

Policy Title: PhD/Doctoral Defence

Parent Policy	None
Policy Administrator	Associate Provost, Research & Graduate Studies
Approving Body	Senate
Approval History	2025-12-02 (updated: minor edits to include doctoral students) 2025-02-04; Senate Motion #2024/25 – 015

Purpose:

The objectives of this policy are to:

1. Establish when a student (PhD/doctoral candidate) can hold their defence;
2. Establish eligibility for the examining committee;
3. Establish the grading of a dissertation defence.

Scope of this Policy:

All PhD/doctoral candidates and all TWU graduate programs offering PhD/doctoral degrees.

Policy Statement:

Several requirements need to be met prior to, during and after the PhD/doctoral candidate defends their dissertation as summarized below.

1. Submitting the PhD/doctoral dissertation for defence:
 - a. It is expected the student (PhD/doctoral candidate) will follow the advice of the supervisor and the supervisory committee in establishing when the dissertation is ready for examination. When a majority of the members of the advisory committee agree the dissertation is ready for defence, the academic unit will advise the Office of Graduate Studies (OGS) in writing. The supervisor and the PhD/Doctoral candidate are responsible that the PhD/doctoral dissertation meets the requirements of the Thesis/Dissertation Quality Policy.
 - b. A student who has successfully completed all of their program requirements has the right to submit and defend a dissertation even if doing so may be contrary to the advice of the supervisor and supervisory committee (where applicable).
2. Forming the PhD/doctoral dissertation examining committee:

The PhD/doctoral examining committee consists of a minimum of five members, as follows:

 - a. Examination chair (non-voting) as appointed by the OGS. The supervisor (co-supervisor, if applicable) and other members of the examining committee listed below, may not serve as

the examining committee chair. The examination chair is responsible for submitting a report to the OGS within one week of the oral defence.

- b. Supervisor (co-supervisors, if applicable) and all members that served on the supervisory committee.
- c. University Examiner (UE) – Approved by Associate Provost, Research and Graduate Studies. UE's:
 - i. Will have an arm's length relationship with the PhD/doctoral dissertation research (The UE cannot be a member of the supervisory committee, have any involvement with the PhD/doctoral dissertation research, or be a close friend or related to the PhD/doctoral candidate or supervisor);
 - ii. Ensure that the quality of the PhD/doctoral dissertation and oral defence meets university standards;
 - iii. Will be a member of the Faculty of Graduate Studies;
 - iv. Will normally have a PhD/doctoral or equivalent.
- d. External Examiner (EE) – Approved by the Associate Provost, Research and Graduate Studies. EE's:
 - i. Participate in the examination of PhD/doctoral dissertations to provide an independent assessment of the quality of PhD/doctoral research (in-person/virtual participation in defence not required);
 - ii. Must be from outside of Trinity Western University
 - iii. Will normally have a PhD/doctoral degree or equivalent;
 - iv. Have demonstrated competence in the field of research of the PhD/doctoral candidate;
 - v. Cannot be in conflict of interest (as defined by the [Canada Research Chairs](#) and the [TWU Conflict of Interest in Research Policy](#)) with the PhD/doctoral candidate, the supervisor or any of the members of the supervisory committee. In all cases, conflict of interest must be avoided in naming an external examiner. While it is the responsibility of the student and all members of the advisory committee to avoid conflict of interest, it is the duty of the supervisor and Graduate Program director, dean or designate to ensure that all members of the supervisory committee are aware of this responsibility;
 - vi. Can serve as an external examiner for multiple students within the same academic unit without restriction, but would not normally serve as an external examiner for more than one student supervised by the same supervisor within a 12-month period;
 - vii. May be a former faculty member or employee of TWU if their employment with TWU ended at least six (6) years prior to the proposed PhD/doctoral defence date;

- viii. May be a former student or trainee of the supervisor if all other criteria are satisfied and the external examiner completed their degree/training under the supervisor's direction at least six (6) years previously;
- ix. Will provide the Associate Provost, Research and Graduate Studies with a pre-defence report including a list of questions for the student (minimum three questions but typically five) at least seven days prior to the scheduled PhD/doctoral defence date indicating whether the oral defence should proceed;
- x. Will be provided an honorarium for their service by the academic unit;
- xi. To prevent bias or the perception of bias in the external review, the student may not communicate with the external examiner before the defence. Likewise, no one external to the OGS may discuss the dissertation, research, or student with the external reviewer at any time before the defence. The research supervisor and/or program may communicate about travel arrangements as applicable. The student should not know the identity of the external examiner until after the dissertation has been submitted to the OGS and transmitted for external examination.

3. Scheduling the PhD/doctoral Oral Defence

- a. The PhD/doctoral dissertation defence will be scheduled only after the academic unit:
 - has advised the OGS that the dissertation is ready for defence;
 - i. has ensured that the student file contains all necessary documentation and that the requirements for the degree have been met prior to submitting a defence request;
 - ii. has completed the paperwork for the recommendation of a UE, three months prior to the proposed oral defence date;
 - iii. has completed the paperwork with multiple options for selection of an EE
 - a. The OGS must be sent the required documentation including CV (s) of the preferred EE (s) six weeks prior to the proposed oral defence date. After approval by OGS, the EE and UE will have the PhD/doctoral dissertation a minimum of three months prior to the proposed defence date. The OGS forwards the dissertation draft and any required documentation to the EE and UE.
 - iv. has ensured that the proposed defence date when the PhD/doctoral candidate and all examiners are available and willing to participate. All arrangements (time, date, location, platform for remote participation) for the PhD/doctoral defence are made by the academic unit;
 - v. has booked an appropriate and properly equipped space for the dissertation defence and/or must set up and invite participants to the digital platform selected for the defence, if applicable (see 3c) below).

- b. The PhD/doctoral candidate will ensure:
 - i. that all requirements of their program have been completed;
 - ii. registration is current and fees are paid and;
 - iii. TWU deadlines are requested in view of any particular convocation.
- c. The PhD/doctoral defences may occur in-person on campus, remotely through digital platforms, or a combination of both under the following scenarios:
 - i. The EE participates remotely through a digital platform and the PhD/doctoral candidate and all other examination committee members are in-person on campus in a room equipped for video conferencing;
 - ii. The candidate and examination committee members are all on campus in-person;
 - iii. A mix of members of the examining committee and/or candidate participating in-person on campus and remotely through a digital platform in a room equipped for high-quality videoconferencing.

4. Conducting the Oral Defence

- a. The written dissertation and the oral defence are assessed by the examining committee as per the following:
 - i. The candidate will make a brief (20-30 minutes) presentation summarizing the major themes and findings of the dissertation;
 - ii. Questions from the examining committee will follow the presentation; beginning with the external examiner, followed by the University examiner, other members of the examining committee, and the supervisor in an initial round of 15 minutes per member of the examining committee followed by a second round of five minutes per member of the examining committee;
 - a) The examination Chair will enforce the time limits on questions;
 - b) The questions are limited to those on the work done by the PhD/doctoral candidate for their dissertation, knowledge, or matters related to the dissertation work and/or peripheral knowledge of the subject matter of the dissertation;
 - c) The PhD/doctoral candidate is expected to demonstrate their knowledge by answering the questions in a clear and direct manner;
 - d) Questions from the EE may be asked by the supervisor in cases where the EE cannot attend the defence in -person or virtually.
- b. At the conclusion of the examination the PhD/doctoral candidate will temporarily leave the examination room or digital platform to allow the examining committee to deliberate. Once the examining committee reaches consensus or majority, the grade for the dissertation and oral defence will be given one of the following recommendations:
 - i. The dissertation is satisfactory, provided suitable revisions are made (if required).

- ii. No revision or only minor revisions are required. The committee charges the research supervisor to verify that the required changes have been made.
 - iii. Substantive revisions are required. The committee chooses two or more of its members, including the supervisor, to verify that the required changes have been made.
 - iv. The dissertation is unsatisfactory. Major rewriting and rethinking are required.
 - v. The dissertation is unacceptable; it is fundamentally flawed and therefore beyond revision.
- c. The examining committee is then asked to select one of the following overall recommendations:
 - i. Pass. Pending submission of their dissertation into the library's institutional repository, the University should award the doctoral degree to this candidate.
 - ii. Re-examination required. The candidate should be allowed a second attempt to pass the PhD/doctoral defence (no more than a second attempt is permitted).
 - iii. Fail. Trinity Western University should not grant the PhD/doctoral degree.
- d. In cases where a re-examination is required, one resubmission of the dissertation will be allowed, and a new examination will be required within six months of the failed defence. A revised dissertation must be submitted before the oral examination.
 - i. The composition of the examination committee normally will remain the same. Upon the recommendation of the academic unit in agreement with the Office of Graduate Studies, an examiner may be replaced.
 - ii. A second failure of the thesis or the oral examination will result in the student being required to withdraw. In the case of failed outcomes, students have the right to appeal.
- e. In any category where the committee's judgment is unanimous, or nearly so (in that at most one examiner dissents), the Chair will express it using the Chair's report form. Dissenting opinions will be noted in the text of the Chair's report. In any category where two or more examiners disagree with the majority view, the chair will select a box labelled "No Decision" and provide a written description of the differing views in the text of the report. If this occurs, the chair will inform OGS as soon as possible (typically within one business day of the examination). The Associate Provost, Research and Graduate Studies will review the Chair's Report and promptly determine an appropriate course of action, in consultation with the examination chair and the examining committee.

Definitions:

CV – Curriculum Vitae

EE – external examiner

OGS – Office of Graduate Studies

UE – University examiner

Procedures: None

Child Policies: None

Other Related Policies: [A 2-16 PhD/doctoral Candidacy Examination \(Proposal Defence\)](#); [A 2-17 PhD/doctoral Comprehensive Examination](#); [A 2-24 Supervisor & Supervisory Committee \(PhD/doctoral\)](#)