

General Guidelines & Assessment Criteria for Evaluating the 8-Month Product of PhD Candidates of the VU Graduate School of Social Sciences.

The main purpose of the 8-month product is to answer the question if the product offers a sufficient basis to assume that the PhD project can be successfully completed within four years (in case of a full time project) after the start of the project.

PhD candidates have the choice between submitting:

- a. two separate documents: research proposal & literature review, or research proposal & research article
- b. a single product that integrates both the research proposal and the literature review

I. Research proposal

The format for the research proposal (meant as a guideline, which can be flexibly used) is available on our [website](#). The substantive part of the proposal (3a. and 3b.) may not be longer than 4.000 words.

Assessment criteria

1. Scientific quality

- Clearness research question
- Originality
- Embedding in scientific literature/debates¹
- Research design (coherence between research question and proposed approach)

2. Feasibility

- Time schedule/work plan
- Methodology
- Output
- Expertise promoter and supervision team

II. Literature review paper

The starting point of this paper is the research question as stated in the research proposal². The aim of the paper is to review the literature, position the research project in that literature and show how the project intends to contribute to that literature. A review of the literature thus aims to answer questions such as:

- What are the epistemological and ontological foundations of the main relevant contributions to the field?

¹ Based on the more specific assessment criteria for the literature review paper, especially important in case of a single 8-month product that integrates both the research proposal and the literature review.

² The literature review can of course use relevant sections from the research proposal, even integrally if deemed possible

- What are the key theories, concepts and ideas employed in the study of your area?
- What are the main questions and problems that have been addressed up till now?
- How is the knowledge on the topic structured and organized?
- How have approaches to these questions increased our understanding and knowledge?
- What are the remaining unresolved controversies in the field?
- What are the gaps (empirical, conceptual) that remain to be addressed?

On the basis of your answers to these questions, you can then formulate a more specific research question. The length of the literature review paper is 8.000 – 10.000 words.

Assessment criteria

** Approach of the review and selection criteria for inclusion of scientific contributions on research topic.*

A review can be done in numerous ways. Is it important that the approach of the review is made explicit and that it is justified in relation to the purpose of the review. Are the criteria to include particular articles and books discussed and made explicit?

** Evaluation of key theories, concepts and ideas.*

A high level of conceptual linking within and across theories is required. The main discussions and arguments have to be identified, evaluated and their relevance for the research problem has to be assessed.

** Systematic analysis of previous work and positioning of research project.*

Can we distinguish different approaches or schools of thought in the literature on the research topic? What is the empirical basis for the present state of affairs? How are previous studies related to the research problem?

** Intended contribution of the research project to the literature.*

Originality and relevance of the research question in relation to previous studies has to be made explicit. Depth and breadth of discussion on approaches and/or schools of thought and ways in which the project intends to contribute a particular approach/school of thought.

** Clarity of writing style.*

III. Integrated product

In this single product the research proposal and literature review are integrated.

Guidelines

For this product the guidelines for the research proposal and literature review paper are combined. One option for composing an integrated product is to use the format for the research proposal (meant as a guideline, which can be flexibly used), increasing the word limit for the substantive part (3a. and 3b.) to 10.000 words.

A second option for an integrated product is to compose a document aiming to function as the first chapter of the dissertation, handling the research topic, research question(s), the relevant theoretical debates, and methodological approach. In addition to this first chapter the format for the research proposal should be added as an attachment, excluding parts 3a, 3b and 3c.

Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria for the integrated product are – logically – a combination of the criteria for the research proposal and literature review paper. Scientific quality and feasibility are the key factors for the assessment.

IV. Possible outcomes of the final assessment & further procedure

- A: Accept
- B: Revise & Resubmit
- C: Reject

After you have submitted your 8-month product we will send it out to both internal and external reviewers as soon as possible. Under normal circumstances we ask them to reply within three weeks. Upon receiving the reviews, the Director of the Graduate School, Prof. Dr. Peter Groenewegen, will contact the PhD candidate, his/her supervisors and the Personal Department about the outcome and further procedure. In most cases of a positive evaluation you will be asked to write a motivated reply to the reviewers' comments.

The Director of the Graduate School advises the Head of the relevant department to extend the contract of the PhD candidate or not:

- In case of positive judgements by the reviewers it is most likely that the Director of the Graduate School will advise to extend the contract;
- In case of conflicting judgements by the reviewers the Director of the Graduate School will ask the Assessment Board for advice;
- In case of critical or negative judgements by the reviewers the Director of the Graduate School will consult the PhD candidate and his/her supervisor (and possibly the Head of Department) in order to give them a chance to react and give explanation. The result of this consult may be that the PhD candidate will have to make an extra effort to formulate a more elaborate reaction/explanation (in writing) or to revise (the weak parts of) the research proposal or term paper.

Because of the small amount of available time left before the end of the first year contract it is important to take into account that there is a chance this negative scenario might become a reality. Therefore it is crucial for the PhD candidate to be available for this (possible) extra effort in the last two months of the first year contract. The results of the extra effort will enable the Director of the Graduate School to formulate a final advice, usually after consulting the supervisor and – in case of a research proposal – the chair of the Assessment Board.

VI. Practical information

Please submit your 8-month product to Saskia Jans, Programme Manager of the Graduate School (graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl), in electronic form (pdf format). Also attach an accompanying letter by the FSS (co-)promotor in which possible special circumstances can be addressed. The (co)promoter should include three names of possible external reviewers (including name, title, e-mail address and a link to their personal webpage). Make sure these reviewers have been contacted beforehand, and make sure they agreed upon writing the review before the deadline (three weeks after the 8-month product has been handed in). You do not need to send us the names of possible internal reviewers, as he/she will be contacted directly by us.