



School of Nursing  
University of Victoria  
PhD Program

## COMPREHENSIVE EXAM GUIDELINES

### 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 by drawing on course work, dissertation work, and their substantive area of interest. 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 independent scholarship that will advance the body of knowledge within nursing. Successful completion of the examination confirms that the student has sufficient preparation and skill to participate in informed dialogue with colleagues in the scholarly community. A formal and rigorous procedure creates a meaningful benchmark in the learning process.

Doctoral students are allowed to move to comprehensive examination when they have successfully completed required course work. Successful completion of supporting elective course work is recommended but not required.

The comprehensive examination must be successfully completed within 24 months of admission. Following successful completion of the comprehensive examination, students will prepare for their dissertation proposal and oral defence, which is the final step before advancement to candidacy that must occur within 36 months from the date of initial registration.

### Format

The format is a four-week take-home examination during which there should be no contact with the dissertation supervisor or dissertation committee. Over the four-week period, the student will write two papers of 15-18 pages (double-spaced) excluding references, abstract, and appendices, using APA format. This is followed by a closed oral examination, which normally occurs within 2-4 weeks after submission of the papers. The supervisory committee, with student input, will generate a list of 4-6 possible questions/topics for the comprehensive exam. *On the day of the exam, the Chair of the examining committee (see below) will email the student a list of three questions of which **the student must address two***. The questions are designed to assess the integration of nursing knowledge, research methods, and the student's substantive area of interest.

### **Examination committee composition**

The preparation and evaluation of the comprehensive examination is the responsibility of an examination committee, which consists of the student's dissertation supervisor and the members of the supervisory committee. All committee members must be regular or adjunct professors who are qualified to supervise graduate students. For a doctoral degree in nursing, a minimum of three committee members is required, including the dissertation supervisor plus a minimum of one member from within the School of Nursing, plus one member from outside the academic unit.

The dissertation supervisor is responsible for:

- a) Forming, with the student, the dissertation committee (examination committee);
- b) Notifying the PhD Program Coordinator who is responsible for selecting the chair of the examination committee (see below); If the PhD Coordinator is the supervisor of the student, the Associate Director of Graduate Education in the School of Nursing will select the Chair of the examination committee;
- c) Working with the examination committee to develop comprehensive examination questions;
- d) Working with the Administrative Assistant (Graduate Programs) to ensure that comprehensive exam paperwork is completed.

### **Chair of the examination committee**

All comprehensive examinations require a Chair who is invited by the PhD Program Coordinator (or Associate Director, Graduate Education, as noted above). Chair responsibility is shared by all the regular research-track professors at the School of Nursing. This ensures even distribution of workload and capacity building for junior faculty.

The Chair is responsible for:

- a) Sending the questions to the student on the starting date of the examination process and informing the Graduate Education Advisor when the exam process has begun;
- b) Receiving and sending the papers to the examination committee;
- c) Overseeing and facilitating the evaluation process (see procedures) including sending a written summary of the committee's evaluative comments to the student;
- d) Working with the student and committee to set a date and time for the oral examination, and to ensure either a room or video links are booked ;
- e) Opening and closing the oral examination proceedings;
- f) Intervening if any issues arise during the oral examination;
- g) Moderating the *in camera* discussion and decision-making (see Appendix A).

### **Procedures (see Appendix B)**

#### **Step 1. Written component**

- a) The comprehensive examination comprises a list of three questions of which the student must address two. The questions are designed to assess the integration of nursing knowledge, research methods, and the student's substantive area of interest.
- b) The Chair emails questions to the student by 9 am the day that the examination period is scheduled to begin.

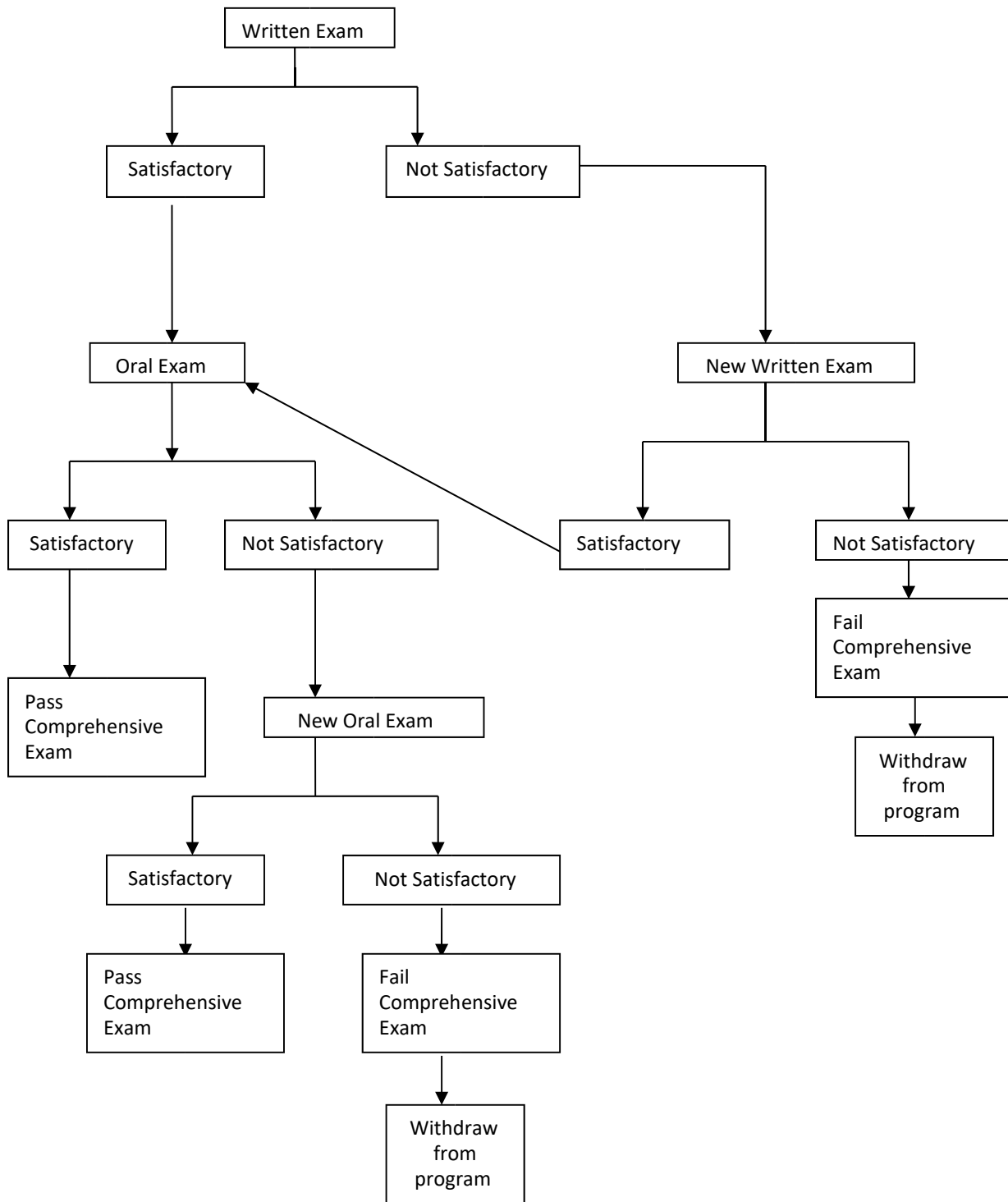
- c) The student prepares two papers (one question per paper) that are 15-18 pages in length (double-spaced) excluding references, abstract, and appendices, using APA format.
- d) During the comprehensive exam process the student must not discuss the exam with any members of the examination committee, or with other doctoral students. For matters related to the comprehensive exam, the student should contact the Chair of the examination committee by email.
- e) The student has a maximum of four weeks to complete the written portion of the exam. The student emails an electronic copy of the two comprehensive examination papers to the Chair of the examination committee.
- f) All committee members have two weeks to submit their written independent evaluation of the written portion of the student's comprehensive exam to the Chair of the examination committee using the School of Nursing Doctoral Program Evaluation criteria for comprehensive examinations (see Appendix B).
- g) The Chair will consult with committee members within two weeks of receiving the committee members' independent evaluations to determine if the written portion is Satisfactory (accepted for oral examination) or Not Satisfactory (new written exam required). If there is a conflict, the Chair must schedule a meeting during which the committee will come to a final decision.
- h) The Chair will inform the student in writing of the committee's decision and evaluative comments within two weeks of consulting the committee and after a decision of Satisfactory or Not Satisfactory to move to the oral exam was made. The Chair will also inform the PhD Coordinator, the Associate Director Graduate Programs, and the Graduate Education Advisor.
- i) In the event that the written examination is Not Satisfactory, the examination committee must provide the reasons in writing to the student.
- j) A student who is unsuccessful will have a single opportunity to re-take the written examination with the original question. They will have 2 weeks per paper to complete this process and complete the re-write.

#### Step 2. Oral examination

- a) The oral examination can only take place when the committee members have reached a consensus for the written component of the comprehensive exam and it will be a closed examination.
- b) The oral exam is scheduled for no later than 2 weeks after the student has been notified that the written exam is Satisfactory.
- c) It is the Chair's responsibility to book a room or video links for the examination, with assistance as needed from the Administrative Assistant (Graduate Programs).
- d) The oral examination will consist of a 15-minute presentation by the student and is intended to address the evaluative comments made by the comprehensive examination committee. The oral examination is an opportunity for the student to expand their point of view.

- e) The Chair will call upon committee members to pose questions the student. There are typically two rounds of questioning beginning with the external committee member (the dissertation supervisor is usually the last to question the student).
- f) Immediately after the oral exam, the committee members plus the Chair will convene in camera and discuss the outcome of the examination as either: Satisfactory – pass comprehensive exam or Not Satisfactory – new oral examination.
- g) The Chair will then invite the student to join the committee to share the outcomes of the examination.
- h) In the event that the examination is Not Satisfactory, committee members must provide the reasons in writing.
- i) A student who is unsuccessful will have a single opportunity to re-take the oral examination. The oral exam must be taken within one month. If the oral examination is failed again, the PhD Comprehensive Examination Report must be submitted to Graduate Admissions and Records, and the student will be withdrawn from the program.

## Appendix A: Overview of the decision making procedures



**Appendix B**  
**School of Nursing Doctoral Program**  
**Evaluation Criteria for Comprehensive Examinations**

The role of the examining committee is to evaluate the two papers, provide evaluative comments, prepare questions for the oral examination, and evaluate the oral examination.

**Evaluation Criteria**

The examinations are adjudicated on a Satisfactory/Not Satisfactory basis (in some instances the committee may reserve judgment and require that the student write a second examination). The written papers 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)

The student must demonstrate to the satisfaction of the examining committee that they have met the criteria in both the written and oral elements of the exam.

The Chair 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 consensus or a majority vote.