**Physical Geography Comprehensive Examination**

**Advancement to Candidacy at UBC**

The Comprehensive exam is one of three separate components that constitute advancement to candidacy (Ph.D.) The UBC Faculty of Graduate and Postgraduate Studies stipulate that:

“It is required that all doctoral students be admitted to candidacy within 36 months from the date of initial registration. 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 basic requirements for a doctoral student to be admitted to candidacy are:

* all required coursework has been successfully completed
* the comprehensive examination has been passed
* the supervisory committee has certified that the thesis proposal has been approved.”

Although the UBC Graduate and Post Graduate Studies stipulate that candidacy must be reached in 36 months, the procedures outlined below are consistent with the **departmental expectation of admission to candidacy within 24 months**. This reflects the department’s goals of a timely pathway to completion, and is described in detail in the ideal timeline below. Students may begin research on their thesis prior to formal acceptance of the thesis proposal. However, formal acceptance of the thesis proposal by the supervisory committee marks the entry into candidacy (for the degree) of the student. This step is separate from, and comes after, the comprehensive exam.

The following diagram represents an ideal, and achievable timeline to candidacy that is discussed in greater detail below. Individual timelines may vary in detail, but the departmental expectation is advancement to candidacy within 24 months.

**Structure of the comprehensive examination**

The examination has three parts designed to assess the cognitive, analytical and communication skills of the student.

**I. Written examination (conducted approximately two weeks prior to the oral exam)**:

The written examination will consist of two questions/tasks (at least one of which will be completed over 3 hours on campus). Each question will be based on the reading lists provided by the examiners. Reading lists may be formulated in consultation with the student, and must be finalized at least 12 weeks before the examination. No fixed number of papers is specified for the reading lists since papers vary in difficulty and content and some items may be books.

The format and style of questions is determined at the discretion of the committee and may include, for example:

1. Analysis of a relevant problem (this may be of a mathematical or statistical nature)
2. Answer(s) to written question(s) on the assigned topic(s)
3. A critical peer review of a journal article (such assignments may be written over an extended period of time prior to the written exam date).

Normally, students are required to answer one or two questions/tasks over two days with breaks (a single question may be addressed over a longer time period and be handed in at the written exam). The exam may be open or closed book and may vary in length, at the discretion of the examiners. The written component of the comprehensive examination is designed to test the candidate’s ability to synthesize material from a variety of sources and contexts on a range of topics within the student’s chosen discipline.

It is the supervisor’s responsibility to ensure that both the reading lists and exam questions are appropriate both in topic area and level, and do not unnecessarily overlap. The supervisor should circulate the questions among the examination committee prior to the scheduled written examination to assist with identifying and addressing real or perceive duplication among the questions.

**II. Preliminary proposal (prepared in advance of the oral examination)**: The preliminary proposal will be presented at the oral defence as a crucial first step toward final proposal approval, and as a vehicle by which to assess the candidate’s oral presentation skills. The substance of the proposal is not considered to be part of the assessment (pass/conditional pass/fail) of the comprehensive exam. That determination is based on the written questions only and the discussion pertaining to them, as well as the candidate’s general ability to orally present and defend material. Note that an early version of the proposal will have been presented at the Spring Review.

Essential components of a preliminary proposal are:

a) Definition of viable research questions that reflects a research gap in the discipline and are deemed to be novel and original

b) description of the methodology proposed to answer the question

c) A brief statement of proposed style/format of the thesis (manuscripts versus traditional thesis style)

At the Oral Examination (see below):

1. feedback will be provided as to improvements required for the preliminary proposal. If deemed necessary a further committee meeting will be scheduled for this purpose
2. A final thesis approval supervisory committee meeting will be scheduled at which the student presents the final proposal for approval.

**III. Oral examination**: The oral examination tests the student’s ability to communicate and defend ideas *in viva voce*. The oral examination is normally up to two hours in length, and is not open to the public.

The examining committee will consist of the three members of the supervisory committee plus one departmental external member as voting chair (the thesis advisor will normally refrain from asking questions in the written and oral portions).

Normally, the process of defining the topic areas for examination will begin at the Spring Review (in the first year). The topic areas should be finalized by the student and committee members at least 12 weeks before the exam. This could be done at a subsequent meeting of the supervisory committee with the student. Students are encouraged to meet with members of their supervisory committee individually before the examination, to discuss the reading list, and if they have questions regarding the written examination and/or oral examination.

The oral examination normally involves four components:

(1) oral presentation of the preliminary proposal (20 minutes), in the style of a conference presentation, with visuals, as appropriate)

(2) questions on the written examination answers, providing the student an opportunity to address oversights or errors, serving both the examiners’ and the student’s interests questions on the preliminary proposal presentation

(3) questions on any other matter considered to be within the range of their expected competence

(4) A separate discussion pertaining to the proposal and agreement on the timeline for approval of the final proposal

At the end of the exam, the student will be asked to leave the room and the examining committee will then discuss the student’s performance with respect to (a) the quality of candidates oral presentation skills and (b) the written exams and oral responses to questions (the committee will not assess the substance of the preliminary proposal). The committee members will then vote which, if necessary, may be by written secret ballot. At least 2 of the 3 (or 4) examiners must recommend a “pass” for the exam to be a pass. In the event of a marginal pass, the committee may apply conditions (e.g., course work, directed readings). The committee must then determine the arrangements for ensuring that the conditions are met. The candidate will either pass or fail the examination. A candidate who fails the first attempt must pass a second examination that will be scheduled to take place within six months of the first examination. Failure to pass a second examination will result in the student being required to withdraw from the graduate program.

The committee will then recall the candidate to the meeting and announce the result of the vote. Written notification of the decision made by the Examination Committee will be sent to the Head of the Department.