

# Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture

A partnership of Ryerson University and York University

PhD Qualifying Examination Regulations

(also informally called Comprehensives or “Comps”)

In addition to stating the overall principles and objectives, this document details the following steps in the Qualifying Exam process and typical timeline:

The entire process normally takes four to six months, beginning by:

**A. Selecting the Areas & Fields of Study: Major General & Specific, and Minor.....p.3**

**B. Constituting the Examining Committee ..... p.4**

**C. Selecting and Preparing the Reading Lists & Preparing the Exam Questions ..... p.4**

*Three to four months before plans to write exams, the student reports:*

**D. Preliminary Meeting and Request to Appoint Examining Committee..... p.4**

**E. Planning for the Exam Format ..... p. 5**

*At least a month before the first written exam, the student reports:*

**F. Finalizing Plans for Approval & Scheduling..... p.5**

*Two weeks or more before the first written exam, the exam chair reports:*

**G. Finalizing the Exam Questions for Approval ..... p.5**

**H. Writing the Exams ..... p.6**

*Within a month of the final written exam:*

**I. Conducting the Oral Defense..... p.6**

*Soon After the Oral Defense, the exam chair reports:*

**J. Evaluating and Assessing the Result..... p.6**

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### PhD Qualifying Examination Regulations

NOTE: The italicized sections below are taken from the OCGS brief and cannot be altered. The remaining sections were approved by the Program's Executive Council.

#### Qualifying Examinations (also informally called Comprehensives or "Comps")

*Students must pass a qualifying examination to advance to PhD candidacy. This examination is normally taken by the end of the second year of registration.*

*The PhD Qualifying Examination assesses the student's overall command of the field and of the major and minor areas of concentration. The examination will test the student's grasp of the history of the field, its central themes and major debates, and the key theoretical and methodological issues.*

*Successful completion of the examination indicates (1) that the student is qualified to teach at the undergraduate level in the field (including introductory and overview courses) and (2) has the foundation in the area of specialization needed to begin work on the dissertation. The examination will reflect the diversity of perspectives in the field and its transdisciplinary nature.*

Thus, the intention of the Qualifying Examination is to test the candidate's breadth of knowledge and prepare them to teach foundation and survey courses, and not limit them to the area of their dissertation specialty.

These regulations have an important underlying principle: that examination committees work with the student in formulating the examination to ensure that the student is clear on what material is to be covered. The Chair of the examination committee must be a faculty member of the Joint Program, normally but not necessarily agreed to continue as the student's dissertation supervisor. It is up to the committee, its chair, and the student's Program Director to ensure that the examination meets the standards of the Program.

Students should be aware that the preparation for the examination is expected to largely be a review of familiar material, and should not normally take more than two terms after the completion of their coursework requirements.

Normally, full-time doctoral students complete their qualifying examinations by the end of their second year of study, except York's part-time students by the end of their third year of study. The dissertation proposal is normally due four months after the successful completion of the qualifying examinations.

### **A. Selecting the Areas & Fields of Study: Major General & Specific, and Minor**

The examination will have three parts. Distinct and separate reading lists for each part are prepared by the candidate in consultation with an examining committee of faculty.

Part I – MAJOR GENERAL: This section of the examination is designed to assess the candidate's overall command of a general area of study within Communication and Culture, that is, knowledge of key theories, controversies and debates in one of the Program's Areas of Study – Media & Culture, Politics & Policy, or Technology in Practice.

*This section of the examination is designed to ensure that candidates are aware of major theories, debates and controversies in the field. Since candidates will not be equally well read in all aspects of the field, it will be important that (1) the examining committee ascertain the topics over which the candidate professes mastery and those about which the candidate professes only general awareness and (2) questions in this section be general in nature, permitting candidates to specify the scope of the answer.*

Part II – MAJOR SPECIFIC: Designed to assess the candidate's mastery of a specific thematic or conceptual field within the Major area of study.

*Because of the breadth of the three fields, examining committees, in consultation with the candidate, must identify those aspects of the major field in which the candidate professes mastery. For example, a candidate majoring in Politics and Policy might have as her/his primary area of concentration broadcasting policy. Such a candidate would be expected to have a general knowledge of cultural policy, in theory and practice, and political economy, and to be able to place her knowledge of broadcasting policy in broader theoretical and historical context. However, she might know little about political communication. Conversely, a candidate specializing in political communication, might have only a general knowledge of the policy literature, but would be expected to demonstrate not only mastery of political communication but also a general knowledge of Canadian and global aspects of communication and cultural policy and the relationship of political communication and political culture.*

Part III – MINOR: Designed to assess the candidate's knowledge of a field clearly distinct from the Major, either an alternate general area of study, or a "constructed minor" focused on a specific thematic in an alternate area of study.

*As the student's grasp of the minor field is not expected to be as comprehensive as for the major field, the agreed-upon bibliography and the questions should be more specific to the candidate's interests.*

## **B. Constituting the Examining Committee**

1. The examination will be assessed by an Examining Committee of three faculty, normally members of the Program, approved by the student's Program Director. The Chair of the examining committee must be a faculty member of the Joint Program, normally but not necessarily agreed to continue as the student's dissertation supervisor. Normally, each university will be represented. In all cases, all committee members are expected to respect the candidate's research interests, as far as possible.
2. All examiners contribute to the preparation of all three parts, and all examiners approve and evaluate all three parts. Any examiner, however, may be charged with primary responsibility for facilitating preparation of any one of the three parts, as best aligns with their currency, competence or research specialization. Such arrangements should be clarified and understood by all examiners and the student, as early as possible in the process.

## **C. Selecting and Preparing the Reading Lists & Preparing the Exam Questions**

1. An early part of the iterative process of "reading" is preparing the reading lists, in consultation with the examining committee. The readings lists of each part should provide a breadth surveying the field, but also allow several in-depth investigations of particular debates, concerns or concepts in the field.
2. A later part of the iterative process of "reading" is preparing possible exam questions. Students will frame and compose three possible exam questions for each of the three parts, in consultation with the examining committee. Questions should be framed and phrased to allow a degree of depth in focus upon a particular debate, concern or concept, within the contextual breadth of materials covered by the lists of readings.
3. In specialized or constructed Minors, students will be expected to demonstrate levels of breadth and integration similar to those expected of standard Minors.

## **D. Preliminary Meeting and Request to Appoint Examining Committee**

1. The areas of study and examining committee are normally determined about three to four months before the student expects to write their exams. Normally, at this point in the process, all examiners meet together with the student, to ensure general agreement upon the direction of the exams and reading lists, to discuss the focus of possible questions, to clarify who is chair of the examining committee, and to determine any specialized responsibilities.
2. To encourage this meeting, the student must submit a form "Appointment of Qualifying Examination Committee," stipulating their examiners and chair, signed by all three members of the examining committee. Note that changes to committees and areas of study cannot be made less than one month before the first written exam, as detailed below.

### **E. Planning for the Exam Format**

1. The exam normally will be written as a take-home examination consisting of two separate examinations, which may be administered separately, but at most a week apart: (1) the two parts of the Major, General and Specific, returned in a 48-hour period; and (2) the Minor, returned in a 24-hour period. Students may do all three parts in a single 72-hour period.
2. Alternative formats (such as closed-book in-class exams) may be considered in exceptional circumstances. The student should submit a rationale for the alternative format, in consultation with the examining committee, to be approved by the student's Program Director.
3. The student is responsible to clarify in advance any accommodation for accessibility

### **F. Finalizing Plans for Approval & Scheduling**

1. Exams and Oral Defenses (detailed below) are written at times agreeable to both the student and examining committee, with the approval of the student's Program Director.
2. Normally not less than one month (20 business days) before the first of the written parts, the student must submit a "Request for PhD Qualifying Examination" form to the Program, approved by the entire examining committee, stipulating the dates for the written exams and oral defense, the areas of study and titles of each part, accompanied by the final reading lists for each part. No changes to the examining committee or readings lists are permitted without resubmitting this form and thus, if necessary, postponing the exam dates.
3. The student's Program Administrator will schedule a room for the oral defense, and will ensure the chair or a designate will send the question paper at a mutually agreeable time for the student. If the student wishes to commence writing the exam on a weekend or statutory holiday, a member of the examining committee must volunteer to forward the exam to the candidate.

### **G. Finalizing the Exam Questions for Approval**

1. Students will frame and compose a total of nine possible exam questions (three for each of the three parts), in consultation with the examining committee.
2. Not later than two weeks prior to the first of the written parts, the chair of the examining committee must submit all nine questions (three for each of the three parts) for approval by the student's Program Director. Once approved, the chair, in consultation with the examining committee but not with the student, selects six questions to create the exam (two for each of the three parts). Then, the student answers their choice of one of the two selected questions for each part.

## **H. Writing the Exams**

1. Students will normally receive the questions around 10 am, and will be required to hand in their answers before noon two days later (Major) or one day later (Minor), or three days later for the 72-hour option. Answers for each part should range from about 3500 to 4000 words, or about 10 to 12 double-spaced, typed pages, plus a list of works cited.
2. Adjustments for accessibility and alternative formats must result in exam answers of similar analytical scope as the take-home exam format.

## **I. Conducting the Oral Defense**

1. Oral examinations are required for all candidates to determine the assessment of the three written parts and whether any part must be adjourned and rewritten. To be clear, even when examiners foresee needing to rewrite before the oral defense, the defense is essential to determine the depth and breadth of the student's knowledge, and to confer, in confidence, over the decision to pass or adjourn.
2. The oral defense will be scheduled within one month of the final written exam, on a date to be determined when dates for the written exams are set.
3. The student and all three examiners must be present for the oral examination, except when an absent examiner would delay the oral defense more than a month after the final written exam; then a proxy will be arranged by the student's Program Director.
4. All three examiners evaluate and participate in the defense of all three written parts. Any examiner, however, may be charged with primary responsibility for the oral exam of any one of the three parts, as best aligns with their currency, competence or research specialization. Such arrangements should be clarified well in advance.

## **J. Evaluating and Assessing the Result**

First, note this restatement of the overall purpose of the qualifying exam process:

*Successful completion of the examination indicates (1) that the student is qualified to teach at the undergraduate level in the field (including introductory and overview courses) and (2) has the foundation in the area of specialization needed to begin work on the dissertation.*

1. In confidence, following the oral defense, the examining committee will assess all three parts of the examination separately, and complete a "Report of the Oral Defense," recording a grade of Passed (i.e. satisfactory) or Adjourned (i.e. unsatisfactory) for each of the three parts, as determined by a majority vote of any two of the three examiners.
2. The student will be awarded an overall assessment of one of the following:
  - a. Pass (all three parts are satisfactory); OR
  - b. Adjourned (one or more parts are unsatisfactory.)
3. A grade of Pass is awarded when responses to the exam questions in both the written work and the oral defense demonstrate that
  - a. the candidate is qualified to teach at the undergraduate level in the field (including introductory and overview courses)
  - b. the candidate is familiar with the scholarship in the area of their specialization and thus in a position to pursue their own dissertation project.

## Rewriting and Re-examining Adjourned Parts

4. In the case of adjourned parts, within a week of the oral defense, the chair of the examining committee must provide the student with a written rationale for the decision to adjourn, copied to the student's Program Director. The purpose of the written rationale is to document a stage of unsatisfactory progress, and to provide constructive criticism toward a provisional plan for the re-examination of that part of the exam.
5. Adjourned parts of the exam must be re-written not less than one month following the oral defense, but normally not more than four months.
6. In the case of adjourned parts, any aspect of the process may be reconstituted at the student's discretion (i.e. the examining committee, reading list, or student's submitted set of three questions may be changed, although not necessarily.) Similarly, examiners may choose to resign from the re-examining committee.
7. A new "Request for PhD Qualifying Examination" form must be submitted when the reconstituted committee, reading lists, and dates for rewriting are determined. Likewise, the new questions must be submitted by the exam chair for approval at least two weeks before re-writing, then selecting two questions per part for the exam.
8. A second oral defense is required for rewritten parts, to confer in confidence over the decision to pass or fail.
9. At the second oral defense, the student will be awarded a final, overall assessment of one of the following:
  - a. Pass (all three parts are now satisfactory, after rewriting if adjourned); OR
  - b. Fail (one or more adjourned parts remain unsatisfactory after rewriting.)
10. A decision of Fail results in the student being required to withdraw from the program. Within a week of a decision of Fail, the chair of the examining committee must provide the student a written rationale, copied to the student's Program Director.

These regulations will be reviewed by the joint TMU-York program executive whenever a simple majority of the executive votes in favour of a motion to conduct such a review; and after a cyclical program review at either university if the reviewers make a recommendation to that effect.