

## Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination Guidelines Year 1

July 2021

The Ph.D. program in Economics at McGill has a Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination Requirement at the end of the first year (PhD 2).

**Objectives.** To ensure that students master the material in the two core areas of Economics, Microeconomics and Macroeconomics. These areas form the basis for the material taught in the second year, as well as for the subsequent thesis work.

**Requirements.** Students must pass two comprehensive examinations at the end of their first year (PhD 2), in Microeconomic Theory and in Macroeconomic Theory. As a pre-requisite to writing the comprehensive exams, students must have passed the two mandatory courses taught during the first year in the corresponding area (ECON 709 and ECON 711 for Microeconomics, and ECON 712 and ECON 713 for Macroeconomics).

**Format.** The comprehensive exams are administered under the courses ECON 701: Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination 1 (Microeconomic Theory), and ECON 702: Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination 2 (Macroeconomic Theory). Students must formally register for both courses. The exams are written, usually with an allotted time of 3h30, and normally take place in May (a re-take is normally offered in September, following the same guidelines).

**Range of material.** Each exam is based upon the material in the two mandatory first-year courses mentioned previously. However, questions are not strictly bounded by the material from these courses. Thus, students should also expect questions pertaining to basic concepts (perhaps covered in detail at the undergraduate/MA level) that every person in the relevant area should know about, or to applications of the tools taught in those courses to new situations.

**Comprehensive exam committee.** Each comprehensive exam is organized by a committee formed by the professors who taught the first-year courses relevant to the exam in question, as indicated previously, and possibly other professors in the area as well. All committee members write exam questions. Every single question is reviewed by all committee members, resulting in a final grade reached by consensus. One of these professors will act as the committee chair. The main role of the committee chair is to communicate with the students on behalf of the whole committee, namely, to address students' questions about the exam format and grading, otherwise each professor has equal weight in writing and grading questions. The department normally announces the composition of the comprehensive exam committees by email in late March/early April, as well as the exam dates. The committee decides the specific exam format, including the type of questions (e.g. short vs long) and weight on each question, and the chair communicates it to the students by email.

**Preparation.** To prepare for the comprehensive exams, students should follow the same approach they have used to prepare for the underlying courses, namely they should refer to the syllabi for those courses for the basic material to be covered. The department has an archive of past comprehensive examinations (<https://www.mcgill.ca/economics/graduates/phd-comprehensive-exams>) that students are strongly encouraged to access and work on. Students are also encouraged to reach out to the comprehensive exam committee for specific preparation

strategies, and implement broader test-taking strategies for recalling content and managing stress during high-stakes, real-time exams (<https://www.mcgill.ca/tutoring/learning-supports/test-taking>).

**Assessment protocol.** The assessment outcome for each student (pass/fail, where the passing grade is 65%) is reached by consensus within the committee. The outcome and numerical grade are then communicated to the students in a timely manner, in writing.

**Feedback.** The committee chair, upon consultation with the rest of the committee, shall provide written feedback to the students having failed the comprehensive exam, indicating the reasons for the decision, including identifying specific strengths and weaknesses, and advice on how to improve. This feedback will be provided concurrently with the assessment outcome, and in sufficient detail to allow the student to understand the decision. At a minimum this must include the scores for each question, and ideally should also include an answer key. Students are also encouraged to reach out to the committee chair by email with specific questions about the grading. The committee chair, upon consultation with the rest of the committee, is then responsible for addressing these questions, also in writing. Failing students are then required to schedule an individual meeting with the committee chair to receive a summary of the feedback verbally and to ensure that the failure policy described in the next point is well understood. Following this meeting, the Recommendation Following a First Failure online form should be completed by the committee chair (<https://www.mcgill.ca/student-records/forms/staff-gr-programs/>).

**Failure policy.** Students need to pass both comprehensive exams, and they have two chances to do so. If a student fails either of the two exams in May, he/she would re-do it normally four months after, in September (the exact dates will be announced by email, normally in June). In such circumstances the grade of HH (to be continued) will be used. In the event of a second failure in either exam, a grade of F will be reported to Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and the student will be withdrawn from the University.

**Appeal.** A student can appeal the comprehensive examination decision by writing to the Economics Graduate Program Director or by requesting a formal grade appeal by writing to the GPS Associate Dean ([associatedeans.gps@mcgill.ca](mailto:associatedeans.gps@mcgill.ca)).

**Absence.** An absence to the Ph.D. Comprehensives must be properly justified (e.g. via formal medical note), and the student needs to formally apply for an exam deferral (<https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/registration/exam>). Otherwise it will result in a fail.

These guidelines are written in accordance to McGill's Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy, which the students are also encouraged to consult ([https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2020-2021/university\\_regulations\\_and\\_resources/graduate/gps\\_gi\\_phd\\_comprehensives\\_policy](https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2020-2021/university_regulations_and_resources/graduate/gps_gi_phd_comprehensives_policy)).