

Graduate Programs in Education | Werklund School of Education

Doctoral Dissertation Oral Examination: A Student's Guide

The purpose of this guide is to share information regarding the doctoral dissertation examination to help EdD and PhD students in their preparation. This guide is intended to supplement, not replace, the Faculty of Graduate Studies Handbook on Supervision and Evaluation and a doctoral student's ongoing consultation with his or her supervisor and supervisory committee.

The Examination

The Dissertation Oral Examination is a requirement of the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS), University of Calgary. FGS states that the purpose of the examination is as follows:

"[T]he dissertation oral examination is not only to defend independently the dissertation, but also to serve as confirmation of the student's knowledge of the research topic within the context of his or her field(s) of study" (FGS Handbook, p. 3).

The Dissertation Oral Examination assesses the quality of both the dissertation and the student's performance defending the work during the oral examination. To successfully complete the Examination, students must pass both components. The Dissertation Oral is considered an open book exam. Students are encouraged to bring a copy of their dissertation and any other relevant reference material to the exam.

Normally, all Dissertation Examinations are "open" which means that interested parties may attend, such as students from our School or from other Faculties. Guests are simply observers and cannot ask questions. As a courtesy, it is expected that all guests inform the student's supervisor ahead of time if they plan to attend.

Examination Committee

The Examination Committee normally consists of the Supervisory Committee and two other faculty members, one of whom is internal to the University of Calgary but external to the program, and one who must be from another university, the external examiner. Committee members and the student may attend in person or virtually. When the student is not physically present for the Oral Exam, there must be a proctor in the room with the student during the examination. All Examiners read the dissertation, independently write a formal evaluation of the dissertation and formulate questions for the student before the Oral Examination.

Neutral Chair

FGS regulations govern the conduct of the Dissertation Oral Examination. While there may be some minor variations, there are certain procedures that must be followed. To ensure that proper procedures are followed, FGS requires that a faculty member, who has not been involved with the completion of the dissertation, oversees the conduct of the Examination—the Neutral Chair. The Neutral Chair from the Werklund School of Education does not receive the dissertation, nor does she or he ask questions of the student. The primary role of the Neutral Chair is to ensure that FGS procedures are followed and that students are examined in a fair and respectful manner.

Examination Procedures

Before the Examination begins, the Neutral Chair collects the Examiners' written assessments of the Dissertation. The student will be asked if she or he wishes to make an opening statement and summary. Most students elect to do so.

The Examination consists of three parts: student's opening summary, Examiners' questions and Committee deliberations. The two components—student's summary and examiners' questions—may not exceed two hours.

Student's Opening Summary

This component is not a requirement, but rather an option. Students may take up to a maximum of 15 minutes to speak about their work. The aim of the summary is to give the student the opportunity to contextualize the dissertation. If students intend to use audiovisual aids—not a requirement—it is their responsibility to make any required arrangement beforehand. Summaries may take various forms; however, students are encouraged not to read prepared statements verbatim. Making reference to notes is acceptable.

Examiner Questions

After the student's opening summary, the Neutral Chair invites the Examiners to ask their questions. The External Examiner is the first member to question the student and the Supervisor is the last. The order typically follows the reverse order of the Examiners' listing in the Notice of Oral. When all examiners have had at least one opportunity to question the student, the committee has completed what is called the first *round of questions*. Normally, there will be two formal rounds of questions. There may be a short break after the first round of questions, in which case, examiners and the student are required to refrain from discussion of the examination until the examination reconvenes.

After two formal rounds of questions, the Neutral Chair invites any Examiner who has additional questions to proceed. At this point in the Examination, there is no formal order and any Examiner may ask questions. When the Neutral Chair observes that the Examiners have no further questions, he or she asks the student to leave the room so that the next phase of the examination—the Examiners' deliberations—can take place. At this time, any other people present for the exam are asked to leave the room as well.

Committee Deliberations

The Neutral Chair engages the Examining Committee in a discussion of the student's written and oral performance. Deliberations continue until the Committee reaches a consensus. At that point, the Neutral Chair asks the student to return to the room at which time the result of the Committee deliberations is shared with the student. Following the exam, the student and supervisor will make arrangements for the completion of any required revisions within an appropriate time frame. It is important for students to note that there is no time limit for Committee deliberations. Students should not make inferences about the nature of the decision based on the length of time this last component takes.