



Notes for Chairing and Conducting Oral Thesis Examinations

FACULTY OF EDUCATION, GRADUATE STUDIES
CELINA CASWELL
GRADUATE STUDIES ASSISTANT

celina.caswell@queensu.ca
Telephone: 613 533-6206
Fax: 613 533-6057

These notes are supplementary to General Regulation 8.6 in the calendar of the School of Graduate Studies and Research, to provide standard administrative practice in the conduct of examinations of theses.

PART I: RECEIVING REPORTS AND OTHER DOCUMENTS

- 1) A copy of the thesis will be delivered to the Chair a few days before the oral. The Chair may use his or her judgement about how thoroughly he or she wishes to read it. The student's file will also be delivered a few days before the oral.

REPORTS

- (a) The examiners do not submit reports on the thesis **prior** to the oral thesis examination, unless they wish to submit a "negative report"; that is, if it is their opinion that the oral thesis examination should NOT proceed – see (b) below. If no negative report is submitted, it is presumed that the examiner agrees that the oral thesis examination should be held as scheduled and that they will attend the oral thesis examination. Examiners are required to bring a hard copy report to the oral thesis examination. This report shall be read aloud at the beginning of the examination by the Chair and included with the student's file when it is returned to the Graduate Assistant.
- (b) If, on the basis of the thesis submitted for oral examination, any committee member feels the examination should NOT proceed, he or she must submit a report which lists some substantive reasons why the thesis should not proceed to examination, no later than 3 working days prior to the scheduled date of the examination. The "negative report" shall be submitted to the Graduate Coordinator in the Faculty of Education, c/o the Manager of the Faculty's Graduate Studies and Research Office. If only one such negative report is submitted, the oral thesis examination shall proceed as scheduled.
- (c) If two negative reports are submitted, the candidate and the supervisor shall be consulted by the Chair of the Examining Committee or the Graduate Coordinator to see if they wish to proceed with the oral thesis examination. The School of Graduate Studies shall be notified whenever two or more examiners recommend that the thesis oral examination not proceed. The onus is on the candidate to make the decision to proceed or not. If the candidate agrees that the oral be postponed, the Chair must convey to the candidate, through the supervisor, the nature of the revisions to the thesis that are advised, and the candidate has the right to present the revised thesis at a later date. At the subsequent submission of the thesis, the oral thesis examination must be held. The School of Graduate Studies shall be informed when an oral thesis examination has been postponed due to two negative reports.

PART II: INTRODUCTION OF CANDIDATE AND READING OF REPORTS

- 2) 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.

The Chair is not a voting member of the committee. The Chair's role is to ensure that appropriate procedures are followed. Therefore, the Chair should make every effort to inform examiners, and the candidate, of the general procedures to be followed, as appropriate. Two very important procedural matters that should be explained to examiners at the outset of the examination are:

- 1. Examiners must be present for the duration of the examination. Any exceptions to this should have been arranged with, and approved by the Dean of the Graduate School before the examination;**
 - 2. Examiners are required to vote to place the thesis in one of the 3 outcome categories, at the end of the examination.**
- 3) The Chair then reads aloud the examiners' reports in this order:
- a) Examiner external to the University (Ph.D., LL.M. exams, some Masters' exams);
 - b) The "internal-external" examiner;
 - c) The departmental reader;
 - d) 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 III: THE ORAL EXAMINATION

- 4) The candidate is recalled. The Chair begins the oral examination. In the natural, applied and life sciences, it is usual to invite the candidate to give a brief exposition of his or her thesis. This should take no longer than 20 minutes. In the humanities and social sciences, the Chair normally opens the examination by asking a broad general question.
- 5) The questioning then follows in the order set out above in 3) for the reading of the reports. The time allowed each examiner is at the discretion of the Chair. For example, normally Ph.D. examinations run on average 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. The supervisor can give the candidate a chance to tie up any loose ends from previous questions, or to speak on matters that have not been the subject of earlier questions.
- 6) 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 may, therefore, temporarily take a more discursive form. The Chair should be careful to see, as tactfully as he or she can, that each examiner has his or her own quota of time without excessive interruption.
- 7) At the conclusion, the Chair asks if there are any supplementary questions and, if not, the candidate is again asked to withdraw, staying within call.

PART IV: DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF THESIS

- 8) On the candidate's withdrawal, the Chair calls for a discussion of the candidate's performance in the written thesis and in the oral defence. Although unanimous decisions are usually reached, a vote of two or more examiners places a thesis in the "lowest" of the three categories. For example, if the vote is two to three to refer, the thesis is referred. If the vote is two to four to fail, the thesis is failed, and so on. Each member of the examining committee, except the Chair, must cast a vote for one of the outcome categories outlined below.

The three decisions that the examining committee may reach are those set out in the "*Thesis Examination Result*" sheet. These are:

1 **Passed:** A thesis is passed if it is acceptable in its present form or pending minor revisions. A thesis may be placed in this category if no substantive changes are required. Changes in the form of corrections to include typographical or grammatical errors, minor modifications to the thesis, editorial revisions or the like, may be recommended with a thesis classified as passed. The Chairperson should indicate clearly whether or not some changes are required before final acceptance of the thesis by the School of Graduate Studies and Research. A list of the required revisions must be provided by the Chairperson to the student and the supervisor, and the completion of the revisions must be certified to the School of Graduate Studies and Research by the thesis supervisor or other designated person.

2 **Referred:** A vote of two or more examiners will place a thesis in this category if it is not acceptable in its present form, but could be acceptable pending major revision. A thesis will be referred if it requires substantive changes such as rewriting a chapter, reinterpretation of data, corrections to calculations or additional research in order to attain acceptable standards of coherence and integrity in argument and presentation. The Chair, in consultation with the committee, may also decide to reconvene the examining committee and hold another oral examination. The examining committee may also use the referred category if it determines that the oral examination itself, either separate from or in conjunction with the written thesis, is unsatisfactory. In such cases, a second oral examination must be held, and the committee must then return a decision of either "pass" or "fail". In all cases of referral, the nature of the revisions and/or additional work, and/or the holding of a second oral examination, must be specified in writing by the Chairperson to avoid dispute or ambiguity. When outlining the revisions and/or additional work required, the Chairperson must be as specific as possible. These comments will be passed on to the candidate by the School of Graduate Studies as conditions to be met for the thesis to be passed. Any outlined revisions must be certified by the Chairperson or delegate as having been completed satisfactorily. Usually, this certification is delegated to at least two members of the examining committee. In all cases of referral, the examining committee remains in being until it has agreed that the thesis is either passed or failed. The Chairperson is reminded to fill out the enclosed "*Chairperson's Confidential Report*" form (see 12) on pg. 4).

3 **Failed:** This means that the thesis is unacceptable to the discipline, even with major revision. If the committee returns two or more votes showing failure, this means that the committee recommends the student be required to withdraw from the programme on academic grounds.

NOTES ON PROCEDURE:

- a) If the committee returns two or more votes for referral it may decide to hold another examination after the candidate has carried out further research and/or rewritten the thesis, but normally not more than one year later.

- b) Candidates have up to twelve months to complete the 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, this has to be done no later than twelve months from the date of the first oral examination.
- c) A thesis that has been defended by oral examination can be submitted once more only in revised form. A candidate whose thesis does not satisfy the examining committee on the second submission will be failed (General Regulations 8.8b).
- d) Regulation 8.6 in the Calendar of the School of Graduate Studies states the consequences of two or more negative votes by the examining committee.
- e) The student will be notified of the results immediately by the Chair of the committee.

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- 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.

In exceptional cases when the external examiner is not able to attend the oral examination, he or she is asked to supply written questions to be put to the candidate by the Chair, or another member of the examining committee.

NOTE ON VISITORS AT EXAMINATIONS: Regulation 8.6 in the Calendar of the School of Graduate Studies states who may attend and ask questions at the oral examination, and the procedure to be followed. Normally, these arrangements are made **BEFORE** the examination, but the Chair may have to accommodate visitors on short notice before he or she can begin the examination.

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

All copies of the thesis are returned to the student.

PART V: DOCUMENTATION FOR THE FILE

- 11) The Chair ensures that the candidate has provided the Graduate Studies and Research Office at the Faculty of Education (A106) with the forms necessary for binding of a thesis. These forms are:
 - a) National Library of Canada release
 - b) Copyright License to Queen’s University
 - c) UMI Dissertation Abstract International
 - d) Permission of Co-Author(s) (this is required only if the thesis is composed of a series of papers or reports that may contain material produced by someone other than the candidate).

These forms give the writer's permission for the thesis to be microfilmed and categorized by the National Library of Canada Archives, and for single copies to be circulated by Queen's University Library. Each candidate is sent a complete set of these forms along with explanatory materials, when the oral examination is scheduled by e-mail. These forms are supposed to be returned to the School of Graduate Studies before the oral examination. Extra copies are enclosed with the examination file if the candidate failed to return his or her completed set in time for the oral examination.

- 12) The Chair fills out a Confidential Report for the Dean. This form provides for recording the Chair's judgment on the quality of the questioning by the examiners and of the candidate's response. He or she also comments on the suitability of the thesis for publication, and when appropriate, on the candidate presentation of his or her work before the questioning. The Chair should draw the Dean's attention to any other aspect of the examination that requires comment or action.
- 13) The Chair returns the file (which is confidential) personally to the Graduate Studies and Research Office, **Room A106, Duncan McArthur Hall.**

(Revised July 2009)