

Department of Nutritional Sciences,
Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto
Ph.D. QUALIFYING EXAMINATION (revised September 2020)

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

A. POLICY

Successful completion of a Ph.D. Qualifying Examination is a requirement for the Ph.D. degree in the Department of Nutritional Sciences. This requirement is waived for students who have successfully passed the Ph.D. Reclassification Examination in the Department of Nutritional Sciences.

B. PURPOSE

The Ph.D. Qualifying Examination serves 3 main purposes: 1) to encourage early communication between supervisor and student regarding the overarching Ph.D. work and thereby assist students to complete their degree in a timely fashion (i.e., within 4 years). The Examination will ensure that all Ph.D. students have, during the first year of their program, completed half of their course requirements in a satisfactory manner and developed and defended a research proposal which is both adequate and feasible to complete in a timely fashion, normally defined as being within the next 3 years. 2) The defense of the proposal will test the student's ability to conceptualize and integrate knowledge and his or her understanding of research design, as well as breadth of knowledge tangential to the thesis. 3) The Examination will allow weak students to be identified early in their program and remedial action implemented.

C. PROCEDURES

1. Scheduling of Examination in Relation to the Student's program

The Ph.D. Qualifying Examination must be cleared before the start of the student's second academic year. Normally students whose Ph.D. program starts in September will have their Qualifying Examination the following Spring term, while those whose Ph.D. program starts in January will have their Qualifying Examination the following Fall term. The Graduate Administrator will coordinate the scheduling of these examinations. Once a date has been set, the student will submit a 250-word abstract of their thesis proposal to the Graduate Coordinator. This abstract will be used to help identify suitable examiners.

2. The Ph.D. Qualifying Examination Committee

An ad hoc Examination Committee will be struck for each student's qualifying exam. The committee will include the Graduate Coordinator, two in-depth reviewers, one reader, and the student's supervisor. The in-depth reviewers will be faculty members who are not members of the student's advisory committee, but the reader will be proposed by the student and may be drawn from the student's advisory committee. The Examination Committee will be developed by the Graduate Coordinator in advance of the date that the student's proposal is submitted. In assigning proposals to individual faculty members, the Graduate Coordinator will consider the expertise of examination committee members, while at the same time endeavouring to balance the workload across the Department.

3. Written Proposal

The student will provide the Examination Committee with a written proposal for his or her PhD program at least 2 weeks before the date of the examination. The proposal should include a background/literature review, rationale, objectives and/or hypothesis, methods and discussion of the anticipated findings and/or their interpretation. The proposal should be a maximum of 20 pages of double-spaced text with 1inch margins all around and font size no smaller than Times New Roman 12, or Arial 11. An unlimited number of references, tables and figures may be included as an appendix.

The in-depth reviewers will be required to provide written comments on the student's proposal (to be shared with the student after the oral examination) and to lead the questioning of the student at the examination. The reader will not be required to provide any written assessment of the proposal but will participate in the questioning of the student during the examination.

4. Conduct of the Examination

The Chair of all Qualifying Examinations will be the Graduate Chair or a representative.

On the day of the examination, the student will provide the Examination Committee with his or her PhD Program Milestones Form which has been filled out, including at least 2 courses completed.

The examination of each student will last approximately 2hr; the student will make a 15-20 min oral presentation of his or her thesis proposal followed by questions from the Examination Committee. The questioning will be led by the two in-depth reviewers, followed by the reader and the student's supervisor. In their questioning, the examiners will probe the student's ability to discuss and defend the thesis proposal. This will include examination of i) how well the student is able to situate his/her research in the field more broadly; ii) the logic underlying the specific research objectives and hypotheses proposed (e.g., why choose this particular focus?); iii) the reasoning behind the proposed study methods (including sample size, study design, analytic methods, etc.); iv) the student's ability to contrast the proposed methods to alternative approaches and defend his/her decisions; and v) the perceived significance of the proposed research.

When questioning has been completed, the candidate will be requested to leave the room and the committee will be asked to address two questions: 1) Was the student's performance acceptable? 2) Is the proposal acceptable as submitted or does it require modification? In evaluating the student's performance, the examiners will consider his/her ability to conceptualize and integrate knowledge and understand research design, as well as the student's breadth of knowledge tangential to the thesis. In evaluating the written thesis proposal, the examiners will consider the adequacy of the background/literature review, rationale, objectives and/or hypothesis, methods and discussion of the anticipated findings and/or their interpretation, while taking into account the constraints imposed by the 20-page limit on this document. Formal votes are taken on each question. A student will be deemed to have passed the examination if at least 3 members of the Examination Committee vote that the student has passed. If the student passes, the PhD Program Milestones Form will be approved by the Graduate Coordinator.

All students will receive written feedback on their proposal and performance at the examination. This feedback will include the written reviews of the student's proposal prepared by the two in-depth reviewers, as well as a brief assessment of the student's performance at the examination, prepared by

the Graduate Coordinator. The Graduate Coordinator's assessment should include comments on the student's strengths and weaknesses as indicated during the examination and identify any needs for remedial work. The in-depth reviewers may elect to provide their comments by inserting text directly electronically on the proposal document. If the Examination Committee has judged that modifications to the proposal are required, these will be detailed in the Graduate Coordinator's assessment. The Graduate Administrator will be responsible for forwarding the in-depth reviews and Graduate Coordinator's summary report to the student and his/her supervisor after the examination.

A student who passes the examination but whose proposal requires modifications will be expected to submit a revised proposal to the Graduate Coordinator within 30 days of the examination. At this time, the student should also submit a brief written 'response' to the Examiners' comments, describing the changes made in response to the feedback. This 'response' should not exceed 2 pages in length. The Graduate Coordinator and supervisor will evaluate the adequacy of the revised proposal.

Students who do not pass the examination on the first attempt may, if the Examination Committee so recommends, choose to be re-examined before the end of their first year of their Ph.D. program. Since successful completion of the Ph.D. Qualifying Examination is a requirement of the Ph.D., if the examination is not cleared on the second attempt, the student will be asked to leave the Ph.D. program immediately and the Department will refuse further registration in the Ph.D. Degree program.