

DLSPH

Doctor of Philosophy Social and Behavioural Health Sciences

Qualifying Examination – Detailed Description

Note: these guidelines were edited in February 2017 for clarification

Overview

The qualifying exam (QE) is a “Departmental Exam” required by the program; as such it must be evaluated by members of the school’s graduate faculty. It should demonstrate the student’s capacity for independent scholarly work and creativity, ability to theorize a topic using a variety of approaches, ability to critically assess related empirical literature, and from these propose theoretically and methodologically sophisticated and consistent research questions that would advance the topic area and may be used for the dissertation. Through this process, the student will demonstrate capacity to identify, synthesize, and critique the literature within their chosen topic area.

The qualifying exam consists of: i) a written paper and ii) an oral presentation of the paper.

Principles

A number of principles are adopted that will guide the format and approach of the qualifying exam.

1. Recognizing that prior theoretical understanding and positions shape research questions, the SBHS QE encourages students to identify a broad topic/problem framing, explore relevant theoretical perspectives and related empirical approaches, and propose one or more specific research questions which have the potential of making a significant contribution to the area of study and could form the basis for their dissertation proposal.
2. The examination, unique to each student, will focus on a problem statement posed by the student. In addition to the framing of the problem, the examination will establish the student’s competence within a (sub)field of social and behavioural sciences. The scope of the QE should be broader than a specific research question (i.e., broader than the research question around which the dissertation proposal will be subsequently written).
3. The process and product should contribute to a final thesis proposal, but would not be a replacement for a thesis proposal or proposal defense.

Purpose of the Qualifying Examination

The qualifying exam should demonstrate the student’s capacity for independent scholarly work and creativity, ability to theorize a topic using a variety of approaches, ability to critically assess related empirical literature, and from these propose theoretically and methodologically sophisticated and consistent research questions that may be used for the dissertation. The examination will occur after all required course work has been completed and prior to proceeding on thesis work. Under certain circumstances, exception to all course completion before the QE examination may be granted, only by approval of the PhD Program Director. Successful passing of the written and oral QE is part of achieving a “PhD Candidacy,” after which students will be

able to proceed with their thesis work. Students who fail their QE may re-sit the QE one more time, and must do so within 3 months of the date of the first examination within the period required for achieving candidacy (see *the possible outcomes of the examination* section).

Supervisor and Supervisory Committee roles during the QE

It is expected that the student, under the guidance/in consultation with their supervisor, will form a supervisory committee prior to starting the Qualifying Examination process, i.e., within the first 12 months of registration in the PhD program. The student's supervisor has a key role in the qualifying examination. The supervisory committee will have an active role in defining the scope of the examination, along with the supervisor.

The preparation of the QE is envisaged as part of the learning experience of the student. The student is expected to meet with their supervisor once every quarter before the start of the QE process and at least 2-3 times, or more frequently if necessary, during the preparation of the outline of the QE to discuss the scope, direction and content. The supervisory committee should meet at least twice with the student during this period. The supervisor and committee members will assist in ensuring that there is breadth in the proposed theory and methods related to the theories to be reviewed. Once the outline has been approved, the student is expected to write the paper independent of the supervisor and the committee (i.e., questions of clarification of process may be entertained, but supervisor/committee will not comment on drafts).

Timeline

- The Qualifying Exam takes place after all required coursework has been completed and prior to the beginning of the thesis work. In rare exceptions, students may defend their QE before completion of all required coursework, only with a prior approval of the PhD Program Director.
- The preparation for the Exam should be initiated in the summer of the first year and no later than 12 months after entry into the PhD program and be completed by no later than 24 months from the program start.
- It is expected that students will complete the process of preparing an outline for the examination paper and writing the paper within a 5-month period. The oral examination should follow two weeks after submission of the paper to the examination committee. A suggested schedule is as follows: preparation of the outline (3 months), preparation of the paper (2 months), and oral examination (1 month).
- Flex time students will be given a pro-rated timeline.
- It is understood that minor variations in the details, timing and manner in which the various steps are addressed or completed may occur.

Initiation of the Process

After the selection of a topic area and a preliminary review of the relevant literature, the student will develop an *outline* for the qualifying paper that addresses the focus, scope, and anticipated structure of the QE paper, as well as a proposed reading list. The outline should identify the issue, policy and/or problem and the theoretical approaches to be explored in the qualifying examination paper. The outline will also include a proposed reference list. This will be done in consultation with the supervisor and supervisory committee, who will advise the student on the scope and direction of the outline. The outline will be approved by the supervisor and committee members prior to proceeding on the development of the paper. Committee approval should be documented on the standard PhD Student Supervisory Committee Meeting form and submitted, together with a copy of the QE outline, to the SBHS administrative assistant at sbhs.dlsph@utoronto.ca. The outline should be no more than 10 pages in length plus references.

Qualifying Paper – Focus and Content

The maximum word count for the paper is 8000 words, excluding references, figures, tables and appendices. The final word count should be included at the top of the first page.

An introduction will provide a clear statement of the issue, policy or problem area which the student will examine and how it is relevant to public health. The introduction provides an overview of the selected topic along with a statement of the rationale for pursuing the topic of interest.

The paper will provide a concise statement of the focus within which the issue, policy or problem will be examined.

The paper will identify a number of theoretical perspectives from which the topic can be considered, and will more specifically examine 2 of these. It will situate the main theoretical perspectives within the broader domain of the field and will indicate what is to be excluded from the critical analysis and reasons for exclusion.

The paper will also critically examine several methodological approaches that have been applied when using the theoretical perspectives. The goal of this critical examination is to analyse and discuss the value, contribution and limitations of different empirical/methodological approaches to examine the proposed topic.

The paper will propose one or more feasible research questions, which might be undertaken in future study, and that arise from the broad consideration of the topic gained through the literature review, theories and methodologies.

In the paper the student will select a specific research question that appears to be promising and provide a rationale for the selection of this and describe an appropriate methodology. This should be the research question the student considers him/herself most likely to pursue in the dissertation.

The final paper will include a full reference list (not bibliography).

The approved outline for the paper is to be included as an appendix.

Submission of the Qualifying Paper

The student should inform the supervisor, the supervisory committee members and the program director when the paper will be ready for examination. The examination of the paper will be conducted by the supervisor and committee members, the program director or designate, and an examiner external to the committee. Following the submission of the final paper, there will be an oral examination.

Examiner

The supervisor, with agreement of supervisory committee members, should submit to the program director a list of potential examiners for approval. The examiner should be someone internal to the Division or School, with a substantive knowledge in the topic and/or theoretical approaches, considered to be at arm's length from the student and committee, and hold a graduate appointment in the Dalla Lana School of Public Health.

Scheduling of the Oral Examination

Once approved by the program director, the supervisor will secure an examiner for the exam, and will arrange a date and time for the oral examination when the student, and all parties concerned can be present. The SBHS administrative assistant (sbhs.dlsph@utoronto.ca) will assist in booking a room and the necessary equipment. Copies of the written paper should be provided to the supervisor and committee members, the program director or designate and the examiner at least 2 weeks prior to the date of the oral examination. The program director or designate, who will serve as a chair of the examination, will bring at the examination the [Record of Social and Behavioural Health Sciences PhD Qualifying Examination Form](#).

Oral Examination of the Qualifying Paper

Oral examinations typically last 90 minutes and consist of a presentation, oral examination and deliberation by the examination committee. The student will make a 20-minute presentation summarizing the main contents of the paper. Most students utilize a PowerPoint presentation. During the oral examination, the student will be asked questions by the examiners usually in the following order: examiner, program director or designate, supervisory committee members, and supervisor.

The program director or designate serves as chair of the examination committee. The supervisor is responsible for note taking and preparation of list of revisions, if required. All supervisory committee members should attend the oral examination.

a) At the Qualifying Exam there will be three votes:

1. Supervisor/committee (1 vote)
2. Program Director or designate (1 vote)
3. Examiner (1 vote)

b) The *decision* of the Qualifying Examination Committee is by simple majority. It should be based on the quality of the paper and the student's presentation and response to questions.

c) At the completion of the examination, the student will withdraw while the committee reaches its decision. The Qualifying Examination will be rated by the committee as pass or fail.

The possible outcomes of the examination are:

- i. *Pass - no revisions*. Suggestions for additional readings may be made; however no revisions are necessary to the qualifying paper.
- ii. *Pass - with revisions*. This may include recommendations for revision of the written paper and may also include requirements for additional reading. Emphasis here should be on revisions required to establish competence to proceed (as distinct from suggestions for future work (e.g. thesis proposal)). Written recommendations should be given to the student at the end of the defense. A revised paper, addressing the required revisions must be submitted to the supervisor and the thesis committee within one month of the oral examination. The supervisor and thesis committee should certify to the Program Director and the Graduate Chair that the agreed upon revisions have been made satisfactorily and submit a copy of the revised qualifying paper.
- iii. *Failure*. A failure on either of the two components of the examination (paper and presentation/examination) will require a re-examination. The student is permitted to re-sit the Qualifying Examination only one more time and must do so within 3 months of the date of the first examination, within the period required for achieving candidacy. Students must

leave the PhD program if they have a second failure or there is a passage of three months without re-examination (unless a time extension has been given based on medical or other compelling grounds). The composition of the re-examination committee should remain the same if at all possible. The Program Director, in consultation with the supervisor, will approve the replacement or additional members of the examination committee, if required.

The student will be informed of the decision of the Committee at the conclusion of the examination.

The chair of the examination will complete the Record of Social and Behavioural Health Sciences PhD Qualifying Examination Form, indicating the decision of the examination, revisions, if any are required, and in the case of a failure, provide an explanation and reasons for failure. The completed form should be delivered to the SBHS administrative assistant. A copy of the second page may be given to the student.