

# Qualifying Exam Guidance Memo<sup>1</sup>

## Geography Graduate Group, UC Davis

### ***Ph.D. Qualifying Examination***

As part of the Ph.D. program requirements students are required to complete a Qualifying Examination. This exam tests the student's knowledge of Geography core competencies and aims to prepare them to teach a broad range of geography courses and to be able to conduct geographical research throughout their career.

In the GGG, there are three parts to the QE and advancement to candidacy: 1) the written exam over the reading lists, 2) the oral exam over the reading lists and the field statement and 3) the dissertation proposal presentation and defense. The proposal defense serves as an integral part of the research process as it provides an official platform and feedback mechanism for the research proposal. The field statement immediately precedes the QE (details below).

The GGG allows for some flexibility in developing Ph.D. courses of study and students typically work with faculty from a wide range of departments. With this in mind, GGG adheres to the following basic Qualifying Examination requirements:

- A Qualifying Examination must be administered by the student's Qualifying Examination Committee and passed according to the rules of Graduate Studies.
- The Qualifying Examination will be both oral and written and will cover general Geography, the student's area(s) of specialization, depth of knowledge in selected subfields in Geography, course preparation indicated in the student's program of study, and the area of proposed research.

### **Timeline for Qualifying Exam, Proposal Defense, and Preparation**

- 6 months before the qualifying exam: the student should form their committee, meet with their Qualifying Examination Committee Chair, begin discussions of reading lists, outlining the dissertation proposal, and set a tentative date for the exam.<sup>2</sup>
- 4 months before the qualifying exam: the student should circulate their complete reading list to the committee for comments and additions, continue work on proposal, set an exact date for the exam, and apply for approval with Graduate Studies.
- 2 - 3 months before the qualifying exam date: the student should finalize their reading list and circulate this final list to the committee.
- 2 months (or more) before the qualifying exam date: a complete draft of the dissertation proposal *and* field statement must be provided to the student's Major Professor (not the exam chair) for review and revision. The proposal must be approved by the Major Professor *before* being circulated to the committee.
- 1 month (or more) before the qualifying exam date: the Major Professor-approved proposal must be circulated to the entire dissertation committee. If the committee feels that the proposal requires revision before being suitable for the defense they may request revisions. Revisions must be made

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the current Graduate Student Handbook (subject to change as updates are approved). V. 10/23.

<sup>2</sup> The role of the QE Chair is to help organize the exam (and deadlines), solicit and collect the written exam questions, administer questions to the student, collect the responses and distribute the answers to committee members for their evaluation. The QE Chair also runs the exam on the day of the QE.

and the revised proposal must be provided to the committee at least two weeks before the qualifying exam date.

- 1 month (or more) before the qualifying exam date: the student should circulate their final field statement to the committee. The student should set aside time for answering the essay questions.
- 1 week before the qualifying exam date: the student must have completed the essay questions and returned responses to the QE exam chair.

#### **Ph.D. Qualifying Examination Committee**

- The Qualifying Examination committee must have at least five members.
- At least two members must represent the area of specialization.
- At least one member must represent areas of geography outside the student's area of specialization (to ensure knowledge of the breadth of the discipline).
- At least three members must be Geography Graduate Group members, and at least one member must be from outside the Geography Graduate Group. If there is no external member (i.e., if all belong to the GGG), a separate letter from a Graduate Advisor must be attached to the exam application stating why the committee composition is appropriate (usually based on breadth of disciplinary expertise of faculty).
- The Chair of the Qualifying Examination Committee must be a GGG member.
- Unlike in some other graduate groups, the dissertation chair (Major Professor) may, and typically does, serve on the qualifying examination committee. However, the Major Professor may not chair the Qualifying Examination committee.
- The student identifies five Qualifying Examination Committee members in consultation with their Major Professor and Graduate Advisor; this committee must be approved by the student's Graduate Advisor and then formally appointed by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

#### **Ph.D. Qualifying Examination Process**

1. Determining eligibility to take the Qualifying Examination: The student must have passed all required coursework prior to the exam. A GGG Graduate Advisor must approve the coursework form, and it must be attached to the Qualifying Examination application.<sup>3</sup>

*The student should start this process at least 6 months before they intend to take the exam, as scheduling the exam can be difficult. See recommended timeline above.*

2. Filing to take the Qualifying Examination: The student must file with Graduate Studies to take the Qualifying Examination, and Graduate Studies must approve the candidate for examination and their committee. The date of the exam must be listed on this form, and Graduate Studies must be notified if the date or the approved committee changes. Graduate Studies sends the approved paperwork for the exam to the Chair of the Qualifying Examination Committee via e-mail.
3. Developing a **reading list**: A reading list must be generated that includes input from the student and all of the committee members. Syllabi from graduate seminars taken by the student normally form part of the list and committee members usually have additions for the list. This list should be based on 3 or 4 major geography topics, each of which should have 3 or 4 subtopics (for a total of between 9 and 16 subtopic lists grouped by the major topics). The reading list should contain a minimum of 90 and no more than about 250 entries (books and articles) and formatted as a reference list using a recognized citation style and properly formatted by author last name and using hanging indents with carriage returns between entries, etc.
4. Developing a **field statement** and bibliography: The student should write a field statement that provides an analytical review of each of the major topic areas from the approved reading list. The

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<sup>3</sup> The QE will proceed only if the exam chair and the Major Professor agree that the student is adequately prepared.

field statement is a review of scholarly literature (an extended literature review) related to – but broader than – the student’s intended topic of Ph.D. research. The field statement should be a “state of the art” essay that provides an analytical summary, critically engages research and literature, demonstrates understanding of past and contemporary issues and debates, identifies lacunae, and suggests future research directions in the major topic areas. The field statement serves to define the student’s areas of expertise, establish a foundation for dissertation research, provide a base for future teaching, and guide the development of the student’s professional identity. It should include, and refer to, an extensive bibliography that includes much of the literature from the student’s reading list. The field statement is expected to be 9,000-15,000 words total (around 30-50 double spaced pages using a standard 12-point font with 1” margins, see the writing guidelines as detailed in the Handbook appendix A).<sup>4</sup>

5. The field statement must be turned in to the student's Major Professor for approval at least **two months** before the qualifying exam date. After being approved by the student's Major Professor, the field statement must be submitted to the entire committee at least one month before the qualifying exam date.
6. Developing a dissertation proposal: Writing of the dissertation proposal should begin early, with the Major Professor's guidance.<sup>5</sup> A complete, polished draft must be given to the student's Major Professor for approval at least **2 months** before the date of the proposal defense/exam. Once approved, the proposal must be sent to the committee at least one month before the exam date. A finalized, possibly revised proposal must be provided to the committee a minimum of 2 weeks before the exam date. The proposal must be **approved as defensible** for the proposal defense/qualifying exam by the Major Professor before circulation to the committee.

#### **QE Part One: Written Exam on Reading Lists:**

Each committee member writes 2 questions over the student's reading lists (not the proposal). The chair of the Qualifying Examination Committee collects these questions from the committee members and delivers them to the student two weeks before the oral exam. The student chooses one question from each committee member to answer with a written essay. Each of the 5 written essays should be 1,500- to 2,500-words (exclusive of references.) The student has one week (7 days) to answer, and submits the five completed essays to the chair of the exam committee at least one (1) full week before the date of the QE; the chair of the exam committee then immediately distributes the essays to the full committee. Written answers must follow the standard writing guidelines as detailed in the Handbook, appendix A.

**Note:** QE Parts Two and Three are conducted on the same day requiring a 3-4 hour block of time.

#### **QE Part Two: Oral Exam on Reading Lists and Field Statement:**

**Content:** The student is examined on their declared areas of geographic depth as indicated in the reading lists, their field statement, their written essays, and on geography as a discipline. This part of the qualifying exam has 3 primary purposes: 1) to ensure the student is adequately and broadly trained in geography in order to be able to teach effectively; 2) to ensure the student is adequately prepared to develop research projects with success; and 3) to ensure the student has adequate expertise in their designated area(s) of emphasis within geography.

**Format:** The format of the oral exam (which lasts 1.5 - 2 hours) is typically as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> For examples of excellent literature reviews published in the relevant literature, see Goldman & Schurman (2000) "Closing the Great Divide: New Social Theory on Society and Nature," *Annual Review of Sociology*, V. 26, pp. 563-584), and Bakker, K., & Bridge, G. (2006) "Material Worlds? Resource Geographies and the Matter of Nature," *Progress in Human Geography*, 30(1), 5-27.

<sup>5</sup> Details on how to write a strong proposal, see appendix C in the Handbook.

1. Committee meets without the student for 5 to 10 minutes to review exam format, discuss responses to written questions, and the student's overall performance in the program (as passing the exam is also a function of past performance and future potential). The written essays are also often discussed in part with the student during the exam.
2. The committee brings the student in and asks the student to spend no more than 5 to 10 minutes describing their academic history, career goals, etc. This serves as a warm-up period. The dissertation proposal is *not* discussed or presented here.
3. The group then poses questions to the student on the responses to the written questions, the field statement, and the specified areas of geographic depth from the reading lists, from each committee member. Each member will be given approximately 15 - 20 minutes to ask questions, with follow-up opportunities.
4. If everyone is satisfied that they have asked enough questions, the committee asks the student to step outside while it confers. This typically takes 15 minutes, as all committee members contribute to the discussion.
5. A short break is taken before the final part of the QE.

### **QE Part Three: Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal Presentation and Defense:**

**Content:** Dissertation proposals are generally 20 to 30 pages (12-point font, double spaced, standard format) in length and contain introductory material, a working hypothesis or clear research problem, a relevant literature review, and a clear iteration of the research plan including details on methods, field sites, data sources, and modes of analysis, and a detailed chapter outline. The overall importance of the research problem must be made clear, as well as the broader implications. For more detailed information on how to write a strong proposal, see appendix C "Elements of a Dissertation Proposal" in the Handbook. Writing must follow the writing guidelines as detailed in appendix A in the Handbook.

**Format:** The format of the proposal defense (which lasts 1.5 - 2 hours) is typically as follows:

- a. Committee meets without the student for a few minutes to review defense format and discuss the student's overall performance in preparing for research.
- b. The committee brings the student in, and the student is given 15 to 20 minutes to present the dissertation proposal. This should be well organized and presented in a style similar to a conference presentation. The student may use slides and professional visual materials.
- c. The committee then asks questions on the proposal, which typically lasts 1 - 1.5 hours. Each member will be given approximately 15 - 20 minutes to ask questions, with follow-up opportunities.
- d. If everyone is satisfied that they have asked enough questions, the committee asks the student to step outside while it confers. This typically takes 15 minutes, as all committee members contribute to the discussion.
- e. Finally, the student is brought back in and told the outcome of the QE. Relevant paperwork is signed, including the Advancement to Candidacy Form signed by the committee chair and given to the student, and the Qualifying Exam Report/Outcome Form that is given to the Graduate Program Coordinator and sent to Graduate Studies.

**NOTE:** Students should coordinate with their Major Professor about when to begin work on the **IRB** (Institutional Review Board) training and application if their research requires approval. This is often done directly after advancement to candidacy if not before. See <https://research.ucdavis.edu/policiescompliance/irb-admin/>