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Programme details

Programme: European Politics and Society

Specialisation:

EC: 30

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Thesis details:

Title: Understanding and Framing of Democratic Decline in the EU-funded Research Projects

Is the thesis in your assessment free of plagiarism?

Yes to my knowledge the thesis is free of plagiarism

None detected in reading and Turnitin report raises no issues.

Can the thesis be made publicly available in the Leiden University Repository?

by M.E.L. David: it can be made public through the repository.

Summary assessment/comments

The thesis is precisely the type of culmination of a Master's degree programme that we hope to but do not always see. The arguments made are significant and compelling and ultimately offer a sound response to the sense of democratic decline that is so pervasive in Europe (and elsewhere) today. With so much focus on other so-called crises, it was a real pleasure to see a student deliver such original work that is focused on an under-regarded challenge facing the EU that actually constitutes a real crisis vs the kind of socially constructed one spoken of in relation to migration, for example.

Criteria

Knowledge and insight

The student asks, "How is democratic decline portrayed and understood in EU-funded research, and to what extent does this align with EU policy priorities?". The research question (RQ) is clear and this focus allows for an original contribution to knowledge on an issue that is, as the student persuasively argues, of great significance and topicality. The RQ is contextualised well and through that contextualisation, both the overall contribution of the thesis argued for convincingly, as well as the direction of that contribution. The work is grounded in relevant literature about democratic decline, liberal democracy and the relationship between the two. Additionally, the student delivers insights into knowledge production and the role of funding in decisions about the scope of what is researched, investigating the relationship between EU funding and the promotion or perpetuation of certain policy paradigms versus other possibilities. In these discussions, connections are not just made, they are married together impressively. The student really needs to be commended on the extensive literature research and grappling with that literature. The early part of the thesis proceeds inexorably towards a focus on democracy and what is discussed in respect of democracy in EU-funded projects - and what is not. Other related discussions, notably about method, are set out convincingly and with full understanding demonstrated. The final impression is of a thesis that is significant in respect of both purpose and conclusions, promoting a research agenda where a good contribution is absolutely made by the thesis, while also arguing persuasively for more related work.

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

Application of knowledge and insight

The thesis is undeniably impressive in methodological terms, both in the abstract and the application. The rationale for the selections made is always clear - and compellingly argued. The student employed mixed methods, in a multi-step approach, beginning with a wide reading to determine those projects which would be included in the further analysis. A determination of the democratic priorities seen in Horizon 2020 projects in the Societal Challenges pillar was then made, followed by a qualitative interrogation of that work to elicit deeper analysis of the frames employed and the conceptualisation of democracy that they reflect and to offset any granularity lost through the clustering technique employed. The student shows both understanding of and regard for issues related to rigour and authority, employing existing literature to a very good effect. The research design is aligned both with the RQ and the empirical analysis then conducted. Key concepts are identified and explicated very ably. The student sometimes works too hard to be convincing but better this than falling short in this respect.

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

Reaching conclusions

The RQ is fully answered and the interim and final conclusions follow on logically from the analysis of the sources employed. The student works hard - sometimes a little too hard - to argue their points and is obviously acutely aware of the need to think about causality very carefully. The student talks through the limitations of the findings but given that there is both implicit and explicit criticism of the academic community I would just have liked to see more acknowledgement that an unknown is the number of proposals that were not funded. There is sometimes an evasion of discussions of agency - I'd therefore have liked to see more unpacking of EU and neoliberalism in terms of identifying more precisely who was deciding what. I was very struck by the reference to Fischer on p. 21 and would really have liked to see this aspect returned to in the final conclusions, in terms of whether the EU is particularly interested in work that is directed at theorisation or whether this is where the gap between the two different knowledge communities - academics versus policymakers is most starkly seen and least likely to be overcome. Generally, those final conclusions would have benefited from direct linking back to specific literature.

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

Communication

The thesis is well-written, well-presented and well-referenced but some improvement was possible to elevate the thesis further. As a very minor point, I would have liked to see new pages for new chapters, showing more consideration for the reader. There are some minor errors in writing, which should have been picked up in the proofreading, but they do not distract overly from the read. There are moments when an overly defensive tone is detectable, for instance, in the discussion about democracy and the justification for this focus. I encourage the student to find ways of expressing the arguments that walk the line of arguing the point versus arguing with the audience. The structure of the thesis is fine but there is sometimes too much detail in the wrong place, e.g. in the intro, we get more substantive information about the findings than we need. Elsewhere, there is a tendency towards repetition, particularly in the Methods chapter. It's absolutely right to have clear signposting but this is sometimes overdone. A good editing process was therefore needed to refine the work further. Nonetheless, I emphasise, this is about refinement to improve the very good work done in these respects. The bibliography is missing some information in places, more consistency was needed to ensure page ranges were in place and urls where needed

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

Learning skills

The thesis is the outcome of the student's original idea and an excellent balance in respect of independent study and use of supervisory structures. There was good engagement with supervision and the feedback supplied in respect of drafts. Work was produced regularly, though it should have been possible to produce drafts earlier than was the case and so to meet the original deadline. I also want to acknowledge, however, that the delay was short and reflected, I believe, more the student's (unwarranted) lack of confidence and the very extensive research of both primary and secondary sources conducted.

Assessment: good

Weighing: n/a

Formal requirements

These are met.

Final assessment

On 21-06-2024 this thesis is graded with a 8.7

Signatures

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M.E.L. David', written in a cursive style.

M.E.L. David