Both the written and oral comprehensive examinations are designed to probe the degree of knowledge and understanding of a student in a specific field of study, not to test recall of specific courses. Those taking an exam in the international organizations field should be familiar with the following broad topics:

- the role of international organizations from the perspective of international relations theory and international legal theory
- the law of international organizations
- the structure, mission and competence of the United Nations, its specialized agencies and regional organizations
- the role of international organizations in the fields of peace and security, human rights and humanitarian affairs, sustainable development and trade.
- debates about the legitimacy, effectiveness and reform of international organizations.

The required course in the international organizations field is ILO L220. Other courses that fall within the field are listed in the catalogue.

Students planning to take the international organizations comprehensive exam should contact the field coordinator during their final semester of coursework. They should then begin to prepare a reading list organized by topic area. The list may correspond to the above topics, but need not be identical and could be divided into sub-topics. This list is discussed with the field coordinator and finalized by the student. The readings should include books, articles, official documents, reports and other material that may or may not have been assigned for specific courses. Relative emphasis of topic areas may vary among the student reading lists depending on interests, but students are expected to be familiar with the literature in all important aspects of the field.

The comprehensive exam is 7.5 hours long, closed book. Students are given a choice of five (5) questions, out of which they must answer three (3). There is a word limit for each question, to be set by the field coordinator (in the past, the limit has been 1500 words per question, though that may change). In the oral exam, students may be asked to elaborate on one of the questions he or she has answered in the written exam. Students may also be asked to respond to one of the questions not asked in the written exam.