Assessment of the PhD thesis
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Introduction

Before being admitted to the defense, a PhD candidate's final thesis must be assessed and approved by all members of the supervisory team and by the Doctorate Committee. The supervisors and committee members are asked to assess the overall quality and scope of the thesis according to five criteria, as formulated in the Doctorate Regulations[1], art. 21 (1), and substantiated in the rubric below. The assessments are recorded in Hora Finita.[2]

Additional requirements for the PhD thesis (regarding e.g. data management, ethics, authorship, and open access) are formulated in the document "Rules and guidelines for the PhD thesis"[3] and checked through the submission of the "Final PhD portfolio".[4]

Assessment

The assessment is made on the basis of the rubric below, which clarifies and complements the five Doctorate Regulation criteria. The rubric helps supervisors and the Doctorate Committee members to evaluate the quality of the thesis. The rubric does not include quantitative measures. It is expected that the supervisors and the Doctorate Committee members are experienced in evaluating scientific work and can work with qualitative criteria.

Each of the five criteria is assessed "inadequate", "adequate", "good", "very good", or "excellent." Doctorate Committee members must include a motivation for the assessment of each criterion, and the thesis must be of sufficient quality on all five criteria to be approved.

Please note that the assessments by the Doctorate Committee are not shared with the PhD candidate and supervisors.[5] Doctorate Committee members can, however, add suggestions and recommendations in a separate text box when submitting their assessments. These are shared with the PhD candidate and can be helpful in their preparation for the defense.

[1] https://vu.nl/en/research/more-about/doctorate-regulations
[2] Supervisors and committee members receive a request by email to submit their assessments.
[3] Available on the GSSS website.
[4] This document is submitted by the candidate together with a plagiarism scan report. Only when these two documents have been approved by the GSSS, the candidate can upload their dissertation for assessment.
[5] The Doctorate Regulations do not permit that the assessments are shared.

Cum laude

If the PhD candidate has demonstrated an above-average level of excellence in the dissertation (ranking among the top 5% of publications in the relevant field), they may be awarded the designation cum laude[6]. 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 this is the period agreed at the start of the project, or a shorter period[7]).

Every member of the Doctorate Committee will provide a well-supported explanation in their assessment of why they believe the dissertation should or should not be awarded cum laude. If every member, or almost every member, believes that the dissertation should be awarded cum laude, the dean will appoint two external referees to issue their opinion on the award.[8]

[6] Doctorate Regulations, art. 31.

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

[8] The process is outlined in detail in the Doctorate Regulations, art. 31.

Assessment rubric PhD thesis

For supervisors and Doctorate Committee members

Supervisors and Doctorate Committee members are asked to use these assessment criteria to assess the quality of the PhD thesis. The five main criteria are derived from the VU Doctorate Regulations,[9] article 21.1, and are the ones to be assessed in Hora Finita by the Doctorate Committee members (with motivations). The sub-criteria are established to clarify the broader criteria and to facilitate the assessment.

Assessment criteria	Sub-criteria	*Inadequate*	*Adequate*	*Good*	*Very good*	*Excellent*
1. The PhD candidate is able to contribute to extending the frontiers of knowledge by conducting original research that can withstand the rigours of peer review.	1a. Problem definition: Originality and significance of the research problem					
	1b. Research question: Clarity and justification of the research question					
	1c. Theoretical framework: Level of theoretical engagement and innovation					
2. The PhD candidate demonstrates a systematic understanding of a specific branch of knowledge and has demonstrated expertise in the methodologies needed for conducting research in this discipline.	2a. Literature review: Critical synthesis of existing literature					
	2b. Methodological expertise and rigour: Demonstrates understanding of the broader methodological principles and standards relevant to conducting research within the field					

[9] https://vu.nl/en/research/more-about/doctorate-regulations

3. The candidate is able to design, develop, implement and modify a research project.	3a. Research design: Quality of the research design and justification of choices made					
	3b. Robustness of data collection and empirics					
4. The PhD candidate is capable of critically analysing, evaluating and synthesizing new and complex ideas in their field and beyond.	4a. Quality of data analysis and interpretation					
	4b. Reflexivity: Level of critical self-reflection on research limitations and ethical considerations					
	4c. Academic structure, writing and argumentative clarity					
5. The PhD candidate is able to enter into debate with peers in the discipline and the wider scholarly community regarding their expertise in a specific branch of knowledge.	5a. Scholarly positioning: Embedding in and contribution to relevant scholarly debates					
	5b. The extent to which the research contributes to progress and renewal of the relevant branch of knowledge					