

Retrospective comprehensive exams

Preamble

- Comprehensive exams are a mandatory component of doctoral programs at McGill. There can be no more than two comprehensive exams (a retrospective and/or a prospective comprehensive exam).
- The purpose of a retrospective comprehensive exam must be to test the students' foundational knowledge of the discipline.
- The retrospective comprehensive must not reexamine content acquired through graduate courses taken during the PhD degree.
- Retrospective comps should be completed by the end of PhD2.
- Retrospective comprehensive exams are not mandatory. Units that choose to conduct retrospective comps must respect the following guidelines.

Guidelines

1. Every exam question should be reviewed by **at least two** comprehensive exam committee members. It must be made clear to the student how the committee is appointed and who sits on it, and how the evaluation is to be carried out (consensus or vote). The supervisor and the co-supervisor must not participate in the evaluation. If there is an oral component, the supervisor and the co-supervisor may attend but must not participate in the question period. The supervisor and the co-supervisor may attend deliberations to provide context, but they do not have voting privileges.
2. **Prior exams should be publicly posted** on the comprehensive exam section of the program website for students to review prior to the exam. Students must be informed of this online resource prior to the exams. Students should not be required to request copies of prior exams.
3. A **comprehensive exam guideline document** should be publicly posted. This document should encourage students to **review prior exams** and provide a link to their permanent online location. The document should also clearly indicate **typical exam protocols** (e.g., timing, location, question format, grading procedure, threshold required for a pass decision, when/how results are distributed, post-failure options/debriefing) and suggest **effective strategies for preparing** for the exams (e.g., reviewing prior exams, strategies for how to review prior course content, test-taking strategies for recalling content and managing stress during high-stakes, real-time exams). This document should additionally indicate **recourse options following a failure outcome** (i.e., retake protocols, appeal decision in writing to the department and/or the GPS Associate Dean: associatedeans.gps@mcgill.ca). This document should further outline all policies related to **potential accommodations** based on disability, language issues (e.g., international students), etc. (e.g., longer duration for exam completion, alternate formats for high test-anxious students, longer duration prior to retake). If no accommodations are being provided, a statement explaining this decision and detailing other supports being provided (e.g., preparatory sessions) is required.

4. Detailed **written feedback** must be provided directly to students following either a pass or fail comps exam decision within two weeks to indicate strengths and weaknesses using accessible language. If grading is numerical in nature, this feedback should additionally detail **scores for each exam question** as well as total exam scores. Students should not be required to individually request feedback following the exam decision.
5. The GPD **must meet, in a timely manner and individually, with each student who fails a comprehensive exam** to verbally explain the [double failure policy](#) and review strategies for improving on the next exam (if the student declines or is not available for an in-person meeting, this information must be conveyed in detail in writing). Following this meeting, the Recommendation Following a First Failure **online form** should be completed by the faculty member (<https://www.mcgill.ca/student-records/forms/staff-gr-programs/>). Students must be given a minimum of four months to prepare for a retake.
6. Given the potential for inequity issues from an EDI (Equity, Diversity & Inclusion) perspective (see "Student Experience" section: https://www.mcgill.ca/equity/files/equity/mcgill_strategic_edi_plan_2020-20251.pdf), students whose **first language is not English must be ensured appropriate supports** prior to and following comprehensive exams as they are likely to be disproportionately negatively impacted by written/verbal exam formats.