

Report: Evaluation of Research Proposal Assessment Criteria at the Faculty of Law

December 2025

1. Introduction

Following a bottom-up approach to increase the faculty's understanding of research quality, and as a first step, an evaluation was carried out. The primary goal of this evaluation was to increase the understanding of the criteria the Faculty of Law currently uses and *should* use to assess the quality of PhD research proposals. Specifically, we sought to identify gaps between the "ideal" assessment criteria (what we value) and the "actual" practice of the Science Committee (what is emphasized during selection).

2. Method

To gather this information, two surveys were distributed. One was sent to senior academic staff (Full Professors (HL), Associate Professors (UHDs), and Assistant Professors (UDs)), one to currently enrolled PhD students within the faculty.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data (see Annex) reveals a tension between the scholarly values held by the faculty and the practical hurdles imposed during assessment. Both groups (Professors and PhDs) strongly agree on what matters most. The top three criteria (excluding Clarity) for both groups were substantive:

Originality

Contribution to the body of knowledge

Scientific relevance / Feasibility (PhDs)

Conversely, when asked what the Committee actually emphasized, the ranking flipped. The criteria (excluding Clarity) with the highest "emphasis" scores (leaning towards "Too much emphasis") were procedural:

Research design and methods

Feasibility (PhDs) / (Inter)national Orientation (profs)

Match with Faculty research programme (Ranked higher by PhDs than Professors)

While Originality is valued highest ideally, it fell to the middle of the pack in actual emphasis. Instead, Research Design, which was ranked as moderately important ideally, became a dominant focal point in practice.

The Faculty's Research Programme is an aspect that received low scores on whether it should be part of the assessment of the research quality.

3.2 Qualitative Findings

Analysis of the open-text responses reveals four critical and sometimes interrelated themes shared by both senior staff and candidates.

"Generalist" dilemma. A recurring frustration is that the Committee, composed of generalists from different disciplines, often lacks the specific expertise to judge the substance of a proposal. PhDs felt discouraged when questions focused on peripheral issues (timeline, bibliography) rather than their core legal argument. One professor respondent remarked: "The Committee appeared to apply informal criteria related to their own disciplinary comfort zones (...) based on their personal intuitions and preferences rather than the stated criteria. This can be demotivating for the candidate and shows bias and unnecessary rigidity".

"Methodology" emphasis. There is a strong sentiment that the Faculty focuses on methodology, yet not always in a way that does justice to the project. One noted, "It felt as if my PhD is on the methods and not on my topic." Professors validated this view, noting that without subject expertise, the Committee retreats to what they can judge: form and method. "The Committee evaluates superficially because it includes people from different disciplines." Respondents feel that doctrinal or theory-based proposals are penalized for having "simple" methods. "Interdisciplinary research is not inherently 'better' than monodisciplinary work." One professor noted the Committee applies rules from one tradition (e.g., social science) to another (e.g., law), leading to "incomprehensible advice."

"Finished Product" illusion. Perhaps the most alarming finding from the senior staff is the unintended consequence of high feasibility standards. To pass the rigorous feasibility check, proposals must look "unrealistically complete." The system favors "safe" projects that look finished over "honest" original research that might raise open questions. Multiple professors admitted that this pressure incentivizes supervisors to write the proposals themselves. One respondent stated bluntly: "Professors (and not the candidate) draft the research proposals (...) This is unethical."

Trust in supervisors. There is a call for the Committee to shift its role from content gatekeeper to trusting the supervisors on the substance. As one respondent put it, the committee "does not really trust the supervisory team."

4. Discussion

The findings suggest that while our stated values are originality and relevance, our current process emphasizes safety, methodological conformity, and feasibility. This raises several questions to consider regarding how we assess research quality:

1. How to avoid systematically filtering out promising or high-risk, high-reward research by over-emphasizing feasibility and "completeness" at the proposal stage?
2. Is it desirable to have "Methodology" (and the clarity in which it is described) become a proxy for quality because the generalist committee has difficulties judging the substantive legal content?
3. Should subject-matter experts be included for competitive rounds?
4. Should the Science Committee's role be re-scoped to focus on candidate quality and process, leaving the content assessment primarily to the supervisors (non-competitive rounds) and/or external experts (competitive rounds)?
5. How do we address the ghostwriter phenomenon? If the bar for a proposal is so high that a graduate cannot meet it without a professor writing it for them, is our standard measuring the candidate's quality or potential?

Annex: Aggregated Results for Quantitative Questions¹

PhDs: Criteria that should be applied

Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...	Average (Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...)	Minimum (Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...)	Maximum (Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...)	Standard Deviation (Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...)	Count
Originality	5.64	1.00	7.00	1.26	28
Contribution to the body of knowledge / Embedding of the research in the literature	5.68	1.00	7.00	1.31	28
Research design and methods	5.07	2.00	7.00	1.33	27
Feasibility	5.48	3.00	7.00	0.92	27
Match with Faculty research programme	4.44	1.00	7.00	1.47	27
Scientific relevance	5.24	2.00	7.00	1.10	29
Societal relevance	4.96	1.00	7.00	1.45	28
Clarity	5.10	2.00	7.00	1.21	29
Interdisciplinarity	3.92	1.00	7.00	1.66	26
(Inter)national orientation	3.92	1.00	7.00	1.66	26
Long-term impact	4.33	2.00	7.00	1.34	24

¹ Note: the scores are not entirely accurate because some '4'-scores (middle of the 7-point scale) are missing. The missing values are not expected to significantly impact the results. The open-ended questions are left out.

PhDs: Criteria that were applied

Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...	Average (Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...)	Minimum (Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...)	Maximum (Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...)	Standard Deviation (Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...)	Count
Originality	3.80	2.00	7.00	1.47	15
Contribution to the body of knowledge / Embedding of the research in the literature	3.88	1.00	7.00	1.45	16
Research design and methods	4.47	2.00	7.00	1.82	15
Feasibility	4.56	2.00	7.00	1.32	16
Match with Faculty research programme	4.55	2.00	6.00	1.50	11
Scientific relevance	4.00	1.00	7.00	1.68	12
Societal relevance	3.88	2.00	7.00	1.54	16
Clarity	4.60	2.00	7.00	1.40	15
Interdisciplinarity	4.18	2.00	7.00	1.64	11
(Inter)national orientation	4.11	2.00	7.00	1.52	9
Long-term impact	3.64	1.00	7.00	1.67	11

Professors (full/associate/assistant): Criteria that should be applied

Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...	Average (Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...)	Minimum (Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...)	Maximum (Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...)	Standard Deviation (Please indicate how important you think each criterion should be in the eva...)	Count
Originality	5.96	1.00	7.00	1.00	54
Contribution to the body of knowledge / Embedding of the research in the literature	5.82	2.00	7.00	1.20	51
Research design and methods	5.08	2.00	7.00	1.47	40
Feasibility	5.35	2.00	7.00	1.22	46
Match with Faculty research programme	3.23	1.00	6.00	1.39	40
Scientific relevance	5.71	3.00	7.00	0.82	51
Societal relevance	4.69	1.00	7.00	1.43	45
Clarity	5.76	3.00	7.00	0.92	42
Interdisciplinarity	2.93	1.00	6.00	1.58	45
(Inter)national orientation	3.73	1.00	6.00	1.58	40
Long-term impact	3.54	1.00	6.00	1.36	39

Professors (full/associate/assistant): Criteria that were applied

Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...	Average (Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...)	Minimum (Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...)	Maximum (Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...)	Standard Deviation (Please indicate, for each criterion and based on your own experience, how t...)	Count
Originality	3.77	2.00	6.00	1.21	31
Contribution to the body of knowledge / Embedding of the research in the literature	3.88	2.00	6.00	1.18	25
Research design and methods	5.24	2.00	7.00	1.28	34
Feasibility	4.76	2.00	7.00	1.27	25
Match with Faculty research programme	4.85	2.00	7.00	1.35	27
Scientific relevance	3.64	2.00	6.00	1.16	25
Societal relevance	4.04	2.00	7.00	1.22	25
Clarity	4.36	2.00	6.00	1.23	22
Interdisciplinarity	4.36	1.00	7.00	1.65	25
(Inter)national orientation	4.94	2.00	7.00	1.48	16
Long-term impact	3.92	3.00	5.00	0.73	13