PhD Comprehensive Examination Procedures in the Sociology Department

The comprehensive examination process in Sociology consists of two parts: written answers to three comprehensive examination questions set by the candidate's PhD Committee and an oral defence of the candidate's doctoral dissertation proposal.

Students registered before Friday, September 20, 2013 can do either the sequestered exam or the take home exam.

Written Comprehensive Examination Procedures:

The written component of the comprehensive examination is a one-week take home exam which focuses upon the relevant theoretical, methodological and substantive areas germane to the student's program. Each exam question shall be between 8-10 pages or 1600-2000 words. In preparation for this exam, the student, in consultation with the members of the supervisory committee, will draw up a list of books and articles upon which the exam will be based. This list will include the most important theoretical, methodological and substantive texts in the student's thesis area. Much of this material will be drawn from the emerging bibliography for the thesis proposal although there will also be material that deals with theories and methodologies that will not be used in the writing of the thesis. This is to ensure that the student has a broad understanding of the areas, and can defend why certain theories and methodologies were selected (and others not). This list would normally include 40 to 50 articles and books.

The candidate successfully completes the written comprehensive exam element when s/he completes written answers that satisfy all three committee members, who shall keep in mind that the candidate had one week to prepare the answers with support from the texts. The internal/external examiner does not participate in the written element of the comprehensive examination.

The written element of the comprehensive examination consists of 3 questions; 1 question supplied by each of the committee members. The content of the questions is determined by the candidate's committee and normally is divided between theory, method and substantive content related to the thesis topic.

The candidate is provided with the exam at 9am of the assigned day and one week later at the same time, an electronic copy of the answers to the exam is due back in a WORD document at the office of the Graduate Assistant. The candidate has seven (7) days to complete the written element of the exam. Accommodations will be made for candidates with disabilities. Upon completion, the Graduate Studies Assistant electronically forwards the candidate's written answers to all three committee members. Suggested length is 8-10 pages per question. How much time you devote to each question during the week is up to you, but consider the entire exam as a 3-part term paper.
The written examination is normally evaluated by the committee members within one week of its completion. Each committee member notifies the Graduate Studies Assistant as to whether she or he agrees or disagrees that the candidate may move to the oral element of the examination. If all three committee members judge the written examination to have been successfully completed, the Graduate Studies Assistant notifies the candidate that she or he may proceed to the oral examination element. The oral examination is normally set up to follow within 3 weeks of the assignment of the written examination.

For doctoral proposals requiring research ethics approval, at the time of the comprehensive examination, the student must submit to the committee members a copy of their drafted research ethics review application forms along with the thesis proposal that they will defend. Upon successful defense of the proposal, including a review of the drafted research ethics review application forms, the student may then submit the research ethics review forms (and any attachments), revised as necessary following the thesis proposal defense, to the Departmental Ethics Review Committee for assessment.

**Oral Comprehensive Examination Procedures:**

Present at the oral examination are: the Chair (Head of Department or delegate), PhD candidate, internal/external examiner, and committee members (including the supervisor and two other members). The Graduate Studies Assistant will send an electronic copy of the Oral Comprehensive Examination Procedures to all members of the examining committee when the date for the examination has been determined.

The role of the Chair is to review the oral examination procedure to those present, and to ensure the oral examination is completed according to the procedures.

Typically, the Chair begins the oral examination by reminding the candidate and committee members of the basic rules of procedure for the examination. Those rules normally involve the following:

1. A review of the procedures that will follow.
2. The candidate is asked to leave the room while the committee members confer, in camera, about the proposal.
3. The in camera discussion begins with the internal/external examiner’s general impressions of the proposal in terms of its feasibility, manageability, substantive, theoretical, methodological strengths and weaknesses, and any other issues the Examiner wishes to note. Each of the two internal committee members provides similar comments on the dissertation proposal followed by the supervisor.
4. On the basis of those comments there may be some discussion among the examiners to clarify various points and perhaps determine particular areas upon which each examiner will focus.
5. Within the oral comprehensive examination, the order of questioning normally begins with the examiner who has been least involved with the proposal – the
internal/external examiner – and proceeds to through the two internal committee members to the supervisor.

6. The candidate is invited back into the room and the examination of the proposal begins following the order noted above.

7. Because only the internal members of the committee have read the answers to the written portion of the examination and they have approved them to allow the oral comprehensive exam to take place, the oral exam does not normally dwell on the written component of the exam. Follow-up questions to the written portion are appropriate, particularly as they apply to the dissertation proposal but the main focus of the oral exam is on the dissertation proposal.

8. Questions concerning the dissertation proposal are usually of two types: (1) Those examining whether or not the proposal is a feasible and manageable study that can be carried out within the normal timelines of a doctoral project and will yield results that will lead to a doctoral dissertation that meets the standards of the Department of Sociology and the School of Graduate Studies at Queen’s and (2) questions regarding any substantive, theoretical, and/or methodological issues or weaknesses that require elaboration, clarification, and/or revision in order for the project to meet the standards of a doctoral dissertation.

9. Although there is an established order for questioning, if examiners wish to pursue further clarification of a question then an examiner not currently asking questions may request such clarification or pose a related question.

10. Following a “first round” of questions, the Chair will ask if there are additional questions that examiners wish to ask. If there are, those questions may be posed. At the end of questioning, the candidate is again asked to leave the room.

11. It is the Chair’s responsibility to keep notes of issues that arise within the examination of the dissertation proposal and to initiate a discussion of whether the proposal is a clear pass, passed pending revisions, or a failure.

12. On the basis of the Chair’s notes, the examining committee members will make their own commentary and contributions to the written report that will be developed by the Chair.

13. The Chair will clarify, as much as possible, the content of what s/he will include in a draft report that will be circulated to all members of the examining Committee.

14. When there is agreement on the rough outlines of the report, the candidate will be invited back into the room and the Chair will let the student know his or her status – passed, passed with revisions, or failed. The Chair will also indicate to the candidate the main themes that will appear in draft report and indicate to the candidate that once the draft report has been circulated and revised as necessary leading to a final report, the candidate will be sent the final report.

15. The Chair will ask the candidate if there are any questions or concerns and if there are, once they are addressed, the examination will come to an end.

16. The Chair will circulate a draft report to all examiners as soon as possible after the exam has been completed. Examiners will be asked to respond as soon as possible while the examination is fresh in everyone’s mind.

17. If there are changes to the draft report, the Chair will circulate a second draft report and repeat that process until there is full agreement on the report.
18. When a report has been agreed upon, the Chair will send the final report to the candidate, all of the examiners, and the Department’s Graduate Studies Administrative Assistant.

19. The report will clearly indicate what further steps, if necessary, are required of the student before he has successfully completed the oral comprehensive examination.

The possible outcomes of the examination are as follows:

a. Pass: Allowed to continue.
b. Pass with Revisions: Revisions may be recommended in the proposal and/or the candidate may be required to do additional reading or course work. Revised proposals may be submitted to the committee who must individually certify to the chair that the revisions have been satisfactorily completed.
c. Fail: The candidate is permitted to re-sit the thesis proposal examination once. This must be done within six months. A second failure, or the passage of six months without re-examination, requires withdrawal from the programme.

N.B. Committee decisions are by simple majority. A 50:50 split constitutes a failure. Candidates wishing to appeal the decision of the Committee after a second failure may consult the graduate school calendar for details of the procedure.

The research proposal, as examined, indicates the stage of development in the thinking of the candidate. As research progresses, ideas can change and emphases may shift. However any major departure from the examined proposal will require a written statement to the chair of the qualification examination committee to be approved by Committee members.

While there may be some change between the original (or revised) dissertation proposal as set out at the end of the comprehensive examination process and the production of the dissertation, major movement away from the agreed upon proposal should not take place without the approval of supervisor and all of the other committee members. At the same time, the supervisor’s and committee members’ expectations of the dissertation research should not move from the final proposal without the agreement of the student and other committee members.

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