Rules and Procedures Regarding Academic Progress within the ECE PhD Program

For students admitted as PhD or MSE+PhD seeking before fall 2018, and who chose not to opt into these revised rules and procedures requirements

Overview of the requirements for academic progress, monitoring of it, and consequences of not achieving it.

To remain within the ECE PhD Program, students must continue to make academic progress, which includes but is not limited to: remaining registered except during approved leaves of absence, and making acceptable progress toward both their PhD Program of Work (based on classroom coursework) and their PhD Dissertation research. The latter includes finding a PhD Dissertation Supervisor; satisfying any academic-track-dependent Pre-Qualifying requirements; establishing the Qualifying and presumptive PhD Dissertation Committee, passing the Qualifying Examination, and advancing to Candidacy; and, finally, writing and successfully defending their PhD Dissertation.

To monitor student academic progress, the progress of ECE students in the PhD Program first will be compared to an itemized set of expectations for acceptable academic progress. A set of expectations for acceptable academic progress on the PhD Program of Work, and for research in terms of the required milestones and their time of completion, are itemized above and detail in following sections. As not all reasonable expectations for academic progress can be listed here, nor perhaps anticipated, the ECE Graduate Studies Committee (GSC) or its representatives reserve the right to add additional items to a student’s set of expectations for acceptable academic progress with notice for the following long semester. These expectations do not represent ideal, desired, average, or median academic performance. Rather, failure to meet these itemized expectations may indicate that a student is not making even acceptable academic progress. Alternatively, failure to meet these itemized expectations simply may indicate that the circumstances are such that it is insufficient to track academic progress for this student by comparison to these itemized expectations alone.¹

In either case, a continuing student failing to meet one or more of these itemized expectations at the beginning of any long semester automatically is placed on (or perhaps retained on) Academic Watch for that long semester. While under Academic Watch, a holistic review will be performed by the members of the ECE GSC and/or representatives thereof, first to judge whether the student is making sufficient academic progress despite not meeting the set of itemized expectations and, if not, then to judge whether one or more additional semesters of Academic Watch are warranted to allow the student to achieve sufficient academic progress.² (Who may act as representatives of the ECE GSC for what specific purpose and for how long is addressed in a subsequent section of these Rules and Procedures.) Specifically, while on Academic Watch:

• The student will meet the itemized set of expectations for sufficient academic progress prior to the next long semester, and, thus, be allowed to continue within the ECE PhD Program during the next long semester. The student will be removed from Academic Watch for the next long semester, unless the student then fails to meet the itemized set of expectations for sufficient academic progress at the beginning of that next long semester.

• The student will not meet the itemized set of expectations for academic prior to the next long semester, but will be found by holistic review to be making sufficient academic progress already
or prior to the next long semester and, thus, be allowed to continue within the ECE PhD Program. However, the student necessarily will continue on Academic Watch through the next long semester at least because of the continuing need for holistic review to judge academic progress.

- The student will not meet the itemized set of expectations for academic progress nor be found by holistic review to be making sufficient academic prior to the next long semester, but will be granted one or more additional semesters of Academic Watch to achieve sufficient academic progress by representatives of the ECE or by the ECE GSC as a whole based on the holistic review.

- Or the student will not meet the itemized set of expectations for academic progress nor be found by holistic review to be making sufficient academic prior to the next long semester, and will not be granted additional semesters of Academic Watch to achieve sufficient academic progress by representatives of the ECE nor by the ECE GSC as a whole based on the holistic review, which will result in a recommendation for dismissal of the student from the PhD Program to the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin.

A student who is admitted as MSE + PhD seeking who is dismissed from the PhD Program for lack of acceptable academic progress prior to obtaining their MSE will be recommended to the Graduate School for the MSE (only) Program, providing that he/she is in good standing with respect to the MSE Program in ECE (according to rules provided elsewhere). A student who is admitted as PhD-seeking only who is dismissed from the PhD Program may be recommended to the Graduate School for the MSE Program as appropriate and providing that he/she is in good standing with respect to the MSE Program in ECE.

Unless stated otherwise in a specific case, a student who has been dismissed from the ECE PhD Program, whether remaining in the MSE Program or having left the Graduate Program entirely, may be able to successfully reapply to the PhD Program if and when circumstances that lead to their dismissal change sufficiently.

ECE PhD academic progress and registration form

Each ECE PhD seeking or MSE + PhD seeking graduate student is responsible for accurately completing and submitting a signed ECE PhD Academic Progress and Registration Form (GF) for each long semester.

In addition to requiring a list of current and proposed courses, the form requires the student to self-identify (with ample help) whether they are either currently on Academic Watch or they expect to be on Academic Watch during the following long semester. Accordingly, the student is responsible for seeking advising and taking corrective actions as needed, or a determination that sufficient academic progress is being made via a holistic review, in a timely fashion.

The ECE PhD Academic Progress and Registration Form (GF) also requires the signature of the student and the signature of the student’s PhD Dissertation Supervisor or, if and only if the Supervisor is not an ECE GSC member, the student’s Co-Supervisor or, in and only in the absence of an existing PhD Dissertation Supervisor, the student’s Academic Track Advisor. (Electronic signatures are acceptable.) Moreover, by signing, each PhD seeking student or MSE + PhD seeking student and the ECE GSC member signee also acknowledges their familiarity with the requirements for academic progress.

Expectations for acceptable academic progress on the PhD Program of Work

A PhD student making acceptable progress on their PhD Program of Work in ECE is expected to:
• maintain a minimum GPA of 3.5 prior to completing the PhD Program of Work, and
• achieve the full requirements the PhD Program of Work prior to attempting—completing or not—more than 8 hours of regular classroom coursework that cannot be used toward the PhD Program of Work, except for courses approved for remedial or for other non-ECE-PhD-Program-of-Work purposes, including two undergraduate courses usable toward the MSE Program of Work for MSE + PhD seeking students.

Moreover, the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin imposes additional requirements, including that:

• any course, including a transferred or reserved course, not completed within 6 years prior to entering Candidacy may be disallowed if deemed too dated to include in the PhD Program of Work,
• and failure to maintain a minimum GPA of 3.0 leads first to probation and then possible dismissal from the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin as determined by the Graduate School.

Expectations for acceptable academic progress on Research

The following figure summarizes the itemized expectations for acceptable academic progress for research in terms of the required milestones and their upper time limits for completion, and illustrates how time is initially marked in course hours and then in years:

Toward defining these expectations, “hours” indicates hours of coursework while within the Graduate Program at The University of Texas at Austin, including individual instruction courses such as research problems courses, and, for this purpose, coursework transferred from another institution and completed coursework reserved for graduate credit while still an undergraduate to be used toward satisfying the...
requirement of the Graduate Program at The University of Texas at Austin. Also note that, e.g., a student transfer student with a Dissertation Supervisor could take the Qualifying Examination before the 33 hour mark; again, the figure represents upper time limits for meeting itemized expectations for Research.

**Finding and Maintaining a PhD Dissertation Supervisor**

A PhD student should find a willing PhD Dissertation Supervisor or Co-Supervisor from among the membership of the ECE GSC, prior to the long semester after attempting—completing or not—33 hours of coursework while within the Graduate Program. An individual may choose not to serve as a student’s PhD Dissertation Supervisor or Co-Supervisor for almost any reason. The role of PhD Dissertation Supervisor and, if any, Co-Supervisor must be confirmed independently by the student and by the Supervisor or, if the Supervisor is not a member of the ECE GSC, the Co-Supervisor. (Perhaps the most convenient way to do so is via the *ECE PhD Academic Progress and Registration Form (GF)*.) A Research Problems, MS Report, or MS Thesis supervisor is not assumed to be a PhD Dissertation Supervisor.

The PhD student-PhD Dissertation Supervisor/Co-Supervisor relationship may be terminated by either party for almost any reason.

After such a termination prior to any long semester, if the student has or will have attempted 33 hours of coursework while within the Graduate Program and has not found a new PhD Supervisor within the intervening period, the PhD student will be placed on Academic Watch for the that post-termination long semester.

**Satisfying academic-track-dependent Pre-Qualifying requirements if any**

Five of the Academic Tracks have prequalifying procedures that must be completed: Architecture, Computer Systems, and Embedded Systems (ACSES); bioECE; Decision, Information and Communications Engineering (DICE); Integrated Circuits and Systems; and Software Engineering and Systems. These procedures and timing thereof vary by Academic Track. Please contact your Academic Track Advisor about these the specific procedures.

**Forming the Dissertation committee, the Qualifying Examination, and Advancing to PhD Candidacy**

A student should form the Qualifying Committee, take the Qualifying Examination, and advance to Candidacy prior to the 9th long semester after attempting 33 hours of coursework while within the Graduate Program, excluding approved leaves of absence.

**Forming the Qualifying and presumptive PhD Dissertation Committee**

The student, with the approval of his PhD Dissertation Supervisor and, if any, Co-Supervisor must propose a Qualifying Committee (perhaps with backup options) with the intent of it becoming the PhD Dissertation committee, that is consistent with the ECE departmental rules for the composition of the PhD Dissertation Committee (which are a superset of the Graduate School rules) and acceptable to the Academic Track PhD Coordinator. (The PhD coordinator checks compliance with rules for establishing the dissertation committee, addresses any apparent conflicts of interest, and may consider others issues.)

The student then (and only then) must seek the tentative agreement of the proposed members to serve on the Qualifying Committee and subsequent PhD Dissertation Committee (and of one or more corresponding backup options, as necessary).

The Graduate Track PhD Coordinator then must present the proposed Qualifying Committee of willing members to the ECE GSC for approval, and allow two weeks for feedback and protests. Protests
can be resolved informally among the protestor, the Academic Track PhD Coordinator, the student, and the Dissertation Supervisor or Supervisors, or, failing that, via a vote of the ECE GSC as a whole.

Failure to complete any of the above steps will require that step and any preceding steps to be repeated.

*Taking the Qualifying Examination*

The Qualifying Examination is an oral examination performed before the PhD Dissertation Committee as a whole, addressing the student’s research progress to date and proposed research toward completion of their PhD Dissertation, as well any apparent deficiencies in foundational knowledge exhibited by the student during the discussion of their research.

The student also must provide to the Qualifying Examination Committee members, at least one week in advance of the oral Qualifying Examination, a written Progress Report highlighting the student’s research accomplishments to date, ongoing research, and proposed research. (Emailed pdf versions are sufficient unless otherwise requested.) The body of the report should be brief, 25 double-spaced 12-point font pages including figures and captions maximum. Moreover, students may obtain greater brevity in the discussion of research accomplishments to date by including existing publications in an appendix, with only a corresponding short description that research—such as provided by the abstract of the publication—in the body of the Progress Report, along with clarification of the student’s contribution to each publication and how that work relates to the topic of their PhD Dissertation. The report also should contain a proposed timeline for completion of their research, and their current proposed PhD Program of Work, including previously taken Program of Work courses with grades, and any current and future proposed Program of Work courses.

The PhD Dissertation Supervisor and, if any, Co-Supervisor attends (attend) the Qualifying Examination but does (do) not vote. Another member of the Qualifying Examination Committee from among the tenure or tenured track faculty within the department of ECE serves as the Chair the Qualifying Examination and reports the outcome of the Qualifying Examination to the UT ECE Graduate Advising Office via the *Report of the Qualifying Examination Outcome Form*.

The outcome of the Qualifying Examination, by a simple majority vote, can be “pass without conditions,” “pass with conditions,” or “fail.” Conditions could include, e.g., requiring the student to perform research on a specific top and report back to one or more members of the Qualifying Examination Committee, or even taking an additional course.

A student who fails the Qualifying Examination once will be given at least one opportunity and until prior to the 11th long semester after attempting 33 of coursework while within the Graduate Program, excluding approved leaves of absence, to retake the Qualifying Examination (if necessarily under Academic Watch during the 9th and 10th long semesters). However, independent of when the student retakes the Qualifying Examinations, a 2nd failure normally will result in a recommendation for dismissal of the student from the PhD Program to the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin.

If the student passes the Qualifying Committee, the Qualifying Committee will recommend the PhD Dissertation Committee membership, which normally but not necessarily will be the same as that of the Qualifying Committee membership.

*Advancing to Candidacy*

Upon passing the Qualifying Examination, with the approval of his or her PhD Dissertation Supervisor and, if any, Co-Supervisor the student then must apply formally for Candidacy to the UT-Austin
graduate school with the PhD Dissertation Committee recommended by the Qualifying Committee, via procedures established by the UT-Austin graduate school. (Information and hints on the application procedure are available here.)

Approval of the application results in the formal entry of the student into Candidacy, and the formal establishment of the Dissertation Committee. If the application for Candidacy is not approved, some of the preceding steps may have to be repeated depending on the reason.

Any changes in the PhD Dissertation Committee after the student advances to Candidacy must be made via procedures established by The University of Texas at Austin graduate school.

**PhD Dissertation and Dissertation Defense**

A PhD student should complete the written PhD Dissertation and perform the oral PhD Dissertation Defenses prior to the 11th long semester after attempting 33 hours of coursework while within the Graduate Program, excluding approved leaves of absence.

The PhD Dissertation and Dissertation Defense must be performed in compliance with the policies and procedures of the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin. The PhD Dissertation Supervisor serves as the chair of the PhD Dissertation Defense. All members of the PhD Dissertation Committee have a vote.

By Graduate School policy, outcomes for the PhD Dissertation and Dissertation Defense are “pass” if perhaps with required revisions to the Dissertation, or, if the Dissertation and/or Dissertation Defense are not acceptable to all members of the PhD Dissertation Committee, “re-defend” or “fail.” By Graduate School policy, the outcome of “fail” normally results in termination of the doctoral student’s program.

If the PhD Dissertation committee cannot reach a (unanimous) decision, the matter is referred to the Dean of the Graduate School for review.

**Who may act as a representatives of the ECE GSC for with regard to Academic Watch**

To minimize the burden on the ECE GSC as a whole, the GSC allows specific representatives thereof to act on its behalf for specific purposes for, in most cases, specific time periods:

- The ECE GSC chair, the ECE Graduate Advisor, and either the PhD Dissertation Supervisor, the Co-Supervisor if the Supervisor is not a ECE GSC member, or the Track Advisor in the absence of an existing PhD Dissertation Supervisor, all in agreement, may add additional items to a student’s set of expectations that are not otherwise included in the itemized Expectations for Academic Progress, with notice for the following long semester.

- The ECE GSC chair, the ECE Graduate Advisor, and either the PhD Dissertation Supervisor, the Co-Supervisor if the Supervisor is not a ECE GSC member, or the Track Advisor in the absence of an existing PhD Dissertation Supervisor, all in agreement, may grant extensions of Academic Watch for any student placed on Academic Watch for failing to complete their full PhD Programs of work within the prescribed expectations for acceptable academic progress, up to but not beyond the point of the student having attempted 4 regular classroom courses that cannot be used toward the PhD Program of work, except for courses approved for remedial or other non-ECE-PhD-Program-of-Work purposes, including two undergraduate courses usable toward the MSE Program of Work for MSE + PhD seeking students.
• The ECE GSC Chair, the ECE Graduate Advisor, and the Academic Track PhD Coordinator, all in agreement, may grant extensions of Academic Watch for one long semester for students placed on Academic Watch for failure to find and maintain a PhD Dissertation Supervisor.

• For students within Academic tracks with prequalifying requirements, The ECE GSC chair, the ECE Graduate Advisor, and the PhD Dissertation Supervisor, all in agreement, may grant an extension of Academic Watch for one long semester for completing the prequalifying requirements as and when required by the track.

• The ECE GSC chair, the ECE Graduate Advisor, and the PhD Dissertation Supervisor, all in agreement, may grant an extension of Academic Watch for up to two long semesters for forming the Qualifying (and presumptive PhD Dissertation) Committee, taking the Qualifying Examination, and advancing to Candidacy.

• The PhD Dissertation Committee, all in agreement, may grant an extension of Academic Watch for up to two long semesters for completion of the PhD Dissertation, the Dissertation Defense, and graduation.

• The ECE Graduate advisor may act on behalf of the ECE GSC to approve the extension of PhD Candidacy by the Graduate School for any ECE PhD student who is not on Academic Watch, or who has been granted an extension of Academic Watch.

However, a student can be recommended for dismissal from the PhD Program to the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin only by a vote of the ECE GSC as a whole. If the student is not removed from Academic Watch by meeting each of the itemized expectations nor is Academic Watch extended by the appropriate set of representatives listed above, then the decision to extend Academic Watch or to recommend dismissal from the PhD Program reverts back to the ECE GSC as a whole.

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1 A part time student working full time is an example of a student for which an acceptable progress rate on their PhD Dissertation research could be greater than otherwise expected, and depend on the details of their situation, such as whether their PhD Dissertation research overlaps their work efforts.

ii A student whose academic progress has been delayed by substantial extenuating circumstances, is an example of a student for whom extending Academic Watch may be warranted.

iii University policy currently defines a class dropped after the first 12 days of classes during long semesters, or after the first 4 days of classes during the summer, as “attempted”.

iv As stated previously, for the purpose of defining acceptable academic progress, “hours” indicates hours of coursework while within the Graduate Program at UT Austin, including individual instruction courses such as research problems courses, coursework transferred from another institution, and completed coursework reserved for graduate credit while still an undergraduate.

v Exceptions are those forbidden by law and/or the rules and policies of The University of Texas at Austin, the Cockrell School of Engineering and the ECE Department.