In 2016, oral exam format changed to reflect our concern that students were often left flailing and paralyzed after their exams and unable to begin work on dissertation. This reformatting included eliminating areas of redundancy in the testing structure and the foregrounding of early stages of dissertation research in what used to be a two-part Exam. In the old format, students seemed to be tested on areas that had already been covered extensively in the First Exam: after extensive consultation with faculty and students, the Executive Committee decided that it was time to shorten the time to degree by reducing redundancies and encouraging students to investigate specifics topics that were of interest for their Dissertation research.

As it now stands, the first part of the exam is more in-depth and structured in a way to encourage students to reflect on the necessary background research they will be conducting for their dissertation and a way of focusing their interests. Instead of covering wide sections of the national literature in which each student specializes, the first part now is designed, in consultation with the Executive Officer and three examiners, to cover three areas that the candidate deems necessary for his/her dissertation research. As a result, the student comes out of the exam with a much clearer idea of his/her dissertation topic, which makes for a quicker and smoother transition to Level III.

The second part has been replaced by the Prospectus Examination which allows for an early intervention from the entire presumptive dissertation committee and forces students to begin the writing process at a much earlier stage. Two weeks before the exam, students are now expected to submit to their dissertation committee (the dissertation director and two readers) a 10-page prospectus and 20 pages of a dissertation chapter. Prior to these changes, all prospectuses were read and approved by a Prospectus Committee, which did not meet with the individual students. The new format, requiring an assessment directly by the committee that will eventually read the entire thesis, allows an early joint intervention of the entire committee, which is thus tasked with assessing the viability of the project since its inception. This is particularly beneficial because, in our conversation with faculty and students, we gathered that while writing their dissertation students received feedback almost exclusively by their Director, and had very little input from their second and third reader until their defense. In this new format, all three committee members are directly involved from the very beginning, and have a very clear sense of the student’s project. Although this change is fairly recent, we have already seen that students’ anxieties are significantly alleviated, and that their communication with the entire committee is considerably stronger. We believe that these two changes will not only speed the time to degree, but they will also provide steadier mentorship for students at a critical stage in their academic career.

In the coming years, our program will assess how well the new structure of the oral examination followed by the Prospectus examination is preparing students to take the next step in their degree, namely to choose a topic, form a committee, and write the dissertation.
Early feedback from students and faculty seems to point that this new structure not only promotes better communication and faster transition from Orals to Dissertation, but also seems to allow students to write their dissertation with less anxiety and in more timely fashion.