

Guidelines for Undergraduate dissertations

Faculty of Humanities

Background

A document prepared by Emma Sanders (Faculty Teaching and Learning Office) outlining the variation in practice with relation to the UG dissertation and providing examples of good practice from within the Faculty and from other institutions went to the FoH UG committee on 21/05/07. It was decided that Faculty would produce some guidelines with a view to ensuring some level of consistency across the Faculty. These guidelines were discussed, revised and approved at the first FoH UG meeting of the academic year 2007-8, on 10/10/07.

Guidelines

In recognition of the diversity of our Schools, our programmes and our students, we do not consider it appropriate to define one mandatory model for the UG dissertation. The approach chosen is instead to suggest a set of relatively flexible options under each heading. It should then not be considered obligatory for a dissertation unit to consist exactly of a subset of the options provided here. However, given that these guidelines are based on current practice across the Faculty and have been approved by a committee with representatives from every School in the Faculty, we would expect programme committees to consider these guidelines carefully when (re-)designing a dissertation unit and depart from them only when there is a clear argument in favour of doing so.

In a number of cases, we suggest that components be credit-rated, by which we mean that they should count for a certain number of credits but not be given a mark. The effect of this, if the student does complete the component on time, would be that the student gets the same mark as that given for the written dissertation, whereas if the student does not complete it, the final mark gets reduced by the appropriate proportion. For example: a component is worth 4 credits out of a 40 credit dissertation and the student gets a 65 for the final written dissertation. If the student completes the component on time, the mark stands; if he or she did not, the mark for the total is 36 credits of 65 marks and 4 credits of 0, i.e. the mark is reduced by 10%, to 58.5.

• Opportunity

We would like all Manchester graduates to have achieved the kind of learning outcomes associated with the successful completion of a dissertation. These are crucial skills both in terms of training our students as researchers and in increasing our students' employability. This means that as many students as possible should be given the opportunity to complete a dissertation. However, it is also recognised that completion of a dissertation is a demanding task for both student and supervisor, and hence a certain standard of achievement might be required before a student is allowed to do a dissertation.

Suggested approaches:

- (i) the dissertation is an obligatory part of a programme, or
- (ii) the dissertation is optional and available to everyone, or
- (iii) the dissertation is optional, but available only to those students who achieve an average mark of 60% or more in the second year.

• Joint and Combined programmes

On joint and combined programmes, a 40 credit dissertation is often seen as problematic since the associated credits have to be assigned to one subject or the other, and on a 50-50 split between subjects this then takes up too many credits from one "side" of the degree.

Suggested approaches:

- (i) a 40 credit dissertation should not be ruled out from joint and combined programmes simply on the basis of division of credits between component subjects, and
- (ii) the dissertation credits are split between the component subjects, and
- (iii) the dissertation should be defined in such a way that it requires students to integrate knowledge acquired from more than one component subjects of their programme.

• **Preparation**

Though forms of assessment such as a long essay go some way towards preparing the students for a dissertation, the dissertation is not just a longer essay, but is qualitatively different and requires a more rigorous and disciplined way of working. Philosophy gives the following advice to their students: 'Writing a dissertation is qualitatively different from writing an essay in a taught unit; not only because a dissertation is much longer than such an essay but also because, in contrast to an essay in a taught course unit, you are responsible for defining a researchable problem and for deciding what material to read.' It is then reasonable to expect students to be trained for this task (see below under 'Structure of unit').

• **Credit rating**

There is evidence from students participating in periodic review, for instance, that a rating of 20 credits is felt to be too little for a dissertation, regardless of the word limit. A dissertation requires a substantial investment of time in terms of establishing a topic, finding and mastering the relevant literature, carrying out independent research etc, which students consider to be far more intense than the preparation required for a 20 credit unit. Where the dissertation is optional, there is then likely to be a higher take-up rate if the dissertation unit is rated at 40 credits. We do appreciate that in some Schools the dissertation is linked to a pre- or co-requisite unit in which the development of a research proposal, the establishing of a bibliography etc. is part of the assessment, in which case a lower credit rating for the dissertation unit seems justified.

Suggested approaches:

- (i) the dissertation should be 40 credits, or
- (ii) if there is a pre- or co-requisite unit linked to the dissertation unit in which a student produces work which forms part of the preparation for the dissertation, then the dissertation unit can be of 20 or 30 credits

• **Word limit**

There is currently substantial variation between Schools and Programmes as to the number of words required for undergraduate dissertations, both in the case of 20 credit and 40 credit units. Though it is recognised that the variation may be justified depending on the type of topic, it would seem appropriate to establish a Faculty expectation and to permit deviation from this norm on a case by case basis. We assume that the difference between 20 and 40 credit dissertations lies not so much in the length of the dissertations as in their quality and depth.

Suggested approach:

- (i) a 40 credit dissertation should be of 10,000-12,000 words and
a 20 credit dissertation should be of 8,000-10,000 words

• **Allocation of supervisors**

It is assumed that in most areas the student's preference for a supervisor will not distribute equally across the potential supervisors. Generally, a restriction will be put on how many students any one member of staff can supervise, which will mean that not all students will get their first choice of supervisor and/or topic. There are different ways in which this issue can be resolved. One way is to allow the student to choose a topic freely and if

there is no supervisor with the appropriate expertise or if the supervisor with the most appropriate expertise has too many dissertation students, then the student is allocated to a supervisor with less expertise. In small disciplines, this may mean that the supervisor has little expertise. In this case, the student should be informed of this in an appropriate way, so that the student understands that a more independent approach may be required to the topic. In a different approach, less value may be attached to the student's freedom to select a topic. In this case, topics may be linked to a supervisor so that if the student's first choice supervisor is oversubscribed, then the student has to change both supervisor and topic. It is important that the unit documentation makes sure students are aware of how allocation of supervisors and topics is decided.

The latter approach in particular has implications for the timing of registration for the course unit and submission of topic and supervisor. The approval of topic and supervisor needs to be early enough for the student to be able to change if they do not get their first choice. Usually, a student will stick with their choice of topic and accept a second choice supervisor, but it might also be fair to let the student change topic if they have to change supervisor. In some Schools each supervisor suggests some broad set topics that students have to work within if they are to be supervised by them, in which case a different supervisor would inevitably involve a different topic. It might then seem best to require proposals to be submitted before the end of the second year. However, some students may wish to wait for the outcomes of second year assessment and some others may prefer to do some exploratory reading over the summer before they make their decision.

There need to be clear criteria for how students will be assigned to supervisors and this process needs to be completed quickly.

Suggested approaches:

- (i) students are informed of constraints on the number of students per supervisor, and the basis on which students will be distributed between the supervisors
 - students have to submit notification of their choice of topic and preferred supervisor by the end of week 2 of their final year at the latest
 - students find out about supervisor allocation by Tuesday of week 3
- (ii) criteria for supervisor allocation:
 - supervisors are allocated on a first come, first served basis
 - topics most central to the expertise of the supervisor get allocated to that supervisor
 - topics for which there is another member of staff with expertise who has fewer supervisees are not allocated to the first choice supervisor
 - the students with the highest second year average mark get their first choice supervisor
 - the oversubscribed supervisors choose amongst the anonymised proposals (there may be a number of drawbacks with this option)

• **Health & Safety**

Research for a dissertation project in some disciplines within the Faculty of Humanities, such as Geography, Archaeology, Planning and Landscape, Education, may involve fieldwork. The University Health and Safety policy outlines the duties of Heads of School and of Academic Supervisors.

Staff should refer to the University Health and Safety policy (see <http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/healthandsafety/policy2.htm>), and if necessary the relevant Health and Safety Officer, for guidance on the duties of dissertation supervisors.

• **Marking**

Given the impact the dissertation mark will have on a student's degree classification, it is essential that there is a robust marking procedure in place. In most departments, there is unlikely to be more than one or two experts in a given topic, so it is unrealistic to expect to find a supervisor and two other members of staff to mark the dissertation. This means that the supervisor will also be one of the markers. Since the supervisor has been closely

involved in the development of the dissertation and since the other marker will often be someone with less expertise in the area, this is one of the few instances where full, blind double-marking would seem appropriate.

Suggested approaches:

- (i) dissertations are always blind double marked , and
- (ii) the markers are the supervisor and one other member of staff with sufficient subject expertise, or the markers are two members of staff other than the supervisor
- (iii) external examiners are always asked to pay particular attention to dissertation, exactly which form this takes will vary between disciplines

- **Structure of unit**

Especially for dissertations which are weighted at 40 credits, there needs to be clear milestones which the student has to achieve. 40 credits cannot be made up for in the second semester if students lose heart and want to change their unit selections because they have made too little progress on their dissertation by Christmas. We also deal with a number of plagiarism cases each year where a student has plagiarised large parts of his/her dissertation and gives as an explanation the fact that they had not started thinking about their dissertation before it was too late to do any real research. It is essential that the dissertation process is structured, that this structure is made clear to staff and to students and that records are kept of intermediate steps such as meetings attended or work submitted. In order to help ensure that students do meet the requirements with respect to intermediate steps, these could be credit-rated.

To ensure that the successful completion of a dissertation really can be taken as evidence of independent work, there needs to be clearly defined limits to the input from the supervisor. In the interest of fairness and comparability, the supervisor involvement should also be consistent for all students.

- *Record of progress*

Suggested approach:

- (i) the dissertation unit consists of a number of credit-rated subcomponents which are not assigned a mark, but which all students need to complete to a properly enforced deadline, and
- (ii) there is a logbook which outlines all the components with their deadlines, where each component has to be signed off by supervisor and supervisee

- *Proposal*

Suggested approach:

- (i) Apart from the brief proposal submitted with the preference for supervisor, there should be a credit-rated proposal of around 1,000 words outlining the main issue to be researched, the methodology and the core texts to be read. To be submitted by week 5.

- *Research training*

Suggested approaches:

- (i) as part of the unit, there are three credit-rated group sessions on research methodology and the technical aspects of writing a dissertation, or
- (ii) there is a second year unit on research methodology which is a pre-requisite for the dissertation unit

- *Supervision*

Clarifying expectations is essential for both staff and students. Course Unit documentation should ensure, for example that there is clarity over:

- whether any of the supervision will take place in groups
- the role of the supervisor:
 - to advise on formal requirements,
 - to guide the dissertation throughout the year, including giving advice on for example literature on the subject, research methodology, organisation of material and writing style. The role of the supervisor is not to provide answers to research questions.
- the amount of written work the supervisor will read and comment on before submission.
- the amount of face to face contact with the supervisor, generally, students receive around 8 hours of face to face contact for a 40 credit dissertation, but the exact number will vary depending on whether some of the contact is through group supervision.

Suggested approach:

- (i) the supervisor does not read the second draft of any material
- (ii) there are always some parts of the dissertation that the supervisor does not read prior to submission
- (iii) the following components are to be submitted, each one credit-rated and each one to be returned with written comments in a supervisory meeting:
 - brief proposal and supervisor preference, week 1 semester 1 (or towards the end of year 2)
 - extended proposal (1,000 words), semester 1, week 5
 - first chapter (literature survey/introduction, max 3,000 words), semester 1, week 12
 - second chapter (methodology/data, max 3,000 words), semester 2, week 5
- (iv) possible outline of dissertation supervision (apart from research training):
 - Semester 1*
 - Meeting 1: before week 5 to discuss extended proposal
 - Meeting 2: in week 6, to return extended proposal with comments and discuss it
 - Meeting 3: in week 8-10, to discuss progress on first chapter
 - Semester 2*
 - Meeting 4: in week 1-3, to discuss comments on first chapter
 - Meeting 5: in week 6-7, to discuss comments on second chapter

- *Submission*

Suggested approaches:

- (i) dissertation to be submitted by the first day of the examination period, or
- (ii) dissertation to be submitted two weeks before the first day of the examination period (to help students plan enough time for exam revision)

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