
**PROCEDURES AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE EXAMINATION OF PhD THESES:
Conducting the Examination Online**

1. Purposes of the Examination

It is the examiners' task to determine whether the student has met the University's thesis requirement that each doctoral candidate must present and successfully defend a thesis that embodies the results of original research and mature scholarship. The examiners represent Graduate Council and through it the Senate of the University and are therefore responsible for the standard of the PhD in this University.

The oral defence at McMaster University is an examination of a PhD Candidate's ability to defend publicly his/her written work. Therefore, questions having to do with the detailed content, or the general argument of the thesis are relevant, as are questions regarding the relation between the matter of the thesis and the body of knowledge to which it contributes. (The more general judgment of the candidate's proficiency in his/her discipline and particular area of specialization is presumed to have been made at the time of the comprehensive examination.)

The committee of examiners, both of the written thesis and of the oral defence, will not likely all be expert in the candidate's specialty, or even in his/her discipline. It is the particular responsibility of the external examiner and the supervisory committee to ensure that the thesis does indeed present an original and significant contribution to knowledge. Other examiners may reasonably be expected to exercise their judgment as members of the University faculty, keeping in mind the standards of excellence expected by the University of its PhD graduates.

The examiners (who volunteer) are expected to judge whether the defence is satisfactory or unsatisfactory. The examiners have previously read and reported on the written thesis and they must now give their final judgment on it, and the oral defence of it. Examiners are expected to exercise their judgment on these questions and only in exceptional circumstances should they abstain from voting.

2. Before the Oral Examination – NEW effective March 16, 2020

The SGS Thesis Coordinator will send an announcement to the examining committee 2-3 days in anticipation of the defence that will include the email addresses for all participants to help with communication and conducting the meeting.

The Chair of the oral defence will host the web meeting:

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- a. McMaster faculty members have free access to WebEx through UTS.
<https://mi.mcmaster.ca/macpherson-supported-teaching-tools/#tab-content-webex>
https://wiki.mcmaster.ca/webex/training_centre_support_resources
- b. Zoom is another option that is being used by some faculty currently:
<https://zoom.us/meetings>

It is recommended that the Chair and Supervisor finalize the web meeting **1-2 business days** ahead of the defence including a test meeting, preferably with the candidate, to confirm the availability of functionality.

In an effort to reduce interaction during the current COVID-19 outbreak, additional attendees including faculty and students, are temporarily prevented from joining the defence. This decision will be revisited once the restrictions have been removed.

3. Oral Examination Procedure

- a. The Chair of the oral defence will host the web meeting and verify that all participants have joined the meeting online.
- b. When the Chair confirms that all participants are online, the Chair will introduce those committee members not known by the candidate.
- c. The Chair should explain to those present the composition of the examining committee. There will be a **minimum of four members on the examining committee, but not exceeding 5 voting members**. All examining committee members are required to attend. If four examining committee members are not present, the defence **CANNOT** proceed and will have to be re-scheduled. If an examining member is not able to attend at the last minute, approval from the Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies is required to proceed.
- d. The Chair will select the candidate and use the option of moving them to the “Lobby” (WebEx) or “Waiting Room” (Zoom) while the order of questioning is established by the examining committee. Once the discussion is finished, the Chair will “Admit” them back into the room.

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- i. Instructions for moving attendees to and from the “Lobby” in WebEx: <https://help.webex.com/en-us/nsq9s2h/Move-Attendees-to-and-from-the-Lobby-in-Cisco-Webex-Meetings>
- ii. Instructions for managing participants in Zoom: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115005759423-Managing-participants-in-a-meeting>
 - i. Using the “Waiting Room”: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115000332726-Waiting-Room>
- e. The Chair will then have the student present an oral statement about his/her thesis of approximately 15 minutes duration (in no case more than 20 minutes). Controls in the web meeting can be shared to the student to allow them to navigate their presentation for the committee. **The student should stress the main points of the contribution to knowledge and the principal technical difficulties either of an experimental or theoretical nature which he/she has overcome. A simple summary of the thesis is neither necessary nor desirable.**
- f. Individual examiners will question the candidate according to the order established by the Chair. **All members of the examining committee are expected to put questions to the candidate.** Issues that have been raised by members of the supervisory committee in the course of composition of the thesis may nevertheless be profitably brought up now, when the candidate will have to respond in the presence of others.
- g. If present, the external examiner should be given full opportunity to question the candidate. If the external examiner is not present, **it is the Chair’s responsibility to see that questions raised in the external examiner’s report are put to the candidate by some member of the examining committee, preferably the supervisor.**
- h. Candidates who are unwilling or unable to respond to questions should be cautioned that such an action may cause the examination to be adjourned, or in extreme cases, could lead to failure on one of both questions put to the committee about the thesis and its defence.

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- i. When there are no further questions, the Chair should move the candidate to the “lobby” using the corresponding feature to prevent access to the conversation and any recording functionality.
- j. After a discussion of the examination, the Chair will ask for a vote on the success or failure of the **oral defence**. If there are two or more negative or abstaining votes, with at least one of these votes being from a member of the supervisory committee, adjournment is mandatory and a decision must be reached at this time as to whether a reconvened oral defence may be held at a later date. If, in the judgment of the examiners, the defence is to be reconvened, the candidate should be told as clearly as possible what he /she must do to improve his/her defence of the thesis. In the event the written thesis is approved conditionally, the Chair is responsible for ensuring that (1) the candidate is advised of the conditions in writing, (2) the conditions are met before the thesis is submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, and (3) the Thesis Coordinator is informed of the conditions.
- k. Following the committee’s decision, the Chair will email gthesis@mcmaster.ca with a CC to the examining committee to request the written vote of each examiner for the completion of the report form.
- l. The Chair will then “admit” the candidate back into the web meeting to inform him/her of the committee’s decision(s), and for any congratulations or discussion appropriate to the circumstances. A successful candidate may be informed of the identity of the external examiner (in cases where the external examiner is not present).
- m. The examination will be formally adjourned and the web meeting ended. Normally, examination of the candidate will not take more than two hours. In no case should it take more than three.
- n. If the student has failed or if the oral defence is to be reconvened, the Chair of the examining committee should discuss the situation as soon as possible with the Thesis Coordinator.
- o. If the oral defence is reconvened, no new examining committee members will be added, except for necessary replacements. It is the duty of the examiners to attend the reconvened examination, and no subsequent defences may be held.