



ISGP Comprehensive Exam Guidelines

The first step to Ph.D. candidacy: Comprehensive Examinations

Comprehensive exams are mandatory for Ph.D. students, but are not required for M.A. or M.Sc. students. In order to advance to candidacy, Ph.D. students must also defend a thesis proposal. The purpose of the comprehensive examination is for the student to demonstrate his/her broad-based knowledge within and across disciplines. The purpose of the dissertation proposal is to demonstrate the ability to apply that knowledge towards a specific research question. Thus, the comprehensive exam demonstrates one's breadth of knowledge and the dissertation demonstrates one's depth.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of ISGP and the participation of research supervisors from over 35 different departments, institutes, centres and schools at UBC, it is important to discuss how this diversity can be honoured while still providing a framework that works for both students and supervisory committees. Different departments have different requirements and formats for the comprehensive examination. While this can allow for flexibility of the content and format of the comprehensive examination, we also wish to ensure that there is transparency, consistency and equity in the administration of comprehensive examinations. *ISGP encourages students, in collaboration with the members of their supervisory committee, to explore innovative comprehensive examinations.* We believe that we can meet the criteria of both flexibility and consistency by adhering to the following principles for each comprehensive exam:

1. As per UBC Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies guidelines, comprehensive examinations will take place after the student completes his/her courses and no later than the end of the second year of PhD study.
2. As in the past, we expect the student and the supervisory committee to engage in a dialogue - initiated by the student - regarding the scope, expectations, timeline and bibliography to be read for the exams.
3. Use the administration of the examination and the preparation to promote and extend the interdisciplinary nature of your program.
4. Urge your committee to meet face-to-face to discuss the format of the exam(s), in particular, how they can be created and administered to enhance the transcending of disciplinary boundaries.
5. Resist any inclination to have the exams formatted along disciplinary lines (i.e. one paper on Physics, one on Fine Arts); similarly, resist the tendency to have each member of the committee prepare a discrete exam in her/his own area.
6. The most common practice is for students to write two comprehensive examinations. Reducing this one examination or increasing it to three exams should be discussed with the Chair.

7. Following discussions with their committee students will submit a draft proposal. The student and committee will agree to a revised format and procedure to the committee which outlines:
 - The topic and rationale of the comprehensive exam
 - The bibliography for the exam
 - The proposed submission date
 - The proposed date for a discussion/defense of the comp to provide feedback to the student
 - The comprehensive examination proposal should be very clear on the timeline for the examination. Exactly when is the examination due? Is it to be submitted in hard or electronic copy? How long will the committee have to read, review and provide feedback to the student?
 - What are the possible outcomes of the exam? (e.g., full pass; pass with revisions; re-write and re-submit; failure, no chance to re-submit, etc.).
 - An external reader for the comp, in addition to the supervisors and committee
8. The research supervisor will forward the proposal to the Chair.

Examples of comprehensive examination formats that ISGP students have used over the years:

- A comprehensive exam in the format of a paper submitted to an academic journal
- A detailed course outline for a senior level undergraduate course in one of the student's disciplines
- An artistic exhibit or presentation along with a an explanatory catalogue or notes
- A policy position paper for government or public audiences (an exercise in knowledge translation)

<https://www.grad.ubc.ca/current-students/managing-your-program/comprehensive-examination-doctoral-students>