



Faculty of Nursing Doctoral Candidacy Examination Guidelines

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Background Explanatory Note

This document was developed to reflect expectations for the doctoral candidacy examination. Historically, the document was originated by the Doctoral Core Curriculum Working Group, has been reviewed by GEC, circulated and reviewed at faculty town hall discussions and caucus meetings from November 2021-January 2022. It was updated to align with the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) examination guidelines in the 2024-2025 calendar.

The document also provides statements for appraisal/evaluation of the outcome of the doctoral candidacy exam (page 5).

Introduction

The doctoral oral candidacy examination is an opportunity for the student to demonstrate the synthesis of their studies as they have integrated course work, explored a range of research and academic experiences, and engaged in scholarly mentorship by faculty and peers during the initial years of their program. The exam consists of a written proposal and oral examination. It follows successful completion of all required coursework and marks an important milestone in the student's preparation



to formally begin the research project. The exam is also an opportunity for the student to formally share their dissertation project with the supervisory committee and external examiners, and to learn from the experts who gather to serve as examiners in this process. This process provides a final opportunity to refine the research proposal before progressing to implementation of the research project.

We are committed to building capacity with nursing scholars who will advance knowledge and skills to improve health outcomes and address health inequity in diverse global contexts. It is recognized that rigorous nursing scholarship and research take diverse forms. Doctoral research is a creative endeavour, and varied modes of scholarly expression are encouraged. Evaluation of progress to doctoral candidacy will acknowledge a range of modes of scholarly expression in an inclusive manner.

The [University of Alberta Calendar](#) states that “All program requirements, other than the thesis, must be completed within three years of the commencement of a student’s program”. The candidacy examination is normally scheduled as soon as possible following completion of coursework. The Faculty of Nursing expectations are aligned with [University of Alberta Calendar requirements](#) for the conduct of thesis and candidacy examinations, which state that at a minimum, “students must demonstrate to the satisfaction of the examining committee that they possess:

1. An adequate knowledge of the discipline and of the subject matter relevant to the thesis;
2. The ability to pursue and complete original research at an advanced level;
3. The ability to meet any other requirements found in the department’s published policy on candidacy examinations.”

I. PURPOSE OF THE ORAL CANDIDACY EXAM

The oral candidacy examination provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge about the discipline, research methods and their substantive research area; respond to questions about their research proposal; and demonstrate the ability to pursue and complete original research at an advanced level.

The candidacy examination in the Faculty of Nursing assesses formative doctoral program outcomes in three key areas:

1. Specialized knowledge of the substantive area of inquiry as addressed in the research proposal and informed by an appropriate scope of relevant literature;
2. Critical understanding of historical, philosophical, theoretical, and scientific foundations of nursing knowledge; and



3. Rigorous conceptualization of research methods and design appropriate to the research question.

The exam should ensure that the student has selected an appropriate research question for the dissertation and that a sound research plan has been developed to complete the project. It is anticipated that the proposed project will enable the student to make an original, substantive contribution to nursing knowledge.

II. PREPARATION FOR ORAL CANDIDACY EXAMINATION

All of the activities leading up to the oral candidacy examination (i.e. coursework, dissertation seminar, community of inquiry learning opportunities, research and teaching assistantships, and colloquia) are an investment in the development of the research proposal and competencies to prepare for implementation of the dissertation project.

Doctoral students work closely with the graduate supervisor and all members of the supervisory committee in the development of the research proposal in the months leading up to the oral candidacy examination. With guidance from the supervisory committee, the student may develop a reading list of seminal literature related to the dissertation topic to provide a foundation for scholarly works that should inform the candidacy exam discussion, but the reading list is not a requirement in candidacy preparation.

In addition to describing the research project, the proposal must address the substantive theory and scholarship related to the research question and the arena of scholarship within which the research question is situated. The conceptual framing of the research project can be depicted in many different ways as appropriate to the research question and method. Flexibility is encouraged as the relationship between theory and the potential contribution of the research project to knowledge in the discipline of nursing and beyond is addressed within the proposal. It is anticipated that questioning in the oral candidacy examination may encompass theoretical, philosophical, and methodological considerations as they are relevant to the proposed research project.

The research proposal must include an abstract and a detailed research plan, including appendices as appropriate. The presentation and length of the proposal will vary depending on the project and the form of the thesis (i.e. traditional thesis or paper-based thesis). The proposal will normally include:

- A. Review of relevant literature;
- B. Theoretical and conceptual framing as appropriate to the research method;



- C. Relevance and anticipated contribution to nursing and health care knowledge;
- D. Research question(s);
- E. Rationale and significance of the question;
- F. Proposed research methods;
- G. Ethical considerations of proposed research;
- H. References and appendices (including a timeline).

The supervisor will provide general help with proposal writing skills and research strategies. Students are encouraged to discuss their proposal with other committee members, experts in the area, or other students. Students can access resources from the University of Alberta [Academic Success Centre](#) to develop academic writing skills, and [Writing Services](#) for workshops, guided writing instruction groups, and tutoring for editorial support. It is expected that the research proposal is written by the student without [substantial assistance](#) from others.

The research proposal will be provisionally approved by the supervisory committee members prior to the scheduling of the date for the oral candidacy examination. It is important that the supervisory committee is in agreement that the student has the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to conduct the project. It is anticipated that final revisions to the research proposal may be made following the candidacy examination with benefit of feedback from the deliberations of the examining committee.

III. SCHEDULING THE EXAM

It is the responsibility of the supervisor(s) to ensure that proper arrangements are made for the student's examination, and that the exam is held in accordance with GPS and Faculty of Nursing regulations. Key steps are as follows:

Establishing the examining committee

The [role and structure of examining committees](#) is outlined in the University of Alberta Calendar. To ensure the examination committee meets all requirements, please review the "Size and Composition of Examining Committees" section in the [University Calendar](#) which outlines regulations:

1. The supervisor(s) and supervisory committee members are "ex-officio members" of the examining committee. The doctoral candidacy examining committee consists of the ex-officio examiners and either one university examiner or one specialized knowledge examiner.



2. The university examiner or specialized knowledge examiner should not be connected to the thesis research in a significant way; not be associated with the student outside of usual contact in courses or other non-thesis activities; not be related to the student or supervisor; not be an active collaborator of the supervisor(s).
3. At least half or more of the examiners must hold a doctoral degree or higher.
4. At least half of the examiners must hold tenured/tenure-track appointment with the University of Alberta; be active in the general subject area of the student's research; and demonstrate continuing scholarly or creative activity of an original nature.
5. The chair is not an examiner but is a faculty member who is normally identified by the Graduate Office from a rotating schedule of members of the Graduate Exam Chairs Committee.

The timeline and activities for preparing for the candidacy exam:

1. Supervisor confirms availability of all examining committee members and schedules the exam. Please ensure all examining committee members are added to the calendar invite and include the online meeting link (if applicable).
2. Once the exam date is set, the supervisor will contact the Graduate Office to request an exam chair. The supervisor will be provided with the name of the next exam chair on the rotation list to contact. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to secure the exam chair and provide the chair with the calendar invite and online meeting link (if applicable).
3. The supervisor informs the examining committee members of meetings and details of the examination.

At least 4 weeks prior to scheduled examination date

1. It is the responsibility of the student to provide the final draft of the research proposal to the supervisor at least 4 weeks in advance of the scheduled date of the oral candidacy examination. The supervisor is responsible to circulate the research proposal to all examining committee members and to ensure that all examiners have received the proposal in a timely manner.
2. Supervisor completes the Notice of Examining Committee & Examination Date form and forwards to the Graduate Office for processing.
3. Associate Dean will review and approve the Notice of Exam.
4. Graduate Office will circulate the approved Notice of Exam to the examining committee and forward to GPS for processing.
 - a. This form must be received by GPS at least 4 weeks prior to the scheduled examination date.
5. The exam chair will contact the student prior to the exam to let them know what to expect during the exam.



IV. EXAMINATION PROCESS

Guidelines for the [Conduct of Thesis and Candidacy Examinations](#) are outlined in the University of Alberta Calendar.

1. Candidacy examinations are normally scheduled for a maximum of 3 hours including the student presentation (normally 15-20 minutes maximum), approximately 2 hours of direct examination, and the remaining time for committee introductions and post-exam deliberation.
2. In addition to the candidacy proposal, the student may bring paper, pen and summary notes to the examination if desired.
3. The student presentation may be public, and open to students, faculty members and invited guests. Questions and discussion are reserved for the subsequent meeting with the examining committee, which immediately follows the presentation.
4. The exam chair is a non-voting member whose role is to moderate the exam and ensure a fair process that conforms to GPS policy and Faculty of Nursing procedures.
5. At the start of the formal examination, the chair will ask the student to momentarily step out of the examination (physically, or move to an online waiting room) while the chair reviews the examination procedures with the committee. Public observers may also be present; they too would physically or virtually move to a waiting room.
6. Rounds of questions (normally two to three) are offered beginning with the examiner(s) most external to the committee, the supervisory committee members, and then the supervisor.
7. Questioning during the oral exam will focus on the research proposal, but examiners will also ask questions that are more comprehensive in nature. These questions could focus on disciplinary knowledge; theoretical approaches and contributions of the proposed research; the substantive area; and research methods knowledge in general and specifically related to the dissertation topic.
8. When the questions have concluded, the chair should ask the student if they have any final comments they would like to add.
9. The student is asked to leave the room while the examining committee deliberates on the outcome of the examination.
10. The examiners are asked to give their opinions on the quality of the written work and the oral responses to questions in the same order as questioning occurred.
11. Evaluation criteria to be considered by the committee are outlined in section IV below.
12. The exam may result in one of the following outcomes: Adjourned; Pass; Conditional Pass; Fail and repeat the candidacy; Fail with a recommendation to



change category to a master's program; Fail with a recommendation to terminate the doctoral program. If the examining committee fails to reach a decision in a reasonable time, the matter will be referred to the Dean of GPS.

V. EVALUATION OF THE CANDIDACY EXAMINATION

As the candidacy exam is integrative, the examination is passed or failed in its entirety. The evaluation of the candidacy examination will be based on demonstration of oral and written competence related to the following areas:

1. Relationships among the subject matter of the proposed research and development of knowledge relevant to the practice discipline of nursing, healthcare in general, and other disciplines;
2. Ability to question and challenge colonial practices and thought in knowledge production, theory and practice as appropriate to the topic under study;
3. Strong analytical, problem-solving and critical thinking abilities;
4. Knowledge and skills specific to the proposed research methodology;
5. A range of potential research approaches relevant to the proposed research focus;
6. Potential to pursue and complete original research at an advanced level;
7. Ability to respond to questions about the feasibility of the proposed dissertation project;
8. Ability to openly engage in scholarly discussion and debate.

VI. FOLLOWING THE EXAMINATION

Immediately Following Examination

1. Supervisor will submit the completed [Report of Completion of Candidacy Examination](#) to the Graduate Office.
2. Graduate Office will submit the Report of Completion of Candidacy Examination to GPS for processing.
 - a. This form must be received by GPS within 5 business days of the final examination date.

Following successful completion of the examination, the student can proceed with the applications for ethics and administrative approvals, and undertake the proposed research.



Research Ethics

Where applicable, graduate student research proposals must receive ethical clearance on behalf of the University after the Candidacy exam is passed, but before any data collection is initiated and prior to submitting any applications for funding to a funding body and/or health care agency. Students will submit their ethics application to the Research Ethics Office. Ethics review guidelines and forms are available from the [Research Ethics Office](#)

In advance of the candidacy exam and in consultation with the thesis supervisor, the student may obtain any letter(s) of support in principle from potential agencies where data collection may be carried out (if needed). Such documentation from an agency does not constitute a commitment on the part of the agency, nor does it constitute ethical approval.

Institution/Agency Administrative Approval

In addition to University ethical approval, a health care agency ethics/operational review of the proposal may be required. The student, in consultation with the thesis supervisor, should carefully investigate the protocol and time frame of the administrative approval process.

Summary of Candidacy Examination Timeline

At least 4 weeks prior to exam...	Student provides the final draft of the research proposal to the supervisor at least 4 weeks in advance of the scheduled date of the candidacy examination. Supervisor circulates the research proposal to all examining committee members. Supervisor forwards the Notice of Examining Committee & Examination Date form to the Nursing Graduate Office for review and approval.
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	<p>The form must be received by GPS at least 4 weeks prior to the exam.</p> <p>The Nursing Graduate Office will circulate the approved Notice of Exam to the examining committee.</p>
Immediately following exam...	<p>The Chair or Supervisor provides the Nursing Graduate Office with a Report of Completion of Candidacy Examination form that lists the decision of the committee.</p>

Approved by GEC Oct 2024