

## **Guidelines for the Comprehensive Examination Process for Doctoral Students in the Nursing Graduate Studies (NGS) Program**

Doctoral students at University of British Columbia, Okanagan are required to advance to Candidacy **within 36 months** of the date of initial registration, as indicated in the policy contained in the Academic Calendar:

<http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/okanagan/index.cfm?tree=18,285,984,1168>

All doctoral students in the Nursing Graduate Studies (NGS) program are required: first, to complete all required coursework; and then, to complete the comprehensive examination process. During this period, they are also required, third, to obtain approval of their dissertation proposal/prospectus. When all three requirements have been satisfied, the student is admitted to candidacy. This document is concerned with the comprehensive examination portion of advancement to candidacy.

A comprehensive examination is intended to test the student's comprehensive knowledge of the chosen field(s) of study and the student's ability to communicate that knowledge with thorough understanding. The student is expected to demonstrate mastery of the concepts, theories, methods, controversies, and recent advancements in the field as well as to demonstrate critical insights concerning how knowledge in their areas of study is being (and can be) advanced. The comprehensive examination is the primary mechanism by means of which academic mastery can be demonstrated and by means of which the committee judges the ability of the student to pursue advanced research at a doctoral level. It is therefore intended to be an academically useful tool and to be of the highest academic standard.

### **1. Purpose of the Comprehensive Examination Guidelines**

Supervising faculty members will make this document available to every doctoral student in order to facilitate informed discussion prior to initiation of the comprehensive examination process. The purpose of this document is to help ensure that there is:

1. consistency in the design and delivery of the comprehensive examination within the NGS program,
2. absence (and perceived absence) of bias, and
3. overall fairness for all participants in the examination process.

The comprehensive examination process proposed for each student must be consistent with the nature of the nursing degree and the requirements of CoGS. The comprehensive examine provides an occasion for focus and synthesis of learning obtained through course work, self-study, and identification of substantive areas of interest in the program. Successful completion of the examination assures both the student and the faculty that there is sufficient preparation and skill to participate in informed discourse with colleagues in the scholarly community. A formal and rigorous procedure creates a meaningful benchmark in the learning process. Specific comprehensive examination formats in the NGS program must, therefore, conform to the guidelines set out herein, including minimum and maximum lengths of the written component, the need for both a written and an oral component, the timing of the components, etc.

Supervisory Committees are, accordingly, expected to make clear to the student a set of specific timelines for each stage of the comprehensive process, from initial planning, to study and preparation, to fulfillment of each component or requirement. Clarifying such expectations will

assist students and their supervisors in tracking the student's progress through the comprehensive examination process and in ensuring an equitable process for all NGS students.

## **2. Initiating the Process**

Students are encouraged to meet with their Supervisory Committee members well before the beginning of the examination period (at least four (4) months prior) to discuss expectations they and their Supervisory Committee have concerning the examination format, structure, and content that is suitable to the areas of knowledge that will serve as the most important intellectual framework(s) for the subsequent dissertation research that the student will undertake. At this beginning point in the process, the Supervisory Committee should identify at least three (3) members (including an external member who is familiar with the nursing doctoral program but not a member of the students supervisory committee, but not including a neutral chair) to serve on the student's comprehensive examination committee. The minimum number of comprehensive examination committee members, including the external member and the supervisor – but not including the neutral chair who plays no pedagogical role in the examination – is three (3) members. Not including the neutral chair, the comprehensive examination should not be larger than five (5) members.

The comprehensive examination committee will set and judge this examination in a manner compatible with the guidelines laid out in this document and with College of Graduate Studies (CoGS) policies.

## **3. Guidelines for the NGS Doctoral Comprehensive Examination**

The remainder of this document outlines current best practices and required procedures for the comprehensive examination, including: purpose and scope, timing, examination procedures and format, written examination preparation period, criteria for evaluation, and adjudication. Once established, the examination committee in each instance has the responsibility to set, conduct, and adjudicate the comprehensive examination in a manner that is consistent with NGS program norms, the policies established by CoGS, and the overall standards of academic excellence at the University of British Columbia.

### **3.1 Purpose of the Examination**

The purpose of the comprehensive examination is to provide formal opportunities for students to demonstrate their abilities to conceptualize and synthesize knowledge relevant to the discipline of nursing. It is intended to ensure that students have both the background knowledge and the analytic abilities required to proceed into their focused areas of independent research; that is, the examination represents an opportunity to assess whether the student has the necessary knowledge and ability to successfully pursue creative, independent scholarship that will advance the body of knowledge within nursing. The examination also provides for the opportunity to assess whether students have developed the ability to communicate their knowledge about their substantive area and the discipline of nursing.

### **3.2 Examination Timing**

It is important for the supervisor and the examination committee to specify for the student the precise timing of the comprehensive examination, including the earliest and latest dates by which the comprehensive examination is to be completed. Given the importance of the examination and the consequences of failure, students must be informed of the specific dates of their examination so that they have adequate time to prepare.

The examination should be held reasonably early in the student's period of study, with the process beginning immediately after coursework is complete, but at the latest at a time that allows for completion of any conditions that might be required by the Examining Committee in the circumstances of a conditional pass, or for re-examination if the exam is failed (and the committee agrees to a re-take), within the College of Graduate Studies-mandated time period for advancement to candidacy (thirty-six [36] months from the start of the program). Accordingly, students should not be expected to spend a length of time preparing for and taking the examination that is inconsistent with these overall time constraints.

The NGS Program expectation is that students will have completed their course requirements, comprehensive examination, and dissertation proposal approval, and advanced to candidacy within the first thirty-six (36) months of their doctoral program. If, for some reason, the student has not completed these three requirements for advancement to candidacy within this 36-month time frame, but wishes to continue in their program, the supervisor must complete the [Request for Extension to Time Allowed for Advancement to Candidacy](#) form found on the College of Graduate Studies website. The granting of such extensions is not automatic: students may be required to withdraw from their program.

### **3.3 Examination Procedures and Format**

The comprehensive examination consists of two components—a written phase and an oral phase. The student must successfully complete both components. The content of these two components will vary by program of study within the overall NGS program.

1. Written component. The comprehensive examination comprises two questions that are answered in a two-week take-home examination consisting of two papers. Each paper is 2500-3000 words in length and is written in APA or other accepted style. The student will have exactly two weeks to write the exam. They will draw on the literature from the annotated bibliography in answering these questions, but is not restricted to this literature. They will submit (via e-mail) the completed papers (with questions attached) to the examination committee members **and** the PhD coordinator on the exam completion date (no later than 9 am). The oral defence will be held a week later.
2. An oral examination that tests the student's knowledge related to the topics above. There is no student presentation at the oral defence. The oral exam lasts between 90 and 120 minutes. The participants in the oral component include: doctoral student, supervisor (or co-supervisors), examination committee members (two or more faculty in addition to the supervisor or co-supervisors, including an external member), and a neutral chair. The neutral chair is any UBC faculty member who has not collaborated with and is not otherwise in a situation of conflict of interest with the student or the supervisor or co-supervisor(s) of the student. The responsibility of the neutral chair is to ensure that CoGS and IGS policies are followed and that the oral examination is conducted in a professional, impartial, and timely manner.

The preparation and evaluation of the comprehensive examination is the responsibility of the comprehensive examination committee. The examiners will individually evaluate the papers and set questions for the oral exam, none of which is discussed prior to the exam. It is expected that all committee members will attend the oral exam and participate in questioning the student, including the chair. The participants in the oral component include:

- Doctoral student

- Supervisor (or co-supervisors)
- Examination committee members (two or more faculty in addition to the supervisor or co-supervisors, including an external member who is familiar with the nursing doctoral program but not a member of the students supervisory committee)
- Neutral chair

(see Appendix A for evaluation criteria – page 8)

### **3.4 Written Examination Preparatory Period**

The student is expected to have completed all foundational coursework for the doctoral program. Also, in consultation with the supervisor, the student will prepare an annotated bibliography of 20 - 30 publications that constitute key readings in the student's declared substantive area. Students may elect to include a brief "preamble" to introduce the substantive area. While there are no strict deadlines, this process is normally completed in a four-six week period. The annotated bibliography needs to be approved by the supervisor before it is submitted to the committee for review, but it is not evaluated as part of the exam. Guidelines for the format of the annotated bibliography is provided in Appendix B (page 9).

Also in consultation with the supervisor, the student will develop four questions arising from the bibliography together with the core course readings. At least one question will deal with methodological issues, one with broader professional or disciplinary issues in nursing, one with theoretical issues, and one with issues in the student's identified substantive area. Based on the annotated bibliography and the four questions submitted by the student, the Comprehensive Examination Committee will finalize two questions for this examination.

It should be noted that the process of preparing for the comprehensive exam is expected to be different for each student, varying according to individual needs and goals.

### **3.5 Criteria for evaluation**

The criteria for evaluation are set out in Appendix A (page 8) of this document. Assessment of student performance is based on both the written and oral components in combination. Most especially: does the student demonstrate adequate preparation for undertaking doctoral level research consistent with the standards of the University of British Columbia?

Students must achieve a pass for both the written (wherever applicable) and the oral components of the examination in order to successfully pass their comprehensive examination. Failure of any one component of the examination will result in the student being required to be re-examined on the failed component. Only one such re-examination per failed component is permitted.

### **3.6 Adjudication**

After the oral component, the comprehensive examination committee must deliberate in camera (absent the student) to work toward achieving consensus concerning the outcome of the examination. If consensus cannot be achieved, a process of secret balloting is used to gain a majority. The neutral chair is a non-voting participant who manages the secret ballots, reports the outcome to the examination committee and the student, and notes the necessity of any voting process in the reporting of the examination to CoGS. The neutral chair is also responsible for submitting to CoGS the final report regarding the outcome and any/all conditions that are imposed on the student with regard to further advancement through the program. The CoGS

Comprehensive Examination Report can be found here:

<https://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/resources/forms/doctoral-comprehensive-examination-report/>

The possible outcomes for the comprehensive examination are as follows:

### **Unconditional Pass**

The student passes without conditions.

### **Conditional Pass**

If the student is given a conditional pass, the student passes with specific conditions imposed, which usually require additional work to demonstrate proficiency in areas of deficiency.

Additional requirements must be specified with great clarity (i.e., the precise scope, expected standards, and time to completion). Typically, these requirements would be completed in—at most—a matter of three (3) months:

- The student may, for example, be required to successfully write a paper in an area in which the committee finds the student needs additional knowledge.
- The additional academic requirements are to be provided to the student in writing by the examination committee and to include expected standards of achievement and times for completion.
- If the student does not complete the conditions to the satisfaction of a majority of the members of the examination committee within the specified time frame, the examination is failed, and the steps outlined in following section (see section entitled Failure) commence.

The comprehensive examination committee may decide that a short meeting consisting of committee members (including the neutral chair) and the student is required for final agreement that the conditions have been fulfilled.

### **Failure**

If a student fails the written component of the comprehensive examination (students who fail the written component cannot move on to the oral component) or is judged not to have performed satisfactorily overall (after the written and oral components have concluded), the examination committee must decide between two options:

1. Dismissal from the program (effective immediately).
2. Opportunity for re-examination:
  - i. The student is allowed one additional opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to perform to doctoral standards (If the student is allowed to repeat the examination, the student is to be informed immediately after the examination).
  - ii. The conditions for repeating the examination are to be clearly defined, including the format, time frame, potential dates, and nature of the re-examination process, and the consequences of a second failure. All examination committee members must agree—preferably by consensus, but, if need be, by majority vote—to these conditions before a second re-examination process can begin.
  - iii. A re-examination would typically have both written and oral components, but would not duplicate materials and knowledge that the student adequately addressed in the initial attempt.

- iv. The re-examination should be completed within four to six (4-6) months, **and** prior to the 36-month CoGS deadline for advancement to candidacy.
- v. The original membership of the examination committee (including the neutral chair) must remain unchanged for the re-examination.
- vi. There is no opportunity in any IGS program for a third comprehensive examination round: Failing a comprehensive examination a second time will lead to dismissal from the program.

### **3.7 Recommendation for Advancement to Candidacy**

If the student passes all components of the comprehensive examination process and has completed the necessary coursework in the program, the student will then complete the last step required for advancement to Candidacy by submitting a thesis prospectus for approval. Once that approval has been obtained, the student's Supervisory Committee completes the College of Graduate Studies [Recommendation for Advancement to Candidacy](#) form and submits it with the required signatures to the College of Graduate Studies.

### **3.8 Feedback**

The assessment and reasons for the decision reached by the Comprehensive Examination Committee are to be documented and provided to the student by way of a verbal communiqué after the oral examination component of the comprehensive examination, as well as by way of a written report made available to the student within one (1) week of the oral component having taken place. Although this report should be communicated and signed by the neutral chair, the substance is to be written by the supervisor in collaboration with examination committee members. The document must include sufficient detail to allow the student to understand the decision, including identification of strengths and weaknesses, as well as any recommendations arising out of the comprehensive examination process.

In regard to the oral examination specifically, the student should be given feedback on their demonstrated comprehensive knowledge of the field, the quality of their presentation, the logical flow and clarity of their oral responses, and their overall ability to answer satisfactorily the questions posed to them during the examination.

### **3.9 Other Considerations**

- The student's Supervisory Committee should confer to confirm the student's readiness for the examination **before** initiating the comprehensive examination process, keeping in mind at the same time the 36-month-to-candidacy requirement.
- The student may wish to conduct a "dry-run" with their peer group and/or supervisor to help prepare for the examination.
- If desired, the student and committee may make the oral examination open to the public.
- Should there be any complications associated with the comprehensive examination process, the student, supervisor and/or Supervisory Committee members should approach the SON graduate program coordinator for advice and clarity concerning the relevant procedures.

### **3.10 Academic Misconduct**

[UBC Policy 85](#) on Scholarly Integrity applies to all comprehensive work. Plagiarism and fabrication or falsification of research data will be considered academic misconduct.

If academic misconduct is suspected, including plagiarism or fabrication/falsification of data, the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies must be informed **immediately**. Concerns should be brought forward directly to the Dean of CoGS, without consultation with others. The examination must be suspended until such time as the Dean or their designate determines whether academic misconduct has occurred and what penalties will be applied. Depending on the Dean/designate's determination, the examination may proceed as scheduled, be rescheduled, or be cancelled. If academic misconduct is suspected the examination must be suspended and the College of Graduate Studies must be contacted immediately (250-807-8180).

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: Evaluation Criteria

The examinations are adjudicated on a pass/fail basis (in some instances the committee may reserve judgment and require that the student write a second examination). The written papers (each 2500- 3000 words) and oral defence will be reviewed by the examination committee to determine whether the student has:

- Addressed the examination questions
- Demonstrated logical development of arguments and defence of positions
- Showed evidence of critical and analytical thinking
- Demonstrated substantive knowledge of the declared field(s)
- Integrated knowledge about disciplinary controversies and issues in nursing
- Developed arguments and explicit stances that are derived from a theoretical, methodological, or historical perspective of the nursing discipline
- Accurately represented cited sources and authors
- Demonstrated competence in communication (parsimony, clarity, and accuracy of language use)

## APPENDIX B: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES

An annotated bibliography includes descriptions and explanations of your listed sources beyond the basic citation information you usually provide in a reference list.

### *Why do an annotated bibliography?*

An annotated bibliography provides specific information about each source you have used. As a researcher, you have become an expert on your topic and have the ability both to explain the content and to assess the usefulness of your sources. The annotated bibliography allows you to tell readers what sources are important under particular situations and their strengths and limitations. You want to give your audience enough information to understand what the references are about and to make an informed decision about useful sources.

### *What does an annotated bibliography do?*

A good annotated bibliography

- • Encourages you to think critically about the content of the works you are using, their place within a field of study, and their relation to your work.
- • Proves you have read and understand your sources.
- • Establishes your work as a valid source and you as a competent researcher.
- • Situates your study and topic in a continuing professional conversation.
- • Provides a way for others to decide whether a source will be helpful to their research.

### *Critical/evaluative annotation*

For the purpose of the comprehensive examination, students will be developing critical/evaluative annotations, which have these defining features:

- • They sum up the content of the source.
- • They give an overview of the arguments and proofs/evidence addressed in the work and note
- • The resulting conclusion.
- • When appropriate, they describe the author's methodology or approach to material. For instance, you might mention if the source is an ethnography or if the author employs a particular kind of theory.
- • Evaluate the source or author critically (biases, lack of evidence etc.).
- • Show how the work may or may not be useful for a particular field of study or audience.
- • Explain how researching this material informed your work.

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***What elements might critical/evaluative annotations include?***

1. Bibliography according to the appropriate citation style (APA).
2. Explanation of main points and/or purpose of the work—basically, its thesis—which shows among other things that you have read and thoroughly understand the source.
3. Verification or critique of the authority or qualifications of the author.
4. Comments on the worth, effectiveness, and utility of the work in terms of both the topic being researched and/or your work.
5. The point of view or perspective from which the work was written. For instance, you may note whether the author seemed to have particular biases or was trying to reach a particular audience.
6. Relevant links to other work done in the area, like related sources, possibly including a comparison with some of those already on your list. You may want to establish connections to other aspects of the same argument or opposing views.