

DECISION 17-054

of the Examination Appeals Board of Leiden University

in the matter of

the appeal by [name], appellant

against

[name], respondent

1. Origin and course of the proceedings

The appellant sent a letter on 3 March 2017 which was received on 13 March 2017, to lodge an appeal against the decision of the respondent of 25 January 2017, which assessed the master's thesis in Political Science at a grade 5.0 on a scale of 10.

The respondent authorised the Board of Examiners of the Political Science Institute to conduct the defence on her behalf.

In short, the appellant argued that the assessment form of his thesis does not provide sufficient basis to reach a final grade of 5.0. The appellant pointed out that he has an average score of 5.5 on *Part 1* of the form (Quality and level of analysis). The appellant holds that communications with his thesis supervisor (respondent) may have been the cause of the unsatisfactory grade. The appellant put forward that he was only just awarded an unsatisfactory grade, that the assessment should therefore have a broader basis and that, consequently, a third supervisor is required.

The appellant pointed out that the grades that he was awarded during earlier stages of the programme were higher on average than the thesis grade.

The appellant holds that he was insufficiently supervised by the respondent and that she gave contradictory advice. Besides, she would have responded too late to emails in a regular manner and it had been unclear during thesis writing how the procedures were structured. Finally, the appellant stated that he is currently employed in Brussels and that the present decision may impact his employment.

The respondent investigated whether it was possible to reach an amicable

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settlement. In an email of 7 April 2017, the respondent informed the appellant with substantiation that no settlement was possible.

A letter of defence was submitted on 13 April 2017. It stated that the assessment form (Thesis Evaluation Form Master's in Political Science 2016-2017) consists of two parts. A thesis supervisor and second supervisor must assess the general quality of the thesis based on the criteria as listed on the form. It is stipulated that the student cannot perform below grade six on either of the two parts. The respondent pointed out that the thesis must be graded as unsatisfactory for this reason alone, since a grade below six was awarded in respect of both parts.

Besides, the written substantiation on the form demonstrates that the thesis is of an unsatisfactory level. The respondent pointed out that the assessment must be performed based on the thesis submitted and that, consequently, no discretion is allowed for wider investigation.

The respondent emphasized that the thesis was also graded as unsatisfactory by the second supervisor, independent from the respondent (the thesis supervisor). The respondent indicated that the research proposal had also been graded as unsatisfactory by the second supervisor.

The respondent is of the opinion that neither the grades that were awarded previously, nor the fact that the appellant is currently employed, can in any way impact the grade for the thesis.

The respondent stated that the appellant mainly complained about the lack of supervision during the first six weeks, in which the research proposal had to be written. In that period, the student is responsible for choosing a topic and structuring the research, and the supervisor is required to provide feedback on it. Since the appellant was awarded an unsatisfactory grade for his research proposal, he was no longer entitled to supervision. Nevertheless, the respondent offered to continue to supervise him. However, the appellant opted to continue without supervision. The respondent pointed out that he did evaluate a draft version of appellant's thesis and provided comprehensive comments on it.

The appeal was considered on 10 May 2017 during a public hearing of a chamber of the Examination Appeals Board. The appellant did not appear and was not represented at the hearing although he had been properly summoned. [names], appeared on behalf of the respondent.

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2. Considerations with regard to admissibility

The appellant lodged a timely appeal against the decision of 3 March 2017 by means of the letter dated 25 January 2017 that was received by the Examination Appeals Board on 13 March 2017. Furthermore, the letter of appeal also meets the requirements as stipulated in the General Administrative Law Act (*Algemene wet bestuursrecht*, “Awb”) and the Higher Education and Academic Research Act (*Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek*, “WHW”). Consequently, the administrative appeal is admissible.

3. Relevant legislation

The e-prospectus, available on

<https://studiegids.leidenuniv.nl/courses/show/63203/thesis-info-msc-political-science-international-organisation-fall-2016> states the following:

Thesis seminar classes

Attendance is compulsory in the thesis seminar classes. Participation in the thesis seminar classes, the assignments for these classes, and the final version of the research proposal constitute the ‘practical part’ of the course and are all mandatory. The final grade for the thesis seminar is based on the grade received for the thesis. It is of utmost importance that students attend all seminar classes and have a thesis proposal of high quality and academic standards finalized during the first part of the thesis seminar.

Submitting final version of research proposal

The deadline for submitting the final version of the research proposal (through Turnitin and in print) is Monday 17 October 2016 at 12.00 pm. An approved proposal is essential for the start of the thesis-writing process. Although students may continue working on their thesis without a formally approved proposal, they are then doing so ‘on their own’ (thesis seminar teachers are no longer obliged to provide supervision). The proposal must be approved by the supervisor and by a second reader. The second reader will be designated by the Director of Studies. Once the supervisor and second reader accept the research proposal, a copy of the proposal, signed by the supervisor and the second reader, is submitted to the Political Science secretariat as part of the student’s file of academic records. If a proposal is not completed in time or not approved, a record of this will be deposited in the student’s file of records.

[...]

Submitting final version of research proposal

In the days following submission, the thesis seminar teacher will read the first complete draft of the thesis. During this period, students can double-check various aspects of their thesis, such as references, bibliography, data or facts, preparing for last corrections on their work. After the comments of the supervisor have been received, students revise their thesis. The deadline for submitting the final version of the research proposal (through Turnitin and in print) is Monday 17 October 2016 at 12.00 pm. Students submit this final printed version to their supervisor and to their

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second reader. The supervisor and second reader (both members of the departmental faculty) together decide on the final grade for the thesis. This final grade is communicated to students after 15 working days.

4. Considerations with regard to the dispute

The appeal is aimed at the decision of 25 January 2017, which assessed the master's thesis in Political Science as a grade 5.0.

First and foremost, the Examination Appeals Board considered that the respondent was appointed by the Board of Examiners as Examiner of the *Thesis MSc Political Science* course unit. This means her expertise to assess the thesis is beyond doubt.

The respondent explained the structure of the 'master's thesis seminar', the course unit in which the thesis is written. In the first six weeks, students have to write a thesis proposal (layout) that will be assessed by the thesis supervisor and a second supervisor. If this proposal is graded as satisfactory, the student is entitled to further supervision by the thesis supervisor. If the proposal is graded as unsatisfactory, it is expected that the thesis will not be awarded a satisfactory grade upon completion. It is then up to the tutor to decide whether he or she will continue to supervise the student, depending on whether the tutor anticipates improvement in the short term.

In the present case, the appellant was awarded an unsatisfactory grade for his thesis proposal, but the respondent offered to continue to supervise the appellant. It is not disputed that the appellant opted not to request further supervision and merely to submit a draft of the thesis for feedback. Furthermore, the email correspondence shows that the appellant cancelled a meeting for a discussion of the draft in person and that, consequently, the respondent sent a comprehensive reaction by email.

The Examination Appeals Board has established that the final version of the thesis was assessed by means of the *Thesis Evaluation Form*. This form has two parts; Part 1 pertains to *Quality and level of Analysis*, and Part 2 pertains to *Formal Aspects and Presentation*. Both parts are subdivided into elements, that are awarded a grade, or rather, a partial grade. These elements are also provided with a written explanation. Part 1 of the form states that this part must at least be awarded a 6 and none of the elements can be unsatisfactory in order to complete the thesis with a satisfactory grade.

The assessment form that was used to grade the appellant's thesis states what grade was awarded to each element and a written explanation was also provided. This shows that the appellant performed below standard on various elements. Part 1 was awarded a grade of 5.0 and part 2 was awarded a grade of 5.5. The Examination Appeals Board deems that the respondent completed the form in a

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careful manner and that the manner in which the grade was made up has been explained clearly. In addition, it should be mentioned that the second supervisor supports the grade.

Furthermore, it has become clear that the final grade is not merely a calculation of figures of the grades stated in the assessment form. At the hearing, the respondent explained that the form is intended to structure the assessment, and that it must support the final grade. The Examination Appeals Board holds that this is the case.

The Examination Appeals Board therefore sees no cause to hold that the respondent has acted in contravention of the law. Since the decision of the respondent does not qualify to be quashed on any other grounds, the appeal must be held unfounded.

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5. The decision

In view of article 7.61 of the Higher Education and Academic Research Act,

the Examination Appeals Board of Leiden University

holds the appeal **UNFOUNDED**.

Established on Wednesday 10 May 2017 by a chamber of the Examination Appeals Board, comprised of M.M. Bosma (Chair), Dr H.W. Sneller, Dr J. Nijland, LL.M., Dr A.M. Rademaker and M. Heezen (members), in the presence of the Secretary of the Examination Appeals Board, W.J. de Wit., LL.M.

M.M. Bosma, LL.M.,
Chair

W.J. de Wit., LL.M.,
Secretary

Certified true copy,

Sent on: