INSTITUTE OF
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UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
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CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING PhD THESIS

Although different examiners will adopt different methods of examining the thesis and for conducting the oral examination, there are some general criteria for evaluating PhD theses that may be useful for students to bear in mind.

1. **PRESENTATION AND CLARITY**
   o   The reader should be able to read the text without difficulty.
   o   The text should be clear and 'tell a story'.
   o   The submission should be 'user friendly'. The reader should be able to find his or her way around the submission, locating tables and figures, and being able to cross-reference with ease. A numbering system for chapters, sections, and, sometimes, paragraphs can be very helpful.
   o   The style should be economic without unnecessary duplication or repetition.
   o   The bibliography and/or reference list should be complete and accurate.
   o   It should be possible to gain easy access to tables and figures relating to particular passages in the text, and to examine both data and commentary without effort.
   o   The submission should be no longer than necessary. Typically this will mean 75-80,000 words for a PhD, with an absolute maximum of 100,000 words.

2. **INTEGRATION AND COHERENCE**

   There should be logical and rational links between the component parts of the thesis. In some cases coherence will be achieved by a series of empirical studies or analyses which build one upon the other. In other words, there will be an intellectual wholeness to the submission.

3. **CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE**

   A submission for a PhD should be approximately equivalent in quantity and quality to at least two articles of a standard acceptable to a fully refereed journal. Where candidates have already had portions of their doctoral work accepted for publication in such journals, this is prima facie evidence of an adequate standard. Alternatively, the submission should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of a book or research monograph which could meet the standards of an established academic publisher operating a system of critical peer review for book proposals and drafts.

4. **ORIGINALITY AND CREATIVITY**

   The research and the written submission should be the candidate's own work. However, the degree of independence shown may vary according to the research topic, since in some instances students will be working as part of a larger team, while in other instances they will be completely on their own. A candidate should show an appropriate level of independent working.

5. **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

Candidates should demonstrate that they have detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues. There should not be undue dependence on secondary sources.

The literature review should be more than a catalogue of the literature. It should contain a critical, analytic approach, with an understanding of sources of error and differences of opinion. The literature review should not be over-inclusive. It should not cover non-essential literature nor contain irrelevant digressions. Studies recognised as key or seminal [sic] in the field of enquiry should not be ignored. However, a student should not be penalized for omitting to review research published immediately before the thesis was submitted.

A good literature review will be succinct, penetrating and challenging to read.

6. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The literature review should have revealed some questions or issues which call for further investigation. Ideally, the problem to be tackled in the research should emerge naturally and inexorably from the literature review.

The research problem may arise as a result of past work which needs to be improved upon. It may be that there is a crucial test which will help to decide between competing theories. The candidate may:

- o be proposing a novel theoretical or methodological slant on a topic;
- o have created an interesting intellectual friction by bringing together hitherto unrelated fields or topics;
- o or have developed a new area of application for a method or theory.

A clear and succinct statement of the research problem should be made, together with a set of specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

There should be some sense that the problem which has been identified is worthwhile.

7. METHODS OF ENQUIRY ADOPTED

Since determination of the most appropriate methodology is not always a straightforward matter, candidates should justify the methods chosen, with an appropriate rationale in each case.

A project may have a mixture of methodologies, suited to the changing needs of the project as it develops. There may, for instance, be initial semi-structured interviews yielding qualitative data, which can be analysed in a sensitive fashion to yield the building blocks for a more quantitative approach. Or, alternatively, the student may start out with an established quantitative methodology, decide it is inappropriate, and then move to qualitative methods to elicit new questions or issues. There are many variants. Potential alternative methods should be rejected on the basis of a reasoned case.

Candidates should be able to demonstrate that the methods used have been chosen through a conscious process of deliberation; and that the criteria for, and advantages and disadvantages of, particular choices of method are well specified.

There should be a sense of planning. This should include a reasoned consideration of the analytic techniques that the methods chosen will require.

8. **ANALYSIS OF DATA**

   o The analytic methods used need to be justified and need to be shown to be sufficient for the task.
   o Any problems arising in the analysis should be recognised and tackled appropriately.
   o Candidates should show sensitivity to problems of reliability, measurement error and sources of bias.
   o Candidates should understand the assumptions behind the test or tests used.
   o Where appropriate, candidates should demonstrate imagination and creativity in identifying and analysing emergent properties of the data which may not have been foreseen.
   o The analyses should be clearly linked to the explicit hypotheses, predictions, or questions which formed part of the stated research problem.
   o Candidates should be able to demonstrate judgement in the presentation of key summary data within the body of the text, assigning primary data and data of secondary importance to appendices.
   o The data should be presented in a well-structured way, so that a clear presentational sequence unfolds.
   o In sum, candidates should be able to demonstrate WHY each particular analysis was conducted, HOW the analysis was done, and WHAT the analysis tells us about the data.

9. **DISCUSSION OF OUTCOMES**

   o The discussion should summarise, without undue repetition, what has been achieved in the research project.
   o It should evaluate the project's contribution to the research area.
   o Links should be drawn between the candidate's own work and the work reviewed in the literature review.
   o The main findings should be interpreted and related to theory (and practice where appropriate).
   o There should be reflection on the research process as a whole. This reveals what the candidate has learned during the course of the work.
   o In many cases it will be appropriate to include a section in which the candidate discusses the limitations of the research design and methodology in the light of knowledge acquired whilst undertaking the research, and outlines alternative or additional approaches which might be pursued.
   o There should be some pointers to future work, either by the candidate or by others.
   o An attempt should be made to identify issues that require further clarification.

http://www.ioe.ac.uk/doctoralschool/info-viva.htm
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