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Literature Review

At the end of the first semester, CDSS PhD students are expected to hand in a literature review of their (prospective) dissertation topic. It serves as a step towards the dissertation proposal and will not be graded. The literature review should be electronically submitted to the respective mentors and to the CDSS - **submission deadline is 31st January**. The literature review should amount to about 10 pages. Your mentor will provide you with critical feedback on it, and notify the CDSS whether the assignment counts as passed or failed.

The following comments may help you to get started on the review:

A literature review is an examination of the research that has been conducted in a particular field of study. Hart (1998) defines it as:

- The selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data and evidence.
- [This selection is] written from a particular standpoint to fulfill certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated, and the effective evaluation of these documents in relation to the research being proposed (p. 13).

What is the Purpose of a Literature Review?

- To demonstrate your scholarly ability to identify relevant information and to outline existing knowledge.
- To identify the 'gap' in the research that your study is attempting to address, positioning your work in the context of previous research and creating a 'research space' for your work.
- To evaluate and synthesize the information in line with the concepts that you have set yourself for the research.
- To produce a rationale or justification for your study.

So what formats could your literature review possibly have? It could be a comprehensive and conclusive literature review extending a dissertation proposal draft you might already have completed or be working on. You could also hand in a long list with literature you are working on including extensive comments on these references, like an annotated bibliography. Or you could write a separate article you can later on transfer into a chapter for your thesis. Finally, you could write a

critical essay on the literature of your chosen dissertation topic. So you are quite free in your design. Please discuss specific requirements with your mentor.

Initially, you may read quite broadly on the topic to enrich your understanding of the field. This is useful for refining your topic and establishing the perspective that your research will take. For example, reading broadly may help you work out where there are gaps in the research, which may provide you with a niche for your research. It may also enable you to establish how your research extends or enhances the studies already done.

However, remember that the literature review needs to relate to and explain your research question. Although there may seem to be hundreds of sources of information that appear pertinent, once you have your question you will be able to refine and narrow down the scope of your reading (see Ferolja/Burnett 2002).

Sources:

- Fefolja/Burnett (2002):
Getting Started on Your Literature Review, <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/pdf/Litrev.pdf>
- Hart (1998):
Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination, SAGE.