**School of Nursing**
**University of British Columbia**
**PhD Program**

**Comprehensive Exam Guidelines**

**Table of Contents:**

Approved January 25, 2010, (Revised Jan 23, 2016)

## COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the comprehensive examination is to provide formal opportunities for students to demonstrate their abilities to conceptualize and synthesize knowledge relevant to the discipline of nursing. It is intended to ensure that students have both the background knowledge and the analytic abilities required to proceed into their focused areas of independent research; that is, the examination represents an opportunity to assess whether the student has the necessary knowledge and ability to successfully pursue creative, independent scholarship that will advance the body of knowledge within nursing. The examination also provides for the opportunity to assess whether students have developed the ability to communicate their knowledge about their substantive area and the discipline of nursing.

### PRINCIPLES

The comprehensive examination provides an occasion for focus and synthesis of learning obtained through course work, self-study, and identification of substantive areas of interest in the program. Successful completion of the examination assures both the student and the faculty that there is sufficient preparation and skill to participate in informed discourse with colleagues in the scholarly community. A formal and rigorous procedure creates a meaningful benchmark in the learning process.

### FORMAT

The comprehensive examination comprises two questions that are answered in a two-week take-home examination consisting of two papers followed by a closed oral defence one week later. Each paper is 2500-3000 words in length and is written in APA or other accepted style. There is no student presentation at the oral defence. The preparation and evaluation of the comprehensive examination is the responsibility of an examination committee, which consists of the student's research supervisor and two faculty members who are familiar with the nursing doctoral program but are **not** members of the student's dissertation committee.

### TIMING

The comprehensive examination will normally be written at the completion of the core courses of the program, **within the first 24 months** after admission. Normally, preparation for the exam takes about two months (this includes writing the annotated bibliography, forming an examination committee, and formulating the questions). The comprehensive exam itself (writing and oral defence) occurs over a three-week period.

Policy Reference: UBC Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies Comprehensive Exams (Doctoral)

Following successful completion of the comprehensive examination, students will prepare for their oral candidacy examination, which is the final step before advancement to candidacy. Advancement to candidacy must occur within 36 months from the date of initial registration.

Policy Reference:
UBC Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies Policies & Guidelines for Advancement to Candidacy
UBC Vancouver Academic Calendar: Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies Regulations on

## PROCEDURES

### STUDENT PREPARATION

The student is expected to have completed all foundational coursework for the doctoral program. Also, in consultation with the supervisor, the student will prepare an **annotated bibliography** of 20 - 30 publications that constitute key readings in the student's declared substantive area. Students may elect to include a brief "preamble" to introduce the substantive area. While there are no strict deadlines, this process is normally completed in a four-six week period. The annotated bibliography needs to be approved by the supervisor before it is submitted to the committee for review, but it is not evaluated as part of the exam. The format for the annotated bibliography is provided in Appendix B (page 5).

Also in consultation with the supervisor, the student will develop **four questions** arising from the bibliography together with the core course readings. At least one question will deal with methodological issues, one with broader professional or disciplinary issues in nursing, one with theoretical issues, and one with issues in the student's identified substantive area.

It should be noted that the process of preparing for the comprehensive exam is expected to be different for each student, varying according to individual needs and goals. Guidelines for formatting the annotated bibliography are provided in the Appendix.

### FORMING THE EXAMINATION COMMITTEE

Together with the supervisor, the student will identify when he/she is ready to begin writing the examination and will enter the proposed date and time in the Student Tracking System (STS)[1]. This must be done **at least** three weeks in advance. The supervisor will be prompted to accept this date and to identify a committee member. The supervisor will also enter the date and time of the oral exam into STS, and is responsible for booking the room for the oral examination[2].

Once the supervisor has entered this information into STS, the PhD Coordinator is prompted to identify a faculty member to serve as Chair.

The examination committee member and Chair should normally be available for the date and time of the oral exam, as identified by the supervisor in collaboration with the student. If the date or time of the exam needs to be altered, the student must cancel the original request, and reinitiate the process in STS. Assistance with this process can be provided by the Student Support Services.

### SETTING THE EXAM

One to two weeks before the scheduled take-home examination, the examination committee will review the annotated bibliography and consult together to select two questions from the list of four that have been provided. This consultation is led by the committee Chair and normally happens via e-mail. The questions may be altered on the basis of the discussion amongst committee members. The chair is responsible for submitting the selected questions to the Student Support Services prior to the exam. Below is an example of the required information:

---

[1] *Student Tracking System or STS is a tool that allows the School of Nursing to keep track of graduate student progressions. Students and supervisors can log into the STS at www.sts.nursing.ubc.ca using their campus wide login or CWL. Questions about system use can be sent to student.services@nursing.ubc.ca, while technical issues can be submitted as a ticket to UBC IT Services.*

[2] *Room bookings at the School of Nursing are done via email, please contact admin.support@nursing.ubc.ca*

> **To:** Student Support Services (student.services@nursing.ubc.ca)
> **CC:** other committee members (optional),
> **Subject:** Comprehensive Exam Questions for "Student Full Name" (Confidential)
> **Body:**
> Student's Full Name (First & Last) and UBC Student Number
> Date & Time for Submission of Question to Student: YYYY/MM/DD & 00:00 AM/PM
> Date & Time of Oral Exam: YYYY/MM/DD & 00:00 AM/PM
> Question 1 & 2 as bullet points– Full text of questions as determined by the exam committee
> Please include any additional instructions to be provided to the student.

On the exam start date, the student will receive via e-mail the two exam questions by 9 am.

This email will be sent by the Student Support Office through the SISC (Student Information System Center) to the email address the student has on file with UBC and the School of Nursing[3]. Should the student experience technical difficulties in receiving this email, they will be able to access a copy of this message through the UBC Student Service Center, in the Message Center. Assistance with this process can be provided by the Student Support Services.

The student will have exactly two weeks to write the exam. He/she will draw on the literature from the annotated bibliography in answering these questions, but is not restricted to this literature.  He/she will submit (via e-mail) the completed papers (with questions attached) to the examination committee members **and** the PhD coordinator on the exam completion date (no later than 9 am). The oral defence will be held a week later.

## EVALUATION

The examiners will individually evaluate the papers and set questions for the oral exam, none of which is discussed prior to the exam. It is expected that all committee members will attend the oral exam and participate in questioning the student, including the chair. (see Appendix for evaluation criteria)

On completion of the oral defence, there will be an in camera session for the examiners to discuss the outcome, after which the outcome and feedback will be shared verbally with the student.

The Chair will be prompted by STS to report the results of the examination with a brief commentary.

If the committee assigns "second attempt required", the student will receive feedback after the oral exam, and be offered the chance to write the exam again at a later date with two new questions. The chair will also have the opportunity to upload a brief overview of the feedback offered to the student into STS, which will be visible to the student for reference. The committee will normally remain the same.

If the committee assigns "fail", the student will receive a formal written evaluation report from the committee, normally within a two week period. The content of this report is uploaded by the Chair into the exam outcome report on STS, and available to the supervisor and student for reference.

---

[3] *It is the student's responsibility to ensure UBC and the School of Nursing have accurate contact information (address, telephone, and phone number) on the Student Information System. The student can access / update their information via the UBC Student Service Centre.*

Approved January 25, 2010, (Revised Jan 23, 2016)

**APPENDIX A: Evaluation Criteria**

The role of the examining committee is to read the two papers, and in the oral examination to ask substantive questions of the student and seek clarification of points not adequately covered. In addition, the role of the Chair includes submitting the questions to Student Services prior to the exam, and in the oral examination, opening and closing the examination proceedings; dealing with any behaviour that interferes with the proper conduct of the examination; and moderating the *in camera* discussion on the merit of the student's performance

**Evaluation Criteria**

The examinations are adjudicated on a pass/fail basis (in some instances the committee may reserve judgment and require that the student write a second examination). The written papers (each 2500-3000 words) and oral defence will be reviewed by the examination committee to determine whether the student has:

- Addressed the examination questions
- Demonstrated logical development of arguments and defence of positions
- Showed evidence of critical and analytical thinking
- Demonstrated substantive knowledge of the declared field(s)
- Integrated knowledge about disciplinary controversies and issues in nursing
- Developed arguments and explicit stances that are derived from a theoretical, methodological, or historical perspective of the nursing discipline
- Accurately represented cited sources and authors
- Demonstrated competence in communication (parsimony, clarity, and accuracy of language use)

Because the examination is integrative in nature, it is taken and passed or failed in its entirety.
The student must demonstrate to the satisfaction of the examining committee that she/ he has met the criteria in both elements of the exam.

The committee will make one of three possible determinations:

- **Pass:** There is sufficient evidence that the evaluation criteria have been met. The student may proceed in the program.
- **A second examination is required:** Following the first examination sitting, the committee may recommend that, although there is some evidence the evaluation criteria have been met, there are one or more areas in which additional work is required before a final decision can be made. The established procedures will be followed.
- **Failure:** The student's work has not met the criteria. In this case, the student will be requested to withdraw from the program.

The PhD Coordinator will be available to the examiners to ensure impartiality and that all procedures are followed. The Committee's decisions are made on the basis of a vote. In the event that consensus cannot be reached, the PhD Coordinator will become involved in the adjudication of the decision.

Approved January 25, 2010, (Revised Jan 23, 2016)

**APPENDIX B: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES[4]**

### Introduction
An annotated bibliography includes descriptions and explanations of your listed sources beyond the basic citation information you usually provide in a reference list.

### Why do an annotated bibliography?
An annotated bibliography provides specific information about each source you have used. As a researcher, you have become an expert on your topic and have the ability both to explain the content and to assess the usefulness of your sources. The annotated bibliography allows you to tell readers what sources are important under particular situations and their strengths and limitations. You want to give your audience enough information to understand what the references are about and to make an informed decision about useful sources.

### What does an annotated bibliography do?
A good annotated bibliography
- Encourages you to think critically about the content of the works you are using, their place within a field of study, and their relation to your work.
- Proves you have read and understand your sources.
- Establishes your work as a valid source and you as a competent researcher.
- Situates your study and topic in a continuing professional conversation.
- Provides a way for others to decide whether a source will be helpful to their research.

### Critical/evaluative annotation
For the purpose of the comprehensive examination, students will be developing critical/evaluative annotations, which have these defining features:
- They sum up the content of the source.
- They give an overview of the arguments and proofs/evidence addressed in the work and note
- The resulting conclusion.
- When appropriate, they describe the author's methodology or approach to material. For instance, you might mention if the source is an ethnography or if the author employs a
- Particular kind of theory.
- Evaluate the source or author critically (biases, lack of evidence etc.).
- Show how the work may or may not be useful for a particular field of study or audience.
- Explain how researching this material informed your work.

### What elements might critical/evaluative annotations include?
1. Bibliography according to the appropriate citation style (APA).
2. Explanation of main points and/or purpose of the work—basically, its thesis—which shows among other things that you have read and thoroughly understand the source.
3. Verification or critique of the authority or qualifications of the author.
4. Comments on the worth, effectiveness, and utility of the work in terms of both the topic being researched and/or your work.

---

[4] *This has been adapted from work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License. You may reproduce it for non-commercial use if you use the entire text and attribute the source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Approved January 25, 2010, (Revised Jan 23, 2016)

5. The point of view or perspective from which the work was written. For instance, you may note whether the author seemed to have particular biases or was trying to reach a particular audience.
6. Relevant links to other work done in the area, like related sources, possibly including a comparison with some of those already on your list. You may want to establish connections to other aspects of the same argument or opposing views.

Approved January 25, 2010, (Revised Jan 23, 2016)

**APPENDIX C: PROCESS AT A GLANCE
COMPS CHECKLIST FOR STUDENTS**

- ✓ Prepare annotated bibliography

- ✓ Prepare four potential examination questions in consultation with your supervisor

- ✓ Discuss with your supervisor who will serve as a second member of the examination committee *(it is the job of your supervisor to ask this person)*

- ✓ Discuss with your supervisor when you will begin writing the two papers and **enter this date in STS** *(this step must be completed **at least** three weeks in advance of the examination start date)*

- ✓ Received message from STS confirming name of second examination committee member and data of oral exam *(it is the job of your supervisor to enter this information in STS)*

- ✓ Received message from STS confirming name of examination committee chair *(it is the job of the PhD Coordinator to enter this information in STS)*

- ✓ Provide annotated bibliography and 4 prepared questions to the committee members *(this step is completed one to two weeks in advance of the examination start date)*

- ✓ Received two exam questions by 9 am on the examination start date. *(You will receive this at the email you have listed with UBC & the School of Nursing. It is your responsibility to ensure this is up to date on the UBC Student Service Centre).*

- ✓ Submit two papers (via email) to the committee members and the PhD Coordinator by 9 am on the exam due date *(you must include the exam questions with the papers)*

- ✓ Complete oral exam and discuss outcome with committee

- ✓ Received message from STS with report of exam outcome

Approved January 25, 2010, (Revised Jan 23, 2016)

**APPENDIX D: PROCESS AT A GLANCE
COMPS CHECKLIST FOR SUPERVISORS**

- ✓ Work with the student to prepare four potential examination questions after student prepares annotated bibliography

- ✓ Discuss with the student who will serve as a second member of the examination committee *(it is your job as the supervisor to ask this person)*

- ✓ Discuss with the student when she/he will begin writing the two papers *(it is the job of the student to enter this date in STS at least three weeks in advance of the exam start date)*

- ✓ Confirm availability of second committee member.

- ✓ Enter name of committee member and the date and time of the oral exam in STS.

- ✓ Receive message from STS confirming name of examination committee chair *(it is the job of the PhD Coordinator to enter this information in STS)*

- ✓ Reserve a room for the oral exam and inform committee[5].

- ✓ Receive annotated bibliography and 4 prepared questions from the student *(this step is completed one to two weeks in advance of the examination start date)*

- ✓ Consult with examination committee to finalize the two examination questions *(it is the job of the committee chair to lead this conversation, normally by e-mail and to submit the questions to Student Services prior to the exam)*

- ✓ Receive two completed papers from the student by 9 am on the exam due date

- ✓ Evaluate both papers and participate in oral examination *(it is the job of the chair to enter the exam outcome in STS)*

---

[5] *Room bookings at the School of Nursing are done via email, and the room booking procedure is available on the* School of Nursing Portal *website → Support Services → Portal Tools → Room Bookings → Room Booking Procedures.*

Approved January 25, 2010, (Revised Jan 23, 2016)

**APPENDIX E: PROCESS AT A GLANCE**
**COMPS CHECKLIST FOR CHAIRS**

**The PhD Program Coordinator is responsible for selecting the Examination Committee Chair for the oral exam, and confirms their availability for the pre-determined day and time.**

✓ Lead the conversation with the examination committee to finalize the two examination questions *(this is normally done by email).*

✓ Submit the exam questions to the [Student Support Services](#) *(this is done via email, normally at least 24 – 48 hours prior to the exam start date, and based on the example provided on page 3 of this guide)*

✓ On the oral exam date, participate in the examination of the student and the evaluation of their performance.

✓ On the oral exam date, open and close the examination proceedings, which normally comprises two rounds of questioning by the committee. There is no student presentation at this exam. After the defence, moderate the *in camera* discussion on the merit of the student's performance.

✓ In STS, report on the Examination Questions and the results of the examination with a brief commentary.
   o If the outcome is successful:
      ▪ Upload the 2 exam questions as separate PDF documents
      ▪ Upload the student's answers to each question as separate PDF documents
      ▪ Enter a brief (250 word limit) explanation to accompany the positive outcome in the "Chair's Report" text box.
   o If a second exam is required:
      ▪ Upload the 2 exam questions as separate PDF documents
      ▪ Upload the student's answers to each question as separate PDF documents
      ▪ Enter a brief (250 word limit) explanation to accompany the outcome in the "Chair's Report" text box
   o If the outcome is unsuccessful (fail):
      ▪ Upload the 2 exam questions as separate PDF documents
      ▪ Upload the student's answers to each question as separate PDF documents
      ▪ Enter a brief (250 word limit) explanation to accompany the outcome in the "Chair's Report" text box
      ▪ Provide the student with a formal written evaluation report from the committee, normally within a two week period.
   o Uploaded exam questions, answers, and Chair's Report can be accessed by the student, supervisor, program coordinator, and associate director – as well as the Graduate Student Support Office. The documents are retained for each attempt of the comprehensive exam.

**APPENDIX F: PROCESS AT A GLANCE**
**TIMELINE**

**The following is a typical timeline for the Comprehensive Exam process:**

- **2 – 3 months prior to examination start date:** Student prepares annotated bibliography
    - Once the Supervisor deems the annotated bibliography is ready, the student and supervisor collaboratively begin setting the exam questions together
    - With the supervisor's guidance, the student prepares 4 questions for the examination committee
- **3 weeks prior to the exam start date:** Student & supervisor mutually agree on a date and time to begin the comprehensive examination
    - During this time
        - The supervisor selects a $2^{nd}$ examination committee member
        - The supervisor also coordinates the availability of the committee member, student, and themselves to determine an oral exam date 1 week after the two papers are submitted
        - The PhD Program Coordinator selects a Chair for the examination committee
        - The student submits the annotated bibliography and 4 questions to the supervisor, who shares this with the examination committee
- **1 – 2 weeks prior to the exam start date:** The examination committee, led by the Chair, reviews the annotated bibliography and 4 questions, and selects two for the student to answer
- **At least 24 – 48 hours prior to the exam start date:** The Chair submits the examination questions to the Student Support Office
- **On the day of the exam start date (before 9am):** Manager, Student Support Services emails the exam questions to the student (and committee members) on behalf of the Chair.
- **From exam start date until exam end date (2 weeks):** Student write 2 essays in response to exam questions
- **On the day of the exam end date (before 9am):** Student submits (via email) the exam essays to the examination committee & PhD Program Coordinator
- **On Oral Exam Date:** Committee Members and student conduct oral exam
- **On Oral Exam Date:** Committee Members (led by the Chair) conduct in camera session to evaluate comprehensive exam, and determine outcome
- **On Oral Exam Date:** Committee Members (led by Chair) provide verbal feedback and outcome of exam to student
- **Up to 1 – 2 weeks after Oral Exam date:** Chair submits questions, student's responses, and Chair's Report to STS
- **Maximum 2 weeks after Oral Exam date:** If outcome is unsuccessful, deadline for Committee (led by Chair) to provide formal written evaluation to student and PhD Program Coordinator

Approved January 25, 2010, (Revised Jan 23, 2016)