PHD Qualifying Examination Procedure

Revised and approved December 2017
Previous revision: August 2016

PURPOSE
The qualifying examination is intended to assess the student’s ability to situate her or his area of research interest within the broad intellectual domains of the field of Information. The qualifying examination is separate and distinct from the evaluation of the Doctoral Thesis Proposal.

TIMING
A qualifying examination is normally held after the completion of INF3001H, INF3003H, and during the second or third term of INF3006Y.

STRUCTURE OF THE EXAMINATION
The qualifying examination includes both a written and an oral component. The student must pass both to successfully complete requirements for the qualifying examination.

QUALIFYING EXAMINATION PROCEDURES

A. Preparation
• The student and the Research Advisor will identify an area of doctoral research as well as pertinent frameworks and literatures that will inform that research.
• The student and the Research Advisor will also identify [usually during the first term of INF3006Y] at least two other professors who are qualified to guide the student in situating the research within those frameworks and literatures, and to serve on the qualifying examination committee (QEC).
  NOTE: Both professors must hold full or associate memberships with the University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies.
• The student will approach these two professors, so identified, with a description of the proposed area of research, and a request that they serve on the QEC.
• When two professors have agreed to serve, the Research Advisor will submit the names for the QEC to the PhD Director for information.
• In consultation with each member of the QEC, the student will prepare a reading list appropriate to the student’s area of research (usually during the first and second term of INF3006Y).

B. Responsibilities of the QEC
• Each member of the QEC will assist the student in preparing a reading list appropriate to the student’s area of research.
• The QEC as a whole is responsible for approving the reading list.
• No new items should be added to or removed from the reading list within six weeks of the scheduled date of the student’s QEC.
• The entire QEC must be present at the oral examination (either in person or remotely via teleconference or Skype), and a majority must be present in person.
• Each member of the QEC will set three questions which may be asked of the student during the qualifying examination. The QEC will meet to discuss the nine potential questions and ensure that, as a whole, they are comprehensive. The QEC will choose one question from each of the committee members to ask the student during the written examination.

C. Oral and written components of the qualifying examination

The student is responsible for scheduling the written and oral components of the qualifying examination. This includes booking the examination room.

NOTE: It is suggested that both the written and oral exams be scheduled so there is no delay going forward with the oral component of the exam. It is recommended that both dates be scheduled and rooms booked.

Timeline for written component:
• One month prior to the start of the written examination, the Research Advisor will forward to the student the list of the nine potential questions. The list will not specify which professor set which question.
• No later than one week prior to the start of the written examination, The QEC will choose one question from each of the committee members to ask the student during the written examination. The Research Advisor will inform the student which three of the nine questions they must answer at the start of the examination period.
• In order to accommodate a diversity of scheduling constraints, the student will be given nine calendar days to complete the written examination. During those nine calendar days, the student will respond to the three questions previously determined by the QEC. The written examination period commences at 9 am on day 1 when the Research Advisor forwards the questions to the student; it ends at 6 pm on day 9 when the student forwards the answers to the Research Advisor who will then distribute the answers to the other members of the QEC.
• The answer to each of the three questions should be approximately 2,000 to 3,000 words (excluding references). The answer to each question must not be fewer than 2,000 words.
• All members of the QEC will review all of the student’s answers.

Oral component:
• Unless the written answers are patently unacceptable to the QEC, an oral examination will be held within one week of the end of the written examination period.
• At the oral exam the QEC will ask questions of the student. The purpose of the oral examination is to allow the student to provide context for his or her answers to the written examination, and to demonstrate additional depth and breadth of knowledge in the area.
• At the end of the oral examination, the QEC will meet in camera to discuss and vote on its assessment of the examination as a whole, both oral and written.

D. Assessment of the Qualifying Examination
The examination is to be assessed on the student’s demonstrated critical ability and mastery of the topics involved through:
• comprehensive knowledge of the main issues or problems;
• incisive evaluation of current and past research;
• rigorous analysis, organization and synthesis of information; and
• clear written and oral communication.

OUTCOMES
Immediately after the oral examination, the Research Advisor will inform the student orally in the presence of the QEC of the Committee’s assessment of both the oral and written components of the examination. The Research Advisor will also complete the QE Report form and a grade report and submit it to the Student Services Graduate Administrator for the doctoral program. Both reports are kept in the student’s file as a record of the exam.

NOTE: The student receives a single grade of credit or no credit (CR/NCR) for both parts of the exam. This grade is recorded on the student’s academic transcript as a Departmental Exam: Qualifying Exam.

Three assessment options are possible:

Pass: If, through both the written and oral components of the examination, the student has clearly met the requirements outlined in D above, the student will receive a pass.

Conditional Pass: If the written examination is weak in certain aspects and the student fails to address these weaknesses during the oral component of the qualifying examination, the student will receive a conditional pass (see below for process to be followed).

Adjournment: If, in the QEC’s estimation, the student has failed, in both the oral and written components of the qualifying examination, to demonstrate sufficient critical ability and mastery of the topics involved, the examination will be adjourned (see below for process to be followed).

Process for dealing with a conditional pass
• In the case of a conditional pass, the QEC will outline the revisions the student must make to one or more of their written answers to address the identified weaknesses; these will be communicated to the student verbally at the conclusion of the oral component of the qualifying examination and in writing within one week of the oral component of the qualifying examination.

• The student must submit the revised answer(s) to the QEC for re-assessment within one month of the oral component of the qualifying examination.
• Once the QEC has approved the revisions, the Research Advisor will notify the PhD Director and the Student Services Graduate Administrator for the doctoral program in writing that the revisions have been made and approved.

• If the student fails to complete the revisions required by the QEC within one month, the conditional pass will be converted to an adjournment and the process for dealing with an adjournment will be initiated.

Process for dealing with an adjournment

In the event of an adjournment, the Committee may recommend either:

(1) that the written and oral examination be taken again after a period of additional preparation; or

(2) that the student be presented with an option to voluntarily withdraw from the PhD program or the student will be advised that a recommendation for termination of registration in the program will be forwarded to the School of Graduate Studies.

A recommendation for termination of registration may be appealed to the Graduate Department Academic Appeals Board as per University Appeal Policy.

In the case of (1), the process is as follows:

(1) The membership of the QEC for the first qualifying examination shall remain the same.

(2) The reading list for the first qualifying examination shall remain the same.

(3) The three questions the student will be asked to answer will be drawn from the original set of nine questions from the first qualifying examination.

(4) The re-taking of the qualifying examination must take place within three months of the oral component of the first qualifying examination. The same requirement applies in cases where the student has had a conditional pass converted to an adjournment, i.e., the three-month time frame is tied to the date on which the oral component of the first qualifying examination took place, not the date on which the conditional pass was converted to an adjournment.

(5) The normal procedures for conduct of the written and oral components of the qualifying examination will be followed.

(6) Only one re-taking of the qualifying examination is allowed. If the second examination results in another adjournment, the student will be presented with an option to voluntarily withdraw from the PhD program or the student will be advised that a recommendation for termination of registration in the program will be forwarded to the School of Graduate Studies.