



Masters by Research in International Relations Dissertation Guidelines

1. Introduction

As part of the Masters by Research in International Relations, students are required to write a dissertation based on work of an advanced or original nature undertaken by them during the course and to present their findings and conclusions in a scholarly manner in a dissertation carrying 80 ECTS. Work on the dissertation is expected to start during the first semester of the course and continue throughout the three semesters. The dissertation is expected to be at a length of 50,000.

The following details outline the expected standards by the Department of International Relations, University of Malta regarding the completion of dissertations for the **Masters by Research in International Relations**.

Assigned supervisors need to be consulted at all stages. Work closely with your assigned supervisor, who will guide you on a structure and appropriate methodology and theoretical and analytical framework to develop. Moreover, do follow the timeframes and deadlines given to you by your supervisor which will ensure that your work is well paced out without overwhelming you as your final deadlines get closer.

2. Your Research Proposal

When applying for the MA by Research in International Relations with us, you will be asked to submit a research proposal. The proposal should be approximately 1,000 words long. This should include an outline of the research that you would like to undertake, and include the following salient points:

- Identify the area of research that you would like to explore. Demonstrate that you are familiar with existing literature, and that you have identified a narrow focus of the subject that would allow for detailed investigation.
- Present your research question – students may opt to list one principal research question and, in addition, the research questions that derive directly from it – and a research hypothesis (if applicable).

- Explain the rationale behind your research (why you think research on your particular point of interest is needed and important).
- Identify existing literature that you plan to review as part of your research, as well as a theoretical framework and appropriate methodology that you plan to explore in the course of your research.

3. Structure

The following outline is indicative of the structure expected of an M.A. Dissertation by the Department of International Relations. Naturally, it will have to be adapted to the particular study carried out and may not have to be reproduced literally. Students are advised to consult their supervisor for guidance on an appropriate structure.

- Title Page;
- Declaration of Authenticity;
- Abstract;
- Acknowledgements;
- Table of Contents;
- List of Tables;
- List of Figures;
- List of Appendices;
- Acronyms and Abbreviations;

Recommended Chapter List:

- Chapter 1 - Introduction;
- Chapter 2 - Literature Review;
- Chapter 3 - Theoretical Discussion;
- Chapter 4 - Methodology;
- Chapter 5 - Empirical/Theoretical Research Findings;
- Chapter 6 - Analysis;
- Chapter 7 - Conclusion and Recommendations; References; Appendices

Notes on Specific Sections

a) **The Abstract** is the “business card” of the dissertation and should provide the reader with the summary of your study in all its aspects. It should be 250 words maximum and should answer the following questions:

- What does this research set out to do and why? (i.e. research question)

- How did it seek to do this? (theory and method)
- What are the general findings and conclusions?

b) **Acknowledgements** should express thanks to those who assisted in the research process in one way or another.

c) **The Introduction** should introduce the reader to the background of the study and the nature of the problem being considered. It introduces clearly the research question, setting it in context, explaining why it is important. It also explains how the student is tackling the research question in the dissertation, thereby introducing the theory and methodology employed. If needed for the understanding of the research project, terms should be defined (even if they are more fully defined later on in the theory chapter). The introduction should also anticipate the rest of the dissertation by explaining how it is structured.

d) **The Literature Review** provides a critical review of the existing academic literature on the research topic being studied. This is not to say that students ought to indicate every book and/or article written about the topic under study, but students should be able to show that they have a thorough grasp of the existent academic literature pertaining to their research topic and/or particular research question. This chapter should indicate that the student has examined both current and past literature on his/her chosen topic and explored the related issues through multiple perspectives.

The literature review must not be written like a narrative. It should rather bring out what other scholars have written and argued in studies related to the research question. It is advisable here to start by discussing the available literature in a broad sense and then working towards discussing those studies that closely resemble the research being undertaken in terms of the particular research question they tackle and the variables they discuss.

Students are advised to group the studies, papers, books and other literature unearthed on the basis of how closely they relate to the research question which is at the heart of their own study. Once students have systematically categorised the literature they uncover, they are in a position to discuss it in groupings rather than one by one. This makes for a more analytical and also clearer literature review.

The Literature Review must be:

- **Relevant** – The literature used should highlight the arguments, claims and contentions made around the chosen research question and/or topic and must feed into the aims and objectives of the study.
- **Structured** – Students may opt to use a Concept Map in order to place ideas and the material surrounding those ideas in good structural order. Again, students are advised to consult their supervisors on matters of structure and presentation.

The following is a list of common mistakes made by students when writing a literature review:

- Discussing studies but falling short of discussing their findings;
- Using the uncovered information to write a narrative about the chosen subject as opposed to discussing the studies themselves;
- Discussing individual studies without providing a link between them;
- Refraining from highlighting the commonalities within a group of studies;
- Failing to identify the independent variables in each study, which in turn makes comparing studies problematic;
- Including studies with little or no connection to the research being undertaken.

e) ***The Theoretical Discussion*** (or Theory) chapter should consist of a theoretical contextualisation of the research question and the issues surrounding it. It is crucial that students use relevant International Relations theories in order to inform the empirical part of their dissertation. It may sometimes be appropriate to frame an issue holistically, by providing a theoretical interpretation using competing theories (e.g. Realism and Liberalism). The theory or theories used should link strongly to the main arguments forwarded by the student.

f) ***The Methodology*** (or Methods) chapter should give a well-documented outline of the methods used in order for any other researcher to be able to understand - and perhaps even replicate - the research to assess its validity. This makes the Methods chapter a crucial one in any research project. The following elements must be considered for inclusion in the Methods chapter subject to the supervisor's advice:

- A discussion on the reasons behind choosing the methods used as well as on why other methods were refuted or where not applicable to the study.
- An in-depth description of the primary data sources used, such as fieldwork, focus groups, document analysis, surveys (mail, face-to-face, phone or electronic), interviews (structured, un-structured or semi-structured), ethnography, desk research, Participative Rural Appraisals, etc.
- A detailed description of the sampling method and why such method was chosen for the study.
- A description of any pilot study undertaken and the changes made to the original research tool as a result.
- A discussion of the methods of analysis used, such as SPSS, content analysis, deconstruction, textual analysis, semiotics, historical analysis, thematic analysis, etc.
- A discussion of the limitations to the methods used, as well as the steps taken to overcome such limitations.

g) ***The Results and Analysis*** chapter should present the results obtained from the application of the methods to the empirical material. These should be presented and discussed with reference to the theories and ideas outlined in the theory chapter. Students

may opt to illustrate their results graphically in order to enhance clarity. Any graphs, diagrams or images must be properly numbered and referenced.

h) **The Conclusion and Recommendations** should draw together all the issues of the research and link back to the aim and objectives outlined in the Introduction. Have the aims set at the beginning been met? If not, why? What are the implications arising from the findings? Students are advised to refrain from making broad generalisations here. All recommendations must be based on evidence provided in the dissertation. This chapter should also include any recommendations for further study in the chosen area.

i) **The References** section must present the details of all the sources cited throughout the dissertation. A reader should be able to identify the exact source and refer to it directly. The References section must NOT be categorised on any basis (many students tend to categorise the references on the basis of source type) and must consist of a single list in alphabetical order. The Department does not impose that students use any particular referencing system (APA, MLA, Harvard, are all acceptable). However, consistency is essential and students must therefore stick with a single referencing system throughout. *More on referencing in the Annex to this document.*

j) **The Appendices** should include selective, supplementary material which is distracting when placed in the main body of text. Only material which is necessary for a full understanding of the study should be included. These include important forms, questionnaires or interview schedules, descriptions of equipment or settings, tables and data lists supportive of the study. Please do not include Appendices which can be found by a click of a mouse unless they are used extensively in the dissertation (e.g. an international convention will only be included if the aim of the dissertation is to analyse that particular convention).

4. Which Research Sources are appropriate?

When conducting academic research, being able to critically evaluate the quality of information is crucial. Some sources are of better quality than others and some are categorically unacceptable. In order to evaluate whether a source is reliable and valid, it is important to look at a number of factors. Most of the time, a peer-reviewed, academic source is valid and reliable and may be counted on for quality information.

a) **Books and academic journals:** In this type of sources, you will find theoretical arguments and historical background to the event/s or process/es that interest you. You will also get a good idea of how other scholars have tackled research questions similar to yours methodologically. At times, books and specialised journals will refer to primary sources of interest to your research.

- b) **Primary sources:** The following are considered primary sources: speeches, PVs, statistics, direct interviews, polling data, personal letters, diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, etc.. Newspaper articles also serve as useful primary sources of information on current topics of research.

Students should note that Wikipedia is *not* considered an appropriate source and cannot be cited in an academic dissertation. This is because Wikipedia, like many other online information sources, operates on an open-source basis, meaning that anybody can contribute to the site without substantiating the information they upload. The internet is awash with information on just about any topic imaginable, but much of that information is unsubstantiated and even false. Students are expected to possess good judgement on which sources are reliable and which are not. When using websites as information sources, it is advised that the websites used belong to transparent, reputable organisations or individuals and cannot be edited by anyone but the site's administrator/s.

When it comes to unearthing quality literature, reputable academic journals are a researcher's best friend. The HyDi search gateway, available through the 'Library' section of the official website of the University of Malta, is a good place to start. Here, one may search through multiple academic journals simultaneously through a single search, as well as discover books and dissertations held within the University's library. Google Scholar is another handy source for quality information. This is a freely accessible web search engine that specialises in scholarly literature.

5. Research Ethics

One of the principal and essential functions of a university is the carrying out of research in all areas of human knowledge and experience. The University of Malta recognises its responsibility to researchers and the wider community to ensure that the highest standards of integrity and professionalism are observed in the conduct of research at the University.

[The University's Research Code of Practice](#) provides guiding principles and standards of good practice in research across all subject disciplines and areas of study in the University. It applies to all those undertaking research on the University's premises using its facilities, or on behalf of the University, including staff, students, visiting or affiliate staff, associates, contractors and consultants.

The procedure to be followed to review ethics in research are laid out in the [University's Research Ethics Review Procedures](#). It applies to all University of Malta staff, students, and anyone else carrying out research under its auspices.

Please note that the process for obtaining ethics clearance usually takes several months, as the proposal needs to be approved both at the Faculty level and the University level (and prior to that, of course, by the student's supervisor). This means that students that aim to conduct their empirical research directly after the end of the academic year in July, must start the process in the early spring. Clearance for vulnerable subjects, e.g. unaccompanied minors, is not easily obtained and the research design should take this into account.

6. **Typing & Proofreading**

The dissertation is to be written in English. The highest level of grammar and syntax is expected. It is recommended that all dissertations are proof read. Tutors will NOT act as proof readers. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that a good piece of work is presented to the Examiners' Board. Students are advised to proof read each chapter before handing it in for feedback from their tutor. Special attention should be given to the final version of the dissertation.

7. **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is the representation of another person's work as one's own or the unacknowledged incorporation in a student's work of material derived from the work of another. This is categorically unacceptable. Such practice will incur the penalty of failure. For guidance on how to avoid plagiarism, please consult:

https://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/95568/how_to_avoid_plagiarism.pdf

The student will have to run his/her dissertation through Turnitin. The tutor will advise the student as to the practical arrangements for doing so.

8. **Failure**

A student can fail a dissertation if the standards set out in the Awards Criteria are not met:

Extract from the General Regulations for Post Graduate Awards (2008):

Examiners shall express the students' performance in the assessment of all study-units, including the dissertation, as a percentage mark and grade as indicated in the table below. Both the percentage mark and the letter grade shall be recorded in the students' academic record. The percentage mark only is used for the purpose of calculating the students' progress and for the award classification

Descriptor	Mark Range	Grade
Work of excellent quality Superior performance showing a comprehensive understanding and application of the subject matter. Evidence of considerable additional reading/research/work.	80% - 100%	A
Work of very good quality Performance is typified by a very good working knowledge of the subject matter. Evidence of a considerable amount of reading/ research/work.	70% - 79%	B
Work of good quality Above average performance, with a good working knowledge of the subject matter. Evidence of sufficient reading/research/work.	55%** - 69%	C
Work of fair but below average quality Considerable but incomplete understanding of the subject matter. Evidence of a fair amount of reading/research/work.	50% * - 54%	D
Work of marginal quality Minimal understanding of the subject matter, with no evidence of additional reading/research/work, which must be compensated by higher marks in other units in order to be eligible for the Postgraduate Award.	45% - 49%	E
Pass – when assessment is based on a pass/fail basis.	Not applicable	P
Unsatisfactory, failing work in any study-unit	0% - 44%	F
Unsatisfactory, failing work in the dissertation study-unit.	0% - 49%*	F
Unsatisfactory, failing work in a practicum study-unit, where such is indicated in the course bye-laws.	0%- 54%**	F
Unjustified absence for an assessment, or failure to hand in assigned work in time, or ineligibility to take assessment due to unapproved absence from lectures. Shall be considered as F with 0 marks in the calculation of the average mark.	0%	F
Temporary grade for Incomplete work due to justifiable reasons (illness, approved absence, etc.) for which the assessment date has been postponed or the deadline for submission of work has been extended.		I
Approved withdrawal of the registration for a study-unit after the official add/drop period has elapsed, given in consideration of exceptional circumstances, such as absence from lectures due to prolonged illness during the semester. The unit shall not be taken into consideration in the calculation of the average mark.		W

* The minimum pass mark for dissertations is 50%.

** The minimum pass mark for practicums, where such is indicated in the course bye-laws, is 55%.

9. Typescript, Binding and Digitisation

- a) **Font and font-size:** The body of the script must be in 12pt Arial; Titles must be in 16pt Cambria. Footnotes must be in 9pt Arial.
- b) **Spacing:** All paragraphs must be indented by 0.5cm. The text must be double-spaced while footnotes (if any) must be single-spaced.
- c) **Quotations:** Quotations of more than 30 words must be single-spaced and form a distinct paragraph without indentation. Quotation marks must not be used in such cases.
- d) **Margins:** The left-hand margin must be of 3.5cm, while the top- and right-hand margins must be of 1.5cm. A top margin of 5cm is to be left on the first page of every section/division/chapter of the dissertation – e.g. Acknowledgements, Abstract, Introduction, References, etc. Footnotes (if any) must appear at the bottom of the relevant page (not at the end of each chapter or as a distinct section).
- e) **Quotation marks:** Single quotation marks must be used throughout, except when presenting a quote within a quote, in which case, double quotation marks must be used. No quotation marks should be used for quotes longer than 30 words.
- f) **Dates:** The day, month and year - without commas - must be used; e.g. 29 October 1983. For decades, both digits and text are accepted; e.g. 1980s or Eighties. When choosing between two accepted typescript options, students are advised to keep consistent throughout their work.
- g) **Textual reference numbers:** Textual reference numbers must be continuous for each chapter. Superscript must be used, without brackets and following – not preceding – punctuation.
- h) **Alignment:** The script should be left-aligned and not justified.
- i) **Spelling:** Students are advised to consult the Oxford English Dictionary and avoid *Americanisms*.
- j) **Abbreviations:** Acronyms should be used when they are generally understood and not when they represent esoteric terms, phrases, groups and organisations. Students are advised to consult their tutor on matters of acronyms and abbreviations.
- k) **Pagination:** The main text, including the Introduction, References and any appendices must be numbered in Arabic numerals (1,2,3,4,etc), while the Title, Page, Declaration of Authenticity, Abstract, Acknowledgements, Table of Contents, List of Tables, List of Figures, List of Appendices and Acronyms & Abbreviations must be numbered in Roman numerals (i,ii,iii,iv,etc). The Title Page must be considered as 'Page i' but should remain un-numbered. Roman numeral numbering must start from 'ii' on the Declaration of Authenticity.
- l) **Supplementary graphic illustrations:** Maps, diagrams, graphs, printed material, etc. should be bound with the dissertation. When this is not possible, these must be numbered and presented in distinct folders or volumes.

- m) **Binding:** Three spiral-bound copies of the dissertation must be submitted. Binding services are offered by independent stores on and outside the University campus. Students are advised to allow up to five working days for binding.
- n) **Digitisation:** Students must create a digitised version of their dissertation, store it as a soft copy on CD and hand it in with their three spiral-bound hard copies for it to be stored by the university's Library Services. For a step-by-step guide on how to create a digitised version of a dissertation, please visit: <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/etd#instructions>.

10. Conclusion

Writing an M.A. Dissertation is laborious but rewarding. Students are advised to use their time wisely and plan every step together with their assigned supervisor. Regular meetings between students and tutors are essential and it is up to the student to ensure that these take place consistently (at least once per month). Establishing a structured plan with deadlines for each section is highly recommended. For each meeting held with his/her tutor, the student should prepare a list of specific queries and send beforehand draft copies of chapters. The writing of the M.A. Dissertation remains, by definition, a self-directed process and self-discipline is vital for a desired result. Students are advised to take notes consistently while reading, as the abundance of information one may come across when carrying out research may serve to bewilder the student and lead him/her off course. It is always a good idea to keep one's principal research question close at hand in order to be able to refer to it constantly so as not to lose sight of the main aims and objectives of the research. Finally, students are also advised to persist in trying to unearth relevant literature until the end of their research project. It is not uncommon to have literature relevant to one's research published in between one's writing of a literature review and his/her handing in of the final research paper.