



THE THESIS PROSPECTUS

On Friday 3 April 2020, first year researchers must deposit their Thesis Prospectus (in electronic form to the supervisor as well as to the Departmental Administrative Coordinator). This constitutes a major contribution towards the development of the thesis and a satisfactory prospectus is essential for passage to the second year.

The prospectus is appraised by the researcher's supervisor and another professor in the department, although in exceptional cases the second reader may be a professor from another department in the Institute.

The goal of the prospectus is to provide a clear and focused presentation of your proposed research. What do you want to study? Why? How do you plan to go about it?

When the assessors evaluate the prospectus, and judge whether the researcher can be admitted to the second year, they often ask: If I approve this prospectus today, will the researcher be able to work constructively on the dissertation tomorrow? If the answer is 'yes', then the researcher gets the green light. If it is 'no', then some rethinking is required and the student will be asked to revise and resubmit.

The prospectus should begin by stating the central problem or puzzle that the dissertation will address. This problem can be theoretical or critical, and should be presented as a question or related set of questions to which the dissertation will attempt to find answers. It is important that the problem, the theoretical framework and hypothetical answers be stated from the outset in preliminary form, so that the research does not risk becoming random and avoids being merely descriptive. It is critical to remember that the thesis should be setting forth a clear argument,

One means of testing the manageability of the research question is to specify more clearly the range of possible answers. This is why it is important to propose these preliminary answers in the prospectus. In empirical fields, these are usually presented as the research hypotheses. In more theoretical or conceptual work, there need not be formal hypotheses, but thinking of the project in that way can be helpful when drafting the prospectus. The prospectus should also explain the rationale of the case selection if cases are to form the basis for the investigation.

The prospectus should also include a brief discussion of the state of the art with respect to the topic. Has this topic been treated before, and, if so, how does the approach of this dissertation improve upon or differ from earlier and existing approaches? Is it because of new evidence or because of a new argument or line of inquiry? The purpose of this section should be to explicate the contribution your thesis will make to the existing literature and/or existing theories – not to simply demonstrate that you have read everything possible.

The prospectus also needs a preliminary chapter outline and a proposed timetable for the research and writing. Outlining a sequence of potential chapters helps clarify

the argument and is a way of checking the balance of its parts in relation to one another. The final dissertation should not be more than 100,000 words, and - depending on the type of research - should not be less than 60,000 words. As a rough guide, an individual chapter should not be more than 10-12,000 words.

In sum, the prospectus should include the following:

1. The puzzle or problem to be addressed.
2. The central research question and its rationale.
3. A brief engagement with the relevant scholarly literature, either in the discussion of the rationale or as a separate literature review.
4. A preliminary discussion of how you plan to answer the research question, including
 - (a) the argument,
 - (b) the theoretical framework and concepts, and, where necessary,
 - (c) the research hypotheses.
5. The methods, approaches and data the dissertation is likely to use, including, where relevant, the rationale for the case studies.
6. A tentative chapter outline and timetable.

These are general guidelines, and the precise form of your prospectus should be agreed in advance with your supervisor. **The prospectus should not be more than 20 pages, or 5-6,000 words in length.** This word count excludes footnotes, bibliography and annexes. The prospectus must include the word count on the cover page.

If approved by the two readers and the department, the decision on admittance to the second year will be taken immediately, and the researcher will be expected to begin developing the prospectus into the thesis. At this stage, a formal agreement will also be reached between the researcher and the supervisor as to what should be written and submitted in the following months.

If not approved, the researcher can submit a revised version by **8 June 2020** – that is, two months after the April submission. If this is approved, the researcher will be admitted to the second year and will be expected to begin developing the prospectus into the thesis. At this stage, a formal agreement will be reached between the researcher and the supervisor as to what should be written and submitted in the following months.

If the revised version is not approved¹, the researcher will not be admitted to the second year. Instead he/she will be offered the opportunity to complete a substantial stand-alone paper of approximately 15,000 words by early September, which, if deemed to be of a sufficient standard, will entitle him/her to a designated Masters of Research degree.

(last update: 24/04/2020)

¹ For the procedure concerning situations where there is a discrepancy between the views of the two readers, please see the *Researchers Guide, 2018-2019*, pp. 29-30.