The BES Guidelines for the PhD Comprehensive Exam

Note that the official URI Graduate School Manual guidelines for Comprehensive Exams are appended to the end of this document. In short, the following BES Guidelines adhere to the Graduate School Manual guidelines, but are more appropriate for our BES program.

**When to complete:** As specified by the URI Graduate School, “each doctoral student shall take comprehensive examinations at or near, but no later than twelve months after, completion of the formal courses stipulated in the Program of Study”.

**Purpose of the exam:** The goal of the BES Comprehensive Exam is to ensure that each doctoral student understands the broadest context of their chosen field of research as well as demonstrates adequate depth of knowledge.

**Preparation for the exam:** Students are encouraged to meet with each faculty member (individually or as the full committee) at least two months prior to the written exam to discuss the scope and format of the written and oral exams, and to determine the schedule for these exams. Students must submit the “Request to schedule Written Doctoral Comprehensive Exam” form to the URI Graduate School at least 10 business days prior to the written examination start date. It is helpful for the student and committee faculty if BOTH the written and oral exam schedule is confirmed at this time even though the form only requires that the schedule for the written exam is specified.

**Format of the written and oral parts of the exam:** The PhD Comprehensive Exam consists of a written exam (at least eight hours in duration) followed by an oral exam (usually two hours in duration) that takes place within four weeks of the written exam. The written exam is administered by the student’s Doctoral Committee (i.e., major professor and two other graduate faculty), whereas the oral exam is administered by the student’s Doctoral Committee plus two other faculty members (see the “BES Committee Composition Cartoon” on the BES website for the affiliations of each faculty on these committees).

The scope and format of the written exam is determined by the student in consultation with their Doctoral Committee. The scope and format of the written exam has usually been one of the following:

- a series of written questions posed by each of the three members of the Doctoral Committee. The questions might involve writing a review of a manuscript(s) and/or grant proposal(s), a critical review of a research topic(s), or explaining a key concept. The student is given some time limit to complete their written answers to the questions (must be a minimum of 8 hrs total, and usually no more than 24 hrs per set of questions from each of the three faculty). The student is informed about whether they may or may not be allowed access to reference material while answering the written exam questions.
- a written research proposal on a topic not directly related to the student’s dissertation proposal. The total number of pages for the text & figures (excluding the literature cited) does not exceed 12 pages. (This is the usual scope and format of the written comprehensive exam for PhD students in the CMB specialization.)

The student submits the completed written exam to the major professor. The student’s answers to the written exam questions are reviewed by the student’s Doctoral Committee and the Committee determines whether the student has passed or failed the written exam. Note that this determination of pass/fail for the written exam is usually done within one week to ensure adequate time for scheduling the oral exam through the URI Graduate School. The student’s major professor must complete the “Results of the Written Doctoral Comprehensive Exam and Scheduling of Oral Comprehensive Exam” form and must submit this form to the URI Graduate School. If the
student has passed the written exam, this form specifies when the oral exam is scheduled (it must be within four weeks of the written exam).

The scope and format of the oral exam - the scope and format of the oral exam is determined by the student in consultation with their Doctoral Committee and the two other faculty members on the oral exam committee. The oral exam is usually two hours in duration for BES PhD students. A portion of the oral exam usually consists of follow-up questions from the Doctoral Committee concerning the student’s written exam as well as additional questions, and questions from the two additional committee members not involved in the written exam.

Note that once the URI Graduate School receives the “Results of the Written Doctoral Comprehensive Exam and Scheduling of Oral Comprehensive Exam” form that reports successful completion of the written exam, the URI Graduate School sends the major professor a “Results of the Oral Doctoral Comprehensive Exam” form that states the approved date, time, and place for the oral exam (this form is NOT freely available on the URI Graduate School website). This form includes a section to be completed that reports the results of the oral exam. After completion of the oral exam, the student’s major professor must complete this “Results of the Oral Doctoral Comprehensive Exam” form and must submit this form to the URI Graduate School.

Policy from the URI Graduate School
http://web.uri.edu/graduate-manual/degree-requirements/ - section757

7.57 Comprehensive Examinations

7.57.1 General: Each doctoral student shall take comprehensive examinations at or near, but no later than twelve months after, completion of the formal courses stipulated in the Program of Study. Comprehensive examinations should be designed to assess a student’s intellectual capacity and the adequacy of training or scholarly research. The comprehensive examinations that each student must pass shall consist of two parts as follows:

7.57.1.1 Part I – Written: This is a written examination of at least eight hours duration. When the student has met all prior requirements, the major professor will request permission from the Dean of the Graduate School to schedule the examination on specific dates. When the student’s eligibility has been verified by the Graduate School, the Dean will authorize the student’s major professor in consultation with members of the doctoral committee including those from other departments, to prepare, administer, and evaluate the examination. The major professor will arrange the time and the place the examination is to be given in consultation with the student and will notify the Graduate School. The doctoral committee shall review the results and shall make the final decision as to whether or not the student has passed. Unanimous approval by all members of the doctoral committee is required for passing. Both the student and the Dean of the Graduate School will be informed promptly of the results of the examination(s) in accordance with the procedure described in 7.70. The form for reporting the results of the examination can be found at http://www.uri.edu/gsadmis/Forms/grad/results_written_comp_exam_phd.pdf. After the examination has been graded, the results will be accepted in partial fulfillment for the degree for which the student is registered for up to five years from the time the examination is taken. A student who fails this examination may be allowed one re-examination in the part or parts failed if recommended by the doctoral committee and approved by the Dean of the Graduate School. A second examination, if permitted, may be taken only after a minimum of ten weeks has passed to allow for additional student preparation. In all cases, a second examination must take place before one year has elapsed.

7.57.1.2 Part II – Oral: The oral comprehensive examination shall be given only upon successful completion of, and normally within four weeks after, the written examination. This examination,
usually two hours long, is conducted by the oral comprehensive examination committee, which consists of the doctoral committee and two additional Graduate Faculty members nominated by the major professor in consultation with the student, and formally appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School. One of the additional members will be from the same department or area while the other member will be from an outside area. The major professor is responsible for arranging the time and place of the examination in consultation with the student and all potential members of the oral examination committee and shall act as chairperson. The full oral examination committee must be present for the duration of the oral exam, including the discussion of the results and final vote. In unusual circumstances and with prior approval from the Graduate School, when one member of the oral comprehensive examination committee cannot be physically present, that member may be electronically present in the form of an audio/video feed such as Skype. Only a maximum of one member of the committee can participate by audio/video feed, and that person cannot be the student’s major professor. The student must also be physically present. At the discretion of the major professor, who serves as chair of the examination committee, an oral exam may be open to other faculty members as non-voting observers. Faculty observers can ask questions if recognized by the major professor. At any time during the exam, however, the major professor can clear the room of all faculty observers. Non-faculty may not attend an oral exam. At least 10 working days in advance, permission to conduct the examination shall be requested from the Dean of the Graduate School, who will be responsible for formally scheduling the examination and notifying the student and all members of the committee. The student will be notified orally of the results of the examination as soon as the committee has completed its deliberations. The major professor is responsible for notifying the Dean of the Graduate School of the results of the examination promptly on the form provided for this purpose, signed by all members of the oral examination committee and acknowledged by the Graduate Program Director or department Chair. Unanimous approval by all members of the oral examination committee is required for passing. A student who fails the examination may be permitted one re-examination if re-examination is recommended by the committee and approved by the Dean of the Graduate School. A second examination, if permitted, may be taken only after a minimum of ten weeks has passed to allow for additional student preparation. In all cases, a second examination must take place before one year has elapsed. (See 7.74)

7.57.1.3 Time Limit: The results of the written and oral comprehensive examinations will remain valid for five years from the time the examinations are taken.