Procedures/Agenda for PhD Thesis Defense
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Saint Mary's University
Updated: August 2025

The Chair makes welcoming remarks which includes:

- Introduce yourself and the role of Chair as an impartial guide to the defence process.
- Read the land acknowledgment statement:
    - Saint Mary's University acknowledges that the university is located on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. This territory is covered by the "Treaties of Peace and Friendship" which Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik peoples first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact, recognized Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations.
- Identification that the PhD is the highest academic degree bestowed by Saint Mary's and that this event is the culmination of a huge amount of work and scholarly activity by the candidate, the supervisor, the supervisory committee and faculty as a whole.
- Introduction of the Examination Committee in the order of:
  o The External Examiner
  o Any other Examiners external to SMU
  o Faculty members external to the "home" Dept/Program (if applicable)
  o Faculty members from within the home Dept/Program
  o The Supervisor

The Chair announces the agenda which is:

- The Candidate will make a presentation on their thesis, highlighting the research problem/topic, the research approach, the findings, and the implications of the research outcomes. **This presentation will be 30-35 minutes in length.**
- The Candidate is given a minute to compose themself. During this time, audience members who wish to leave may take this opportunity to do so.
- First round of questioning occurs with the order of questioning following the order of Introductions that is identified above. Identify the time allotment for each questioner (see below)
- Second round of questioning (individual Examiners may choose not to pursue a second round)
- Supplementary round of questions; if necessary and time allowing. This round of questions should be for clarification of previous comments/answers only.
- **PLEASE NOTE: There is no time allotted to audience questions. As part of this formal examination, questions are only taken from the committee members.**

- The Candidate and audience will then be asked to leave the examination room/video conference while the Examination Committee deliberates. The candidate should stay in the vicinity of the Examination room or their computer (if they are defending virtually).
    - If the student is defending virtually, they should be either: 1) placed in a virtual breakout room (can be found under account preferences) or 2) an arrangement is made with the student where the supervisor will contact them via phone or email when deliberation has been completed so they can re-join the virtual meeting.
- The Examination Committee deliberates and comes to a conclusion on the thesis examination. The Examination Committee will be assessing the acceptability of the Thesis as a written document and the acceptability of the Candidate in the Defence of the Thesis.

- The Candidate will be asked back into the room (or reconnected to the video conference) to hear the outcome of the examination process.

Details on the questioning period:

- The question period (all rounds) should normally last no more than 1.5 hours. The time allotment for each Examiner within each round will be determined by the Chair before the defense and will be defined largely by the number of Examiners.
- For example, if there are four Examiners, the first round of questions could be 15 minutes each for a total of 1 hour. The second round would be then a maximum of 7.5 minutes for each Examiner, assuming all had questions. If time is allowing for the Supplementary round, each Examiner would be limited to one or two brief questions.
- If there are five Examiners, the first round could be 15 minutes each for a total of 1.25 hours. The second round then would be then brief with each Examiner given an average 3 minutes, assuming all had questions.
- The Chair will give latitude to give slight favour to the External Examiner in the distribution of time allotment for questioning.
- It is the responsibility of the Chair to ensure that the questioning takes place in an organized and fair manner. They should discourage a debate among Examiners and that an Examiner does not interrupt/intervene in the questioning of another Examiner.

Details on the Deliberations:

- The Chair will ask each Examiner in turn (in the order identified during the Introductions above) to make **brief** comments on their assessment of:
- The thesis as a written document
- The performance of the Candidate in defending the thesis
- The Committee must then come to a consensus or majority vote on a Recommendation on the thesis according to the **Outcomes from the PhD Thesis Defense** Table.

Outcomes from the PhD Thesis Defense

<table>
<tr><td>THESIS ACCEPTABLE</td><td>Recommendation 1

• Thesis acceptable, with or without minor revisions
• Oral defense acceptable

All members of the examining committee sign the certification page EXCEPT THE SUPERVISOR, who will sign only after ensuring the necessary revisions have been made.

As a general guide, if the committee does not feel that the thesis revisions can be completed within a two-week time frame by a student working full-time on the thesis, it should be considered Recommendation 2.</td><td rowspan="2">ORAL DEFENSE ACCEPTABLE</td></tr>
<tr><td>THESIS REQUIRES RE-SUBMISSION</td><td>Recommendation 2

• Underlying research adjudged to be sound, but thesis in need of recasting, addition of illustrative material or limited additional data
• Oral defense acceptable

Recommendation 2 is often used in situations where different members of the committee take on specific responsibilities for ensuring that a particular part of the thesis is revised as required. In these circumstances, the normal practice is for those with such responsibilities not to sign the certification page until the revisions have been made, while other members not so involved may sign immediately after the examination. Otherwise, none of the committee members sign the certification page until the revised document has been returned for the committee's final approval (no additional oral defense).

As a general guide, if the committee does not feel that the thesis revisions can be completed within a six-week time frame by a student working full-time on the thesis, it should be considered Recommendation 4.</td></tr>
<tr><td>THESIS ACCEPTABLE</td><td>Recommendation 3

• Thesis acceptable
• Oral defense unacceptable
• Only available to students taking the oral exam for the first time

Second attempt at oral defense should be completed within three months of the date of the initial examination. For logistical reasons, the second oral defense may occur without the presence of the External Examiner. If the External Examiner does not attend, a Faculty member</td><td>ORAL DEFENSE UNACCEPTABLE</td></tr>
</table>

	external to the home department/program will serve in their place.	
THESIS UNACCEPTABLE	**Recommendation 4** • Thesis does not meet minimum standards, but committee believes that further research and/or revision may bring it to an acceptable standard or thesis defense is unacceptable but the committee agrees that the Candidate has the potential, with additional preparation, to be able to successfully defend their work. • Only available to students taking the oral exam for the first time. ***Re-submission of thesis and second attempt of oral defense no sooner than six months and no later than twelve months after the original defense.***	**ORAL EXAMINATION RE-TAKE**
THESIS UNACCEPTABLE	**Recommendation 5** • Thesis does not meet minimum standards and committee considers that no reasonable amount of additional research or revision is likely to bring it to an acceptable standard or oral defense of thesis is completely unacceptable and committee agrees that the Candidate does not have potential to be able to successfully defend the work. ***Committee recommends that the Candidate be Required to Discontinue from the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research.***	**CLEAR FAIL**
EXTERNAL EXAMINER DOES NOT VOTE WITH MAJORITY	**External Examiner Does Not Vote With Majority** If the committee cannot reach a consensus on the acceptability of the thesis and/or the defense, a vote must be taken. The Dean's designated Chair of the Examining Committee does not vote. Abstentions shall be interpreted as negative votes. Where the External Examiner does not share the majority view, (whether it is a yes or no vote) the examination shall be adjourned, the External Examiner shall write a report to the Dean indicating why he or she could not support the majority opinion of the Examining Committee, and the Dean will review the situation and establish appropriate procedures to resolve the matter. In addition, the chairperson must submit a written assessment of the examination. All reports must be copied to the Program Coordinator.	**DEAN'S ACTION**