

Guidelines and Procedures for Admission to Candidacy (ATC) Exam for MSc Agriculture

What is the Admission to Candidacy?

This is an opportunity for the student to present their proposed research, to defend this to a committee and to receive feedback. It is both a formal meeting of the supervisory committee and an opportunity for the input of a faculty member external to the supervisory committee and for input from the Graduate Studies Office.

When does this have to be done?

The ATC must be done within the first six months of beginning the MSc Agriculture. It is preferable to do this within the first four months. The ATC should be completed before actual experimental work is begun, although students may have done a pilot study.

It is realized that for students who begin in May, and who will be doing field work, that actual project work may need to start before the ATC is completed. However, students should be developing their ATC document at the same time and be able to justify the work done in the context of their overall project.

Why do this so early in the program?

The external examiner and the discussion of the supervisory committee may identify areas that can be improved, or suggest additional resources.

The committee may find that the student is lacking in some background, and suggest a course or additional reading that would be helpful to the student in carrying out the research.

What happens if the ATC is not done in the first six months?

The student must submit a request for an extension with a detailed timeline for completion and the reason why the ATC has to be delayed. This must be signed by the supervisor. This is to be submitted to the Faculty Graduate Coordinator, who may allow for a certain period of extension after consultation with the supervisor.

Students who have not completed the ATC by the end of their second semester will need to meet with the Graduate Coordinator. Students who have not completed by the end of the third semester may be required to withdraw on the basis of non-completion of an academic requirement.

What needs to be done for the ATC Research Proposal?

The student prepares a Research Proposal, following the format given below. The proposal is prepared in consultation with the supervisor and supervisory committee members. This should include the rationale for the proposed research, the general outline of the planned project, the resources

available and any practical limitations to the project, and the timeline for the student to complete the project and defend the thesis. The document is not expected to have a complete and thorough literature review; the literature cited should set the framework for the project. The methods used should give the broad outline; it is not necessary to include every aspect of methodology.

It is recommended that students have all members of their supervisory committee review, comment and edit, and critique the proposal before submission for the ATC exam. The supervisor is required to sign the Planning Form to indicate agreement that the student is ready to come forward for the ATC. (A student may choose to bring the ATC document forward without this signature, but arrangements will not be made without discussing this decision and approval by the Graduate Coordinator.)

Who is on the ATC committee?

The Committee consists of the supervisor, the members of the supervisory committee, an external examiner, and is chaired by the Faculty Graduate Studies Coordinator or designate.

It is important that the supervisory committee be defined well in advance of the ATC, and strongly recommended that the committee has met as a whole before the ATC.

Dalhousie faculty who are [members](#) of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, but not in the student's department, may act as external examiners for ATC examinations. Adjunct FGS members in the Faculty of Agriculture, or FGS members from another department at Dalhousie University may also serve as external examiners. The external may not be directly involved with the student's proposed research area. Names of external examiners are suggested by the student in consultation with the supervisor; approval of suggested names is given by the Graduate Coordinator.

Who covers the cost?

Travel expenses incurred by the external examiner or any member of the supervisory committee to attend the ATC will not be reimbursed by the Faculty of Agriculture or Dalhousie University. The supervisor may choose to reimburse these costs, and should discuss any specific arrangements for travel with the Graduate Program Assistant.

What is the process to set the ATC?

The student consults with the supervisor and supervisory committee to arrange available dates (at least three (3) separate dates should be confirmed). The supervisor then contacts potential External Examiners (*after approval by the Graduate Coordinator*) to determine their availability on those dates. Once dates and External Examiner are confirmed the student completes the **ATC Planning Form & Part 1**. This form must be submitted to the Graduate Studies Office, Faculty of Agriculture (gradagri@dal.ca), *at least four (4) weeks before* the proposed date of the ATC. The **Research Proposal** must be submitted at least three (3) weeks prior to the date of the ATC.

All forms are available on the Faculty of Agriculture [Graduate Forms](#) page.

The Graduate Program Assistant will confirm the time of the examination with the student and examining committee. The proposed dates are not guaranteed. Students should have alternate dates in mind, particularly at busy times of the year.

The Graduate Coordinator will approve the ATC Chair. For virtual exams, the Graduate Program Assistant will send the examining committee and student a calendar invitation with the appropriate meeting details and link. For in-person or hybrid exams, the Graduate Program Assistant will arrange for the room. It is the student's responsibility to obtain the necessary computer resources.

Can the documents be submitted electronically?

Paper documents are not required. An electronic copy of the Planning Form, with digital signatures, may be sent to the Graduate Program Assistant (gradagri@dal.ca).

The Research Proposal must be submitted electronically as a Microsoft Word file to the Graduate Program Assistant.

Format of the Examination

The student will make a 15-minute oral presentation of the proposal, highlighting the goals and objectives of the research, the research strategy/methodology, and the impact, significance, or benefit of the proposed research.

The external examiner and supervisory committee members will then question the student on the proposal and concepts relevant to the proposal. There are typically two rounds of questions. The external examiner will be the first to ask questions with the supervisor asking last. However, this order is at the discretion of the chairperson. The chairperson may participate in the questioning but is not required to do so.

The examination is expected to be completed in two hours. The chairperson should allot time for individual questioners to meet this timeline.

What is being evaluated?

The committee will consider the following:

- The merit and feasibility of the project for a 2-year Master's program and a Master's thesis
- Whether the resources are available for the project
- If the student has the right background to be able to do the project, including the methods to be

used, the literature, and the general academic background.

The student is expected to have put together a viable research project, to justify the background for the project and the general methods and be able to relate the methods and protocol to the objectives. This should be justified with appropriate reference to the literature, but a full literature review is not expected at this time. The examiners should keep in mind that this is not a Comprehensive Examination. Questions will arise from the scientific content of the work but will not range randomly over the entire field.

The Chairperson is expected to intervene on behalf of the student if examiner's questions are not consistent with the purpose of the ATC examination.

Who makes the final decision and what are the possible outcomes?

The evaluation decision is by consensus. The Chair will vote only if the committee vote is tied.

The Decisions will be Pass or Fail.

A **Pass** may be accompanied by Recommendations, or by Conditions. These may include requirements to take additional courses or to do supplementary reading. Required courses must be defined in the context of available courses, and normally must be completed by the end of the next academic year. A student may be required to re-write the Research Proposal if this is not satisfactory.

A Recommendation is to be considered by the student and supervisor in consultation with supervisory committee members.

A Condition will be verified by the Graduate Coordinator. This must be completed before the student will be allowed to proceed to Thesis Defense.

A student who **Fails** the ATC is required to withdraw from the program. A failed examination can be appealed to the Faculty Graduate Coordinator within three working days. The student has the option to request to be re-examined. This re-examination will be organized by the Graduate Coordinator, and will be held within two weeks, and will include the Chair, the student's supervisor, and three faculty not on the original examining committee.

Is it possible to change the Research Proposal after the ATC is completed?

The broad format of the proposal must be followed. However, any scientific study may require alteration of methods as the study progresses. Such changes are made by consultation between the

student, supervisor, and supervisory committee.

If it becomes necessary to make major changes to the proposal, or if the timeline of the project is affected, the supervisor and student should consult with the Graduate Coordinator. A new ATC may be required.

Format of the Research Proposal

The research proposal is a documented account of the project that the student wishes to undertake for the MSc Agriculture.

The proposal should be no more than 25 pages, single sided, including all attachments. It should be written in 12-point font in the main body text, with 1-inch margins, and be double spaced. It is to be submitted as a Word document.

The proposal should include: a cover page, table of contents, reference list, any necessary figures or tables, and the timeline for completion. The timeline should include all requirements for the MSc degree. The format and referencing should be consistent with publications in the student's area of study.

Students may also wish to consult the [Agricultural Campus Writing Centre](#) for general assistance. The Writing Centre is located in the [MacRae Library](#).