

Department Policy Changes for PhD Comprehensive Exams during Social-Distancing Mandates

Version 1.0, March 23, 2020

Scope

This document outlines changes in the Comprehensive Exam procedure policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. It applies immediately and will terminate once both the university has allowed in-person group meetings on campus to resume and full university library services have been restored.

Comprehensive Exams in Progress Now

Comp exams in progress should continue on schedule, working from home. McMaster digital library services remain operational so access to journals and e-books continues.

For Comprehensive Exams Planned but Not Yet Started

Students should discuss with their supervisors and comprehensive exam committee whether to start on schedule or to delay the exam. Since this is a task that need not be conducted on campus in most cases, it may be feasible to continue as scheduled. Students that experience atypical hardship due to the crisis, for example, facing travel/housing difficulties or extenuating circumstances should not start the comp exam and attempt to reschedule. Committees should allow reasonable accommodations and considerations during these special circumstances.

Scheduling New Comprehensive Exams

New comprehensive exams may be scheduled as desired, considering reasonable accommodations and a student's personal situation. Note that the time window for comprehensive exams in the department handbook are guidelines and not rigid, to allow for extenuating circumstances. The ultimate deadline is that a student cannot complete their PhD without passing the comprehensive exam.

For Any Comprehensive Exam Taking Place

- Committees should conduct the defense as scheduled via Microsoft Teams or other online meeting tool. The SGS guidelines on conducting PhD defenses remotely are good guidelines to follow for comprehensive examinations as well, although not required. When students have insufficient internet connection capabilities to support video or desktop screen-sharing, a tool such as WebEx which supports telephone dial-ins should be used.
- Should circumstances require further changes as the pandemic develops, the student may ask the committee chair for an extension or a reduction in scope or expectations, and the committee chair may make reasonable accommodations in response to the current situation.
- If a student cannot access a critical text that is only available in hardcopy via the university library, and digital options are not available, the student can contact the comprehensive exam chair and either ask for alternative sources, or if critically necessary, a re-scoping of the problem statement.
- If a comp exam in progress cannot reasonably be accommodated or completed due to changing circumstances, the exam can be terminated without judgement (it will not count as a pass or failure, it will be as if the exam never took place). The student will need to take a new comprehensive exam at a later date, with a different topic/question.

