

## Final Oral Examination Review Working Group

### Final Report

#### ***Background and rationale***

At the University of Toronto, the thesis is the culminating research project for a doctoral degree. The final oral examination (FOE) is the evaluation of that thesis and its oral defense. More than 1,000 final oral examinations take place at the university every year.

The final oral examination committee represents the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) Graduate Education Council and through it, the university. The committee is therefore responsible for upholding the standard of the doctoral degree at the University of Toronto and possesses the full authority of SGS with respect to the examination.

Members of the graduate community have shared challenges with the current SGS Calendar examination regulations and guidelines, including a lack of clarity on key components of the FOE and complicated or resource-intensive processes and procedures. Given the presence of two similar documents, the SGS Calendar and the SGS FOE Guidelines, there is confusion between what exactly are the regulations versus what are the suggested best practices that units can choose to implement depending on their context. Currently, the SGS Calendar only presents the minimum core regulations, while the SGS FOE Guidelines cover both regulations and best practices in greater detail. As a result of these challenges, some inconsistencies in application of these regulations and guidelines across divisions are observed. It is critical that the foundational regulations and guidelines are clear, differentiated, simple and flexible to enable individual graduate units to adhere to the regulations while incorporating discipline-specific practices that align with scholarly norms in their fields.

Therefore, as the graduate education landscape continues to evolve – globally and at the University of Toronto – it is important to review the current FOE regulations and guidelines to ensure alignment with innovative practices, foster quality scholarship and academic rigour, and facilitate a quality experience for all individuals involved. To this end, SGS initiated a review of the final oral examination in January 2024 and the *Final Oral Examination Review Working Group* commenced in September 2024.

#### ***Purpose***

The goals of the working group in undertaking a review of the FOE regulations and guidelines are:

1. To increase the sense of occasion of the FOE.
2. To ensure the FOE guidelines allow for innovation, as well as disciplinary and programmatic flexibility.

3. To increase clarity of the FOE guidelines for all stakeholders.
4. To ensure the FOE guidelines align with both the [SGS thesis guidelines](#) and [degree level expectations](#).
5. To ensure alignment between the FOE guidelines and other SGS regulations.
6. To increase the operational impact of current processes and any recommended changes.

***Working group membership***

The following individuals served as members of the *Final Oral Examination Review Working Group*:

- Vina Goghari, Professor, Graduate Department of Psychological Clinical Science, University of Toronto Scarborough, and Vice-Dean, Research and Program Innovation, School of Graduate Studies (Chair)
- Greg A. Jamieson, Professor and Associate Chair, Professional Programs, Department of Mechanical & Industrial Engineering, Faculty of Applied Science & Engineering
- Josée Johnston, Professor and Acting Chair, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto Mississauga
- Joseph Flessa, Professor and Associate Dean, Programs, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Kajri Jain, Professor and Graduate Chair, Department of Art History, Faculty of Arts & Science and University of Toronto Mississauga
- Katherine Tamminen, Professor and Associate Dean, Graduate Education, Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education
- Pamela Klassen, Professor, Chair and Graduate Chair, Department of Religion, Faculty of Arts & Science
- Paul Kushner, Professor, Chair and Graduate Chair, Department of Physics, Faculty of Arts & Science
- Sarah Peake, Director, Student Academic Services, School of Graduate Studies
- Stephanie Waterman, Associate Professor, Department of Leadership, Higher & Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and former Provostial Academic Advisor on Indigenous Curriculum and Education
- Tania Watts, Professor, Department of Immunology, Temerty Faculty of Medicine

***Pre-working group consultations and environmental scans***

To help inform the primary foci of the working group, SGS conducted pre-working group consultations with various stakeholders in the graduate community from February to

September 2024. Consultations included focus groups with graduate students and attendance at an SGS Graduate Student Advisory Committee meeting, survey of faculty (n=418 responses) and facilitation of a Conversations with SGS session, survey of administrative staff (n=48 responses) and attendance at the Graduate Administrators Community of Practice, and a survey of external appraisers who have participated in an FOE at U of T (n=68 responses).

In general, stakeholders consulted were satisfied with the current FOE regulations, guidelines and resources. However, there were a few core areas where stakeholders suggested improvements, including:

- Revising pre-exam procedures, such as obtaining an FOE chair and the criteria required for an external appraiser
- Reviewing existing examination formats and their associated value to the student experience (i.e., in-person vs. online or hybrid exams, closed vs. public exams)
- Increasing flexibility in the regulations to allow for department-specific FOE practices
- Enhancing clarity across FOE voting categories and more streamlined voting procedures
- Enhancing the sense of occasion of the post-examination experience and examples of unit-specific practices that have worked well

In conjunction with stakeholder consultations, several environmental scans were also conducted to review the common practices at peer institutions for the core components of the FOE (i.e., FOE chair, external appraiser, types of examination, closed vs. public defense). Each of the environmental scans reviewed FOE practices at U15 institutions in Canada and select peers in the United States, including University of California, Berkeley, Cornell University, University of Minnesota, Ohio State University and the University of Southern California.

### ***Working group process***

The FOE Working Group met seven times to discuss the survey results and environmental scans, review FOE regulations and guidelines, and develop recommendations for consideration.

The first task of the working group was to identify the core principles necessary for a successful, academically rigorous, and fulfilling FOE experience. Once identified, these principles, listed below, grounded discussions and helped the working group evaluate different domains of the FOE. Consistently referenced by working group members during meetings, the principles were employed to help guide decisions and build informed, thoughtful recommendations.

Each meeting of the working group was structured around key domains of the FOE. The FOE domains reviewed by the working group included: FOE chair, external appraiser, composition of the FOE committee and quorum, type of examination, voting, adjournments and reconvened exams, closed exam vs. public defense, and the FOE time length. Equity, diversity and inclusion,

as well as Indigenous practices were identified as cross-cutting factors guiding all discussions of the FOE domains.

Data and consultation insights were presented to the working group at the beginning of each domain review to help foster evidence-informed dialogue and help working group members become familiar with the experiences of all the stakeholders and the practices of peer institutions. Specifically, the working group examined and considered the benefits and disadvantages of different approaches and models used at peer institutions for key domains of the FOE, which assisted in evaluating practices at U of T and guiding the development of recommendations.

Finally, the working group dissected the FOE regulations in the SGS Calendar, and as relevant, the FOE Guidelines on the SGS website. This practice helped pinpoint discrepancies, issues of clarity, and challenges with implementation, and thus, helped identify necessary improvements and develop recommendations.

### ***Core principles underlying the FOE***

The core principles identified as necessary to a successful, academically rigorous, and fulfilling FOE by the *Final Oral Examination Review Working Group* are as follows:

- **Academic rigour:** Ensuring that FOE process and outcomes are underpinned by scholarly excellence, integrity, innovation, and an enriching learning experience.
- **Disciplinary and programmatic flexibility:** Ensuring that the appropriate regulations are in place to meet OCAV's (Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents) degree level expectations and SGS Calendar requirements, while allowing for unique discipline- or program-specific practices.
- **Wellness and exceptional experience for all stakeholders:** Ensuring that the FOE process and procedures prioritize stakeholder well-being and strive for a fulfilling experience for all involved.
- **Equity, diversity and inclusion:** Ensuring that the FOE processes promote equity and inclusion and are responsive to our diverse stakeholder groups.
- **Professional development:** Ensuring that the FOE process serves as an opportunity for students to develop and advance their academic and professional skills and professional network.
- **Sense of occasion:** Ensuring that the FOE process and environment demonstrates a sense of significance and achievement given the importance of this culminating milestone.
- **Public accountability:** Ensuring that, as a public university, there are appropriate mechanisms for publicly disseminating research and engaging with the community.

- **Transparency:** Ensuring that all FOE regulations, processes and procedures are clear, accessible, and understandable by all stakeholders.
- **Streamlined and operationally efficient:** Ensuring that FOE regulations, processes and procedures can be implemented in a well-organized, timely and effective manner.

These core principles should underlie and be reinforced by the FOE process and procedures.

### ***Recommendations***

The working group recommends that students, faculty and staff would benefit if SGS were to:

- Streamline processes and increase efficiencies with FOE procedures.
- Increase flexibility for graduate units by allowing for, where advisable, unit autonomy in implementation of regulations.
- Simplify final oral examination guidelines on the SGS website.
- Clearly differentiate between SGS regulations that must be implemented for all FOEs by all units and best practices that graduate units are encouraged to implement (i.e., FOE guidelines), if relevant to their context.
- Maintain core elements of the FOE that are valued by the stakeholders (e.g., inclusion of the external appraiser; allowing the student to receive the external appraisal letter prior to the FOE; allowing for an adjournment rather than a fail after the first examination).
- Revise core elements of the FOE that could be enhanced for the stakeholders (e.g., clarify and simplify voting categories and processes; create more flexibility in who can chair the FOE; be more flexible in who can attend the examination; encouraging in-person FOE participation).

Based on these recommendations, and the core principles listed above, the working group has developed more detailed recommendations for the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies to guide internal consultations going forward (document submitted to the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies).

### ***Next steps***

The working group provides this report and a list of sample practices to help enhance a sense of occasion for the FOE that could be implemented by graduate units and/or supervisors to the general U of T community. In addition, a detailed set of recommendations are provided to the Dean of SGS for further consultation, delineation and implementation. The ultimate output of the working group will be the revised SGS Calendar for the FOE section and the reworked SGS FOE Guidelines webpage and materials. All revisions to the SGS Calendar for the FOE section will need to be approved by the Graduate Education Council.