

# Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy

## **Guidelines for the Comprehensive Examination – PhD in Curriculum Studies**

Approved by GAC November 2010

Approved by EDCP December 2010

These guidelines contain the policies and procedures of the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy for the comprehensive exam in the doctoral program. The guidelines are in accordance with those outlined by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and provide further details on the process.

The Faculty of Graduate Studies (FoGS) requires all doctoral students to successfully complete a comprehensive examination before being admitted to candidacy.

The exam is intended to test the student's grasp of the chosen field of study as a whole, and the student's ability to communicate his or her understanding of it. The student's committee will set and judge this examination in a manner compatible with the policy of the graduate program concerned. The comprehensive examination is separate and distinct from the evaluation of the thesis proposal. *(FoGS Comprehensive Exam Guidelines and Procedures).*

The EDCP Guidelines for the Comprehensive Exam are intended to provide guidance to students, supervisors and committees on the comprehensive exam process within EDCP. The Guidelines provide a structure with clear expectations so that all involved have a somewhat common experience.

### **1.0 Purpose**

The purpose of the comprehensive exam is to demonstrate and communicate: 1) comprehensive knowledge of the chosen field of study; and 2) comprehensive methodological knowledge needed to complete a dissertation. The exam provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate the ability to communicate required in-depth and broad knowledge of the discipline, engage in critical analysis and conceptual synthesis of scholarly literature in required fields, and demonstrate readiness to conduct high quality independent and original research. In addition, an important goal of the exam process is to help students focus on a particular area of study within the field of curriculum studies and receive constructive feedback from the committee. Although the process of completing the comprehensive exams prepares students for their thesis research, examination on specific thesis research is usually considered secondary to the main purpose of the comprehensive exams.

### **2.0 Structure and Content**

The comprehensive exam consists of two parts. One part includes three written papers completed independently by students at a time chosen in consultation with the research committee (usually upon completion of required coursework and typically when the

student is midway through the second year in the program). A second part involves an oral discussion of the papers with the student and his/her committee.

The content of the papers is broadly defined to focus on curriculum studies, research methodology, and area of specialization. It is up to the committee and student to agree on the required breadth and depth of each paper related to a particular focus, recognizing that a main purpose of the exams is to demonstrate and communicate “comprehensive” knowledge in the fields. The comprehensive exams are intended to be somewhat broader than the focus of a specific research problem. Although some aspects of the papers may eventually be included in the thesis or proposal, the exams themselves are not meant to be dissertation chapters or to become the research proposal.

Each paper should be no longer than 7,000 words and usually no less than 5000 words excluding references (footnotes and endnotes are considered to be part of the text and should be included in the overall word count of the paper).

Exceptions to the standard three-paper exam must be presented in writing with detailed rationale to Graduate Advisor. Approval by all members of the committee, the Graduate Advisor, and in some cases the Graduate Advisory Committee is needed for alternative formats.

### **3.0 Examination Process**

Students may complete the comprehensive examination at any time during the academic year, usually after completion of all coursework, and usually within 20 months of the start of program. The expectation by FoGS and the Department is that students complete their comprehensive exam and have their research proposal approved by the end of their second year in the program and no later than the end of the third year. Extensions may be permitted with approval of the Dean of Graduate Studies in exceptional cases.

Typically, the examination process begins as required coursework nears completion. Around this time students and their supervisors begin discussions about the possible focus of the comprehensive exam questions. It is recommended that the research supervisory committee be formed by this time. Working with their supervisor and committee students draft an exam question and selected reference list for each paper. Once the committee approves the questions and respective reference lists students can begin writing the papers, usually over a single three-month period. Students are expected to adhere to this timeline.

A goal of the comprehensive exam process is to demonstrate independent scholarship. Students should therefore share or take on responsibility for developing the exam questions and reading-lists as well as organizing and summarizing comprehensive exam committee meetings. During writing of the papers students may contact their committee members but not submit drafts or request feedback on written work.

Exceptions to the standard three-month timeline for writing the three papers are permitted only with approval of the supervisor, committee and Graduate Advisor. Exceptions must be presented in writing with detailed rationale to the Graduate Advisor. Approval by all members of the committee, the Graduate Advisor, and in some cases the Graduate Advisory Committee is needed for alternative time frames.

#### **4.0 Review and Evaluation of Exams**

Students submit the completed papers to their supervisor and committee members. Within three weeks of submission the whole committee and student will meet to discuss the papers. The meeting provides an opportunity for the student and committee to engage in a discussion of major ideas in the papers. The committee may ask students questions to clarify, extend or challenge ideas presented in the papers. This meeting typically requires approximately 1.5 hours. An additional .5 hours is needed for the committee's in camera discussion and evaluation of the papers and oral discussion.

The committee will assess the papers using the criteria established by FoGS which includes demonstration of:

- strong analytical, problem solving and critical thinking abilities;
- required breadth and in-depth knowledge of the discipline;
- required academic background for the specific doctoral research to follow;
- potential ability to conduct independent and original research;
- ability to communicate knowledge of the discipline

Considering the quality of each paper, the overall quality of the papers as a set, and the oral discussion, the committee should reach a decision on what, if any, revisions will be required prior to acknowledgement of successful completion of the comprehensive exams. The committee should take into consideration assessments made by each committee member on the papers and questioning of the student during the oral discussion.

At the end of the in camera discussion the committee must determine the appropriate category of evaluation for each paper. Any revisions required by the committee must be clearly communicated to the student. The committee will use the following categories to evaluate each paper:

- **Pass:** The paper is satisfactory and meets or exceeds the assessment criteria. No revision or only minor revisions are required.
- **Satisfactory pending substantive revisions:** The paper requires revisions of content. The student and supervisor will establish a clear time line to complete the revisions, up to a maximum of one month per paper. The supervisor withholds a Pass on the paper until revisions are complete.
- **Unsatisfactory:** The paper is unsatisfactory in its current form. Major rewriting and rethinking are required. The student is given two months to re-submit the paper. The nature and extent of the required changes are determined by the

committee in consultation with the student. Only one re-submission per paper is permitted.

- **Fail:** The paper is unsatisfactory and re-submission is not permitted.

It is highly preferable that all members of the committee agree on the evaluation, but in those rare cases when committee members do not reach a consensus, the majority view will hold. Time to complete “substantive revisions” is up to one month per paper. Time to resubmit “unsatisfactory” papers is up to two months per paper. In extraordinary circumstances up to a maximum of six months can be requested by students and approved by the research committee. The composition of the committee usually remains unchanged for the assessment of resubmitted papers. Revisions will be judged as “Pass” or “Fail”.

It is the responsibility of the supervisor to notify students, in writing, of the results of the comprehensive examination. Students can expect written feedback on the quality of the written papers and oral discussion as a summary report from the committee and/or from each committee member. The feedback should outline the assessment and reasons for the decision reached by the committee in sufficient detail for the student to understand the decision, including articulation of the strengths and weaknesses. Feedback on the oral discussion can include comments on communication of ideas and ability to answer questions.

A Pass on the comprehensive exams is attained when all three papers are assigned the category of pass.

### **5.0 Appeal Process**

If students wish to appeal a decision made by the committee on the assessment of one or more papers, and/or of the comprehensive exam process, they may do so following UBC appeal procedures. (<http://www.grad.ubc.ca/faculty-staff/policies-procedures/senate-appeals-academic-standing>)

An appeal of the decision on the comprehensive exams should involve the following:

- A formal letter detailing the grounds for appeal should be submitted to the Graduate Advisory Committee, which will serve as the first appeal committee. This letter should summarize the nature of the academic concern, the basis for an appeal of that judgment, and the process followed and outcome of efforts to resolve the issue with the supervisor and committee. The Graduate Advisory Committee will review the case and make an initial assessment of the merits of the appeal and discuss options available to resolve the concern within two weeks of the appeal being submitted.
- If not satisfied with the result of this appeal, students may then submit their case to the Head of the Department and subsequently to the Dean of Graduate Studies.

### **6.0 Sample Comprehensive Exam Questions**

See Graduate Program Assistant for sample questions.