SKHS COMPREHENSIVE EXAM PROCESSES AND FORMS (SCIENCE PHD)

PURPOSE

The comprehensive exam serves as a learning opportunity and a key milestone in determining whether the Candidate has developed the necessary background knowledge and academic competencies required to successfully continue their studies. The SKHS PhD Comprehensive Exam process has been designed to give Candidates the opportunity to demonstrate sufficient competence in reading, critical thinking, academic writing, oral presentation, and teaching in their research area/field.

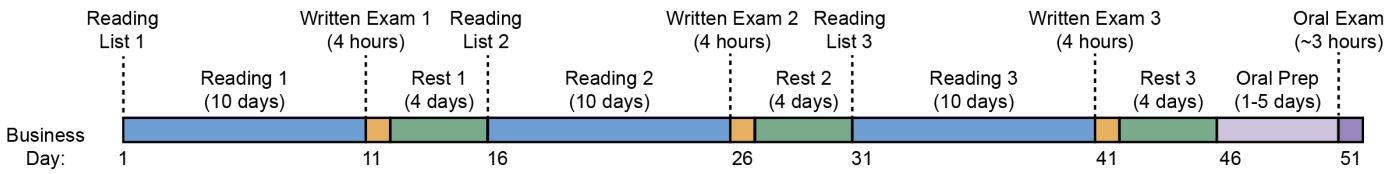
SUMMARY OF PROCESS AND TIMELINE

The comprehensive exam consists of 3 in-person written exam questions completed on separate dates, followed by an oral exam. The process takes approximately 2.5 months. The Supervisor and two Examiners will each create a reading list, context statement, and question. The Candidate will be provided with one reading list and the context statement ten working days (two weeks) prior to the written exam date. (For a detailed list of responsibilities for all parties, see **Appendix A**).

On the day of the written exam, the Candidate will write on an offline computer (with no internet access) in the SKHS. The computer will have a file folder on the desktop that contains the exam package (i.e., context statement, question, memory aid sheet (if provided and approved), and PDF copies of the assigned reading papers). The Candidate will have 4 hours to produce a written response in a Word document. The computer will contain no other resources. Use of additional resources or devices with an internet connection is prohibited. For a list of permissible items that may be taken into the exam, see **Appendix B**.

The written exam will be followed by a 4-working-day break, at which point the Candidate will receive the next reading list and context statement. The process will continue until all 3 written responses are completed. A final oral exam, which will cover content from all 3 written exam questions, will occur 5-10 working days (within 2 weeks) after the final written exam. During the oral exam, the Candidate will engage in conversation with the Examiners about their reading and written responses and may be asked to present and teach key concepts based on their reading and written responses. In total, the process, from receiving the first reading list to completing the oral exam, is expected to take approximately 50-55 working days (10-11 weeks). A timeline of the process is outlined below. Candidates are encouraged to complete the comprehensive exam process in their third or fourth term of study.

As in all aspects of their work, Candidates have the **right to be accommodated**, and SKHS has a corresponding duty to respond quickly and appropriately to requests for accommodation. When relevant, the Candidate, Supervisor, Committee Chair, and Graduate Coordinator will collaborate prior to the initial organizing meeting to ensure appropriate accommodations are in place.



PROCESS

A. Prior to the Commencement of the First Exam: Process and Timeline

1. **The Supervisor** must convene a meeting of all members of the Exam Committee, which consists of 3 Examiners (one of whom must be the Supervisor) and a fourth member who will serve as Chair, **15 working days** (3 weeks) prior to the submission of exam reading lists, context statements, and questions (see 4 below). Attendance via Zoom/Teams is permitted.

2. In instances where Candidates are co-supervised, only one Supervisor is responsible for establishing the Exam Committee and arranging the initial meeting. For the exam itself, Co-supervisors may either a) create a joint exam package and share the oral exam question period; or b) decide that only one Supervisor will participate in the Exam Committee. In instances where Option b) is chosen, the non-active Supervisor may attend the oral exam as an observer but may not participate in the proceedings.

3. At the initial organizing meeting, the Exam Committee and the Candidate must:
   a) Review the exam process to ensure that the Candidate and Examiners understand the process and their individual responsibilities;
   b) Identify topic areas from the following possible areas: i) General background (mandatory); ii) Current developments; iii) Current controversies; iv) Methodological issues; and v) Theoretical issues. The Candidate's exam must be made up of 3 distinct questions from the five possible areas. (For example, candidates could write two methodological answers if the content of each is distinct).
   c) Complete the SKHS Comprehensive Exam Planning Form (**Appendix C**).

4. Each Examiner will submit an exam package to the Chair for approval **no less than 10 working days (2 weeks)** prior to the date when the first reading list will be shared with the Candidate. The package will contain a context statement, exam question, and PDF copies of the assigned reading papers.
   a) The context statement is required to help guide the Candidate in their preparation and should not be the exam question.
   b) The reading list consists of approximately 15-20 journal articles, or an equivalent amount of materials from book chapters or books. The reading list is intended to provide a strong background from which the Candidate can respond to their written exam question. The Candidate may read beyond the assigned reading list during the preparation period and may draw upon or cite these additional materials from memory (or their memory aid sheet, described below) in their written response.
   c) The question consists of one or more written prompts that a Candidate can respond to within a 4-hour writing period. The Examiner should include a statement about the expected output (e.g., a minimum, maximum or range for the word count, whether tables or figures are required, etc.). If any other formatting requirements are expected (e.g., font size, spacing, reference style), these should be laid out by the Examiner as well.

5. The Chair is to confer with the Examiners to ensure that questions do not overlap. If revisions to any of the questions and/or reading lists and context statements are required, **final approved versions** must be submitted to the Chair **no less than 5 working days (1 week)** prior to the date when the first reading list is to be shared.

6. The Candidate may submit a one-page memory aid sheet (max. 500 words) to the Examiner for approval no later than 3 working days prior to the exam date for that question. If approved, the Examiner will forward the sheet to the Graduate Coordinator, copying the Candidate, for inclusion in the exam

package.

B. During the Exam Period: Process and Timeline

1. The Graduate Coordinator will provide the Candidate with the reading list and context statement for a given question 10 working days (2 weeks) in advance of the exam date for that question. The message will also include a reminder of the written exam date, room, and time.
2. Once the Candidate has been provided a reading list and context statement, any queries regarding the list or context statement are to be directed to the Chair. The Chair may confer with the Examiner as required.
3. Throughout the exam process, the Candidate is expected to prepare for their written exam questions and final oral exam at least **on a half-time basis during regular working days** (other than the break days following each written exam question).
4. At the start of the 4-hour written exam, the Candidate will find the exam package on the designated computer. Blank paper will also be provided. The Candidate is welcome to bring their own keyboard to use alongside the designated computer, if preferred.
5. During a written exam, the Candidate will write their response in a Word document. Candidates may also choose to provide their response, or part of their response, in handwritten form. This may be particularly useful if the Candidate wishes to provide a conceptual diagram in their response. Blank paper will be provided, and the Candidate should bring appropriate writing utensils.
6. Candidates may take up to 4 hours to respond to an exam question and may take breaks as needed.
7. After completion, the Candidate will save their response to the desktop folder containing the other materials. Any handwritten responses are to be submitted to the Graduate Coordinator for scanning and circulation.
8. A complete reference list is not required; however, the Candidate should include relevant references within the text where appropriate using the following convention: (*First Author's Last Name, Year*).
9. After a written exam, the Candidate will have a **4-working-day break** before the reading list and context statement for the next exam question is provided. Therefore, a minimum of **14 working days** will occur between written exam dates.
10. Within 3 working days of the written exam, the Graduate Coordinator will forward the response, along with the question, in PDF format for marking, to the Candidate and all 3 Examiners, with a note indicating that only the Examiner for that question is required to assess the response, while all 3 Examiners are required to read the response.
11. Any required accommodations or adaptations to the exam process will be considered on an individual basis. For example, a Candidate residing outside Kingston may request an adapted timeline in which all 3 written exams are completed over a 2–3 day period. Candidates should discuss any requested accommodations or adaptations with their Supervisor(s), the Graduate Chair, and the Graduate Coordinator in advance of the initial organizing meeting.

C. Oral Exam

1. The oral exam should take place between 5 and 10 working days (1 to 2 weeks) after **the final written exam date**.
2. The Graduate Coordinator will distribute copies, in PDF format, of the exam package and written responses to all members of the Exam Committee **within 3 working days after the final written exam date.**
3. **No less than 2 working days prior to the oral exam,** each Examiner must send a brief email report to the Chair indicating whether the written response to that Examiner's question is satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and briefly summarize its strengths and weaknesses.
4. Evaluation of the written responses **will not include judgment of whether a particular reference or references are used** but will be based on whether the Candidate demonstrates knowledge of the theory, methods, and/or content of each of the selected topic areas. The written response must demonstrate the Candidate's ability to (1) synthesize information from within the reading list, (2) construct a logical and clearly written presentation of the materials, and (3) critically analyze the materials.
5. The Candidate will always proceed to the oral exam following evaluation of their 3 written responses, regardless of the quality of those written responses. Following the oral exam, the Exam Committee can consider whether remedial work or re-examination is required for the Candidate to display competence (see Decision Section below).
6. The Candidate may bring printed copies of their written responses to the oral exam, but no other materials.
7. Before questioning commences, the Chair will excuse the Candidate and the Exam Committee will discuss the Candidate's written responses and Examiners' reports assessing those responses. This is especially important if one Examiner has rated a question unsatisfactory.
8. The oral exam consists **of two rounds of about 20-25 minutes per Examiner** and will **usually take no more than 3 hours.** During one or more question periods, a Candidate may be asked to present and/or teach key concepts (potentially using the whiteboard/chalkboard) based on their reading and written responses. If any written response is considered unsatisfactory, the Examiner responsible may take more time to question the Candidate. The Chair will not examine Candidates directly but will moderate the questioning and record the nature of the questions asked by the Examiners.
9. Any concepts related to the readings, the Candidate's written response, or foundational content required for the Candidate to be proficient in the topic area of the written response may be explored during questioning. Given that the Candidate has had additional time and resources available to reflect on their original written responses, Examiner questions need not be restricted to the written response alone.
10. The oral exam must demonstrate the Candidate's ability to present and teach on the topic area, and engage in scholarly discussion.
11. Following the two rounds of questions, the Chair will excuse the Candidate and the Exam Committee will confer on the results.

D. Decision

1. All decisions of the Exam Committee are to be made by consensus where possible. If consensus is not achieved in a reasonable time, a vote may be taken. The Chair does not vote.

2. **Upon completion of the oral exam**, the Exam Committee will assign one of the following verdicts:

   a) **Pass**: The Candidate has demonstrated satisfactory competence in the written responses and oral exam. No remedial work is required.

   b) **Referred, pending satisfactory completion of remedial work**: The Candidate's performance on the written responses and/or oral exam does not meet the standard for a pass in its present form, but could meet that standard after the Candidate satisfactorily completes the remedial work specified by the Exam Committee.

   c) **Referred, pending re-examination**: The Candidate has not demonstrated satisfactory competence in the written responses and/or oral exam. The Candidate must satisfactorily complete one or more remedial written exams, as specified by the Exam Committee, followed by a remedial oral exam attended by the entire Exam Committee.

3. Upon completion of the oral exam, the Chair and the Examiners fill out and sign the SKHS Comprehensive Exam Outcome Form (**Appendix D**) and submit it to the SKHS Graduate Coordinator for recording and filing.

4. **In the case that remedial work is required**, the Exam Committee will outline the work required, which could include additional reading and a written response; taking a course; presenting a lecture; or other tasks or combined tasks as assigned by the Exam Committee. The Exam Committee will also identify who will review and provide final authorization on approval of the remedial work and the accompanying submission date. This information is to be recorded in the SKHS Comprehensive Exam Outcome Form (**Appendix D**).

5. **In the case that a re-examination is required,** additional reading and/or context statements may be assigned, and the Candidate will complete 1-3 remedial written exams, followed by a remedial oral exam. This information is to be recorded in the SKHS Comprehensive Exam Outcome Form (**Appendix D**). The exam response(s) are evaluated by all members of the Exam Committee, and the entire Exam Committee attends the remedial oral exam.

6. **Following remedial work and/or re-examination**, the Exam Committee will assign one of the following verdicts:

   a) **Pass:** The Candidate has demonstrated satisfactory competence in their remedial work and/or re-examination.

   b) **Withdraw from program:** The Candidate has not demonstrated satisfactory competence in their remedial work and/or re-examination, and is required to withdraw from the program immediately.

7. Following remedial work and/or re-examination, if the Exam Committee cannot reach consensus, at least two of the 3 Examiners must vote Pass for the Candidate to receive a Pass verdict.

8. Upon completion of the remedial work and/or re-examination, the Chair and the Examiners sign the SKHS Comprehensive Exam Outcome Form (**Appendix D**) and submit it to the SKHS Graduate Coordinator for recording and filing.

E. Appeals

Please consult the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs General Regulations.

APPENDIX A

RESPONSIBILITIES

Chair

- Collaborate with Candidate, Supervisor, and Graduate Coordinator prior to the initial organizing meeting to ensure appropriate accommodations are in place, if required.
- Attend all meetings of the Exam Committee
- Submit signed SKHS Comprehensive Exam Planning Form (**Appendix C**) to Graduate Coordinator immediately following initial meeting
- Ensure all components of the exam package are submitted on time and that they follow stipulated criteria
- Confer with the Supervisor to ensure that written exam questions do not overlap
- Moderate queries while the Candidate is preparing for a written or oral exam
- Chair oral exam, ensuring it follows the stipulated process
- Secure required signatures at the end of the oral exam
- Arrange a subsequent meeting of the Exam Committee, in whole or in part, to adjudicate remedial work and/or re-examination as required
- Submit completed and signed SKHS Comprehensive Exam Outcome Form (**Appendix D**) to the SKHS Graduate Coordinator following the oral exam and/or remedial work and/or re-examination

Supervisor

- Collaborate with Candidate, Committee Chair, and Graduate Coordinator prior to the initial organizing meeting to ensure appropriate accommodations are in place, if required.
- Attend all meetings of the Exam Committee
- Invite Examiners and a Chair to sit on the Exam Committee
- Arrange the time and location of initial meeting
- Ensure the Candidate has adequate time to complete the comprehensive exam process
- Confer with the Chair to ensure that written exam questions do not overlap
- Serve as an Examiner and adhere to the responsibilities of Examiners laid out below

Examiners

- Attend all meetings of the Exam Committee
- Create exam package in consultation with Supervisor
- Review any memory aid sheet, if submitted by the Candidate, in advance of a written exam and forward the approved sheet to the Graduate Coordinator
- Read all 3 written exam questions and responses and prepare to ask questions at the oral exam
- Submit a written report on the Candidate's response to the Examiner's own question no less than 2 working days prior to the oral exam.
- Participate in the oral exam including: 1) asking the Candidate questions, primarily about content related to the Examiner's own question; 2) prompting the Candidate to explain or teach a specific concept stemming from the reading lists/responses; and 3) reaching consensus or voting on the overall verdict
- Assess remedial work or attend re-examination where applicable

Candidate

- Bring any accommodation concerns to the attention of, and collaborate with, the Supervisor, Committee Chair, and Graduate Coordinator prior to the initial organizing meeting to ensure appropriate accommodations are in place, if required.

- Attend the initial organizing meeting and all examination meetings at which the Candidate's attendance is required
- Complete all written exams on the assigned date, in accordance with the criteria
- Respond to questions in the oral exam
- Complete remedial work and/or re-examination where applicable

Graduate Coordinator

- Collaborate with the Candidate, Supervisor, and Committee Chair prior to the initial organizing meeting to ensure appropriate accommodations are in place, if required.
- Assist Chair in overseeing the exam process
- Send reminder email to Examiners 5 working days before their reading lists, context statements, and written exam questions are due
- Distribute each reading list and context statement to Candidate 10 working days in advance of the related written exam date
- Arrange a space and proctor for the Candidate to write each exam response
- Load the exam package on the desktop of the offline computer prior to the start of the exam.
- Distribute each exam package to the Candidate and Examiners, and copy Chair, within 3 working days following each written exam
- Oversee paperwork and signatures
- File copies in Candidate's SKHS graduate file

Graduate Chair

- Support and advise Committee Chair, Supervisor, Candidate and Graduate Coordinator when necessary
- Adjudicate appeals where applicable

APPENDIX B

PERMISSIBLE AND NON-PERMISSIBLE ITEMS

Permissible Items

- Writing utensils and your own keyboard (if preferred) should be brought into the exam room.
- Beverages and snacks are permitted.
- Coats, bags, electronic devices, and other belongings can be stored outside the exam room.

Non-Permissible Items

- Any articles, books, notes other than those provided in the exam package.
- Devices with recording, connectivity, or computational capability (including AI-assisted functionality) are not permitted in the exam environment unless expressly authorized as an approved accommodation required to remove documented functional impacts related to disability, and in situations where no other alternative to using the above listed technology is reliably able to provide full and safe access to the exam writing environment. **This includes, but is not limited to, smart eyewear, watches, earbuds, and phones**.
- Candidates who require vision correction must use non-electronic prescription lenses during examinations. Where a Candidate cannot reasonably do so for reasons related to documented functional impacts due to a disability meeting the **QSAS Documentation Criteria** (and where no alternative to provide full and safe access to the exam writing environment is available), alternative arrangements must be approved in advance through the University's accommodation process.

APPENDIX C

SKHS COMPREHENSIVE EXAM PLANNING FORM (SCIENCE PHD)

Candidate Name: _____ Email: _____ Signature: _____

Chair Name: _____ Email: _____ Signature: _____

	Examiner Name	Email	Topic
Question 1			
Question 2			
Question 3			

	Exam Package Due for Approval (dd-mmm-yy)	Reading Start Date (dd-mmm-yy)	Written Exam Date (dd-mmm-yy)	Written Exam Time (HH:MM AM/PM)
Question 1				
Question 2				
Question 3				

Date for Examiners to submit exam package to Chair (at least 10 working days prior to Q1 reading start date):

_____
(dd-mmm-yy)

Oral Exam Date: _____ Time:_____

APPENDIX D

SKHS COMPREHENSIVE EXAM OUTCOME FORM (SCIENCE PHD)

Candidate Name: _____ Student Number: _____

Oral Exam Date: _____

Initial Decision Following the Oral Exam

The Exam Committee must select one verdict. Decisions are made by consensus where possible; if a vote is required, the Chair does not vote.

☐ **Pass:** The Candidate has demonstrated satisfactory competence in the written responses and oral exam. No remedial work is required.

☐ **Referred, pending satisfactory completion of remedial work:** The Candidate's performance does not meet the standard for a pass in its present form, but could meet that standard after satisfactory completion of remedial work specified by the Exam Committee.

☐ **Referred, pending re-examination:** The Candidate has not demonstrated satisfactory competence and must complete one or more remedial written exams, followed by a remedial oral exam attended by the entire Exam Committee.

If Referred, Documentation of Required Work

Complete this section only if the decision is referred. Clearly identify the deficiencies to be addressed, the remedial work or remedial written exams required, the Exam Committee Member(s) responsible for review and approval, and the timeline/due dates. Attach additional pages if needed.

Signatures

Member	Printed Name	Signature	Date
Chair			
Examiner 1			
Examiner 2			
Examiner 3			

Final Decision Following Referral (if applicable)

The Exam Committee must select one verdict. If consensus cannot be reached, at least two of the three Examiners must vote Pass for the Candidate to receive a Pass verdict. The Chair does not vote.

☐ **Pass:** The Candidate has demonstrated satisfactory competence in the required remedial work or re-examination.

☐ **Withdraw from program:** The Candidate has not demonstrated satisfactory competence in the required remedial work or re-examination and is required to withdraw from the program immediately.

Exam Committee Comments

Summarize the Exam Committee's assessment. A written rationale is required for a Withdraw from program verdict. Attach additional pages if needed.

Signatures

Member	Printed Name	Signature	Date
Chair			
Examiner 1			
Examiner 2			
Examiner 3			