Philosophy Program Review of Learning Outcomes

PhD Program: First and Second Examination Qualifying Papers:

In 2011 the Philosophy PhD program introduced First and Second Qualifying Papers—required for First and Second Examination (respectively)—to replace its former Comprehensive Examinations. In our first evaluation of this change, the qualifying papers were judged to have achieved their primary goal, which was to reduce the time between the completion of coursework and advancement to candidacy/proposal defense. Students would regularly take their comprehensive exams after they had completed their coursework, and would then spend a year (or more) preparing for them, which seriously impeded the timely development of their proposal defense. Under our present system, the First Qualifying Paper (5000 words in length), must be submitted at the beginning of the Spring semester in the student’s second year; the Second Qualifying Paper (7,500 words in length) must be submitted at the beginning of the Spring semester in the student’s third year, which means that both requirements are normally satisfied (unless the student fails one or both) by the time the student has completed their coursework. However, the qualifying papers were not only introduced to help accelerate time to degree, but also to provide early preparation for conference presentations and academic journal publications, since they are written in accord with the professional requirements of academic journal publications.

When a student decides on a topic for a qualifying paper and finds a faculty member willing to serve as advisor for their paper, the two meet regularly to assess the student’s progress, until the student is ready to submit the paper for review. On the basis of an abstract of the paper forwarded to the Qualifying Paper Coordinator (QPC), the QPC secures the service of another faculty member to serve as an anonymous reviewer who prepares a report on the paper and assigns a grade of pass or fail. The advisor also assigns a grade of pass or fail to the paper. If both agree on a pass, the student passes their qualifying paper. If adviser and reviewer disagree upon the grade, their reasons for their assessment of the paper are communicated to each other by the QPC in an attempt to reach a negotiated agreement on the final grade. When this fails to be the case, a second and sometimes third reader is appointed until the majority agrees upon a final grade.

This year the Curriculum and Examination Committee (C&EC) decided to determine how well our qualifying papers satisfy the learning outcome specified in our 2018 PhD learning outcomes spreadsheet, namely to demonstrate ‘ability to write at the level of professional philosophy’, while also gaining feedback from both faculty and students on what they thought were the strengths and weakness of our present system of qualifying papers. To this end we distributed questionnaires to both faculty and students, which in the case of students included a question about whether they had developed their qualifying papers into conference presentations or publications. With respect to this last question, which was a direct measure of the stated learning outcome, of the 28 students who responded to the questionnaire, 17 had developed one of their qualifying papers into conference papers, and 9 had developed one of their qualifying papers into publications in refereed journals. Others reported that they were planning to do so, had papers under review, or had incorporated material from one of their qualifying papers into a dissertation...
chapter. While we have reasons to suspect underreporting (based upon our end of year conference and publication listings in our annual newsletter), we consider this to be strong evidence that the qualifying papers are achieving their desired learning outcome.

With respect to faculty and student responses to questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the qualifying papers, both faculty and students expressed general satisfaction with this form of assessment. Most considered them a useful exercise that enforced a more disciplined approach to writing academic papers and facilitated professional development. Students especially appreciated the ability to receive critical feedback from both their advisor and the QPC while writing the paper, and from the blind anonymous reader on completion of the paper, which provided a simulacrum of the journal review process.

There were a number of suggestions for improvement. While most advisors met with their advisees regularly to produce revised drafts, others adopted a more hands off approach, leaving the student to work on the paper and only signing off on the final draft. Similarly, while most anonymous readers wrote reasonably detailed critical responses with suggestions for improving the paper (for both passing and failing papers), others submitted only cursory comments or marginal remarks.

The C&EC will recommend to the Executive Committee that the QPC encourage advising faculty to spend a reasonable amount of time meeting with their student to help them improve their drafts, and that the QPC encourage anonymous reviewers to produce at least two to three paragraphs of constructive critical analysis of the paper.

A number of faculty and students suggested that it would be useful if the identity of the reader could be revealed after the student had passed their qualifying paper, so that they could benefit from a meeting with the reader to discuss their comments. The C&EC agreed to recommend this to the Executive Committee, on condition that such an arrangement would be mediated by the QPC when a reader voluntarily agreed to it.

Some faculty and students suggested that there should be more than one advisor or more than one reader for each qualifying paper. While recognizing that this would be of benefit to students, the C&EC thought that this would put too much pressure on our already overstretched faculty advising resources. The committee did, however, note that it is entirely appropriate for any advisor or student to seek input from another faculty member (or student) on their qualifying paper.

Faculty and students expressed some concern about the ambiguity of the grading criteria for the qualifying papers. Although the general learning outcome is ‘to demonstrate the necessary skills for conducting sustained research and writing at the level of professional philosophy,’ these necessary skills are explicated in terms of the format of a journal article, leading students to not unreasonably suppose that qualifying papers are adjudicated to the standard of an accepted journal article. To obviate this confusion, the C&EC will recommend to the Executive Committee that the passing criteria be specified in terms of a judgment that the paper could be worked up to the level of a publishable paper or a chapter in an approved dissertation.
MA Review

The C&EC decided to evaluate the ability of our current MA program to ‘prepare students for admission to PhD programs,’ one of the learning outcomes specified in our 2018 Learning Outcomes Spreadsheet. Students in the MA and PhD students share the same course offerings (except for the PhD proseminar), and comparison of the grades of our current MA and PhD students showed them to be of near equivalent standard, with a preponderance of A grades and only the rare B+. The C&EC judged that our current coursework successfully prepares students for coursework in PhD programs.

The C&EC did identify one serious weakness of our current MA program, which is the absence of any thesis or capstone requirement—our current program requires only 9 graduate courses. A variety of proposals were proposed and rejected, including a capstone course with different faculty participating each week, judged to be too difficult to reproduce on a regular basis; and a thesis, judged to be too demanding of our faculty given their already substantial commitment to advising and evaluating qualifying papers. A single qualifying paper was rejected for similar reasons, but a variant of this proposal was accepted by the C&EC, and will be recommended to the Executive Committee. Each student would be required to write a 5000 paper (inclusive of references) under the supervision of an advisor designed to serve as a possible writing sample for applications to PhD programs in philosophy.

Curriculum and Examinations Committee
PhD/MA Program in Philosophy