

PH.D. COMPREHENSIVES POLICY

Preamble

All doctoral programs at McGill require candidates to pass a comprehensive examination, such as a qualifying examination, a preliminary examination, a candidacy paper, a comprehensive evaluation, a thesis proposal, etc. The results of this examination determine whether or not students will be permitted to continue in their programs. The methods adopted for examination and evaluation and the areas to be examined must be specified by departmental regulations and approved by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. It is the responsibility of the Unit to make this information widely available and for students to inform themselves of these details.

Objectives and Content

The purpose of comprehensive examinations is to determine whether the student demonstrates the necessary research skills and academic achievements to continue in the Ph.D. program. Permissible objectives may only include assessing foundational knowledge of the discipline (retrospective comprehensive) and/or ability to conduct independent and original research (prospective comprehensive). As such, comprehensive examinations must not reexamine graduate course content completed at McGill. Units must consult GPS guidelines for retrospective and prospective exams when establishing their comprehensives.

The content of the comprehensive must be consistent with the stated objectives and should be appropriately circumscribed. At least 3 months prior to the examination, students must be given an indication of the range of material that may be covered in the examination and suggestions as to how to cover this material (e.g., via reading lists, courses, etc.).

Format

Units must provide doctoral students with a written description of the Ph.D. comprehensive process, detailing objectives and content, format, timing, assessment, grading and reporting, and failures (and procedures for repeats).

The format of the comprehensive must be consistent for all students within a given program. The following list gives some of the more common formats, which are often combined:

- written examination
- take-home examination
- synthesis of relevant research in the field
- written research proposal and/or thesis proposal
- oral examination or defence

Timing

Units must clearly specify when the comprehensive must be taken and how this fits into the program milestones, e.g., whether all coursework must have been completed prior to undertaking the comprehensive

and/or whether the comprehensive is the final step before thesis research and writing.

Scheduling of the comprehensive must be specified by the unit and the comprehensive exam must be completed by the end of Ph.D3. Students must be informed of the date of the exam with sufficient time to prepare for it.

Assessment

Assessment parameters must be made clear to the student in advance of the examination. This includes information about who sets the exam questions and who evaluates the student. If performance is assessed by a committee, it must be made clear how the committee is appointed and who sits on it, and how the evaluation is to be carried out (consensus or vote).

Where there is more than one component to the examination (e.g., an oral exam plus a written exam), it must be made clear to the student how these components are factored into the final grade. For example, it must be clearly specified whether each component counts equally, whether the assessment is global, and whether failure of one part of the comprehensive examination (or of one question) results in overall failure.

All Ph.D. comprehensives must be represented by an administrative course number, usually XXXX 701. Grading of this course must be Pass/Fail. A Pass is required for students to continue in the program.

Feedback

The assessment and reasons for the decision, including identifying specific strengths and weaknesses, must be provided to the student in writing within 2 weeks of the examination. There must be sufficient detail to allow the student to understand the decision.

In the case of oral examinations, the student must be given feedback on presentation, logical exposition, ability to answer questions, etc. To help ensure that assessments can be put in context, units may choose to make a record of the examination (including audio or video recording) and/or to have a neutral observer, chair, or outside committee member, or to make the oral presentation open to members of the academic unit. If recorded, an unedited copy of the recording must be forwarded to the student within 2 weeks of the examination.

Failures

In the event that the student is judged to have failed the comprehensive, units must allow, without prejudice, one repeat of the comprehensive (in whole or in part) within a minimum of four months and a maximum of six months. After the first failure, a grade of HH (which designates "continuing") will be recorded on the student's transcript.

The student must be informed in a face-to-face meeting and in writing by the department that they have failed the comprehensive. At this meeting and in the written document, the student must be informed of conditions relating to a repeat of the examination, including the nature of the re-examination and committee membership, as well as the deadline for retaking the exam. Units have the right to specify further requirements in the event of failure, e.g., requiring students to take an additional course or courses in areas where they have shown weakness on the comprehensive.

If the student does not repeat the exam by the deadline specified by the unit, the HH will be converted into F and the student will be withdrawn from the university. In the event that the repeat comprehensive is passed, the grade of HH will be converted to a Pass and the student will be allowed to continue in the program.

Appeals

A student withdrawn due to failure of their comprehensive exam has 30 days to appeal this decision. They must follow the steps specified under Requesting an appeal in case of withdrawal due to failure in the Failure Policy.

Approved by Executive of Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) Feb. 17, 1997 and Council of FGSR March 7, 1997; Revised by GPS July 9, 2014, June 29, 2015, June 14, 2017, December 18, 2019 and April 11, 2022.