

DISSERTATION PROCEDURES FOR STUDENTS

Bachelor in Psychology (Honours)/ Higher Diploma in Psychology

As you well know, one of the major milestones in your study is the submission of a dissertation in your final year. The procedure for submitting successfully starts now! These guidelines have been drawn up to detail the process that you need to go through to successfully submit your dissertation in due course. The process involves three basic steps: (1) The Research Proposal (2) The FREC Ethics Form (3) Submitting your Dissertation. It is worth bearing in mind at all times that the dissertation is a **research exercise**, and that students assessed competencies are those relating to their **ability to conduct an empirical study of a psychological nature**.

1. THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Your research proposal is an indication of the research topic you wish to embark on. It is a brief description of the area you are interested in researching, as well as your preferred methodology. The deadline for submitting the research proposal is November and the exact deadline will be communicated to you in the course of the academic year. **Failure to respect the research proposal deadline can lead to significant delays in your research progress, hence the deadline must be respected.** Your proposal will be reviewed by members of the Dissertations Committee who will advise on a subsequent course of action. By the time you submit your proposal, you need to have solicited the services of a supervisor. You need your supervisor's signature in endorsement of your proposal. This indicates that the supervisor is aware of and is in accordance with what you have stated in your proposal. You will meet him or her to complete the proposal. It is the student's sole responsibility to secure dissertation supervision from a supervisor who has been approved by the Dissertations Committee.

Your very first step is therefore to select an area of psychology in which you would like to further your interest through empirical research (e.g. educational psychology, clinical psychology, social psychology, etc.). Once you have identified a chosen area, you should then identify a topic of research that you would like to study. It is not necessary at this stage to have a clear and well-defined research question. You will be able to formulate these later under the guidance of your supervisor. It is however necessary for you to familiarize yourself with key literature that will enable you to ask good empirical questions for psychological research. You are encouraged to access relevant journal articles, textbooks and student dissertations at the Library. At this stage, you will approach one or more psychologists requesting supervision. Once you have secured supervision, you then proceed to writing your research proposal. It is very important to meet regularly with your supervisor during the entire research process, however, writing the research proposal is perhaps the stage where your supervisor's guidance is most crucial. Your proposal should consist of a description of your research question and an outline of what methodology you will employ that will address your research question. Remember that this is a research exercise and that it will be your research competence that will be assessed and graded. What you need to demonstrate throughout is proficiency to undertake psychological research in your chosen area.

Research proposals need to feature the following:

- Ideas need to follow a logical sequence and relationships between ideas need to be understandable.
- Your sentence and paragraph structure must be correct. Spelling mistakes are not acceptable at this level. Please familiarize yourself with the APA referencing style.
- The tone of your proposal should display an impartial scientific attitude. Try not to be biased in your thinking. Make sure you are aware of your preconceived notions about an issue.
- The aims of the study need to be clearly defined. The research question needs to be clear.
- State the rationale supporting your research. Why are you undertaking this study? Why is it important?
- Briefly mention knowledge of previous work in this area. References taken from academic sources need to be interwoven throughout the research proposal.
- State the methodology you intend to use. Your methodology follows from the research question and not the other way around. You cannot choose a qualitative methodology merely because you like it and then go on to structure your research question around it. Avoid trying to apply a quantitative methodology to a research question which requires a qualitative methodology and vice versa.
- Once you state your methodology, state the rationale for choosing it.
- State how you will recruit your participants (e.g. opportunistic sampling). If you intend to recruit them from an institution state which one.
- State the number of participants, their age range, gender and characteristics.
- State how you will elicit your data. Mention any instruments you intend to use (questionnaire, interview guide etc.) and state whether you have designed
 - the instrument yourself or if you are using a structured questionnaire e.g. Beck's Depression Inventory. Note that it is recommended that wherever possible, standardised measures are used.
- Describe how you will analyse your data.
- **Do not submit your proposal unless it has been approved and signed by your supervisor. Proposals will not be accepted without a supervisor's signature. Therefore, students need to ensure that they meet their supervisors to discuss and review the proposals beforehand to obtain their signatures. Resubmissions should be made against the supervisor's approval too, therefore, the supervisor will need to be included in the email correspondence and any changes made to the document should be noted using tracked changes.**

The Research Proposal is an important feature of your work and should not be left until the last minute. Students have the months of August, September and October to work carefully on their research proposal and secure supervision.

Procedure for submitting your research proposals

Students are to submit completed proposals by a November deadline which will be communicated in the course of the academic year. Students will be informed in writing by the Dissertations Committee whether their dissertation proposals have been accepted, rejected or require amendments. All research proposals are reviewed by members of the Dissertations Committee. The Dissertations Committee will either accept your proposal, or request amendments to your proposal before you proceed further with your study, or will reject your proposal entirely. The Dissertations Committee will provide reasons in writing for its decisions at all times and will instruct on further action that needs to be taken by the student.

All students are required **to submit an ethics application to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC)**. FREC is an independent committee from the Dissertations Committee. **Students can only apply for ethical clearance once their research proposal has been accepted by the Dissertations Committee.**

After all proposals are viewed by the Dissertations Committee they will be marked accordingly and returned to students. Those marked **accepted** may immediately begin working on their ethics application.

Those students whose proposals have been marked **accepted but resubmit with amendments** or **rejected** need to resubmit their proposals with required changes to the Dissertations Committee once completed.

The supervisors' guidance to make the required changes is again necessary at this point and the supervisor needs to sign the proposal to show that s/he agrees with the changes made. Please resubmit your new proposal, **clearly highlighting the changes (use tracked changes)** made. Your proposal will again be reviewed by the Committee and you will be informed whether it has been accepted or otherwise. **Kindly keep copies of everything.**

If you decide to make any changes **after your proposal has been accepted**, please inform the Dissertations Coordinator; you might be required to re-submit your research proposal in light of the changes you intend to make. **No change will be allowed in the proposed topic of the dissertation after October of the third year.**

Any information or queries regarding dissertation **procedures** (not content) for the second year can be addressed to Dr Chantal Avellino by email (chantal.avellino@um.edu.mt). Any information or queries regarding dissertation **procedures** (not content) for the third year can be addressed to Dr Anna Grech (anna.m.grech@um.edu.mt) by email. Queries regarding content and format need to be addressed to your supervisors.

Whilst the process of submitting proposals that may be returned with requests for amendments or rejected may seem an arduous process, and undoubtedly some students will go through more difficulties in having their proposals accepted than do others, the ability to submit a research proposal that conforms to good psychological standards of research and that adheres strictly to ethical principles of good practice is an essential skill that you are required to master at this stage. It is equally important that your chosen study be realistic given the constraints and limitations of the dissertation. The ability to undertake empirical work, go through the various stages of research (including submitting proposals and obtaining ethical clearance) and submit your final project to a deadline is what is requested

of you in this project. Every stage of research is a learning experience that needs to be mastered and that is effectively assessed.

2. University of Malta Research Ethics Committee (UREC)

The UREC forms are to be submitted by students to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC). Please refer to the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee webpage for further guidelines and information. Here you can also download and complete the ethical clearance forms for students.

<https://www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing/frec>

Any queries regarding the FREC procedures, ethics and forms must be addressed to the Chairperson of FREC. The Dissertations Coordinator is not in a position to answer questions pertaining to FREC, ethical clearance etc.

You are also expected to discuss ethics and obtaining ethical clearance with your supervisor before the FREC submission. Your supervisor is required to sign forms pertaining to ethical clearance, otherwise they will not be accepted by FREC/UREC.

You must not collect any data until you have received UNCONDITIONAL ETHICAL APPROVAL from FREC/UREC.

You must also provide your supervisor with written documentation from FREC/UREC indicating that you have received unconditional ethical approval before commencing data collection.

Students who submit their dissertation without having unconditional ethical clearance will be considered to have breached the Research Code of Practice and will have disciplinary measures taken against them in accordance with Reg 5(2) of the University Student Discipline Regulations.

GENERAL DISSERTATION GUIDELINES

- All B.Psy. Students are to submit a dissertation with the value of 12 ECTS.
- Dissertations are coordinated and regulated by a Committee appointed by and responsible to the Department of Psychology.
- Dissertations shall be presented by the first week of May in the third year of studies for B.Psy students and the first week of September for HDIP students. Dissertations submitted after the deadline will incur penalties as follows: **1-5 days -5 marks; 6-10 days -10 marks; 10 to 15 days -15 marks.** No dissertation shall be accepted after 15 days unless there is a reason that the Dissertation Board considers valid. Any late submissions will have to be accompanied by a Late Submission Form. The dissertation must also be uploaded onto Turnitin on a specially created VLE area by the submission deadline. **Failure to submit the dissertation on Turnitin by the deadline will count as an incomplete submission and the above penalties will also apply.**
- One electronic copy and a Turnitin upload of the dissertation are to be submitted to the Department.
- **Dissertations shall be presented in conformity with APA guidelines. The main body of the dissertation, excluding declaration, acknowledgements, abstract, table of contents, illustrations, references and any appendices SHALL NOT exceed 10,000 words in length. Students should note that tables, verbatim quotes and in-text citations are included in this word count. Students who are unsure about including translations for direct quotes can add these in the appendices but should consult their supervisor first. Adhering to this word limit is crucial; not doing so will result in penalties determined by the Board of Examiners. Specifically, for every 500 words beyond the limit, a 2-point deduction will be made from the final score.**
- The Appendices should generally include evidence of ethical clearance from FREC/UREC; Maltese and English versions of the interview schedule, information sheets, debrief forms, any questionnaires and (unsigned) consent forms etc. Students are encouraged to access past student dissertations via HyDi, the online Library, to see what other students have included in their Appendices and to discuss with their supervisor.
- The dissertation shall normally be assessed by an examination board made up of three persons, including a chairperson. These shall be nominated by the Dissertations Committee, presented to the Faculty Board and appointed by the Senate.
- If the Board of Examiners are of the opinion that the dissertation does not conform to the criteria and expectations of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee and the University Research Ethics Committee, then the student will be **immediately referred to the Rector's office as dictated by regulations governed by disciplinary action.**

- **Students should not include any identifying information pertaining to their participants in their dissertations. Names of organisations and institutions should be changed e.g. ‘participants were recruited from Hospital X’. Students must ensure that demographic information included in the study, especially when studies feature small sample sizes, does not compromise the participants’ anonymity.**
- Failed work must usually be resubmitted before the end of September of the same academic year. Those dissertations that are referred for failed, unsatisfactory or incomplete work will be marked, if successful, at the lowest pass mark (D – 45).
- Kindly refer to the following instructions on **how to avoid plagiarism** by visiting the following website: <https://www.um.edu.mt/ms/students/howtoavoidplagiarism/>
- The following statement should be included in the dissertation:

“I confirm that this is my own work and that all material attributed to others (whether published or unpublished) has been clearly identified and fully acknowledged and referred to the original sources. I agree that the University has the right to submit my work for originality checks.”
- **Cases of suspected plagiarism and other intellectual dishonesty will be immediately referred to the Rector’s office as dictated by regulations governed by disciplinary action.**
- Students are also required to include a declaration of authenticity for undergraduate students:

https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/254319/authenticityformug.pdf
- It is worth bearing in mind at all times that the dissertation is a research exercise. As such, it should identify and review a particular literature and describe a research question that is rooted within that literature. It should outline a methodology that addresses the research question and demonstrate empirical work in the form of findings that answer the research question. It should also be able to discuss those findings in view of the literature pertaining to the identified psychological area of study. It is worth noting that at undergraduate level, an original contribution to the field is not required. What is required is a demonstration of the proficiency to conduct psychological research. This also means that research need not be as exhaustive or thorough as methodologies may require (e.g. representative sampling or exhaustive theoretical sampling), as long as limitations are identified and recommendations made that address such limitations.

Format

- Dissertations must be formatted according to the comprehensive guidelines developed by the APA. For an overview of the APA's formatting guide, students should consult the "Student Paper Setup Guide" found here: <https://apastyle.apa.org/instructional-aids/student-paper-setup-guide.pdf>

TURNITIN

Two dissertation areas will be made available on VLE for students in their third year of studies and HDIP students:

1. A draft dissertation area which allows students to submit 5 parts of the dissertation and to download an originality report which students are to discuss with their tutor. Students are required to send their supervisor a downloaded copy of the originality report by email or print it out and discuss it with them during research supervision.
2. A final dissertation area where students upload the FINAL dissertation prior to manual submission at the Psychology Department Office. Students must upload their FINAL dissertation in PDF (including all the dissertation chapters, reference list, appendices etc.) by their dissertation deadline.

With regards to the Turnitin originality report it is important to note:

1. Turnitin produces an originality report after comparing the students' work against electronic sources e.g. Internet, books, journals and other students' work.
2. The originality report highlights any text in the students' work found to be matching with other sources, along with links to the original sources where matched text was identified.
3. The report grades the students' work for similarity between 0% (no plagiarism detected) and 100% (wholly plagiarised) and assigns a colour coding for the whole assignment according to the severity of the alleged plagiarism. The percentage rating (reflecting the amount of content that has been matched) is also known as the similarity index.
4. A judgement about whether or not plagiarism has occurred cannot be based simply on the percentage of matching text that is found. Tutors will analyse and interpret the originality reports carefully as part of their decision-making process to determine if the students' work has been plagiarised or not.

Further information pertaining to Turnitin, including frequently asked questions, can be found via the following link: <https://www.um.edu.mt/itservices/vle/pds>

Cases of suspected plagiarism in a dissertation are automatically referred to the University Assessment Disciplinary Board.

PROCEDURE FOR LATE SUBMISSION

Each late submission, that is, any dissertation submitted after the deadline set by the department, must be accompanied by a late submissions form.

PROCEDURE FOR APPLYING FOR AN EXTENSION IN CASE OF EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES

In the event that a student experiences exceptional extenuating circumstances during the course of their empirical work that prohibit her/him to submit the dissertation by the deadline set by the department, such a student may request an extension of specified time to make up for the loss of time incurred due to said circumstances. In such cases, the student must complete the Dissertation Extension Request Form: https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/333869/extensionformUG.pdf

This form must be completed by the student and supervisor. The student needs to submit this form to the Head of Department, together with supporting **evidence** that details the nature of the extenuating circumstances and the reason why no other routine measures than an extension are considered satisfactory in enabling the student to submit the dissertation successfully. The supervisor will also be required to submit a brief progress report together within a possible timeframe required by the student to complete the work. Additionally, the student needs to submit a **portfolio** of work undertaken to date at the time an extension request is submitted. Extension requests are evaluated by the Head of Department who then passes on the request along with recommendations to the Faculty Board. Extensions of deadlines for dissertations are processed at Faculty level, and the Faculty Board's decision is final. In the event that an extension request is denied and that the student submits the dissertation after the deadline set by the department, late penalties will apply as detailed above.

Note that extensions only apply for exceptional extenuating circumstances and that routine adverse life circumstances (such as computer or transport difficulties) do not qualify for an extension.

Kindly note that the month of August is recess and therefore members of staff might not be available. **Therefore, students whose dissertation extension request is granted should not assume that their supervisor will be in a position to correct their work in August.** In cases of emergency during this period (e.g. bereavement, illness, personal injury), please contact the Psychology Department's secretaries, who are instructed on how to proceed in these situations and can therefore provide appropriate guidance and information.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Dissertations will be graded as per the university's general undergraduate regulations, as follows:

Descriptor	Mark Range	Grade
Work displaying exceptional quality Exceptional performance showing comprehensive and critical understanding, and application of the subject matter. Evidence of extensive additional reading/research/work.	90%-100%	A+
Work displaying comprehensive and critical understanding Superior performance showing a comprehensive and critical understanding of the subject matter. Evidence of considerable additional reading/research/work.	80% - 89%	A
Work displaying comprehensive understanding Performance showing a very good working knowledge of the subject matter. Evidence of a moderate amount of additional reading/research/work.	75% - 79%	B+
Work displaying substantial understanding Above-average performance, with a working knowledge of the subject matter. Evidence of some additional reading/research/work.	70% - 74%	B
Work displaying sound understanding Average performance. Evidence of little additional reading/research/work.	60% - 69%	C+
Work displaying satisfactory understanding Adequate performance. No evidence of additional reading/research/work.	55% - 59%	C
Work displaying satisfactory understanding with shortcomings Adequate but inconsistent performance. No evidence of additional reading/research/work.	50% - 54%	D+
Work displaying basic understanding Marginal performance, satisfying minimum criteria.	45% - 49%	D
Work displaying inadequate understanding to varying degrees.	0% - 44%	F ^{1,2}
¹ If mark obtained is between 35% and 44% in Compensatable Study-Units, and is compensated by good performance in other Study-Units, a Compensated Pass (CP) shall be awarded (vide regulation 48).		

Further details can be obtained from The Registrar's Office or the following webpage:
<https://www.um.edu.mt/media/um/docs/about/governance/regulations/general/GeneralRegulationsforUniversityUndergraduateAwards.pdf>

The following marking criteria are used by the Department when grading theses:

	Criteria	Weighting
1	<p>Abstract</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly reflects purpose of the study Describes what was being investigated Includes pertinent characteristics of participants (if applicable) Notes the methodology adopted Key findings stated Conclusions and/or implications of the study briefly mentioned 	5%
2	<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sets the scene and presents a concise overview of the study Outlines the study's rationale including the purpose, aims, objectives, research question(s) Discusses the relevance of the study Key terms are defined and explained if necessary 	10%
3	<p>Literature Review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides a critical and analytic (rather than solely descriptive) appraisal of key literature relevant to the research topic Coherent and concise presentation of theories and research studies Literature cited is up to date and relevant to psychology, taken from credible sources Mainly original (as opposed to secondary) sources accessed 	15%

4	<p>Methodology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methodology selected is informed by the research question • Clear rationale for selected methodology provided • Data collection described sequentially • Recruitment strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria noted • Information pertaining to the data collection instrument is outlined • Attention to ethical issues (e.g. informed consent) considered • Reflexivity (e.g. awareness of the researcher’s role, assumptions and biases, motivation for pursuing this research) attended to • Data analysis is appropriate and thorough • Issues pertaining to validity and reliability reviewed 	20%
5	<p>Results/Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results/findings are presented in a clear, understandable and well-organised manner • No inaccuracies or inconsistencies • Statistical output (if applicable) makes sense • Findings are presented according to the established standards of the methodology adopted (e.g. participant quotes included if study is qualitative; statistical output and test results included for quantitative research) • Themes are credible and plausible • Student demonstrates creative processing of results in terms of commenting and highlighting significance of findings 	15%
6	<p>Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results are explained and discussed with reference to the study aims • Clear references to theory and existing research are interwoven throughout • The student makes an attempt to explain the results with reference to the context and literature • The student shows sensitivity to the implications of the study • There is appropriate reflection about the study and the issues raised • Discusses whether hypotheses were refuted or corroborated and reasons for this (if applicable) 	15%

7	<p>Conclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results/Findings are applied to the discipline and practice of psychology • Study’s main implications discussed briefly • Limitations of the study are addressed appropriately • Consideration of possibilities regarding future research. 	10%
8	<p>References & Appendices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appendices are appropriate and clearly presented • The APA Style® is used correctly and consistently throughout the dissertation • All references cited in the text are included in the reference list. 	10%

SUPERVISORS

Your relationship with your supervisor will undoubtedly prove an important part of your learning experience. Your supervisor has accumulated expertise in your chosen area of inquiry, from which you can benefit directly. Your supervisor should be able to guide you into learning more about your area as well as how to conduct research into your area of interest. Whilst supervision procedures vary widely across different supervisors as well as different students, some general rules apply:

- You should expect your supervisor to be able to provide guidance into certain difficulties that you may come across in your research. It is worth making sure that your supervisor is in a position to supervise your project, both in terms of expertise and in terms of resources. You should not expect your supervisor to provide any resources. Supervisors’ expertise is not a substitute for reading and conducting a thorough literature review, although supervisors may well guide students as to what literature is noteworthy in their chosen area.
- You should expect your supervisor to provide you with relevant suggestions in relation to the pragmatics of your work. However, the undertaking of the dissertation study remains your sole responsibility. Further, you should not expect your supervisor to carry out any work that is part of your own dissertation.
- You should expect your supervisor to provide you with relevant and timely feedback on your written work. You should not expect your supervisor to review your work earlier than 2-3 weeks before you submit it, although some supervisors may occasionally be in a position to reply earlier. You should also expect your supervisor to review each chapter once and your overall entire project once, and to provide you with relevant feedback. You should not expect your supervisor to review any part of your work or your final dissertation more than once, or to make any corrections or editing in your dissertation (e.g. page layout, editing, spelling) themselves.

- You should expect your supervisor to respond to your general queries in a timely manner, in a way agreed between yourselves. You should not expect your supervisor to respond to your queries earlier than 2-3 weeks or **during official occupational leave or recess.**
- **You are expected to submit drafts within the deadlines discussed and agreed in supervision and to be respectful and courteous towards your supervisor. Therefore, draft chapters and dissertation-related queries should not be left to the last minute.**
- Please note that supervisors should only be contacted via the work email available on the UoM website or the email provided by the Dissertations Coordinator. Supervisors should not be contacted via Facebook, LinkedIn, Messenger, WhatsApp, text message etc. Students are not to share their supervisors' email addresses or on social media. They should not telephone or text their supervisors unless their supervisors have given them explicit permission to do so.

Whilst these general rules apply to student supervision of undergraduate dissertations, the pragmatics of supervision are often a function of the relationship between supervisor and student and any ensuing arrangements between them. Your supervisor is a rich source of learning and education, and you are encouraged to respect their position in the field. Supervisors undertake such work out of an intrinsic motivation to help students like yourself in an area of psychology which they are passionate about. They are there to assist and guide you, and you are encouraged to make the most of what they can offer.

FURTHER DETAILS

Should any further issues arise that are not detailed in these guidelines, you may seek consultation with the Coordinator of the Dissertations Committee by email.

- Dr Chantal Avellino: chantal.avellino@um.edu.mt (SECOND YEAR SUPERVISOR)
- Dr Anna Grech: anna.m.grech@um.edu.mt (THIRD YEAR SUPERVISOR)

Please always include your **UNIVERSITY** email address when completing any dissertation-related documentation and when you are liaising with supervisors or other members of staff.