

Guidelines for PhD Candidacy Examinations in EOAS

April 15, 2025

The PhD Candidacy exam is meant to determine the adequacy of a student's academic background, knowledge and readiness to carry out PhD-level research, as evidenced by the ability to:

1. Articulate clear and significant research questions and propose feasible methodological approaches to examine those questions.
2. Demonstrate a sound understanding of a relevant scientific context for the research, including both depth and breadth of knowledge as defined by the examination committee prior to the exam.
3. Demonstrate critical and independent thinking and the ability to interpret relevant concepts and/or observations.
4. Demonstrate an appropriate level of proficiency with key methodological approaches that will be used to conduct the research.

Well prior to the oral PhD Candidacy exam, the candidate must produce a well-developed research proposal. The proposal is not meant to rigidly define the student's PhD research trajectory. Rather, it is meant to demonstrate the candidate's ability to plan their research and articulate clear research questions, critically review relevant literature, propose a feasible approach, and define the contributions of the proposed research. This final version of the proposal must be formally accepted by the supervisory committee prior to the oral Candidacy Exam. The final version of the proposal must be presented to the examining committee at least two weeks prior to the Candidacy Exam. For timelines and milestones towards the preparation for the PhD Candidacy Exam, please see the separate document 'EOAS_PhD_Candidacy_Exam_Timelines_2025'. The research proposal typically contains the following components:

1. Introduction to topic of research
2. Literature review and identification of knowledge gaps
3. Definition of overarching objective for thesis, specific objectives for chapters and research questions
4. Description of methods and strategy for achieving the objectives and addressing the research questions
5. Anticipated significance of work
6. Planned contributions (e.g. journal papers)
7. Proposed timeline for completing the various components of the work

Formatting requirements:

1. 30 pages maximum including, figures tables and references
2. 12 pt font, 1" margins

In addition to the proposal, all EOAS students will be required to take a 2.5-3 hour oral examination, during which they will give a 20-25 minute overview of their proposed research and undergo one or more rounds of open questioning by an examining committee. Normally the candidacy examination is not a comprehensive exam, but questions will focus on the proposed research and directly related fields. The questioning will be used to ascertain the student's knowledge level, both in terms of breadth

and depth, related to the proposed area of research. As part of the open questioning, the student may also be expected to defend some aspects of the research proposal (e.g. significance of research questions and relative strengths / weaknesses of methodological approaches). Additional examination formats, over and above the oral examination may be used at the discretion of supervisory committee. The nature of these additional examinations must be made clear to the student in writing, with at least three months' prior notice. Note: The PhD Candidacy examination for ATSC students contains elements in addition to the oral exam. This interdisciplinary program has structures agreed upon by various groups across campus. Information related to the ATSC Candidacy exam is posted separately. Students are encouraged to consult with their supervisor or the director of the ATSC program.

Procedures for Candidacy Examination

1. The Candidacy Examination is normally held within the first 18-24 months of a student entering graduate studies at UBC.
2. It is required by G+PS that all doctoral students be admitted to candidacy within 36 months from the date of initial registration ([Comprehensive Examination and Candidacy - Graduate School - University of British Columbia - Vancouver - Canada](#)). A student who is not admitted to candidacy within this time period will be required to withdraw from the program. Extensions may be granted under exceptional circumstances and with the permission of the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. The date of initial registrations for students who have transferred from a Masters program is the initial registration to the Masters program, NOT the date of transfer to the PhD program.
3. The Examination Committee will comprise the supervisor, at least two additional members from the Supervisory Committee, at least one faculty member not on the Supervisory Committee, and the Chair of the Examination Committee. At least 50% of the supervisory committee must be members of G+PS. If a member of the supervisory committee is not a G+PS Member, a recommendation for this committee member to serve on an UBC doctoral committee must have been submitted to G+PS and approved prior to the examination. The external examiner should have a general understanding of the broad research area but does not have to be an expert in the field. They must not be on the student's supervisory committee or have a close involvement with the proposed research project. The Chair is any one of the EOAS-designated persons identified for this role and cannot be a member of the Supervisory Committee. The list of currently available PhD examination chairs is available on 'GradMe'. The Chair's role is to moderate the exam, document the results and ensure consistency and fairness across the department. It is up to the student and the supervisor to identify a chair for the examination.
4. The Examination Committee including the External Examiner and Chair must be set at least one month prior to the exam. The candidate has the right to request for the examination not to be held until at least three months after the Examination Committee has been identified. This option is intended to allow the candidate to prepare for the examination but need not be exercised.
5. Preparation of a written thesis proposal (maximum 30 pages, including figures, tables and references). The final proposal must be approved by the supervisory committee and submitted to the Examination Committee at least two full weeks prior to the examination date (for details on content see above).

6. The oral examination comprises:

- a. An oral presentation of the PhD research plan (preferably 20-25 minutes and not to exceed 30 minutes).
 - b. A first round of questions from the committee members, based on approximate reverse order of proximity to the candidate, thus: (1) External examiner; (2) Members of supervisory committee (3) Research Supervisors (in reverse order of proximity if more than one). Each committee member should restrict themselves to approximately 15-20 minutes of questions, moderated by the Chair. Questions commonly focus on the proposed research, as described in the proposal and presented orally.
 - c. An additional round of questions can be allowed to address any important outstanding questions or to follow up directly on answers given during the first round. These additional questions are optional (subject to reasonable time constraints and at the discretion of the examination chair).
 - d. The student is asked to leave the room.
 - e. The supervisor should first discuss the candidate's academic / research performance, providing information about possible situations that may have affected progress in the PhD program and performance during the Candidacy exam. This should be followed by an open discussion where each examining committee member provides comments on the quality of the student's research presentation, answers to questions, and the adequacy of the proposed research as described in the proposal.
 - f. If the student is to be given a pass with conditions (see below), the nature of the conditions must be determined before asking the candidate to return.
 - g. Once the candidate has been recalled, the result will be announced along with details of any necessary conditional pass requirements, if necessary.
 - h. The results of the PhD Candidacy examination will fall into one of four categories:
 - i. a clear pass
 - ii. pass with conditions
 - iii. failure with the option to retake the examination once, within 6 months.
 - iv. failure and dismissal.
 - i. The Examination Chair will prepare a report on the exam and upload this using the 'GradMe' tool. As per G+PS procedures, the Chair's report will separately address the adequacy of the research proposal, the quality of the oral presentation and the ease with which the candidate answered the questions or challenges from the exam committee. The report will also include the outcome of the exam (as listed above), and details of any conditions required of the candidate.
7. After successful completion of the oral exam, the form [Advancement-to-Candidacy-2024.pdf](#) must be completed. The supervisory committee must be approved in the Supervisory

Committee Management Tool (SCMT) prior to submission of the form to G+PS.

8. The requirements for a doctoral student to be advanced to candidacy are:
 - a. All required coursework has been successfully completed
 - b. The comprehensive examination has been passed
 - c. The research supervisor has certified that the thesis proposal has been approved by the Supervisory Committee
 - d. The student is not on financial hold due to outstanding fees