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 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 done particularly well before year 3 begins. If you want to opt for the Long Dissertation is important to consult the Dissertation Coordinator (Bill Hebenton, bill.hebenton@manchester.ac.uk) and you may also want to discuss it with your Academic Advisor. If you want to do the Long Dissertation you need to follow a special admission procedure described below. Please read carefully the details of each dissertation type 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 currently two formats to the Short Dissertation that students can choose to take: the **Research Proposal** and the **Secondary Analysis**.

As the name indicates, the **Research Proposal** dissertation takes the form of a research proposal. You are expected to produce a document that identifies a particular research question; 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 modality of dissertation **does not** involve direct empirical investigation.

The Research Proposal has two distinctive parts:

- A literature review 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 methodological section where you describe a relevant methodological approach to study the research question that you have identified as relevant.

During the first semester there are 10 scheduled one-hour group sessions that explain how to identify a research question, how to carry out systematic literature reviews, how to identify a good research design, and how to write a research proposal.

The **Secondary 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 and publicly available. Therefore, you can expect this modality of dissertation to look better in your CV if you are aiming for a research career or for postgraduate studies (although this modality is not only restricted to those). If you have any questions about this modality of the dissertation please get in touch with Juanjo Medina: (juanjo.medina@manchester.ac.uk).

During the first semester there are 10 one-hour scheduled group sessions that explain how to identify a research question, 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 **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 don't have to commit to either of these modalities until week 5 of the first semester of Year 3.

Regardless of the modality 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 you have selected, although this is not always possible. Normally, there will be TWO group meetings with students that have been assigned the same supervisor followed by 3 surgery drop-in clinics (3x2 hour-slots) where you can have one-to-one discussion.

If you opt for the Secondary Analysis dissertation you will also be able to benefit from a Dissertation Support Clinic available every week to students doing this type of empirical work across the Faculty.

Long Dissertation (40 credits)

As mentioned above, admission to the Long Dissertation is at the discretion of the School. There is a process to the admission as explained below. Only the most academically able students are allowed to take the Long Dissertation. It is particularly advisable for those that aim 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. *If you want to do empirical work that entails primary data collection or a more substantive piece of secondary analysis, then the Long Dissertation is the way to go*.

Keep in mind that primary data collection with human subjects may require approval by the University Ethics Committee before you can start gathering the data. Ultimately you will be drawing together issues of theory, method and analysis to bear on 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 (as compared to the Short Dissertation) and you need to go through the admission process set out below.

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 questions 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 course assessed work (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 normally every fortnight. 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 min 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 is a contra indicator*.
- 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 2014-2015 is set out below. Remember that **it is not possible to be admitted to the dissertation in September without going through this process**:

- **Expression of interest - Deadline Friday 11 April:** Email Bill Hebenton 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.

- **Provisional supervisor assignment:** You will be assigned a member of staff with whom you can correspond and meet between **28 April and 9 May 2014**. You will be able to refine your research question in discussion with your provisional supervisor.

- **Email your research question: Deadline Friday 23 May.** Email Bill Hebenton to confirm your "researchable question". You will then receive a confirmation email that you are require to undertake an initial literature search on the research question, submitting a draft literature review of around 2000 words by your return in late September. This should be emailed to Bill Hebenton. If the Exam Board in June reveals you do not meet the formal criteria for admission to the Long Dissertation, you will then be notified by Bill Hebenton that this option is no longer possible.

- **Formal admittance to the Long Dissertation:** This will take place in **Mid/Late September** and you will be assigned a dissertation supervisor at this time. If you are planning primary data collection, your supervisor may encourage you to have a meeting as soon as possible in order to process the application to the University Ethics Committee.