

IMESS DISSERTATION



Note: Please email the completed mark sheet to Year 2 coordinator
(cc Chiara Amini chiara.amini@ucl.ac.uk and ssees-imess@ucl.ac.uk)

Please note that IMESS students are not required to use a particular set of methods (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, or comparative) in their dissertation.

Student:	Jordan Marcella
Dissertation title:	<i>Presenting Prague: Visions of a City Through Western Guidebooks</i>

	70+	69-65	64-60	59-55	54-50	<50
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Knowledge <i>Knowledge of problems involved, e.g. historical and social context, specialist literature on the topic. Evidence of capacity to gather information through a wide and appropriate range of reading, and to digest and process knowledge.</i>	X					
Analysis & Interpretation <i>Demonstrates a clear grasp of concepts. Application of appropriate methodology and understanding; willingness to apply an independent approach or interpretation recognition of alternative interpretations; Use of precise terminology and avoidance of ambiguity; avoidance of excessive generalisations or gross oversimplifications.</i>	X					
Structure & Argument <i>Demonstrates ability to structure work with clarity, relevance and coherence. Ability to argue a case; clear evidence of analysis and logical thought; recognition of an argument limitation or alternative views; Ability to use other evidence to support arguments and structure appropriately.</i>		X				
Presentation & Documentation <i>Accurate and consistently presented footnotes and bibliographic references; accuracy of grammar and spelling; correct and clear presentation of charts/graphs/tables or other data. Appropriate and correct referencing throughout. Correct and contextually correct handling of quotations.</i>	X					
Methodology <i>Understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research.</i>		X				

ECTS Mark:		UCL Mark:	74	Marker:	
<i>Deducted for late submission:</i>				Signed:	
<i>Deducted for inadequate referencing:</i>				Date:	

MARKING GUIDELINES

A (UCL mark 70+): Note: marks of over 80 are given rarely and only for truly exceptional pieces of work.

Distinctively sophisticated and focused analysis, critical use of sources and insightful interpretation. Comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research.

B(UCL mark 65-69):

A high level of analysis, critical use of sources and insightful interpretation. Good understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research.

C (UCL mark 60-61):

Some evidence of critical analysis, knowledgeable interpretation. Wide range of sources used to develop a logic and coherent argument. Good understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, the extent of independent research could have improved.

D (UCL mark 59-55):

Employ relevant sources and show ability to engage in systematic inquiry. Little critical analysis of the material. It demonstrate methodological awareness but the standard and rigor of the analysis can improve.

E (UCL mark 54-50):

Mostly descriptive argument. Employ relevant but limited sources. The structure, logic and overall quality of the argument needs improvement.

F (UCL mark less than 50):

Demonstrates failure to use sources and an inadequate ability to engage in systematic inquiry. Inadequate evidence of ability to engage in sustained research work and poor understanding of appropriate research techniques.

Comments, explaining strengths and weaknesses (at least 300 words):

This is an excellent dissertation and I quite enjoyed reading it. While there are occasional infelicities of expression, overall the writing is clear and engaging. While there are occasional typos, overall the presentation is clean and careful. The central corpus under examination is rather compact—17 guidebooks—but the opening section is well informed by existing scholarship on travel writing in general and analysis of guidebooks in particular. Finally, the dissertation shows clear familiarity with the broader historical and social context relevant to this topic (kudos for Good *Prince Wenceslas!*).

I have two main suggestions for improvement, one structural and one conceptual. The structural comment is this: in the central chapters it becomes at times a bit difficult to follow the narrative accounts of what each guidebook says on particular topics and how these change over time. While there is much interesting information and there are lots of good quotations, it does feel a bit repetitive and amorphous at times. What would be really helpful would be if each section began with some sort of *chart* showing categories that the researcher identified as significant plotted against each guidebook series chronologically, in a way that would give some visual rendering of the major shifts in each category over time. This could then be followed by (more concise) narrative analysis that would provide the relevant quotations as evidence and draw together the sort of interpretive conclusions that are currently tucked away in chapter 4, rather far from the initial presentation of the material. Such an approach would also potentially have the advantage of rendering more clearly the differences in chronological development *among each series*. Currently the one series singled out as unique is Frommer's, as the only one authored by a Czech; this is indeed very significant, and the dissertation offers some good analysis and draws some important conclusions from this. But the distinct approaches and 'identities' of the other series remain less clear.

The conceptual comment is this: how far should one understand—and indeed, how far can one even evaluate—the changes in presentation over time as reflecting a *shifting perception* or, to use a stronger word, *ideology*, among the Western textbook authors, and how far are these *objective developments* in the urban structures and social patterns in Prague? For instance, is the depiction of increased/better eating opportunities related to guidebook writers overcoming a 'blind spot' that marked them in the '90s, or is it a reflection of an actual broadening and improvement in the restaurant scene in Prague over that time? Ditto for nightlife. These particular example may not be too difficult to evaluate, but more difficult would be that wonderful example discussed a few times of one guidebook describing the possibility of shopping for 'junk', later giving way to 'vintage items/antiques'. One wonders here if the objects themselves have changed substantially or if the guidebook author has simply become less blinkered in their own perceptions. And then the most clearly ideological category would be references to 'what Czechs are like', which produces some of the most problematic quotations in these books. (Cases like these are where the Frommer's series can be particularly illuminating.) The final paragraphs of the dissertation touch on these questions, raising the 'chicken-and-egg' question of whether 'presentation changes perception' or 'perception changes presentation'; but there is a third element here of *actual objective* change in a city that went through dramatic transformation in the 20 years following 1989. One example, which is one of the main relevant topics that the dissertation does not discuss at all, is taxi service: taxis in Prague in the 90s and into the 2000s were objectively a rip-off scam in relation to foreigners, and I am sure the guidebooks must have discussed this (and I would be curious *how* they handled this). But as this became a major image problem for the city, measures started to be introduced, and then Uber will have changed the situation fundamentally—so we are talking about an objective change here. More detailed reflection on the 'change of perception v. change in reality' question would be welcome.

Specific questions you would like addressing at the oral defence (at least 2 questions):

- *In many respects the overall arc revealed by your findings is unsurprising: a general shift from presenting Prague as a ‘mysterious’, ‘exotic’, or ‘tantalizing’ destination (both through its architectural beauty but also through its inexpensiveness and grit) to a particularly attractive yet more or less ‘normal’ European destination. This is largely to be expected. What, by contrast, did you find in the course of your research that surprised you most?*
- *How far do you think the narrative shifts described in your dissertation reflect changes in the authors’ approach and how far might they reflect actual changes in the urban structure and social fabric in Prague over this period? How might one try to measure and distinguish between these two sorts of change?*
- *A speculative question: a standard trope of guidebooks (especially those targeting a younger audience) is that they take you ‘off the beaten track’ and reveal ‘hidden’ aspects of the destination that most tourists miss—and yet, most guidebooks inevitably reproduce the same such ‘hot tips’, leading foreign residents/visitors who have spent a longer time in the city to roll their eyes and feel superior in their more ‘authentic’ understanding of the city’s ‘true’ identity. If you could conduct a similar study based not on guidebooks but on interviews with, say, British and/or American expats in Prague from the early 90s till now, what sort of narrative do you think that might reveal? Do you think it would more likely parallel or stand in contrast to the narrative you trace here in guidebooks over that period?*

