



Nutritional Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Temerty
Medicine

Student Progress and the
Role of Student Advisory Committees

Updated December 2023

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A. STUDENT PROGRESS THROUGH THE DEGREE PROGRAM

1. Stages of the Graduate Program

The stages are demarcated by a series of events which should take place in the normal program. Of course, the student and their supervisor are keen to see that progress to the degree proceeds satisfactorily. It is, however, also the responsibility of the Department to monitor that these events proceed smoothly and to ensure that the student is making appropriate progress through their program.

2. Expected Rate of Progress Through the Stages

The program design (definition of course requirements and research area) must be completed before the first registration, but it is difficult to set specific dates (times in program) when other stages in the program should occur. Suggested time limits for the stages in the MSc and PhD degree programs are presented in Table 1 (pg. 9), Table 2 (pg. 10), and Table 3 (pg. 11). The normal expectation would be that these events take place well before the suggested time limit, so the dates should not be seen as goals. However, a pace of progress that is slower than that mapped out in Tables 1, 2 and 3 would be cause for concern, and the Department would be expected to initiate enquiries as to the reason for the delay.

B. ROLE OF STUDENT ADVISORY COMMITTEES

1. Function of Student Advisory Committees

The primary purpose of the committee is to assist the student in their graduate program by offering advice and support. The Committee's major work is the review of the thesis proposal, research progress and thesis. A secondary purpose of the Student Advisory Committees is to keep the Department advised about the student's progress in their program so that appropriate steps can be taken to address any problems that may arise. These purposes are accomplished through a process of advice on program design, periodic review of progress, recommendation of students for Ph.D. reclassification, providing comments on thesis drafts, and participation in the thesis defense (M.Sc. or Departmental Ph.D. or School of Graduate Studies Final Oral Exam).

In addressing the roles of Advisory Committees, it is to be emphasized that these are advisory and not supervisory. That is, the role of the Advisory Committee must not be seen as reducing in any sense the academic responsibility of the designated supervisor, nor as interfering in any way with the essential one-to-one relationship between the student and the supervisor. A summary of responsibilities of the supervisor and advisory committee members is provided in **Appendix A**.

2. Composition of Advisory Committees

Advisory Committees have a dual role, i.e. a technical advisory role in relation to the research and programmatic role, both offering programmatic advice to the supervisor and student and, on behalf of the Department, monitoring

progress of the program. In structuring committees, competence in these areas should be considered. It is to be hoped, and expected, that good students will seek technical advice from individual staff wherever it may be found, and will not rely solely on persons appointed to the Advisory Committee. At the same time, persons serving on an Advisory Committee should recognize a special obligation to meet with and assist the student, including referring the student to competent sources of technical advice, as reasonably requested. It is possible (although not essential) that Ph.D. committees will be larger than M.Sc. committees and will often include one or more members from outside of the Department.

3. Appointment of Student Advisory Committees

The Advisory Committee should be appointed shortly after the student has been accepted. M.Sc. committees will normally consist of the supervisor and two other persons in addition to the Associate Chair (Graduate Education) or their designate, who shall serve as an *ex officio member*. The supervisor shall be Chair of the Advisory Committee. In the case of Ph.D. committees, additional members may be appointed. This may include members from cognate departments who bring particular expertise to the committee. At least one member of the committee must be a core staff member holding an appointment as a member of the Graduate Department of Nutritional Sciences (i.e. a full or associate SGS Graduate Appointment). A second member must hold an SGS graduate appointment (Full or Associate) in this or another department. The members shall be appointed by the Graduate Department in consultation with the supervisor. Normally, members shall continue to serve until completion of the student's program, although adjustments in membership can be made by the Department if deemed necessary or appropriate.

4. Guideline for Operation of the Advisory Committee

Students are required to meet with their advisory committee at least once a year, but it is strongly recommended that meetings be held at least every six months. All faculty and students should be aware of SGS regulations regarding Advisory Committees:

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/policies-guidelines/monitoring-doctoral-progress/>

For PhD students, failure to meet with the Advisory Committee at least once per year is considered to indicate unsatisfactory progress. This can have serious consequences for the student's continued registration and funding.

- A) **Program Design** - It would be desirable for the Advisory Committee to have been established and to review and recommend upon the proposed program for the degree, taking into account Departmental requirements, School of Graduate Studies requirements, the unique background of the student, and the proposed area of research, before first registration. It is recommended that this step be completed as early as possible after the student arrives on campus. If this has not been accomplished, the Associate Chair (Graduate Education) may

convene a special committee to advise them on the appropriateness of programs of new students before recommending those programs to the School of Graduate Studies.

- B) **Development and Presentation of Research Proposal** - It is expected that the student and supervisor will work closely in the development of a research plan and thesis proposal. The student should prepare a written research proposal including key background information, specification of the hypotheses and objectives to be addressed, and an outline of the planned approach to the research, including a timeline for its completion. While the specific length of this proposal will vary depending on the nature of the project and norms and expectations of the student's supervisor, some general guidelines for the preparation of thesis proposals are provided in **Appendix B**. The thesis proposal should be circulated to the Advisory Committee for review and an Advisory Committee meeting held for the student to receive constructive criticism of the proposal. The committee members should judge the scientific merit of the intended research design and should consider whether or not the plan is appropriate for completion of the degree for which the student is registered. That is, at this time the committee should offer guidance to avoid a research program that is unrealistically demanding for an M.Sc. or might be inadequate in extent or depth for a Ph.D. If a major revision of the proposal is indicated, the Committee members should review the amended plan.
- C) **Course Work** - Advisory Committee members should be kept apprised of the student's progress in course work and particularly of any problems encountered. Normally such review would be undertaken at the end of each term in which courses are taken; unless there are apparent problems, a meeting may not be necessary. Any proposed change in required courses to be included in the program should be considered and recommended by the Advisory Committee.
- D) **Research Review** - Periodically, as initiated by the student or the supervisor, but preferably at about 6-month intervals, the student should review their research progress with the Advisory Committee. An appropriate method of providing such information would be a presentation by the student of work completed, its interpretation in relation to the originally defined research questions or hypotheses, and implications/plans for future work. The role of the committee is again to offer constructive criticism and, at the same time to identify, for specific consideration by the student, supervisor and Department, any potential problems that are emerging. The Advisory Committee might wish to recommend additional course work the student should complete, or sources of technical advice the student should contact. As the research progresses, an additional important role of the Committee will lie in offering advice as to whether there are now sufficient results to warrant preparation of the thesis.
- E) **Reclassification Assessment (M.Sc. Only)** - During the first year of a M.Sc.

program the supervisor and Advisory Committee should consider whether the student should be encouraged to apply for reclassification into the Ph.D. When a student makes such an application; a special Reclassification Committee will be established in accordance with the School of Graduate Studies' policies (see Departmental Guidelines on Reclassification Procedures). If a student is reclassified, the Department will review the composition of the Advisory Committee and may alter the membership in accord with the norm for Ph.D. committees.

- F) **Qualifying Examination (for Direct Entry Ph.D. students and Ph.D. students entering after an MSc only)** - Committee members should assist students in the preparation for the Qualifying Examination. Normally one Committee member will be appointed as a member of the Qualifying Examination Committee, along with others appointed by the Department Chair. (See Departmental Guidelines for Qualifying Examination.)
- G) **Thesis Plan** - When indeed the student is prepared to begin writing the thesis, the Advisory Committee should be given an opportunity to review the proposed structure and tentative outline of contents of the thesis. This step is seen as one that should be of major assistance to the student and, hopefully, will reduce the number of major revisions.
- H) **Thesis Review** - Drafts of the thesis will initially be corrected by the supervisor. Committee members should then review the final draft of the thesis and offer additional constructive criticisms. When the committee is satisfied that a final thesis is available, they can give recommendation for its Departmental defense for the M.Sc. or Ph.D.
- I) **Departmental Defense (M.Sc. and Ph.D.)** - The members of the Student Advisory Committee act as members of the Thesis Examination Committee, along with other appointees. (See Departmental Guidelines for Defense of Master's Theses) and (see Departmental Guidelines for Defense of Doctoral Theses).

5. **General guidelines for the conduct of Student Advisory Committee Meetings**

Meetings should be held as often as necessary but at least once per year and ideally every six months (or twice per year). A student may request that a committee meeting be held at any time they feel it is necessary or appropriate, whether or not 12 months have passed from the date of the previous meeting. A supervisor may also request that a meeting be held whether or not 12 months have passed.

Meetings are normally held to discuss:

- A) course work requirements or problems
- B) research proposal

- C) research progress
- D) thesis plans, review and/or approval
- E) reclassification to Ph.D.
- F) questions or concerns from the student
- G) other issues

To ensure that advisory committee meetings are as efficient and effective as possible, students should:

- a) provide the committee with a copy of information to be discussed, e.g. research proposal, progress report (recent data and interpretation), new protocols, etc. in advance of the meeting to allow time for adequate review. Students are advised to contact their advisory committee members individually to establish how much time they require to read whatever is being circulated for discussion, and to clarify whether the committee members would prefer to receive the material electronically or in paper form. A copy should also be provided to the Graduate Administrator for your file
- b) begin the meeting with a short oral presentation summarizing the research proposal, data, etc. and other information to be discussed
- c) note comments and suggestions, clearly identifying needs for follow-up work.

A summary report must be completed for each meeting, signed by the committee members, and submitted to the Graduate Coordinator for the student's file. To facilitate this process, the Graduate Coordinator should be informed of all student advisory committee meetings in advance, so that they can prepare the student's file and committee report form and book a room for the meeting if necessary.

It may occasionally be necessary to schedule an Advisory Committee meeting at a time when all members of the committee cannot attend (e.g., when committee members travel schedules conflict). In these instances, the student should arrange to meet individually with the missing committee member to receive their feedback on whatever written material was discussed at the committee meeting.

***In camera* portions of Student Advisory Committee meetings:**

- a) The student may be asked to step out of the room prior to the start of the meeting, after the completion of the question period, or at both times, to allow for discussion among the committee members of progress or other issues relevant to the student's program. These in camera sessions are not necessarily required and their usage is at the discretion of the supervisor

and the committee;

- b) At the end of the meeting, the Supervisor will step out of the room to allow the student to have a private conversation with the other committee members regarding any topic, including courses, progress, the relationship with the supervisor, career advice, etc. If the student raises any concerns during this session that should be brought to the attention of the department, it will be the responsibility of the most senior member of the Advisory Committee to confidentially report these concerns to the Associate Chair (Graduate Education) at the earliest possible time.

6. Reports to Department - At each stage of the activity of the Advisory Committee, a report along with a copy of the material described (e.g. proposal, progress report, thesis plan, etc.) will be entered into the student's file and will remain available for subsequent review by the committee and by the Department.

7. SGS Checklist for Supervisor and Ph.D. Students - SGS has listed a number of questions as a guide in the supervision of graduate students. These are provided <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/resources-supports/supervision/supervision-guidelines/>

TABLE 1

Suggested Time Limits for Stages in M.Sc. Program

Stage	M.Sc.	
	Full-Time	Part-Time
Admission & Program Design	September of 1 st year	September of 1 st year

Registration/ Enrolment	September of 1 st year	September of 1 st year
Course Work Completed (required Courses)	May of 1st year	May of 2 nd year
Presentation of Research Proposal	January of 1 st year	January of 1 st year
Progress Review	Every 6-12 months	Every year
Reclassification Assessment	12-15 months of MSc registration	N/A
Thesis Plan Presentation + Writing	May/June of 2 nd year	May/June of 4 th year
Thesis Approval	August of 2 nd year	August of 4 th year
Thesis Defense:		
Departmental	September of 2 nd year	September of 4 th year
SGS Final Exam	N/A	N/A

TABLE 2

Suggested Time Limits for Stages in Ph.D. Program

Stage	Ph.D. after M.Sc.	
	September Start	January Start

Admission & Program Design	September of 1 st year	January of 1 st year
Registration/ Enrolment	September of 1 st year	January of 1 st year
Course Work Completed (required Courses)	August of 3 rd year	December of 3 rd year
Presentation of Research Proposal (Qualifying Exam)	May of 1 st year	December of 1 st year
Progress Review	Every 6-12 months	Every 6-12 months
Thesis Plan Presentation; Writing	April of 3 rd year	August of 3 rd year
Thesis Approval	June of 4 th year	October of 4 th year
Thesis Defense:		
Departmental	July of 4 th year	November of 4 th year
SGS Final Exam	September of 4 th year	January of 5 th year

TABLE 3

Suggested Time Limits for Stages in Direct Entry and Reclassification Ph.D. Program

Stage	Direct Entry Ph.D.	Reclassification PhD
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	Sept. Start	Jan. Start	Sept. Start	Jan. Start
Admission & Program Design	September of 1 st year	January of 1 st year	September of 1 st year	January of 1 st year
Registration/ Enrolment	September of 1 st year	January of 1 st year	September of 1 st year	January of 1 st year
Course Work Completed (required Courses)	August of 4 th year	December of 4 th year	August of 3 rd year	December of 3 rd year
Presentation of Research Proposal (Qualifying Exam)	May of 1 st year	December of 1 st year	Not required	Not required
Progress Review	Every 6-12 months	Every 6-12 months	Every 6-12 months	Every 6-12 months
Thesis Plan Presentation; Writing	April of 4 th year	August of 4 th year	April of 4 th year	August of 4 th year
Thesis Approval	June of 5 th year	October of 5 th year	June of 5 th year	October of 5 th year
Thesis Defense:				
Departmental	July of 5 th year	November of 5 th year	July of 5 th year	November of 5 th year
SGS Final Exam	September of 5 th year	January of 6 th year	September of 5 th year	January of 6 th year

APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF RESPONSIBILITIES

A. SUPERVISOR

1. Offer advice in the selection of courses and development of research proposal.
2. Provide day-to-day supervision in the conduct of research.
3. Organize and attend advisory committee meetings.
4. Attend and evaluate student seminars.
5. Offer advice in the writing of thesis.
6. Correct initial drafts and approve final drafts of thesis.
7. Prepare students for comprehensive or reclassification examinations, seminars, conference presentations.
8. Attend thesis defense examination.
9. Assure student of funding.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

1. Offer advice in selection of courses and research program.
2. Provide constructive criticism and advice on thesis proposal.
3. Provide advice or assist students in thesis research when needed.
4. Attend advisory committee meetings to evaluate student progress, thesis plan, etc.
5. Attend and evaluate student seminars.
6. Help prepare students for comprehensive or reclassification examinations.
7. Read, offer constructive criticism and approve final drafts of thesis.
8. Attend thesis defense examination.

APPENDIX B

WRITING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Characteristics of a Good Proposal

1. provide a clear, accurate and complete picture of the activity to be undertaken.
2. provide all necessary information to make a judgement regarding the merit of the project.
3. convince the reader that the research is worthwhile, that it is likely to succeed, is methodologically sound and is achievable within the time required for graduate work.

Typical Components of a Research Proposal

- Title page: with name of the project, student and supervisor.
- Introduction: Provide a statement of the overall research questions or objectives and hypothesis of the research to be undertaken and why it is important that the research be carried out.
- Review of Literature-Critically review pertinent literature. Review the most significant previous work and describe the current status of research in the field that led to the unanswered questions, the hypothesis and proposed research. This section should provide the reader with adequate background to understand the rationale of the research and to display the student's analysis of existing knowledge. It should logically lead to the statement of the specific objectives or research questions.
- Specific Objectives or Research Questions - Provide a list.
- Methods-Describe the research plan. For students involving experiments, provide details including a description of the experiments in the sequence in which they are to be carried out; number of human subjects or species of animals and their treatment; the analytical methods and techniques to be used; the kinds of data expected; the means by which the data are to be analyzed and interpreted to attain the objectives. Include any discussion of pitfalls that might be encountered and the limitations of the proposed procedure.
- Timeline-A tentative schedule of the main steps of the experiment or data gathering and analysis planned.
- Reference List.