

PhD Comprehensive Examination Procedures
(Approved at EDST Department Meeting, June 17, 2004)

Background

EDST is committed to procedures for the comprehensive examination that are a learning experience for students rather than just another hurdle on the PhD journey.

Two possible lenses exist for thinking about the comprehensive examination:

1. a test over a comprehensive body of literature in the discipline or field,
2. an examination built around and leading to the PhD thesis.

In the EDST case it is difficult to identify a disciplinary body of literature that can form the basis for a “test.” Even if we applied the notion of different disciplines or fields to the comprehensive, it would be hard to agree on a defined body of knowledge. In the case where this body exists it is quite common to find that one of the purposes of the test is to see if the person has the knowledge needed to teach an academic course in the area. The other lens is to look at “comprehensive” as an examination of the theoretical and methodological aspects associated with the thesis beyond any particular formal disciplinary program. The two lenses may not be mutually exclusive, but a matter of balance to be decided by the student and examining committee.

We define comprehensive as a wide mental grasp. A candidate should go beyond the isolated bits and pieces of knowledge in the exam and exhibit a meaningful response relating various aspects of a particular field or topic.

The expectation is that students will complete the comprehensive examination by the end of their second year in the program. We recognize individual lives differ, and there may be exceptions. Under current Faculty of Graduate Studies policies, doctoral candidacy (comprehensive exam passed and thesis proposal approved) must be attained by the end of the third year. Extension of this period may be permitted by the Dean of Graduate Studies in exceptional circumstances.

The Examination

The PhD comprehensive examination in EDST involves writing three papers. The topics for the three papers may be directly linked or loosely coupled to courses and/or anticipate the thesis and the body of knowledge it involves.

The three papers will normally be written over a single three-month period. Students may write each paper over a month or the three papers together over three months. Prior to writing the papers, the student and committee will meet to determine the topics of the three papers and their boundaries, to clarify expectations, and to agree on process.

A meeting of the whole committee with the student will occur within three weeks after the completion of the three papers. The purpose of the meeting is to stimulate intellectual growth and exchange between the student and their committee. The meeting will give an opportunity for the student and their committee to discuss the three papers. The committee will give the student feedback on both content and writing.

The committee will use the following categories to evaluate each paper: “pass,” “requires minor revisions,” or “fail.” It is highly preferable that all members of the committee agree on the evaluation, but in those rare cases when committee members cannot reach consensus, the majority view will prevail. If any of the three papers requires minor revisions, the committee and the student will negotiate a clear time line to complete the revisions, within a maximum of one month per paper. The revision(s) will be judged “pass” or “fail.” In the case of a failed paper, the student has six months to retake this part of the exam. The nature of the part to be retaken will be determined by the committee in consultation with the student. The exam may only be retaken once. It is the responsibility of the chair of the examination committee to notify the student, in writing, of the results. A copy of this notice will be provided to the Graduate Secretary for the student’s file.

The three papers are intended to demonstrate that the student possesses the content, knowledge, and understandings necessary to undertake the thesis research, at the same time giving them the opportunity to think and reflect on three topics of importance to them. The goal is for the student to take ownership of the papers they write, to show that they can develop independent scholarship. For all these reasons the process needs to be student-driven, student led. The student may consult with committee members, but not hand in drafts or ask for feedback on written papers. While the committee is expected to support the student in preparing for the comprehensive examination, the goal is to develop student self-reliance and independent scholarship.

Any exception to the standard three-paper, three-month format must be petitioned in writing and demonstrate an adequate rationale. Any alternative format must be approved in writing by all members of the committee and the departmental Graduate Advisor prior to the start of the three-month examination period.

Current doctoral students (those enrolled as of May, 2004) will have the option of following the old or the new comprehensive examination procedures. We recommend that the new procedures be evaluated by students and faculty after a three-year period, or in 2007.