A brief guide to the Short and Long Dissertations

Introduction

There is a tradition in undergraduate degrees to provide final year students with a dissertation option. This is because the process of producing this type of assessment enables you ideally to:

- identify your own area of interest
- explore an area in some depth
- define your own researchable question
- experience the process of knowledge production
- consolidate your information gathering and intellectual argument skills

Both the Short and the Long Dissertation formats allow you to develop these aims, and both run across the two semesters, with a submission of assessment date normally in May of the third year.

The Short Dissertation **is the default position** for final year students. **Admission to the Long Dissertation is restricted** to students that have achieved 2:1 grades in each of their second year course units. If you want to do the Long Dissertation you need to follow the special admissions procedure described below.

Please read carefully the details of each dissertation type outlined in this document.

Short Dissertation (20 credits)

The Short Dissertation addresses a clearly focused research question, which you will identify and refine throughout the first semester. There are two formats to the Short Dissertation that students can choose to take: the **Research Proposal** pathway and the **Secondary Data Analysis** pathway.

As the name indicates, the **Research Proposal** dissertation takes the form of a research proposal. You are expected to produce a dissertation that identifies a particular research question/aim; explains why this question is important; discusses how your proposed research contributes to the existing literature (which you have to systematically describe and evaluate); and describes and justifies a particular research design and method to explore this research question. This form of dissertation **does not** involve direct empirical investigation.

The Research Proposal has two distinctive parts:

- A <u>literature review</u> based on a systematic approach to searching and reviewing a body of relevant literature on a chosen topic. You will be expected to use the library e-databases to undertake your library search.
- The <u>methodological section</u> where you describe a relevant methodological approach to study the research question that you have identified as relevant.

The **Secondary Data Analysis** dissertation is an exercise similar to the one you carried out for Data Analysis in the second year. If you did well in that course unit you may want to consider doing this format for your Short Dissertation. In the third year, however, you will have greater freedom in selecting the topic of your research question and the data to explore, but you will also receive closer supervision and support.

You are **not** expected to gather your own data, but you are expected to use a real-life dataset collected by other researchers that is publicly available. If you have any questions about this e dissertation pathway please get in touch with Juanjo Medina: (juanjo.medina@manchester.ac.uk).

During the first semester, there are 10 one-hour scheduled group sessions. The first 5 core sessions are for all Short Dissertation students, and cover how to identify a research question, how to carry out a literature review, and how to write/structure your dissertation. After reading week, the class splits and students attend the remaining 5 classes that are specific to the pathway that they have selected. These sessions will cover in detail issues that are specific to each pathway. For example, the Secondary Data Analysis pathway sessions will include how to select and locate an appropriate data set, and various aspects of data handling that complement what you learnt in the second year. The Research Proposal pathway sessions will consider research design, ethical considerations, and other aspects of research design.

The **dissertation word limit for both forms** of Short Dissertation, excluding references and appendices, is 5000 words. Harvard referencing style is a requirement. **Please note:** You do not have to select a pathway until week 5 of the first semester of Year 3.

Regardless of the pathway you opt for, **during the second semester each student will be allocated to a supervisor**. We aim to allocate supervisors on the basis of the match of their expertise to the research question and pathway that you have selected, although this is not always possible. Normally, there will be one small group supervision meeting with students that have been assigned the same supervisor followed up to 5 one to one appointments.

If you opt for the Secondary Analysis dissertation you will also be able to benefit from Q-Step support.

Long Dissertation (40 credits)

As mentioned above, admission to the Long Dissertation is subject to conditions and is at the discretion of the Course unit leader. There is a process to the admission as explained below. Students will only be admitted on to the Long Dissertation unit if they achieve 60 or above in each of their level 2 course units. This option is particularly advisable for those that are aiming to develop a research or academic career, or who want to acquire more solid research skills and experience.

As with the Short Dissertation, the Long Dissertation addresses a clearly focussed research question, but it allows you to undertake empirical research, either in terms of library based-work, secondary analysis, or fieldwork.

Keep in mind that primary data collection with human subjects may require approval by the University Research Ethics Committee before you can start gathering the data. Your supervisor will help with this application. Ultimately, you will be drawing together issues of theory, method and analysis to address your chosen researchable question.

Key characteristics of the Long Dissertation are:

- You determine the focus and direction of the work
- You have an assigned supervisor to guide you **through the year** from the outset
- There is a secondary analysis or a data collection component to the work
- The research question has to be identified at an earlier stage (unlike the Short Dissertation, which allows this to be confirmed at a later date) and you need to go through the process set out below to be admitted to the Long Dissertation.

There are no formal teaching sessions in the Long Dissertation, although your supervisor may recommend you attend some of the sessions for the Short Dissertation or other available training opportunities in the University.

Process of admission to the Long Dissertation

Current policy states that students should normally be admitted only if academic performance at Year 2 is at 60 or above on all year 2 units of assessment. If you are on track to meet this requirement, there are some points that you need to consider when thinking about whether the Long Dissertation is for you:

- The dissertation word length is **10,000 words**. This is a *substantial* piece of work.
- Do you typically fare well in coursework assessments (as opposed to exams)? The dissertation (40 credits out of 120 in total for year 3) will contribute one-third of your marks in Year 3, and *what you achieve in the dissertation may have a significant impact on your overall final degree classification*.
- Do you work well independently? You will have an assigned supervisor, with whom you will meet have meetings with during the year, but *the responsibility for maintaining and working within that supervisory relationship will be yours*.
- Are you well motivated? Research success on the Long Dissertation is largely about motivation. Evidence suggests that if you already have a research topic in mind then this means you are more likely to achieve in the dissertation. *If you are scratching around, thinking …' wonder what I am interested in?' then this may indicate that this isn't the right option for you*.
- Did you do well and enjoy the research method courses offered in Year 1 and 2? The dissertation is an empirical piece of work. Therefore, *it is important you have a solid grounding on how to gather and analyse data*.

You may want to discuss the Long Dissertation option with your academic advisor before committing to it.

For those interested in admission to the Long Dissertation, the process for 2016-2017 is set out below. Remember that **it is not possible to be admitted to the dissertation in September without going through this process**:

1. **Expression of interest - Deadline Friday 27th May:** Email Claire Fox with a research topic of interest (e.g., 'I'm interested in gender violence', 'I really want to make research on what makes a difference reducing recidivism', or 'How is crime presented in digital media?'). At this stage, it is not necessary you outline a fully developed research question. You only have to nominate a particular research area of interest.
2. **Provisional supervisor assignment:** You will be assigned a member of staff with whom you can correspond with to help develop your researchable question.
3. **Confirmation of your research question and completion of brief literature review: Deadline Monday 5th September.** Once you and your provisional supervisor have agreed a research question, you should undertake a literature review of around 2000 words. Both the literature review and the research question agreed should be emailed to Claire Fox no later than the above deadline.
4. **Formal admittance to the Long Dissertation:** This will take place in **Mid/Late September.** At this point, your supervisor will be confirmed and you will be expected to meet with them within the first couple of weeks of semester 1.

If you do not achieve marks of 60 or above in all of your 2nd year course units then you will not be able to progress with the Long Dissertation. If you do achieve these grades but you fail to liaise with your provisional supervisor to agree a research question or complete the literature review then you will not be allowed to progress with the Long Dissertation. It is your responsibility to meet these requirements.