

Name of the student:	Gregorio Vichi
Title of the thesis:	The Absorption Dilemma. An analysis of the national determinants affecting the absorption capacity of EU funds.
Reviewer:	Andreas Hofmann

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

(relevance of the research question, research objective, literature review):

The thesis pursues an interesting and well explored research question: What explains EU member states' absorption capacity of structural funds? As one of the EU's largest expenditure policies, this question is clearly relevant, in particular given that such funds constitute the source of a large part of public investments in some member states, as the thesis demonstrates.

That said, I sometimes got the impression that the thesis slightly oversells its approach. Cohesion fund absorption is rather well explored, including the variables analysed here, and the literature review could have made clearer where it identified gaps. It is not necessary for an MA thesis to break substantial new ground – toning down some claims made throughout the thesis may have been more advantageous ("previous research has seemed unwilling...", "interviews represent an innovation...").

I wonder about the choice of title. Where is the dilemma? The term is not used throughout the thesis.

2. ANALYSIS

(methodology, argument, theoretical backing, appropriate work with sources):

I like the mixed methods approach that the thesis pursues. It is a good use of interviews, although the author could have (again) been more modest in stating what can be achieved with 6 interviews. How many interviewees were approached?

The author could have been a bit clearer about the sequence. Did the interviews come first (as is implied in the methods section: "the quantitative analysis complements the qualitative findings..."), or were they used to contextualise the results of the statistical analysis, as the structure of the thesis implies?

The advantage of doing a quantitative empirical study is that they follow a fairly standardised format. A drawback for thesis writing is that it is also easy to spot and call out deficits – easier in any case than for a thesis that pursues a more narrative qualitative case study. I should therefore preface the following criticism by saying that I do not intend to penalise the student's ambition or be overly nitpicky. Nonetheless, a few things came to mind when reading the analysis:

I am not sure that the distinction between structure and agency in the development of the hypotheses is necessary and I think it causes more problems than it solves. Quality of governance (QOG) and decentralisation are well established factors that impact all policy implementation in the EU. I am not sure I find it convincing that the proportion of cohesion funding in public investment is any less structural. There are also some endogeneity issues. Cohesion funds are allocated to 'poorer' countries

that have difficulties financing investments in e.g. public infrastructure on their own. The 'independent' variable in H3 is therefore a result of the allocation decision. There might also be a correlation between QOG and GDP that might confound the results that pertain to this factor.

I am also not sure why the Commission would be the principal here and where the agency conflict would lie. Presumably both sides want the money spent? It could be that governments would prefer to spend it on getting reelected and the Commission would like to see it go to long-term investments, but I am not sure what exactly the implications of that would be for absorption capacity.

There are some interaction effects here. I would not ask an MA thesis to model these, but perhaps a discussion may have been useful. Decentralisation presumably exacerbates QOG deficits, in particular where regional variation is large, such as in Italy and Spain. Decentralisation, however, presumably increases absorption in high QOG countries with 'poorer' regions, such as Germany and Finland. H3 might therefore work better at a regional level. (Btw, the claim that multilevel governance theories justify a focus on the national level seems odd.)

I struggle to understand the operationalisation of the dependent variable. The way it is described in the formula is the deviation from the EU mean, averaged out over 5 measurement points. If that is so, how can the EU mean be greater than 0? Also, are laggards (below EU average) treated the same as leaders (above average)? In other words, how exactly do higher values stand for better absorption capacity? I think a quantitative study should do a better job explaining its most crucial component part.

If the dependent variable is an average of 5 measurement points over several years, should the independent variables not be the same? Or do the values on the independent variables not vary much over time? In any case, this would have been worth discussing.

I would caution against a substantive interpretation of the size of regression coefficients where the underlying scales of the independent variables are different. I would look at expected effects first.

3. CONCLUSIONS

(persuasiveness, link between data and conclusions, achievement of research objectives):

The thesis draws sensible conclusions from its analysis.

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

(appropriate language, adherence to academic standards, citation style, layout):

The thesis conforms to the standards of academic writing. I see no evident issues with formal requirements

The section "Discussion" seemed redundant to me - it repeats what was presented before and preempts the Conclusions.

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

(strong and weak point of the dissertation, other issues)

This is a good thesis that succeeds in presenting a convincing analysis and demonstrates a very good

facility with the demands of good research design.

Grade (A-F)	8.2
Date	Signature
25/06/2024	

Percentile	Prague	Krakow	Leiden	Barcelona
A (91-100)	91-100 %	4,51-5,00	8.0-10	9-10
B (81-90)	81-90 %	4,21-4,50	7.5-7.9	8-8,9
C (71-80)	71-80 %	3,71-4,20	7-7.4	7-7,9
D (61-70)	61-70 %	3,21-3,7	6.5-6.9	6-6,9
E (51-60)	51-60 %	3,00-3,20	6-6.4	5-5,9

Assessment criteria:

Excellent (A): 'Outstanding performance with only minor errors';

Very good (B): 'Above the average standard but with some errors';

Good (C): 'Generally sound work but with a number of notable errors';

Satisfactory (D): 'Fair but with significant shortcomings';

Sufficient (E): 'Performance meets the minimum criteria';

Fail: 'Some/considerable more work required before the credit can be awarded'.