

Sheffield Methods Institute

The University of Sheffield

Floor 2

Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences

219 Portobello

Sheffield S1 4DP

s.mcandrew@sheffield.ac.uk

Tel: 0333 090 4635

Rachel Llewellyn, Postgraduate and Research Officer

Department of Politics

Birkbeck, University of London

21 November 2022

Dear Ms Llewellyn,

Thank you for sending through the sample of dissertations – five Social Research dissertations and two MRes Politics dissertations.

I very much enjoyed reading them. There was a clear interest across the sample in ‘diaspora’, and a diverse range of data sources were used and methods deployed. The highest-scoring dissertation, on Irish feminist Repeal the 8th activism in London, was excellent, well-controlled and scholarly. The dataset created by candidate 13194122 on Private Members’ Bills also looks extremely interesting and potentially valuable if made more widely available. Their dissertation was very well-written and, to echo the first marker, I hope they do go on to PhD study to develop this work further.

The dissertations evidence thorough methodological training and supportive supervision, as well as the considered programme structure where dissertation research planning itself often bears credit.

I offer the following further observations:

1. Those dissertations which did not score quite so highly (namely, those in the sample not achieving a 70+ grade) often had lengthy literature reviews and methodology chapters, while devoting relatively little time to the actual research, analysis and interpretation. I’m sure you provide appropriate guidance on how they should allocate their research/preparation time, and space within the written dissertation. It may be that some students need this advice to be communicated in a very direct and compelling way. Equally, they may all be achieving their full academic potential – it is difficult to say. I also recognise it is difficult to be prescriptive about the number of focus group participants or semi-structured interviews that would be ‘enough’ since so much depends on the quality of the conversation.
2. I would have liked to have seen candidate 13194122 attempt formal modelling of the quantitative data they had gathered so painstakingly. The Birkbeck quantitative training is strong and assuming they have taken the relevant modules, this could have been done reasonably easily – the N is just large enough for a time series analysis. My hunch is that they would have had some useful results which would have added some further originality and rigour to the dissertation. Otherwise, the academic value of the contribution of a new dataset to the scholarly could be emphasised further; I hope the candidate is encouraged to publish it openly.
3. You may have strong principles or binding constraints – but if there were any reason to consider reducing the maximum word count to 12000 words or even 10000 words, I would support it. I recently examined a PhD which was just shy of 45000 words which passed well. It should be possible for good candidates to demonstrate their research skills and academic standards within a shorter word limit, one which is still above the norm for journal articles. I don’t feel strongly that it is necessary, but would be happy to support any such initiative were that thought desirable to do.

Thank you again for sharing these interesting and impressive projects with me and congratulations to those who have completed their Masters-level studies successfully.  
  
Yours sincerely,

Dr Siobhan McAndrew

Senior Lecturer, Politics, Philosophy and Economics

Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield