATION FOR THE FILE

- 1) The Chair reminds the supervisor(s) and student that, prior to the final submission of the revised approved thesis to QSpace, all issues of intellectual property rights and any potential for patents from the work in the thesis should be discussed. The Chair reminds the student that he or she can choose to select the “Restrict” option when submitting the thesis to QSpace to protect any rights to commercial publication, to obtain a patent, as a result of any contract with a third party, or for any other justifiable reason.
- 2) The Chair informs the examining committee and student that the Chair submits a report on the conduct of the oral thesis examination to the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, and that all examiners and the student are welcome to contact the Dean with any comments or concerns about the oral thesis examination.
- 3) **All copies of the thesis are returned to the student.**
- 4) The Chair fills out the Confidential Report for the Dean. This form records the Chair’s judgment on the quality of the questioning by the examiners, the candidate’s responses and, when appropriate, the candidate’s presentation of his or her work before the questioning. The Chair should draw the Dean’s attention to any other aspect of the oral thesis examination that requires comment or action.

The Chair returns the file (which is confidential) personally to:

School of Graduate Studies

Room 425, Gordon Hall