Minimum requirements for qualifying examinations as an additional admission requirement for acceptance to a doctoral programme

Dear Sir or Madam,

The Doctoral Administration Office occasionally has to reject proposals for qualifying examinations, if in my view they do not meet the standards of fair, independent and open-outcome assessment. Without reference to any particular case, I would like to clarify my perceptions.

Adherence to the stipulation of Art. 4a) of the Implementation Provisions, which states that qualifying examinations may not be conducted by the thesis supervisor alone, is now well established. What I also see as unacceptable is when co-examiners are brought in who are dependent on said supervisor – i.e. if they are employed in the same Chair. In large-scale written examinations, on the other hand, I find it no problem if the doctoral supervisor is part of the examining body, because correction proceeds according to a uniform standard.

Experience has shown, however, that it is better if the supervisor is not involved in the qualifying examinations in any case. Every candidate makes mistakes in the exam situation which are not seen elsewhere, and it is no help to the relationship of trust – in particular where the doctoral student is involved in teaching – if the supervisor is a witness.

If the only qualifying examination is oral, I insist upon a minimum duration of 30 minutes – even if the minimum duration of the exam for Master’s degree students is only 20 minutes. I am aware that exam duration has a direct influence on faculty members’ total examination hours and has great significance for many examiners. However, failing a qualifying examination is generally more serious than failing a course in the Master’s degree programme, because the student can no longer change subjects. For this reason I feel that doctoral candidates deserve a somewhat longer assessment time; the more so as there are not many of them.

I am very critical of the practice of regarding semester performance and the results of end-of-semester examinations as additional admission requirements, and reserve the right to judge from case to case according to recent grades whether the criterion ‘open-outcome’ has been fulfilled.

I ask you to take the above remarks into consideration in your proposals for qualifying examinations.

Sincerely,

Prof. Thomas Vogel
Prrorector for Doctoral Studies