Social and Behavioural Health Sciences – PhD Program

Guidelines for the PhD Proposal Defense

Approved by SBHS curriculum committee, May 2018

The PhD proposal defense is a requirement for candidacy and for full-time students, should be completed by December of the second year (appropriate timing will vary for flex-time students, but all requirements for candidacy must be completed by the end of year four).

The purpose of the proposal defense is to:

- Ensure that the proposed research will result in a successful PhD dissertation.
- Strengthen the thesis question, theoretical framework, design, and methods through critical feedback.
- Assess the student's ability to conduct independent and original research.
- Assess the student's knowledge base relevant to their thesis topic.
- Provide a formal approval to proceed with the dissertation research.

Format of proposal:

Proposals should be single-spaced with 1" margins and 12 point Arial/Calibri/Times New Roman/Cambria font. Any standard referencing style (e.g., Vancouver, APA, ASA) is acceptable so long as it is used consistently throughout the entire paper. Proposals should be **10-15 single-spaced pages in length**, depending upon the research design (not including the title page, abstract, and reference list). Appendices, beyond those specifically noted below, should be kept to a minimum.

The proposal will normally include the elements described below, presented in whatever order is appropriate to the student's project. Changes or additions to this format are possible where appropriate. The thesis supervisor(s) and committee members should support the students in interpreting these guidelines to best suit the nature of the student's work.

<u>Title Page</u> – Student's full name, proposed title of thesis, date, degree sought, department, university and names of the committee members.

<u>Abstract</u> – Include an abstract of 350 words, briefly introducing the problem/issue, summarizing the objectives of the proposed research, its significance, theoretical and methodological approaches, and the primary research design components.

Part A (maximum 5 pages)

Critical Review of Relevant Research

- A critical, concise review of relevant high-quality research literature, including peer reviewed and grey literature as appropriate.
- A critical review evaluates the substantive content of existing research. If the research problem is theoretical or methodological in orientation, then the review should describe current theoretical or methodological approaches to the issue, as appropriate. In addition to detailing the current state of knowledge about a problem/issue, it should point to areas overlooked or inadequately addressed by existing studies, and discuss how the proposed research study will address these limitations and make a unique contribution to the literature.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

- A clear and concise statement of the research problem or issue. Drawing upon the literature review, indicate why this problem or issue is important (i.e., justification for the proposed research). The problem may be theoretical/methodological (e.g., a conceptual issue) and/or substantive (e.g., a particular health or health care) issue.
- The overall aim/objective of the thesis **or** central research question. Research hypotheses may be presented, if appropriate.

Theoretical Approach/Conceptual Framework(s)
- An outline of the theory or conceptual model/framework(s) that will guide the proposed research. This section may draw upon the student's work for the qualifying examination (QE) paper, though the student is not required to use the same theoretical tradition(s) applied for the QE. Diagrams may be included in an Appendix, as appropriate.

Part B (maximum 10 pages)

Methodology/Research Design

- Describe and justify the study design.

- If a multi-study, multi-method or mixed methods research design is proposed, the type, description and rationale for each study or method should be included, together with a discussion of how each study or method complements or relates to the others.

- Comment on the epistemological consistency and alignment between the research questions, theoretical approach, proposed design and analytic techniques to be used.

Sampling, participant/case selection methods and recruitment

- Provide a rationale for the method of sampling or selecting data, whether they be participants/cases, documents, or other forms (e.g., why a particular group and not another).
- Clearly state the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participants or data sources.
- Justify the proposed/anticipated sample size and its representativeness (where appropriate). For example, how many documents, interviews, focus groups will be consulted/undertaken and why? Where appropriate, provide a sample size calculation with proper referencing of the method(s) used in the calculation.
- Describe how/why the research participants will be recruited (in the case of primary data collection) or how secondary data, documentary and other evidence will be selected. Justify and demonstrate the feasibility of acquiring the anticipated data.

Data Collection/Production

- Describe the data collection/production procedures (e.g., surveys, interviews, documents) and provide draft copies of/excerpts from all tools/instruments (e.g., samples of questionnaire, interview guide, focus group guide, selection of written materials) in the Appendix.
- Discuss the appropriateness of the proposed data collection/production procedures to the research questions.
- Discuss the validation of measurement instruments, as appropriate (e.g., Have instruments been validated? How and with what results?)
- Where relevant, identify sources of bias (e.g., influence of interviewer, type of questions), how these are likely to affect the research, and where appropriate, means to reduce/address/account for them.

Data Analysis

- Describe the proposed data analysis procedures (e.g. statistical and/or qualitative analysis techniques), and any software to be used.
- Describe how the analysis procedures are consistent with the research questions, theoretical and methodological approach, design and data collection methods described elsewhere in the proposal.
- If appropriate, describe how different types of data will be combined.

Rigour

- Describe and justify procedures for substantiating the rigour of the research process, which might include:
    - Quantitative: validity, reliability, generalizability
    - Qualitative: relevant concepts of rigour such as transferability, credibility, trustworthiness, meaningful coherence, authenticity

- Where relevant, discuss the researcher's positionality and how this will be accounted for in the process of conducting the research (e.g., use of reflexivity).

Ethical considerations

- Assess any ethical issues and challenges that relate to the study design, recruitment of participants, documents/records, analyses and dissemination of findings, including any risks and benefits to participants. Discuss how these issues will be addressed, minimized and/or disclosed to participants, communities, etc.
- Students should review the Tri-Council Policy Statement -2, and ensure that all relevant chapters are addressed in this section. For example, in keeping with Chapter 9, students engaging in research with Indigenous peoples must indicate if a relationship has been established, and the input that Indigenous peoples/organizations will have in the research. Similarly, students proposing qualitative research should review Chapter 10 and discuss how they will address relevant ethical considerations.
- Discuss efforts to ethically and meaningfully engage relevant communities in the research. Where relevant, provide details of research partnerships and/or copies of any agreements reached to access data, participants/documents/records in the Appendix.
- Disclose any real or perceived conflicts of interest.

Limitations

- Provide a concise discussion of study limitations consistent with your research questions, theoretical approach and proposed design.

Anticipated Contributions

- Describe the significance of your study, including what you anticipate will be the major substantive, theoretical and/or methodological contributions, and the key stakeholders likely to be affected by these these outcomes.
- Where relevant, briefly describe your proposed knowledge mobilization plan.

Feasibility

- Where the work will have associated operating costs (e.g., for field work travel, data access fees, participant honoraria), briefly describe the available financial or infrastructure resources to support the project.
- Indicate the estimated time needed to complete the thesis. Include time to various milestones (e.g., time to obtain ethics approval; develop data collection instruments; recruit participants; collect data; analyze data; produce a draft of the thesis; defend). This can be included in the Appendix in the format of a draft workplan.

Process for approval of the PhD proposal:

The SBHS proposal defense will occur at a meeting of the supervisory committee scheduled expressly for this purpose. The supervisory committee will be responsible for approval of the proposal, informed by written feedback from an external assessor who is arms-length to the student and their project (i.e., does not currently nor has previously supervised the student in studies or employment, and has no affiliation with the student's proposed work). The external assessor must have an SGS appointment (Full or Associate member) at the University of Toronto and be approved in advance by the SBHS Program Director.

The process of approving the thesis proposal will be as follows:

Preparation for proposal defense meeting

1. The student's supervisor(s), typically with input from the committee members, determines that the proposal is ready for defense, and a tentative date, at least 4 weeks in the future, is identified for the committee meeting. The student and the supervisor, with input from committee members as appropriate, also identify a potential external assessor and two alternates.
2. The student contacts the Program Director via email, copying the SBHS Administrative Assistant, to give notice that the proposal is ready for examination, together with the name and rationale for the proposed external assessor and two alternates, listed in order of preference. The Program Director will approve the potential external assessors, or will ask the student/supervisor(s) to submit the name of an alternate assessor if necessary, within 3 business days.
3. After receiving approval from the Program Director, the student confirms the participation of the external assessor, and distributes the thesis proposal via email to the external assessor and supervisory committee, at least 3 weeks prior to the scheduled committee meeting. At this time, the student should notify the external assessor of the date by which their feedback is required, which will be one week prior to the scheduled committee meeting. If the external assessor is not available, the student must conduct the next assessor on the pre-approved list (see #1 for details).
4. The external assessor will review the proposal, and provide constructive and specific feedback in written form, addressing the criteria provided below ("**Table 1-Criteria for evaluation of the proposal"**). This feedback can be prepared in the format typical of a journal peer review or external examiner report for a dissertation. The length of the external assessor's report will vary according to the needs of the student/proposal, but should address all of the criteria in Table 1, providing concrete suggestions for improvements, where necessary. The external assessor does not participate in the committee meeting at which the proposal will be defended, nor does the external assessor have a vote on the outcome of the proposal defense (as described below, "**Possible outcomes of the proposal defense"**).

5. One week prior to the scheduled committee meeting, the external assessor will provide the student with the written appraisal in PDF format, copying the supervisor(s). The student will distribute the appraisal to the committee members. The student, supervisor(s), and committee members should all review the appraisal from the external assessor in advance of the scheduled committee meeting, but discussion of the appraisal will not occur until that meeting.

Proposal defense meeting

6. At the scheduled committee meeting, the student will deliver a 20-minute presentation providing an overview of the thesis proposal. The presentation may also address any concerns raised by the external assessor, if desired.
7. Following the student's presentation, there will be a period of questions and discussion with the supervisor(s) and committee members, during which they should endeavour to address key issues raised by the external assessor, and come to agreement on the evaluation criteria described below ("**Table 1-Criteria for evaluation of the proposal"**). No formal structure for this question/discussion period is required.
8. On the basis of the student's written proposal, answers to questions, and the report of the external assessor, the supervisor(s) and committee members should come to consensus on the outcome of the meeting (see "**Possible outcomes of the proposal defense"**, below) and record their decision on the Supervisory Committee Meeting Report Form. If consensus cannot be reached, the decision should be made by majority vote. Note that the external assessor does not have a vote in this decision.
9. The completed Supervisory Committee Meeting Report Form should be delivered to the Program Director and Administrative Assistant, who will notify the Graduate Office of the outcome of the proposal defense.

Possible outcomes of the proposal defense

The following are the possible outcomes for the proposal defense:

<u>Pass:</u> The student may proceed with dissertation work and remaining program progression, taking note of the feedback received during the proposal defense, and in consultation with the supervisor(s) and committee, considering minor amendments to their proposal as appropriate.

<u>Provisional pass:</u> The student must create a point-by-point response to the key concerns raised in the external appraisal and by the supervisor(s) and committee during the course of the proposal defense; the concerns to be addressed will be provided in writing by the supervisor(s) within one week of the defense. The student is required to provide the supervisor(s) and committee with the point-by-point response and revised proposal (with revisions tracked or highlighted) within 60 days of receiving the requirements from the supervisor(s). Once the supervisory committee has

approved the revisions, the proposal should be submitted to the Program Director, and a pass will then be recorded.

Fail: A failure indicates that the proposal has major deficiencies, requires major revisions, and thus should undergo a second evaluation. This will include assessment of the revised proposal by an external assessor (usually the same person who assessed the original proposal). The second attempt must occur within 120 days of the first attempt, and a second failure will result in a recommendation for program termination.

Next steps

Once the student has successfully passed their proposal defense, they can proceed with ensuring that all necessary ethical review processes are completed. The Office of Research (research.dlsph@utoronto.ca) can provide support with this process as it pertains to the University of Toronto Research Ethics Boards, and will be the Faculty signatory for all SBHS student protocols. The student is responsible for determining whether any other ethics approvals are required prior to proceeding.

Table 1: Criteria for evaluation of the proposal

The external assessor and supervisory committee members should consider the following criteria in determining whether or not the proposal is ready for approval:

Domain	Passing proposal will include or demonstrate:
• Critical review of relevant literature	• A clear and concise review of the relevant literature • Important citations in the field, appropriately cited to demonstrate a strong understanding of the literature • Evidence of a compelling rationale for the project's focus
• Problem statement and research question	• Clear articulation of the overall aim of the project and/or central research question
• Theoretical approach/conceptual framework	• A clear description of the theoretical approach/conceptual framework • Strong alignment between the theoretical approach/conceptual framework, research questions, and methodology proposed
• Research design	• Clear description of, and rationale for, methodology that is appropriate to the research question and theoretical approach/conceptual framework • An appropriate and clearly described research plan, including recruitment strategy, anticipated sample size, data collection/production, and data analysis (as appropriate to the project)
• Ethical considerations	• Thoughtful discussion of all relevant ethical considerations • A plan for mitigation of key ethical concerns
• Limitations	• An acknowledgement of important study limitations

• Anticipated contributions	• A compelling statement of the proposed work's scholarly impact and novelty with respect to substantive area, theory, and/or methodology • Discussion of the key stakeholders likely to be affected by the project's outcomes
• Feasibility	• A thoughtful discussion of relevant feasibility issues, including: access to participants/data sources, resource requirements, and timelines (as appropriate)
• Appropriateness for a PhD dissertation	• The project is appropriate in scope (i.e., is both sufficient and manageable within the timeframe of the PhD program) • The project is feasible given the available resources • The project meets the expectations of the SBHS PhD program (i.e., addresses important social and/or behavioural aspects of an issue relevant to public health, and/or theoretical or methodological topics relevant to the social and behavioural health sciences)
• Written communication abilities at a level appropriate to PhD studies	• The proposal is well organized • The writing is logical with sound structure and flow