

QE Guidelines & Information Sessions

Graduate programs offered written guidance and information sessions to help prepare graduate students for the qualifying exam. Written documentation included checklists for how to schedule and prepare for the exam, as well as what to expect during the exam. Information sessions included an overview of the written resources, as well as access to graduate student and faculty panels. [Sample QE Guidelines & Information Sessions](#).

Student/Faculty Feedback

The feedback emphasized a real need for additional guidance and advising for the qualifying exam within graduate programs. Graduate students expressed not knowing what is required during the qualifying exam and not receiving adequate advising or mentorship on how to prepare for the exam. Students indicated their biggest challenges with the qualifying exam were:

"I do not know what exemplar QEs look like nor have a road map for how to get there."

"(My biggest challenge is) the lack of knowledge of what the QE encompasses, the lack of communication from folks on what the QE is, what the process is, etc. Also, there isn't much structure to actually get started with the QE and I definitely think the department can learn... how to better organize and structure the program to help students meet milestones in a timely manner without so much ambiguity."

"The expectations and 'criteria' seem to vary greatly between faculty members...The decision making process can be prone to implicit biases...Such uncertainties of expectations are (a) major source of stress, especially for minorities and students who need support the most, especially during stressful times like this past year. This source of stress can definitely be mitigated prior to and during the exam with proper communication and a clear rubric."

After receiving guidance materials and attending an information session, a majority (97%) said their understanding of the qualifying exam improved. Graduate students appreciated a complete overview of what a qualifying exam entails, access to panels with graduate students who passed their exam, advice from faculty, timeline/flowchart materials, and an open discussion forum. A majority of those surveyed recommended the graduate program offer the qualifying guidance and information sessions again in future years.

"The participation of both graduate students and faculty added depth in demystifying myths and making the QE process clearer."

Students did recommend that programs offer information sessions early in the program and consider strategic times of year to offer them. Many also felt it would have been helpful to incorporate example qualifying exams into the session and ensure representation of all sub-fields and quantitative/qualitative approaches to the exam.

These resources resulted in an illuminating dialogue between faculty and graduate students, particularly about how the qualifying exam can meet the individual goals and needs of the student.

“It is especially important that departments begin acknowledging that many PhD students are not intending to become professors/academia, and for these students the expectations at the QE ought to be different (less paper/author regurgitation capabilities and more ability to frame research in the context of the world/economics/politics/social issues as well as other relevant areas. In other words, the QE should be a more dynamic exam that shifts and adapts to the students' goals.”

“I hope we prioritize our efforts to support not just the 'average' group of students, but those who are in need of support the most; the end of the spectrum, which usually overlaps with first-gen, minorities, underrepresented, international students whose English is not a native language. To improve diversity, equity and inclusion in sciences, we need to change how we 'qualify' and provide support to colleagues and trainees who would become the future members of our community.”

Faculty also provided feedback that there can be a lack of recognition for advising students for the qualifying examination.

“Preparing for the QE means that I have to meet with the examinee at least three times and then I have to read and comment on the proposal. This is not really a challenge; it is doable and I enjoy working with individual students. The problem is that there is no reward or recognition for doing this well. If anything, the recognition is that more students ask me to be in their committee, which does not make it better. As an ally of students, I have always felt unappreciated in this university. Yet, I participated in many exams and worked really hard to get students prepared for the QE.”

Summary

Graduate students need formal guidance and advising on how to prepare for their qualifying exams and should not solely rely on word of mouth from fellow graduate students as they approach this critical milestone. Graduate programs should provide graduate students with explicit written steps and expectations for the exam. An information session is also helpful for giving students the ability to ask questions and hear from experienced faculty and students for advice.

The discussions that resulted from these resources revealed the importance of providing qualifying exam guidance directly to the faculty as well as the graduate students. Faculty will benefit from defining the qualifying exam within their discipline (in a changing academic and professional landscape) and creating clear procedures for conducting and evaluating a qualifying exam. A shared understanding of the purpose and goals of the qualifying exam can better help graduate students prepare for this milestone, which enhances their ability to pass their exam and empowers them for their academic and career endeavors. Standard rubrics and procedures can also avoid bias during the exam, a reality that disproportionately impacts students of color, international students, and women.

Graduate programs should recognize and reward faculty who provide excellence in mentoring and advising for the qualifying exam. These faculty provide a great service to graduate education and should be celebrated and rewarded.