

Guidelines and Procedures for Oral Examinations for Master's Thesis Route and Doctoral Programs

Oral examinations will normally be conducted at a distance, with both the student and committee members in separate and/or off-site locations. The presentation and question period will normally be closed for the master's proposal oral examination and the doctoral candidacy oral examination. The final oral examination for the thesis and dissertation will be open. The adjudication process will always be closed. The academic unit has the option to hold an informal presentation and discussion separate from the formal oral examination. Any deviation from the procedures outlined below must be approved in advance by the Dean of the FGS.

Technology is evolving with current modes exhibiting inconsistent quality and reliability. Over time this will improve. AU is a world leader in distance education and therefore has a mandate, role and responsibility to "push the envelope" and create new and flexible strategies to bring education to the world. And yet, must be accountable to its students, academic colleagues, and funders ensuring that a high quality of education is provided.

The integrity of the oral examination must be ensured. This means there must be satisfactory accommodation for reliable technology; back-up to the primary technology selected; arrangements that ensure safety and support for the student who will be anxious at the examination; that the identity of the student is verified; and that academic honesty and integrity are maintained.

1 Choosing technology for the oral examination

- 1.1 The supervisor and student are responsible for choosing an appropriate preferred technology for the oral examination, based on the following considerations:
 - 1.1.1 An alternative technology must always be provided as the back-up if the technology of choice fails;
 - 1.1.2 The technology must be secure and appropriate under current FOIPP guidelines and Alberta legislation, with reasonable expectation of security and privacy;
 - 1.1.3 An appropriate technology is one that allows for effective communication, is ethical and culturally sensitive, and will not be a detriment to the student's defense;
 - 1.1.4 The supervisor is responsible for ensuring that all committee members have access to and familiarity with the proposed technology;
 - 1.1.5 The technology must be synchronous, not asynchronous (e.g. everyone must be present and active for the fixed duration of the examination);
 - 1.1.6 If the student chooses to use the technology with additional cost on the student's end, it is the student's responsibility to bear that cost (e.g. videoconferencing facilities).
 - 1.1.7 The supervisor ensures that the type of technology allows the adjudication deliberations to occur in private, with only the examination committee members and the chair (if applicable) present;
 - 1.1.8 That the technology allows the supervisor to re-establish communication with the student after deliberations are completed.

- 1.2 The FGS is responsible for the management of the technology, including the availability of any necessary technical support, for the duration of the oral examination at the university end. The student is responsible for same at the distant site, as are distance participants from the committee.
 - 1.2.1 Normally, the FGS will connect to the student or make available to the student the means for the communication.
 - 1.2.2 The FGS can provide the student and examination committee members with the Adobe Connect url if this technology will be used;
 - 1.2.3 The student and committee will be given sufficient time in advance of the start of the oral examination to set up and test the presentation software or other technology used (15 to 30 minutes).
- 1.3 In the event that the examination is interrupted for up to 30 minutes (for one length of time or several periods of time during the examination) or if connections cannot be reestablished within that time, the examination will be rescheduled.
 - 1.3.1 The rescheduled examination will be considered the student's first examination;
 - 1.3.2 The supervisor or neutral chair must immediately notify the FGS regarding the interruption;
 - 1.3.3 Back-up technology must be available to the primary technology selected. For example, phone numbers of each of the committee members must be available should the supervisor need to establish contact with them during the examination. A toll free number that all members and the student could use to reconnect as a teleconference may comprise a back-up strategy also. The back-up information should have been included on the Notice of Oral Examination forms [*Notice of Final Thesis \(Master's\)*](#), [*Notice of Candidacy \(Doctoral\)*](#) or [*Notice of Dissertation \(Doctoral\)*](#)
- 1.4 The student and supervisor are responsible for proposing an appropriate location for the oral examination. Location may be determined by the availability of the technology. If the student is from outside Canada, an institution recognized by AU may be used by the student. The location or institution must be approved by the supervisor and FGS four (4) weeks prior to the anticipated oral examination date. If the setting requires payment, this is the student's responsibility. AU has a list of approved exam invigilation sites in Canada that students may use <http://www.athabascau.ca/registrar/invignet/ab.php>
 - 1.4.1 No one in addition to the student can be present at the student's location unless preapproved by the FGS;
- 1.5 For the oral examinations that are 'open' (the final thesis and final dissertation oral examinations):
 - 1.5.1 All observers must apply in advance to the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) for permission to attend;
 - 1.5.2 The academic unit sets the maximum number of attendees present. The total number includes the student, the committee members, the proctor, if applicable, and any observers;
 - 1.5.3 Observers are not allowed to participate in any part of the oral examination unless they have advance permission from the chair;

- 1.5.4 Observers are not allowed to exit or enter during the oral examination. They must be present for the duration of the presentation and question period;
 - 1.5.5 The observers must exit or will be disconnected (depending upon the technology) immediately after the question period.
- 1.6 A designate of FGS will be available by phone or email to address issues that arise prior to or during the oral examination. This designate may be the chair for the oral examination. In the event that FGS or the designate cannot be reached, the Dean or the Director of the academic unit will have the decision-making authority. If the latter are unavailable, the supervisor will have the authority.

2 Procedures Preceding the Oral Examinations

- 2.1 The supervisor will submit the Notice of Oral Examination form (links under 1.3.3) to the FGS **at least four weeks** before the examination and will include the following:
 - 2.1.1 The date of the oral examination. The supervisor is responsible for scheduling the oral examination confirming availability with the student, all committee members and FGS;
 - 2.1.2 The proposed proctor, if applicable, including name, occupation, current place of employment, and short CV, or alternative method of ensuring examination security and procedural standards;
 - 2.1.3 The preferred technology and alternate/backup technology for both the presentation/question period and for the closed adjudication process to ensure privacy;
 - 2.1.4 Back-up phone numbers of each of the committee members so they can be contacted and reconnected to the examination in case the technology fails during the examination;
 - 2.1.5 The total number of observers allowed (inclusive of committee, student, neutral chair, and proctor);
 - 2.1.6 The location of the oral examination;
 - 2.1.7 The name of the student, degree being sought and academic unit of student;
 - 2.1.8 The title of the thesis/dissertation;
- 2.2 Between 3 to 4 weeks before the examination, the FGS will have approved and informed the proctor in writing of the appointment and provide pertinent guidelines and regulations (see section 3.0). The proctor should verify in writing that he/she accepts the responsibility incumbent upon that position.
- 2.3 **At least two weeks** in advance of the oral examination, the FGS will:
 - 2.3.1 Confirm the date, the technology set up, and proctor with the supervisor;
 - 2.3.2 Post the information about the final oral examination under Announcements on the FGS website [Announcement of Final Thesis Oral Examination \(Master's\)](#) or [Announcement of Dissertation Final Oral Examination \(Doctoral\)](#). This includes (name of student, date of examination and thesis title; in the case of the doctoral examination, the abstract of the dissertation will also be posted). The announcement will indicate that if anyone is interested in attending the oral examination they are to request permission from the FGS
 - 2.3.3 Provide the supervisor, chair and student with any documents necessary for the oral examination, such as:

For Master's Examinations

- [Thesis Proposal Oral Examination report](#) or the [Thesis and Oral Examination Final Report](#)
- the procedures that describe the role of the chair and the proceedings of the oral examination [see section 4, 4.1, 4.2] (for the supervisor, chair and student);
- the [Report of the Neutral Chair](#) (if applicable), and any other documents deemed necessary.

For Doctoral Examinations

- [Final Report of Candidacy Oral Examination and Proposal](#) or [Dissertation and Oral Exam Final Report](#)
- the procedures that describe the role of the chair and the proceedings of the oral examination [see section 4, 4.1, 4.2] (for the supervisor, chair and student);
- the [Report of the Neutral Chair](#) (for the neutral chair), and any other documents deemed necessary.

The supervisor is responsible for disseminating necessary information to the examination committee members.

- 2.4 **At least 72 hours** prior to the oral examination, the FGS will provide the supervisor and neutral chair with the list of approved observers.

3 Duties of the Proctor

Unless a member of the examination committee is present with the student for the entire process, a mechanism must be in place to ensure both the identity of the student, effective application of the examination procedures, and the integrity of the examination and its program requirements. In the case where a proctor will be used, the following applies:

- 3.1.1 The proctor must be preapproved by FGS as part of the *Notice of Oral Examination* [Notice of Final Thesis \(Master's\)](#), [Notice of Candidacy \(Doctoral\)](#) or [Notice of Dissertation \(Doctoral\)](#)
 - 3.1.2 The proctor is not involved in the distribution of documents related to the student's presentation or thesis/dissertation;
 - 3.1.3 The proctor must meet the criteria for invigilators outlined in the AU calendar at http://www.athabascau.ca/calendar/page07_04.html
 - 3.1.4 Proctors will not be paid by the university. If the proctor requires payment, the cost is borne by the student.
- 3.2 Where a proctor or committee member is invigilating the oral examination at the student's location, the proctor or committee member is responsible to:
- 3.2.1 Verify the identity of the student through appropriate photo identification;
 - 3.2.2 Verify that the student cannot access the deliberations of the examination committee during the closed adjudication process;
 - 3.2.3 Ensure that all observers at the distance site with the student leave immediately following the open presentation and question period;

- 3.2.4 Stay with the student until the examination committee has communicated its decision to the student;
- 3.2.5 Within 5 days, submit the [*Report of the Proctor*](#) confirming compliance with FGS regulations and noting any unusual circumstances. The form should address procedural rather than substantive issues and note any problems, especially technical, that might have occurred during the examination. It should indicate the time the examination started, the time it ended, and the names of the people present in the room at the distant site during the examination;
- 3.2.6 In the event of a failed examination, an examination resulting in a lack of unanimity, or an examination in which there were procedural irregularities, a report must be submitted within 24 hours to the FGS.

4 Conduct of the Oral Examination

4.1 Rules for Guest Attending Oral Examinations

FGS will inform the guests of the attendance regulations when they have been approved. At the beginning of the oral exam the neutral chair will inform all in attendance of the regulations:

- Must sign into the examination between 5 – 15 minutes prior to the beginning of the session;
- Must mute their microphones;
- Cannot write in the chat box during the oral examination;
- Must not enter and withdraw during the session;
- Cannot participate in the questioning;
- Must withdraw from the session after the examiner's questions are over;

4.2 Chairing an Oral Examination

The individual chairing the oral examination, whether it is for the proposal or the final thesis or dissertation bears a very important responsibility. Their role is to ensure that policies and procedures are correctly followed during and after an oral examination, that the integrity and fairness of the process are upheld, and to guard against perceived conflict of interest or undue influence.

4.3 Procedures for Chairing the Oral Examination

In the master's thesis route, the supervisor chairs the oral examinations for the proposal and the final thesis. The entire oral examination, including the presentation by the student and the period of questioning should normally **not be longer than 1.5 hours**.

The chair for the master's proposal and thesis oral examinations is there to ensure that policies and procedures are correctly followed during and after the oral examination, guard against perceived conflict of interest or undue influence, uphold the integrity and fairness of the process and maintain the timing of the meeting.

In the doctoral program, a neutral chair is selected by the FGS for both the candidacy and final dissertation oral examinations. The entire oral examination, including the presentation by the student and the period of questioning should not normally be **longer than two hours**.

The neutral chair is not a member of the examination committee. The nature of their background, being from outside the academic unit of the student who is undergoing the oral examination, allows an objective observation of the proceedings. They do not read the dissertation, participate in the discussion about the dissertation, or vote.

The role of the neutral chair is to:

- ensure that policies and procedures are correctly followed during and after the oral examination,
 - guard against perceived conflict of interest or undue influence,
 - uphold the integrity and fairness of the process,
 - maintain the timing of the presentation and questioning period.
- The neutral chair presides over the oral examination and the subsequent confidential discussion. They complete a report on the proceedings *Report of the Neutral Chair*, which is submitted to the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies after the oral examination.
 - The *Report of the Neutral Chair* should provide details regarding:
 - all **procedural** anomalies, e.g. if an examiner fails to participate, any technical problems that may have occurred, if there appears to be bias against the student, or a lack of agreement on the adjudication outcome;
 - the time the examination started, the time of finishing, the names of the people present in the room and those at the distance site during the examination;
 - whether revisions were needed and name of individual responsible for ensuring the revisions are completed with the timeframe agreed upon by the student and committee;
 - technical problems.
 - See this url for the appointment of the neutral chair for the candidacy oral examination <http://fgs.athabascau.ca/guidelines/doctoral/candidacy.php#oral-exam>
 - See this url for the appointment of the neutral chair for the final doctoral oral examination http://fgs.athabascau.ca/guidelines/doctoral/oral_exam.php#appointment

4.4 The Order of the Proceedings for the Oral Examinations for the Chair or Neutral Chair. (In this section the title 'chair' will denote the individual chairing the examination for the master's or doctoral programs.)

A script is provided by FGS for the chair to follow to ensure all oral exams follow consistent procedures. Below is an outline of the process. Before the oral examination officially begins, the chair verifies that:

- The technology is working for the examination committee members and the student;
- All examination committee members are present;

- The student is who they claim to be (this may be done by various means – a proctor being present with the student and indicating their identity; the examination being done by videoconference, or other means deemed appropriate by the academic unit and FGS);
- The student is alone in the room and will be alone for the duration of the examination, unless a proctor who has been approved in advance is present;
- Only preapproved observers are present during the presentation and question period (only applicable for the final oral examination which is open). Roll call will take place at the outset and anyone without pre-approval will be asked to leave the oral;
- Observers will be informed of the rules regarding their attendance (Section 4.1)
- All examination committee members are required to be present for the entire examination and deliberations;
- In the event that the examination is interrupted for up to 30 minutes (for one length of time or several periods of time during the examination) or if connections cannot be reestablished within that time, the examination will be rescheduled. The rescheduled examination will be considered the student's first examination;
- The student's presentation and the questioning period will not be recorded.

The chair welcomes all of those in attendance and may congratulate the student on arriving at this milestone in their program.

The chair impresses upon the student and the examiners that this is a formal examination. The chair then proceeds to provide information on the order of the proceedings as outlined below:

- The student will conduct a short presentation of their proposed or completed research study that is approximately 15 minutes in duration;
- After the presentation, the committee members will take turns asking questions. Each examiner will be given a maximum of 15minutes for questioning. Starting with the most external person and working toward the supervisor. There is normally two rounds of questions for the doctoral oral examinations;
- Round 1: One round of questions (15minutes each) for each committee member. Starting with the most external person and working toward the supervisor;
- Round 2: A second round of questions (15minutes each) for each committee member
- After completion of the rounds of questions the chair will ask the student if they wish to add anything to the material presented;
- Then the chair will ensure the student and the observers are not present while the committee deliberates;
The supervisor, or someone of authority who is familiar with the technology, will ensure the student is not able to hear the deliberations;
- The chair will ask each committee member in sequence their adjudication proposal/dissertation and oral examination, based on the guidelines;
- After the deliberations and decision, the student is reconnected with the committee;
- The chair informs the student of the adjudication outcome;
- Any revisions and their completion deadline should be verbally discussed with the student and also provided to the student in writing by the supervisor. The supervisor or the committee members must decide who will assume the responsibility to ensure the revisions are completed by the agreed upon date.

For the master's oral examinations, the supervisor and the committee completes the [*Thesis Proposal Oral Examination Report*](#) for the proposal or the [*Thesis Oral Examination Final Report*](#) for the final thesis oral examination.

For the candidacy oral examination, the supervisor is responsible for ensuring the committee members indicate their adjudication decision and comments on the form [*Final Report of Candidacy Oral Examination and Proposal*](#) and that the form is submitted to the FGS as soon after the oral examination as possible.

For the final dissertation oral examination, the supervisor and the examination committee complete the [*Dissertation and Oral Examination Final Report*](#). It is the supervisor's responsibility to ensure that all committee members indicate their decision on the form and that the form is submitted to the FGS as soon as possible. The Neutral Chair must complete the [*Report of the Neutral Chair*](#) and submit it to FGS as soon after the oral examination as possible.