

## **The Social Work PhD Qualifying Examination**

The Qualifying Examination is an integral part of the program of doctoral study. It offers a process for the consolidation of knowledge, and a bridge into the preparation of the dissertation. The purpose of the qualifying examination is to provide each student with an opportunity to demonstrate that they have achieved both a breadth of knowledge in social work and a depth of knowledge in the chosen area of specialization within which it is expected that his or her dissertation will be located. It is designed to enable the student to demonstrate (1) a command of the broad field of inquiry, and (2) the connections between the intended dissertation and the structural approach to social work.

An example may help to illuminate. A student wishes to complete her dissertation on the connections between mental health and homelessness. For the purposes of the qualifying examination, the area of specialization is mental health and homelessness but the broad field of inquiry could be either mental health or housing. In some cases the student may want to take on both areas. So the qualifying examination is intended to permit the candidate to demonstrate the connections between structural social work and the dissertation topic (her area of specialization), and her knowledge of either of mental health or homelessness or both.

At the end of the qualifying examination process he or she will have had the opportunity to demonstrate both to themselves and to the committee that she or he has the knowledge and skills necessary to complete the independent research which is required in the preparation of the dissertation. As a consequence of focussing on structural social work as it relates to the broad field of inquiry and the area of specialization, the qualifying examination provides the doctoral student with an opportunity to develop areas of knowledge and skill which he or she can offer when it comes time to be applying for employment. Our expectation is that for many doctoral students their goal is to find employment in post-secondary education.

The social work qualifying examination takes place immediately following the completion of all course work. The following are the steps in the process leading up to the completion of the qualifying examination.

### **Step 1 Committee Members**

The members of the committee will **in normal circumstances** be the student's dissertation supervisor, one additional social work faculty member, and one additional faculty member who could also be from social work but could also be chosen from other units in the university. The list of members of the committee must be submitted to the Supervisor of Doctoral Studies for approval.

### **Step 2 The Reading List**

Each student will take the lead in preparing a brief description of the student's particular interests in the broad field (s) of inquiry and the area of specialization and the connections of the field and the area of specialization to structural social work (1 or 2 pages). This is followed by a reading list that guides the critical review of the social work literature in the student's broad field of

inquiry and area of specialization. The student will prepare a list of a minimum of 25 key scholarly readings which are representative of the broad field of inquiry, the area of specialization and the connections to structural social work (to include books, journal articles, chapters, reports). At least half of the readings chosen must be scholarly books, original and interpretive texts. This list will form the basis of his or her preparation for the qualifying examination. Each member of the committee will have the opportunity to contribute suggestions to the final list. The student will prepare a final version, in consultation with their supervisor, to be circulated to all committee members. The final list will require the approval of the members of the committee and the Doctoral Studies Supervisor.

### **Step 3 Format of the Examination**

Students can choose to undertake the qualifying examination in one of two possible formats. The options are:

- a. A take home paper, with questions assigned by the committee members who will arrive at the list of questions in a collaborative manner, facilitated by the student's doctoral studies supervisor. The paper will require students to select and provide answers to either 2 of 4 questions or 3 of 6 questions. The paper will normally be 25 pages or 10,000 words (excluding references) with a deadline that can vary from 3 days to 7 days;
- b. A critical review essay prepared by the student with an agreed length (normally 25 pages or 10,000 words) and deadline date. It should be framed by the line of inquiry which preceded the bibliography approved by the committee.

Both the take home paper and the review essay serve to test the student's ability to think critically about the issues in their board field of inquiry, their area of specialization and their relationship to structural social work however that is interpreted

While the Qualifying examination constitutes an independent piece of work, the student is encouraged to discuss the overall plan for the paper with his/or her supervisor.

The paper is submitted to the supervisor for approval. The supervisor examines the merits of the submission and either approves it for defence as presented or she/he may ask the student to rethink/revise some aspects of their work. While the supervisor provides this written feedback he or she does not provide any substantive or editorial comments on the body of the paper. Since this is an examination, the supervisor is limited to one review of the paper and one set of written comments.

When the paper is ready for defence, the Committee is expected to provide a written assessment of the examination to the candidate at least three days before the date of the oral examination. The date for the oral examination will be established by the Qualifying exam supervisor.

If the committee members are not satisfied that the written work has met the qualifying exam standard, then the oral defence will not proceed. The student re-registers in the fall term and submits the examination at the end of the term and plans on the defence in the winter term. Students have a maximum of five terms from the initial registration in the PhD program to complete the qualifying examination. (See the attached table of significant dates.)

#### **Step 4 The Oral Defence**

Upon completion of the written examination, all students are required to defend their work in an oral examination. Whether or not a student is ready for oral defence is the decision of the student's doctoral studies supervisor, in consultation with committee members who have read the written exam. The oral defence is closed to the student and his/her examining committee and the Chair. During the defence, questions may arise related to the student's written work as well as any of the 25 works cited on the student's reading list.

The defence date shall be set as soon as possible following agreement by the committee that the qualifying exam is ready for examination. An oral defence is normally arranged within two weeks following submission of the qualifying examination paper. The thesis supervisor will assist the student in preparing for the defence process. The oral defence is normally up to 2 hours in duration. The Chair of the Examining Committee for the oral defense is the Supervisor of Doctoral Studies or someone designated by **that individual**.

At the beginning of the oral examination the chair will ask the candidate to make a presentation of approximately 15 to 20 minutes in duration outlining the contents of the written qualifying exam. Once this presentation has been completed, the chair will ask each member of the qualifying exam to ask questions of the student. The order will be determined by the Chair. In the first round, questions and responses are a dialogue between the candidate and the questioner. Each member will have approximately 15-20 minutes to ask questions at the discretion of the Chair. In the second round, members of the committee have the opportunity to ask follow up questions and to intervene in a broader discussion based on the student's reading list.

At the end of the oral examination the Chair of the Committee will ask the candidate to leave while the committee members have the opportunity to discuss the written examination submission and the candidate's oral defence. The committee may award the student one of the following grades: pass with distinction, pass, or fail. The candidate will then return and is notified of the result.

Successful completion of the qualifying examination will appear on the student's annual academic audit. The Chair of the committee will submit a report to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs stating the results. Copies of the qualifying examination and the written paper, as well as the results of the oral examination are placed in the student's file after the completion of the oral examination. In the event that a student is unsuccessful in the oral defence, he or she will have one additional opportunity to repeat the qualifying examination.

This additional examination will require the candidate to again choose one of the options under Step 3 and go through the process above for establishing a new examination.