How many papers is too many for a PhD student?

Theres no such thing as “too many papers” if they are all good papers in strong journals and genuinely reflect the work of the PhD student involved. In my field, for a three-year Australian PhD, more than 5–6 papers is surprising (though not unheard of), so I would take a closer look:

Are they all in good journals? If not, the student would have been better off publishing fewer papers in stronger journals.

How much did the student really contribute to each paper? If most of them are first-authored papers that’s a good sign, but sometimes you see research groups where everyone in the group is included as a co-author of every paper, and it can be difficult to assess whether the student author really contributed much. This is something to ask referees.

Are the papers all minor variations on a common theme (e.g., salami slicing the work by writing different papers for the same experiment repeated for each of seven different organisms)? If so — well, kudos to the student for getting them all published in good journals, but the value of each individual paper is less.

Was the student already involved in research before their PhD (e.g., as a research Masters student or as a research assistant or research consultant)? If so, some of the papers may be from their pre-PhD work and even it really is all work done during the PhD, it is less surprising that they have been very productive.

Do they agree with the research experience shown on the student’s CV and other materials? I once saw a CV from a job applicant who had tried to claim publications by another researcher with the same name. It was obvious from the fact that more than half the papers bore no resemblance to the projects that the researcher had mentioned working on.

Is there anything suspicious about the methods or the amount of work that the student claims to have done? This would not be my first thought, but there have been cases of people making up data or claiming credit for work done by others, so if there was a very large number of papers from a PhD (say 10) and no other obvious explanation, it is a possibility that I would think about while reading the papers.

I guess the other way of considering the question is “how many papers is too many for a student to expect from themself or for their advisor to push them to achieve?” The answer there depends on your field. Have a look at what other graduates who have gone on to get good jobs had by the end of their PhDs. In my field, one to two papers published plus another one to two submitted and under consideration by good journals should be enough. Expecting more might be unrealistic.