

MA International Education

Constructing your Dissertation

The dissertation allows you the opportunity to synthesize thinking on educational /social science research methodologies within a topic in education which interests you and is worthy of research. As an independent but guided study, it allows you to experience the processes of research project management, as well as to explore in depth a potential topic for (your) future research, possibly as a doctoral student.

Learning Outcomes

The dissertation project is designed to develop:

- Understanding of the implications of locating a research study in a particular research discourse;
- Understanding of the applications of a particular research design and methodology;
- Stronger understandings of what it means in practice to construct trustworthy research;
- Understanding of the experience of carrying out fieldwork;
- Understanding of the interplay of using more than one research method for data collection and analysis;
- Understanding of the practical processes of data collection and analysis;
- A critical style of writing suitable for academic work;
- Stronger presentational skills that are appropriate to their work;
- Understanding of research project management.

Content

A dissertation should:

- Explain its purposes, importance and contexts;
- Contain a substantive conceptual framework based on a recent and relevant literature;
- Elaborate its key research questions;
- Explain clearly, through reference to a recent and relevant literature, its choice of a research design and methodology for a small scale study to operationalize its key research questions;
- Present a research study that uses more than one method of gathering data;
- Present and analyze its findings from gathering data in the field in the context of the literature of its field;
- Draw conclusions about its success and limitations as a research project and explore what future or further work needs doing in its field.

For full-time students, the dissertation must be submitted at the latest by mid-September of the year following their registration.

The role of your dissertation supervisor

Your supervisor will support your work by discussing the likely structure, content and bibliography and by giving comments on draft versions. Supervisors will expect to see you on a number of occasions from April through to submission, meetings to be negotiated between you and your dissertation supervisor. You should consult your supervisor about your overall plan, about appropriate reading and research methods. Your supervisor will expect to read and comment on the dissertation outline, on a draft of the literature review, methodology and findings of your dissertation (once for each), and a complete draft of the dissertation once before its formal submission. *Contact with the tutor during dissertation development, as well as submission of the final version of the dissertation, is the responsibility of the student.* Your dissertation supervisor will support you through face-to-face contact or e-mail, as agreed between you. The specific role of the supervisor includes:

- helping you to identify the broad educational area (module) within which your project will be located;
- helping you to identify the specific focus within one of the areas which interests you, and presents a teaching, learning or management challenge in your school, college or organization;
- consulting with you as you tackle each major section at the first draft stage;
- reminding you of the format and suggested order for the presentation of the dissertation;
- confirming the University instructions with regard to presentation and submission;
- ensuring that the appropriate ethics approval forms have been completed and returned.

Please note that under no circumstances should you begin your dissertation without having received ethical approval, the procedure for which will be explained in dissertation preparation workshops in the Spring Term. See also Section 13 of the MAIE Study Guide.

Dissertations will be assessed by two of the course tutors, one of whom will normally be the supervisor. A selection of dissertations will be seen by the external examiner.

Presenting the dissertation

The following aspects of presentation must be followed:

Word-length: 15,000 - 20,000 words;

- The dissertation must be typed or word-processed;
- Typing (or arranging for typing) is your responsibility. Allow adequate time between completion and the deadline for submission for this typing to be done;
- A4 paper must be used, with typing on one side only; There must be double spacing between lines;
- Margins - each page should have a left-hand margin of at least 35mm and margins at head, foot and right-hand side, of at least 15mm;
- Pages must be numbered;
- The title page must include title of dissertation, name of degree MAIE (Pathway initials), the year and your name;
- Abstract: a separate abstract of not more than 500 words must be provided;
- A list or table of contents with page numbers must be supplied at the beginning;
- References should follow the Harvard System, as explained in on p.29;
- If you must use a footnote, it should stand at the foot of the page to which it refers, but endnotes are preferred;
- The bibliography should follow the text and any appendices;
- Please note that the dissertation should be submitted loose-leaf (i.e. with no hole punching or binding) in a folder. In addition, you are required to submit an electronic copy.

Submitting the dissertation

Full-time students should submit one hard copy of the completed dissertation to the Course Administrator and submit an electronic copy to Blackboard. Any extension to the final hand-in date must be applied for well in advance through your dissertation supervisor. If you do not submit the dissertation in time, this may delay confirmation that you have completed the course and also delay recommendation for the award of your degree.

Writing Your Dissertation

The dissertation is a substantial piece of work, being a small-scale empirical study of an aspect of education of a student's own choice. It should show in-depth acquaintance with the literature of the subject area, but it should also be a vehicle for the expression of personal views supported by evidence. The conclusion is expected to reflect critically and in some detail on the research processes undertaken by the author / student.

First construct a provisional topic area/title using the appropriate Dissertation Proposal Form and give it to your course tutor. Once your tutor has approved it, he/she will allocate you a dissertation tutor, bearing in mind your choice, and the interests, expertise and commitments of various tutors.

Your dissertation is an opportunity to undertake an empirical study, usually focused on something relevant and important to schools, to the teaching and learning of students, or the professional development of staff.

You will need to gain access to an educational context to conduct an investigation into an issue raised in the programme, e.g. the approach a school has taken to developing the vocational curriculum or the impact of a particular strategy on the curriculum organization of a school. Such an arrangement must be negotiated with your supervisor as there will be ethical and practical issues to resolve.

When you are writing up your research, what is it that you are trying to achieve? Essentially, you are aiming to construct a cohesive argument about something of concern to you and show that you can analyze and evaluate an aspect of educational practice in the light of what others have written and researched about it.

In writing up the dissertation, you are attempting to draw succinct and precise conclusions from the outcomes of your study and show an academic and professional awareness of yourself as a teacher. This occurs not only through the way you write up the dissertation, but how you are able to critically and constructively analyze the data you gather. You will need to guide your reader through what you did carefully but succinctly; keeping the threads of your argument woven through each part like a story (it may even have a happy ending!)

Structuring your dissertation

A common format for organizing your dissertation is to divide it into clear chapters. This format is set out below to guide you. This brief outline below provides percentages to indicate roughly how long each chapter should be as a proportion of the total expected length of a dissertation. Note that neither the reference section nor the appendices count as part of that total word length of 15,000-20,000 words.

The title of your dissertation should give a clear indication of the topic to be addressed.

a. *Abstract*

b. *Introduction: (Approximately 15%)*

You should state the purpose of the study and provide the reader with background information about the school or college, education system, environmental factors etc. You must ensure that the purpose of your assignment is clearly related to the educational theme of the pathway you are following. You might try to answer the following questions:

What is the focus of your writing? Who else (if anyone) was involved, e.g. children, students? Why did you do this research? What did you hope to find out? What relevance has this for educational practice? Why is this important to you? How have you structured this writing?

c. *Literature Review: (Approximately 30%)*

What does the established literature (your reading) tell you about your chosen area of focus? Who else has said what, which supports your thinking? Who has said what, which challenges your thinking? How does all this link to what you are trying to find out?

d. *Research Methodology* (Approximately 15%)

What are your key research questions? What methodology or approach did you choose to answer these questions? Why did you make this choice? How did you establish the trustworthiness of your study? Did you carry it out in an ethical manner? What methods did you use to find out what you wanted to know - how did you gather your information (data), e.g. by observation, interviews, questionnaires, analysis of children's work, video/audio taping etc.? Why did you choose this method (convenience, only ones possible, recommended in X's book/article, etc.)? What actually happened? Describe how your study proceeded, using factual information based upon your methodology and your intentions.

e. *Discussion of Findings* (Approximately 30%)

This is the heart of your dissertation: it is where you demonstrate your capacity to reflect and understand, organize information, explain its significance and justify your conclusions; show how your findings relate to the literature you have already reviewed. You might try to answer the questions: What did you find out? How can you substantiate this? Does this support what the theory (and you) had earlier identified? What changes/differences are there from that theory?

f. *Conclusion* (Approximately 10%)

In this section, you present your conclusions, which should be:

- Explicitly derived from your analysis;
- Cross-referenced to your literature review;
- Responding to your title of original purpose.

How far did you meet your research intentions? Would you have done anything differently with hindsight (Evaluate your methodology)? Where to now? What might this research mean to (you as) a teacher? What have you learned? How might the outcomes affect classroom practice? What else do you feel you need to do? What are the implications for practice generally?

Where you choose to make recommendations for practice or policy in your conclusion, you should make clear how these recommendations arise from your findings. You should indicate what the possibilities of implementing recommendations relatively easily are and normally avoid recommendations that are long-term, or require major changes in policy and practice before being implementable.

The final pages of your dissertation must give a full list of the references you have used within the text to inform your work. The references section is not included in your word count. You may also wish to add transcripts, questionnaires or similar data-gathering items as appendices.

Where relevant, you should use sub-headings within your chapters so that you keep yourself and your reader focused on what you are writing about.