QUALIFYING EXAMINATION FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

The Qualifying Examination (QE) functions as a threshold in students’ pathway through the doctoral program. The QE requires students to demonstrate their ability to identify, synthesize, and critique foundational concepts and theories in relation to a significant educational issue. In this respect, the QE has two primary functions:

a) to demonstrate and apply knowledge gained from doctoral courses, and

b) to lay the groundwork for designing and conducting dissertation research.

Successful completion of the QE enables the student to proceed with confidence to the dissertation phase of the doctoral program.

Qualifying Examination Characteristics
The QE provides a formal opportunity for students to demonstrate competency in the following areas:

1) an articulation of a foundational theory or framework that informs a significant educational issue; and

2) a review and critique of relevant research/policy literature.

The topic selected for the QE should hold strong interest for the student and may have been explored in previous doctoral coursework. While most students will continue to refine and develop the topic for use in the dissertation proposal, some students may elect to modify or change the topic after completion of the qualifying exam.

Qualifying Examination: The Issues
The Qualifying Exam will be comprised of two inter-related papers focused on a topic of professional educational significance. Each paper is expected to be 20-25 pages in length (at least 6000 words minimum) and adhere to current APA formatting and reference requirements. A unified reference list will accompany both papers.

Students will write the QE papers following the guidelines below. Ideally, there will be a natural coherence between the two papers that enriches the student’s thinking and informs the design of the student’s future research.
Question 1. Theoretical Traditions and Frameworks
*How does a substantive theoretical framework or a broad philosophical paradigm inform a significant educational issue?*

Focusing on a significant issue in education, write a paper that engages with a theory\(^1\) that provides a foundation or framework for your thinking about the issue. Address the following:

- Describe the foundations/origins/history of the theory, using major author(s) and their contributions to the theory;
- Explain the key principles and assumptions of the theory;
- Critique the theory in relation to educational inquiry; and
- Evaluate the theory’s implications for serving as a framework or foundation for understanding and analyzing a research topic.

---

**Question 2. The Research/Policy Literature**
*What is the historical and current body of scholarship that surrounds a significant issue in education?*

Focusing on a significant issue in education, review the relevant research or policy\(^3\) literature. Prepare a review of the literature that synthesizes, critiques, and evaluates the historical and current scholarship in the field. Address the following:

- Describe the broad context (legal/political/institutional) of the issue;
- Synthesize the major trends, findings, and debates in the historical/contemporary scholarship;
- Critique the strengths, weakness, and gaps in the body of scholarship;
- Analyze how the scholarship frames and shapes the issue for educational practitioners, with particular concern for social justice;
- Provide suggestions and implications for future inquiry.

---

\(^1\) Theoretical traditions range from mid- to macro-levels. *Mid-level theories* are discipline-based and conceptually oriented; examples are, but not limited to, the following: theories of adult learning, theories of transformative leadership, theories of college student identity development, theories of resilience, theories of language acquisition, evaluation theories, etc. *Macro-level theories* are broad philosophical paradigms; examples are, but not limited to, the following: social constructionism, positivism/post-positivism, pragmatism, feminism, interpretivism, poststructuralism, etc.

\(^3\) Examples of policy are, but not limited to, the Read to Achieve legislation, the Race to the Top initiative, North Carolina teacher evaluation policies, policies that influence culturally and linguistically diverse students, policies that attempt to impact academic achievement, etc.
Qualifying Exam Timeframe
The specific timing for completing the QE is variable. A student must have completed at least 30 credit hours in the doctoral core curriculum before writing a qualifying exam. In some cases, a doctoral student may wish to write the QE in parallel with completion of a final course. In most cases, however, students will begin the QE after completing all required doctoral coursework (including electives and internship).

Before commencing with the QE, students will submit a brief (2-3 paragraph) abstract of the proposed QE topic and consult with the Director of the Doctoral Program and/or the Student Advisor for topic approval. The student may consult with other faculty members regarding the general research topic or literature during preparation of the QE papers, but faculty members should not be expected to edit or provide specific feedback on draft QE papers. The QE is intended to assess a student’s ability to continue with dissertation research; therefore, the QE must reflect the student’s own independent work. As suggested above, a student may tap assignments completed during previous coursework to inform the development of the QE.

In ALL cases, regardless of when the student begins work on the qualifying exam, the QE must be formally completed by the end of the first full academic term (fall/spring) following completion of required doctoral coursework.

The QE papers must be submitted to the Qualifying Exam Review Committee (QERC) using a designated online platform no later than November 1 for the Fall semester and April 1 for the Spring semester. Submissions by this date will enable the QERC to complete a review and any required follow-up by the end of that semester.

Students may also submit their QE papers earlier in the semester. For example, a student could work on the QE over the summer and then submit the completed QE in mid-August at the beginning of the fall semester. Generally, QE papers will not be reviewed during the summer (from mid-May through mid-August) unless specific arrangements have been made with the Doctoral Program Director.

Failure to meet the required deadlines will typically result in an “unacceptable” rating of the QE (as noted below). Due to unexpected life events or circumstances, a student may request a modification to this timeframe. Such a modification must be discussed and documented by the student and Doctoral Program Director in advance of the deadline.

QE Review Committee and QE Assessment
The QE Review Committee (QERC) will complete an assessment of the QE approximately 2-3 weeks after submission. Upon approval, students will be able to move forward from the QE to the proposal stage quickly after completion of their doctoral coursework.

The Qualifying Exam Review Committee (QERC) will consist of 2 members of the doctoral faculty, one of whom will be the Doctoral Program Director or Doctoral Research Coordinator. The QERC will evaluate the QE using a rubric available to all students in advance. The rubric will facilitate an evaluation of each QE paper as falling into one of three ratings: excellent, acceptable, or unacceptable.
The two members of the QERC will discuss their individual ratings to determine a summary rating for each QE paper. If there is substantive disagreement between the 2 reviewers, the Doctoral Program Director (or another designated doctoral faculty member) will be asked to review the QE independently and facilitate further discussion of a summary rating.

Review of the Qualify Exam will result in one of the following outcomes:

1) Both QE papers rated as **Excellent/Acceptable**. The student passes the qualifying exam.

2) One QE paper is rated as **Excellent/Acceptable**; the other paper is rated as **Unacceptable**. The student is allowed 2 weeks to make revisions to the unacceptable paper. The revised paper must be submitted to the Doctoral Program Director, Research Coordinator, or faculty member for final approval.

3) Both QE papers are rated as **Unacceptable**. In this (rare) case, the student is required to meet together with the Doctoral Program Director and another faculty member to determine the student’s interest and ability to continue in the doctoral program. The student will be asked to develop an Action Plan to address the deficiencies in the qualifying exam and revise both papers with a 6-week period. The papers will be resubmitted and reviewed by the QERC.

**After Passing the QE**

Once a student has passed the qualifying exam, the doctoral program will register the student for GRD 7989 (“holding course”). In order to maintain continuous registration, students will remain enrolled in this non-credit, fee-bearing course each academic term (including summer) until completing an approved dissertation proposal and enrolling in EDL 7999 (dissertation credits).

**Failure to Pass the QE**

If, after the steps noted above, the student fails to produce a QE that meets the acceptable standards within the required timeline, the student will be deemed to fail the Qualifying Exam. As a consequence, a student will not be able to advance to candidacy and will be expected to withdraw from the Doctoral Program.

A student has the right to appeal, as noted in the [Graduate Bulletin](#).

**Implementation**

The new QE format will be required of all students who complete coursework in 2016 or later. In 2015, students will have the option of either working within the previous QE guidelines or adopting the new QE format.

Especially for students who have finished coursework and have not yet begun work on the QE, the Doctoral Program strongly encourages adoption of the new format.

*Regardless of the format, all students who have completed coursework before August 1, 2014 will be required to complete the QE by November 1, 2015.*