

PHD APPLICATION SERVICE

ELEMENT TWO



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PhD Titles and Rationales

Title 1 - “Bridging the ESG Disclosure Gap: Towards a Harmonised Framework for Stakeholder-Centric Reporting in Infrastructure Firms”

Rationale (Detailed):

The global proliferation of ESG reporting frameworks—SFDR, GRI, TCFD, SASB—has led to a lack of consistency and comparability in ESG disclosures. Infrastructure firms, which operate at the intersection of public accountability and private investment, are especially vulnerable to reputational and regulatory risks stemming from fragmented disclosures.

This PhD will critically evaluate ESG reporting practices across UK and EU infrastructure companies, identifying gaps and overlaps in their adherence to multiple frameworks. It will draw upon **Stakeholder Theory** and **Legitimacy Theory** to assess whether existing disclosures meet the expectations of key stakeholder groups (investors, regulators, communities).

Research Aim:

To develop a harmonised, stakeholder-aligned ESG reporting model that can be operationalised across infrastructure firms and applied to both regulatory compliance and internal decision-making.

Methodology Suggestion:

- Comparative content analysis of ESG reports from 30–50 infrastructure firms (UK & EU)
- Semi-structured interviews with ESG officers and compliance teams
- Benchmarking against regulatory standards (SFDR, CSRD, TCFD)

Academic Contribution:

The research contributes to the academic discourse on ESG standardisation, adds practical relevance for reporting firms, and addresses a clear policy gap in stakeholder engagement through ESG transparency.

Title 2 - “Stakeholder Legitimacy and Strategic Trade-offs: Examining the Role of ESG in Shaping Corporate Political Activity”

Rationale (Detailed):

Firms today face increasing scrutiny not only for how they operate but also for how they influence policy. As ESG principles shape public and investor expectations, corporations face difficult trade-offs in aligning ESG commitments with corporate political activity (CPA), especially lobbying and policy engagement.

This PhD will investigate how firms negotiate these trade-offs and maintain stakeholder legitimacy when ESG ideals appear to conflict with political or commercial imperatives. It will be grounded in **Institutional Theory** and **Political CSR**, using case studies of firms that

have engaged in high-profile ESG lobbying—especially in sectors like energy, tech, and finance.

Research Aim:

To understand how firms use ESG to frame, justify, or recalibrate their political actions, and how stakeholders perceive this influence in terms of legitimacy and ethical alignment.

Methodology Suggestion:

- Case studies of 4–6 large firms with documented ESG lobbying activity
- Thematic analysis of policy documents, shareholder letters, and media discourse
- Stakeholder surveys or interviews with advocacy groups, analysts, and policymakers

Academic Contribution:

The research will fill a gap in ESG literature concerning political strategy, adding depth to the understanding of how ESG and CPA intersect in a legitimacy-sensitive era.

Title 3 - “The ESG–CSR Nexus: Evaluating the Long-Term Financial Impact of Stakeholder-Aligned ESG Investments in Emerging Markets”

Rationale (Detailed):

While ESG has become mainstream in developed economies, its adoption in emerging markets often lags due to infrastructure gaps, political uncertainty, and stakeholder misalignment. However, early adopters are showing signs of both competitive advantage and increased reputational capital.

This research will assess how ESG investments aligned with local stakeholder needs (e.g. employment, environmental protection, equitable access) contribute to long-term financial performance and operational resilience in emerging market firms. The study will draw on **Resource-Based View (RBV)** and **Stakeholder Capitalism** to link ESG implementation with measurable business outcomes.

Research Aim:

To evaluate how aligning ESG strategy with local stakeholder expectations in emerging markets affects firm performance and investor attractiveness.

Methodology Suggestion:

- Longitudinal financial analysis of 20–25 emerging market firms over 5–7 years
- Stakeholder mapping and engagement index creation
- Interviews with impact investors, NGOs, and community leaders

Academic Contribution:

The study will bridge ESG and CSR research in non-Western contexts, providing policy and strategic insights for multinational firms and local regulators aiming to embed sustainability without Western bias.