Assessment of the quality and scope of the PhD thesis
Approved by the Faculty Board at March 22, 2021[1]
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Introduction

The instructions in this document, the document on 'A portfolio for award of the degree of PhD' and the document on 'Rules for the PhD Thesis' outline for the candidate, the supervisors and the members of the Doctorate Committee[2] the requirements that the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam imposes on a PhD thesis. For the FSS, the instructions, supplements, replaces and clarifies the Doctorate Regulations.[3,4] The instructions established by FSS are valid for dissertations defended at Vrije Universiteit under the responsibility of the Dean of FSS.[5,6]

The thesis is assessed by the supervisors, followed by the assessment by the Doctorate Committee. The supervisors and the members of the Doctorate Committee will make a judgment on three criteria, with an explanation for each judgment.[7] The instructions give unambiguity to the criteria used within FSS. The introduction of rubric makes the judgment more transparent and helps all involved. The criteria for awarding cum laude are made explicit.

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[1] The approved document has been split in two documents. This document is specifically about the assessment of the thesis. The other document is on the portfolio. A third relevant document is on 'Rules for the PhD Thesis'.

[2] In Dutch: promotiecommissie (VU Promotiereglement, 15 juli 2021) of beoordelingscommissie (Hora Finita).

[3] Unless otherwise stated, we refer to the Doctorate Regulations dated July 15, 2021, including all articles and the procedural regulations. To be retrieved from https://vu.nl/en/research/more-about/doctorate-regulations.

[4] Formulated in Article 21.

[5] The rules also apply in the case of a 'double doctorate graduation' (Article 33) as for a 'joint doctoral graduation' (Article 34)[5]; in both cases a separate agreement shall be drawn up, approved by the Rector Magnificus, which, if different, shall take precedence over the requirements set by FSS.

[6] When a project involves collaboration between researchers from different faculties (or institutes), the framework of the faculty where the approval and graduation takes place is guiding. This may therefore mean that two theses in one project defended at different faculties will look (somewhat) different because the faculties involved have different rules and customs. However, when it comes to assessing the quality of the research, it is usually possible to come to a common understanding, within the rules and assessment framework of the faculty where the approval and graduation takes place. Not every part of the rubric will always fit exactly to the concrete situation of a dissertation research – interpretation is then needed (and that is where recognizing and dealing with diversity and autonomy come in). If there are nevertheless too many or too great differences between faculties, it is desirable to consult the Dean.

[7] In FSS, the current assessment in Hora Finita is on three criteria: (1) Content, theory building and application; (2) Research design and methodology; (3) Academic skills. The rating scale is: insufficient; sufficient; good; very good; excellent. A motivation is requested. It is proposed to again use three assessment criteria with a five-level rating scale, with a motivation.

Requirements

The dissertation must show that several requirements have been met.[8] From the regulations, some requirements need discussion. The first requirement ("The PhD candidate is able to contribute towards extending the frontiers of knowledge by conducting original research that withstands the rigours of peer review.") has to be read as follows: the type of research must fit in the discipline of social sciences; members of the Doctorate Committee are peers. The fourth requirement ("The PhD candidate is capable to critically analysing, evaluating and synthesizing new and complex ideas in their field") has to be read that replication research is allowed. The fifth requirement ("The PhD candidate can participate in academic discourse with peers from their field and the wider scientific community regarding their specific field of expertise.") is difficult to test through the assessment of the dissertation alone and is therefore addressed in the portfolio.

Assessment and grading[9]

The supervisors and the members of the Doctorate Committee are asked to assess the overall quality and scope of the thesis. We ask them to give their assessment on three general criteria only, acknowledging: 1. Scientific quality; 2. Interpretation and reflection on the research as a whole; 3. Quality of writing (appendix 1). The supervisors and the members of the Doctorate Committee provide an explanation for each criterion.

The assessment is done on the basis of a 'rubric' (appendix 2). The rubric will help the supervisors and members of the Doctorate Committee to evaluate the quality of the thesis and will lead to a more standardized set of opinions.[10] The rubric does not include quantitative measures. It is expected that the supervisors and the members of the Doctorate Committee are experienced in evaluating scientific work, and can work with qualitative terms. During the entire PhD trajectory the rubric can be used by the supervisors and the candidate to focus on a desired end result.

The thesis must be of sufficient quality on each of the criteria.[11] Sometimes reviews are carried out several times, for example the 'Scientific quality' if the quality of chapters or articles varies widely. It is important to note that American research has shown that many supervisors strive for a thesis that has a 'very good' quality.[12] There is no reason to expect this to be different within FSS. However, the feasibility of this ambition must be weighed against other considerations, such as the likelihood that this result will be achieved. Account must also be taken of the limited time available to supervisors and the candidate, the need not to exceed the planned duration of the project, and the candidate's ambitions. A thesis that is assessed as 'sufficient' or between 'sufficient' and 'very good' can be a good outcome of the promotion process.

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[8] Article 21.

[9] This is an elaboration of the Articles 1 and 16.

[10] It is well known that members of a Doctorate Committee differ in their judgments. Research showed that members' experience and regional affiliation impacted on the quality assessments; acquaintance to supervisors mattered less than expected. Kyvik, S., & Thune, T. (2015). Assessing the quality of PhD dissertations: A survey of external committee members. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 40*, 768-782. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2014.956283

[11] The Doctorate Regulations do not describe a rating scale but refers to 'sufficient' (Article 16; page 24) and 'excellent' (Article 1). We propose: insufficient; sufficient; good; very good; excellent. 'Insufficient' means unacceptable, and the candidate will not pass. The performance level in the rubric has four categories, i.e., does not include the level 'good'. This number is sufficient, because only two decisions have to be made: whether the degree is awarded (i.e., the thesis is sufficient or better), and whether the degree is awarded cum laude (i.e., the thesis is excellent).

[12] Lovitts, B. E. (2005). How to grade a thesis. *Academe, 91*(6), 18-23. doi:10.2307/40252858

<u>Cum laude</u>[13]

A doctoral degree may be awarded cum laude if the academic quality of the thesis is excellent and the candidate has demonstrated outstanding competence in the thesis. [14] The thesis awarded with cum laude is innovative, makes an important theoretical contribution, is based on exceptional data and contains solid and innovative analyses (when the thesis contains the report of empirical research), is clearly and unequivocally written, and is completed within a reasonable timeframe (usually[15] this is the period agreed at the start of the project, or a shorter period).

In concrete terms, this means that when applying the rubric (1) the scientific quality is assessed as 'excellent'; (2) for the two other criteria the thesis is at least assessed as 'very good'. Valorization[16] is considered as part of scientific quality. Furthermore, (3) other conditions specified in the portfolio have been met; because these requirements are not or only indirectly visible in the thesis under review, it is important that a supervisor's proposal to give cum laude is supported by a description by the supervisors of the quality of project implementation as set out in these sections. For example, the relative independence and autonomy of the candidate in carrying out the research may also play a role.[17] To help the members of the Doctorate Committee evaluate the candidate's contribution, her or his contribution has been made explicit (see below). Considerations about the project or the candidate outside the academic scholarship are not taken into account. For example, the candidate's social involvement is not taken into account, although this may be a condition for valorization. The procedure for awarding cum laude is described in detail elsewhere.[18]

Finally, we draw attention to bias in the assessment of a thesis. For example, it is known that more men than women promote cum laude.[19] In addition to gender bias, there can also be a bias to the benefit of employee candidates and to the detriment of other categories such as candidates with a scholarship and self-financed candidates. Assessing the quality of the thesis using the rubric should help to reduce the likelihood of a biased decision.

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[13] This is an elaboration of the Article 1.

[14] Articles 1 and 31.

[15] A significant overshoot of the intended duration is incompatible with the designation of cum laude, unless extraordinary circumstances are the cause.

[16] "Valorisation is the process of creating value from knowledge by making knowledge suitable and/or available for economic and/or societal use and translating that knowledge into competitive products, services, processes and entrepreneurial activity" (www.rathenau.nl/en/knowledge-policy/valorisation-researchers-already-do-much-more-they-realise; visited December 21, 2020)

[17] However, it is not intended to read this from, for example, single authorship of articles. Some candidates work in a discipline where single authorship is natural, others in a discipline where single authorship is virtually non-existent.

[18] Article 31 and 32. Article 31: "… the supervisor or co-supervisor must submit a written and detailed request to the Dean (…). Every member of the Doctorate Committee can also submit this type of request." WUR amended their regulations: "In case of an excellent (or very good/excellent) overall assessment by all four opponents, the thesis will automatically enter the cum laude evaluation procedure." (www.wur.nl/web/file?uuid=6ce8e42b-361b-4522-85e0-5b5417108706&owner=497277b7-cdf0-4852-b124-6b45db364d72&contentid=551606) This adjustment makes for a more substantively argued presentation, which also requires less work. It should be further determined how many members of the Doctorate Committee should give the qualification 'very good' or 'excellent'.

[19] See for example www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/10/19/helft-van-depromovendi-is-vrouw-maar-cum-laudes-krijgen-ze-zelden-a266839, and the annual report of the Graduate School. Incidentally, the number of cum laude promotions in FSS per year is small, which makes statistical testing impossible and can quickly give the impression that decisions were biased.

Appendix 1. Assessment of the quality of the PhD thesis by the supervisors and members of the Doctorate Committee

Criteria	Quality *	Explanation
1. Scientific quality	o Insufficient o Sufficient o Good o Very good o Excellent	
2. Interpretation and reflection on the research	o Insufficient o Sufficient o Good o Very good o Excellent	
3. Quality of writing	o Insufficient o Sufficient o Good o Very good o Excellent	

* See description in 'Rubric for evaluation of the overall quality of a PhD thesis'. The qualification 'good' is not elaborated in the rubric and can be chosen if some parts have a sufficient quality, and others have a very good quality, or when all parts are in between sufficient and very good quality.

Appendix 2. Rubric for evaluation of the overall quality of a PhD thesis

	Insufficient	Sufficient	Very Good	Excellent
1a. Scientific quality: Originality of the research question *	• Looks at a research question or knowledge problem that is trivial, unoriginal, or already solved • Answering the research question does not make a contribution to scientific knowledge (this can for example be because the conducted study is unjustified)	• Has a question or problem that is highly derivative or an extension of the adviser's work • Asks a research question that will lead to a small and not very original contribution	• Has a very good research question, which rises above a minor or traditional question • Makes a more than modest contribution to the field, e.g. an important contribution by solving an old problem in a new way, or by addressing a new and relevant question, however without completely exploring and solving that new question	• Asks new questions or addresses an important question or problem • Makes an exciting, major contribution to scientific knowledge, either by solving an old problem in a brilliant, innovative way or by asking and answering a new and intriguing question; pushes the discipline's boundaries and opens new areas for research • Is of interest to a larger community and changes the way people think; the research contributes not only to science and has an impact on science, but also contributes to society and has societal or economic impact
1b. Scientific quality: Literature review	• Plagiarizes or deliberately misreads or misuses sources • Does not understand or misses relevant literature	• Displays a narrow understanding of the field • Studies the literature sufficiently; knows the literature but is not very critical of it or does not discuss enough what is important • Misses opportunities to explore interesting issues and connections	• Shows understanding and mastery of the subject matter • Limits its own focus in a very good way, while explicitly positioning its own research in the context of the broader field	• Is synthetic • Displays a deep understanding of all relevant, and at times complicated, literature • Exhibits command and authority over the material

	Insufficient	Sufficient	Very Good	Excellent
1c. Scientific quality: Theory	• Does not understand basic concepts, processes, or conventions of the discipline • Does not handle theory well, or theory is missing or wrong; has an inconsistent, self-contradictory, unconvincing, or invalid argument	• Can sustain an argument, but the argument is not imaginative, complex, or convincing • Demonstrates understanding of theory at a simple level, and theory is minimally to competently applied to the problem	• Has a strong, comprehensive, and coherent argument • Uses appropriate (standard) theory	• Exhibits mature, independent thinking • Argument is focused, logical, rigorous, and sustained • Is theoretically sophisticated and shows a deep understanding of theory
1d. Scientific quality: Research design	• Relies on inappropriate or incorrect methods	• Uses standard methods (a cookbook approach) • Demonstrates technical competence • Data are suitable to answer the research question but limited in scope and richness	• Includes well-executed research • Demonstrates advanced technical competence	• Has a brilliant research design • Demonstrates very high technical competence • Has very rich data, e.g. from multiple sources and with great depth
1e. Scientific quality: Analysis	• Has data that are flawed, false, fudged, or misinterpreted • Has incorrect, inappropriate, incoherent, or confused analysis	• Has an unsophisticated analysis • Does not explore all possibilities and misses connections	• Uses solid methods and techniques • Obtains solid answers to the research questions	• Uses or develops new tools, methods, approaches, or types of analyses • Is thoroughly researched; analysis is comprehensive, complete, sophisticated, and convincing

	Insufficient	Sufficient	Very Good	Excellent
2. Interpretation and reflection on the research (shown in the articles and synthesis, or shown throughout the monograph)	• Has unsupported or exaggerated interpretation of results • It is not clear why the research was done as it was done • It is not clear how the results fit into the existing scientific knowledge, or what the social impact is • Possible weaknesses in the research are not discussed	• Interpretation of results is limited but sufficiently justified • In a simple way what has been done is described, but not why it has been done • Trivial reflection on how results fit in the existing knowledge and what the social impact is • The most obvious weaknesses in the research are indicated, but not how they affect the conclusions	• Interpretation of results provides a very complete answer to the research question • It is clearly described what has been done and why this has been done • Most correspondences and conflicts with existing knowledge are identified. Most social impact is indicated • The most important weaknesses in the research are indicated, and how they affect the main conclusions	• Interpretation of the results is rich and contributes greatly to the advancement of scientific knowledge • There is a clear, compelling and critical description of what has been done and why it has been done; the conclusion ties the whole thing together • Results are critically confronted with existing knowledge; possible social impact is fully addressed • Taking into account the limitation of the allowed number of words, all weaknesses in the research are indicated, and how they affect each of the conclusions

	Insufficient	Sufficient	Very Good	Excellent
3. Quality of writing	• Is poorly written • Has spelling and grammatical errors • Has a sloppy presentation; writing, figures and lay-out are so poor that it is hard to understand what the candidate wants to say • Reading is very difficult • Thesis is badly structured, often information is missing or appearing at the wrong spot	• Writing is pedestrian and plodding • Has a weak structure and organization • Writing, figures and lay-out are not always correct and clear, level of detail varies widely, but with effort the text is understandable • Reading is difficult • Main structure of the thesis is adequate, but placement and structure of sections are often not logical	• Is well written and organized • Writing is clear and concise, and figures and lay-out are functional and flawless • Reading is easy • Main structure of the thesis is clear and correct, most sections are well structured and well placed	• Is very well written and organized; connects components in a seamless way • Writing is crystal clear and compelling, concise but balanced with sufficient detail, with attractive, functional figures and lay-out • Reading is very easy • Thesis is very well structured with each chapter, article and section having a clear function and sitting at the right spot

* Originality is "the quality of being special and interesting and not the same as anything or anyone else" (Source: Cambridge Dictionary). It does not have to be a work with a unique style and content, because usually a thesis is based on a solid, established scientific basis, and makes a robust contribution to the multiplication or reinforcement of scientific knowledge. A critical re-examination of earlier scientific work can be original. In the case of a thesis on interdisciplinary or applied research, please consider the contribution to the interdisciplinary or applied field rather than to each of the underlying disciplines.

Sources for this rubric: www.wur.nl/upload_mm/6/0/7/45f9cb0e-652a-489e-96c4-21fb631fd8c6_Wageningen%20University%20Thesis%20evaluation%20form%20with%20rubric.docx; Lovitts, B. E. (2005). How to grade a dissertation. *Academe, 91*(6), 18-23. doi:10.2307/40252858, www.jstor.org/stable/40252858. Note that Lovitts objects to the title of the article. The goal of her work was to provide supervisors and candidates with a tool they can use throughout the thesis process to help make faculty's performance expectations for the thesis more transparent to candidates (www.ittc.ku.edu/~frost/How_to_grade_disseration_Academe_article.pdf).