

**Graduate Program in Civil Engineering, York University  
Policies and Procedures for the PhD Research Proposal Presentation and Defence**

13 March 2022

### **1. Objectives**

The objective of the Research Proposal Presentation and Defence is to ensure that the student has conducted extensive literature review and background investigation in sufficient depth on the student's PhD research project to be able to propose an original research program and have the necessary experimental and/or analytical tools to complete the research program.

### **2. Timing**

Each PhD student is required to present a Proposal for the student's PhD research in the form of a formal written document as well as in an open seminar format and to defend it before an Examination Committee within the first 24 months of the student's PhD program. It is anticipated that the majority of students will be able to complete this requirement within the first 24 months of their PhD degree program. As such, exceptions to the 24-month time limit will only be considered under exceptional circumstances (e.g. part-time students, personal situations beyond the student's control, etc.) and must be approved by the GPD.

### **3. Format**

The student is required to prepare a formal written Research Proposal, using the generally accepted format for an NSERC Discovery Grant proposal. The student should discuss the merits of the student's PhD research in the Research Proposal and expect it to be evaluated in the following areas:

- Originality and innovation;
- Expected contributions and their significance;
- Scope and clarity of the objectives;
- Appropriateness and clarity of the methodology; and,
- Feasibility of timely completion of the proposed research.

The Research Proposal document should use 25 mm (1") margins, single line spacing and 12-point font and must be presented in 3500 or fewer words (excluding figures and tables). It must contain the following details:

- The student's recent progress in research activities related to the proposal;
- A clear statement of both the short- and the long-term objectives;
- A comprehensive review of relevant literature;
- Proposed approach and methodology;
- Anticipated significance of the work; and
- Proposed timeline of research activities.

Copies of the Research Proposal must be made available to the members of the Examination Committee at least four weeks prior to the oral examination of the Research Proposal. At the beginning of the examination, the student will give a 20-minute presentation highlighting salient features of the Research Proposal. The questions asked by the examiners will be based primarily on the proposal but may also include related areas of Civil Engineering and other scientific disciplines that are relevant to the proposal.

#### **4. Accessibility and Accommodations**

Students requiring accommodations are encouraged to contact the appropriate accessibility office at the university well in advance of the examination. The Examination Committee is expected to support students who require accommodation, whilst ensuring the integrity of the examination process.

#### **5. Examination Committee**

A separate Examination Committee will be formed for each PhD student. It will comprise the student's supervisor, two research experts whose areas of expertise align closely with the major area of the student's PhD research project, and the GPD (or the GPD's designate), who will chair the Examination Committee. Normally, a research expert will be a member of the Department; however, upon consultation with the GPD, the student's supervisor may invite someone from another Department at York or from industry. The student's supervisor and the two research experts will be the voting members of the Examination Committee. The GPD (or the GPD's designate) will be a non-voting member of the Examination Committee. In the case of joint supervision of the student by two or more faculty members, all the co-supervisors will collectively have a single vote on the Examination Committee.

The student will be informed of the composition of their Examination Committee at least four weeks before the Examination. The student will have the right to request to the Department Chair that any voting member of the Examination Committee be replaced if the student feels that past instances of personal conflict may potentially compromise the voting member's objectivity.

#### **6. Arrangements**

All arrangements for this examination are the responsibility of the student's supervisor(s). Copies of the Research Proposal Examination Request Form (attached at the end of this document) and the Research Proposal document must be given to the GPD and to each member of the Examination Committee at least four weeks before the scheduled day of the examination. The GPD must be notified of the scheduled date of the Examination at least four weeks prior to the examination.

#### **7. Assessment Criteria and Feedback**

The Research Proposal Presentation and Defence will assess if the student has conducted an extensive literature review and background investigation in sufficient depth to be able to propose an original research program and have the necessary experimental and/or analytical tools to complete the research program. The Examination Committee will evaluate the student's Research Proposal based on the following assessment criteria:

- Originality and innovation;
- Expected contributions and their significance;
- Scope and clarity of the objectives;
- Appropriateness and clarity of the methodology; and,
- Feasibility of timely completion of the proposed research.

The Examination Committee will assess the written Research Proposal, the proposal presentation, and the student's answers to questions following the presentation. Each component will have an equal weighting, and a single integrated outcome will be provided. The description of possible outcomes is provided in Section 8; a grading scheme will not be used and a final grade will not be provided. The Examination Committee will provide a

written assessment with a rationale for the final outcome to the student in the case of a “Referred” or “Fail” outcome. This feedback will be provided to the student within 5 business days following the proposal presentation. A written assessment will not be provided for a “Pass” outcome.

## **8. Outcome**

The outcome of the Proposal Defence will be described using the following categories:

- a) Pass
- b) Referred: The Examination Committee will use this category when one or more deficiencies have been identified in the student’s performance in the written and/or oral (or both) components of the Examination. A set of corrective measures will be prescribed by the Examination Committee. The student’s supervisor(s) must ensure the implementation of these corrective measures and will inform the GPD, in writing, of their successful implementation.
- c) Fail: A written report on both the written and the oral components of the Examination is required from the Chair of the Examination Committee in case of the student’s failing the Research Proposal Presentation and Defence. The Examination Committee may recommend the student either resubmit an updated Proposal followed by a presentation and the defence of an improved version of the Research Proposal within three months or the student’s withdrawal from the PhD program.

Note: In the case of a second presentation and defence of the Research Proposal – either as a result of the Examination Committee’s recommendation as outlined in Section 8(c) above, or because of the result of an appeal process as described in Section 9 below, the outcome of the second presentation and defence of the Research Proposal will be final. That is, no third presentation and defence of the Research Proposal will be allowed.

## **9. Appeal Procedure**

The procedure for a PhD student to appeal the composition or the decision of the Examining Committee will be as follows:

- a) If a student wishes to appeal the outcome of the Research Proposal Presentation and Defence on procedural and/or academic grounds, the appeal must be lodged formally with the GPD, setting forth in writing the reasons why the student believes the academic decision is unjust. This should be done as early as possible after the decision is announced and, normally no later than five business days thereafter.
- b) If the matter has not been resolved by the GPD, and the student continues to believe that the academic decision is unjust, a formal request may be lodged for a review of the formal appeal by an Appeals Committee established by the GPD. The Appeal Committee should exclude the initial examiners on the student's Examination Committee.
- c) After reviewing the appeal, including interviewing the student and the members of the examination committee, the Appeals Committee may find that:
  - i. The decision is academically and procedurally sound; or,
  - ii. An error in procedure or academic judgment has been made. In this case the Appeals Committee will proceed to rectify the error. This may include passing the student or allowing the student to repeat all or part of the Research Proposal Presentation and Defence.
- d) If the GPD and the Appeals Committee find that the decision of the Examination Committee was academically and procedurally sound, the GPD may recommend to

the York University Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) that the student be required to withdraw from the PhD program.

**10. Updates to the Research Proposal Presentation and Defence Policies and Procedures**

The Comprehensive Examination Policies and Procedures will be reviewed every 5-years by the Civil Engineering Graduate Program Administration Committee, and if necessary, propose changes to the Policies and Procedures.