

PhD Student Review Boards in Divinity

The Review Board Process

With nine to twelve months of initial enrolment, PhD students are to be assessed formally by a Review Board usually composed of at least three academic staff, including at least one who has not been involved significantly in the student's work either academically or administratively.¹ This involves both a written submission and an interview with the student by the Review Board. This Board is to decide whether the student is progressing properly, and has a viable and suitably thought-out thesis proposal. If the Board is satisfied, the student is confirmed for registration for the research degree sought (PhD, MPhil, MTh/MSc by Research).

If the Board is not fully satisfied with the proposal, or with the student's competence for the proposed thesis, it may request a revised submission, in which case a further review is undertaken three to six months after the first review. If a revised submission is not satisfactory, the Board may recommend that a PhD student be registered for the M.Phil., or that the student be granted an extension of the probationary period, or registration for a postgraduate taught degree, or discontinuation.²

The Board's recommendation (reached in consultation with the School Postgraduate Director) will be based on the following criteria: (1) Satisfactory competence in the relevant knowledge and abilities (e.g., appropriate languages and/or other matters); (2) a satisfactory thesis proposal (see the following section for specifics); (3) a satisfactory chapter/chapter-portion draft; (4) co-operation with the supervision process and general promise of success in the research proposed. The Review Board must issue a written report which must be signed by all members *and the student*.

The Thesis Proposal

For this Review Board process, PhD students submit a delineated research proposal addressing the following matters: (1) the aims/objectives of the proposed research, (2) the research question or problem to be addressed, (3) the "research context," i.e., the current state of scholarly research on the topic, indicating major works/voices and major options in any disputed matters, (4) the method or approach proposed, including the key evidence to be considered, (5) a tentative outline of the proposed thesis, i.e., thesis chapters, with brief descriptions of probable contents of each chapter, (6) a statement of research skills specific to the thesis-project (e.g., relevant languages, or such training as statistics), and an indication of steps taken to acquire these skills, and (7) a working bibliography, indicating which works have been consulted and which are yet to be consulted. In addition, if the research involves any activity that may raise questions of safety, the proposal must address this. Likewise, if the research involves human subjects (e.g., field interviews), the project must be reviewed by a research ethics committee. This written proposal should be developed under guidance of the primary supervisor, but may well also involve advice from the secondary supervisor.

¹ This includes part-time and "home and away" students. Allowance for slower progress may be made, however, in considering part-time students. For part-time students, a further formal review may be held eighteen to twenty-four months from initial enrolment. For further information and a formal statement of regulations, see *A Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students*, section 5.4. (www.postgrad.ed.ac.uk/RESCODE/Default.mht).

² If the Board judges the submission seriously faulty, the student will be provided a written statement of deficiencies. Likewise, if the Board recommends reclassification or discontinuation, the student will be given a written statement of reasons for the recommendation. Students must have the opportunity to respond to any negative decision.

The work submitted should reflect an intensive nine months or so of research and reflection/analysis, and will normally comprise about 10,000 words (plus bibliography). The matters itemised above may be addressed in a submission that can also serve as a draft of a first chapter of the thesis. Or students may prefer to submit a concise proposal that addresses these matters, and along with it a sample chapter or portion of a chapter of the thesis. In either case, the written work should be clear and accessible to staff members not involved in supervision of the student, and even to staff members from another research area. The following is a basic statement of criteria to be used by the Review Board in assessing the proposal.

- 1.) Is there a clearly stated and coherent project, a question or hypothesis, with rationale given, and a clearly stated approach or method?
- 2.) Is there sufficient originality, in the evidence to be studied, in the question(s) formulated, in the approach to be taken, in the argument proposed, to suggest the likelihood of publishable material being produced, and a significant contribution to the field?
- 3.) Does the student show an ability to “place” the proposed research in the field, and does the prospectus show an adequate and sufficiently accurate knowledge of the field? “Adequate” and “sufficiently accurate” for this early stage of the project to show that the proposed work will not simply duplicate previous work, and that the project is informed by previous relevant work. The proposal should reflect an adequate search of scholarly literature in the subject, including completed doctoral theses (e.g., for US theses, *Dissertation Abstracts*; for UK theses, *ASLIB Index to Theses*.)
- 4.) Does the student have the requisite abilities and preparation for this type of research (e.g., relevant languages or preparation in specialised methods, etc.)? (The supervisor will be expected to speak to the student’s statement on this matter.)
- 5.) If the project involves human subjects, does it meet research ethics concerns?
- 6.) Are there any issues of safety of the researcher? If so, does the proposal adequately address them?

Responsibilities for Arrangements

- After consultation with the student and staff members who will form the Review Board, the thesis supervisor will inform the student of the time and location of the Board meeting.
- The supervisor will also inform the Postgraduate Secretary of the composition of the Board and meeting time/location.
- The student should ensure that the written submission is in the hands of the Postgraduate Secretary at least one week before the date of the Board’s meeting for copying and distribution to the members of the Board.

(28 June 2006)