



DISSERTATION GUIDELINES

Postgraduate

(M.Sc by Research)

INTRODUCTION

This document provides important guidelines for students writing dissertations. It presents the aims and objectives of the dissertation as part of the degree programme, describes the formal requirements that the dissertation must satisfy and provides guidelines on the substance, structure and presentation of the dissertation. Although the topic and approach is discussed with the supervisor, the dissertation is an independent piece of work and responsibility for planning, preparation, writing, presentation and submission lies with the student.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the dissertation is to enable students to enhance their knowledge of the field covered by their degree programme by pursuing an independent research project on a chosen topic within the field. Students completing the dissertation will have examined a subject in substantial depth, shown evidence of an ability to undertake critical analysis, developed and improved their research skills, and produced a long piece of written work that exhibits understanding of their area of study. A dissertation should present a logically developed argument, the claims of which are supported by evidence where necessary.

A dissertation should make an original contribution to the field. This can take the form of exploring previously neglected primary sources, undertaking an original theoretical analysis or interpretation of existing literature, or using primary material to develop your own critique of existing scholarly arguments. It is not enough simply to review the books and articles which you have collected on the topic.

The dissertation should demonstrate not only that you can collect evidence and consider a particular problem or topic in detail, but also that you understand how the topic relates to the work others have done in the same field. The review of the literature should show how the works of different authors on the topic relate to one another and where your own work is intended to fit in, and the analysis should show an awareness of what others who have addressed related questions have already said (or are saying) and of the implications of their various views and positions for your own work.

THE TITLE

The title should be kept as brief as possible but clearly indicates the main focus of your research.

COMMUNICATION AND PRESENTATION

The same rules of clear and simple expression should be followed in writing a dissertation. Discussion should be broken up into sections and sub-sections, but excessive fragmentation should be avoided. Organise the discussion into paragraphs and avoid bullet points. Present data with graphic illustrations (graphs, tables, charts, diagrams, flowcharts) where appropriate.

Although structure varies according to the topic and methodology chosen, a dissertation typically consists of several parts, which should be formally indicated by section breaks or chapters. A possible structure is as follows:

- The introduction states the objectives of the dissertation, outlines the research question, and identifies how it is intended to meet the objectives and answer the question. In other words, the research methodology employed is described and its appropriateness to the topic explained.
- The topic is placed in its academic context by reviewing the relevant scholarly literature and relating the research question to academic debates.
- Primary and secondary source material is presented, with an appropriate account of how primary material was gathered (e.g. how an interview schedule was developed) and how sources might be interpreted in the light of their authorship.
- An argument or interpretation is advanced in the light of the evidence.

- The conclusion presents a summary of the findings of the dissertation, relates these to the argument outlined in the introductory chapter and states precisely what has been demonstrated.

Each of the main sections or chapters (i.e. not including the introduction and conclusion) should begin with a paragraph outlining its aims and content, and conclude with a brief summary.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

Research for the dissertation may involve use of a variety of primary and secondary sources. Where relevant, students are encouraged to make use of primary material, for instance, from interviews, surveys, or the analysis of original documents, provided they demonstrate an awareness of the methodological issues raised by the use of these sources.

There are several different referencing conventions and it does not matter which one you adopt provided that your sources are properly cited, all the necessary information is given and consistency is maintained. However, the 'Harvard' system is particularly recommended, not least because it is relatively simple and 'user-friendly'.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The dissertation is assessed according to the following criteria, with credit given to the extent that:

- the research question is well-defined, and contextualised;
- an argument is specified, coherently presented and supported by evidence;
- alternative arguments are analysed;
- the approach is critical, not descriptive;
- a relevant methodology is employed;
- relevant sources have been consulted;
- knowledge of relevant literature, issues and debates is demonstrated; and
- the style and presentation is clear and careful, and appropriate academic conventions have been observed.

DIGITISATION OF DISSERTATIONS

It is important that from the very first script of your dissertation, you utilise the format that will eventually make digitisation possible. Do use software such as Microsoft Office and the recommended digitisation norms from the start.

To familiarise yourself further with the digitisation process, please refer to the "[Step by Step Guide to Create a User-Friendly Digitised Dissertation](#)" prepared by the Library Sub-Committee Digitisation of Dissertations

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism, that is, the wilful representation of another person's work, without the acknowledgement of the sources as one's own or the deliberate and unacknowledged incorporation in a student's work of material derived from the work (published or otherwise) of another, is UNACCEPTABLE. It is your responsibility to understand the concept of plagiarism and why it should be avoided.

Students are to refer to the [University's Plagiarism and Collusion Guidelines](#) and use the Resource Pack for students on how to avoid plagiarism

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (UREC)

Where the research includes the use of human subjects there might be the need to request consent from the University Research Ethics Committee. Students are advised to familiarise themselves with [UREC Guidelines](#).

WHAT TO AVOID

EXCESSIVE DESCRIPTION

The dissertation should offer an analytical treatment of the subject under investigation.

POOR DEFINITION OF THE QUESTION

This is the most difficult task of all. It is also one of the most important. A fuzzy question often results in a weak overall structure, since the structure of the dissertation should be designed so that each section contributes to the argument you are making in response to the question.

POOR INTEGRATION OF THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

Many dissertations contain theoretical discussions that are meant to inform the analysis of the material under study but that are never rigorously and clearly applied to it. All too often, the theoretical section simply stands isolated from the rest of the text and is never referred to again in the dissertation. Its inclusion reflects an awareness that it is somehow relevant but it is never brought to bear on the case or cases under discussion.

POOR CONTEXTUALISATION

The dissertation should demonstrate that you understand how the topic relates to the work others have done in the same field. The review of the literature should identify relevant debates and outline the positions of the main participants in order to situate the topic of your dissertation and the argument that you present.

UNCRITICAL USE OF SOURCES

It is important to subject sources to critical scrutiny. A wide range of sources may be used in a dissertation, but students should demonstrate an understanding of whether a source should be treated as authoritative and of the need to cross-check and 'triangulate' important empirical claims. Academic sources should also be interrogated for logical argument, internal coherence and strength of evidence.

FORMAL REQUIREMENTS

LENGTH

The length of the dissertation should be a maximum of 50,000 words. A dissertation which is substantially longer or shorter will be penalised by the examiners.

FORM

The dissertation must be typed or word-processed. The paper should be of A4 size, of

adequate quality, with clear printing, a type face of adequate size (usually font size 12), 1.5 line spacing, on one side of the page, with margins of 1.5 inches on the binding edge and 1 inch on the rest. Candidates are required to submit two copies (double sided printing) with one cover sheet for each copy.

The cover sheet must state the following:

1. Title of Dissertation
2. Student Name
3. Year
4. Name of Institute
5. Name of University

The following sentence: Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Master of Science (Research) in the area of Sustainable Development.

Typographic spelling and other technical errors should be avoided by leaving sufficient time for proof-reading the final draft. Particular care should be taken with figures, statistics, diagrams and tables, ensuring that the information presented is clear, that headings and captions are fully self-explanatory, and that sources are correctly attributed.

Further guidance

In addition to these guidelines students are advised to familiarise themselves with the MSc Student Handbook and use the Graduate Research Log Book to note the progress of their work.