15. THESIS DEFENSES

15.1. Timing of thesis defenses. It is sometimes more difficult to schedule thesis defenses in the May-August period due to faculty being away for field work and summer vacations. Thus if you plan to defend during these months you would be wise to contact potential examiners well in advance to be sure that they will be available. The Graduate Assistant usually takes vacation in August so you may have to make your own arrangements for Head's Delegate and Chair during that period. Please ask the Graduate Assistant for more information well in advance of your proposed defense date.

It is strongly recommended that a committee meeting be held within 6 months of the expected thesis defense date to discuss progress, the thesis, and the scheduling of the defense. The arrangements for the examination are made by the supervisor. The supervisor is responsible for arranging a time suitable for all members of the committee and booking a room. A Committee member may not be excluded from an examination (and a replacement obtained) without their written permission. Both the arrangements for the exam and the membership of the committee must be recorded on the Oral Thesis Examination Form. This form must be signed by the supervisor, the Graduate Coordinator, and the Chair of Division I (or the Dean of Graduate Studies for a PhD examination) and submitted with the thesis.

Final arrangements for the exam should not be made until the thesis is ready for submission.

15.2 MSc Thesis Examination. The examining committee must include a minimum of 5 faculty, as follows:

1 Chairperson (chosen by the Graduate Studies Assistant in consultation with the Graduate Coordinator; the Chair must be from a different department within Division I)

1 Head’s Delegate (usually a member of the Graduate Studies Committee)

1 or 2 Biology faculty members (usually from the student's supervisory committee)

1 Internal-external Examiner (a faculty member from another department, but may be cross-appointed in Biology)

1 Supervisor (or, in some cases, 2 Cosupervisors)

The Chairperson's role is to manage the exam and (usually) not to ask questions of the candidate.

The Internal-external Examiner cannot be a co-author on any papers contained in the MSc thesis.

Examiners may be regular full-time faculty members at a recognized university, emeritus
professors (as long as they are still active in research), adjunct professors (provided this is covered in their letter of appointment and funds are available to cover the costs mandated by the faculty union), or other researchers in government agencies and NGOs (usually a PhD is required plus approval from the Graduate Coordinator and the Graduate School). Please consult with the Graduate Coordinator if you are unsure about the status of a potential examiner.

15.3. PhD Thesis Examination. The examining committee must include a minimum of 5 faculty, as follows:

1 Chairperson (delegated by the Dean of the Graduate School)

1 Head’s Delegate (usually a member of the Graduate Studies Committee)

1 or 2 Biology faculty members (usually from the student's supervisory committee)

1 Internal-external Examiner (a faculty member from another department, but may be cross-appointed in Biology)

1 External Examiner (a faculty member from another university, or government agency but must hold a PhD; see 15.4, below)

1 Supervisor (or, in some cases, 2 Co-supervisors)

The Chairperson's role is to manage the exam and (usually) not to ask questions of the candidate. The Chair of this examination must approve Committee membership - confirmation of these arrangements will be made in writing to the members of the examining committee and the student.

Neither the Internal-external Examiner nor the External Examiner are permitted to be a co-author on any papers contained in the PhD thesis.

Examiners may be regular full-time faculty members at a recognized university, emeritus professors (as long as they are still active in research), adjunct professors (provided this is covered in their letter of appointment and funds are available to cover the costs mandated by the faculty union), or other researchers in government agencies and NGOs (usually a PhD is required plus approval from the Graduate Coordinator and the Graduate School). Please consult with the Graduate Coordinator if you are unsure about the status of a potential examiner.

15.4. External Examiners. To ensure that the external examiner is suitably qualified, the supervisor is required to submit an External Examiner Request Form to the Graduate Coordinator for approval well before the thesis is submitted. External Examiners must then also be approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies before the thesis is formally submitted.
15.5. **Thesis Examination Committees.** The examining committee is suggested by the student's supervisor and is approved by the Coordinator of Graduate Studies. Note that while this examination committee may include members of the student's supervisory committee, this is not a requirement. Examination committees are constituted to evaluate the thesis and the student's competence whereas supervisory committees are constituted to guide the student through the research program and preparation of the thesis.

15.6. **Deadlines for Submission.** The members of the examining committee must receive copies of an MSc thesis at least two weeks (10 business days), and for a PhD thesis, five weeks (25 business days), before the date of the exam. The Chair of the examination committee receives a copy of the thesis from the Graduate School three days before the exam. These deadlines must be strictly adhered to otherwise the exam may be cancelled. Final scheduling of the exam will not occur until the thesis is submitted.

15.7. **Scope of Exams.** The thesis examination is conducted according to the General Regulations of the School of Graduate Studies and Research as set out in the Graduate Calendar. The thesis examination is based primarily on the thesis although the student may be asked to demonstrate additional relevant background knowledge.

The student should be:

(a) fully familiar with all experimental or analytical procedures used in the thesis;

(b) prepared to discuss and defend all approaches to the problem, the procedures, the results, and the conclusions;

(c) prepared to discuss and defend the format and style of the thesis;

(d) prepared to evaluate the significance of the results and to suggest further experimental work.

15.8. **Examination Procedure.**

(a) The student may request to have an open examination subject to approval by the Head of Department and the Chair of the examining committee. If approved the audience will be present only during the presentation of the summary by the student and the subsequent questioning of the student by the examining committee.

(b) in the absence of the student, the Chair will read out the written comments of the committee members. There will be an opportunity for brief discussion of the student's progress, of any difficulties relating to the thesis or the defense, and how the exam will be conducted;

(c) at the beginning of the defense, the student must present a summary of the work in the thesis. For the MSc defense this should be a 15-20 min summary that highlights the major
findings. For the PhD defense this can be either a 15-20 min summary, or a full-length (40-min) departmental seminar that will be open to the department;

(d) the student will be questioned by the committee members starting with the external examiner and finishing with the supervisor - typically two rounds of questions will be asked;

(e) in the absence of the student, the committee will discuss the defense and indicate whether the student will be assigned a i) pass, ii) referred, or iii) fail. If a student fails to revise the thesis in a satisfactory manner in the required period, the grade will be changed to a "fail".

15.9. MSc Thesis Results in PhD Thesis. The results of an MSc thesis must not form a substantial part of a PhD thesis; citation of the MSc thesis is adequate. In some cases, limited inclusion of MSc results are acceptable if they help to clarify the PhD thesis.

16. REVIEW OF ACADEMIC DECISIONS

16.1. Review of Course Grade. A student who wishes to question a grade in a graduate course should request, in writing, a review of the grade by the instructor. This request must be made within one month of the grade being announced. The instructor will notify the student and the Coordinator of Graduate Studies, in writing, of the result of the review.

A student who is not satisfied by the results of that request should ask, in writing within 5 working days of receiving the review of the instructor, for a review of the grade by the Coordinator of Graduate Studies.

A student who is not still not satisfied with the outcome may request the Coordinator of Graduate Studies to establish an independent committee to review the grade within 5 working days of receiving the review of the Coordinator of Graduate Studies. This committee shall consist of three professors of Biology, one of whom may be nominated by the student. The committee will submit a written report and this decision will be final.

16.2. Review of Qualifying Exam Decision. A student who wishes to question the decision of the examining committee should request, in writing, an interview with the Chair of the examining committee. This request must be made within one month of the examination. If the Coordinator of Graduate Studies was not present at the exam, the Coordinator must also attend the interview. The Head of the Biology Department must also be present.

A student who is not satisfied by the results of that request should ask, in writing within 5 working days of the exam decision, that the examining committee be convened to reconsider the decision. Committee members from outside Queen's will not normally attend. Written and oral presentations will be accepted by the committee.
A student who is not satisfied with the outcome may request an independent committee of three professors from the Biology Department to review the case within 5 working days of the decision of the examining committee. One of these professors may be nominated by the student to the committee. The decision of the committee will be final.

16.3. Withdrawal on Academic Grounds (i.e., Unsatisfactory Progress).

(a) A student who wishes to question a request by the Department to withdraw on academic grounds should request, in writing, a review of the case by the supervisory committee. This request should be made within one month of the decision being announced.

(b) A student who is not satisfied by (a) may request the Coordinator of Graduate Studies to review the case.

(c) A student who is not satisfied by the outcome of (a) and (b) may request a review of the decision by an independent committee of three professors of Biology, one of whom may be nominated by the student. The decision of this committee will be final.

16.4. MSc and PhD Oral Defense Decisions. Thesis defenses are conducted by the School of Graduate Studies and reviews of these decisions should follow the procedure outlined in the Graduate Calendar.

Appendix

A Teaching Assistant Agreement with clearly defined expectations on behalf of the instructor and the department will be given to each TA at the beginning of the term in which the course is being taught. A survey will be conducted at the end of the term. See also the Senate Document on Teaching Assistants.

In considering this document a few things should be kept in mind:

(a) The Department of Biology uses its TA funds (provided by A&S) in support of our graduate program. This is not a requirement of A&S, as these funds may be used to hire TAs who are not graduate students.

(b) Although recognizing that there are differences among courses and among TAs, a TAship constitutes about 65 hours of work.

(c) A student is expected to be qualified for an assigned TA position. Thus, if the student has to learn the material in order to teach effectively, this is not counted within the TAship work hours.

(d) In general we try to assign students with the same TAships each year since this eases the qualification issue.

(e) If faculty demand that the student attend a TA meeting (expected to be <1 hour per week for a qualified TA), or attend the lectures, that this time is included in the TAship work hours. If this represents a large proportion of the TAship work hours then the Coordinator of Graduate Studies may consider whether this is a good use of such time.

(f) All set up of laboratories, contact with students (in lab or tutorial, answering questions, emails etc) and marking are part of the TAship.

(g) With respect to (f) an
agreement must be reached between the student and the faculty over what constitutes a reasonable expenditure of time (relative to other students and time available) for carrying out these various duties.

(h) It is inappropriate to download heavier duties onto the students in cases where the Department and a given Faculty member cannot reach agreement on what constitutes a single TA.

revised 26 Sep 2011