First and Second Examination

FIRST EXAMINATION LEARNING GOALS

On successful completion of the First Examination, students are expected:

1. to be developing a breadth of knowledge of philosophy and its history
   Assessment: Successful completion of the first part of the distribution requirements, which require a student to take courses across the field of philosophy
2. to have a depth of knowledge in a topic in philosophy and its history
   Assessment: Passing the First Qualifying Paper
3. to be developing the ability to present and defend a philosophical position in oral argument
   Assessment: Passing the First Year Seminar; successful completion of the first part of the distribution requirements
4. to be able to write a short paper (5000 words) at the level of professional philosophy
   Assessment: Passing the First Qualifying Paper; successful completion of the first part of the distribution requirements
5. to be developing the ability to conduct sustained research on philosophical topics
   Assessment: Passing the First Qualifying Paper

SECOND EXAMINATION LEARNING GOALS

On successful completion of the Second Examination, students are expected:

1. to have a breadth of knowledge of philosophy and its history
   Assessment: Successful completion of the distribution requirements, which require a student to take courses across the field of philosophy.
2. to have a depth of knowledge in a further topic in philosophy and its history
   Assessment: Passing the Second Qualifying Paper (on a different topic from that of the First Qualifying Paper)
3. to be further developing the ability to present and defend a philosophical position in oral argument
   Assessment: Successful completion of the distribution requirements
4. to be able to write a long paper (7500 words), at the level of professional philosophy
   Assessment: Passing the Second Qualifying Paper
5. to be further developing the ability to conduct sustained research on philosophical topics
   Assessment: Passing the Second Qualifying Paper
After extensive discussion with faculty and students, these new requirements for First and Second Examination were introduced in Fall 2009:

First Examination: A student in the PhD program in Philosophy passes first examination upon completion of (i) First-Year Seminar; (ii) First Qualifying Paper; (iii) one course in each group, A to E.

Second Examination: A student in the PhD program in Philosophy passes Second Examination upon completion of (i) Second Qualifying Paper; (ii) remaining distribution requirements.

Distribution requirements replaced the former system of required ‘core’ courses, and qualifying papers at fixed points in a student’s career replaced written comprehensive examinations that were taken at times chosen by the student. The first qualifying paper, 5000 words in length, is due on the day before the first day of classes of the Spring semester in the student’s second year; the second qualifying paper, 7500 words in length, is due on the day before the first day of classes of the Spring semester in the student’s third year.

The most significant change to the First and Second Examination is the introduction of qualifying papers. Students prepare for these papers by registering their topic and agreed supervisor with the Qualifying Paper Coordinator (QPC) early in the semester prior to the due date of the paper. The student receives extensive feedback from the supervisor, who works with the student to develop the paper into a polished piece of work that could ideally be developed into a conference paper or publication. When the QPC receives the student paper, he or she appoints an examiner expert in the subject area and blind to the student and supervisor. Both the supervisor and examiner write detailed reports justifying their decision to pass or fail the student, edited portions of which are later made available to the student. If both supervisor and examiner pass, the student passes; if there is disagreement, the QPC appoints an additional examiner, whose vote usually decides the matter—although the QPC will on occasion appoint an additional examiner or examiners if the case is sufficiently borderline or ambiguous. When additional examiners are appointed, reports are shared between supervisor and examiners to see if an agreed grade can be negotiated. A special faculty panel helps to adjudicate the final decision when there is continued disagreement between examiners.

Our original pilot study confirmed that our new system of qualifying papers had two advantages over our older system comprehensive exams: they facilitated the acceleration of time to degree by removing written examinations that were perceived as obstacles to smooth transition from coursework to dissertation, and served as more effective benchmarks for progress in the program, by providing students with extensive feedback about their progress directly relevant to their dissertation and professional development, especially in the area of conference presentations and published papers.

Our follow up study this year focused upon how effectively we thought our system of
qualifying papers was satisfying our learning goals of having students write papers at the level of professional philosophy based upon sustained research that demonstrated depth of philosophical knowledge. We believe that our first year seminar and distribution requirements adequately satisfy the remaining learning goals of developing the ability to present and defend a philosophical position in oral argument and developing a breadth of knowledge of philosophy and its history.

In evaluating the effectiveness of our qualifying papers in attaining their stated learning goals we conducted an analysis of pass and failure rates and estimation of the number of qualifying papers that were turned into conference papers, journal articles and dissertation chapters.

After extensive review, our curriculum committee produced a revision of all our documents relating to qualifying papers [Guide to Students, Guide to Supervisors, Handbook Information on Qualifying Papers, Guide to QP1 Examiners, Guide to QP2 examiners], which was then approved by our executive committee.

Of the sixty students who took the first qualifying paper between 2010 and 2013 twelve failed; nine passed on their second attempt; one left the program after their first failure; one failed the second and third attempt and left the program; one is currently resubmitting.

Of the fifty students who took the second qualifying paper between 2010 and 2013 twelve failed; seven passed on their second attempt; one passed on their third attempt; one failed on first attempt and left program; one failed on second attempt and left program; one is resubmitting; one is resubmitting after second fail.

These failure rates are in line with program expectations, and all the students who withdrew from the program did so for independent reasons (leaving New York, medical problems, etc.), and many were technical failures (that is, failure to submit a qualifying paper by the due date). However, we hope to reduce our repeated failure rate by requiring students who have failed their qualifying papers to consult with their advisor to improve their repeated papers.

As evidence that the qualifying papers are succeeding in preparing students to write papers at the level of professional philosophy, ten students turned their first qualifying papers into conference papers, three into publications, and one has a paper currently under review; nine students turned their second qualifying paper into conference papers, four into publications, and five have papers currently under review/revise and resubmit. These numbers are almost certainly underreported (since our student survey reported 50% who put their QP1 to further use and 62% who put their QP2 to further use) and we hope to improve upon this success rate by requiring students who successfully pass their qualifying papers to meet with their advisors to discuss potential ways in which the paper might be turned into a conference paper, publication or dissertation chapter.

We conducted surveys of both faculty and students on what they thought were the strengths and weaknesses of the present system. The faculty survey included questions
for faculty about increasing in the word length of the first qualifying paper from 5,000 to 7,000 words (76.19% against; 24% for), whether the recommended due dates for first drafts and abstracts should be changed to an earlier date (89.47% for; 10.53% against) and whether blinds should be lifted for examiners willing to do so (50% for; 50% against). The student survey included questions about how helpful they found qualifying paper supervision (some dissatisfaction), how useful they found blind examiner feedback (considerable dissatisfaction), how divergent they found examiner feedback (some concern) and how helpful they thought it would be to have the blinds lifted (some support). As a result of these findings, we have decided to recommend that first drafts of qualifying papers be submitted to supervisors by the end of November, with abstracts submitted to the Qualifying Paper Coordinator by December 15, and to keep the 5,000 word requirement for the first qualifying paper. We have also decided to clarify criteria for passing the qualifying papers by working this into our handbook statement and guides to supervisors, students and examiners. In particular we will specify that both supervisors and examiners should write reports that justify their decision to pass or fail, with some indication of how well or badly the student passed or failed, to improve on the feedback that we are now requiring successful and unsuccessful candidates to discuss with their supervisor.

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