



World Politics and International Relations
Department of Political and Social Sciences
Università degli Studi di Pavia

Final Thesis – Academic Guidance

Important note for non-EU students: your residence permit (*permesso di soggiorno*, issued by the *Questura*) must be up-to-date at the time when you hand in your application for admission to the final exam at the Student Administration Office (*segreteria studenti*). The *segreteria studenti* cannot proceed with your thesis defence unless you are still a legal resident in Italy. (Even if you happen to be residing outside Italy for the final part of your studies and intend to return only for the thesis defence, it is not sufficient simply to return with a tourist visa.)

Supervision

The final thesis is normally written during the second semester of the second year. It is worth 24 credits and therefore represents a substantial commitment in terms of research and writing.

The thesis topic is established by agreement with the supervisor (*relatore*), on the basis both of the student's declared interests and the supervisor's availability and areas of competence. It is up to the student to establish contact with a potential supervisor in good time (normally, but not necessarily, during the first semester of the second year). Agreeing on a good topic and an appropriate research question can be a matter of negotiation. For example, the potential supervisor you are speaking with might think that you need to be refine or even substantially change your initial proposal in light of considerations about its feasibility as a project for a master-level thesis.

Your first move, then, should be to find a supervisor for your thesis, and you should make this move *in good time*. Your supervisor will normally be one of the teachers on the degree program, but they may also be another member of the Department of Political and Social Sciences, or indeed a member of another Department provided the co-supervisor is a member of the Department of Political and Social Sciences.

The supervisor's role is to provide coaching and assistance in the execution of the thesis project. This can involve:

- providing initial guidance in choosing the topic and identifying a good research question;
- bibliographical advice;
- advice on research methods and the structure of the thesis;
- feedback on how to improve drafts.

Styles of supervision vary, but most supervisors will expect you to hand in a plan or provisional table of contents in the early stages, and successive chapters, as they are eventually produced, for comment and improvement.

Do not expect your supervisor to be ready to comment on a draft chapter immediately after you have sent it to them. ("Dear Professor, here is a first draft of chapter 1. I will try dropping by tomorrow to see what you think about it"). Your professor is almost certainly a very busy person and will probably require at least a week to look at a draft chapter. Times will vary from supervisor to supervisor, and you should agree with them on what constitutes an adequate amount of time for commenting on material.

For the same reason, you need to plan ahead in such a way as to avoid sending large pieces of written work to your supervisor very near to your submission deadline ("Dear Professor, here is a draft of the entire thesis, which I have to submit in 3 days' time"). You need, indeed, to allow time *not only* for the supervisor to read the material, but also for you to absorb any comments, which might require reflection or some further reading, and to make any necessary revisions. Above all, you should not contemplate submitting the thesis until your supervisor is satisfied that it is ready.

Managing your time effectively – establishing a roadmap with a clear timeline – is itself one of the skills that the thesis project will help you to consolidate.

Co-supervision

Once your project is underway, the Department will also name a co-supervisor. You can talk about possible co-supervisors with your supervisor. Indeed, the Head of Department usually receives informal advice from the supervisor concerning the choice of co-supervisor.

The degree of active involvement of the co-supervisor during the writing process will vary depending on the co-supervisor's area of competence. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the degree program, many WPIR students have a co-supervisor in a different discipline who can provide some input that complements that of the supervisor.

Although the supervisor should be a member of Pavia University, the co-supervisor can be a member of a foreign university (for example, if the student has established contact with a potential co-supervisor when participating in an exchange program). In normal times (i.e. post-pandemic), in order to be named officially as co-supervisor, a foreign professor must agree to participate in the examining committee and therefore to be physically present in Pavia for the thesis defence.

Nearer the time of the thesis defence (normally a few weeks before), if the supervisor judges the student's work to be outstanding, they may request that the Head of Department nominate a *second* co-supervisor. The presence of a second co-supervisor is necessary for the awarding of a Distinction (see below). The second co-supervisor participates in the examining committee and provides an independent evaluation of the thesis.

Length and page layout

There are no formal rules about the length or layout of the thesis.

The length of your thesis will depend on the discipline and topic and is a matter of judgement that you should discuss with your supervisor. Many master-level theses are around 100 pages long, but this is merely a generalization.

The thesis should be printed on A4 paper containing roughly 25 lines per page, with each page containing roughly 1,800 characters (spaces included). Adequate margins should be left for binding.

Submitted copies should be bound and the cover should contain the name of the University and Department, the title of the thesis, the name of the supervisor, the name of the student, and the academic year of graduation. It is conventional for Italian graduation theses to be bound in a good quality hard cover.

By convention, at least two weeks before the thesis defence you should supply your supervisor and co-supervisor (and, if applicable, your second co-supervisor) with bound copies of your thesis.

Procedure for submission

During the period leading up to the expected date of the thesis defence, certain procedures need to be followed, including the submission of certain forms within certain deadlines. The first of these deadlines is *two months before the date of the chosen graduation session*.

For details about these procedures, consult the relevant guidelines in the WPIR website:

[Final Thesis – Submission Procedures](#)

Plagiarism and citations

You should be aware of the rules on plagiarism, which apply equally to term papers and to the final thesis. It is the responsibility both of the student and of the supervisor to check the thesis using the relevant software as various chapters are produced.

It is very important that all your sources be cited in an orderly way. Your supervisor may have a preference about the system to use for citations and footnotes/endnotes. Otherwise, use a recognized system and above all use it *consistently*.

The thesis defence

The thesis defence is a formal oral exam, but is also a public occasion (anyone, including people from outside the university, may attend) and is the official meeting in which degrees are awarded through a public “proclamation”. The exam is carried out by the graduation committee (*commissione di laurea*), which is made up of a number of members of the Department, including the supervisor and co-supervisor. The most senior member of the committee chairs the meeting and delivers the proclamation at the end.

During the exam you are expected to give a brief presentation of the thesis (explaining its main aims, the research carried out, and its results). This presentation might last around 10 minutes. You will receive instructions about this from your supervisor. You will then answer questions about the thesis. The questions are usually (but not necessarily) asked by the supervisor and co-supervisor.

At the end of the question-and-answer session the candidate (and audience) is asked to leave the room while the committee makes a collective decision on the final degree mark. The candidate (and audience) is then asked back in. A final mark is awarded for the degree as a whole and (in the case of a positive result) the chair of the committee awards the degree.

Note: Some European Universities adopt the practice of assigning the official role of “opponent” to a particular member of the committee, so as to set up an adversarial debate. This practice is not adopted at Pavia University. On the other hand, any member of the committee might choose to ask some searching questions and/or to object to points that the student has made, either in the thesis or in the initial presentation.

How the graduation committee arrives at your final degree mark

The degree mark – that is, the overall grade with which the student graduates – depends on a combination of the marks obtained in the individual exams taken during the degree course, and the mark awarded specifically to the thesis in the final exam.

- The overall mark for the individual exams is calculated as the arithmetic mean of the exam marks, but leaving out two of these marks: the lowest and the highest.

- The thesis is awarded between 0 and 7 points, on the basis of the quality of the thesis itself and of its presentation and discussion. Roughly speaking, the points for the thesis can be interpreted as follows: 0-1 poor; 2-3 fair; 4-5 good; 6 very good; 7 excellent.

These two elements are combined as follows: the average exam mark is multiplied by 11 and divided by 3. This operation produces the starting point (*base di partenza*) for the thesis defence. Decimals are rounded up/down. For example: a candidate with an average exam mark of 25/30 will start the defence with 92 points; a candidate with an average mark of 29/30 will start the defence with 106 points. To this initial mark, the points for the thesis are added. For example, a candidate with a starting point of 99 who is awarded 5 points for their thesis will graduate with a mark of 104.

The final degree mark is given out of a maximum of 110. Therefore, the highest mark obtainable is 110/110, even if, in calculating the mark, the combination of the two elements (as described above) comes to more than 110.

The reason for the final mark being out of 110 goes back centuries and has been superseded over the years, but the traditional grading scale has been maintained. Originally there would have been 11 examiners, with each awarding a mark out of 10, hence the maximum total of 110.

In the case of candidates who achieve the top mark of 110/110, the graduation committee may in addition award a distinction (in Latin, *cum laude*, in Italian, *lode*, meaning “compliments of the jury”). This requires the presence of a second co-supervisor. Since the maximum mark for the thesis is 7, one can only achieve 110/110 with a distinction (*lode*) if one starts the defence with at least 103.

N.B. a candidate for whom the total combined mark (for exams and thesis) comes to more than 110 (for example, a candidate who starts with 106 and is awarded 5 or more points for the thesis), will not automatically graduate with distinction (*lode*). Achieving *lode* depends above all on the committee's *evaluation of the thesis*, and is not awarded automatically to a student simply because their starting point at the thesis defence is at, or near to, 110, or because they have achieved a certain number of *lode* in their individual exams.