

2. Bibliographical Research and Documentation

c. Choosing a Research Topic and the Masters Dissertation

The aims of this seminar are:

- To introduce the expectations and requirements of the Master's Dissertation, by examining the expected learning outcomes and the assessment criteria;
- To demonstrate the advantages of forward planning and the preparatory stages in relation to the dissertation;
- To explain the processes of agreeing a dissertation topic;
- To communicate the requirements of the dissertation proposal.

1.

The Masters Dissertation

The Dissertation module is a compulsory element of the Masters' degrees in English at Level 7.¹ It represents 60 credits in the Master of Arts (MA) programmes and 120 credits in the Master of Research (MRes) programmes, and in each case forms the second part of a programme, of which the first part is taught. The module descriptors for both these modules may be found in the Module Directories on the Faculty of Humanities and Performing Arts Postgraduate Information Page on Moodle. The word limit for MA dissertations is 15,000 words and for MRes dissertations is 30,000

¹ These are the following:
MA Medieval and Early Modern Literature
MA Modern Literature
MRes Medieval Literature
MRes Early Modern Literature
MRes Contemporary Literature

words. In either case, the dissertation should normally consist of a title-page, introduction, chapters, conclusion, and bibliography or list of works consulted.

The *Postgraduate Student Guide (Taught Degrees)*, a guide to the University Regulations, also indicates, rightly in my view, that '[t]he dissertation should be the high point of your Master's programme in that it gives you the opportunity to undertake a substantial programme of research on a topic of your own choice'.² Successful completion of the dissertation will therefore demonstrate that you have the ability to learn independently and develop as a researcher, as well as communicate effectively and in a sustained and coherent way about a topic that greatly interests you.

2.

Agreeing a Dissertation Topic

The first step in the dissertation is the selection of a topic. This can be rather tricky and so you may wish to spend some time thinking about this. On an MA programme you should begin to develop ideas for your dissertation whilst completing the second block of 60 credits in the taught part of your programme. Admission to an MRes programme depends upon submission of a dissertation proposal at the outset.

Taught modules at level 7 tend to aim to enhance the development of scholarly research skills, for example, through the use of printed and electronic bibliographical resources and works of reference and through the selection, analysis, integration, and interpretation of textual material or information of one kind or another. The compulsory research methods and skills module includes your production of an annotated bibliography in the field in which you may propose to undertake the research for your dissertation. This involves undertaking a critical review of existing literature or other scholarly outputs and compiling and systematically organizing an

² University of Wales Trinity Saint David University Regulations – *Postgraduate Student Guide (Taught Degrees)* (September 2016), 7.2, p. 13.

annotated list of the most relevant. Furthermore writing essays and other kinds of assignment requires the construction of (and adjudication between) relevant, cogent, well-structured, fully documented, and well-referenced arguments defended and modified in the light of others' ideas, knowledge, and views. So at Master's level, more than at undergraduate levels, in one way or another, the link between teaching and research is maintained and developed. One aim of this is to encourage inquiring open-mindedness about the generation of knowledge, concepts and values within your discipline and a judicious and scholarly attitude towards sources of knowledge.

As a result of completing the taught part of your programme, it is hoped that you will be both inspired and equipped to undertake successfully the dissertation component of the programme. When you begin to select a dissertation topic, reflect on the research skills you have developed – intellectual and practical – as well as the discipline-specific knowledge and understanding you have gained, and your awareness of various critical, theoretical and scholarly approaches. As far as possible try to develop a topic that will enable you to draw on a range of the above.

The *Postgraduate Student Guide* quite properly warns that '[c]areful thought needs to be given to the selection of a topic'.³ You are advised to take the following into consideration:

- 1) The topic should be specific; you are cautioned against very general topics as these are likely to be too broad in scope and unmanageable within the context of a Master's dissertation, although proportionately larger topics may be managed within the context of an MRes dissertation. But in both cases depth is to be preferred over breadth, thereby avoiding superficiality and giving the dissertation the kind of focus that is required to investigate specific problems and develop specific research questions. Whereas the significant conclusions of deep engagement with specific problems may have wider implications,

³ Ibid., p. 14.

superficial engagement with more broadly defined issues is unlikely to make a useful contribution to knowledge.

- 2) Availability of data/information/resources: it is important at the outset, as far as possible, to establish that the necessary resources (including printed, manuscript or digital resources and materials) are available to meet the aims of the project.
- 3) Logistical matters: potential issues such as travel, subsistence, availability of contacts, etc. need to be borne in mind.

The selection of a topic should be done in consultation with relevant members of academic staff, that is, for example, the tutors of modules on your programme. This can be done in several ways. Discussion and enquiry may elicit subjects that members of staff are prepared to supervise. The Faculty's academic staff web pages provide information about the research interests of members of staff. By consulting the module directories on Moodle, students might explore the descriptors of modules that are taught, and approach a module tutor about supervising a dissertation based on some aspect of a particular module. The module should be one that the student has not already taken, or the dissertation topic may be developed in relation to a module that the student has already taken, as long as it is not a topic that the student has already covered in their course of study. In other words, the dissertation should not seek merely to reproduce learning acquired previously. In addition the student may independently devise a topic based on a subject that interests them, or for which they have already compiled an annotated bibliography (in the Research Methods and Skills module) and that they would like to explore and research, but nevertheless this should be done in consultation with academic members of staff.

Consultation should lead to the appointment, by the Programme Director, of a dissertation supervisor, with whom you should discuss your initial ideas about your topic and the problem or question which you have identified; or you may generate this research question in consultation with the appointed supervisor. A timetable for the work needs to be established at the outset, either at this stage or in the process of

writing the proposal or in the initial stages of the project. The *Postgraduate Student Guide* advises that care should be taken to ensure that the programme of work needed to meet the aims of the particular project can be realistically completed in the time available. At an early stage you should identify times which are convenient for both you and your supervisor to meet in person or via Skype video, etc. In general, regular contact with your supervisor is crucial to the successful completion of your dissertation, and regular meetings will be held between you and your supervisor at mutually agreed intervals.

It will probably be possible in these initial discussions to identify whether your proposed research will require ethical approval. Any dissertations that involve human participants, human material, human data or animals will require ethical approval. Your Programme Director will be able to give you information about how approval should be obtained.

Further detailed information about the supervision and assessment of Taught Master's dissertations can be found in the Supervision Policy for Taught Master's Students (Appendix GA30 in the *Academic Quality Handbook*), which is available on the UWTSD website (<http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/academic-office/appendices-and-forms/>). This includes information about student and supervisor responsibilities, and about the dissertation support entitlement. Distance students will be able to find further information in the University's *Distance Learning Student Guide*.

3.

The Dissertation Proposal

The proposal should be submitted to your Programme Director on the appropriate form, the MA Dissertation version of which may be found on the Faculty of Humanities and Performing Arts Postgraduate Information Page on Moodle and on this module's Moodle page. The proposal should provide the provisional title of the

dissertation and the research aims and objectives or question(s), that is, the problems or issues that the dissertation aims to address. It should also set out the subject of the proposed dissertation in the section headed 'abstract', describing the methodology or approach that the research and dissertation will follow.

In setting out the subject of the dissertation, the proposal should identify for the reader the value of the topic, i.e. *why* is this of particular interest? In other words, you should make a case for your reasons for wishing to pursue your chosen research topic and indicate how you think you might be able to make an original contribution. You should describe the broad context of your topic as well as, and in order to demonstrate, its significance. The context of your research is the current state of the scholarship in your field. When describing this you should focus on the most important academic sources relevant to your project, the most important contributions to the relevant debates. This is a brief literature review, i.e. a survey of key works in the field, and this may already have been done if the proposed topic of the dissertation was also that of the annotated bibliography. These key works should then be listed as a 'short introductory bibliography' in a specially designated section of the proposal form. Although it is true that it is the idea or topic of your research that will generate your greatest reasons, interest, and motivation for undertaking research, it is only through an informed familiarity with not only the primary evidence or texts for your research, but also the scholarship in your chosen field, will you know which are valid questions to ask, which hypotheses may be likely to fit the evidence and are testable, and whether you are likely to be able to answer the questions you want to ask. It is for these reasons that bibliographical research should be preliminary to any research project of significant scope.

The section headed 'abstract' should also describe the methodology or approach that the research and dissertation will follow. Methodology is the way in which as a researcher you propose to approach your topic, undertake your research, and answer your research questions. Methodologies extend from the adoption or development of a theoretically informed critical approach, such as Lacanian psychoanalytic or

poststructuralist feminist or new-historicist, to the investigation of texts by means of critical or textual bibliography. Most importantly, the choice of methodology or methodologies must be appropriate for the research you propose to undertake, and must be appropriate at each point or part of the research. It is therefore important that you should demonstrate an awareness of the potential limitations of your methodology or methodologies and hence an appreciation of it/their particular appropriateness to different aspects of the research.

For the purposes of the proposal, it is not required that you present a proposed outline of the dissertation, chapter by chapter, with a summary of the proposed contents of each chapter. But some sense of the likely structure and order of the respective parts of the dissertation that will contribute most effectively to achieving the research aims would be welcome. It is of course understood that this is entirely provisional and likely to change significantly as the research progresses. There are some considerations you may wish to bear in mind. The number of chapters will depend on the nature of the subject, but normally three or more chapters are expected in an MA dissertation and proportionally more in an MRes dissertation. The chapters should be complete in themselves and at the same time contribute to the overall argument of the dissertation. When judging the quality of the dissertation, examiners will consider how well the dissertation is structured, that is, how well the chapters explore particular aspects of the research question(s) and also how effectively they contribute to the overall argument of the dissertation. One might think of the chapters as a series of related essays, but it is important that the dissertation should form an integrated whole, with an overall rationale and purpose, and an argument that accumulates evidence and is developed, modified, and refined as the chapters of the dissertation progress.

4.

What is a Dissertation Expected to Demonstrate?

No doubt of most interest to you is your subject, broadly speaking, and more specifically your chosen research topic. But let us also consider the dissertation as a form of assessment. When developing a proposal it is necessary to consider what characteristics or abilities a dissertation at Master's level should typically enable the student to demonstrate. Sometimes these are referred to as 'intended learning outcomes' and those of the MA and MRes Dissertations appear on the module descriptors. These typically tend to address the areas in the following list. (Where those for the MA and MRes dissertations differ, I have tended to place the outcomes of the MRes Dissertation in parentheses, but the difference between them is largely one of degree rather than kind.)

- 1) Subject specific attributes, such as the ability to demonstrate an advanced and sustained (or deep and sophisticated) level of knowledge and understanding of a defined area of study within the discipline or subject, informed by current scholarship and research, including a critical awareness of current issues and developments in the subject (including a sophisticated and critical awareness of relevant theoretical and conceptual considerations underpinning the research project);
- 2) The systematic use of the resources of libraries, archives and the internet and the ability to establish dependable systems for information acquisition, collation, retention, and retrieval;
- 3) (The ability to critically evaluate a breadth of accumulated information and interpretations, drawn from a wide range of textual sources, of both a primary and secondary character, and the ability to construct and sustain a hypothesis based on a critical evaluation of the various source materials as they relate to the research topic);
- 4) The ability to devise and adopt an appropriate and coherent structure for an extended piece of advanced research work;

- 5) The presentation of a systematic and comprehensive piece of research work according to accepted scholarly conventions;
- 6) The ability to study independently and to manage your research project, from an initial proposal, through an outline and reviews of progress, to the finished work.

Assessment Criteria

The dissertation as a form of assessment is designed to test whether these learning outcomes have been achieved. A standard set of assessment criteria is employed, which corresponds to the expected learning outcomes at various levels of achievement. These marking criteria are the ones relating to *essays* at Level 7 and they may be found in a document on the Moodle page for this module. To understand them more fully it may help to compare them with the following, which are a typical set of criteria for the attainment of distinction for the dissertation. It may be worth noting that sets of assessment criteria such as this generally indicate that a dissertation with (in this case) distinction will possess *most but not necessarily all* of the following characteristics in a consistent and sustained fashion:

- 1) Subject specific characteristics, such that the dissertation:
 - o Makes reference to a range of relevant source/primary materials and involves critical in-depth discussion of these, demonstrating awareness of the nature of the evidence available;
 - o Demonstrates advanced critical understanding of and acutely focused engagement with the subject, and thoroughly establishes the importance and wider context of the research;
 - o Demonstrates awareness of appropriate scholarly developments over time and includes comprehensive critical evaluation of current research and/or writing in the field, taking into account, adopting, engaging with and critiquing, as appropriate, critical, scholarly, and

- theoretically informed approaches, and providing (a) clear statement(s) of the dissertation's own position in relation to existing scholarship;
- o Demonstrates ability to understand, conceptualize and solve problems within the field of study, and to develop research questions and hypotheses;
 - o Appropriately selects, and justifies, the research methodology adopted to test hypotheses or answer research questions, indicating a full understanding of its values and limitations;
 - o Contains evidence of comprehensive, insightful, and original research (the criterion of originality in the case of a Master's dissertation should include originality of conception and research design, which may not apply so much to a set question at the taught modular level).
- 2) More general academic characteristics, such as:
- o Wide, thorough and relevant reading and adjudication between views;
 - o An argument which is relevant, cogent, well-structured, fully documented, well-referenced, and defended and modified in the light of others' ideas, knowledge, and views; and a clear and coherent structure that supports, demonstrates, and contextualizes its argument.
 - o Outstandingly fluent, clear and precise writing and sound scholarly presentation, including adherence to appropriate referencing techniques, appropriate subject-specific layout, and excellent grammar and spelling.

It should be noted that greater or less weight will be given to particular criteria according to the nature of the dissertation that is being assessed, and the particular blend of characteristics that the work demonstrates. Therefore it is not possible to indicate generally how much weight will be given to each criterion of assessment. It is perhaps worth noting that a proportion of the evaluation is based on scholarly presentation, specifically the use of the conventions for presenting references, and for presenting a bibliography or list of works consulted. The occurrence of the following kinds of error in a dissertation would also be evaluated accordingly: grammatical

(syntax, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary); typographical; formal (requirements regarding such matters as line-spacing and the presentation of title-pages, and so on).

In summary, then, and very generally, the objective of the dissertation is to test a student's ability to carry out research in an independent way, and to present the results of that research to a high standard of clarity and accuracy. The dissertation will need to show a sound and appropriate critical, scholarly, and/or theoretical method in terms of the investigation of its subject and/or primary sources, the assembling of a comprehensive list of works consulted, and the citation of primary and secondary materials. It will need to indicate to the reader areas of synthesis and areas which present original argument or point of view. It is worth considering these expectations when you are developing a topic and composing your proposal.

5.

Submission

Information about the submission of dissertations can be found in the Guide to Postgraduate Taught Dissertations (Appendix GA29 in the *Academic Quality Handbook*), which is available on the UWTSD website (<http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/academic-office/appendices-and-forms/>), and in the *Academic Quality Handbook* 7.3 – 7.5, which is also available on the UWTSD website (<http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/academic-office/academic-quality-handbook/>).