

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examinations

Approved November 23, 2006. To come in effect 1/1/2007. Students already in the program can elect to follow the old or new guidelines.

Objectives of the comprehensive examination:

According to Faculty of Graduate Studies Policies and Procedures:

“A comprehensive examination is held after completion of all required coursework. It is intended to test the student's grasp of the chosen field of study as a whole, and the student's ability to communicate his or her understanding of it in English or in French. The student's committee will set and judge this examination in a manner compatible with the policy of the graduate program concerned. The comprehensive examination is separate and distinct from the evaluation of the thesis proposal. “

Specifically, Faculty of Graduate Studies states that the purpose of the exam is to provide an assessment of whether the student has developed:

- *strong analytical, problem-solving and critical thinking abilities*
- *required breadth and in-depth knowledge of the discipline*
- *required academic background for the specific doctoral research to follow*
- *potential ability to conduct independent and original research*
- *ability to communicate knowledge of the discipline*

In Geography, conduct of the comprehensive examination is consistent with the Faculty of Graduate Studies policies and procedures. Furthermore, the Physical Geography examinations provide an opportunity for the candidate to demonstrate the capacity to provide expert advice/commentary on issues of public, academic and/or professional interest. This ability is particularly tested through completion of the written project (see Structure of the Comprehensive Examination below).

Scheduling of Comprehensive Examination

The examination is normally taken in the second year of residence for the degree and must, according to FoGS rules, be taken within 24 months of entering the program. Flexibility is allowed within this limit as some students are changing fields and require variable amounts of background preparation. Ordinarily, the examination will be conducted no earlier than the autumn term of the second year. In the event that a student is unsuccessful in the comprehensive examination, there are provisions for a second attempt as defined by policies of the Faculty of Graduate Studies.

Physical Geography Comprehensive Examination

Structure of the comprehensive examination

The examination has three parts designed to assess the cognitive, analytical and communication skills of the student.

I. Written examinations: There will be three written examinations, each assigned by a different examiner. Each examination is based on a reading list provided by the examiners. Reading lists may be formulated in consultation with the student, and must be finalized at least 12 weeks before the examination. No fixed number of papers is specified for the reading lists since papers vary in difficulty and content and some items may be books.

The exam may be open or closed book at the discretion of the examiner, and may vary in length, also at the discretion of the examiner. Normally, students are allowed two to four hours to answer one or more questions. The written component of the comprehensive examination is designed to test the candidate's ability to synthesize material from a variety of sources and contexts on a range of topics within the student's chosen discipline.

Normally, the process of defining the topic areas for examination will begin at the Spring Review. The topic areas will usually be finalized at a subsequent meeting of the supervisory committee with the student.

It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that both the reading lists and the written questions are appropriate both in topic area and level, and do not unnecessarily overlap. The supervisor should circulate the questions among the examination committee prior to the scheduled examination to assist with identifying and addressing real or perceived duplication among the questions.

II. Project: The project involves the assimilation, analysis and synthesis of information to answer a question related to scientific and/or applied issues deemed to lie within the student's area of expertise, but not related directly to the proposed thesis research. It requires production of a substantive professional paper, such as one might present at a conference, or in a professional situation such as a consultation. Student's are normally allowed seven days to complete the project.

The purpose of this exercise is to test the candidate's ability to solve a problem in a prescribed length of time as is required in professional situations. Mock grant proposals are not considered to be an appropriate exercise.

The supervisor will be responsible for formulating the project in consultation with other members of the examination committee.

III. Oral examination: The oral examination tests the student's ability to communicate and defend ideas *in viva voce*. The oral examination is normally two hours in length, and is not open to the public.

The oral examination normally involves four components: (1) an oral presentation of the project (20 minutes), in the style of a conference presentation, with visuals, as appropriate); (2) questions on the presentation (30-40 minutes); (3) questions on the written examination answers, providing the student an opportunity to address oversights or errors, serving both the examiners' and the student's interests (20-40 minutes); (4) questions on any other matter considered to be within the range of their expected competence (20 minutes).

Defence of the thesis proposal

Students may begin research on their thesis prior to formal acceptance of the thesis proposal. However, formal acceptance of the thesis proposal by the supervisory committee marks the entry into candidacy (for the degree) of the student. This step is separate from the comprehensive exam and comes after the comprehensive exam.

Human Geography Comprehensive Exam

For human geographers, the comprehensive exam consists of three written exams in three distinct fields, determined by the supervisory committee, followed by an oral exam.

Written Examinations: Three exams will be written, selected from two format options: a take-home exam and a review essay. The student has the choice of writing two take-home exams and one review essay, or three take-home exams. Choice of format is to be decided 3 months in advance by the supervisory committee. The scope of the exam in each case is quite similar: the exam is meant to test knowledge of a sub-discipline or major issue or area of thought. It is the timing and type of output that differs for each format.

Take-Home Exam: A reading list is drawn up by the student in consultation with committee members for each field to be examined by take-home exam; this is to be done three months in advance of the exam. However, studying for the exam is meant to be a creative process, and there is an expectation that the lists will shift as the process of reading progresses. Our understanding of the three month deadline for finalisation of the reading lists is that the supervisory committee cannot add texts to the agreed upon lists within three months of the exam, but that students can add to the lists as their reading progresses. Each list typically consists of 30-40 articles or books. A file of reading lists from previous exams is available from the graduate secretary.

On the morning of each exam, the student receives a selection of questions (usually 6-10) from which they select two. The student is meant to complete each question within 3-4 hours. The answers require no bibliography, as they draw upon the established reading lists. In normal circumstances, the exam is due – at the very latest -- by midnight of that same day. Typically the exams are scheduled within the same week, with one day between each exam.

Review Essay: requires the preparation of a review essay of a major field, figure, issue or idea. The focus need not be a conventional sub-discipline, and will need to be approved by the supervisory committee. Examples include: environmental history (a field); David Harvey (a figure); global warming (an issue); or space-economy (an idea). The review is not a sequential summary of texts; it requires an imaginative and independent guide to the major debates and contributions, together with your own commentary and constructive critique. While the essay need not be confined by disciplinary boundaries, you must situate your discussion in relation to the field of human geography more generally. The essay should conform to the style guidelines for submission to *Progress in Human Geography*, and has a limit of 8000 words. This is an exam; it is done independently and is unsupervised. In the case of the review essay, no reading list is established in advance with guidance from the supervisory committee.

Timing of the various written options: If the review essay option has been selected, preparation can start up to three months before the take-home exams. It is to be submitted at the beginning of the exam period. Each take home exam is written within the day, and all of the take-home exams will be completed within the week. The oral exam is normally scheduled for the following week.

Oral examination: The oral exam is normally focused on the written examination answers and provides an opportunity to repair oversights or errors, serving both the examiners' and the candidate's interests. The candidate may be questioned on any of the materials on the reading lists. All written exams, of all formats, are examined in the oral exam. The normal length is two hours. The purpose is to test the candidate's ability to communicate ideas verbally and to defend ideas put forth. The supervisor typically chairs the exam. The examination is not public. Regardless of the outcome, supervisors are expected to provide a short paragraph of written evaluation for each of the three fields examined.

In the event that the student fails any of the exams, they have the opportunity to rewrite the failed exam(s) **once**. This is normally done within 2-3 months of the first exam. After the initial failed exam(s), the supervisory committee will specify in writing (in a short paragraph) a rationale for their decision and some clear guidelines for improvement. For the take-home exams, new items cannot be added to the reading lists at this time. A review essay cannot be revised; in the case of a failed review essay, the candidate will be asked to write a take-home in the same field, and a reading list will be assembled from the bibliographic references of the failed review essay, and in consultation with the supervisory committee. The re-examination will be chaired by a member of the Graduate Committee. Either the candidate or the supervisor can ask to have the re-examination to be tape-recorded, in which case copies must be made available to both parties.

Defence of the thesis proposal

Successful defence of the thesis proposal marks the entry into candidacy (for the degree), is considered to be separate from the comprehensive exam and comes after the comprehensive exam (which does not preclude the candidate from doing preliminary planning and commencing work on the thesis before the defence). Review of thesis proposals is not considered to be an appropriate part of the comprehensive examination exercise.