



HEALTH SCIENCES 6060 (9900): PHD DISSERTATION POLICIES AND PROCEDURES for DOCTORAL DISSERTATION PROPOSALS and DEFENCES

Approved February 12th, 2021 (Collaborative Department Meeting)

Updated: Sept. 16, 2021; Sept. 22, 2021; July 13, 2022; May 30, 2023; March 27, 2024; June 24, 2024 (links updated); Sept. 2025; November 17, 2025

All relevant information about the Health Sciences doctoral dissertation is on the D2L course site. Students who have documented disabilities/medical conditions and who require accommodations to successfully engage in the dissertation should be in touch with Student Accessibility Services. More information is available at: [To Student Accessibility Services](#)

Doctoral Program Regulations can be found [here](#).

OBJECTIVES and COMPETENCIES

The PhD dissertation, through its emphasis on the development of research and dissemination skills, will embody the elements required for the successful development of a research program. Students will largely work independently and will be expected to have hands-on learning opportunities and one-on-one contact with their Dissertation Supervisor. The students will be mentored by successful researchers and provided with multiple opportunities to develop the essential skills to function independently in a research setting. Through completion of the PhD dissertation, including oral defenses of the work, students will develop skills related to each of the six (6) Degree Level Expectations.

The objectives of the PhD in Health Sciences program are to prepare graduates who are able to:

- Discuss and critique current and emerging issues and trends in the field of health sciences;
- Design, carry out, and defend research at an advanced level to create knowledge relevant to the field of health sciences;
- Conduct research and scholarly activities in a way that is consistent with expected guidelines, processes, and procedures in the field of health sciences.

This document provides an overview of the various activities engaged in over the course of completing a dissertation in the Department of Health Sciences. The following topics are covered in this document:

1. Selection of dissertation committee
2. Dissertation Proposal
3. Ethics approval
4. Internal and external review
5. Oral Defence Examination
6. Final submission of the Doctoral dissertation

DISSERTATION TIMELINES AND EVALUATION OF PROGRESS

Students in a dissertation program should be in regular touch with their dissertation supervisor from the start of the program and throughout. This will ensure that the student progresses through the program in a timely fashion.

Student progress is formally evaluated at the end of each winter term (Progress Report). Students who receive two (2) unsatisfactory evaluations of progression will be withdrawn from the program.



A program plan for completion of program requirements is available [here](#); the table below provides a suggested timeline for completion of the program.

Note that the timeline for flexible full-time students uses the full 8-year timeframe allotted to complete all program requirements. It may be possible to complete the program in fewer than 8 years. Flexible full-time students should discuss this with their supervisor as early as possible in their program.

Suggested timelines for Full-time and Flex students

Tasks	Full-time	Flexible full-time
Course requirements HESC 6010 HESC 6030 Elective #1 Elective #2	Year 1 – Fall Year 1 – Winter or Spring/Summer Year 1 – Fall Year 1 – Winter or Spring/Summer	Year 1 – Fall Year 1 – Winter or Spring/Summer Year 1 – Winter or Spring/Summer Year 2 – Fall
Comprehensive Examination Reading List (develop and read) Submit document & defend	Year 1 – Winter & Spring/Summer Year 2 – Fall	Year 2 – Winter & Spring/Summer Year 3 – Fall
Research Internship	Year 2 – Winter	Year 3 – Winter & Spring/Summer
Dissertation Committee selection Proposal development Proposal defence Dissertation research Dissertation draft & review Dissertation defence	Year 1 – Winter or Spring/Summer Year 2 – Winter & Spring/Summer Year 2 – Summer Year 3 – Full year Year 4 – Fall or Winter Year 4 – Spring or Summer	Year 1 – Winter or Spring/Summer Year 4 – Full year Year 5 – Fall Years 5, 6, 7 Year 8 – Fall & Winter Year 8 – Spring or Summer
PhD Seminar	First 3 years of program	First 3 years of program

SELECTION OF DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

Prior to applying, students will have selected a supervisor from among faculty with core membership in the Department of Health Sciences who has an active program of research and recent publications. Once admitted to the program, the committee is formed. Together, the supervisor and committee members must have expertise in the content area and study methodology; they must also understand the study's fit in and implications for the broader field of health sciences. The student will work under the guidance of this committee throughout their program.

- The committee must have **at least three members** (including the supervisor), of which two must have core membership with the Department of Health Sciences. All committee members must have a doctoral degree. Ensure that the student does not exceed the 30-minute time allotment;
- Oversee the question period, including:
 - Inviting each committee member to pose questions – normally, the total time for questions will be sixty minutes, but should be no more than ninety minutes. After 90 minutes, the committee may choose either to invite questions from the audience, or to excuse the audience and continue to examine the candidate.
- Oversee the committee deliberations, which are normally completed within 60 minutes. If committee members are split in their assessment, the Chair will vote to break the tie. This also includes documenting all suggested changes to the document on the **Report on Dissertation Examination** form and ensuring that it is fully signed and submitted to the Administrative Assistant within **one week** of the Defence.

REQUIRED FORM:

Dissertation Committee
(Appendix 1)

degree. The supervisor serves as Chair of the Dissertation committee.

Co-supervisor

If desired, a co-supervisor may be selected from among faculty in the Department of Health Sciences, in another academic unit at Lakehead, or at another university. If the co-supervisor is a professional who is not a faculty member or is a faculty member outside of the Department of Health Sciences, this person must have (apply for) both core membership and adjunct status with the Department of Health Sciences.

Committee Member(s)

If there is a co-supervisor, then only one additional committee member is needed. If there is no co-supervisor, then two additional committee members are needed. Committee members may be selected from among faculty in the Department of Health Sciences, another academic unit at Lakehead, or at another university. Professionals who are not faculty are not required to have core membership or adjunct status with the Department of Health Sciences.

Relevant policies

The Lakehead University Faculty of Graduate Studies Supervisory Policy provides additional guidance related to the roles and responsibilities of students, supervisors, and members of the committee; it can be found [here](#).

Conflict of Interest

Conflict of Interest refers to the real or perceived potential for competing roles to affect the responsibilities of committee members. For example, when a potential committee member is employed by the supervisor or has a close personal relationship with the student or supervisor. If a conflict of interest exists, the individual may act as a non-voting member of the committee, and **an additional committee member must be identified**.

Addressing Difficult Situations

Difficulties arising between students and supervisors and/or committee members should first be addressed, and hopefully resolved, by the parties involved. Committee members and students are urged to discuss perceived problems early, and to communicate any major problems to the Graduate Coordinator. If a resolution is not achieved, the matter will be referred to the Department Chair and/or the Dean of Graduate Studies, through the Graduate Coordinator. If the issue cannot be resolved, the student may take their issues/concerns to the Faculty of Graduate Studies Appeals Committee.

Note that during any meeting, both students and faculty have the right to bring an advocate.

DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Over the course of many months, the student will work with their supervisor and committee to develop the dissertation topic and proposal. While the student is expected to independently identify the study objectives, review the literature, and prepare the written Dissertation Proposal document, it is expected that these efforts will be guided by the dissertation committee.

Written Dissertation Proposal

The section below provides guidance only – length may vary depending on the nature of the proposed project. Students, supervisors, and committee members should discuss expectations early in the writing process. It is the responsibility of the student, with the guidance of the committee, to determine the appropriate proposal content and length. Dissertation formatting guidelines are provided [here](#).



Introduction and Rationale

WHAT is the issue and WHY is it important? This section should set the overall scene for what is to come. This is also when you set the scene, and provide context and rationale for your work. Convince the reader the study is timely, important, and addresses a need or unresolved question.

- Introduction to the general topic area; provide basic information/data on the current situation
- Importance of topic (e.g., for target population, health system, broader field)
- What is the knowledge gap – very briefly address key gaps in knowledge and their impact
- Specific scope of your research interest and how it addresses the knowledge gap
 - Why *this* study, in *this* place, at *this* time?
 - Overall research aim/goal
 - What will be the potential use and who are the potential users?

Literature Review

WHAT do we already know and HOW do we know it? This section defines the *conceptual* scope of your work and is intended to provide a well-organized overview of the research most closely related to your work. This section leads into your research questions and validates the rationale of your proposed work.

- Synthesize knowledge, information and data related to the issue; include info on key debates, conceptual/theoretical approaches, methodological research designs
- *Critically evaluate* the research that has been done in this area and the methodologies/methods that have been used to obtain it
- Identify gaps in the literature – this can be something that has not been researched at all, not well researched, or could be researched differently

Theoretical Framework

WHAT is the framework or structure for understanding or explaining your research?

Theoretical frameworks can be “grand” theories (e.g., long established theories that have been empirically tested and studied) or “micro” theories--those theories that have emerged out of specific studies (e.g., grounded theories). A theoretical framework could also include theoretical concepts emerging out of the literature review that are pulled together into a structure by the student to inform the research.

Research Questions and Specific Objectives

WHAT will your research focus on – i.e., WHAT questions are you asking? This section very clearly and explicitly tells the reader about the focus of your work and why you are doing it. The objectives of the current research project should ideally flow from the identification of gaps and include a well-justified rationale for the need of the work. The questions will link directly to your methodologies and methods.

- Very briefly highlight the main limitations or gaps in the literature
- Define the main research question, including the specific problem/outcomes and specify the determinant(s) and other factors that may be linked to the identified problem
- Discuss the specific objectives or questions that will be studied
- Ensure that you describe the potential contributions of your work to the broader field of health sciences, as well as to knowledge/practice/policy in your specific area of interest
- Briefly talk about how and with whom you plan to share your research findings

Methodology and conceptual framework

HOW will you approach the research? This section further demonstrates your knowledge of the different types of research used to study the topic and informs on the overarching approach you have chosen (e.g., health services research, clinical epidemiologic research, health economics research, qualitative ethnographic research, eco-health approach, mixed methods, etc.). Demonstrate consideration of alternatives and justify why your selection is appropriate and feasible. Also describe whether your research is related to or informed by any conceptual or theoretical frameworks. For example, you might describe a conceptual framework that is specific to your research, or one that has been adapted from existing framework(s).

Methods

HOW specifically will you do the research? The specific ways in which you will do the research must logically link to your research questions, objectives, and methods. The content of this section will depend on the nature of your study (qualitative or quantitative). Speak to your supervisor about the areas to be addressed in this section.

- Study design (including conceptual/theoretical framework(s)) - describe and justify
- Study population - who are your study participants? Provide high level criteria/characteristics, including number of participants and rationale; recruitment, process, and timeline
- Data (this should flow from your study design and framework(s))
 - New Data Collection – describe the methods that will be used and why (for example interviews (individual/focus groups etc., face to face, zoom, telephone, asynchronous, walk and talk etc.); include your interview guide as appendix; describe the materials and instruments that will be used
 - Use of Existing Data – describe existing databases that you will use and how the data was collected; describe how/where the data is stored and how you will get access to it
- Concepts/Variables – description and operationalization in the current study
- Hypotheses
- Data Analysis – analytical approach/framework(s)/statistical tests that will be used and why
- Research Rigour – strategies you will use to ensure credibility and trustworthiness; potential validity, causality, and generalizability and how you will mitigate biases and risks
- Ethical Considerations – ethical considerations relating to who you and/or your participants are; the methods you are using; describe how consent to participate is sought and what information is given to participants (and include the information letter and consent form in the Appendix)
- Overall study limitations – the strengths and limitation of the study design, data collection/databases, and analyses; describe any potential challenges specific to your work and how you will overcome them.

Oral Proposal Defence

Once the committee has approved the written Dissertation Proposal, the student will defend their proposal in an oral presentation open to the public on campus.

Scheduling the Proposal Defence

The **supervisor** works to schedule the date/time for the proposal defence and notify the Administrative Assistant of the proposed date/time. The Administrative Assistant requires **at least 10 days' notice**.

At least 10 business days in advance of the Proposal defence, the **student** must provide the Administrative Assistant with an electronic copy of the written Dissertation Proposal to share with the Lakehead University Community if requested. The committee may also request a hard copy; **all related costs are the responsibility of the student**. **Failure to adhere to this timeline will result in rescheduling the Defence.**

Process Related to the Proposal Defence Oral Presentation

The student is given a maximum of 20 minutes to present on: Overview of the topic; Study objectives and rationale; Methods; and Relevance to the field of health sciences. The Defence is chaired by a faculty member in the Department who is **not** on the committee, who will:

- Ensure that the student does not exceed the 20-minute time allotment;
- Oversee the question period, including:
 - Inviting each committee member to pose questions – each is allotted 10 minutes to ask questions in each of a maximum of two rounds of questions (i.e., 20 minutes per member, for a maximum of 60 minutes). If there is a fourth, non-voting member, time allotted will be adjusted to adhere to the 60-minute maximum.
 - Inviting members of the audience to pose questions (after committee questions). Note that this question period may not exceed 20 minutes.
- Oversee committee deliberations, which should normally be completed within 60 minutes, after which the student will be invited to return.
 - Document revisions in the **Committee's Report on Proposal**, obtain all signatures, and submit it to the Administrative Assistant within 5 business days of the defence.

Once the **Committee's Report on Proposal** is received:

- The **Administrative Assistant** distributes it to the student and committee members.
- The **student** revises the document as required and submits it to the supervisor.
 - NOTE: In cases where the Dissertation Proposal was **deemed unacceptable** by the committee, the revised document (and second oral presentation, if applicable) must be approved by all members of the dissertation committee in order for the student to continue.

If a member cannot attend the Proposal Defence, the Department's policy on **Absent Committee members** applies (see box).

REQUIRED FORM:

Committee's Report
on Proposal (*Appendix 2*)

Policy on Absent Committee Members

All members of the committee should be present. Quorum must consist of 50% plus one in addition to the Chair. If quorum is not met, the defence must be postponed.

A committee member who cannot attend must submit the following to the Administrative Assistant **at least one week prior to the proposal defence date**: (1) a list of questions to be posed during the presentation, (2) assessment of the proposal, and suggested revisions to improve the Dissertation Proposal or study.

The **Administrative Assistant** will forward this information to the person chairing the Dissertation Proposal.

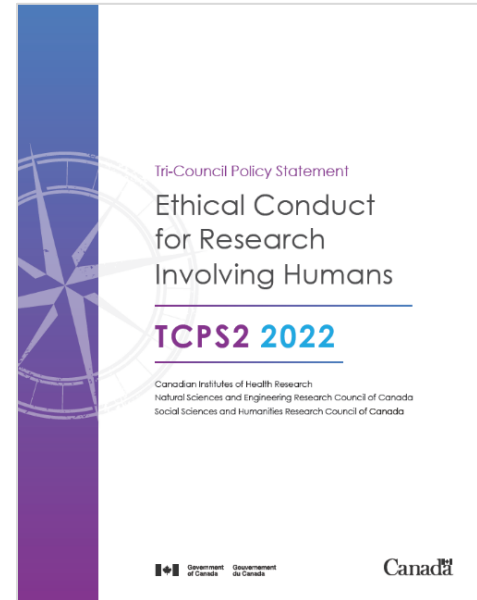
It is the responsibility of **the person chairing** to ensure that this information is communicated during the Dissertation Proposal and deliberations.

ETHICS APPROVAL

All projects involving human or animal subjects must be approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (REB) prior to initiation of any form of recruitment or data collection.

Students must submit a copy of their TCPS 2 Core certificate along with their proposal to the REB. A link to the TCPS 2 course on research ethics can be found [here](#). A certificate will be issued upon successful completion of the knowledge consolidation exercise.

Note that secondary analysis of existing, anonymized data is exempt from ethical review, as per the TCPS2; **however, an exemption must be requested** from the Research Ethics Board.



Process for submitting an ethics application

It is the responsibility of both the **student and supervisor** to ensure that all necessary ethics approval is obtained **prior** to beginning the study (e.g., recruitment, data collection).

The **student** prepares the ethics submission or request for exemption (if secondary data analysis) to the Lakehead REB, as well as to any other organization, if applicable. For example, if the student is recruiting from a healthcare organization, approval by that organization's REB may also be required.

Additional information about guidelines for ethical review, including information on how to submit an ethics application, is available through the [Ethics & Research Integrity | Lakehead University](#).

FINAL DISSERTATION

The dissertation supervisor and committee members will work with the student to identify the most appropriate format for the final dissertation document. It is expected that the final document will include the final version of the approved Dissertation Proposal, as well as all sections required in a dissertation (e.g., updated methods if any changes, study results, discussion of results and study limitations, and implications for research, practice, and policy). The content of the final dissertation document may vary depending on the nature of the proposed project. It is the responsibility of the student, in discussion with their supervisor and committee, to determine the appropriate length and necessary information required for the final document.

The student will produce a draft write-up of the final dissertation document, and work closely with the dissertation supervisor on refining that document. Once it is felt that the draft final document is ready, it will be sent to all members of the committee for review. The committee may request that the student complete several rounds of revisions prior to approving the document.

Dissertation formatting guidelines are provided [here](#).

Internal and External Review

All dissertations are subject to **internal and external review**. The committee works with the student to identify an appropriate internal and external examiner. Both Examiners must have a doctoral degree, current research activity, recent publications, and relevant subject matter and/or methodological expertise; and be at arm's length from the student, dissertation supervisor, and all committee members.

- An Examiner that has a current/recent familial or close personal relationship with the student, dissertation supervisor, or committee member may not be considered at arm's length.

Internal review

The **Internal Examiner** is a faculty member in another academic unit at Lakehead University, who may be an adjunct in the Department. The **supervisor** completes and submits the following three forms to the Administrative Assistant for approval by the Graduate Coordinator:

- ***Dissertation Ready for Review***
- ***Proposed internal Examiner***
- ***Confirmation of Arm's-Length Status.***

The **Administrative Assistant** will confirm their availability. The **Internal Examiner** will submit the ***Internal Examiner's Report on Dissertation*** within 3 weeks. This form is sent to the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS), supervisor, and student by the Administrative Assistant. If the assessment falls into the categories Accepted or Accepted Subject to Revisions, the dissertation may be sent for external review. Otherwise, the student must revise the document and receive final approval from all committee members. Upon re-evaluation by the Internal Examiner, it must receive a passing assessment.

REQUIRED FORMS:

Dissertation Ready for Review
(Appendix 3)

Proposed Internal Examiner
(Appendix 4)

Confirmation of Arm's-Length
Status (Appendix 5)

Examiner's Report
on Dissertation (Appendix 6)

External review

The external examiner is a faculty member from another university who is not affiliated with the Department and does not have adjunct status.

At least 3 months before the scheduled Dissertation Defence oral presentation, the **supervisor** completes and submits the following three forms to the Administrative Assistant, who forwards them for approval by the Dean of FGS:

- ***Confirmation for External Review***
- ***Proposed External Examiner***
- ***Confirmation of Arm's-Length Status***

REQUIRED FORMS:

Confirmation for External
Review (Appendix 7)

Proposed External Examiner
(Appendix 8)

Confirmation of Arm's-Length
Status (Appendix 9)

Examiner's Report
on Dissertation (Appendix 6)

Once approved by the Dean of FGS, the **Administrative Assistant** forwards the dissertation to FGS. **FGS handles all correspondence with the External Examiner.** The **External Examiner** has up to 4 weeks to submit the ***Examiner's Report on Dissertation***. This will be received by FGS and forwarded to the Graduate Coordinator and Administrative Assistant, who will make it available as soon as possible.

If the External Examiner's assessment falls into the categories Accepted or Accepted Subject to Revisions, the student may proceed to the oral defence. If the External Examiner selects Appreciable Revisions Required, the student must revise the document and receive final approval from all committee members. It must then receive a passing assessment from the External Examiner. If Dissertation Rejected is selected, the student must revise the document, and the committee will work with FGS to arrange for a second review by the original External Examiner. The student has failed the program if after re-evaluation, the Examiner again rejects the dissertation.

ORAL DISSERTATION EXAMINATION

Once it is confirmed that the student can proceed, they will defend their work in an oral presentation open to the public on the Thunder Bay campus.

Scheduling the Dissertation Defence

The **Administrative Assistant** will work with the student, dissertation committee members, Internal and External Examiners to schedule a date/time for the Oral Dissertation Defence when all can attend (in person, via tele/videoconference) and book the room and equipment.

- In the event that not all can attend, the Department's policy related to Absent Committee members applies.

At least **10 business days** before the Dissertation Defence, the **student** must provide the Administrative Assistant with an electronic copy of the Final Dissertation Document. **Failure to adhere to this timeline will result in rescheduling the Dissertation Defence for a later date.** Note that the student is responsible for providing a hard copy, if requested, to committee member(s) or the Internal/External Examiner(s); **all related costs are the responsibility of the student.**

The **Administrative Assistant** will then send an electronic and/or hard copy of the Final Dissertation Document to the Internal and External Examiners, and announce the Dissertation Defence to the university community.

Process Related to the Dissertation Defence Oral Presentation

The student is given a maximum of 30 minutes to present on the following: Introduction and overview of the topic; Summary of literature review; Study objectives and rationale; Methods; Results; Conclusions; and Methodological or theoretical Implications, as well as knowledge, practice, and/or policy in health sciences implications.

The Dissertation Defence Presentation will be chaired by a faculty member in the Department of Health Sciences who is **not** on the dissertation committee. This person will:

- Ensure that the student does not exceed the 30-minute time allotment;
- Oversee the question period, including:
 - Inviting each committee member to pose questions – normally, the total time for questions will be sixty minutes, but should be no more than ninety minutes. After 90 minutes, the committee may choose either to invite questions from the audience, or to excuse the audience and continue to examine the candidate.
- Oversee the committee deliberations, which are normally completed within 60 minutes. If committee members are split in their assessment, the Chair will vote to break the tie. This also includes documenting all suggested changes to the document on the ***Report on Dissertation Examination*** form and ensuring that it is fully signed and submitted to the Administrative Assistant within **one week** of the Defence.

REQUIRED FORM:

Oral Defence Examination
Committee Report
(Appendix 10)

The **Administrative Assistant** will send the form to the student and save it to the student's file. The **student** will make the appropriate revisions and resubmit as appropriate (i.e., to the supervisor, to all committee members – including or excluding the External Examiner).

FINAL SUBMISSION OF THE DISSERTATION

Please note that the submission process must be done in a way that meets the requirements of both the Department of Health Sciences and the Faculty of Graduate Studies. Information on the [Faculty of Graduate Studies Dissertation Process \(Doctoral\)](#) must be carefully adhered to.

Submitting the final version of the dissertation

Once the final version of the dissertation is accepted by the appropriate party (i.e., the supervisor, committee, examiners), the following actions must be taken by the supervisor, student, and Administrative Assistant.

Students are responsible for submitting their [Intent to Graduate](#) between:

- January and March for spring convocation
- July and September for fall graduation
- October and December for winter graduation

The

student must:

- Close the research project file with the Office of Research Ethics (i.e., submit the final report) and provide evidence of closed research project file to the supervisor. Note that this step is omitted if an exemption was received for the project.
- Work with the supervisor to transfer all relevant files and data to a secure file/computer **owned by the supervisor**
- Delete all relevant files and data from their own computer.
- Submit the following to the Administrative Assistant:
 - Evidence of closed research project file
 - Electronic copy of the Final Dissertation Document, in a locked pdf format
 - License to the University
 - Exit Survey – Students may submit directly to the Faculty of Graduate Studies if preferred

The **supervisor** must submit the ***Dissertation Ready for Final Submission*** and ***Recommendation of Dissertation*** forms to the Administrative Assistant for sign-off by the Graduate Coordinator.

- Note that if “appreciable revisions required” was selected, the revised document must be approved by all members of the committee.

Once all documents have been received, the **Administrative Assistant** will forward them to the Faculty of Graduate Studies.

REQUIRED FORMS:

Dissertation Ready for Final Submission (*Appendix 11*)

Recommendation of Dissertation (*Appendix 12*)

License to University (*Appendix 13*)

Exit Survey (*Appendix 14*)

