

# FOOTNOTE ~~###~~

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External Examiner's Comment  
Rizwaan Sabir Dissertation

I would not normally expect to spend a lot of time writing on your dissertations, but I'm afraid I have to this time since I disagree with both examiners. You will have to decide what to do with these comments. I hesitate to suggest what you should do since your internals are in firm agreement. I am more than happy to enter into a dialogue on this –or any other- question that comes up. I'm sorry that my first piece of work for you involves such a sharp disagreement, but I am pretty confident of my conclusions and would ask you to consider them seriously.

This is a good piece of work. It is clearly written and based on a very strong range of research. It examines the debate on anti-terror legislation fairly carefully and gives a good detailed account of the legislation itself. It reads well, is written with passion and makes a case soundly. It has a solid structure. It has excellent focus on its topic. It also has some serious problems. Judged only on the weaknesses, it is a fail and not really an MA dissertation in IR at all. Judged on its strengths, it is certainly good. But I cannot reconcile the dissertation marking guidelines you have, or what I presume are your learning outcomes for the module, with the conclusions the internal examiners both reach on the thesis.

My problems include the following: (a) the diss does not seem to have a 'home discipline', or rather, *the author is not aware* of where it belongs –it is a bit human rights, a bit comparative politics, a bit ethics and a bit policing studies. It could make a claim to be any of these; and any of these *might* count as 'international relations'. I am not very precious about the boundaries of IR, and welcome promiscuous ranging around the field if it is well grounded. But I would expect a student at MA level to know what s/he was doing and *to show* s/he knew it; and I would expect them to be able to justify it and be reflexive about it –and there is *no claim* that this is an IR dissertation for such and such reasons at all! How then does he want us to judge his work? (b) (Much the most serious of my objections) I cannot find the words 'method' or 'methodology' anywhere in the dissertation at all. Is this really a research track student? What has he learned? Your learning outcomes/marketing criteria suggest you are looking –as I certainly would expect- for a reasonably rigorous presentation of how and why the research approach is justified and how it is grounded in every diss. But it is not just that there is no M & M chapter –which may not be necessary –the words do not appear at all (c) In so far as the piece is grounded in a theory of human rights (with or without some ethics input), where is the discussion of what human rights are, how academic freedom might relate to general ideas of rights, and what limitations a particular theory of rights might impose on appropriate conceptions of academic freedom? Is he a liberal, a libertarian, a levinassien or something else? We are not told. If this thesis was grounded in a radical Islamic account of human rights or in a basic liberal account or in some kind of Chomskian account, it could make sense –but it really must indicate which in some detail (to not explain this is surely to lack the 'depth' examiners claim for it); and to be at distinction level it should do so in a rigorous way with an element of reflexion and self criticism too (d) in so far as there is an element of comparative politics in the approach, the author compares legislation in the US and UK –he seems quite unaware of the differences in the *form of state* in the two; he wants to see them as 'democracies', whereas the US is a federal republic with considerable Hamiltonian powers, and the UK a constitutional

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monarchy in which democratic institutions fairly thinly overlie the awful powers of the still-existing Tudor state—you cannot write well about comparative anti-terrorist powers without addressing the state-society question and the nature of law and power in the two states more carefully (e) some of the key sources for the main argument (that over-zealous anti-terrorist laws, in denying freedoms including academic freedom, encourage forms of terrorism and undermine what they are designed to protect) are news sources, including stories of his own experience. But the thesis would be a lot stronger if a wider range of more academic sources were also used to support this case—the repetition of the same sources in the intro and conclusions without much reflection on the quality of sources in the middle weakens a good case.

I have no problem with his core argument in so far as I agree strongly with what he wants to say politically—but that does not make a good dissertation at MA level. The most important arguments, although well made in themselves, are floating in air where they should be more securely grounded. I also have no problem with his use of personal experience. Indeed, I think using some more developed form of autobiographical form might work very well in a narrative/narratological thesis .... BUT again, the approach would have to be properly grounded in the appropriate literature, and this is not. I cannot help thinking, although it may be unfair, that both he and his thesis advisors have got carried away by enthusiasm for the topic, his experience of it, and his argument; and they have forgotten some of the basics of a good dissertation. But your own criteria make it clear that how a thesis is grounded in both theory and literature are important in assessment, especially at the higher range of the mark scale. This is therefore an opportunity missed.

I am very happy for someone to point out how or why I am missing the point. Do the students have clear learning outcomes for the dissertation separate from the marking criteria? Do they see both of these? If I am mistaken I would be grateful if I could be put right. It is—I think—my job to match the thesis to your marking criteria rather than to import my own, and that is what I have tried to do here. But I think that this is overall a moderately good dissertation with some sound research and a decent structure rather than an outstanding piece of work. Methodologically, it is simply poor. It has real weaknesses that place it very clearly some way out of the distinction level. I would mark this at a maximum of 62%.

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