

## **Submission, Graduation, and Publication: Dealing with the Quality, Timing, and Expectations**

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### **How to decide if a thesis is ready for submission?**

It is not necessary to wait until the last minute to determine if a thesis is ready. Ideally, the supervisor has to be able to tell somewhere in the middle of the writing process if a thesis meets the required standards. Prof. Mimi Zou from the Faculty of Law said, “If you are a good supervisor, then I think that by the time that students are half way through their PhD, you should be already able to tell whether they can make the three/four-year deadline. You shouldn’t get to a point where your student is at the end of their fourth year and the standard is bad.”

In terms of determining whether a thesis is ready for submission, Prof. Helen Zhao from the Faculty of Arts suggested that, “As long as all the sections – theories, methods, analyses, and discussion - are included, and it is clearly explained, then I think that it is essentially done.” From an internal standard point of view, the completeness of this basic structure constitutes a good reference point. On the other hand, some supervisors rely on real or hypothetical external examining standards, for instance, the threshold of acceptability of a thesis committee. Prof. Mimi Zou maintains that a thesis should “get to such a standard that it will not be referred back [to be rewritten], which would be devastating for the student’s confidence.” Prof. Dahua Lin from the Faculty of Engineering also suggested that the student “look for an audience who has basic knowledge of the field; if they can make sense of the thesis draft and comprehend the main points, then I think that the student can build on the current structure and start to polish the details.”

### **Are there any other pressures for graduation?**

Given the three/four-year timeframe for undertaking PhD studies, time is a critical issue. Most of the faculty interviewed believe that supervisors are obliged to ensure that their students maintain the momentum and complete their thesis in time, and that students have to be very self-disciplined in order to meet the required target in terms of both of quality and time. This can be very stressful, and the current system of funding of research degrees in Hong Kong adds more weight to such stress. Prof. Helen Zhao said, “In my previous PhD program in the US, if you needed more time, then you could still receive funding from the university. But here in our department, after 3 or 4 years, you don’t get any more funding. This has very serious financial

implications for students, and so (as supervisors) we need to make sure that they stay on track.”

### **How to balance between perfection and submission?**

Prof. Mimi Zou advised that candidates should not aim at perfection, as some students might prolong the normative time period in order to strive for a perfect thesis. She confirmed that, “The supervisor’s role is to say, ‘this may not be a perfect thesis, but there is no such thing as a perfect thesis.’ This is something that PhD students need to realize, that it’s never going to be amazing, okay? You only have three or four years, and as you are coming to the end, it is so dangerous for you to think ‘maybe I can take another few more months, I’m gonna make it perfect’. It’s never going to happen. There is always a deadline.”

Prof. Helen Zhao also shared her thoughts on how students should perceive their thesis, when she quoted a colleague’s comment: “When I look back at my own thesis, I feel like there are so many things that I should have addressed, so many things that I didn’t notice. At the same time, though, I noticed some very smart statements that I had made, statements that I probably cannot make now.” She therefore tends to instruct students under her supervision that, “given the time you have, this is the best you can do.”

### **Is a publication required for graduation?**

In general, having a publication is not a pre-requisite for graduation. Expectations regarding publishing post-graduate research tend to differ between disciplines and degree type. These expectations differ depending on the relative ease of publishing in the particular field. For example, being able to publish the work from a PhD research project might be less realistic in the soft sciences. Prof. Ehsan Bolandifar from the Business School asserted that, “I can’t say that it [a publication] is required because all of us know that it’s very difficult to finish a paper from the beginning to the end in two and a half years in our field.”

### **How would having a publication help?**

Though it is not required, the benefits of having at least one publication are obvious. It helps the student to produce a better thesis as the writing skills are developed through the process of preparing a manuscript, and the student’s work is examined by a reviewer, chosen by the journal editor, who is an expert in the field. Thus, if the work has been accepted for publication then it is unlikely to be rejected by the thesis committee. Prof. Hualing Zeng from the Faculty of Science observed that, “when a student has a certain number of publications, the thesis is usually of better quality.”

He mentioned that although having a publication is not an official requirement, “Some members of the thesis committee might have their own standards. Some would question whether the student is qualified to have a PhD if he/she has no publications.” Thus, he suggested that it would be safer to have several publications at hand before undertaking the oral defense.

In reality, to publish is less important for the purpose of graduation, but is of more value for the the student’s academic career. Most faculty agree that a publication will provide students with “more options” if they aspire for an academic career. Prof. Sophia Jeong from the Business School spoke directly, “It is not a requirement of the program, but it is a requirement of the market ...Students can still get a job in mainland China without a publication. However, if you want to get a job in a good school in mainland China or if you want to go to the United States, Hong Kong or Singapore to work, then you need publications.”