

## **Biology Graduate Program Handbook**



**University of British Columbia Okanagan**

September 2023

This handbook is produced by the Biology Graduate Program Committee. It summarizes basic information about the Biology Graduate Program to assist you throughout the course of your time here. Please let us know if there is additional information you would like to see in this guide or format changes that would make it easier to use. The information in this handbook is subject to change. Please contact the Associate Head Graduate Studies for Biology for any updates.

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## **1. Welcome to UBC Biology**

### **1a. Background**

Our goal is to make the Biology Graduate Program one in which students and faculty are enabled to do their best work, individually and collaboratively. This Handbook is designed to help you navigate through the formal requirements of the graduate program, as well as summarize information that may help you to make the most of your time here.

Much of the material in this handbook is taken from program documents for the Biology Graduate Program as approved by the UBC Okanagan Senate or developed and approved by the Biology Graduate Program Committee with subsequent approval by the Biology Graduate faculty. Some content is linked to policies of the College of Graduate Studies (CoGS). All of these procedures or requirements have been designed to support our goal of making the Graduate Program strong, vibrant, and intellectually rewarding.

Similarly, we want this Handbook to be helpful, clear, and readily accessible—please feel free to offer suggestions for ways to improve this Handbook.

### **1b. Getting Started**

The beginning stages of your degree program will vary: some students may start with some time in the field or lab to become acquainted with their study system or to learn techniques they will use, whereas others will commence with coursework and developing a proposal, and will start the actual data collection later.

At a minimum, the following things should happen *within the first semester* you are in the program:

- Establish a supervisory committee
- Meet with your committee to discuss your coursework
- Take some of your courses if appropriate
- Begin a preliminary draft of your proposal
- Discuss authorship and collaborative roles

Please note that course registration does begin in June, so you should discuss your starting coursework with your supervisor—but then your entire committee does need to approve your final selection of courses.

### **1c. Sources of help**

Your research supervisor and your supervisory committee are your primary sources of help. The Associate Head Graduate Program of Biology and this Committee are also available if you need help beyond what your supervisory committee can offer.

The Biology Graduate Program Committee manages policies and procedures, as well as tending to the recurring events in the program. If you have questions about the program that are not answered by your supervisor, feel free to contact any of us.

### **1d. Student Responsibilities**

Upon registering, a student has initiated a contract with the University and is bound by the following declaration:

**“I hereby accept and submit myself to the statutes, rules and regulations, and ordinances (including bylaws, codes, and policies) of The University of British Columbia, and of the faculty or faculties in which I am registered, and to any amendments thereto which may be made while I am a student of the University, and I promise to observe the same.”**

This student declaration is important. It imposes obligations on students and affects rights and privileges, including property rights. You must not enroll as a student at the University if you do not agree to become bound by the declaration above. By agreeing to become a student, you make the declaration above and agree to be bound by it.

Each student is required to furnish the information necessary for the University record and to keep Enrolment Services informed of changes in name and contact information.

Students are required to inform themselves of the statutes, rules and regulations, and ordinances (including bylaws, codes, and policies) and to any amendments thereto applicable at the University. For more information, please see the [Index of Board of Governors Policies](#) and [Senate Policies](#).

The University authorities do not assume responsibilities for others that naturally rest with adults themselves. This being so, the University relies on the good sense and on the home training of students for the preservation of good moral standards and for appropriate modes of behavior and dress.

The University and University authorities are not obligated to enforce any statutes, rules, regulations, or ordinances (including bylaws, codes, or policies) if discretionarily enforceable by law or made under its, or their, power or authority.

This information is from Graduate Policy and Procedure Manual prepared by the UBC Okanagan’s College of Graduate Studies, <https://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/policies-procedures/student-responsibilities/> We strongly recommend that you familiarize themselves with this entire manual.

### ***Work Expectations***

Training at UBC Okanagan is expected to produce mature and professional personnel who will contribute significantly to academia, industry, government, or other sectors. Students are expected to work full-time towards their degrees; this total includes coursework, GTA duties, GRA duties that are not part of the thesis research, writing the research proposal / preparing for a comprehensive exam (PhD), and the thesis research itself. Students should discuss with their supervisors whether there are mandatory work hours and locations for some of the research requirements. Supervisors must ensure students can meet all of their other program obligations without overscheduling mandatory hours. Students should also be able to schedule necessary appointments (e.g. medical) even if these occur during standard research hours in that lab group.

### **1e. Space**

UBC Okanagan is a young and rapidly growing campus. Space is limited and will be allocated following Faculty of Science policies (please refer to the Faculty of Science

handbook). Access to printing and photocopying will be set up if approved by the Supervisor. Supervisors will also provide the necessary laboratory space or field access. Please be respectful of all shared and private spaces: do not use other people's desks, bench spaces, or equipment unless they have expressly given you permission to do so, keep shared space tidy, keep noise down, and generally be a good and respectful colleague.

## 2. Required Timelines and Milestones

### 2a. MSc Overview

Students must maintain a standing of  $\geq 75\%$  in all coursework. Within 8 months of initiating a MSc, students must successfully present a research proposal.

By the end of	
Month 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structure a supervisory committee. Review coursework and timing.</li> <li>Ensure that you know the major milestones in the program.</li> <li>Complete a student – supervisor agreement form if desired.</li> </ul>
Month 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prepare a first draft of the proposal, to obtain feedback prior to the necessary approval by the committee at 8 months.</li> </ul>
Month 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Present research proposal for approval by committee</li> </ul>
Month 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If you have not already defended or scheduled your defense, hold a committee meeting to discuss timelines for completion.</li> <li>Complete course requirements (typically done within year 1)</li> </ul>
Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schedule a defense.</li> <li>Complete thesis for final submission.</li> </ul>
Annually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hold committee meeting on progress towards the degree.</li> <li>Submit the <i>CoGS Annual Progress Report</i> by Biology Graduate Program internal deadline May 15. Due to CoGS June 1.</li> </ul>
Throughout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apply for funding (fellowships, grants in aid of research, travel grants).</li> <li>Discuss publication of the research, if appropriate.</li> <li>Attend conferences.</li> <li>Attend seminars and discussion groups.</li> <li>Plan your future, whether it is pursuing a PhD or finding a job in your field.</li> </ul>

### 2b. PhD Overview

Within ~16 months of initiating a PhD, students must successfully present a research proposal. There should be at least 6 weeks between the proposal defense and the comprehensive exam.

PhD students must take their comprehensive exams within 18 months of degree initiation; if they fail, they may retake the exam within 6 months, but a second failure will lead to termination in the program.

As per College of Graduate Studies policy, PhD students must be present at the UBCO campus for at least 24 months or must have an approved Engagement Requirement.

<b>By the end of</b>	
Month 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structure a supervisory committee.</li> <li>• Review coursework.</li> <li>• Ensure that you know the major milestones in the program.</li> <li>• Complete a student – supervisor agreement form if desired.</li> </ul>
Month 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Submit a draft research proposal for comments by committee.</li> <li>• In consultation with your supervisory committee, establish the committee for the comprehensive exam.</li> <li>• Meet with examiners for your comprehensive exam for advice and topic areas.</li> </ul>
Month 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defend thesis proposal</li> </ul>
Month 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete comprehensive exam.</li> </ul>
Month 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree with committee on outreach to be undertaken</li> <li>• (retake comprehensive exam if necessary)</li> </ul>
Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalize thesis for submission and defense; follow CoGS guidelines.</li> <li>• Apply for jobs or postdoctoral positions</li> <li>• Fulfill outreach requirement</li> </ul>
<i>At least annually</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold committee meeting on progress towards the degree.</li> <li>• Submit the CoGS Annual Progress Report by Biology Graduate Program internal deadline May 15. Due to CoGS June 1.</li> </ul>
<i>Throughout the program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply for funding (fellowships, grants in aid of research, travel grants).</li> <li>• Discuss plans for publishing research.</li> <li>• Attend conferences.</li> <li>• Attend seminars and discussion groups.</li> <li>• Plan your future, whether it is pursuing a postdoctoral position or finding employment.</li> </ul>

### **2c. Track your progress: Committee Meetings**

Committee meetings must be held **at least annually** to review your progress towards the degree. During the first year (MSc) or two years (PhD), meetings will be more frequent as you address the coursework and develop and defend your proposal. **An initial committee meeting should be held during the first four months** to discuss timelines and components for degree completion and to discuss any required coursework. The supervisor will chair each meeting, and the committee is tasked with: (a) reviewing your progress towards completing the degree and offering recommendations and guidance about the next stages of the program; and (b) approving any coursework towards the degree (if applicable). We encourage students to arrange their own committee meetings, with the exception of the first one, which the supervisor should arrange.

At least at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year (MSc) or 4<sup>th</sup> year (PhD), the committee will ask for a timeline for thesis completion and defense; most committees like to see suggested timelines annually. Beyond 3 years in a MSc program and 5 years in a PhD program, the committee must approve annual extensions. After 5 years in a MSc or 6 years in a PhD, a

student will be asked to leave the program unless they obtain the permission of the Dean of CoGS to continue.

Prior to each committee meeting, students typically provide their committee a short synopsis (2-4 pages) of their progress and projected timelines. If used, this report ideally should be given to committee members at least one week in advance of the meeting.

The Supervisory Committee Meeting Report form is found online on the Biology Graduate Program website: <https://biology.ok.ubc.ca/graduate/graduate-resources/forms>. Notes on the committee meeting will be prepared by your supervisor and attached to the form. You and your committee need to sign the form and submit it to the Graduate Administrative Assistant for filing.

## **2d. Track your progress: Annual Progress Reports**

Each year, each student must complete the *CoGS Annual Progress Report* found on the CoGS [website](#). This form asks for information on coursework, fellowships and grants-in-aid applied for or received, conferences attended, talks given, progress towards the degree, committee meetings, etc. It enables the Biology Graduate Program to help showcase the activities of students, as well as allowing us to evaluate how students in the program are performing. CoGS also requires this information as part of their campus-wide oversight of graduate programming.

## **2e. Other requirements: Safety, Permits, Research Ethics, Animal Care**

Supervisors are responsible for ensuring students have the necessary permits or training for the research they are undertaking. This category includes things like Animal Care certificates and protocols, ethics approvals if human research or questionnaires are to be used, permits from the Canadian Wildlife Service or the Ministry of Environment for handling wildlife, radiation safety training, first aid, safe driving with trailers, etc. Supervisors are expected to pay for the training and permits that are required for the students to undertake the work safely and in accordance with university policies. You should make yourself familiar with basic safety procedures and resources available on campus.

## **3. MSc requirements**

### **3a. Courses**

The MSc degree requires completion of BIOL 501 (3 credits), a 21-credit research-based thesis (BIOL 599), and a minimum of 6 additional credits of coursework. All coursework must be completed with a cumulative average of 75% or higher. The elective course(s) must be approved by the student's supervisory committee, which may require additional coursework if deemed necessary for successful completion of the thesis research. Up to 6 elective credits can be fulfilled by way of Directed Studies (BIOL 552X) designed in consultation with the supervisor, a supervisory committee member, or another faculty member. Students interested in joining an already approved Directed Studies course should contact the Instructor directly. *Please note that students are expected to take their elective courses from more than one faculty member.* At the discretion of their committee, students may also take courses in other programs (e.g. Chemistry, Math, Statistics).



Continuous registration must be maintained in the MSc Thesis (BIOL 599). Failure to register for two consecutive terms may result in required withdrawal from the graduate program.

For the latest information on program requirements, please consult the graduate studies section in our academic calendar: <https://okanagan.calendar.ubc.ca/faculties-schools-and-colleges/college-graduate-studies/biology/program-requirements>

For available courses: <https://courses.students.ubc.ca/cs/main?campuscd=UBCO>

### *Transfers of credits from other institutions*

Because the MSc requires substantial original research, any request for transfers of thesis credits from other institutions will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the Biology Graduate Program Committee and CoGS.

### **3b. MSc Thesis Proposal Approval**

MSc students must have a preliminary committee meeting to discuss the topic of research and the direction that the student wishes to take. **This meeting should occur within the first semester, and before undertaking significant amounts of the proposed research.** The committee will provide clear feedback to the student on the proposed research.

A final written proposal is expected **no later than 8 months after initiating the degree program.** Students must present their committee with copies of the research proposal at least one week prior to the committee meeting.

**A neutral chair is not required for this meeting, but can be present at the request of either the student or the supervisor.** If a chair is requested, students/supervisors must contact the Biology Senior Departmental Administrative Assistant at least 3 weeks in advance of the anticipated meeting to allow sufficient time for scheduling. Students will give a formal talk (approximately 20 minutes) on the proposed work, then field questions from the committee. The bulk of the time during this committee meeting should be spent on discussion between the student and the supervisory committee on the details of the proposal. At the end of the meeting, the committee shall discuss in camera whether the proposal is satisfactory or ask for modifications. If modifications are required, they should be specified in detail and a timeline should be developed for when the changes are expected. In cases where the proposal is deemed unsuitable, the committee may request another committee meeting to discuss the proposal.

### **3c. The MSc Thesis Defense**

When all requirements have been met, and the student, Supervisor, and the Supervisory Committee agree that the thesis is ready for defense, please refer to the document “Procedures for Scheduling the MSc Defense” that can be obtained from the Biology Senior Departmental Administrative Assistant.

CoGS governs the policies and procedures related to the actual defense. For more detailed information, refer to the Thesis and Dissertation-Examination section, on the CoGS website: <https://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/academics/thesis-anddissertation/examination/>.

### **3d. Transferring from the MSc to the PhD Program**

Exceptional MSc students may request a transfer into the PhD program with the support of their supervisor; the Supervisory Committee must then approve the decision. In order to complete a transfer, the following requirements must be met:

1. The student must have completed one year of study in the master's program with:
  - a minimum 80% average in 9 credits;
  - at least 6 credits must be at the 500-level or above
  - at least 6 credits must be at 80% or above.
2. The student must have a MSc thesis proposal formally approved by their supervisory committee.
3. The student must show clear evidence of research ability.
4. The Application for transfer must take place within one year of beginning the MSc, in order to allow time to prepare for a PhD proposal defense and the comprehensive exam.
5. The supervisor must submit a new "Statement of Financial Commitment for Admissions Form" demonstrating sufficient funding for a total of 4 years of stipend support (elapsed time in the program counts towards this total).
6. The transfer must be clearly justified by the student's supervisor and Biology Graduate Program Coordinator in a memorandum to Graduate Studies recommending the transfer which must be accompanied by the Transfer from Master's to Doctoral Degree [form](#) found on the CoGS website.

Please Note:

1. Transfers may not be retroactive.
2. If the transfer is approved, the commencement of the doctoral program will be from the date of first registration in the master's program.
3. The transferring student will be immediately subject to the requirements of a PhD student described above.

## **4. PhD Requirements**

### **4a. Courses**

The PhD degree requires completion of a substantial, original research-based thesis (BIOL 699) under the supervision of a faculty member in the Biology Graduate Program. PhD students are not required to complete any additional coursework unless: 1) required by the supervisory committee, or 2) as a condition of admission.

Continuous registration must be maintained in the PhD Thesis (BIOL 699). Failure to register for two consecutive terms may result in required withdrawal from the graduate program.

For the latest information on program requirements, please consult the graduate studies section in our academic calendar: <https://okanagan.calendar.ubc.ca/faculties-schools-and-colleges/college-graduate-studies/biology/program-requirements>

For available courses: <https://courses.students.ubc.ca/cs/main?campuscd=UBCO>

### ***Transfers of credits from other institutions***

Because the PhD program requires substantial original research, any request for transfers of thesis credits from other institutions will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the Biology Graduate Program Committee and CoGS.

### **4b. PhD Thesis Proposal Defense**

The PhD thesis proposal defense is closed to the public and requires a neutral chair.

**PhD students must present a preliminary research proposal to their committee no later than 12 months after initiating their program, and before undertaking significant amounts of the proposed research.** The committee will provide clear guidance to the student as to any necessary modifications of the proposal. **A final proposal is expected no later than four months after presentation of the preliminary proposal and is to be formally defended.** Students must present their committee with copies of the finalized research proposal at least one week prior to the thesis proposal defense.

During the thesis proposal defense, students will give a formal talk (~20 minutes) on the proposed research followed by questions from the committee. Normally, questioning from the committee will occur over two rounds. In the first round, each committee member will have ~10-15 minutes, followed by a second round of ~5-10 minutes. After the questioning period, the student will be asked to leave the room and the committee shall discuss in camera the proposal and defense. The committee (including the supervisor) will vote, with no abstentions, to determine one of three evaluations: pass, pass with conditions, or unsuitable. If the outcome is pass with conditions, then a specific list of conditions and timeline for completion should be communicated to the candidate. All committee members except the supervisor will sign the PhD proposal defense form; once the conditions have been met, the supervisor will sign and submit to the Biology Program Assistant. If the outcome is unsuitable, a timeline and specific list of conditions should be communicated to the candidate and the committee may request another meeting to review the revised proposal. The final proposal must be approved before the student takes the candidacy exam (see below).

***The PhD Proposal defense will be chaired by a neutral faculty member.*** Given the need to appoint a chair, students/supervisors must contact the Biology Senior Departmental Administrative Assistant at least 3 weeks in advance of the anticipated meeting.

The MSc Research Proposal Approval form or PhD Proposal Defense form will be provided to the supervisor or Chair, as appropriate. This form needs to be completed and signed at the Proposal Meeting. If a neutral chair has not been appointed (MSc only), the form is to be completed by the supervisor.

Please submit the paperwork and a copy of the proposal to the Senior Biology Administrative Assistant.

#### **4c. The PhD Comprehensive Examination for Admission to Candidacy**

As stated in the [Calendar](#), PhD students must defend their proposal successfully and complete the comprehensive exam **within 18 months** of initiating the program.

The Biology comprehensive examination is oral and designed to assess the student's ability to carry out the proposed line of [research](#). The exam will consist of questioning from the committee. The student does not give a presentation of thesis work at the beginning of the comprehensive exam. Questions will focus on topics contained within or pertinent to the research proposal, but will not be centered on the proposal itself, as the proposal must have been previously approved. The questions are expected to be broad-ranging, but should encompass topics considered relevant to the proposed research.

Students should show:

- Familiarity with the literature in the proposed research area
- Familiarity with fields related to the proposed research
- Ability to integrate scientific information and draw appropriate conclusions
- Understanding of relevant experimental design, techniques, and analytic methods
- Sound reasoning skills

Because of the critical nature of this exam to progress in the program, the students should know the composition of their committee 6 months prior to taking the exam, so that they can obtain advice from the committee on how to prepare. The examining committee can be the same as the supervisory committee, or can consist of the supervisor, at least two other members of the supervisory committee, and up to two others not on the supervisory committee. This flexibility is in place in case a supervisory committee member is away on sabbatical or otherwise unable to participate, or if questioning in a particular area pertinent to the proposed research would benefit by bringing in someone external to the supervisory committee.

**The comprehensive exam is normally taken within 6 - 8 weeks of having the research proposal approved and must be completed within 18 months of enrolling in the PhD program.** Any extensions to the 18-month deadline must be requested in writing to the Associate Head Graduate Studies for Biology, justifying the need for the extension. The request for extension letter must be signed by both the student and the supervisor.

The comprehensive exam is closed to the public and typically does not exceed 3 hours in length. Normally, questioning from the committee will occur over two rounds. In the first round, each committee member will have ~10-15 minutes, followed by a second round of ~10-15 minutes. After the questioning, the committee will ask the candidate to leave so they can discuss the exam, and, at their discretion, may ask the research supervisor to leave. The committee (including the supervisor) will vote, with no abstentions, to determine one of four evaluations: pass, pass with conditions, fail with the opportunity to retake, and fail without the opportunity to retake. Should students fail but be allowed to retake the exam, they must retake the exam within 6 months; failing a second time will require withdrawing from the PhD program. Students who fail may continue in a MSc program. The 'pass with conditions' determination is used for strong students with a particular weakness; the conditions imposed are designed to remedy the weakness and

could include such things as coursework in a particular area, writing essays on specified topics, etc. The student is advanced to PhD candidacy once the conditions are fulfilled, but there is no need to retake the comprehensive exam.

**The comprehensive exam will be chaired by a neutral third party.** The chair of the comprehensive exam is responsible for keeping track of time, intervening if questioning is inappropriate, guiding the discussion about the decision, informing the candidate of the decision, and preparing the written PhD Candidacy Exam Report. The chair will not ask questions of the student.

Given the need to appoint a chair, students/supervisors must contact the Biology Senior Departmental Administrative Assistant at least 3 weeks in advance of the anticipated meeting.

The following forms for the PhD Comprehensive are required and can be obtained from the Biology Senior Departmental Administrative Assistant:

PhD Comprehensive Examining Committee Membership Form

PhD Candidacy Exam Report Form

Recommendation for Advancement to Candidacy

#### **Preparing for the comprehensive exam**

You and your supervisory committee should determine the members of your comprehensive examining committee no later than 6 months before the exam. It will help you in the exam if you:

- Discuss your proposed work with each member of the examining committee well in advance of the exam to obtain ideas about what sorts of material to study.
- Have a mock exam in which other grad students or your supervisor ask questions.
- Read copiously.
- Treat the exam as a chance to work on broadening and deepening your knowledge, rather than as an artificial thing imposed by the university: preparing for and taking the exam can help you learn a lot and you are in graduate school for that education.

#### **4d. PhD Outreach Requirement**

PhD students are required to demonstrate outreach of their results. The method and timing for fulfilling this requirement will be determined by the student in consultation with the committee no later than one year after a successful candidacy exam.

Possibilities include presentation of the results to a public (non-scientific) audience; contributing information to governmental reports; presenting research at a government-led workshop; developing and disseminating educational materials on subjects related to the thesis research; and presenting to school groups.

#### **4e. The PhD Thesis, Oral Presentation, and Defense**

Students should obtain the formal requirements for PhD completion from the College of Graduate Studies six months before anticipated completion of the thesis.

When all requirements have been met, and the student, Supervisor, and the Supervisory Committee agree that the thesis is ready for defense, please refer to the document

“Procedures for Scheduling the PhD Defense” that can be obtained from the Biology Senior Departmental Administrative Assistant.

CoGS governs the policies and procedures related to the actual defense. For more detailed information, refer to: <https://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/academics/thesis-anddissertation/examination/>.

### ***Preparing for the thesis defense***

Congratulations—you’re almost done with your degree. But don’t relax too early; the defense should feel good in the sense that you present your work clearly, then are asked challenging questions that you answer well. Your examining committee views the defense as a forum for you to be able to explain any pieces of the thesis that are unclear or complex, relate your work to other research, justify your interpretations, and discuss follow-up research.

To help make your defense a good one:

- Take all suggestions on the thesis seriously. If you ignore a committee member’s advice during your revisions, the odds are very high that the person will wonder why and will ask you about it during the defense.
- Prepare a good talk, practice it, and revise it with feedback from a test audience.
- Bring a copy of your thesis.
- Bring a pencil and paper to make notes.
- Listen carefully to each question (and do not interrupt the speaker). If you are not sure what you are being asked, you may ask for it to be rephrased or you can say something like “if you are asking x, then y...if you are asking z, then q.”
- It is ok to pause to marshal your thoughts, but do not pause too often or too long.
- Be patient; if people ask you the same thing in different ways, answer again
- If you don’t know something, don’t bluff your way through it; instead, say that you don’t know or be very clear that you are making an educated guess.

## **5. Student Funding**

### **5a. Overview**

Funding of a student’s graduate program is a collaborative effort on the part of the student, the student’s supervisor, and the Biology Department. The Biology Graduate Program’s minimum stipends are as follows:

MSc	\$20,000 per year for 2 years (effective Sept 2023)
PhD	\$22,000 per year for 4 years (effective Sept 2023 and mandated by CoGS)

These minimum values are reviewed annually and do not necessarily track changes in Tri-Council funding amounts. These minimum values do not preclude a supervisor from funding a student at a higher rate. Funding is contingent on students remaining in good academic standing during these time frames.

Graduate student stipends are funded through any combination of internal and external funding awards, Teaching Assistantships (GTA), and Research Assistantships (GRA).

Students are expected whenever possible to apply for relevant scholarships and fellowships. These include Tri-Council Scholarships and other awards circulated by the College of Graduate Studies, as well as awards the student and supervisor identify, e.g. from professional societies or organizations funding students in a given research area.

Teaching assistantships and marking positions are awarded in accordance with the applicable Collective Agreement. Positions are not guaranteed, but are normally available subject to the balance between supply (the departmental TA budget), demand (the number of students seeking TAs), and the student's qualifications (the skills and expertise required to instruct individual courses, and the student's prior performance as a TA).

Research assistantships are typically funded by the supervisor's external grants, contracts, or other sources of funding.

***Queries about your annual (or per semester) stipend:*** Your main point of contact about your stipend is your research supervisor. GTA and marker amounts are set by the BCGEU collective agreement and are non-negotiable; PhD students are paid more than are MSc students for these positions. Okanagan Graduate Research Scholarships are allocated from CoGS upon recommendation from the Associate Head Graduate Studies and affirmation that eligibility criteria are met. Other fellowships are handled via the rules established by each funder.

Please note that some funding is disbursed as a lump sum once per semester, while other funding is paid biweekly or monthly.

Because Research Stipends are allocated by supervisors, your supervisor is your first and main contact for understanding your annual stipend. ***Please note that your stipend may differ among semesters or even monthly depending on the sources used for your stipend.***

If you are not obtaining the annual minimum stipend, please speak first to your supervisor, then either the Associate Head Graduate Studies or the Biology Department Head.

***Queries about WorkDay, pay statements, etc.*** These queries about the mechanics of when you are paid and interpreting your pay stubs may be brought to Cheryl Craig or Lindsay Odne. Please do not ask them to comment on what your annual or semester stipend should be, as your supervisor should handle those questions.

## **5b. Scholarships and Fellowships**

Graduate students are expected to apply for scholarships and fellowships. Often, if a student is awarded a scholarship, the support supplied from the supervisor's grants will be decreased. You should discuss total stipend support with your supervisor ***when you apply*** for scholarships to clarify what funding is likely to be available for your stipend or your project in the event you are successful. You should also notify your supervisor about

the outcomes of any applications so that your sources of funding can be adjusted as needed. Check out Award Opportunities details on the CoGS website: <https://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/tuition-awards-and-finance/award-opportunities/>.

Watch for announcements for external fellowships such as CIHR, NSERC and others. The American Association for the Advancement of Science often posts graduate fellowships. Your professional societies may also have fellowships or grants-in-aid-of-research for which you can apply. Also ask your supervisor for sources of which they are aware. [www.scholarshipscanada.com](http://www.scholarshipscanada.com) may be useful.

Most students will receive internal UBC Okanagan funding via the Okanagan Graduate Research Scholarship. These awards are typically given as larger awards for a student's first year, with smaller awards for continuing students. There are criteria set by CoGS for eligibility (based on length of time in the program and progress towards the degree). Amounts also vary by year, depending on how much funding is allocated to Biology and how many students are eligible for funding.

### **5c. Teaching Assistantships (GTAs)**

MSc and PhD students often TA at some point during their program. The Biology Department will attempt to accommodate as many TA requests as possible. GTA positions contribute financial support towards meeting minimum graduate stipend amounts, and also help students in learning how to communicate scientific information to audiences with less sophisticated scientific backgrounds. As part of the Teaching Assistantship, students will be mentored in teaching skills, both from the faculty member coordinating the TA and via the Centre for Teaching and Learning: <http://ctl.ok.ubc.ca/>.

Teaching assistants are part of the BCGEU and working conditions follow the collective agreement that is bargained with the university. Please note the following specific points about GTA contracts:

As per the BCGEU/UBC Collective Agreement (06/2025), page 80,

“c) It is agreed that the employee and their immediate Supervisor have a mutual responsibility to ensure that the hours of work as defined in this letter of understanding are not exceeded.”

***We expect GTAs to report issues as they arise***, e.g. if a given laboratory, preparatory, or grading task seems to be taking longer than budgeted. GTAs may raise concerns about hours with the Associate Head Graduate Studies or the Head of Biology, but we expect all such concerns to have been raised first with the person responsible for the course. GTAs will not be paid for tasks they are not assigned to do.

If a GTA is taking significantly longer than comparable GTAs for a task, we expect the GTA to meet with the coordinator / faculty member to find ways to reduce the time allocated to a given task.



## 6. Supervisor and Thesis Committee Guidance

### 6a. The Role of the Supervisor

To be an effective graduate supervisor, a faculty member must first recognize the responsibilities of the role, and ensure that these are met to the best of their abilities with each graduate student.

The critical relationship between a research graduate student and their supervisor should always be **academic and professional, with an emphasis on a mutually open, committed, and respectful relationship**. The supervisor should act as both an academic mentor, with an emphasis on guidance, instruction, and encouragement of scholarship and research, and as an evaluator of the student's performance. A fundamental duty of the supervisor is to impart to the student the skills necessary to plan and conduct original research.

Specifically, the supervisor should:

- Work with the student to establish a realistic timetable for the completion of the various requirements of the program of study;
- Discuss with the student and establish mutual expectations for the student's vacation time (students are entitled to three weeks of vacation during each twelve month academic year);
- Develop a relationship with the student conducive to research and intellectual growth;
- Guide and mentor the student concerning the research ethics approval process and concerning the intellectual property issues around their thesis or dissertation research;
- Guide the student in the pursuit of knowledge and provide constructive criticism in support of the highest standards of research and professional development;
- Mentor the student in areas such as, but not limited to, the development of appropriate professional skills, funding applications, networking, assistance with publications, and career development.

The College of Graduate Studies has developed a **Checklist of Expectations for Graduate Student and Supervisor** to define the expectations and responsibilities of the graduate student and the supervisor. The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (Vancouver campus), in consultation with the Graduate Student Society and UBC Counsel office, has created **several documents** that outline the expectations of the student-supervisor relationship.

Please also see the CoGS materials: <https://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/policies-procedures/supervisors/#item2>.

### 6b. Supervision

[Senate Policy: O-9: Graduate Student Supervision and Membership in the College of Graduate Studies](#) outlines regulations for the supervisory privileges and sets out regulations

for membership in the College of Graduate Studies. This site offers a convenient review of who can act as a primary supervisor, co-supervisor, or committee member.

Primary supervision includes responsibility for the guaranteed personal stipend and ensuring all program requirements are met.

### **6c. Co-Supervision**

Individuals from outside the University may serve as co-supervisors upon recommendation of the Associate Head Graduate Studies for Biology, and approval of the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies.

These individuals are defined as members outside of the Biology Graduate Program, Assistant/Associate Professors without review, Instructors, Biology Adjunct faculty, faculty from other Universities or with agency employees (e.g. Parks Canada, Environment Canada, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada). If partners/spouses co-supervise a graduate student, the Supervisory Committee must be expanded to include another member.

[Dean's Approval for Co-Supervisor/Committee Member](#) form is required for:

- Appointment of all non-UBC Okanagan co-supervisors or committee members
- Appointment of any UBC Okanagan co-supervisors or committee members who do not hold the rank of Assistant, Associate, or Full Professor
- Appointment to graduate supervision of any UBC Okanagan members of the College of Graduate Studies who hold a terminal master's degree who wish to supervise a doctoral student

Retired members of the College of Graduate Studies may continue to supervise or co-supervise graduate students, as recommended by their graduate program and approved by the dean of the College of Graduate Studies.

### **6d. Forming a Committee**

Supervisory committees should be chosen *within the first term* you are on campus, ideally within the first month. As you develop your committee, you should consider the research expertise, time availability, and the interest of possible members in your research topic. Supervisory committees need to be approved by the Associate Head and the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies.

For **MSc students**, committee membership must conform to the following:

- At least three members (one of which is the supervisor).
- For each supervisor/co-supervisor, there must be at least one committee member (e.g. if there are two supervisors/co-supervisors, there must be at least two additional committee members)
- The committee may include:
  - ✓ faculty members from other UBC graduate programs
  - ✓ non-faculty members or faculty external to UBC upon approval of the Associate Head Graduate Studies for Biology and Dean of the College of Graduate Studies
- The majority of the committee must be faculty members at UBC's Okanagan campus. This does not include Biology Adjunct faculty.

For **PhD students**, committee membership must conform to the following:

- At least four members (one of which is the supervisor).
- For each supervisor/co-supervisor, there must be at least one committee member
- The committee may include:
  - ✓ faculty members from other UBC graduate programs
  - ✓ non-faculty members or faculty external to UBC upon approval of the Associate Head Graduate Studies for Biology and Dean of the College of Graduate Studies
- The majority of the committee must be faculty members at UBC's Okanagan campus. This does not include Biology Adjunct faculty.

The Biology Supervisory Committee Membership form is found here:

<https://biology.ok.ubc.ca/graduate/graduate-resources/forms>.

The [Dean's Approval for Co-Supervisor/Committee Member](#) form must be completed online for any members who are not UBC Okanagan faculty.

The [Change of Student Supervisor/Committee Member](#) form needs to be completed if a supervisory committee needs to change midway through a degree.

Committee members are responsible for offering advice, reading and commenting on proposals and thesis drafts in a timely fashion (typically within 2 weeks), and attending committee meetings; most or all committee members will sit on comprehensive exams (PhD students) and most or all will participate in the thesis defense. In some cases, committee members may also be your research collaborators and the work that you do might involve publication with committee members; in many cases, however, committee members are advisory rather than participatory in the research.

### **Ideas on preparing for committee meetings**

Committee meetings are important: there are only a few times during the degree when you will meet with your entire committee. Sometimes issues will emerge that have not come up in your one-on-one discussions with your supervisor or committee members. It therefore pays to be well prepared going into each committee meeting.

- Discuss the purpose of the upcoming committee meeting with your supervisor. Is it primarily about coursework? An annual check-in? The proposal? Each meeting should have a clear agenda: you may wish to consult with your supervisor about whether you should prepare this agenda or if your supervisor will.
- Be sure that you prepare your progress synopsis carefully. It is a good idea to have your supervisor read it for you before sending it to your committee.
- Bring copies of relevant materials. You probably should bring at least one spare copy in case someone has not printed out or brought with them material you sent in advance of the meeting.
- Remember that the committee is there to help you; you should prepare notes for yourself (and sometimes formalize these as part of the agenda) of what you want out of the meeting so that you can be sure your questions and needs are addressed.
- Reserve or bring AV equipment if needed.
- It often helps if you are in regular contact with committee members outside of the formal meetings, so that concerns can be dealt with as they arise rather than

accumulating and so that your committee members get an idea of how you approach problems and respond to feedback. These regular contacts often make the formal committee meetings less stressful and more useful.

### **During the committee meeting**

- Follow the agenda. If other topics arise, give them separate time in the agenda, but be sure all agenda items are addressed.
- Be sure you are clear on what ‘action items’ or decisions have been reached. Also be sure you are clear who needs to know when you have accomplished particular things (e.g. are you submitting a form, meeting later with your supervisor, or reporting back at another committee meeting?). Ask for clarification as often as needed; problems arise when the committee thinks they’ve told you one thing, but you’ve heard another.
- If a topic arises that is really between you and one other person, ask the group if the two of you can have that conversation later or if it should be held here (e.g. if there is a question around a particular technique that one of your committee members is helping you learn).
- Work from your list of questions / needs to ensure you get the advice and help you need.
- Be aware that people differ in how they give feedback. Sometimes it comes across really harshly, even when it is intended by the speaker to be useful. Try to separate the advice from the way in which it is given.
- It may be useful to have a post-meeting debriefing with your supervisor, especially if you have any concerns about how the meeting went or what you are being asked to do.

## **7. Research proposal and thesis guidance**

### **7a. Guidelines for the Research Proposal**

Research proposals should be approx. 25 double-spaced pages. Each proposal should:

- Provide a brief literature review to contextualize the proposed research,
- Give clear questions / objectives / hypotheses (as appropriate for the field),
- Outline the major methods and data collection (including the statistical analyses to be used, when appropriate),
- Indicate any progress to date (if appropriate)
- Give a brief projection of likely thesis chapters

Although not a part of the formal proposal, it is often useful for each student to also provide a brief projected timeline, e.g. when lab or fieldwork will occur, when drafts of chapters are expected, when the likely defense is. These timelines will likely be updated at each subsequent committee meeting and should be flexible, but they are useful for helping students and supervisors to ensure the thesis research is completed in a timely fashion.

### **Ideas on preparing a research proposal**

- Read widely. It may help to ask your supervisor or committee for suggested readings, but of course you will also need to read well beyond what they

recommend. Read some other proposals to see how other students have tackled their proposals.

- Look at some of the reference books listed later for guidelines. Books on preparing grant proposals are often useful too.
- Discuss your ideas with other graduate students, your supervisor, and committee members.
- Start writing early; expect that you will revise and revise and revise this document.
- Someone reading your proposal should be able to tell what question(s) you will address, why the topic is interesting, how you will approach the problem, the types of data you will collect, and how your research will advance the field. Give drafts of your proposal to friendly readers and ask them to answer those questions to see how well you did at conveying your ideas.

### **7b. Thesis Guidelines**

CoGS provides descriptive and required guidelines for formatting the thesis: <https://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/academics/thesis-and-dissertation/preparation/>.

## **8. Additional Guidance**

### **8a. Develop your Professionalism**

Becoming a professional biologist is only partly about your research and coursework. The following activities are strongly recommended as ways to develop the skills and experiences that typify a professional's life:

- Publish your research. If your research is grant-funded, that also brings an obligation with it to disseminate your results. Publications are also a critical piece of evidence on your CV demonstrating your ability as a scientist. Discuss where to publish and authorship issues with your supervisor. It is best to discuss publications early and often; it is ideal if you can have several manuscripts submitted or even accepted before you finish graduate school, rather than focusing on the thesis or dissertation and leaving all of the submission of manuscripts for after your degree program.
- Attend seminars and discussion groups. These events foster learning and the exchange of ideas, as well as helping to build your professional network. You can even start your own group, if you have topics you want to discuss!
- Attend professional conferences and present your work. Presenting at conferences is another good way to get your ideas and data out to others in your field. Conferences are also great opportunities for networking.
- Join one or more professional societies. Societies offer many advantages: they often provide expert advice to governments, support annual conferences, and publish flagship journals. Members often have access to reduced rates for conferences, journals, publication in society journals, as well as other benefits. Societies often have job boards and granting opportunities or fellowships that are restricted to members.
- Maintain a current and polished CV. Most fellowships, grants, and jobs require a CV, so practicing scientists typically update their CVs regularly.

You should aim for updating yours at least once per semester. Feel free to ask your advisor or other faculty for comments on what to include and how to format your CV.

- Maintain a presence on campus. A vital part of your graduate school experience is learning from interactions with your fellow students, faculty, and visiting scholars. Becoming a professional scientist is about engaging in regular interactions with your peers, rather than being a solitary scholar. Often, the friendships you develop in graduate school will be the centre of your professional network for years or even decades to come. Furthermore, when it comes time to ask faculty for recommendation letters for jobs or further training, students who have avoided interactions will not receive strong letters simply because faculty will have less knowledge about the students.
- Apply for funding for your stipend or your research project. Funding applications are a way of life for most practicing scientists, so use graduate school as a time to learn how to apply. If you are successful, not only will you receive the money, but also your CV will look much stronger. Even small grants or fellowships (e.g. \$500-\$2000) are useful additions to your CV.
- Take advantage of opportunities to be a leader or to serve on committees. Service and outreach activities, within or external to the university, are often regarded quite positively by funding agencies and employers. These opportunities are often rewarding in their own right, especially if you select activities that are consonant with your values and interests. There are various committees on campus that welcome graduate student involvement.
- Mentor undergraduates. Work with your supervisor to see if there are opportunities for undergraduates to help with your thesis research, or for you to help mentor an Honours or Work Study student.

**Some resources in our library about being a successful graduate student**

- Gosling, P., & Noordam, B. (2006). *Mastering your PhD: Survival and success in the doctoral years and beyond*. New York: Springer. Call Number: LB2386 .G67 2006
- Grix, J. (2001). *Demystifying postgraduate research: From MA to PhD*. Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham Press. Call Number: LB2371.6.G7 G75 2001
- Mullen, C. A. (2006). *A graduate student guide: Making the most of mentoring*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education. Call Number: LB2371.4 .M85 2006
- Potter, S. (Ed.). (2006). *Doing postgraduate research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Open University Press. Call number: LB2371 .D65 2006
- Rugg, G., & Petre, M. (2004). *The unwritten rules of PhD research*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press. Call Number: LB2386 R84 2004
- Tinkler, P., & Jackson, C. (2004). *The doctoral examination process: A handbook for students, examiners and supervisors*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press. Call Number: LB2371.6.G7 T56 2004
- Wallace, M., & Wray, A. (2006). *Critical reading and writing for postgraduates*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications. Call Number: LB2395.3 .W35 2006

**8b. Looking for work or more training**

What happens next? Do you want more academic training, i.e. a PhD program or a postdoctoral position? A job in your field? It is a good idea to start thinking seriously about your future a year or more before the end of your degree program. It can take a while to locate good options and be accepted into a position you want. Good resources for you are your supervisor, professional societies, workshops held by the graduate program or CoGS, and the UBC Career and Alumni Services office.

**8c. Leaves of absence, withdrawal**

Sometimes, academic progress gets disrupted—parental leave, study leaves, medical leaves, and leaves for other reasons are available to students. Please be aware that leaves will affect funding, and also that leaves are tied to academic terms. [Leaves and withdrawals](#) are handled through CoGS, with supervisory and program sign-off prior to CoGS' review of each application.

**8d. Dealing with situations not described so far**

So far, this Handbook has described the events that will occur for most students from start to finish of their programs. Inevitably, some situations will arise that are not described here. Please contact the Associate Head for help on any other issue arising.

If you have issues you can't resolve with your Supervisor, please feel to discuss the issue with the Associate Head, or book an appointment to speak with the Department Head through the Biology Senior Departmental Administrative Assistant.

The Biology Graduate Program Committee welcomes feedback on how we can help make the Program more welcoming and effective. Our goal is to make the environment one in which you can do your best work, so if you have good ideas about how to foster that environment, please let us know.