



Series: Academic / Courses, Curriculum, Exams (A 2)  
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**Policy Title: PhD / Doctoral Comprehensive/Candidacy Examination(s)**

<b>Parent Policy</b>	None
<b>Policy Administrator</b>	Associate Provost, Research and Graduate Studies
<b>Approving Body</b>	Senate
<b>Approval History</b>	2026-02-03; Senate Motion #2025/26 – 026

**Purpose:** All PhD and Doctoral programs at Trinity Western University (TWU) (hereafter referred to as Graduate Programs) require candidates to pass a comprehensive and/or candidacy examination(s), such as a qualifying examination, a preliminary examination, a candidacy paper, a comprehensive evaluation, or a thesis proposal. The results of this examination(s) determine whether students will be permitted to continue in their programs as PhD/Doctoral Candidate.

**Scope of this Policy:** PhD/Doctoral Graduate Programs and Students

**Policy Statement:**

**Objectives and Content of PhD/Doctoral Comprehensive/Candidacy Examinations**

The purpose of comprehensive/candidacy examinations is to determine whether the student demonstrates the necessary research skills and academic achievements to continue in the PhD. or Doctoral program as a “PhD/Doctoral Candidate”. Permissible objectives may only include assessing foundational knowledge of the discipline (retrospective comprehensive) and/or ability to conduct independent and original research (prospective comprehensive).

1. The procedures adopted for the comprehensive/candidacy examinations must be specified by procedures developed by each Graduate Program and approved by Office of Graduate Studies (OGS).
2. It is the responsibility of the Graduate Program to make the procedures adopted for comprehensive/candidacy examinations, evaluation, and the areas to be examined widely available and for students to inform themselves of these details.
3. The Comprehensive/Candidacy Examination Committee consists of the Supervisory committee as defined in the “A 2-24 Supervisor and Supervisory Committee (PhD)” policy and an Examination Chair that is appointed by the graduate program and approved by the OGS. The Examination Chair is required only for the ultimate comprehensive/candidacy examination administered prior to PhD/Doctoral candidacy. For example, if a Graduate Program has two comprehensive/candidacy

examinations prior to candidacy, the Examination Chair will only be required for the second examination.

4. The content of the comprehensive/candidacy examination must be consistent with the stated objectives and should be appropriately circumscribed. At least two months prior to the examination, students must be given an indication of the range of material that may be covered in the examination and suggestions as to how to cover this material (e.g., via reading lists, courses, etc.).
5. There can be *no more than two* comprehensive/candidacy examinations. Retrospective comprehensives/candidacy examinations assess foundational knowledge of the discipline, while prospective comprehensive/candidacy examinations assess the student's ability to conduct independent and original research. Regardless of the format(s) they choose, Graduate Programs must:
  - a. Make clear to the student how the Examination Committee is appointed and approved by OGS and who sits on it, and how the evaluation is to be carried out (consensus or vote).
  - b. Post a publicly accessible comprehensive/candidacy examination guideline/procedures document. The document should also clearly indicate typical examination protocols (e.g., timing, location, question format, grading procedure, threshold required for a pass decision, when/how results are distributed, post-failure options/debriefing) and suggest effective strategies for preparing for the examinations (e.g., reviewing prior examinations, strategies for how to review prior course content, test-taking strategies for recalling content and managing stress during high-stakes, real time examinations). This document should additionally indicate recourse options following a failure outcome (i.e., retake protocols, appeal decision in writing to the OGS). This document should further outline all policies related to potential accommodations based on disability, language issues (e.g., international students), etc. (e.g., longer duration for examination completion, alternate formats for high test-anxious students, longer duration prior to retake). If no accommodations are being provided, a statement explaining this decision and detailing other supports being provided (e.g., preparatory sessions) is required.
  - c. Provide detailed written feedback directly to students following either a pass or fail comprehensive/candidacy examination decision within two weeks to indicate strengths and weaknesses using accessible language. If grading is numerical in nature, this feedback should additionally detail scores for each exam question as well as total examination scores. Students should not be required to individually request feedback following the exam decision.
  - d. Ensure appropriate supports prior to and following comprehensive/candidacy examinations for students whose first language is not English given the potential for inequity issues from an EDI (Equity, Diversity & Inclusion) perspective for students whose

first language is not English, as these students are likely to be disproportionately negatively impacted by written/verbal exam formats.

- e. Work with the Academic Unit (TWU Faculty or School) and TWU Centre for Accessible Learning to ensure Graduate Students receive appropriate academic considerations for extenuating circumstances and/or disability-related accommodations.

### **Format of PhD/Doctoral Comprehensive/Candidacy Examinations**

Graduate Programs must provide PhD/doctoral students with a written description of the Ph.D. comprehensive/candidacy examination process, detailing objectives and content, format, timing, assessment, grading and reporting, and failures (and procedures for repeats).

The format of the comprehensive/candidacy exam(s) must be consistent for all students within a given Graduate Program. The following list gives some of the more common formats, which are often combined:

- written examination
- take-home examination
- synthesis of relevant research in the field
- written research proposal and/or thesis proposal
- oral examination or defence

### **Timing of PhD/Doctoral Comprehensive/Candidacy Examinations**

Graduate Programs must clearly specify when the comprehensive/candidacy examination must be taken and how it fits into the program milestones, e.g., whether all coursework must have been completed prior to undertaking the comprehensive and/or whether the comprehensive is the final step before thesis research and writing.

Scheduling of the comprehensive/candidacy examination must be specified by the Graduate Program and the comprehensive exam must be completed by the end of PhD/Doctoral degree. Students must be informed of the date of the exam with sufficient time to prepare for it.

### **Feedback and Grading of PhD/Doctoral Comprehensive/Candidacy Examinations**

The assessment and reasons for the decision as specified below under “Grading”, including identifying specific strengths and weaknesses, must be provided to the student in writing within two weeks of the examination. There must be sufficient detail to allow the student to understand the decision.

In the case of oral examinations, the student must be given feedback on presentation, logical exposition, ability to answer questions, etc. To help ensure that assessments can be put in context, Graduate Programs may choose to make a record of the examination (including audio or video recording) and/or to have a neutral observer, chair, or outside committee member, or to make the oral presentation open to members of the academic unit. If recorded, an unedited copy of the recording must be forwarded to the student within two weeks of the examination.

## Grading

The Examination Committee grades the exam as:

- Unconditional Pass
- Conditional Pass– could require completing a course or re-writing the proposal.
- Failure – with opportunity to re-write the exam, or immediate dismissal from the program.

The grades referred to above are not included in the student's official transcript. The results with a brief report of the Comprehensive/Candidacy Examination signed by each member of the Examination Committee must be submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies.

In the event that the student is judged to have failed the comprehensive/candidacy examination, Graduate Programs must allow, without prejudice, one repeat of the comprehensive/candidacy examination (in whole or in part) within a minimum of four months and a maximum of six months.

The student must be informed in a face-to-face meeting and in writing by the department that they have failed the comprehensive. At this meeting and in the written document, the student must be informed of conditions relating to a repeat of the examination, including the nature of the re-examination and committee membership, as well as the deadline for retaking the exam. Graduate Programs have the right to specify further requirements in the event of failure, e.g., requiring students to take an additional course or courses in areas where they have shown weakness on the comprehensive/candidacy examination.

If the student does not repeat the comprehensive/candidacy examination by the deadline specified by the Graduate Program or does not pass the comprehensive/candidacy examination on the second attempt, the student will be withdrawn from the university. In the event that the repeat comprehensive/candidacy requirements are passed, the student will be officially designated as a PhD/Doctoral Candidate.

## Appeals

A student withdrawn due to failure of their second attempt at the comprehensive/candidacy examination has 30 days to appeal this decision in writing to the OGS at which point the OGS will have 60 days to investigate the appeal working with the Graduate Program and the student. The final decision resulting from the investigation will be made and communicated to the student by the Associate Provost Research and Graduate Studies.

## Definitions:

**Face-to-face:** means in person or online, provided all parties have their cameras enabled

**Graduate Programs:** All academic programs at TWU offering Doctoral and/or PhD degrees.

**OGS:** Office of Graduate Studies

**Procedures:** Procedures for implementing this policy will be generated by each Graduate Program, approved by the Office of Graduate Studies, and subsequently administered by each Graduate Program.

**Child Policies:** None

**Other Related Policies:** A 2-24 Supervisor and Supervisory Committee (PhD); A 2-26 Graduate Studies Exam Chair