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Term papers, BA theses, MA theses at the Chair of ‘European Studies’

Principles:

- Term papers are used to learn and practise scientific methods that serve to better understand socially relevant subjects and/or to explain socially relevant problems. Subjects are often real-world artefacts, e.g. ‘European integration’ or ‘Russia's foreign policy’. However, it is also possible to deal with interpretative artefacts, e.g. the ‘theory of neo-realism’ or ‘political culture in East Germany’. Problems are open questions (= questions that have not yet been adequately answered) that are based on the difference between an existing theory and real-world circumstances that supposedly deviate from it (see below).
- What subjects, or topics, are covered in my courses? The range of subjects is determined by the denomination of the Chair of ‘European Studies’ and the specific nature of the courses offered, e.g. ‘German European Politics’, ‘Eastern Dimension of the European Union’ or ‘Theories of Democracy’. As a matter of principle, term papers at the professorship are written in such contexts, i.e. I do not assign topics in free space.
- Term papers not least have the function of leading to BA or MA theses. I therefore encourage you to write term papers in the context of later MA topics. Double utilisation is not possible. However, it is conceivable to use term papers to familiarise yourself with a specific topic. MA theses are also not assigned freely at the Chair but are based on the teaching profile and usually on the topics of courses held.
- Assessment as second examiner (for BA theses and MA theses): in this case the link to the courses of the Chair is not necessary. However, the topic of the thesis must fall within the subject area of the Chair. Normally, the thesis is mainly supervised by the first examiner.

Academic profile:

- The Chair teaches in the paradigm of critical rationalism. This means that the approach to solving problems should be planned or methodical and reasonable or rational. A first introduction – for newcomers to this field, so to speak – can be

found in: Popper, Karl R. 'The Logic of the Social Sciences.' In *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*, edited by Theodor W. Adorno, 103-124. Frankfurt: Luchterhand, 1972. Further publications in the same paradigm:

- King, Gary, Robert Keohane, Sidney Verba. *Designing Social Enquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Brady, Henry E., David Collier (eds.). *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.
- Critical rationalism does not predetermine certain methods; rather, their selection depends on the given problem. Consequently, I do not propagate any superiority in principle of certain social science approaches over others, as is the case, for example, in the (supposed) debate between 'constructivism' and 'rationalism'. However, every term paper/thesis written at the Chair should be based on existing (theoretical) knowledge, which often involves the use of certain methods. For example: In order to categorise the development of democracy in country X, the use of 'objective' and 'quantitative' data is generally indispensable, i.e. the method of indicator-based comparison is used here. For the assessment of legitimacy patterns within the EU, on the other hand, methods that have been developed for the interpretation of textual statements are suitable, i.e. discourse analysis or attitude research could be used here, for example.
- In the sense of critical rationalism, a scientific problem always consists of an interrelationship between existing knowledge ('theories') and real-world observable phenomena that deviate from this knowledge. So there is always a 'why' question in the background: why does the real-world phenomenon X exist, although the knowledge available to us (in the given situation, under the given conditions) would actually have suggested the existence of a phenomenon Y? This leads to a few guidelines for the topics of term papers/theses:
 - 1) In order to get to grips with a (scientific) problem, you need a (scientific) question.
 - 2) Most of the 'big' questions in social and political science come down to a 'why' question. However, this does not mean that every term paper, BA thesis or MA thesis has to develop its own 'why' question. Theses can also deal with partial aspects of 'big' problems; this is actually the rule. However, a good thesis will always have to show where there are links between its own subject matter and the overarching problem.
 - 3) Topics and objects are much easier to work on if they are located in the observable past. Phenomena are easier to observe if they are not located in the future. For example, if you want to work on the subject of the European Monetary Union, you should concentrate on how it has functioned to date. In contrast, the question 'what will become of the economic and monetary union' is less useful. Work that is predominantly focussed on future scenarios always runs the risk of slipping into speculation.

4) Due to the page limit, there is a tension between two concerns in every term paper/thesis: a) working with theory and b) working with empirical data. On the one hand, theoretical-methodological considerations should be incorporated, on the other hand, real-world phenomena should be subjected to descriptive analysis. The relationship between theory and empiricism is not relevant a priori for the assessment of a thesis. However, the following rules of thumb can be used.

- Both components must be identifiable. Every good work has a theoretical-methodological as well as an empirical component. Even in works with a predominantly empirical focus, there are references to the theoretical origin of the terms and concepts used. Incidentally, this does not necessarily have to lead to separate 'theory chapters'. It is often better to constantly link theory and empirical research, as this makes it easier to follow the common thread.
- A descriptive-analytical approach is suitable where little information is available about certain real-world phenomena. For example, an analysis of a newly formed political party can do (almost) entirely without theoretical discussion and still be 'very good' (graded 'A').

However, when we are dealing with subject areas about which a great deal can be assumed to be known, the focus should shift from the empirical-analytical to the theoretical-conceptual level. If this does not happen, two dangers lurk.

- Firstly, it is easy for term papers/theses to become too 'retelling', which jeopardises the criterion of scientific originality.
- Secondly, empirically well-researched subjects (and this includes many areas of European politics) usually also have competing explanations in the form of theories. In the context of a purely descriptive-analytical work, there is a danger of overlooking the resulting discussions. If, however, relevant scientific debates are not adequately acknowledged, it is usually not a good piece of academic work.

5) What options are there if students have little interest in theoretical-conceptual questions, but still want to work on 'well-researched' subjects? Since the degree programmes offered at the Viadrina are academic programmes, it must be clearly stated: The lack of a theoretical-conceptual dimension can often only be partially compensated for. Nevertheless, it is possible to write a good ('B') or very good ('A') term paper/thesis without a strong theoretical focus. To do this, it is important to ensure that there are no further deficits in addition to the theoretical-conceptual abstinence:

- Central terms, even if they are not theoretically problematised, must be used clearly, consistently and with an eye on their conceptual origin.

- The work must follow a clearly defined – usually empirical – research interest. Even without a scientific question in the narrow sense, there must be a central statement as the result of the term paper/thesis.
- A common thread orientated towards the research interest must be clearly recognisable.
- The formal aspects of the work (see below) must be correct.

Under these conditions, two forms are possible in which the weight of the theoretical-conceptual dimension can be partially balanced out.

- Exceptionally dense descriptive-analytical work (e.g. ‘Action strategies of German parliamentarians during budget deliberations’). Here, there are increased demands on the recording of the empirical dimension of the phenomenon to be analysed.
- Preparation of policy papers: a largely atheoretical simulation of a policy recommendation (e.g. ‘Development of the EU Neighbourhood Policy in Moldova’, etc.) based on clearly stated premises. The type of policy recommendation to be simulated in the work (short-term/long-term, addressee, etc.) must be agreed during the consultation. The challenge here is to work out aspects of a problem that are relevant to decision-making and to present them in their complexity. The theoretical foundation then usually consists of conscious or unconscious reference to actor-centred institutionalism, i.e. rationally acting actors are assumed whose actions are guided by the existence of institutions (see *Scharpf, Fritz W. Interaktionsformen: Akteurzentrierter Institutionalismus in der Politikforschung. Opladen: Leske+Budrich, 2000*).

Formalities:

- A term paper/thesis includes:
 - Cover sheet with correct information on title, university and faculty, lecturer, seminar, author (incl. address and e-mail, degree programme and semester, matriculation number), submission date, semester and seminar for term papers, ‘To obtain the academic degree’ for theses, first and second examiner,
 - Table of contents, possibly further lists
 - Foreign language abstract (German, English, French, Polish, Russian),
 - bibliography, appendix if applicable
 - Declaration of independence.
- It is essential that the rules of formal design, once chosen, are followed consistently throughout the term paper/thesis. The formatting usually contains

font size 12, line spacing 1.5 and margins 2.5 cm. Page numbering begins after the table of contents, i.e. usually with page 1 of the introduction. A standardised citation style, e.g. 'Chicago Style', is used in the thesis for correct citation and references.

- The required number of pages of the thesis is specified in your respective study and examination regulations and may also differ for term papers depending on the number of ECTS.
- The respective course will explain which procedure is valid and what the timetable is. As a rule, the procedure involves a gradual approach to the topic through the successive concretisation of the research question and working hypothesis. This is what the 'term paper draft form', which you will find in the important documents, refers to. I do not force anyone to use the form, as such a formalised procedure can sometimes restrict creativity. However, if you have little practice with term papers (e.g. because you did not have to write many of them in your first-degree programme), you should definitely use the form. For theses, a somewhat longer synopsis should be prepared, which should include the research question, the working hypothesis, the method used, the planned structure and the literature environment of the topic.
- I kindly ask you to adhere to announced and agreed schedules. The point here is that missing deadlines is not a positive qualification in any professional field related to European Studies. Rather, one of the most important social skills of all is the ability to organise your time, which is always in short supply. Unannounced late submissions of assignments are therefore penalised with a deduction of half a grade. In justified cases, exceptions, deadline extensions etc. can certainly be agreed. As a general rule, I do not like to extend deadlines beyond the start of the lecture period of the following semester (usually 15 April or 15 October). This is only to the detriment of the quality of the following semester.
- Plagiarism: Every term paper/thesis submitted will be checked for copied text passages using relevant software. I reserve the right to take appropriate steps (e.g. a further oral examination) even if there are clear suspicions of plagiarism that cannot be proven. Any cases of plagiarism that are uncovered will be reported; the person concerned will be excluded from further examinations at the Chair (including in the future). The name of the person concerned will be published within the faculty and a warning will be issued. In the case of exchange students (Erasmus etc.), the sending university must be notified.
- Please observe the university's guidelines on the use of artificial intelligence, e.g. ChatGPT or DeepL.

In conclusion:

- Please do not be discouraged by the many rules. I have not spelt them out here to scare anyone off. Rather, I believe that many students are unsettled when rules are only implicit but are not mentioned or explained. Ultimately, I hope to increase transparency with regard to grading so that you can adapt to the existing

requirements at an early stage. This is why the assessment grid, which is the basis for grading every assignment, is included here:

	Criteria for assessment	Assessment				
		1	2	3	4	5
Mainly relevant for: theoretical-conceptual dimension	Clarity and relevance of the research question					
	Structure of the thesis					
	Plausibility of the core hypothesis					
	Stringency of the argumentation					
	Theoretical foundation					
Mainly relevant for: empirical-analytical dimension	Information content of the work					
	Methodological realisation					
Mainly relevant for: formal dimension	Use of relevant literature					
	Formal accuracy (spelling, punctuation, formatting, bibliography, etc.)					