

PhD by Publication

Guidance Document

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0. Introduction

This document provides guidance to postgraduate research students, supervisors and examiners on the University's approach to the PhD/MD by Publication. The document covers the regulatory requirements, guidance on writing publications, guidance on writing a thesis that incorporates publications and guidance on examining a thesis in publication format.

1. Key points from the regulations on PhD/MD by Publication

1.1 What is a PhD/MD by Publication?

Many doctoral candidates choose to write their thesis as a monograph. According to Parkin¹, a monograph thesis is written by a single author, aimed at fulfilling degree requirements. The audience is the examination committee and the document itself is a unified text structured in long chapters. The elements of a monograph cohere because the content of each chapter exists expressly to provide background and basis of later chapters.

At Surrey, instead of writing a thesis as one large monograph, doctoral researchers have the option of substituting one or more chapters with one or more chapters written for publication. There are two routes to a PhD by Publication:

- i) **PhD by Prior Publication:** This option is available to University staff and staff in organisations with teaching and/or research connection to the University. Candidates using this option will already have a body of published works and their candidature focuses on preparing a thesis with additional text that wraps around the publications;
- ii) **PhD/MD by Publication Format:** This option is for postgraduate research students registered on a standard PhD or MD degree who want to include one or more chapters written for publication in their thesis. PGRs using this option will base their publications on research conducted during their doctoral degree at Surrey.

Neither option is a straight exchange of papers for a doctorate. A thesis submitted in this format must still meet the national requirements for a doctorate. Consequently, the publications must be interconnected and the thesis itself must contextualise the publication(s) with a coherent narrative and, importantly, demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge.

1.2 Is there a minimum number of chapters that need to be written as publications?

No. There is no minimum number of chapters that need to be written in publication format. The focus should be on ensuring that the thesis as a whole meets the required standard for a doctorate through a coherent narrative and original contribution(s) to knowledge. The criteria for awarding a doctorate are in [Section 4.2](#).

1.3 Is there a minimum journal quality for publications?

Journals are often ranked by citation metrics, which are used as a proxy measure for their quality. Examples of metrics include Impact Factor, h-index, [SCImago Journal Rank](#) and [Altmetrics](#). Journal rankings can be controversial, their importance varies by discipline and there is debate about whether the metrics used actually measure the quality of the articles they publish. Similarly, not every article fits the aims and objectives of top ranked journals and some papers are a better fit for other journals

¹ Parkin, N. (2015) *Publishing your Doctoral Thesis*. Routledge. Available at: <https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Publishing%20Your%20Doctoral%20Thesis.pdf>.

where they would attract a wider readership. Based on these considerations, there is no regulatory minimum journal quality for publications at Surrey.

1.4 What counts as a publication?

The [University's regulations](#) do not specify the form of a publication. The regulatory position is that what counts as a publication is best determined by practitioners in the discipline. Nonetheless, the most common examples of a publication include peer-reviewed journal articles, peer-reviewed conference proceedings, book chapters and technical reports.

For those on the **PhD by Prior Publication** route, all publications must have been accepted for publication or published before they enter the programme.

For those on the **PhD/MD by Publication Format** route, the chapters written as publications can be at any stage of the publication process from written for publication to accepted and published. Rejected publications are permitted because it is the thesis as a whole that is being assessed. For rejected publications, students are advised to consider and respond carefully to any feedback they received during the review process before including it in their thesis. Of course, including work that has been accepted for publication may strengthen a thesis because one of the criteria for a doctorate is to produce work that is of publishable standard.

1.5 What else do I need to include in my thesis other than publications?

The precise structure of a thesis by publication will vary based on the nature of the research project, the discipline(s) in which it is based, and discussions with supervisors. In addition to the publication chapters, the thesis would also normally include:

- i) an introductory chapter to provide a literature review setting the research in context;
- ii) a discussion/conclusion chapter to state the contributions of the research, areas for future research, and implications of the research for academia and/or practice, and
- iii) a stand-alone methodology chapter if this is not covered in enough detail in the publications.

In some cases, a publication may be used instead of points i), ii) or iii). If publications are used for the introduction, discussion or methodology, an additional narrative will still be required to contextualise and tie the publications together into a coherent whole.

1.6 Can I include co-authored papers?

A co-authored paper is a publication with more than one named author. All named authors on the publication must have made a substantial contribution to the publication. There is some excellent guidance available [here](#) on co-authoring papers.

At Surrey, co-authored papers can be included in the thesis and the candidate does not need to be first author on them. When including co-authored papers, candidates must also include a statement in their thesis about their contribution to those papers. There are lots of examples online of what a statement might look like. It is a good idea to search for examples from your discipline.

When drawing on co-authored papers, it is important to select papers that allow students to demonstrate the breadth of skills required at doctoral level. It is advisable to avoid selecting numerous papers that only cover one or a few aspects of the research project lifecycle, for example, papers for which the candidate only did the literature review. That will tell examiners that they are good at literature reviews, but the examiners will have questions about the rest of a project. However, including publications that offer a different perspective of the same study or different studies e.g.

literature review, findings, discussions, critical analyses or methods papers would complement each other and showcase different doctoral level skills.

1.7 When do I have to decide if I want to write my thesis in publication format?

On the **PhD/MD by Publication Format** route, the regulations allow students to switch between monograph format and publication format up to the point at which they enter 'completing status'. Completing status normally starts at the end of the third year for full-time students when data collection/generation and analysis is complete, and they are focussed solely on writing the thesis. More information is in the [regulations](#).

Candidates are advised to have a discussion with their supervisors as soon as possible when considering the PhD/MD by Publication Format and we advise them to prepare their thesis in this format as early as possible. By having 'completing status' as the final point by which a firm decision needs to be made, candidates have the flexibility to try out different approaches to their thesis and choose the option that best suits them and their research project.

1.8 How do I make it official that I want to write my thesis in publication format?

Candidates can record their decision to prepare a thesis in publication format on their progress review form and/or confirmation document. This will help them and their supervisors with planning their research and writing for publication, as well as helping to ensure everyone is working to the same project objectives. If candidates wish to use the publication format, they must have the approval of their supervisory team.

2. Guidance on writing for publication

There is a plethora of books, guides and resources on different aspects of writing for publication, some of which are listed in the 'Useful resources' section below. The Researcher Development and Employability (RDE) team at the Doctoral College also offers a range of workshops on publishing your research, from the basics of getting published to writing high quality publications and developing an effective publication strategy (<https://www.surrey.ac.uk/researcher-development-programme/development>).

Below we provide some general pointers on a number of issues which are particularly pertinent to those writing a thesis by publication.

2.1 Choosing a journal

Choosing the right journals for the work produced during a PhD by publication depends on a number of factors. Different journals represent different audiences and have different preferences for thematic foci and/or methodologies, so it is important to think about what would be the best fit for a particular piece of research. Key information about a journal can usually be found in the 'About the Journal' or 'Aims and Scope' sections of the journal website.

Another factor for choosing the target journal or outlet is whether it is open access (freely available online) as this will determine how research is accessed by others. Open access publications tend to be viewed and cited more often, and, crucially, they help to lower barriers to accessing knowledge and latest research – something the University of Surrey is strongly committed to. (For more information on different open access options, see <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/library/open-research/open-access> or contact the Library Open Research team at openresearch@surrey.ac.uk).

For novice researchers and writers who do not have experience of going through a journal publication process, it might make sense not to aim for top-ranking journals straight away and develop their skills of writing for publication step-by-step. However, in disciplines where journal rankings and impact factors play a significant role for those who want to develop a career in academia, it would be particularly useful to have proper discussions with their supervisors about the most appropriate outlets for their work. Something else that comes into play is whether the papers included in a thesis are co-authored and what the co-authors' expectations about publication are. As Rowena Murray² noted, '[w]hile choosing a target journal is straightforward in some fields, in others a more complex mix of factors comes into play: the power of the journal, the power wielded by colleagues and your own sense of empowerment to make a choice' (p. 38).

Another useful strategy for deciding where to publish is keeping an eye out for requests for contributions to special issues of journals or edited books around specific themes. For novice researchers, this may be a really good way to get their work accepted for publication in a high-ranking journal or a prestigious series.

Getting involved in peer reviewing can also be an excellent way to develop one's knowledge of the publication process, as well as understanding the standard required by a particular journal or publisher.

Something to **avoid** when aiming to publish your work is **predatory journals** which may publish work quickly for a fee, but which do not necessarily have a proper peer review or editorial systems in place. For advice on how to deal with such journals, please contact the Open Research at Surrey team (openresearch@surrey.ac.uk).

2.2 Journal lead times

Different journals have different time frames for reviewing, editing and publishing papers. Additionally, if revisions are required, these can take a long time to implement and get reviewed. Those planning to submit papers to journals during the course of their PhD need to take all this into consideration when developing the timeline for their thesis.

2.3 Maximising one's chances of being accepted

There is a lot of advice, some of it discipline-specific, around how to get accepted for publication. Supervisors can often provide some really useful information about getting published in a particular discipline or a specific journal. The following points reflect some of the most common tips and strategies for increasing the chance of being accepted for publication:

- Get to know the journal, the type of work it publishes and the audience it is aimed at;
- Check any resources for prospective authors provided by the target journal and/or its publisher;
- Read the author guidelines and follow the instructions to the letter when you prepare a manuscript;
- If in doubt whether it is an appropriate journal for your publication, email the journal editor with a summary of the proposed paper. Often Editors will inform you quickly if the paper is not suitable for their journal and they will signpost you to another – more suitable journal.
- Check some articles previously published in that journal to get a sense of the style, structure and level of academic rigour required to get accepted;

² Murray, R. (2020). *Writing for Academic Journals* (4th Ed.). Open University Press.

- Aim to ‘join a conversation’ on your topic/ methodology etc. happening in the target journal by building on the relevant papers that have been published there;
- Edit and proof-read your work carefully before submission. Use Grammarly to check work, if needed and ensure the language is in the appropriate format (US/UK spelling/terminology).

2.4 Dealing with feedback / rejection

Peer review is at the heart of the academic publication process, aiming to assess the quality, validity and rigour of the research. The reality is that the world of academic publication is very competitive, and a lot of top-ranking journals have high rejection rates. Papers may be rejected for a number of reasons, including authors not following author guidelines or a paper not being a good fit for a particular journal. Researchers need to accept that rejection is part of academic life and be open to accepting reviewers’ comments in a constructive way, rather than seeing them as personal criticism. Reviewer feedback can be immensely useful in helping researchers reflect on the robustness and significance of their research, the approaches and the methodologies they adopted, and it can also help develop their skills in communicating your work in a clear and impactful way.

The topic of dealing effectively with reviewer feedback is explored in more depth in Susan Smith’s (2015) book ‘PhD by Published Work: A Practical Guide for Success’ listed in the ‘Useful Resources’ section below.

3. Guidance on producing a thesis in the publication format

Writing a thesis by publication is quite different from producing a monograph-based thesis, and there are a number of considerations you need to be aware of when embarking on this journey.

3.1 Writing for different audiences

A thesis by publication consists of (a) stand-alone paper(s) and an accompanying narrative to make it into a coherent whole. The primary function of the paper(s) is to communicate one’s research to the scholarly community, whereas the narrative is aimed at examiners and its primary function is to demonstrate that the candidate has achieved ‘doctorateness’. (The criteria that examiners use to assess whether somebody has achieved ‘doctorateness’ are listed in Section 4.3). Therefore, the process of writing a thesis by publication will most likely involve a ‘complex process of juggling different writerly identities’ (Nygaard and Solli, 2021, p. 44) and will require doctoral students to be aware of the purposes and functions of each chapter and the audience it is aimed at.

3.2 Writing the accompanying narrative

As the thesis by publication should form a cohesive body of work, the narrative effectively acts as the ‘golden thread’ that helps to tie in all the chapters into a coherent whole. Working out a thesis structure that can do this effectively becomes of paramount importance.

Although the precise structure of a thesis by publication will depend on the nature of the research project and disciplinary norms, its typical format might be as follows:

- **Introductory chapter:** this chapter will normally set the research in context by providing a literature review, stating research aims, outlining research questions and how they are addressed in the papers, and providing an overview of the thesis structure.
- **Methodology chapter:** this may be included as a stand-alone chapter if the issues of methodology are not explored in enough detail in the publication-based chapters.

- **Chapters in the publication format:** each paper will typically comprise a separate chapter. The number of publication-based chapters will be determined by the nature of the discipline and the scale of the research included in each chapter.
- **Discussion/conclusion chapter:** typically, this chapter will cover the significance and contributions of the research, its implications for academia and/or practice, and areas for future research.

(Note: Surrey regulations allow in some cases for a publication to be used instead of the Introduction, Methodology or Discussion chapters).

The Introduction, Methodology and Discussion chapters then constitute what we call the ‘narrative’ part of the thesis. According to Nygaard and Solli³, the single biggest mistake doctoral students make is putting all their effort into the papers and leaving the narrative for later, ‘not realising how challenging it can be to take that additional step to reflect on their work as a whole, to think of the entirety of their research as a sustained argument’ (p. 54).

It is strongly advisable, therefore, to start thinking about the narrative part of the thesis from the start and to reflect on the ‘big picture’ (i.e. what binds the thesis together) regularly. A helpful strategy suggested by Nygaard and Solli is to create a ‘map’ of the whole thesis that would show the overarching research questions and how they will be addressed in each publication-based chapter.

The guidance provided above sets the basic parameters for what a thesis by publication should achieve and how it can be approached. As disciplinary requirements differ, doctoral students should seek their supervisors’ advice in relation to the specifics of their particular project. The issues discussed above, along with other areas pertinent to writing a paper-based thesis, are explored in more depth in the workshop offered by RDE ‘Writing a Thesis by Publication’ (<https://www.surrey.ac.uk/researcher-development-programme/development>).

4. Guidance for examiners of PhDs by Publication Format

4.1 Guidance for confirmation examiners

Confirmation examiners are advised to refer to the guidance within this document as well as general information about confirmation examination [here and any additional guidance provided by individual schools/departments](#).

A key point for confirmation examiners to hold in mind is that the **PhD by Publication Format** is not a straight exchange of publications for a PhD. In addition to the publications themselves, the PGRs still need to be able to articulate their contribution to knowledge and to demonstrate that the research underpinning the papers is based on sound scholarly research questions and a robust methodology.

What this means for the confirmation exam is that the broad types of questions examiners would ask about a monograph PhD still pertain:

- Can the candidate situate their work in the literature and identify a gap?
- Are the research questions clear and robust?
- Is there a clear methodology and justification for methods used?
- Does the work have an emerging argument/potential for a contribution?

³ Nygaard, L.P. and Solli, K. (2021). *Strategies for Writing a Thesis by Publication in the Social Sciences and Humanities*. Routledge.

In addition, for PGRs pursuing the **PhD by Publication Format**, it also advisable to explore:

- How does the candidate intend to present the publications within the thesis?
- How will the candidate tie the publications together to articulate a contribution to knowledge?
- Have they planned time to submit the publications to journals?
- Do they have a publication strategy?
- Where a candidate plans to include or has included co-authored paper(s), have they justified their contribution/original thinking in the paper?

Discussing these points with candidates helps to give examiners an idea about whether the candidate is reflecting on the bigger picture of their work and its overall contribution, and not merely thinking that writing papers is enough to warrant the award.

4.2 Guidance to supervisors when approaching potential examiners for the *viva voce*

The *viva voce* examination is the final examination of a doctoral degree when the candidate's thesis is examined by a panel of experts. Information about the viva is available [here](#).

Different examiners will have different views about what constitutes a **PhD by Prior Publication** or **PhD by Publication Format**. Also, not all academics approve of presenting a thesis that includes publications. Therefore, when you approach a potential examiner for the first time, it is important to be upfront with them about how the thesis is presented. This will give the examiner the opportunity to decline the invitation if they are opposed to this model. Also, it means that examiners will be clear about what examining the thesis entails.

It is better to be specific in the initial approach with the examiners about which chapters are written in publication format and where in the publication cycle (i.e. not yet submitted, submitted, under consideration, published, rejected, re-submitted) those chapters are.

When it comes to making a formal examiner nomination to the Admission, Progression and Examination sub-Committee (APESC) via [Surrey Self-Service](#), supervisors will be asked to confirm that they have informed the examiners if the thesis includes publications or chapter written for publication.

4.3 Guidance for *viva voce* examiners

Examiners who are appointed to examine a postgraduate researcher's final thesis by publication are advised to refer to this whole document. Examiners may find the section on the regulatory requirements (See section 1.4) for the programme (Section 1) particularly helpful.

In addition to this general advice, a key point to note is that a PhD by Publication is *not* a straight exchange of papers for a PhD. A thesis submitted in this format must still meet the national requirements for a doctorate. Consequently, the publications must be inter-connected and the thesis itself must contextualise the publications with a coherent narrative and, importantly, demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge. Specifically, the thesis, as a whole, must demonstrate:

- the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication;
- a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice;
- the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;

- a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

When examining a thesis by publication, examiners must come to a decision about the quality of the thesis as a whole and can apply any of the following outcomes after the *viva voce*:

- (i) that the degree be awarded;
- (ii) that the degree be awarded, subject to specified minor corrections being made to the thesis or portfolio to the satisfaction of the internal examiner within a period not exceeding one month;
- (iii) that the degree be awarded, subject to specified, minor revisions being made to the thesis or portfolio to the satisfaction of the internal examiner within a period not exceeding six months;
- (iv) that the degree not be awarded, but that the student be permitted to submit a revised thesis, by a specified date (normally twelve months), with or without further research, and be examined with or without a further *viva voce* examination;
- (v) that the degree not be awarded but that the degree of Master of Philosophy be awarded, if appropriate, after specified minor corrections or minor revisions have been made to the thesis or portfolio, and if the student submits the thesis for that degree within one month in the case of minor corrections or six months in the case of minor revisions;
- (vi) that degree not be awarded but the student be permitted to submit a revised thesis, for the degree of Master of Philosophy, by a specified date (normally twelve months), with or without further research, and be examined with or without a further *viva voce* examination;
- (vii) that the degree not be awarded.

Note: A thesis cannot be failed solely on the grounds of it being submitted in publication format because it is a legitimate mode under the University regulations. Examiners should be informed prior to formal appointment if the thesis is in publication format. Examiners are advised not to accept the appointment if they object to its format.

5. Useful resources

- Duke, D., Denicolo, P. and Henslee, E. (2020). *Publishing for Impact*. Sage Publications.
- Murray, R. (2020). *Writing for Academic Journals* (4th Ed.). Open University Press.
- Nygaard, L.P. and Solli, K. (2021). *Strategies for Writing a Thesis by Publication in the Social Sciences and Humanities*. Routledge.
- Smith, S. (2015). *PhD by Published Work: A Practical Guide for Success*. Palgrave.
- <https://thesisbypublication.com/>

This is a really useful compilation of resources to support researchers doing a thesis by publication. It also includes separate sections for doctoral supervisors and examiners.

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