

UC DAVIS GRADUATE COUNCIL POLICY Doctoral Qualifying Examinations

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Introduction

Before advancing to candidacy for a doctoral degree, a student must have met any deficiencies in his or her background training, must have satisfied all requirements set by his or her major program, must have maintained a minimum GPA of 3.0 in all course work undertaken except those courses graded S or U, and must have passed a Qualifying Examination (including any required tests of a reading knowledge of foreign languages) before a committee appointed to administer that examination.

The primary purpose of the Qualifying Examination (QE) is to validate that the student is academically qualified to conceptualize a research topic, undertake scholarly research and successfully produce the dissertation required for a doctoral degree. The QE must evaluate the student's command of the field, ensuring that the student has both breadth and depth of knowledge, and must not focus solely on the proposed dissertation research. In addition, the QE provides an opportunity for the committee to provide important guidance to the student regarding his or her chosen research topic.

The QE administered to candidates for doctoral degrees is the final step prior to advancement to candidacy; all of the other requirements noted above must be satisfied before the application for the QE is approved. Following the successful completion of the Qualifying Examination, each student should apply for advancement to candidacy for the doctoral degree in a timely manner using the form provided by the Office of Graduate Studies. Once the student has advanced to candidacy, the graduate program may not impose any additional requirements other than those specified under Plans A, B or C; however, graduate programs may require reasonable evidence of successful progress in the dissertation research (not including coursework), as specified in the Graduate Council approved degree requirements the student is following.

Committee Membership

- The qualifying examination committee shall include four or five members, as required by the students' graduate program; whichever number is required by the program must apply to all students in the program and be specified in the program degree requirements; one additional member beyond the number required by the program may be added; the majority of the members shall be members of the student's graduate program,
- The Chair of the QE committee shall be a member of the student's graduate program,
- No fewer than three members of the QE committee shall be voting members of the Academic Senate of University of California (includes Professors, Lecturers with Security of Employment, Professors in Residence and Professors of Clinical “ ”)
- At least one member should be external to the student's graduate program, except when the program has an approved exception. (The process to request an exception is part of the degree requirement approval process and is described at the end of this document.)

- In cases where a student is completing a Designated Emphasis (DE), at least one committee member must be affiliated with the DE ([GC1988-03](#)). In such cases, the QE committee shall include a minimum of five members.

At most two members may be from categories that include non-Senate faculty. In particular, at most one member can be a faculty member from another university or scholars from outside academia as specified in the Graduate Council “Policy for Service on Advance Degree Committees” (GC1998-01; <https://gradstudies.ucdavis.edu/graduate-programs/policies>).

Requests for any exceptions to the constitution of QE committees shall be submitted to the Dean of Graduate Studies for review and approval. Unless Graduate Council has approved new degree requirements that specifically state that the program requires only 4 members of each QE committee, no exceptions to the minimum 5 members will be approved for said program.

The graduate program primarily concerned with an examination will be asked to suggest the names of persons to be included on such examining committees, but appointment shall be made by the Dean of Graduate Studies, who will advise all parties concerned. The intended Chair of the Dissertation Committee (commonly known as the Major Professor) may be a member of the QE committee but may not serve as its Chair. The Chair and members of the examination committee should be chosen to avoid any real or perceived conflict of interest. The suggested membership of the committee should allow for assessment of both breadth and depth of knowledge during the examination.

The primary responsibilities of the Chair of the QE are to facilitate the work of the committee and to ensure that the examination is conducted fairly. Prior to the examination, the Chair shall meet with the student to discuss scheduling, procedures, format, general content, etc., and shall provide the student with clear written guidelines on these matters. The Chair also shall discuss the procedures, format, general content, and evaluation expectations with the other members of the committee. At the start of the examination, the Chair should attempt to put the student at ease so that they can focus on the content of the examination. The Chair should also ensure that the examination conforms to the approved format and general norms of the program, and that the examination addresses both breadth and depth of knowledge. During the examination, the Chair must ensure that the QE adheres to the expected schedule and that breaks are taken if needed. Following the examination, the Chair should facilitate the discussion among the committee members, ensure that the committee makes every reasonable effort to reach a unanimous conclusion, lead the committee in informing the student of the result and file the committee report with Graduate Studies.

Service on Qualifying Examination committees is a regular responsibility of all full-time faculty. Those who agree to serve are expected to be flexible with their schedules to accommodate the interests of the student in scheduling the examination in a timely manner and to participate fully in the process. It is the responsibility of all members of the Qualifying Examination committee to facilitate an examination that addresses both breadth and depth of knowledge.

Timing

Graduate programs may define a window of time during the program of study that is appropriate for Qualifying Examinations. The examination must be scheduled only after the student has completed all courses and other program degree requirements and early enough to enable the student to advance to candidacy by the end of the 9th quarter of residency (excluding summer terms). However, the QE may be scheduled during a quarter in which the student is taking the final 1 or 2 courses in their program of study. If that is the case, the Graduate Adviser must not sign the Advancement to Candidacy form until it can be verified that the student has passed the courses and thereby satisfied all program requirements.

The Chair should assist the student in arranging a time, date and place for the examination, and may be consulted on other logistical issues. The student must be registered when taking any portion of the examination.

Process

The Qualifying Examination shall include an oral examination of approximately 2-3 hours in length, with only the student and entire committee present, and the decision-making process immediately following. Non-voting faculty observers may be invited with the unanimous consent of the committee and student. All members of the examination committee are expected to be present during the entire examination; procedures to be followed in the case of unexpected absences of committee members are described in the Graduate Council's "Guidelines for Service on Advanced Degree Committees" (<http://www.gradstudies.ucdavis.edu/gradcouncil/policiesall.html>). Under unusual and extenuating circumstances, as determined by the committee, the committee may suspend the qualifying examination in process, and may request that the exam be considered a "No examination". If the committee wishes to make this request, the chair must return the Report on Qualifying Examination form so indicating "No examination", and informing the Dean of Graduate Studies of the reasons.

The qualifying examination must cover both breadth and depth of knowledge. If a written examination is administered earlier as part of the Qualifying Examination, it must be evaluated by the same committee members as the subsequent oral component. The breadth component of the QE may in part be covered in previous written preliminary or field examinations. Such field or preliminary examinations should be used to provide additional information to the QE committee and do not have to be administered or scored by the QE committee. Committee members may individually meet with the candidate and administer written exams in advance. Any such additional information must be available to all committee members at the time of the oral Qualifying Examination.

In addition, Graduate Council specifies that Qualifying Examinations must have the following essential characteristics:

- 1. Be interactive.** The examiners must be able to ask questions, hear the answers, and then follow up with another question or comment in response to the student's initial reply. Committee members, individually and collectively, must be able to engage in a discourse with the candidate on topics relevant to the candidate's area of competence.
- 2. Be a group activity.** In addition to the ability to follow up to one's own questions, it is also very important for all examiners to hear all of the questions and all of the student's responses, plus have the ability to interject an alternate follow-up question. The collective wisdom of a group is generally greater than that of the individual. Further having other examiners present serves to moderate the group, to ensure that one examiner does not ask questions that are either trivial or too difficult, and that any one examiner is neither too friendly nor too obstreperous. Thus, to optimize the examination process and evaluation of the candidate, the committee as a whole must collectively: 1) experience the discourse with a candidate, 2) evaluate the candidate's performance, 3) determine the length and content of the examination, and 4) moderate the demeanor of the candidate and the members of the committee.
- 3. Be broadly structured.** Based on the candidate's past academic, research, and scholarly record and the performance on the examination, the candidate must broadly demonstrate sufficient competence in the selected disciplinary area, which must go (beyond the limited area of scholarship associated with a dissertation topic). Further, the candidate must demonstrate the capability for integration and utilization of knowledge and skills that are critical for independent and creative research, thereby qualifying them for advancement to the research-intensive phase of doctoral education.

The expectation during the QE should be that the student will focus solely on successfully passing a challenging academic examination. Therefore, it is important for programs to remember that Graduate Council policy is that neither the program nor the QE committee shall impose any expectation that the student will provide refreshments during the examination.

Special Considerations for Students with Disabilities

Graduate Council recognizes that students with disabilities may need appropriate accommodations in order not to be disadvantaged when taking the Qualifying Examination. Requests for reasonable accommodations must be made well in advance of the date of the first sitting for the QE (not less than 1 month and preferably 2 months). Students must initiate such requests through the Student Disability Center (<http://sdc.ucdavis.edu>). When accommodations are deemed appropriate by the SDC, they must preserve the essential characteristics of the QE as described above.

Outcome

The members should endeavor to reach a unanimous decision as to the qualifications of the student for successful completion of a doctoral program. They should include in their evaluations of the student such factors as relevant portions of the previous academic record, performance on specific parts of the examination, and an overall evaluation of the student's performance and potential for scholarly research as indicated during the examination.

A committee, having reached a unanimous decision, shall inform the student of its decision as "**Pass**" (no conditions may be appended to this decision), "**Not Pass**" (the Chair's report should specify whether the student is required to retake all or part of the examination, list any additional requirements, and state the exact timeline for completion of requirements to achieve a "Pass") or "**Fail**". If a unanimous decision takes the form of "Not Pass" or "Fail", the Chair of the QE committee must include in its report a specific statement, agreed to by all members of the committee, explaining its decision and must inform the student of its decision. Technically, a unanimous committee is making a recommendation to the Administrative Committee of the Graduate Council; however, the Administrative Committee has delegated authority to make a decision to a unanimous committee. The decision of a unanimous committee may be changed only for cause, e.g. procedural error or probable bias, or in details of the conditions attached to a "Not Pass" decision.

After a second examination, a vote of "Not Pass" is unacceptable; only "Pass" or "Fail" is recognized. Only one retake of the qualifying examination is allowed.

If, after due deliberation, it becomes evident that the committee cannot reach a unanimous decision, the Chair shall inform the student that the committee is divided. Chairs of divided committees shall be especially careful to inform the student that (i) the majority and minority are making recommendations, (ii) that the recommendations will be subject to further review, (iii) and that the Administrative Committee of the Graduate Council will make the decision as to future action. The Chair shall also notify the Dean of Graduate Studies that the Committee is divided and shall forward to the Dean separate written reports from the majority and minority of the committee with their specific evaluations of the student's performance on the examination and recommendations for further action by the Administrative Committee. The Dean will forward information from the committee to the Administrative Committee for review and final decision (GC1998-01 (rev.07)). The Administrative Committee may, at its discretion, request individual statements from members of the examining committee and will consider a written statement from the student if one is submitted. While the deliberations of the examining committee are confidential, student records, such as written reports from committee members, are by law available to the student.

In all cases, the Chair of the examining committee is responsible for reporting the result and supplying

other information to the Graduate Council as required by this policy statement. Qualifying Examination reports must be filed within 72 hours of the completion of the examination. The Dean of Graduate Studies shall inform the student in writing of the outcome of the exam.

Blanket Exception for an External Member on the QE Committee

Graduate programs can request a blanket exception to the policy of including an outside member on each student's qualifying examination. Such exceptions shall require clear justification. One possible justification for such a request is that the membership of a large program is not dominated by any single department, but instead draws a super-majority of its members from many different departments. If the program is dominated by a single department, blanket exceptions will not be granted. Requests will be reviewed and granted or denied by the Graduate Council's Administrative Committee.

Requests must include the following:

1. A faculty member list sorted by departmental affiliation.
2. A statement guaranteeing the program will recommend appropriate QE committee compositions. Appropriate compositions are those that are not drawn from a single department, and ensure that a student's breadth of knowledge will be examined. The Graduate Adviser will make certain that each committee is appropriately composed before signing the *Application for Qualifying Exam*, and students should be advised accordingly.

When the program having an exception provides a suggestion of committee membership to the Dean of Graduate Studies, each member should be listed with their home department (and not the name of the program) so that the appropriate committee makeup can be assessed.

If a program revises their degree requirements to change from five to four required committee members, it must file a new request for a blanket exception.

Requests should be addressed to the Chair of the Graduate Council, c/o the Graduate Council Analyst. <https://academicssenate.ucdavis.edu/about/contact>