

PhD based on publications: Guidance and Existing Policies

Are you considering doing a PhD based on publications? If so, there are two different paths you can currently choose from, a Retrospective – ‘PhD by published work’ and a Prospective – ‘Journal format’ thesis. These two paths are outlined below.

1. Retrospective – ‘PhD by published work’

If you’re a member of IHW staff who is interested in turning an already published body of work into a PhD thesis, you should consider a retrospective PhD by published work. This route is supported by the College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences (MVLS) and the College of Social Sciences (CoSS) and is particularly suitable for established researchers who can demonstrate a significant amount of research experience AND a body of previously published research linked by a common theoretical thread. This PhD route allows for shortening significantly the period of time from the point of registration to thesis submission. There is a set time limit of three months from approval of the prima facie case to full submission. The prima facie case should include a list of relevant publications, a curriculum vitae and a statement of up to 3,000 words which justifies the consideration of the application to full submission.

Whilst the existing university guidelines are not prescriptive in relation to the full submission, previous cases of IHW staff obtaining a PhD through this route have shown that the papers have to report findings from similar research or present a coherent picture of one’s wider research portfolio with a common research theme. The papers should also be accompanied by a robust introductory essay, which provides evidence of the theoretical anchoring of the published work and presents content which is not otherwise addressed in the published articles. This additional content might include outlining how the articles are interconnected with each other and how they comprehensively encompass the area covered by the research project or the wider research portfolio of the respective staff member. Summarising the content of the presented articles will normally be considered as insufficient. As part of the introduction, you will also be expected to provide a clear indication of your contribution to the research project, as it would be the case when obtaining a PhD via a traditional route.

A robust introduction is particularly important when the cited articles:

- provide little information on theoretical background of the research;
- do not outline details of the methodological design;
- do not discuss the findings in the context of existing evidence;
- do not provide sufficient evidence of the amount of work which was required to complete the project.

There is currently no word limit for the entire thesis, whereas the word limit for the introductory essay has recently been increased from 2,000-5,000 to 10,000-12,000. There are no set rules regarding restrictions as to the allocated time period within which the papers should have been published, but where papers are particularly dated, it might be more difficult to make the case that they still represent a contribution to knowledge.

If you are considering obtaining a retrospective PhD by published work, you should start by having a very honest and open discussion about your body of published articles with your line manager. You may also want to consult the university guidelines ([Schedule B: Degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Published Work](#)), but please remember that there will inevitably be variations between PhDs, depending on the discipline, methodological approaches and even examiners.

Below are several theses by published work downloadable from the University of Glasgow library, which present a variety of styles and are good examples of how the introduction section may be structured. However, please note that these example theses were all completed under the old 2,000-5,000 word count rules for the introductory essay:

McGonigal - <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/6658/>

Porter <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/3854/1/2013PorterMD1.pdf>

Sutherland - <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/4188/1/2013SutherlandPhDdedited.pdf>

Webster - <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/1720/1/2010websterphd.pdf.pdf>

If you would like to search for more examples, please [visit the university library webpage](#), then click specific search and choose 'theses' and then type in by 'published work'.

There are also some guidebooks on doing a PhD by published work and one example is a book titled ['PhD by published work: a practical guide for success' by Susan Smith](#).

2. Prospective – 'Journal format' thesis

The prospective route of obtaining a PhD via a journal format thesis should not to be confused with a PhD by retrospective published work (see above); those completing a journal format thesis are expected to publish their research whilst doing their PhD studies (i.e. enrolled as a full or part-time PhD student). This route is also open to staff members, but it requires enrolment as a PhD student. Journal format theses are currently only permissible for IHW students enrolled through MVLS. Students in CoSS may not submit a PhD via this route. Any students wishing to submit a thesis containing journal articles should discuss and seek permission for this from their supervisor as early as possible during the period of their study and seek current guidance on required format.

The University's [2019-2020 PGR Code of Practice](#) (section 10.4) states these are "a thesis containing one or more journal articles as submitted to a journal or as published" (i.e. the expectation is NOT for a thesis comprised entirely of published or submitted journal articles). Any students wishing to submit a journal format thesis will still be expected to meet the requirements for originality, criticality and their own contribution to knowledge in the discipline, and requirements for minimum or maximum word counts. They will also be expected to address the following points within the thesis:

- a justification for considering the body of work presented as a coherent whole or for the contribution of particular pieces of work to this whole;
- an explicit statement as to what your contribution has been where others have been involved in the work or where there are named co-authors: you will be expected to have made the primary contribution to any work presented within a thesis;
- an elaboration, if needed, to address any gaps in a published piece, e.g. to be clear about research design or methods used or present supplementary data;
- confirmation that permission has been obtained from a publisher where this is required, e.g. to ensure that the copyright of the publisher has not been violated;
- provision of clear formatting to ensure that examiners are able to follow the structure and content of the thesis despite the existence of chapters that may be formatted according to a published version.

It's also worth keeping in mind that while completing a journal format thesis may bring benefits in terms of amassing a body of published work relatively early on in your academic career, it might mean your research and/or student experience is slightly different from those working towards a more traditional format.

If you are an IHW student enrolled through MVLS and are interested in doing a PhD by publication prospectively ('journal format') rather than retrospectively ('by published work'), please have a look at [sections 10.4-10.6 of the PGR Code of Practice](#) for more information.

Information on more policies and procedures pertaining to PGR students can also be found on [the MVLS Graduate School website](#).