Title: Doctoral Research Degree Programs
Category: Academic Affairs
Responsible Cabinet Member: Provost

Purpose: This policy establishes the institutional academic requirements governing the administration and completion of doctoral degree programs at the University of Kentucky. It ensures consistent academic standards, rigorous graduate education and compliance with institutional, state and national accreditation requirements. The policy supports the University's mission to advance original scholarship, cutting-edge research, intellectual leadership and contributions to knowledge by defining expectations for program structure, faculty mentorship and supervision, student progression through candidacy and dissertation stages and degree completion. The Provost (or designee) is responsible for interpretation of this policy in collaboration with the academic colleges and graduate programs. Individual doctoral programs may establish additional academic requirements that are consistent with this policy and approved through the University's academic governance processes.

Definitions:

- Qualifying Exam (QE): The examination used to assess whether a doctoral student has acquired the disciplinary knowledge and research readiness necessary to advance toward candidacy.
- Advancement to Candidacy: Formal recognition that a doctoral student has successfully completed the QE, required coursework and all institutional requirements necessary to begin dissertation research.
- Dissertation: An original scholarly work demonstrating the student's ability to conduct independent research that contributes new knowledge or creative scholarship appropriate to the discipline.
- Graduate Faculty: Members of the University faculty who have been appointed to the Graduate Faculty in accordance with University policies and are authorized to perform graduate faculty responsibilities, including teaching graduate courses, directing theses and dissertations, serving on graduate advisory committees, mentoring graduate students and participating in graduate education as appropriate to their appointment.
- Continuous Enrollment: A student's ongoing enrollment status, maintained through required registration during applicable academic terms, to preserve active progress toward the doctoral degree and access to University resources until all degree requirements are completed, except during an approved leave of absence or other authorized interruption.
- XXX-757: Students who must complete all coursework and requirements before challenging their QE must register for one semester of 757 Qualifying

Exam (QE) Residency in anticipation of completing the QE during the semester. A student who is preparing to take the QE (and has completed all required pre-QE coursework) should enroll in XXX-757 for the semester in which the exam is scheduled. Like 767, this two-credit hour course counts as full-time. The Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) is responsible for confirming the student's plans, as the course is generally nonrepeatable. Should the student fail the exam or postpone due to lack of preparation, they must enroll for nine (9) credits of additional coursework in the next semester. The course is graded "S" (exam passed) or "UN" (exam failed/postponed). Should a student postpone the exam due to extenuating circumstances as approved by the DGS, the course is graded as an "I." In this case, the DGS may petition the graduate school to allow a second semester of 757.

- XXX-767: 767 Dissertation Residency Credit is the University's designated dissertation residency course for doctoral students who have successfully completed the QE and is a two-credit hour course. Two semesters of enrollment in 767 satisfies the doctoral dissertation residency and post-qualifying continuous enrollment requirements established by policy. Except as otherwise expressly authorized by policy, no other course may be substituted for 767 to satisfy these requirements.
  When a new graduate degree program is approved, the establishment of the 767 course is automatic and does not need to be submitted as such through the course approval process.
  Students enrolled in 757 who pass their QE, prior to the University drop/add deadline, may drop 757 and add 767 to count toward the minimum two required semesters. Once the drop/add period ends, students may not change from 757 to 767.

Policy Statement: The University of Kentucky awards doctoral degrees to students who demonstrate advanced disciplinary knowledge in a major field, breadth in a minor or related area (where required), the capacity to conduct independent, original scholarly research or creative work appropriate to the discipline. This policy outlines standards for program curriculum, advisory committee formation, examination procedures and time-to-degree expectations for Ph.D. programs.

Each doctoral program shall maintain approved program guidance or a graduate student handbook describing program-specific academic requirements, milestones, examination procedures, dissertation expectations, annual progress review processes, timelines and other implementation requirements. Program guidance shall be consistent with this policy, other applicable University policies and the approved curriculum. Where a conflict exists, institutional policy shall govern.

Program Structure and Degree Requirements

Doctoral degrees require a minimum of 36 credit hours of graduate coursework or equivalent approved academic preparation prior to the qualifying examination. The doctoral curricula shall include advanced graduate coursework, independent scholarship, seminars and research experiences appropriate to the discipline and approved curriculum. An awarded master's degree may satisfy up to 18 hours of this requirement, subject to program approval. A master's degree is not required for admission to a doctoral program unless specified by the approved program requirements. Doctoral students shall maintain continuous enrollment in accordance with the University's Continuous Enrollment Policy. Failure to maintain enrollment may require reapplication for admission and payment of retroactive tuition for intervening terms.

Doctoral curricula shall demonstrate progressive intellectual rigor, increasing scholarly independence and advanced disciplinary mastery as students progress through the program. Programs shall provide sufficient depth and breadth of study to prepare students for successful completion of the QE, advancement to candidacy and independent dissertation research. Graduate coursework may include 600- and 700-level courses, as appropriate to the approved curriculum and disciplinary expectations. Guidance for doctoral programs include 40-50% at the 600 level and 50-60% at the 700 level. Specific curricular requirements shall be published by each doctoral program and approved through the University's curriculum governance process.

Major Field Core Requirements: The major field constitutes the student's primary area of scholarly specialization and provides the disciplinary knowledge, theoretical foundation, research methodology and advanced study necessary for doctoral-level scholarship. The major field curriculum shall provide sufficient depth in theory, methodology and contemporary scholarship to prepare students for independent research and successful completion of the QE. Programs may establish additional discipline-specific requirements consistent with approved curricula and accreditation or licensure standards, where applicable.

Minor or Related Area Requirements: Programs may require completion of a minor, related field, cognate area or other approved breadth requirement to provide interdisciplinary knowledge or complementary expertise appropriate to the discipline. Requirements shall be established by the academic program and approved through the University's curriculum approval process. The advisory committee shall approve the student's plan of study, using the University-approved program guidance, to ensure academic coherence and appropriate integration of the major and any required minor or related area. Programs that do not require a formal minor shall ensure that students demonstrate appropriate breadth through other approved curricular experiences.

Advisory Committee (Composition, Authority and Responsibilities)

Each doctoral student shall have an advisory committee established by the academic program in accordance with this policy. The advisory committee serves as the principal academic body

responsible for oversight of the student's doctoral education and shall provide guidance, mentorship and evaluation throughout the student's program.

The advisory committee shall:

- Approve the student's program of study, where applicable;
- Evaluate the student's academic and research progress;
- Determine the student's readiness for the QE;
- Supervise dissertation research and scholarly development;
- Evaluate the dissertation and conduct the final examination; and
- Recommend successful completion of the doctoral degree requirements.

Composition:

- Consist of at least four (4) members of the Graduate Faculty;
- Include a committee chair or co-chairs who are members of the Graduate Faculty and are eligible to supervise doctoral research;
- Include faculty with expertise appropriate to the student's major field of study;
- Include any additional members required by program accreditation, disciplinary practice or approved program requirements

Committee Changes

- Changes to advisory committee membership may be made when necessary to support the student's academic progress or to address faculty availability, expertise, conflicts of interest or other academic considerations. Programs shall establish published procedures governing committee appointments, changes, resignations and replacements consistent with this policy.

Qualifying Exam(s)

Students shall successfully complete QE requirements established by the academic program to demonstrate mastery of foundational disciplinary knowledge, research methodology and readiness to undertake independent dissertation research. The QE shall normally occur following completion of the pre-qualifying residency requirement established by this policy. Students must complete the equivalent of two (2) years of residency (36 credit hours of graduate coursework) prior to the QE.

Some programs require more than 36 hours of graduate coursework prior to the QE. Programs shall publish approved QE procedures, evaluation criteria and remediation expectations in line with their approved program and university policy.

Qualifying Examination and Advancement to Candidacy

Doctoral students are eligible to take the QE when they have satisfied the program's published eligibility requirements, are in good standing, and have completed the institutional pre-qualifying requirements and have an approved advisory committee. Programs may permit students to complete the QE during the final semester of required coursework, provided all remaining coursework and other program requirements are completed prior to advancement to candidacy.

Failure of the Qualifying Examination

A student who does not pass the QE shall remain in pre-candidacy status and enroll in additional coursework in accordance with the University's Course Numbering and Continuous Enrollment policies. The timing and conditions for re-examination are determined by the program and approved by the appropriate academic authority.

Passing the Qualifying Examination with Outstanding Requirements

Successful completion of the QE does not, by itself, constitute advancement to candidacy. Students who pass the QE but have not successfully completed all required coursework or other program requirements may not advance to candidacy or enroll in dissertation research (XXX-767).

In such cases, the QE result remains valid; however, the student must:

- Remediate any deficiencies in coursework or other requirements; and
- Remain enrolled in coursework until all academic requirements for advancement to candidacy have been satisfied. If a student has already used one semester of XXX-757, the DGS may petition the graduate school for the student to enroll in a second semester of XXX-757.

Advancement to Candidacy

Advancement to candidacy is granted only after the student has:

- Passed the QE;
- Successfully completed all required coursework;
- Met all program and institutional requirements; and
- Satisfied institutional residency requirements.

Only upon advancement to candidacy may a student enroll in dissertation research (XXX-767).

“SI” and “UI” grades (see Grading Policy) must be removed prior to the QE and can only be changed to regular letter grades.

The results of the QE must be reported by the DGS to the Graduate School within 10 calendar days of its conclusion.

If the result is failure, the advisory committee determines the conditions to be met before another QE may be given. Programs shall establish published procedures governing QE outcomes, including conditions for re-examination, consistent with policy. A student may not attempt the QE more than twice. A third QE is not permitted. A student who does not successfully complete the QE remains in pre-candidacy status and may enroll in XXX-757 in accordance with the University's Continuous Enrollment and Course Numbering policies with approval of the DGS, or, if XXX-757 is exhausted, additional coursework until the QE is successfully completed or the student is otherwise separated from the program. Programs shall establish published procedures governing eligibility for re-examination consistent with policy.

Dissertation and Final Examination:

A doctoral research degree culminates in the successful completion of a dissertation demonstrating the student's ability to conduct independent, original scholarship or creative work that makes a significant contribution appropriate to the discipline. The dissertation shall reflect advanced disciplinary knowledge, rigorous methodology or creative practice, scholarly independence, and adherence to the University's standards for academic integrity and responsible conduct of research.

Each doctoral program shall establish and publish dissertation requirements, evaluation criteria and expectations appropriate to the discipline. Program requirements shall be consistent with this policy, institutional academic guidance and the approved curriculum.

The doctoral degree culminates in a final examination consisting of an oral defense of the dissertation before the student's advisory committee. The final examination evaluates the quality of the dissertation, the student's command of the field and the student's ability to defend the scholarly contribution and methodology of the research or creative work. Final examinations shall normally be conducted as public oral defenses. Programs may authorize exceptions only where necessary to protect confidential, proprietary, legally protected or otherwise sensitive information in accordance with institutional requirements.

The dissertation shall be distributed to all members of the advisory committee sufficiently in advance of the final examination to permit substantive review and feedback. Each doctoral program shall publish minimum review expectations consistent with institutional academic guidance. The advisory committee is responsible for determining that the dissertation satisfies the scholarly standards of the discipline and the requirements of the approved doctoral program. Approval of the dissertation signifies that the committee has determined the student has demonstrated the level of independent scholarship expected for conferral of the doctoral

degree. In all decisions, the majority opinion of the Graduate Faculty members of the advisory committee prevails. If the advisory committee is evenly divided, the candidate fails. In the event of failure, the advisory committee will establish the procedures and conditions under which the candidate may be re-examined. Should any vacancies on the committee occur between the two (2) final examinations, the advisor, with approval of the DGS, shall appoint replacements. A third final examination is not permitted.

Please note that all "SI" and "UI" grades (see Grading Policy) must be removed prior to the final examination and can only be changed to regular letter grades.

Residency and Time Limits

- **Pre-qualifying Residence**

  Prior to the QE, doctoral students shall complete the institutional pre-qualifying residency requirement, consisting of a minimum of 36 graduate credit hours or the equivalent academic preparation established through approved transfer or prior graduate coursework. Individual doctoral programs may require additional graduate coursework prior to eligibility for the QE.

  An awarded master's degree from the University or from another accredited school may satisfy 18 hours of this 36-hour pre-qualifying requirement, subject to program approval.

- **Pre-qualifying Time Limit**

  Students are required to take the QE within five (5) years of entry into the program. Extensions up to an additional three (3) years may be requested if there are extenuating circumstances through submission of a request form.

- **Post-qualifying Residence**
  Following advancement to candidacy, doctoral students shall enroll in XXX-767 Dissertation Residency Credit as the University's designated dissertation residency course.

  Students shall complete a minimum of two (2) semesters of XXX-767 prior to degree conferral. Enrollment in XXX-767 satisfies the institutional dissertation residency requirement and post-qualifying continuous enrollment requirement established by University policy.

  Except as expressly authorized by institutional policy or guidance, no other course may be substituted for XXX-767 to satisfy these requirements.

Students shall remain continuously enrolled following advancement to candidacy in accordance with the University's Continuous Enrollment Policy.

During dissertation residency, students remain under the academic supervision of the advisory committee and are expected to make satisfactory progress toward completion of the dissertation.

Summer Enrollment: Enrollment during the summer term is not required unless the student is completing a qualifying examination, defending the dissertation, required by the approved doctoral program, or otherwise required by institutional policy.

Programs with approved doctoral culminating experiences other than a traditional dissertation may establish alternative residency requirements through the University's curriculum approval process, provided they remain consistent with institutional policy.

- **Post-qualifying Time Limit**

  All degree requirements for the doctoral degree must be completed within five (5) years following the semester in which the candidate successfully completes the QE. Extensions up to an additional five (5) years may be requested for a total of 10 years.

  In special circumstances, an extension up to one (1) year may be requested by the DGS and approved according to University policy.

Assessment of Good Standing/Progress for Doctoral Students

Each doctoral program shall establish and publish standards for satisfactory academic and research progress that are consistent with this policy, the University's Academic Standing Policy and institutional academic guidance. Programs may establish additional discipline-specific progression requirements that do not conflict with institutional policy or approved institutional guidance. Each doctoral student's progress toward completion of the degree shall be formally evaluated at least annually by the advisory committee, graduate faculty of the program or other faculty body designated by the academic unit. The evaluation shall consider progress toward completion of coursework, examinations, dissertation research, scholarly development and other published program milestones.

Programs shall provide each doctoral student with feedback summarizing the annual evaluation, including any expectations, recommendations, deficiencies or required corrective actions.

Relationship to Academic Standing

A doctoral student's academic standing shall be determined in accordance with the University's Academic Standing Policy. Annual doctoral progress reviews may be used by the academic program in determining satisfactory academic progress and recommending academic standing actions consistent with institutional policy.

Doctoral students are expected to remain in good academic standing throughout enrollment in the program. Eligibility for advancement to candidacy, dissertation residency, final examination and degree conferral is governed by this policy together with the University's Academic Standing Policy.

Doctoral programs may establish additional academic progression requirements related to QEs, dissertation milestones, professional expectations, research competency or other discipline-specific requirements, provided they are consistent with this policy, institutional academic guidance and the approved curriculum.