

FACULTY OF LAW

UPGRADING FROM MASTER'S TO PHD

Introduction

The *Higher Degrees Guide* contains the following statement:

“In practice, most PhD candidates have a Master's degree. However, Senate may, on the recommendation of the Faculty concerned, convert the registration of a candidate for the Master's degree to registration for a PhD degree. Such conversions require the Head of Department (or Faculty Higher Degrees Committee, where relevant) and supervisor to be satisfied that the student's completed work is of a standard normally expected of a doctoral student, that the student is capable of completing a doctoral degree and that the project is of a level and scope expected of a PhD study. Applications for conversion should normally be submitted for consideration to the Higher Degrees Committee of the appropriate Faculty no sooner than 12 to 18 months after first registration for the Master's degree.”

This reflects the relevant rule contained in the General Rules for Degrees contained in the *Calendar*:

“G.54. Senate may, on the recommendation of the Board of the Faculty concerned, convert the registration of a candidate for the Master's degree by thesis to registration for the PhD degree if they consider that the work is of a standard normally expected of a doctoral student.”

At the outset it should be appreciated that to qualify for a PhD is significantly different from a Master's degree. In particular a doctoral degree requires a candidate to be able to make an original contribution to knowledge in the discipline; something not required for a Master's degree.

A strong case can be made that the norm should be to complete a Master's degree first, and then go on to a PhD after that. In particular, invaluable experience is to be gained in “writing up” a Master's — a task whose difficulty is notoriously underestimated by many if not most candidates, along with the underestimation of how time-consuming it actually is to produce an error free and attractively presented document. In addition, the examination process at the Master's level exposes the candidate and the research to invaluable external peer review.

The upgrade route should therefore normally only be followed by an exceptional student whose already completed work shows great promise. Thus, applications to upgrade come under intense scrutiny, and will be approved only in exceptional cases.

The process

In the Law Faculty the following guidelines will apply to candidates who wish to upgrade:

1. Master's candidates in their first year of study shall not normally be allowed to convert their registrations to PhD.
2. Candidates must make a formal application for an upgrade to the Chair of the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee. Candidates must discuss the matter with their supervisor(s), who play an important role in guiding both the candidate and the Higher Degrees Committee on the suitability of the application.
3. In making their application, candidates must comply with the University's rules by providing evidence that (a) they have made significant progress in their Master's studies, to the extent that (b) their already completed work is of a standard normally expected of a doctoral candidate.
4. In order to do this, the candidate should motivate for the upgrade by providing a comprehensive report on progress made to date on the Master's degree, and by providing a motivation for the change of registration. The report and the motivation should indicate and explain future objectives and how these meet the requirements for a PhD as set out in the *Higher Degrees Guide*. In compiling the report and the motivation, candidates should also consider carefully the criteria which the Higher Degrees Committee will consider in evaluating the application, which are discussed below. Evidence of publications in the relevant area of research would be a distinct advantage to such a motivation.
5. Applications for an upgrade must additionally be accompanied by a new PhD research proposal, as per the Faculty requirements. This proposal will not normally be subject to scrutiny by readers, as would usually be the case with a proposal. The proposal will be considered directly by the Higher Degrees Committee.
6. In addition to the candidate's report and motivation, the supervisor will be requested to provide a report to the Higher Degrees Committee in which the supervisor describes the candidate's progress to date, assesses the quality of the work already completed, and makes a recommendation about whether the candidate has indeed made significant progress in his/her Master's studies, to the extent that the already completed work is of a standard normally expected of a doctoral candidate. The supervisor should also provide a realistic estimate of when the project will be completed if the application is successful.

The criteria

After considering (a) the report, motivation and proposal presented by the candidate, and (b) the report of the supervisor, the Higher Degrees Committee will consider the following broad questions in making its ultimate recommendation to the Faculty Board.

1. Is the student competent to engage in PhD studies without first completing a Master's degree?
2. Is the rate of progress in the Master's exceptional? (The committee will want to see evidence not only that the student has completed a significant amount of work but, more importantly, that this work is thoroughly researched, the

revised research question and research goals are precisely formulated, that the work is analytically coherent and carefully thought-out, and that it shows evidence of intellectual depth, rigour, insight and originality that goes beyond a standard Master's project. In simple terms, the candidate's work must show evidence that the project has developed to the point where it has clear potential to be taken "to the next level".)

3. Is the project itself appropriate for PhD studies? (The committee will frown upon applications where the project will merely be bigger in scope, but which will, in substance, be "more of the same". By contrast, if the candidate proposes taking the original research project in an entirely new or different direction, this may be an indication that this is a new research project entirely, rather than the same project, but which is suitable for upgrading.)
4. Does the Faculty have the appropriate facilities and supervisory capacity to support the research at the PhD level? (If there is no-one in the Faculty able to supervise the candidate at a doctoral level, this would naturally jeopardise the application. It may be appropriate for changes in supervision to be contemplated, particularly if the Master's supervisor is not in a position to supervise a PhD.)
5. What is the time scale for completion of the project? (There should be some strong evidence to suggest that the student will, in fact, complete within a further two to three years, both in the student's and the university's interest. In this light, applications by students who are not full-time in attendance, or who intend to be employed outside of the academic environment while doing the project, will be scrutinised with some caution.)

The ultimate decision-making process

As indicated at the start of this document, the Higher Degrees Committee will make a recommendation on the application. This recommendation must be considered by the Faculty Board, and also by the Senate. It is the Senate's decision which is decisive, since it is the ultimate decision-making body in respect of academic issues.