

# Thesis manual for the MA programme

## History

This thesis manual is consistent with the Master's thesis regulations of the Faculty of Humanities. Those general regulations include the guidelines concerning the nature, form, assessment and completion of the thesis in the context of the VU-wide concern to uphold educational quality and the rules of the faculty Examination Board. This programme-specific course manual concerns the thesis process in the one-year History Master's programme. As in the case of the thesis regulations, this thesis manual is intended for both students and supervisors, so that both parties are informed of their shared objectives and possibilities.

### Thesis process

The Master's thesis process comprises both the thesis and the Master's thesis colloquium and consists of a total of 18 credits or 504 study hours. Together the stated components make up the graduation process, the admission requirements for which are stated in the Academic and Examination Regulations (AER) of the programme. These also state that a Master's student must have obtained at least 24 EC before he/she is permitted to start the Master's thesis.

### Thesis colloquium

While working on the thesis the student is required to take part in the associated thesis colloquium. The thesis colloquium is intended to promote contact between the students during the thesis process, to stimulate good progress and timely completion, to foster discussion about shared theoretical, historiographical and methodological aspects of every piece of thesis research, and to practise clear presentation of research results.

The thesis colloquium is a module in the second semester. The lecturer-coordinator of this module has the title of thesis coordinator. This person is responsible for organizing the colloquium and hence only indirectly for the thesis process itself, which is a matter for the student and the supervising staff member.

One thesis process starts each academic year, in January. If there are sufficient candidates, the thesis coordinator may also decide to start a graduation process in September. If there are insufficient candidates for a group, the programme may agree an individual process with the students for the thesis and the holding of the thesis colloquium.

### Topic and supervisor

The VU history programmes attach importance to a free choice of topic for the graduation thesis. That means that in principle all topics that match the personal interest and ambitions of the student are eligible. If the student has chosen a specialization, the topic must fit in with it. The topic of the Master's thesis must also differ from that of the Bachelor's thesis (which may have been completed in another programme). The relevance of the topic, the feasibility of the research and its embedding in the academic context are discussed with a supervisor from the programme staff. The topic is determined in close consultation, along with an associated problem definition, source and literature selection and the broader framework.

The student can take the initiative of approaching a staff member to discuss the choice of a topic. It is important to focus on the expertise that is available among lecturers, sections, research centres and all kinds of projects in the faculty. Lecturers and researchers can be expected to make their profile, projects and publications readily visible via websites (in particular via the VU research portal PURE). The student can turn to the thesis coordinator to obtain information and advice at any time.

If a student has difficulty finding an appropriate supervisor, he/she should first contact the thesis coordinator. If the thesis coordinator and student fail to find a solution, the matter will be referred to

the Examination Board. The Examination Board will then designate a supervisor within ten working days, in consultation with the Director of Studies of the programme with which the thesis coordinator is associated.

As stated in the faculty thesis regulations, in some cases it is possible to include a second supervisor in the process. In the history programmes this requires the consent of the Director of Studies.

### **Second reader**

In addition to the supervisor(s) there is a second reader in accordance with the requirements as set out in the thesis regulations. Furthermore, in the History programme the second reader is designated by the thesis coordinator in consultation with and under the ultimate responsibility of the Director of Studies. The supervising staff member can suggest a second reader to the thesis coordinator. The student therefore has no concern whatsoever about finding a second reader. The thesis coordinator agrees the designation with the Director of Studies, who takes account of both the independence requirements and the available manpower as well as any allocation agreements within the programme, department or faculty.

In all cases the second reader must apply the final attainment levels for the programme of the first reader and/or supervisor(s). The most that can be required in order to award the thesis a pass mark are marginal adjustments to language, style, factual data or annotations.

### **Thesis contract and thesis plan of work**

After the thesis topic has been determined, the student draws up a thesis contract jointly with the supervising staff member. The standard form can be found among the documents on VUnet. This is a written record of the agreements made. In addition, the student submits a thesis plan of work to the supervisor, detailing the substantive content. The standard form for a plan of work can also be found among the documents on VUnet.

The thesis contract provides the supervisor and the student with clarity about the nature of the supervision. Students know what is expected of them and what they can expect of the supervisor. The same applies to the supervisor. The purpose of the thesis contract is to prevent students from falling behind with their studies unnecessarily and to provide solutions in the event of ambiguities and/or problems.

The thesis contract includes the following elements:

- the start date and the planned end date.
- name of the supervisor(s);
- name of the second reader;
- the description of the topic;
- agreements on the frequency of supervision interviews;
- the deadline before which the supervisor and the second reader will assess the thesis;
- the number of credits available;
- the language in which the report must be written;
- additional agreements, where relevant.

The plan of work for the thesis structures the student's thoughts on the topic and his/her work and lists the activities for the thesis. The timeline for completion is part of the thesis plan of work. Both the supervisor and the student must adhere to this timeline and they share responsibility for monitoring the process.

### **Signing and archiving**

After the thesis contract and the plan of work have been signed by the supervisor, the second reader and the student, these documents will be sent to the thesis coordinator as a PDF. The student and the supervising staff member are responsible for the clear and correct interpretation of the thesis contract and the plan of work. The coordinator generally checks whether the thesis contract and plan of work are complete and checks the summary of the content. If the coordinator discovers any omissions or mistakes, he/she may ask the supervising staff member and the student to amend the

thesis contract and/or the plan of work. After any amendments have been made, the thesis contract and plan of work must again be submitted to the thesis coordinator for approval.

The archiving of the thesis contract and the thesis plan of work is dealt with through the submission of documents by the supervising staff member to the Education Office when he/she notifies it of the grade.

### **Form and frequency of supervision**

Students are entitled to systematic supervision when working on the thesis. Supervision should in all cases include the following elements:

- advice on the choice of research topic and on setting an appropriate scope for their work;
- approval of the design;
- instructions regarding the rewriting of inadequate sections of the thesis.

The frequency of the supervision interviews is stated in the thesis plan of work. The student makes agreements with the supervising staff member about the submission deadline for the various sections of the thesis in relation to the supervision interviews. As a guideline the student is entitled to a minimum of four and a maximum of eight supervision interviews. According to the norms for teaching load, a teacher can spend a total of 30 hours on supervising a thesis, including all marking. The supervising staff member will provide written comments (in the margins or separately) on the work submitted. During the supervision interviews, the supervisor explains the comments to the student and advises him/her on how to follow them through. Good feedback is characterized by:

- recognition (necessary precondition for revisions);
- applicability (pointers for a better approach in future, as specific as possible);
- framed positively (the feedback does not make the student feel insecure).

When submitting a revised version of a part of a thesis, the student must also submit the previous versions. The corrected versions must be retained until the thesis is complete.

The supervising staff member provides feedback at most twice on drafted parts of the thesis. If a draft is still unsatisfactory after feedback has been given twice, the supervisor will record this and it will form part of the final assessment.

The date on which the final version of the thesis is to be submitted to the supervisor(s) is stated in the thesis contract. The thesis contract also stipulates the amount of time that the supervisor(s) and second reader have to read the thesis.

### **Delays**

If material is submitted to the supervisor late or not at all, the supervision interview is cancelled. Supervision interviews may not be cancelled by the student or supervising staff member(s) less than two days in advance, other than in exceptional circumstances.

If a supervisor is unable to meet his/her obligations (due to long-term absence/illness etc.), the student and the thesis coordinator are informed. The thesis coordinator arranges a replacement in consultation with the chair holder of the lecturer concerned. If the student is unable to meet his/her obligations (due to long-term absence/illness etc.), the supervisor is informed. In such cases, the plan of work and the thesis contract are revised.

If the student exceeds the agreed deadline for submitting the final version by three months without consultation, he/she will automatically fail the thesis.

### **Language of the thesis**

- Students taking the History Master's programme taught in English write their thesis in English, except for those taking the specialization taught in Dutch, who write their thesis in Dutch.
- Master's students following the general track, in other words selecting optional subjects from various specializations, are free to choose English or Dutch.
- If Master's students have begun an English-language specialization but wish to write their thesis in Dutch, that is possible, but then they will graduate not in the English-language specialization but in

the general track. Specifically this means that they do not have the additional annotation on their degree certificate stating that they have completed a specialization taught in English.

### **Final assessment**

The assessment procedure and use of assessment forms are described in the faculty thesis regulations. The final assessment of the thesis will be communicated to the student at a meeting with the supervisor(s) and if applicable the second reader, after which the content of the thesis will be discussed. The process leading to the production of the thesis is evaluated in a discussion between the supervisor(s) and the student, including content, organizational aspects and supervision. If requested, the student must always be able to see the cover sheet and assessment forms.

The student must score a pass mark (v) in all components in order to be awarded a final pass mark. The following is a guideline for determining the final mark: satisfactory (v) = 6, very satisfactory (rv) = 7, good (g) = 8, very good (zg) = 9. If a student mainly scores rv or g, he/she is awarded a final mark of 7 or 8 respectively. An almost even distribution of v and rv leads to a 6.5, and an almost even distribution of rv and g to a 7.5 etc. The supervising staff member justifies the assessments in the 'explanatory notes' column. The alignment of the grade between the first and second readers (particularly if there are differing assessments) is described in the faculty thesis regulations.

### **Timeline**

The faculty Education Office ensures that students and supervisors receive timely notification of the precise dates on which marks and documentation must be submitted so as to award the degree on the intended graduation date (VUnet under 'graduation'). As a guideline for the final phase and the role that the student, supervisor(s) and second reader play in it, the following schedule can be maintained within the History programme. To ensure that students have equal treatment and equal opportunities, it is very important that all supervisors adhere to the submission dates for the first and any revised versions of the thesis.

- The student submits the first complete version to the supervisor around 1 June.
- The supervisor has a maximum of 10 working days to read the thesis and to provide comments.
- The student receives feedback on the thesis around 10 June. The student then has around two weeks to revise the thesis.
- The student submits the amended final version around 1 July.
- The student arranges for the amended final version to be uploaded to Canvas for the plagiarism check. The supervising staff member ensures that this plagiarism check is carried out and that nothing impedes a positive plagiarism declaration, which (as set out in the thesis regulation) must be appended to the thesis. A negative result in the plagiarism check triggers the procedure described in the faculty thesis regulations.
- If the thesis supervisor considers the final work to be satisfactory, this version is sent to the second reader. Even if the supervisor(s) consider(s) that the revised version is still unsatisfactory, the text goes to the second reader, who has a maximum of 10 days to assess it.
- Around 10 July the supervisor(s) and the second reader must determine a grade and two assessment forms must be completed. The supervisor must explain the completion of the forms as fully as possible; the second reader only has to tick the sections.
- If the assessors decide to fail the thesis, this result must be recorded. The student will then have to write a new thesis on another topic under the supervision of other lecturers.
- The supervisor then submits the approved final thesis, the grade and the two assessment forms, as well as the thesis contract and the plan of work, to the grade administration in accordance with the instructions issued by the Education Office. The final mark is not recorded until these documents have been received in good order.

- If the student submits the final version of the thesis later than the aforementioned date around 1 July, the supervisor is not required to assess it, as lecturers are entitled to several weeks of holiday in July and August. The deadline for supervisors to submit the grade awarded for the thesis to the Education Office is the end of August (check VUnet for precise dates). On the basis of consultation between the lecturer, the second reader and the student, an exception to the aforementioned schedule may be granted, enabling the student to submit the final version (slightly) later than 1 July.