Thesis Regulations

Faculty of Religion and Theology

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Contents

0. Guide

This document explains the thesis regulations for the Bachelor's and Master's programmes in the Faculty of Theology at VU University Amsterdam, and for the faculty's joint Bachelor's programme with the Protestant Theological University. These regulations apply to the thesis component of all faculty programmes. Any differences between the Bachelor's, pre-Master's and Master's theses are specified; in all other cases, the thesis regulations outlined here apply to all of these programmes.

1. Preparations

1.1. What is a Thesis?

A thesis is a written report on a research project that each student conducts largely independently, though with some guidance from a supervisor. The thesis serves as a final testament to the student's mastery of his/her subject. For that reason, it should not contain any past projects or previously published articles. Students must use standard methods in applying the knowledge, understanding and skills they have gained to their discussion of clearly formulated and well-defined research goals and research questions.

The differences between theses at the Bachelor's and Master's levels are outlined below.[1]

a. *Scope.*[2]
   i. The Bachelor's thesis earns 12 EC (including the *Research Lab: Thesis Preparation* module) and generally contains between 7,000 and 10,000 words.
   ii. The pre-Master's thesis earns 12 EC (including the *Research Lab: Thesis Preparation* module) and generally contains between 7,000 and 10,000 words.[3]
   iii. The thesis for the one-year Master's programme earns 12 EC (excluding the *General Research Skills* module) and generally contains between 15,000 and 20,000 words.
   iv. The thesis for the Research Master's programme earns 30 EC (excluding the *Research Design* modules) and should contain no more than 50,000 words.
   v. The thesis for the three-year Master's programme earns 18 EC (excluding the *Research Skills* module) and should contain no more than 30,000 words.
b. *Complexity.* The Bachelor's thesis may apply knowledge in a singular context, and/or within one sub-discipline. Master's theses must span multiple contexts and specifically discuss interconnections with other sub-disciplines.

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[1] See also R. van der Rijst & R. Jacobi, *De verwevenheid van onderzoek en onderwijs in universitaire bacheloropleidingen (English:* The interconnection between research and education in university Bachelor's programmes); https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/16257/VanderRijstJacobi2010_TvHO.pdf?sequence=2 (26 June 2014).

[2] Including footnotes. Excluding attachments, but the thesis must be intelligible without the attachments. These can only be used for "proof", e.g. lists of texts or persons; interview questions; etc.

[3] In the rest of this document the pre-Master's thesis follows the rules of the Bachelor's thesis.

c. *Pre-formulated structure.* Bachelor's students may use structures, research questions and working methods that are pre-formulated primarily by their supervisors. For Master's theses, however, students must contribute these elements independently for the most part.

d. *Use of sources.* For Bachelor's theses, students may use textbooks in addition to scientific and primary sources. Textbooks are not permitted as sources for Master's theses (unless the textbook is in use as a primary source).

e. *Depth of discussion and conclusions.* Bachelor's theses offer information, ideas and solutions with their themes. In addition to these contents, Master's theses specify contrary considerations and the limitations of the solutions and themes they present.

f. *Writing skills.* Both Bachelor's and Master's theses must contain correct spelling, while Master's theses must also use clear, precise language to prevent uncertainties in interpretation.

g. *Independent work.* Bachelor's students work independently, but can still expect a fair amount of guidance from their supervisors. Master's students are expected to show great independence in their work. Students at both levels will be responsible for the entire course of their thesis projects.

h. *Originality*. Bachelor's theses present findings from literature and/or case studies in the light of an original perspective or new research question.[4] Master's theses make an original contribution to the development and/or application of existing ideas in the literature and/or case studies.

1.2. Educational Goals

In their theses, students are able to analyse a problem or phenomenon in the field of
theology and/or religious studies and to write a coherent, well-defined and methodologically sound report on it. The student:

a. shows the importance of the subject for the academic or religious discourse

b. formulates the research problem and a precise research question with appropriate subquestions

c. describes the research method(s) and sources

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[4] See, for example, B. Greetham, *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

d. gives a clear and relevant description of the results
e. analyses the results and comes to conclusions and implications of the material for the field of study
f. shows awareness of the distinction between data and judgment, as well as between mainstream and marginal voices in the research field
g. presents all of the above with sound arguments
h. presents all of the above at an appropriate level of writing
i. shows responsiblitity for the thesis trajectory, initiative and curiosity, and processes feedback

The Dublin Descriptors have been incorporated as follows: knowledge and understanding (b, d), applying knowledge and understanding (b, c, d), making judgments (a, e, f, g), communication (g, h), learning skills (c, i).

1.3. Thesis Admission Requirements
The student must be enrolled in the appropriate course Thesis.

Bachelor's programmes:
Barring exemptions granted by the Examination Board, students cannot enter the *Thesis Preparation* module, or start on the thesis itself, until they have completed all second-year courses. Students may only begin on the thesis once they have concluded the *Thesis Preparation* module.

Master's programmes:
Barring exemptions granted by the Examination Board, students cannot begin their thesis until they have completed the *Research Design* (Research Master), *Voorbereiding Scriptie* of *Research Design 2* (Divinity Master), or the first assignments of the *Thesis* course (One-year Master), i.e. until they have completed their research proposal and have received approval of the course coordinator and possible supervisor.

1.4. Exemptions
As laid down in Article 3.7 of the Academic and Examination Regulations (Dutch abbreviation OER) of the faculty, no exemptions will be granted for the thesis.

1.5. Language
The thesis is written in the language of the programme or the track. Exemptions can be granted by the Examination Board.

The thesis of the Research Master's students is written in English. The thesis of students in the one-year master and the international bachelor is

written in English, except for the tracks that are classified as Dutch. The thesis of students in the Dutch Bachelor and the Divinity Master is written in Dutch.

1.6. Choice of Topic
Thesis topics can be chosen in different ways:
   a. Each research group has a list of potential topics. These topics are ideally suited to the research interests of certain lecturers or faculty sections.
   b. Students may also choose their own topic, as close to the topics of the research group as possible.

The thesis supervisor is assigned to the student after submitting an initial, preliminary proposal. The supervisor supervises the student during the writing process. The assessor is assigned to the student after submitting a full thesis proposal, which will then be assessed by the second assessor. Afterwards, the final proposal will be submitted.

1.7 Thesis Supervisor and Second Assessor
The final thesis supervisor must have sufficient affinity with the subject and its scientific study. In special cases, the Examination Board may, at the student's request, appoint a person outside the faculty as final thesis supervisor. The final thesis supervisor is responsible for the level of the thesis design, the thesis and for the supervision process. The final thesis supervisor and second assessor must have a doctorate and be appointed as examiner by the Examination Board.

   Because our programmes do not provide education in quantitative research, such as statistics courses, it is only possible to graduate on quantitative research if the student can demonstrate that they are trained in quantitative research, for example by demonstrating that they have completed quantitative courses in psychology or sociology. The condition is that the final thesis supervisor is also qualitatively trained.

   If a thesis supervisor is not a native speaker of Dutch, the assessor must be one.

2. Overview of the Thesis Process and Supervision

2.1. Overview of the Thesis Process

2.1.1. Bachelor's Thesis

The thesis component begins in period 4 with the *Bachelor's Thesis Preparation* module. During this module, students draw up a thesis proposal, and start writing their thesis. The lecturer of this module assigns thesis supervisors and assessors.

During the *Bachelor's Thesis Preparation* module, students write a thesis proposal of roughly 1,000 words. The proposal must, at the very least, contain all the components listed below:

A. Fact Sheet
1. Name, student number, e-mail address
2. Name Bachelor program and the track
3. Provisional title
4. Name of the (intended) thesis supervisor
5. Name of the (intended) second assessor
6. Date

B. Research Topic
1. Introduction: "what's at stake"
2. Embedding the research in recent literature of the discipline
3. Problem definition
4. Main question and sub -questions
5. Objective of the research and relevance

C. Methods and Techniques
1. Type of research (descriptive, exploratory, comparative, evaluative, etc.)
2. Scope/delineation of the research
3. Research methodology

D. Theoretical Framework and Operationalisation

E. Provisional Chapter Classification

F. Data Management Plan

G. Planning of the Study

H. Bibliography

During the *Bachelor's Thesis Preparation* module, students should contact their supervisors to consult them about their topic choice and thesis

proposal. During this same module, students will also begin making other preparations for the thesis project itself. The study guide for the *Thesis Preparation* module explains how the work needs to be presented to complete this module successfully (draft version, literature report, etc.). Students will submit their thesis proposals and supplementary documents to the lecturer for the *Bachelor's Thesis Preparation* module. The lecturer will evaluate the students' thesis proposals based on the format (outlined above) to see if they meet the standard academic writing requirements (cf. academic skills).

At the same time, the student registers in OnStage, the thesis supervision programme of VU, and uploads the proposal and chapter(s) there. In OnStage, the thesis is completed, assessed and graded.

If a thesis proposal is inadequate, the lecturer will notify the student as swiftly as possible of the areas requiring improvement. This will be done no later than ten working days after receipt. The student should use that feedback to submit an improved proposal. Students will write their theses in period 6.

2.1.2. Master's Thesis

The thesis proposal process ends in period 3, and usually takes place in conjunction with the *General Research Skills*, *Research Design*, and *Voorbereiding scriptie* modules. Before or during this modules the student will compose a very short research proposal. During this modules this proposal will be complemented and corrected in the tutorials until is has reached a final, well-founded and coherent form. Students who want to take another thesis topic (e.g. for their Internship) after these modules will draw up their thesis proposal together with their thesis supervisors when they start their thesis project.

The student uploads a short thesis proposal in *OnStage* **before 1 March** of the academic year. Based on this, a thesis supervisor is assigned. The student can make one or more suggestions for a supervisor in the short thesis proposal. Under the supervision of the above-mentioned module teacher and the thesis supervisor, the short proposal is converted into a fully-fledged thesis proposal, as indicated below. That proposal will be submitted to *OnStage* before the end of the resit period 3 (i.e., **before 1 May** of the academic year). Then an assessor is assigned. If students have not submitted a proposal after the resit period of period 3, they will write their thesis in the following academic year.

The complete thesis proposal should contain, in the end, all the components listed below:

A. Fact Sheet
    a. Name and student number
    b. The specific master's programme and track for which the thesis is being written
    c. Research theme in one short phrase
    d. The (prospective) research team and first supervisor
    e. A possible second supervisor (if the thesis is really interdisciplinary)
    f. A possible first assessor

B. Background of Research and Researcher
    a. Introduction to the topic (research problem)
    b. Its relevance for society, academia, religion, (faith) communities, or a certain group of individuals: what gap(s) does this thesis intend to fill?
    c. Background/motivation for choosing the specific topic, including the questions whether you have a special wish for a certain outcome: how will you avoid being subjective? Or: how do you guarantee scrupulousness, reliability, impartiality, and independence in this specific investigation?
    d. Your own strong and weak points and their consequences for this investigation

C. Research Plan
    a. In case you authored a paper or thesis on this topic before? State the research question of your undergraduate thesis and explain how your current thesis will deepen and/or broaden your undergraduate thesis
    b. Brief survey of the most relevant scholarly literature: who has published on this topic; what are their key problems/questions; what methods were used; what positions have already been worked out. This survey must consist of the top 10 pieces of literature.
    c. Main research question in ***one sentence, concluding in a question mark***, preferably in the ABC format, introduced in (General) Research Skills or Research Design
    d. Determination of the kind of research question: descriptive, comparative, explanatory, evaluative, or prognostic
    e. Delimitation: what is the scope of your research and how do you delimit it to a workable size
    f. Sub-questions, necessary to answer the main research question
    g. Structure of your thesis: indicate your planned chapters and indicate which sub-question will be answered in which chapter
    h. Approach and/or method, including:
        1. determination of the kind of research method: qualitative or quantitative
        2. determination of the focus on textual, historical, systematic, or empirical, or a combination
        3. You can further narrow down your method by choosing a useful chapter of Michael Stausberg & Steven Engler, *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion (*London: Routledge, 2011), also to guide you with an eye to your approach and/or method
        4. any extraordinary requirements (travels, archives, library visits, etc.)
    i. Data management plan

> - how do you guarantee verifiability of your investigation = where do you store your original data in such a way that also your supervisor could check (if necessary) how you got from your original data to the text in your thesis?
> - how do you keep your data safe: think about backups of digital files
> - how do you keep your data private: think about digital protection. Think about European privacy rules. If you investigate privacy sensitive material, consult Appendix 1 of the Thesis Guidelines.
> - Do you need consent forms for interviews, surveys, focus groups or otherwise? Consult Appendix 1 of the Thesis Guidelines.
> j. Realistic planning
> k. Provisional bibliography

If a student's final thesis proposal is inadequate, the lecturer will inform the student as swiftly as possible of the areas requiring improvement. This will be done no later than ten working days following receipt of the proposal. The student should use that feedback to submit an improved proposal.

When the thesis supervisor has definitively approved the thesis proposal, a second assessor is assigned via *OnStage*. The second assessor provides comments on the thesis design within ten working days. The second assessor's comments on the thesis outline are processed by the student until the final version of the outline has been approved. Both the thesis supervisor and the second assessor must agree with the thesis structure. The student can then start working on the thesis.

2.2. Thesis Supervision

Every Bachelor's and Master's thesis must be assessed by (1) the supervisor and (2) a evaluator. Master supervisors and evaluators must have a doctorate. Only one of the two might come from another university/faculty.

Thesis supervisors for Bachelor's students are available for a total of five consultations of no more than one hour. Thesis supervisors for Master's students will provide a total of ten consultations spread throughout the supervisory period. These sessions will also be limited to a maximum duration of one hour.

Consultations between students and their thesis supervisors will focus on written submissions. Thesis supervisors will then provide verbal or written feedback on these submissions. If a submission fails to meet the minimum formal requirements (correctness in spelling, quotations and footnote citations), the thesis supervisor may return it with a request for the necessary improvements.

In July and August, students should take account of their thesis supervisors' holiday and conference planning. Students are not entitled to supervision during these months.

For Bachelor's students, the period of active thesis supervision lasts no longer than two months. For Master's students, that period has a five-month duration. The supervisory period begins on the date the supervisor approves the thesis structure. Once a student has used the maximum number of supervision hours or surpasses the duration of the supervision, the thesis supervisor is entitled to issue a final evaluation and withdraw as that student's supervisor. In that case, the thesis coordinator must be notified.

2.3. Form and Contents

Every thesis should, at the very least, contain the following components:
   a. a research problem and question;
   b. the student's own positionality;
   c. an explanation of the working method used;
   d. a critical discussion and evaluation of the literature and documentation relevant to the research question;
   e. an answer to the research question;
   f. well-founded conclusions regarding the research question;
   g. references and bibliographical information listed in keeping with the faculty's standard guidelines (see *Thesis Guide*).

In terms of structural contents, every thesis should include the following:
   a. *Title page*. In addition to the title, this page should list the student's name and student number. Other information to list here: the date of completion, the thesis supervisor's name as well as the second assessor's name, and the programme and track for which the thesis was written.
   b. *Abstract*. A short summary should follow the title page to offer readers an immediate overview of the research question, working method and conclusions of the thesis.
   c. *Table of contents.* This should list each section by page number.
   d. *List of abbreviations* for easy reference to frequent abbreviations in the thesis. Terms that occur only once in the thesis are best spelled out in full.
   e. *Introduction*. In every thesis, the table of contents should be followed by an introductory chapter. That chapter should present: (a) the focal problem or research question; (b) an account of the approach to the subject matter; and (c) a concise, but clear, overview of the contents.

f. *Chapters and sections*. It is recommended to divide the different sub-topics of the thesis into individual headings that are typographically distinguishable from the rest of the text. Chapter titles should appear in upper case letters. Titles of smaller sections should appear in underlined or bold font. Chapters should be numbered as 1, 2, 3, etc., and sections as 1.1, 1.2, 1.3... 2.1, 2.2, etc. At least one blank line should be inserted between different sections of the thesis.

g. *Paragraphs*. Avoid beginning every sentence on a new line. Instead, divide your text into paragraphs. There are two ways to separate paragraphs: with or without a blank line in between. If you do not use the blank line as a separator, use the tab key to indent the first line of each new paragraph.

h. *Footnotes*. Commentary that is added in notes throughout the thesis must be listed in consecutively numbered footnotes. The sources used should be cited in this manner. Students are responsible for using the faculty's writing guidelines for theses to cite their sources whenever they draw on the texts or ideas of others (see *Thesis Guide*).

i. *Conclusion*. The thesis closes with a conclusion chapter that follows the last chapter of the main body. The conclusion presents a brief summary of the contribution made by the thesis and answers each of the research questions addressed. This chapter may also make recommendations regarding future research.

j. *Literature list*. Every thesis must include a list of the literature consulted. This list should appear on the page following the conclusion. These literature lists in theses specify all of the works mentioned, quoted, paraphrased and consulted in alphabetical order (based on the author's last name). The titles are listed according to standard guidelines (see *Thesis Guide*). Title description information should be taken over carefully from the source's title page (not from the dust jacket, since the latter differs at times).

The following elements may also be included in a thesis:
a. *Illustrations*. Use photos and illustrations only as required by the text. Each illustration should be numbered, and appear with an explanatory caption and source reference.

b. *Tables and graphs*. Tables and graphs will be incomplete unless they appear with: (a) a number and title above the table or graph; (b) a legend of abbreviations; and (c) a caption underneath the table or graph serving as a source reference. If the information is entirely

new and is being published for the first time, the source reference requirement does not apply.

2.4. Co-Authoring

Students wishing to collaborate on a thesis project must apply in advance for permission from the Examination Board. Permission requests should include a joint thesis proposal by both students and a written letter of approval from their thesis supervisor.

Each student must make an independent, well-defined contribution to the thesis project's conceptual and theoretical component. The thesis itself should also specify each author's individual contribution to the entire thesis project. Both students will be personally responsible for making their individually assigned contributions and for ensuring overall cohesion in the project. Co-authored thesis projects are required to offer 50% to 100% more words than individually completed theses.

For co-authored theses at Bachelor's level, thesis supervisors are available for a total of five consultations of no more than two hours. At Master's level, the thesis supervisor will provide a maximum of fifteen one-hour consultations, held jointly with both students. Each student will receive their own, individual grade for the thesis.

2.5. Thesis Consisting of an Article Plus Explanation

Master students—especially those of the *Research Master*—may be helped in their career by making them acquainted with writing, editing and sending in an article. An academic article might therefore be delivered instead of a thesis. The student must hand in:

1. one article according to the norms of a chosen *scientific* journal, entirely as it would be submitted. The minimum number of words must surpass the 5000 words, unless this would be exceeding the norm of a very reputable journal. The article can be submitted to the journal editors, but acceptance is not relevant to the assessment of the thesis.
2. an account of the choices that are made in the article, because articles for journals must usually be shorter than a thesis and cannot contain all the necessary elements of a thesis. This account may include:
   a. the *status quaestionis* of the research problem;
   b. the explanation of methods and sources, if these could not be included in the article;
   c. the personal position of the student with regard to the topic of the article;

    d. an explanation to what extent the student did not consider counterarguments or dissenting opinions;

    e. other background information that would have been too extensive for an article.

Article and account together must not surpass the maximum number of words, as is indicated earlier in these regulations.

3. Final Phase

Students who have submitted their first and final proposals on time, write their thesis components and submit them via OnStage. Completion and grading also go via OnStage.

3.1. Cheating

The student will upload the final version of the thesis in OnStage, where it will be checked on plagiarism.

Submission of work for evaluation in a thesis project that uses – without the proper source citations - segments of literature, works by others, or segments of the student's own previous work will be called plagiarism and considered fraud. Use of false data for thesis research purposes will also be considered fraud. Thesis supervisors will report all fraud to the Examination Board, who will determine sanctions on a case-by-case basis.

3.2. Grading and Grading Matrix

The following requirements are pre-set for the thesis, but do not count for assessment and the height of the grade:

1. Presence of a correct title page, including the data of student and thesis;
2. Presence of the statement of originality and that of approval;
3. Correct spelling and grammar;
4. Correct length (see 1.1);
5. Correct references to used literature;
6. Neat appearance and layout.

The following criteria determine the grade (see Appendix 1: assessment matrix):

1. Status Quaestionis
2. Research questions
3. Methods and sources
4. Results
5. Discussion and conclusion
6. Positionality and dialogic competence
7. Scientific argumentation
8. Hermeneutics and context analysis
9. General writing quality
10. Self-direction and flexibility

A thesis that is submitted on time will be read and evaluated within twenty working days. In exceptional circumstances, the thesis supervisor

may petition the Examination Board for an extension of the allotted grading period. In that case, the student in question will receive a written notification explaining the reasons for the extension before the allotted period has passed.

Once the first supervisor has approved the thesis, it is submitted to the second assessor. If the thesis also meets his/her approval (possibly after requiring some final revisions by the student), the supervisor and evaluator fill in the grading matrix. The thesis coordinator derives the average of their individual grades to determine the final grade.

If there have been two thesis supervisors, their assessment will count for 50% of the final grade, while the assessment of the second assessor will also count for 50%.

If the individual marks differ by more than 2 points, the thesis coordinator will ask a third assessor via *OnStage* for a third assessment. The average of the three assessments then counts as the final grade. Every assessment carries equal weight.

When for a thesis the final mark after completion will be 6.0 or 9.0 or higher (in practice, therefore, with an average mark of the two assessors of 6.0 to 6.2 or 8.8 or above, because the Education Desk will round marks to wholes and halves), the thesis coordinator asks a third assessor who must check whether the grade is justified and properly justified in the grade form on OnStage..

Whatever the procedure, the students must pass all the elements of the thesis matrix on average.

3.3. Disputes

3.3.1. Dispute between Student and Supervisor

Whenever disputes arise between students and their thesis supervisors during thesis projects, the thesis coordinator will serve as a mediator. If necessary, the thesis coordinator can assign the student a different thesis supervisor.

When disputes stay unresolved even after the thesis coordinator's mediation, students may file a complaint with the Examination Board.

3.3.2. Dispute between Supervisor and Second Evaluator

Outlined below are the procedures for disputes between the thesis supervisor and second evaluator regarding the approval of a thesis structure and/or a thesis itself.

a. The thesis supervisor should report the matter to the thesis coordinator.
b. The thesis coordinator will find an independent third assessor.

c. If the third assessor's mediation does not resolve the dispute, the student may file a complaint with the Examination Board.

3.4. Final Phase

Students who fail twice on a thesis (first date and resit) start in the new academic year with a new subject and a new supervisor.

On or shortly after 1 September, the supervisors of all students who have not submitted anything after the provisional or final research proposal will be separated from their supervisors with an NS (= No Show). They must then submit a new provisional research proposal (or the same proposal) and a new thesis supervisor will be assigned. That can be the old thesis supervisor, if he has the time and wants, but it can also be a new supervisor.

For students who have not contacted their supervisor for more than 6 months, the right to be automatically supervised again by the same supervisor lapses in the future.

3.5. Copyrights and Public Access

In principle, students own the copyrights to their thesis. If their thesis is ever published (including in part), students are expected to specify the Bachelor's or Master's programme within VU University Amsterdam for which they wrote their thesis.

Students are asked to upload a digital version of their final thesis in Surf Sharekit. If students have founded objections against publishing their thesis in full, they can hand in a comprehensive summary.

If a student conducts his/her thesis research in an organization, that organization *cannot* be given any assurances of confidentiality in the publication of the thesis. However, a confidentiality alternative that may be acceptable in publication is the use of pseudonyms and other means of guarding anonymity.

3.6 Final Provisions

These regulations enter into effect on 1 September 2023. They will apply, wherever possible, to theses that were already started before that date. Decisions regarding situations not covered by the regulations outlined here will be made by the Faculty Board.

Appendix 1: Explanation of the Thesis Matrix

This is the explanation of the rubrics for assessing Bachelor's and Master's Theses. The rubrics themselves are available in OnStage and will be filled out there.

The rubrics are not based on the five Dublin descriptors because of several reasons. Yet, these descriptors can be linked to the ten criteria of the rubrics. The table below shows how the descriptors are integrated in the criteria:

	1. Up-to-date Knowledge and Understandding	2. Applying Knowledge and Understandding, Reasoning	3. Analyzing, Interpreting and Making Judgments	4. Communication with Specialists and Others	5. Lifelong Learning Skills
A. Status Quaestionis	x	x			
B. Research Question		x	x		x
C. Methods and Sources	x	x			x
D. Results		x	x	x	
E. Discussion and Conclusion	x		x	x	
F. Positionality and Dialogical Competentce	x	x	x	x	
G. Scientific Reasoning		x	x	x	x
H. Critical Hermeneutics		x	x		x
I. General Writing Quality		x		x	x
J. Self-Management		x			x

1. Use of the Rubrics

There are several ways to use the rubrics in the process of supervising and assessing theses, for example, instructive, formative and summative ways.

1.1. Instructive

Discuss in the first meeting with the student these rubrics. The student is then informed about the criteria of assessing. The student can also learn how the supervisor(s) interprets the ten criteria. The supervisor can mention the most important items and state when a criteria is met or not. To mention a few examples: extensive explanation of which methods are used and referring to methodological literature is very important for supervisors in the field of empirical research, while supervisors in a more philosophical or systematic field tend to stress the theological tradition and its literature.

1.2. Formative

Chapters or sections can be assessed by parts of these rubrics during the process of writing a thesis, for example use of sources, scientific reasoning or hermeneutics. These rubrics can be added to the remarks on the chapter, even if the rubrics are not filled in completely.

1.3. Summative

It is obligatory to use the rubrics in the final assessment. This must be done according to the protocol (see below). The supervisor must fill in the grades for the ten criteria. As important is it to fill in the boxes for remarks. Supervisors must describe their feedback in their own words, but remarks from the explanations below can also be used to reason why a certain grade is chosen.

1.4. Mind Calibration

If the thesis supervisor and the second assessor did not cooperate before, it is useful to discuss the rubrics together before the thesis trajectory starts. It is important to know if both assessors use the same definitions and methods.

2. Requirements for Approval

Some items are not mentioned in the rubrics, because we presuppose that these items are correctly done or integrated in the thesis – especially after three years of study. The supervisor must, of course, check whether these

requirements are met. If the thesis does not meet the following requirements, it has to be revised:

- The thesis starts with a correct title page, including the thesis' title and possible sub-title, the name of the student and his/her student number, the date of conclusion, the supervisor(s), the second assessor and the educational programme in which this thesis is written.
- The thesis is free of plagiarism: the first supervisor checks the thesis after the student has uploaded it on the OnStage site for theses.
- The thesis does not contain evident typos or grammatical errors.
- The layout of the thesis is neat and consistent.
- The thesis has an appropriate length.
- References to literature are included and are presented through all the text, footnotes and bibliography in a correct and consistent way.

3. Criteria and Norms

Find below the ten criteria including their norms, each on a new page. The left column always starts with "some of these are applicable". That means: the more items of that column are applicable, the higher the grade for this criterion. It is up to the supervisor to give the final judgment.

The criteria in orange more of less follow the order of the chapters of the thesis: from introduction to conclusion. The criteria in blue refer to other aspects of the thesis.

A. Status quaestionis

The student must demonstrate that the chosen topic is suitable for writing a thesis. The importance can be demonstrated by the absence of this subject or certain aspects of the subject within academic discourse, but also by the demand or necessity for groups in society. Even if it is a curiosity-driven study, it must be shown that this curiosity could not have been satisfied by reading a book or article on the subject.

Question: Does the introduction make a comprehensive argument for the significance of the student's research within the context of the current academic literature and/or for certain groups within society?

Characteristics: The thesis

- includes an adequate literature review that places the student's research within its appropriate scientific context
- describes what is known about the topic
- identifies the specific knowledge gaps that the student's project intends to address
- makes an argument for the broader significance of the student's research when addressing these gaps

Excellent			Acceptable		Requires major revision
Some of these are applicable: ● The introduction accurately reviews and summarizes relevant literature. ● The introduction demonstrates how the student's research fills a gap. ● The introduction presents a compelling argument for the broader significance, or scientific value of the student's research.			● The introduction presents a literature review that sufficiently and (partly) effectively places the student's research within the context of current / past academic literature. ● The introduction presents an argument for the broader significance and/or scientific value of the student's research. (However, this may be rather implicit.)		● The introduction does not present an adequate review of the literature. ● The introduction does not make sufficient connections between the published literature and the student's own research.
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

B. Research Question

Question: Does the introduction clearly articulate the student's research goals, the main research question and the sub-questions?

Characteristics: The thesis includes

- a description of the research problem.
- the research goal and the main research question.
- a logical analysis of the main research question into sub-questions.
- a conceptual framework in which key concepts are defined.

Excellent			Acceptable		Requires major revision
Some of these are applicable: ● The student explicitly and precisely articulates the goal, main question and sub-questions of the project. ● The research goal is demarcated and (somehow) ground-breaking. ● Research goal, main question and sub-questions are logically and explicitly interrelated. ● The central question and sub-questions reveal an innovative approach to the research goal. ● Research goal, main question and sub-questions are placed within a clear and relevant conceptual framework. Key concepts are well chosen and well defined.			● The student articulates the goal, the main question and the sub-questions of the project. ● The research goal is sufficiently demarcated and relevant to the field. ● Research goal, main question and sub-questions are interrelated, but some relations may be implicit and/or questionable. ● The introduction includes a conceptual framework that is relevant and (sufficiently) clearly explained. Key terms are generally well defined.		*Some of these are applicable:* ● The student does not explicitly articulate a goal, a main question or sub-questions. ● The research goal and/or main question are insufficiently demarcated. ● The research goal, the main question and/or the sub-questions do not match; answering the main question does not achieve the research goal or answering the sub-questions does not contribute to answering the main question. ● The conceptual framework is not clear; key terms are either ill-defined or not defined at all.
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

C. Methods and Sources

Methods and sources form one criterion together. An empirical research will stress method, its description and its application. A formal research will underline the correct sources, their use and their interpretation. Or a formal research will ask the question in which research tradition the thesis is written. Sometimes, a research knows both empirical and formal aspects.

> NOTE: This criterion is *not* about correct footnotes or a correct bibliography. Those are not part of the assessment, but are presupposed (see above, section 2). This criterion is about the logical coherence between research and methods or research and sources, and about the clear description of both.

Question: Are the methods and sources adequately described and referenced?

Characteristics: The thesis

- provides sufficient information on methods and data, for example by referring to methodological literature.
- provides enough information to secure that the right methods and sources are used.
- would allow someone to repeat the student's research.

Excellent	Acceptable	Requires major revision
Some of these are applicable: ● The methods used are embedded in methodological literature in an adequate and/or surprising manner OR the methods used are adequately and consistently applied. ● The methods used represent an adequate approach to the research goal. ● The student is precise in describing and referencing the methods and	● The methods used are connected to current methodological literature; ● The methods and selection of sources are adequate given the research goal. ● The student describes the research methods and sources, but may not consistently achieve an appropriate level (too much or too little detail). ● Primary religious sources are used, but the shift from an internal to an external	● Methods are not (adequately) connected to current methodological literature. ● The methods and/or the selection of data/sources are inadequate given the research goal. ● The student does not clearly describe his/her methods and/or data/sources, or does so incompletely, or superficially. ● Primary religious sources are used at random, as if every

data/sources used in the thesis work. ● The thesis refers to primary religious sources in a way that the reader knows when arguments from within the religious tradition are used and when from outside.			perspective is not indicated all the time.		reader has the same presuppositions.
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

D. Results (Verbal and Visual)

The matrix makes a distinction between the actual results and the discussion and conclusions. This fits both empirical and formal research, but the supervisor must decide in each case how to make a proper distinction between results proper and their discussion.

Besides the results the matrix asks for visual elements: illustrations or tables. These belong in an empirical environment, rather than in a formal one. Yet, you must ask yourself whether certain elements of your thesis can be presented best by a table or an illustration, for example a geographical map instead of a description of several geographical places, a table of opinions or arguments, a list of dates with important events, etc. Sometimes it is just pleasant to be addressed visually instead of verbally.

Question 1: Does the thesis provide a comprehensive, understandable and relevant description of the results (or lack of results)? *Characteristics of Results:* The thesis

- describes the findings of one's research.
- analyses the sources and findings accurately.
- interprets the results within a specific scientific context as discussed in the Introduction, in relation to the research problem and research question.
- does not lack important elements from the field of research.

Excellent	Acceptable	Requires major revision
Some of these are applicable: ● Results (or the lack of results) are clearly and completely described. ● Data analysis is accurate; the process of data analysis is examined. ● Results are related to the research problem and research question: the research question is	● Results are included, but lack depth. ● While the student explains the way the data is analysed, there is no critical reflection on the way the results are generated/found. ● While the results are related to the research problem and research question, the thesis does not succeed in achieving a strong coherence between these elements. ● The thesis presents a reasonable description and interpretation of the results, but may not	● The thesis lacks clear results, or results are only minimally (incompletely) described, or described inappropriately. ● The process of data analysis is not examined. ● No connection is made between the results, research problem and research question. ● No interpretation is included of the results.

answered on the basis of the findings. ● The student provides an insightful interpretation of the results and relates these results to the theoretical debate(s) to which the student aims to contribute.	(convincingly) explain the potential theoretical implications.	

Question 2: If visualizations are included, are they clear, effective and informative?

Characteristics of visualizations
- Appropriate choices should be made regarding how to display data (when to use a figure, what kind of figure to use and how to organize evidence within the figure or table).
- The visual elements of all tables and figures should be clear and easy to read or interpret.
- Figures and tables should include numbering and appropriate, descriptive titles;
- The legends should provide a clear description and source of each table or figure;
- Written results should explicitly refer to each table and figure.

Excellent	Acceptable	Requires major revision
Some of these are applicable: ● The student provides the most appropriate way to present his/her data: tables, graphs, photographs, figures and/or text. ● The visualizations are well constructed, correct and unambiguous. ● The visualizations have a number, a title, and where needed, a full legend.	● The data presented is clear and correct, but one or two visualizations are superfluous; or, one or two visualizations may have helped to clarify a paragraph. ● The visualizations are well-constructed, generally correct and almost unambiguous. ● The visualizations have a full legend where needed, but one or two numbers or titles are absent. ● The visualizations presented are clear, but	● Visualizations are superfluous or required visualizations are absent. ● Some visualizations are misleading, incorrect or unclear. ● Visualizations lack numbers, titles and legends. ● The majority of the visualizations are not referred to in the main text.

● Every visualization is referred to in the main text.			one or two of them are not referred to in the main text.		
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

E. Conclusions and Discussion

Empirical research usually separates the results from the discussion of the results. Formal research has difficulty to do so in separate chapters. It is up to the supervisors to indicate which parts of the thesis is 'results' and which part 'discussion'. In both cases, the conclusions belong to this criterion.

Question: Do the conclusions and discussion present logical argumentation regarding the implications of findings and possible future directions?

Characteristics: The conclusion

- briefly highlights major findings, acknowledging complexities of the data, as well as inconsistencies, limitations and alternative explanations.
- explicitly relates the implications of the research findings (results) within the academic context constructed in the Introduction. The narrative should draw connections between the student's research findings and other published work.
- the implications of negative results should be discussed.
- highlights how the project could lead to future research within the field and/or suggests additional research or alternative approaches. Theses with largely inconclusive or incomplete results should focus on the latter.
- if a student has inconclusive or incomplete results, the conclusion and discussion should focus on the limitations of the results and possible explanations.

Excellent	Acceptable	Requires major revision
Some of these are applicable: ● The thesis provides a compelling discussion of the implications of the findings (positive and negative), placing their importance within the context of current knowledge. ● When appropriate, the thesis recognizes the potential for multiple interpretations of the data.	● The thesis makes some attempts to discuss the implications of the findings, but may not explain their significance. ● The thesis may mention possible future studies without explaining how they could contribute significant new knowledge to the field.	● The thesis reiterates the findings from the results, but makes little or no attempt to discuss the implications of the findings. ● The thesis does not describe future directions for the project.

● The thesis includes a thorough consideration of possible future studies.					
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

F. Positionality and Dialogical Competency

Being dialogically competent means that students (1) are open about their own worldview, interpretations, wishes and norms during the entire writing process of the thesis, and how their own stances may affect the research and the outcomes, (2) shows that they are able to change perspective (in the broadest sense of the word) when analyzing and expressing the views of people with whom they disagree, and (3) reaches out to people who believe and practice differently during their writing process. This competence is visible, not only with regard to interreligious and other relations, but also with regard to historical and/or cultural gaps and with regard to the general public.

Question: Does the thesis demonstrate the student's dialogical competency by showing (1) a critical assessment of one's own positionality, (2) a change of perspective in analyzing and expressing the views of people with whom they disagree, and (3) a clear summary of the thesis for the general public?

Characteristic of contents as applicable to thesis topic:

- The introduction provides a clear section on the student's own positionality, including an assessment of its strong and weak points with regard to the research conducted.
- The text provides sufficient details so that the readers can judge the role of subjectivity in the thesis.
- The selection, analysis, and discusion of the data show that the student looks beyond his own point of view, empathizes with the points of view of others, and discusses them in an fair manner.
- The conclusions provide a critical assessment of the student's positionality within the research trajectory, e.g., how the student's own position might have affected the results, where the student had to choose position or where the trajectory took another direction than the student had expected beforehand.
- The thesis provides a summary of the main findings for the general public.

Excellent	Acceptable	Requires major revision
Some or all of these are applicable: ● The student critically reflects on personal interests in the subject matter and clarifies how	● The student provides insight in their own positionality, but does not indicate how it will or has	● The student does not reflect on personal interests in the subject matter or how his positionality may have been of influence to the research.

that will be and has been of influence to the research. • The student makes counterbalance against their personal stance an integral part of the thesis, showing that subjectivity has been fought. • The student shows a change of perspective by analysing and expressing other points of view in an empathic way. • The thesis provides a summary of the main findings for the general public. • The student indicates how their research contributed to their own normative stands.			been of influence to the research. • The student only sometimes reflect on their personal stance in the thesis. • The student does discuss other viewpoints, but not always in a fair way. • The student shows some awareness of the research contribution to their own normative stands. • The student provides a summary, but this is not really accessible to the general public.		• The student uses personal interests to narrow the research and not to deepen it. • The student does not discuss other viewpoints or does so in a biased way. • Paragraphs on the research problem are not understandable for outsiders. • There is no summary. • The student does not reflect on the outcome's influence on their own normative stands.
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

G. Academic Reasoning

Question: Are the discussions and conclusions justified and at an academic level?

Characteristics of academic reasoning:

- The student provides arguments and counter-arguments in the most unbiased manner possible.
- The student provides arguments and counterarguments that relate to the views put forth.
- The presentation and discussion in the thesis must take place by means of an appropriate and correctly applied argumentation scheme.
- Arguments and counterarguments are weighed, not counted.

Excellent			Acceptable		Requires major revision
Some of these are applicable: ● The thesis provides arguments in a logical order. ● The student provides unbiased and appropriate arguments and counter-arguments. ● The student uses a correct argumentation scheme. ● The student weighs arguments and counter-arguments within his/her personal proposition.			● The thesis provides arguments in a rather logical order. ● The student provides unbiased and appropriate arguments and counter-arguments, but not always the most appropriate. ● The student uses a correct argumentation scheme, except for one or two cases of minor argumentation fallacies. ● The student weighs arguments, but it is not always clear how his/her weighing is connected to his/her personal proposition. ● Some parts of the thesis may still be associative, rather than argumentative.		● The student provides his/her arguments in a chaotic manner. ● The student ignores counter-arguments or provides them in a biased manner. ● The student uses several argumentation fallacies. ● The student gives arguments and/or counter-arguments, but hardly weighs them.
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

H. Hermeneutics: Context Analysis

In using and presenting literature, it is important to take into account and account for the context from which the cited author wrote. Texts are not written in a vacuum, but are connected to the historical, cultural, social and personal context of the author. The student must be aware of these contexts and not neglect them when analysing and processing this literature within the thesis.

It is also important that the student does not only process texts from one type of context, but consciously chooses mainstream and marginal voices to process in the research. These marginal voices are not marginal because they make unsubstantiated statements, but are suppressed because they are not given the opportunity to publish in top journals or because they speak in other languages.

In addition, the student must also take into account and account for the context of the problem statement and question statement in the thesis. Problem statements and questions arise from a specific historical or cultural context. Here too, the student must consciously process the limitations of his or her own problem statement or question statement in the thesis.

Question: Does the thesis demonstrate critical hermeneutics with regard to the own problem statement and with regard to the analysis and processing of other people's literature?

Characteristics of critical hermeneutics:

- The text offers the reader sufficient information about the embedding of the problem statement and question statement within a specific context.
- The student shows a variety of voices to process in the research.
- The student demonstrates insight into the historical, cultural and social backgrounds of the many aspects of the research, in particular the literature used.
- The text offers starting points for critical reflection on the many different opinions in the heavily charged world of religious positions.

Excellent	Acceptable	Requires major revision
Some of these are applicable: ● The student describes the context from which the problem and question arose.	● The student discusses the problem and question within the academic discourse, but not within the historical context.	● The student discusses only the prevailing or only the more marginal opinions in the academic debate on the chosen topic and thus creates a one-sided

● The student discusses more and less common opinions in the academic debate on the chosen topic. ● The student shows awareness of the historical background of the texts, authors, subjects, methods, etc. ● The student shows awareness of the context of the texts used.			● The student mainly discusses the current or more marginal opinions on the chosen topic in the academic debate and thus creates a somewhat one-sided perspective. ● The student does not always show awareness of the historical, cultural or social backgrounds of authors or positions. ● The student does not always place texts in the correct context.		perspective in which the hermeneutics of suspicion is lacking. ● The student does not demonstrate historical awareness or is unable to establish a connection between the historical background and the topic. ● The student shows that he is not aware of the context of his own question or problem. ● The student treats all texts in the same way, as if context has had no influence on the texts.
10	9	8	7	6	<5

I. Overall Writing Quality

This criterion is *not* about spelling or grammar. These are supposed to be correct. This criterion is about the quality of your writing (precise, unambiguous, correct terminology), its quantity (not too wordy, not too compact) and its fluency (varied sentence structure, good examples, clear overviews).

Question: Is the writing at an appropriate level for the target audience of upper division undergraduates and faculty in the general field of theology and religious studies?

Characteristics of writing quality:
- The wording is clear and unambiguous.
- The author is not wordy nor too compact.
- The style is smooth and enjoyable to read.

Excellent			Acceptable		Requires major revision
Some of these are applicable: ● Arguments or descriptions are direct and to the point, employing no unnecessary words. ● Wording is unambiguous; academic terminology is used appropriately, with specific terms defined if needed. ● The author does not assume the reader will have an expert level of knowledge. ● The style is smooth, clearly showing transitions in argumentation, and is enjoyable to read.			● Arguments or descriptions are usually direct, precise and concise, but some areas may need improvement. ● Occasionally, terminology is not (well) defined or used appropriately. ● Occasionally the thesis assumes too much or too little knowledge on the part of the reader. ● The style is generally smooth, but certain passages need to be re-read in order to be fully understood.		● A significant amount of the terminology in the thesis is either used inappropriately or is inappropriate for the target readers. ● A significant portion of the prose is too concise, too wordy and/or ambiguous. ● The expected level of knowledge is too high, too low, or constantly changing. ● The thesis's style is rigid, not fluent and/or contains stylistic errors. Transitions in contents and/or argumentation are not indicated.
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

J. Self-regulation

Self-regulation of students is also assessed and graded. This part of the evaluation is a process evaluation, rather than a product evaluation as in the other eight criteria. This criterion belongs to the fifth Dublin descriptor, namely learning skills. It does not refer to the character of the student (although that will be present on the background), but to skills that are useful to develop oneself in a next academic programme or in practice, yet in an academic way.

The degree of self-regulation in a Bachelor's thesis project is, of course, less that in a Master's thesis project. Therefore, the supervisor must choose the left column earlier in a Bachelor's thesis project than in a Master's thesis project.

Question: Did the student take responsibility for the project?
Characteristics of self-regulation: the student
- shows curiosity and eagerness to learn.
- is eager for new ideas, situations and academic tasks.
- looks around him/her and can make new connections.
- recognizes the need for assistance or feedback and actively asks for it.
- takes feedback seriously and processes it appropriately.
- shows flexibility and perseverance.

Excellent	Acceptable	Not acceptable
Some of these are applicable: ● Demonstrates the capacity for innovation and a willingness to take risks. Is eager for new ideas, situations and academic tasks. ● Recognizes the need for assistance or feedback and actively asks for it. ● Takes feedback seriously and processes it appropriately. ● Shows flexibility and perseverance; makes an effort when	● Shows curiosity and interest in learning. ● Approaches new ideas, situations and academic tasks with a positive attitude. ● Takes feedback seriously and processes it appropriately or at least on a sentence or word-level. ● Is (sometimes) stubborn about accepting feedback or is (sometimes too) dependent on feedback. ● Is able to persevere and (with some encouragement) to	● Does not demonstrate interest in learning; is reluctant to take on new ideas, situations and academic tasks. ● Ignores feedback. ● Shows a passive and/or helpless attitude when confronted with obstacles or challenges. ● Does not take responsibility for the project; attributes problems to external factors; does not adhere to agreements.

responding to obstacles and challenges. ● Demonstrates a sense of full responsibility for the project; manages his/her own activities and adheres to agreements.			keep up efforts when confronted with obstacles and challenges. ● Demonstrates responsibility for the project; is usually able to manage his/her own activities and to adhere to agreements.		
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

4. Grade

There are seven requirements (see 1) and ten criteria (see 2).
- Theses will only be graded if the seven requirements are fulfilled.
- Theses will only be graded if the ten criteria are met. In other words, if a thesis 'requires major revision' or is 'not acceptable' on one or more points, the thesis must be revised on each of the points flagged for revision.
- Since all criteria are equally important, the grade will be the mean of the ten scores of the criteria.