

Dalhousie University
Faculty of Health

PhD Health Program HLTH 8000 Comprehensive Exam Guidelines

Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. We are all Treaty people.¹

A. Purpose

The purpose of the Comprehensive Examination is for the PhD in Health student to demonstrate the background preparation necessary for the successful completion and defense of their doctoral dissertation. Its intent is both normative and pedagogical, serving as a mid-degree check on the student's knowledge, understanding, synthesis, and analytical skills in their area of research appropriate to the doctoral degree. The combination of written and oral methods provides opportunity to develop and demonstrate strengths in these two ways of communicating. The content and process should assist in preparing the student to write and successfully defend a quality PhD dissertation, developing the skills required of an independent scholar.

The comprehensive examination will typically occur after coursework has been completed, the area of study for the dissertation has been defined, and areas of further exploration through the comprehensive exam process have been identified. The student and supervisor should both be confident that the student is prepared to enter the comprehensive examination process, with the program coordinator facilitating if consensus is elusive.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the comprehensive examination process, the student will have demonstrated:

- Evidence of substantial understanding of core knowledge areas related to the dissertation subject
- Evidence of good scholarship contextualized within the literature, use of primary references, originality of written text and critical thought, and intellectual honesty
- Appropriateness of answer, demonstrating a level suitable to the doctoral degree
- Ability to critically analyze the pertinent literature, identify gaps, and synthesize the broader concepts

¹ For more information about the purpose of territorial acknowledgements, or information about alternative territorial acknowledgements if your class is offered outside of Nova Scotia, please visit <https://native-land.ca/>.

- Grasp of the broader issues in scientific and health knowledge surrounding the specific dissertation research topic and how they bear on the dissertation

B. Objectives

To ensure, by written and oral examination, that the student is well versed in the multidisciplinary literature broadly underpinning their dissertation. If this objective is not met, areas of deficiency must be identified and the necessary remedial action taken to demonstrate this knowledge.

To provide a quality check on the student's approach to their research, including intellectual rigour and academic honesty, at a high level of scholarship consistent with the academic model for the highest degree the university awards.

C. Preparation of the Student

This preparatory phase is required prior to the process of writing the comprehensive examination.

The student will typically spend one or two semesters reading for the comprehensive exam. This is likely to vary by discipline. The student and supervisory committee will collaboratively identify the core knowledge areas that underpin the proposed dissertation and that will be the foci of exploration through the comprehensive examination process. These core knowledge areas may include, for example, context/field, theory, and methodology. The student and committee should also draft an anticipated timeline, noting times when people may be unavailable or face heavy commitments.

The student and supervisory committee will jointly compile a reading list intended to provide familiarity with the major scholarly debates in key areas. With the guidance of the supervisory committee, the student will lead the first draft of the reading list and committee members will contribute and give feedback. Through dialogue with committee members (for example a committee meeting), the list will be refined to ensure that key resources are included, and the list meets the student's learning needs and expectations of the field. The reading list may change over time, as the student gets immersed in the core knowledge areas and discovers more helpful literature, but at some point, well before the exam, the supervisor must circulate a finalized reading list to be approved by the committee. The reading list should be comprehensive enough to answer the exam questions. Numbers of sources will vary, but it may help to think of reading for comprehensive exams as roughly equivalent to taking 2-3 full-time courses for a 12-week semester.

The finalized reading list will be circulated to all members of the examination committee. This is the basis for the exam; the student cannot later be held responsible for literature beyond this list.

While reading the required material during the preparatory phase, the student is permitted to consult with committee members about their interpretation of the readings, to seek clarification and guidance on further reading, or to address questions that arise. The student is not required to cite all of the readings on the list or be limited to the readings on the list, when answering exam questions.

D. Membership of the Examination Committee

The Supervisory Committee comprises the basis for the Examination Committee.

In addition, students engaged in Indigenous health research and with other priority communities may wish to have an Indigenous Elder or community member on the examining committee. The student, supervisory committee, and Elder/community member should discuss in advance expectations about the Elder's role involvement. FGS outlines expectations and protocols for [Indigenous Advisors](#) on supervisory committees.

E. Chair of the Oral Examination

The Chair of the Oral Examination must be a faculty member cross-listed to the PhD Health program. The purpose of the Chair is to ensure the oral examination process is equitable and fair to the student, and that the questions asked of the student are appropriate to the PhD level, framed to evaluate the student's knowledge and research capability, and informed by the broad context of the World Health Organization's definition of Health.

The Chair does not need to have expertise in the student's area of research.

The Committee should identify potential faculty to fill the role of Chair at the time the reading list is finalized. The PhD Health Program Coordinator is available to support this process.

F. Comprehensive Question Development & Confirmation

Comprehensive examination question development begins with the supervisory committee and student discussing core knowledge areas and methodologies of interest. Based on the reading list, the student is invited to submit areas of focus for examination questions. The committee works with student input to develop six examination questions which reflect the areas of intensive study undertaken in the preparation stage.

Questions should require the student to demonstrate thorough understanding of the topic and abilities to analyze, synthesize, and critically interpret the literature for the core knowledge areas identified.

Supervisors can seek sample questions from the Program Specialist.

Questions must be submitted to the PhD in Health Program Coordinator at least two weeks in advance of the scheduled exam. Approval by the PhD Health Program Coordinator, for clarity, is required prior to the comprehensive examination commencing.

Please note that while the supervisory committee and student may wish to structure the written examination in a format that could result in a research 'product' (e.g., peer reviewed publication), this is not a requirement of the comprehensive examination process, nor is it a criterion by which the responses will be evaluated. Students may want to discuss with their committee how portions of their papers may be integrated into the dissertation and/or the possibility of publishing parts of their examination documents later.

G. Procedures for Comprehensive Examination

The comprehensive examination evaluates the student's ability to critically analyze the literature, synthesize that information, and directly address the questions posed. It includes both a written and oral process.

Written Examination

Given the variety of disciplines and professions in the Faculty of Health and the varied types of research students conduct, there are three possible procedures for the written exam. Students decide in advance, consulting with their committee, regarding the option that best suits the material, the discipline, and the student's life circumstances. If consensus is not reached, the student or supervisor will notify the Program Coordinator who will facilitate a collaborative decision-making process.

Dates for submission of papers and timelines for evaluation of papers will be negotiated with attention to keeping the process moving, and the overall aim of completion in Year 2. Given the different procedures available, students and committee members should think ahead about the timing for oral examination, and hold calendar dates as estimated.

Whichever procedure is selected, these are constants:

1. Questions must be approved by the PhD in Health Coordinator.
2. The supervisor alerts the Program Specialist regarding the procedure selected and the deadline(s) for papers.
3. The Program Specialist sends the questions and procedure to the student at the requested time/date and copies the supervisor.
4. Every student will complete three written papers of 15-20 pages (4000-5000 words), double spaced, each. If granted a passing grade, the written comprehensive is followed by an oral examination.
5. The written papers are submitted to the Program Specialist who distributes them to the committee.
6. Student accommodations can be negotiated through the Program Coordinator and/or Dalhousie Accessibility Services.

Procedure 1:

On an agreed upon date, the Program Specialist sends the student the six approved questions. The student will then choose three of these questions and will answer them in three corresponding original, scholarly documents 15-20 pages (4000-5000 words) in length, double spaced, in a formatting and referencing style agreed upon by the student and committee. The student will have six weeks to complete all three documents before submitting them to the Program Specialist. Students may submit prior to the end of the 6-week period, however no feedback will be provided until the exam period is complete. Written feedback will be provided typically within three to four weeks of submission.

Procedure 2:

The student and supervisory committee agree in advance that there are three distinct areas of focus in the exam. The student will read in an area, then on an agreed-upon date, the Program Specialist sends the student two questions on that topic, from which they will choose one. The student will answer it in an original, scholarly document 15-20 pages (4000-5000 words), double spaced, in length, written over an agreed timeframe with the examining committee. The committee will provide written

feedback, typically within two weeks. If the first paper is assessed as meeting the expectations (a 'pass'), the student will proceed to reading in the next area of focus. If it does not meet expectations, the student and committee will agree on remedial processes before continuing to the next area of study. This process is repeated two more times, for a total of three papers addressing the three areas of focus.

Procedure 3:

Upon approval of the reading list and examination questions, the Program Specialist sends the student the questions. Over one or two semesters, the student will read the expected material, choose three questions, and answer each of those questions in an original, scholarly document 15-20 pages (4000-5000 words) in length. When the student is nearly finished writing, they will inform the Comprehensive Examination Committee when to expect their exam papers for review. The committee will provide written feedback on all three papers at once, typically within three to four weeks of submission.

Evaluation of the Written Examination:

Evaluation of the written portion of the exam must be completed prior to the student moving forward to the stage of the oral examination using these criteria:

1. Did the student answer the questions posed?
2. Did the documents satisfy the expected level of academic performance, specifically:
 - Evidence of substantial understanding of core knowledge areas related to the dissertation subject
 - Evidence of good scholarship, contextualized within the literature, use of primary references, originality of written text and critical thought, and intellectual honesty
 - Appropriateness of answer, demonstrating a level suitable to the doctoral degree
 - Ability to critically analyze the pertinent literature, identify gaps, and synthesize the broader concepts
 - Grasp of the broader issues in scientific and health knowledge surrounding the specific dissertation research topic and how they bear on the dissertation
3. Was the document written at grammatical and scientific levels as expected of a PhD Candidate, given this is an examination rather than a publishable paper?

In adjudicating the documents, the Comprehensive Examination Committee will seek consensus of opinion in answering questions 1–3 above for each document submitted. In the case where consensus is not achieved, a majority vote will rule.

In the case where one or more documents are judged to not meet the standards of the examination, the student will be given an opportunity to revise the document(s). The time frame for the revisions or re-examination will be agreed between the student and the Comprehensive Examination committee, with the goal of completing the comprehensive exam within Year 2 (or Year 3 for direct-entry students). If the Committee deems a specific course of action is required to aid the student in remediating a component of the comprehensive exam, this should be communicated to the PhD in Health Coordinator. As is deemed appropriate, Committee members should provide detailed guidance to the student regarding improvement of the documents toward successful adjudication.

Successful written examination will be achieved by approval of all three documents submitted. The supervisor is responsible for coordinating the completion of the comprehensive exam approval form,

which includes obtaining signatures of committee members, and submission of the approval form to the Program Specialist, following deliberations on the written portion of the exam. Failure to achieve this approval after two rounds of submission will be considered a failure, and grounds for the student's withdrawal from the PhD in Health program.

When and only when all three documents are judged by the Comprehensive Examination Committee as meeting the standards for the examination, the student will be invited to defend the documents and their background knowledge in an oral examination.

Oral Examination

The oral examination should be scheduled as soon as possible after the written documents are evaluated, typically within two to three weeks of submission. Given challenges in scheduling, it is helpful to set tentative calendar dates when the written documents are submitted.

The supervisor and student will meet to discuss the oral examination process and expectations.

Possible structures include:

- The student presents on each paper (approximately 5-8 minutes), followed by committee questions in turn, three times, for the three papers
- The student presents on the three papers at once (approximately 15-20 minutes), followed by committee questions in turn, up to three rounds

The Program Specialist and Chair for the oral examination will be advised of the procedure.

Typically the oral examination occurs in a two-hour period followed by up to 30 minutes of in-camera deliberation without the student present, followed by notification to the student from the committee immediately afterward.

Committee questions should focus on the agreed-upon readings and the scope of the written work.

The oral exam may be in person or conducted virtually.

Evaluation of the Oral Examination:

Evaluation of the oral examination is to be completed using the appropriate form(s) and as per the criteria below. It is recommended that the fillable portion of form be completed in advance and at least one printed copy brought to the student's oral examination meeting for completion following deliberations.

1. Was the oral presentation clear, concise and effective?
2. Did the student provide convincing answers to the questions posed during the oral examination?
3. Did the answers to the questions posed during the examination satisfy the expected level of academic performance, specifically:
 - Evidence of substantial understanding or core knowledge areas related to the dissertation subject
 - Evidence of good scholarship contextualized within the literature, use of primary references, originality of written text and critical thought, and intellectual honesty
 - Appropriateness of answer, demonstrating a level suitable for a PhD candidate

- Ability to critically analyze the pertinent literature, identify gaps, and synthesize the broader concepts
 - Grasp of the broader issues in scientific and health knowledge surrounding the specific dissertation research topic and how they bear on the dissertation
4. Was the student able to support their answers with evidence from the literature?
5. Was the student able to engage in scientific dialogue appropriate to function in scientific meetings, presentations, etc.?

In adjudicating the oral examination, the Comprehensive Examination Committee will seek consensus of opinion in answering questions 1–5 above for each document submitted. In the case where consensus is not achieved, a majority vote will rule.

If the answers to questions 1-5 for the oral examination are assessed to not meet the standard for all three documents, the student will be given an opportunity to re-sit the exam. As is deemed appropriate, Committee members should provide detailed guidance to the student toward successful adjudication.

Not meeting the expectations of the oral examination criteria a second time will be considered a failure, which is grounds for the student's withdrawal from the PhD program in Health.

I. Post-examination Remediation

In keeping with the pedagogical objectives of the Comprehensive Examination, the Committee may follow the examination with recommendation of remedial work for the student, the objective being to optimize the likelihood of success in writing the PhD dissertation and in its oral defense. Such remedial work may consist of:

- directed study of certain areas of the literature to supplement perceived areas of weakness
- additional coursework
- rewriting paper(s), having been provided detailed feedback
- other work as is deemed appropriate

The remedial work will be carried out under the guidance of the Supervisor and the Supervisory Committee.