

Writing a Dissertation at RGS Econ

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This paper is addressed primarily at incoming RGS students and as a reference for 'older' students. It aims to give students guidance on writing an excellent dissertation (Section I) and provide information on how the doctoral program of the Ruhr Graduate School in Economics is geared to this end (Section II).

It also serves the Board of Management, the RGS Faculty, and the Scientific Advisory Board as a documentation and clarification of the goals and elements of the structure of our doctoral program.

I. Writing a Dissertation in Economics

The Contribution

A necessary element of a good dissertation is that it makes an original and meaningful contribution to the field, i.e. its central arguments, conclusions, or methodological advances should be recognized by the profession as a genuine contribution of high quality. This recognition by the scientific community is evidenced by

- (eventual) publication of extracts from the dissertation in refereed journals,
- prizes awarded for the dissertation, and
- professional success of the candidate after graduation.

Ideally, one or several publications of parts of the dissertation will have materialized by the time the dissertation is submitted. Given current publication lags, however, this is hard to achieve and the exception rather than the norm. Consequently, additional signals of the dissertation's quality, its potential for publication, and the research potential of the candidate are highly relevant. These signals include

- assessment by the supervisor(s)¹,
- presentations at conferences and workshops,
- scholarships and awards, and, more generally,
- contribution to academic exchange, both internally and externally.

Remember that the doctorate will ultimately be awarded to a researcher, not to a series of papers alone. Potential employers and colleagues will look for a candidate that has ongoing research potential and can be expected to make a contribution to the institution's research environment, e.g. by connecting and working with other researchers.

The Topic and Supervisor

The top priority of a dissertation is quality as defined above, including the associated signals. Whether the contribution is theoretical, empirical, or methodological - and to what particular field

¹ Supervisors put their reputation on line when recommending a candidate or a candidate's work.

the dissertation's topic belongs, plays a secondary role. The choice of topic and supervisor is, however, a central ingredient in allowing you to write a high quality dissertation and accumulate the associated signals. It should allow for a **close match between research interests** of student and supervisor(s) and ideally entail a **nucleus of researchers** at various stages of academic development to frequently exchange ideas and get support with problems of implementation.

Graduate students should ascertain whether their potential supervisor holds a **convincing record of research dissemination** (not only in the form of her publication record, but also in her experience as journal referee or editor, a task that requires handling – rejecting, commenting, and sometimes accepting – loads of academic papers) and has acquired **experience in supervision** of other doctoral or master's students. Only then the doctoral student can expect to receive helpful and constructive criticism on his or her own work in progress. The best way to find out who will be an ideal supervisor to work with is to talk to previous and current doctoral students and to think strategically about whose judgment will be respected highly in the profession.²

It is also helpful to consider the supervisor's perspective. When supervision is more than a mere formality – as it should be – it takes time. But supervision of doctoral students also provides the researcher with important benefits: For most researchers, supervision is a privilege, because it allows them to accompany a very select group of interesting young minds during an important phase of their intellectual maturation, giving the supervisor the opportunity to influence their students' approach to research problems, and to intellectual challenges more generally, in a positive way. Moreover, supervision effectively fosters the supervisor's own development as a senior researcher, because it helps in deciding what topics it makes sense to address more thoroughly, in placing methodological advances into a broader perspective, and in learning about practical strengths and weaknesses of research avenues without having to implement every detail in her own work. Furthermore, supervision provides the researcher with the opportunity to learn and contribute in a broader range of her research interests, both directly in joint work and indirectly in commenting on ongoing research. Needless to say that many successful supervisors will find their most fruitful connections with co-authors among their former graduate students.

The Structure of the Dissertation

Today, dissertations are almost exclusively in the form of a collection of 3-5 self-contained papers. Typically, dissertations that contain more than one co-authored paper consist of 4-5 papers in total, otherwise 3-4. These papers should

- address a **joint theme**, which may be defined broadly;
- provide a **genuine contribution, one-by-one**,³
- be **mostly publishable, one by one**, as self-contained contributions to journals or collective volumes;
- **not necessarily be chronologically ordered** in the way they were written, but the order typically reflects the maturation of the researcher and increasing command of the set of research questions involved.⁴

² For a list of RGS Econ's alumni, their supervisors, dissertation titles and placement, see [Completed Dissertations and Job Placements](#). The coordination office can provide you with contact details.

³ For one or the other paper in the dissertation, making a genuine contribution might mean solving a technical puzzle or a methodological question arising in another paper, others should be ambitious enough to be published in a good journal.

- be, to state the obvious, **written in English**;
- crucially contain **at least one single-authored key paper**.⁵

The Process

The most important step in the dissertation work is to get started with a record of written material. Working for a long time on a serious contribution without passing some small milestones along the way is not an advisable way to get ahead. Be sure to

1. **Get started with something simple**, e.g. a replication of existing work with slight but interesting genuine adjustments or an overview of previous and current research that is a genuine contribution in that it provides a novel perspective;
2. **Put yourself and your work out there**, by putting as many papers as possible into the realm of public scientific exchange, via their presentation at conferences and workshops, internally as well externally, as working papers, and by submitting them for publication. This should already happen at an early stage of the dissertation work;
3. **Work with others**, because especially during the initial phase of writing academic papers, one can learn enormously from more advanced researchers, e.g. about the frustrating process of submitting papers and receiving harsh criticism from anonymous referees. One ideal candidate for this joint work is certainly the supervisor, other candidates would be members of the core research team around the supervisor.
4. **Keep the introduction for the end**. An introductory chapter that ties the individual papers together and outlines a common intellectual thread can easily be written at the last stage in the process. Completing the work on the dissertation with such an introductory “executive summary” is a simple way to persuade any outside referee or the faculty awarding the degree that the researcher is able to cover a broad and intellectually challenging topic in a coherent way. It is also a good preparation for defending the thesis and its major arguments and conclusions in the final dissertation “Rigorosum”.

II. Writing a Dissertation at the Ruhr Graduate School in Economics

The Ruhr Graduate School in Economics (RGS Econ) is an internationally renowned center for research and higher education in economics, offering a three-year structured PhD program. From its start in 2004, this doctoral program has been geared to facilitate excellent dissertation work, with the points made in the previous section in mind. The program’s structure serves to get students on track with their dissertation research quickly, provide the right kind of training, give qualified feedback and opportunities for networking, and assess progress in order to offer additional guidance where needed.

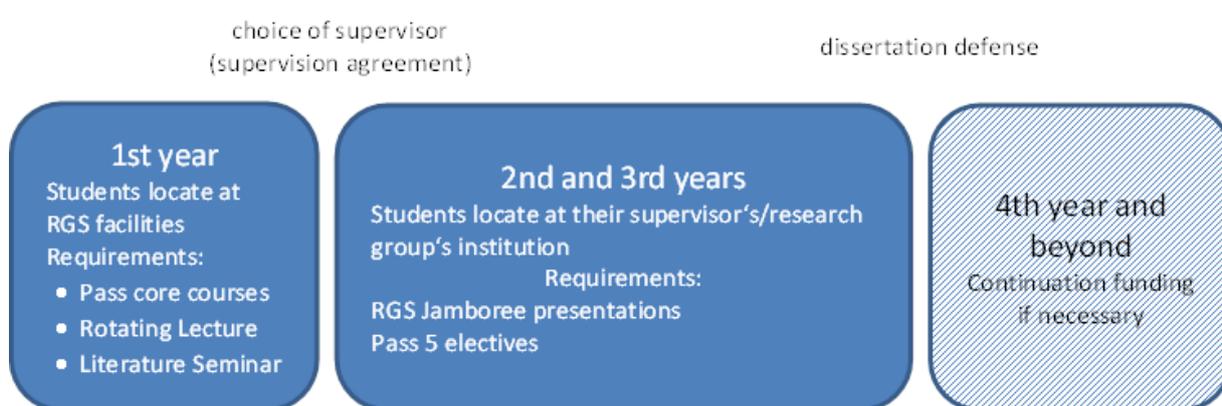
⁴ Often, the first paper of the dissertation is a replication of an empirical finding in another setting or an introduction to more serious work, providing an overview of previous and current research. Typically, such a paper could be started at the beginning of the process, but would be finished as the last piece in the dissertation.

⁵ This paper should demonstrate that the candidate is able to work on her own and is ideally accepted or targeted for publication in a respected journal. The German job market does not know the concept of a “job market paper”. But in an international context, this is certainly an important issue and speaks for placing special emphasis on and high ambition in one of the papers.

The Environment

RGS Econ is jointly operated by the Economics departments of the three universities of the University Alliance Ruhr (Bochum, Dortmund, Duisburg-Essen) and the RWI, one of Germany's leading economic research institutes. The Faculty of RGS Econ consists of more than 35 professors, with many additional researchers associated with RGS Econ via the participating institutions and international research networks. Currently, there are around 45 doctoral students enrolled in the program. The program welcomes international students and all courses are taught in English.

Incoming students are situated at the RGS's facilities during their first year, located at RWI in Essen, where they concentrate on the core coursework of the program. Here, students have access to an excellent research infrastructure, including a library, a research data center (FDZ Ruhr), computers, and relevant software. At the end of their first year, students choose their supervisor from one of the participating institutions and relocate their workspace to their supervisor's institution.



The breadth of expertise, international visibility, and research impact of RGS Econ's faculty and affiliates allows students to realize a close and productive supervisor match. By exposing students to the research process at universities and a leading economic research institute, students at RGS Econ receive unique experience and research and training opportunities in theoretical, empirical, and applied economics. RWI conducts evidence based and scientifically sound analysis and formulation of economic policies as well as prediction in diverse areas such as health, energy economics, education, macroeconomics, and labor markets. From the start of the program, students are thus exposed to real-world approaches to real-world questions, connecting theoretical with empirical analyses and assessing their value. This is one of the distinguishing and essential features of the program, also providing a rejoinder to recent criticisms of the discipline, especially levelled in the wake of the financial crisis.

Laying the Foundations: The Curriculum

The curriculum of RGS Econ's doctoral program contains a mandatory core curriculum (1st year) and an elective requirement (2nd and 3rd years). Each academic year is divided into two terms (semesters).

Core Courses

The mandatory core courses of the first year consists of

- "Advanced Mathematics for Economists" at the beginning of the 1st year
- Econometrics I, Microeconomics I, and Macroeconomics I during the first term
- Econometrics II, Microeconomics II, and Macroeconomics II during the second term

The core courses are designed to convey methodological skills and topical knowledge that enables all students at RGS Econ to in principle

- work on any topic in economics at the research frontier,
- contribute to discussions in any area of economics,
- teach courses in all areas of economics at least at the BSc and MSc level, and
- build fruitful bridges between (sub-) disciplines, thereby opening up new research fields.

To proceed to the second year, students are given two attempts to pass end-of-term exams associated with each of the core courses⁶. Parts or all of the core requirements may be waived for students who have successfully passed comparable courses during their previous studies.

Electives

The elective component of the curriculum requires students to select and pass at least five courses before graduation, typically in the 2nd and 3rd years. This part of the curriculum can be precisely tailored to each student's training needs, providing students with specialized topical knowledge and methodological skills for research in their fields of interest. The broad range of elective courses offered by RGS Econ draws on the expertise of the RGS Faculty (**RGS Electives**), guest researchers (**RGS Mini-Lectures**), and can be augmented by externally provided courses (summer schools) via financial support from RGS Econ.

Some examples of elective courses offered at the RGS Econ are the methodologically oriented "Statistical Learning", "Heterogeneous Agent Models", "Causality and Policy Evaluation" and topical courses such "Inequality and Health", "Advanced Labor Economics", and "Economics of Migration."

In addition, students may participate in Soft-Skills Seminars organized by RGS Econ. Offered two to three times a year, these courses enhance students' presentation, writing, and other professional skills.

Choosing the topic and supervisor and getting started

Students choose their supervisor and topic at the end of the program's first year. To provide information and guidance for this choice, members of the RGS Faculty and senior researchers at the RWI present their own research interests and research groups in a **rotating lecture** during the first term of the 1st year. The rotating lecture also contains sessions introducing students to data and other academic resources available at the participating institutions, a session on scientific conduct, and a session on writing academic papers in economics.

A **literature seminar** in the second term of the 1st year requires students to present an existing paper from the literature of their field of interest. The seminar is designed to develop students' own research ideas and help them get an overview of the associated literature.

First year students also participate as auditors in a one-day annual event – the **RGS Jamboree** –, where all RGS students and RGS Faculty come together for presentations and discussions of 2nd and 3rd year students' current research. One of the goals of this event is to provide 1st year students with the information of "who is doing what under whose supervision". Additionally, this event and an annual two-day **RGS Doctoral Conference** (with more than 50 presentations by doctoral students

⁶ With the exception of "Advanced Mathematics for Economists", where the exam solely serves to inform students.

from around the world) expose 1st year students to dissertation projects at many stages of development, guiding them in their own work.

Furthermore, the work-load of the first year's curriculum – although demanding – allows students to attend (and possibly present in) the numerous **research seminars, brown bag lunches and workshops** at the participating universities and RWI, giving students first-hand exposure to the research process from the start of the program.

Ensuring a productive relationship with the supervisor

Several features of RGS Econ's program promote a high quality of supervision and a productive relationship with the supervisor:

- From the second year onwards, students' workspaces are located in **close proximity** to their supervisor and/or the associated research team, allowing for frequent communication.
- Presentations at the RGS Jamboree provide an early opportunity for broad, **external feedback** regarding the quality of the work arising from the student-supervisor relationship.
- Interaction with other RGS students at all stages of their dissertation work allows students to **'benchmark'** their progress and supervision arrangement and identify potential problems early on.
- A **supervision agreement** between student and supervisor lays out rights and responsibilities for both parties.
- The coordinator and the directors of the RGS act as **contact persons** in case of disputes or grievances.

Networking the Research Process

RGS Econ has established a uniquely co-operative and collaborative research and learning environment. Students of each incoming cohort form a close working group during the first year, facilitated by the common curriculum, adjacent office space, and the lack of competition for continuation funding ingrained in many other doctoral programs. Numerous joint events connect students with each other and with faculty throughout the program. Starting in the second year, students are fully integrated into the research group of their supervisor.

RGS Econ additionally promotes networking outside of the participating institutions, via, for example, the RGS Doctoral Conference, support in initiating and financing research stays, and through the financing of conference participation and summer schools. Mini-Lectures, workshops, guest research stays and seminar talks by renowned external faculty and researchers provide students with ample additional opportunities to get input on their work from junior and senior researchers.

Organization and Quality Control

Decisions regarding the program and its development are made in a Board of Management consisting of the directors of the RGS and selected RGS faculty members. A coordination office is a one-stop resource for students' administrative concerns, suggestions, and grievances. Courses and the overall program are evaluated regularly by students and a scientific advisory board oversees RGS Econ to ensure continued excellence in research and teaching.

