



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
School of Social and
Political Science

Taught MSc Student
Dissertation Handbook 2025-26

This handbook is published on the School website:

<https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/students/postgraduate/taught-msc/your-studies/student-handbooks>

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PART A: POLICIES AND REGULATIONS

Dissertation deadline: Thursday 13th August 2026 at 23:59 (UK Time)

The dissertation deadline is set by the Postgraduate Teaching Office and is the same for all MSc programme including MSc by Research programmes across the School of Social and Political Science. Please see below for School regulations on the request of extensions and concessions related to the dissertation. Lateness penalties, outlined below, will be applied to all work submitted late.

1. Scope of the dissertation

Most MSc Programmes in the School have a dissertation component. The dissertation is an in-depth piece of writing based on independent study. It tests students' ability to conduct research autonomously, to effectively organise larger quantities of information, and to communicate research findings in a fluent and structured fashion. It gives students an opportunity to pursue an academic interest in a topic (largely) of your choosing, providing it aligns with the material in your programme and the programme-level and course-level learning outcomes. In assessing the dissertation, examiners look for similar analytical and presentational qualities to those expected in all coursework, but at greater depth.

Information about the scope and expected qualities of the dissertation for your specific programme can also be found in [programme-specific handbooks](#), your programme-specific dissertation Learn page, and in [the Degree Programme Table \(DPT\)](#).

2. Available support and supervision

2.1 Programme Director

The first port of call for all questions relating to the dissertation is the Programme Director (PD) for your MSc degree programme. PDs organise dissertation preparation in various ways, depending on the needs of the specific subjects. Most PDs hold a dissertation workshop that gives an overview of the entire dissertation process. These workshops are usually held before the end of February.

2.2 Dissertation Supervisor

Supervisors are allocated by PDs in liaison with subject areas. The supervisor accompanies students throughout the dissertation writing period. Most programmes allocate supervisors in March and start the formal supervision period during April once semester 2 coursework is largely completed. Some programmes start and finish the process earlier – these details will be communicated to you via your programme handbook and/or Learn page.

2.3 Other Support

Beyond the support available through their supervisor and PD, students can also contact other academic members of staff across the School to ask specific questions about their

chosen topic, either by emailing them or by attending their guidance and feedback hours. Some MSc programmes give students the option of a placement-based dissertation (see Part C for specifics of placement-based dissertations). Placement-based dissertations are supervised by a representative of the organisation they work with, as well as an academic member of staff.

3. The supervisory relationship

Every supervisor will have their own approach to the process, and there will always be variations across and within programmes and subject areas. However, students can expect the following:

- 3 to 4 one-to-one meetings throughout the dissertation period; meetings are normally in person, but can be via MS Teams, especially for placement-based students required to work outside Edinburgh.
- feedback on a dissertation outline or a schedule of work early in the dissertation process.
- feedback on one draft chapter (but not the draft of the whole dissertation).
- feedback on the general structure and organisation of the argument(s).
- ongoing help with specific queries (usually by email). The supervisor should:
- discuss preferred methods of contact and mutual availability (including any periods of leave that the student would need to be aware of)
- help define the research problem and focus of the dissertation
- give basic advice on relevant bodies of literature and/or refer to other members of staff for suggestions regarding sources
- provide advice on the analytical framework and methodology used
- provide advice on the ethical implications of empirical research (see info on Ethics approval below).
- help with issues regarding structure and cohesion of the argument

Students should not assume that they will be able to meet supervisors at short notice or get immediate e-mail responses. It is reasonable to expect supervisors to respond to email queries within 5 days (unless they are away), and provide more detailed comments on written work within 2 weeks.

The supervisory relationship is student-driven: it is the responsibility of each individual student to work on their project consistently and seek help when needed. Supervisors will not formulate research questions or make other key decisions about the dissertation for you: they are there to provide advice and guidance, but ultimately the dissertation assesses your ability to work autonomously. Should there be any problems impeding their work, students should raise this with their student advisor and with their supervisor.

When deadlines have been agreed for the submission of writing for review by your supervisor, you must ensure you submit work in good time – discuss with your supervisor how long they will need to provide feedback. If you are unable to make an agreed deadline or a meeting appointment, email your supervisor to discuss alternatives.

4. Dissertation Training and samples of previous years' work

There are dissertation-related workshops and other resources offered by the School's Student Development Office, the Research Training Centre, as well as other bodies around the university such as the Institute for Academic Development. These have been designed to supplement personal supervision and programme-level dissertation preparation, by offering training in specific skills, research and time management strategies, as well as helping students to tackle their dissertations with confidence.

To make it easy for MSc students to identify which training would be most relevant to their work, when this is offered and how to access it, we have collated some of the most useful links to workshops and other resources into a single list on a dissertation Learn site. This list is structured into categories such as 'Generating Research Questions', 'Literature Review' and 'Methodology', so that students can see which training would be most helpful at specific stages of their research. Students will be able to access this list via a special LEARN site (see link below). Students will be added to this LEARN site from February. Students are advised to consult this site regularly, as they move through the different stages of their dissertation, and, if necessary, discuss with their supervisor which further training opportunities would benefit them most.

- Learn Site [Dissertation Support \(2025-26\) Research Training Centre & Student Development Office](#)

All students have access to [the School of Social Political Science MSc dissertation library](#), which only contains dissertations that achieved a very good mark. The Library will be available from April 2026. When reviewing previous dissertations, you should be mindful that there are potentially multiple ways to write a good dissertation, depending on your subject matter, the research design and methods employed, and conventions of the field of study across different programmes. Even dissertations with good marks may still contain important deficiencies. While you may gain some useful insights and inspiration from these exemplars, you should be wary of seeking to uncritically replicate an approach you have seen elsewhere – discuss these issues with your supervisor.

5. The dissertation ethics preview process

All students conducting dissertation research are required to submit a [Research Ethics form](#), and to receive formal approval before beginning any research.

Your supervisor will review this form, and assign it a risk level from 1-3. Low risk level 1 projects will be able to begin work immediately following supervisor review, but projects with higher risks will require additional review. **Read the following information carefully for guidance on this process.**

5.1 What is meant by 'research ethics'?

The [University Research Ethics Policy](#) defines it as:

"[T]he application of ethical principles to research activities. These ethical principles are applied throughout the lifetime of a research project: from conception and design, via data

collection and analysis, to dissemination, archiving of research materials, and beyond. Researchers have a responsibility to undertake their research with due diligence of all relevant ethical considerations.”

This entails aligning your research with five key principles:

1. **Beneficence and non-maleficence:** maximising benefits and minimising harms arising from research.
2. **Integrity, openness and transparency:** ensuring aims and methods are transparent, and conflicts of interest are avoided.
3. **Dignity and respect:** respecting the “*rights, autonomy, privacy, interests, values, and dignity of fellow researchers and research participants*”. This crucially includes the use of voluntary informed consent processes for research participants (barring very exceptional circumstances which do not apply to masters dissertations). It also entails safeguarding data security and confidentiality.
4. **Responsibility and accountability:** researchers are responsible and accountable for adhering to ethical principles through the whole research lifecycle.
5. **Equality, diversity and inclusion:** “*Researchers consider equality, diversity and inclusion in all of their research activities, and promote a positive inclusive environment, which ensures fairness, challenges prejudice, and celebrates difference.*”

5.2 The importance of research ethics for your dissertation

All research carried out by members of the School, including postgraduate dissertation projects, needs to go through an ethical review process. The ethical review process is designed to support researchers and students in managing risks associated with their research, and to ensure the highest standards in designing, conducting, and disseminating research. Before starting any empirical research, you need to complete ethical review, which begins with submission of the Research Ethics [form](#) (Ethics, Data and Research Integrity Online Support Tool) on the SPS intranet - detailed guidance on completing this form is outlined Section 6.8.

You should approach the research ethics process as a valuable learning opportunity that will help develop your research skills and knowledge. Your supervisor and programme director are there to help guide you through this process. You must also be aware that failure to follow the research ethics process could have significant consequences. As stated in the University Research Ethics Policy:

"For students, failure to meet research ethical obligations may constitute research misconduct. This failure may lead to a referral to the relevant Academic Misconduct Officer and implementation of academic misconduct procedures, and could lead to referral of the case for disciplinary action under the Code of Student Conduct."

5.3 Conducting ethical research

Key principles

Your research must align with the following principles:

All research should protect the **dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing of study participants and other contributing parties** (e.g. research assistants, interpreters, organisational partners).

- Research involving human participants should obtain **informed consent** (written or oral), or (exceptionally) students should provide a clear rationale why fully informed consent cannot be obtained. Cases where fully informed consent cannot be obtained will also be subject to additional review before approval.
 - **Researchers themselves should be protected from risk**, and as such you will need to reflect on potential risks to your own safety and wellbeing as part of the ethics approval process.
 - **Researchers should be clear on how data are handled**, ensuring compliance with [data protection guidance](#).

Issues to reflect on

In the process of developing your dissertation research design and completing the ethics review process, students must reflect on the following, with the support of their supervisor:

- Any **potential harms** to participants, yourself, third parties, the wider academic community (including physical, psychological, social, economic, legal, or professional or reputational harm) and **strategies to mitigate** these risks.
- Any potential **vulnerability** of participants or third parties involved in the research. This can include, for instance: legally defined minors; adults who cannot competently provide consent; adults who are wards of the state (e.g. prisoners); adults who experience disadvantageous power relationships within personal and professional roles; adults who are in a dependent relationship; persons who have experienced trauma etc.

- Any other **legal requirements** in the field. For instance, the ability of security forces to gain access to research data or the requirement for research disclosure of illegal activities uncovered during research (e.g. abuse of a minor) will vary across contexts. As discussed below in Section 6.7, some research is also legally required to go through additional review and obtain sponsorship from the College research office.
- Managing **sensitive topics**: what constitutes a 'sensitive topic' is contextually dependent and it is incumbent on the student (supported by the supervisor/reviewer) to reflect on these in relation to their specific research. Examples of sensitive topics include (but are not limited to) confidential information related to health, illicit behaviour, sexual activity, etc.; research related to trauma; research that relates to peoples/things/places/practices that are considered sacred to those being studied (where study will profane them); research on the activities/ vested interests of powerful actors where the research is likely to affect such activities/interests, etc.

Informed consent

Obtaining freely-given informed consent from research participants is essential to compliance with research ethics requirements. Following the UKRI definition: "informed consent entails giving sufficient information about the research and support ensuring that there is no explicit or implicit coercion so that prospective participants can make a meaningful and free decision on their possible involvement."

In most projects involving data collection from human subjects, this will involve producing:

- 1) **An 'information sheet'** to give to participants explaining issues including: what the project is for/about, the research objectives, what their participation will involve, what the data they provide will be used for, how things like data security, confidentiality and anonymisation will be handled etc.
- 2) **A consent form** which participants review before signing to provide a written record of consent.

Students are strongly advised to use templates for the [Participant Information sheet](#) and [Participant Consent](#) templates provided by the SPS Research Office. These should be adapted and modified to reflect the specifics of your project and its research design. Please seek your supervisor's support and advice.

In some instances where it is not possible to gain informed consent using forms (for example, if research participants are not literate), researchers will use an oral consent process. If using an oral consent process, it will need to be clearly explained during your ethics review application, and you will need to consult with your supervisor on how to do this. There are some instances in which it is not possible

to gain informed consent from participants. Such projects typically involve higher levels of risk, and this type of research is only very rarely approved in MSc research. In such cases, students' projects will undergo a lengthy process of multi-stage scrutiny.

Students should use this [Consent Checklist](#) and discussion with their supervisor to help ensure the adequacy of their consent processes.

5.4 The ethics approval process

To gain ethics approval you will need to fill out the Research Ethics [form](#). There is detailed guidance on the form in Section 6.8 below. Once you have submitted the form, it will first be reviewed by your dissertation supervisor who will assess the 'level' of the project. There are three 'levels': Level 1 represents the lowest risk category, Level 3 the highest:

- **Level 1 research involve low reasonably-foreseeable risks.** The School strongly encourages most students to conduct level 1 projects.
- **Level 2 research involves moderate but mitigable reasonably foreseeable risks.** Level 2 research may be permitted in limited circumstances, and only when the student is able to demonstrate effectively that risks can be adequately mitigated.
- **Level 3 research involves high or moderate but unmitigable risks:** Masters students are not permitted to conduct level 3 research.

The criteria for the levels are explained in detail in Section 6.6 below.

If your supervisor assesses the project to be Level 1, they can approve it themselves pending any required revisions. If your supervisor assesses your project to be Level 2-3, it will be sent to your Programme Director, and possibly also the School's Director of Postgraduate Taught Programmes for additional review. Projects can be approved at Level 2 by Programme Directors, pending any required revisions. Projects assessed at Level 3 will need to be revised to Level 2. The process is summarised in the diagram below.

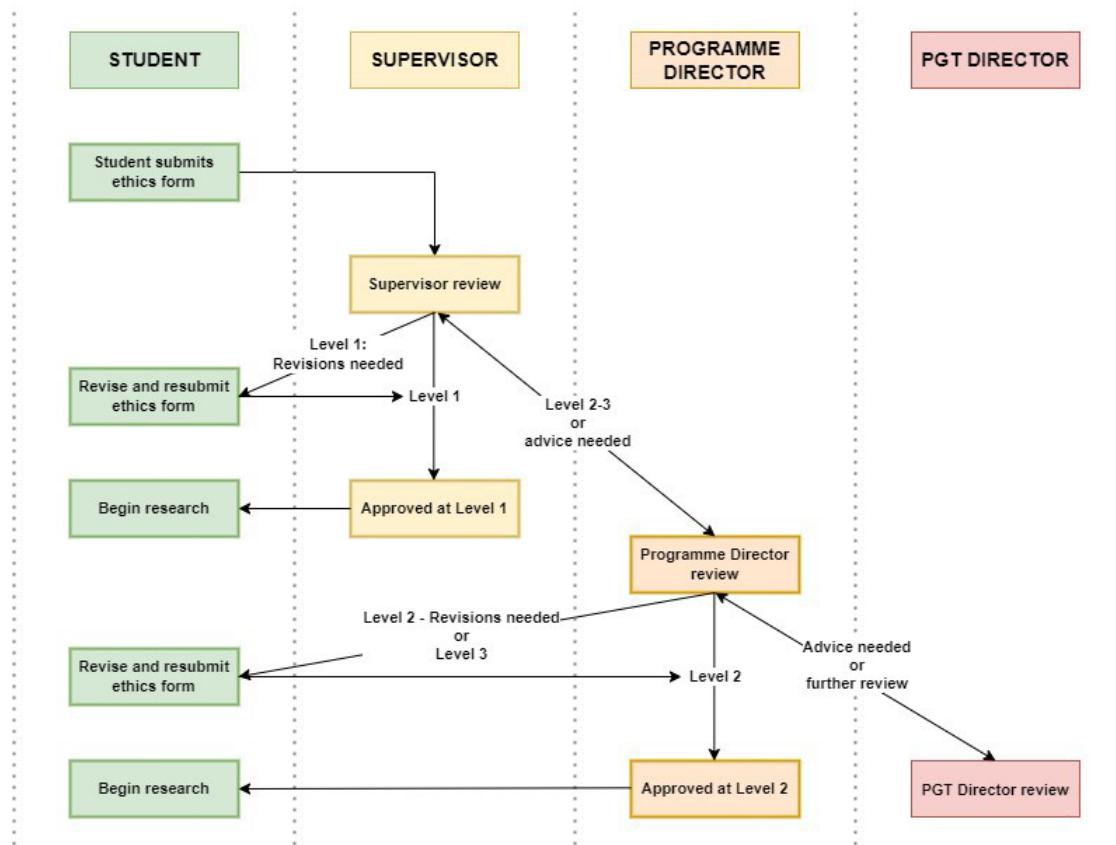


Figure 1: Overview of the PGT ethics approval process

The scenarios associated with each Level outcome are as follows:

Level 1 outcome

- If your supervisor designates your project as level 1, they can approve it themselves and you can begin research.
- Students conducting Level 1 research must still work with their supervisor to ensure any reasonably foreseeable risks are identified and appropriate steps are taken to mitigate them.
- Your supervisor may require you to carry out revisions to your form before granting level 1 approval, and therefore you should not expect an instant approval.
- If your supervisor asks you to make revisions, you must make a list detailing the changes you have made and email it to them when you re-submit the form.

Level 2 outcome

- If your supervisor designates your project as level 2, you can discuss with your supervisor whether to take the following options:
 - Revise your project research design to level 1.
 - Refer your level 2 project to your programme director for further review.
- All level 2 projects must go to programme directors for further review.
- Programme directors are allowed to grant level 2 approval, but in more

complex cases, they may need to consult with the Director of Postgraduate Taught Programmes (PGT Director). You should expect level 2 review to potentially take several weeks.

- The programme director / PGT Director may require you to make revisions to your form before granting level 2 approval. If so, you must write a list of the changes you have made and email it to them and your supervisor when you re- submit the form.

Level 3 outcome

- PGT students are not permitted to conduct level 3 research.
- If your supervisor or programme director assesses your project as level 3, you will be required to completely revise your project research design to ensure that the project is a level 1 or 2.
- When you have revised your research design accordingly, you must then resubmit your form with a detailed explanation of the changes you have made.

Additional legal or regulatory checks

Some projects may require additional review by the College – see Section 6.7. This can apply to projects at both level 1 or 2. If your supervisor or programme director deems your project to require this, you will need to complete these checks before your form can be approved.

5.5 Start early: Integrating ethics into research design

You should begin thinking about research ethics from the earliest stages of the dissertation process. When drafting your dissertation proposal and developing the research design, you must carefully consider the potential ethics risks of the research and the ways to either avoid or mitigate these risks. There are resources available to help with thinking through this (Section 6.9), and the School will be running ethics workshops for students.

Not thinking carefully about ethics early in the research design phase can create big problems for you later on. As outlined in Section 6.4, projects that involve moderate to high risks will require a lengthy multi-stage review process. Some projects may also require additional legal and regulatory checks, typically involving an additional lengthy review via the College research office (6.7). Such reviews may result in your dissertation research proposal being blocked and/or subjected to major revisions. This can create severe delays in your dissertation project.

Such problems can be avoided by designing your project at Level 1. We recommend this for most MSc students. Students pursuing level 2 research and/or research requiring additional external review, will need to be proactive in ensuring they begin their research ethics application process early. Your first step is consultation with your supervisor, or, if they have not yet been assigned, your programme director.

5.6 Detailed explanation of the risk levels

Level 1

A level 1 designation applies to research that: carries negligible or low reasonably foreseeable risks (to either the participants, researcher, or third parties); where data processes do not pose a challenge to individual data security; there is no (reasonably perceived) conflict of interest, and where the data does not concern groups that may be construed as terrorist or extremist. Assuming that the research adheres to the provisions above, examples of research in this category may include (not exhaustive):

- Research involving documents that are not ethically sensitive (note that some documents e.g. active medical records may be considered ethically sensitive).
- Secondary analysis of existing quantitative data sources where there is no risk of linking to individual-level or sensitive data.
- Secondary analysis of qualitative data where there is no risk of linking to individuals (e.g. where data has been previously anonymised and archived).
- Unobtrusive observation of public places, where research does not include observation (or audio/visual recording) of identifiable individuals or spaces, and where the observation itself does not cause additional risk to the researcher.
- Social media analysis or internet-mediated research where there is a clearly established strategy in the literature for foreseeing risks.
- Interviews with people about their professional roles in their professional capacity, unless under a Placement Based Dissertation (PBD) context.
- Interviews, focus groups, participant-observation and other forms of qualitative data collection with legally competent adults on topics that are not considered sensitive to that population, unless under a PBD context.
- Collection of quantitative data with legally competent adults on topics that are not considered sensitive to that population, unless under a PBD context.

Level 2

A level 2 designation applies to research that: may potentially carry low or moderate reasonably foreseeable risks (to either the participants, researcher, or third parties); where data processes do not pose (or pose a mitigatable) challenge to individual data security; there is no (reasonably perceived) conflict of interest, and; where the data does not concern groups that may be construed as terrorist or extremist. Assuming that the research adheres to the provisions above, examples of research in this category may include (not exhaustive):

- Research on topics that are considered sensitive to the participant group, where there are established techniques for mitigating this sensitivity.
- Research where participant groups are reasonably or legally regarded as vulnerable, where there are established techniques for mitigating

- this vulnerability.
- Small participant pools or conditions (e.g. restricted sub-professional category) where full anonymisation may not be practically possible, and the supervisor/student have discussed the limitation of this and how to make that information evident to participants.
- Quantitative data set (i.e. achieved through an administrative consent process) where there is a reasonable likelihood that the research could lead to the re-linking of data to an identifiable individual but where individual data will not be presented in publication.
- Complex research practices, including (but not limited to): experimental or non-traditional participatory methods; interventionist projects; complex uses of data throughout the project life cycle (incl. visual data, data linkage, open data, data reuse); complex research teams.
- Social media analysis or internet-mediated research where there is no clearly established strategy in the literature for foreseeing risks.
- Given the risks inherent in many WBP contexts (such as risks to institutional reputation, management of complex relationships with the host organisation etc.), all research involving human participants will be assessed at Level 2 for WBP projects and require Directorate oversight.

Level 3

A level 3 designation applies to research that: carries either moderate but highly likely risks, or severe and reasonably foreseeable risks (to either the participants, researcher, or third parties), or:

- where data processes pose a challenge to individual data security.
- where there is a (reasonably perceived) conflict of interest.
- where the data concerns groups that may be construed as terrorist or extremist*.

In addition to the above, examples of research in this category may include (not exhaustive):

- For student researchers, research where there is a reasonable potential to cause harm to the researcher, which is occurring in challenging contexts or insecure environments, or which involves lone working in unfamiliar/insecure settings (in the UK or overseas).
- Where there are challenging or multiple risks in relation to sensitivity, vulnerability etc of the nature listed under level 2 above.
- Research with vulnerable individuals or groups who cannot consent (and require administrative or legal guardian consent).
- Research that involves psychological, medical or physical testing.
- Research where the results may, or are likely to, harm the participants, researcher or third parties.

* Exceptions may be made for PGT work in a programme that provides students with the relevant expertise to work on security-sensitive issues where the research triggered PREVENT in relation to data storage (i.e. documentary data, but not where the research proposes to collect data directly from human participants from terrorist/extremist groups as defined under PREVENT). In such cases, the supervisor needs to alert the relevant the PGT Director and SPS Deputy Director for Research (Ethics & Integrity) to ensure that secure data storage is made available to the student. This process requires the work of central IT and can take several weeks, so notification of intent for such student research must be made in a timely manner, well in advance of data collection.

5.7 College Sponsorship

Some research may require a further approval processes by the College to obtain 'sponsorship' from the College research office, where the university takes on legal responsibility for ensuring insurance and indemnity are in place. There is detailed guidance on sponsorship [here](#). The following categories of research will require additional approval processes and sponsorship:

- All research involving **health and social care**, which comes under the [UK Policy for Health and Social Care Research](#).
- Research involving **NHS patients or staff** is likely to require NHS ethics approval and/or NHS R&D approval. Research in other countries may legally require similar approval.
- Research involving **prisoners** in Scotland will require approval via the Scottish Prison Service ethics committee. Research in other countries may legally require similar approval.
- Research involving **adults who lack capacity to consent** under the terms of the 2005 Mental Capacity Act and/or the (Scottish) 2000 [Adults with Incapacity Act](#) needs to pass through an [NHS REC](#). In Scotland, the researcher also needs to be cleared under the [Protecting Vulnerable Groups \(PVG\) Scheme](#) via [Disclosure Scotland](#), which also applies to research with minors. The financial costs of applying for PVG clearance are usually carried by the student.
- Research involving **terrorism or terrorist groups** (per [UK government definitions](#)) will come under PREVENT policy and require research data to be placed in the Data Safe Haven.

What should I do if my project falls under these categories?

In practice, only a very small number of MSc dissertations will fall under the above categories – most would entail level 3 research, which is prohibited. If you think your project may fall under these categories, it is crucial that you seek guidance early because:

- Obtaining College sponsorship and/or external approval can be expected to take around a month, sometimes more.

- You may not succeed in gaining sponsorship and have to completely redesign your project.
- Setting up access to the Data Safe Haven required for research falling under PREVENT requires liaison with IT services, and can take several weeks.
- Your Research Ethics form in SPS cannot be reviewed until you have obtained your sponsorship/approval letter from College. This will add additional weeks to the final approval.

Your first meeting with your dissertation supervisor is the crucial time to discuss the research ethics form because:

- Your supervisor is your key source of advice on research ethics. They are responsible for helping you reflect on research ethics, assisting you to pass ethical review, and they will be the first reviewer of your ethics form.
- Your research design/methods may change following your first supervision meeting if your supervisor has recommendations for ways to improve your project.

You should therefore come to your first supervision meeting familiar with the form and ready to discuss research ethics issues connected to your project.

For research requiring sponsorship, you will need to contact the College ethics team via email (cahss.res.ethics@ed.ac.uk) for further assistance. Copy your supervisor and programme director into all correspondence.

If your project falls under the PREVENT policy, you will need to contact the Deputy Director for Research (Ethics and Integrity) (ethics-ssps@ed.ac.uk) to liaise with IT. Copy your supervisor and programme director into all correspondence.

Given the long timeline likely to be needed for approval, you must ensure you factor in the risk of delays to your dissertation project.

5.8 The Research Ethics form

When to complete the form

As discussed above in 5.5, you should integrate ethical considerations into the earliest stages of your research design process as you work on your dissertation proposal.

You should begin work on the form itself when:

- You have discussed research ethics with your supervisor.
- You have familiarised yourself with the key principles and practices associated with research ethics from the resources listed in section 5.9 below, and with the 'levels' detailed in section 5.6 above.
- You have finalised, or are very close to finalising, your research design. The form will require you to provide detailed explanations of the methods you plan to

use. You won't be able to complete the form if you don't have this information decided. If you subsequently change your research design, you are likely to also need to revise your form.

Completing the form

The research ethics form can be accessed on the SPS website:

<https://ethics.sps.ed.ac.uk/>

You will need to be logged in to your university account, and either be on-campus or using the university VPN if off-campus. The form will require you to answer a series of questions and prompts about issues which might arise during research. Work through the form carefully, noting the following key practical issues:

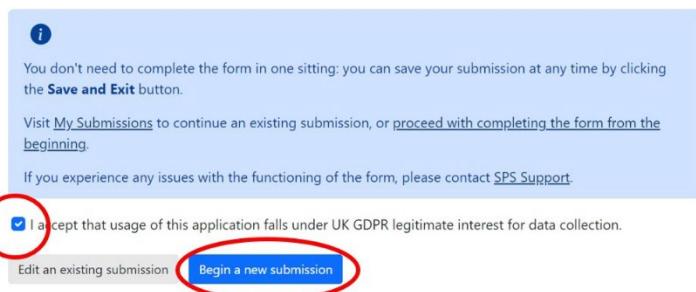
- To start your form, click 'Begin a new submission', and check the box to accept the UK GDPR conditions.

Ethics, Data and Research Integrity Online Support Tool

This form comprises seven sections:

1. Project details
2. Participants
3. Data
4. Research team
5. Collaborating organisations and individuals
6. Legal matters
7. Final review

There are PDFs comprising screenshots of each page of the form in the [Help section](#). Please refer to the relevant document if you'd like to see an overview of the whole form.



You don't need to complete the form in one sitting: you can save your submission at any time by clicking the [Save and Exit](#) button.

Visit [My Submissions](#) to continue an existing submission, or [proceed with completing the form from the beginning](#).

If you experience any issues with the functioning of the form, please contact [SPS Support](#).

I accept that usage of this application falls under UK GDPR legitimate interest for data collection.

[Edit an existing submission](#) [Begin a new submission](#)

- **On page 1, ensure you select your supervisor's email address.** Use the 'Supervisor' box to search for their email address, or enter manually. Leave the 'Course organiser' box blank. Otherwise the form will be sent to the wrong person and will not be processed.

Are you submitting your research for ethical review as a student or as a member of staff?

Student
 Staff

Are you an Undergraduate or Postgraduate student?

Undergraduate
 Postgraduate

Are you doing a Masters or PhD?

Taught Masters
 Research Masters
 PhD

Please select your subject area

Please specify your supervisor and/or course organiser.

Supervisor

Course organiser

- Seek guidance from your supervisor if you are unclear how to complete any of the sections of the form. Note, at the bottom of each page of the form there is the option to 'Save and exit' if you need to pause work on the form and return to it later once you have received guidance.

Will any data, particularly data which might enable a person to be identified, be transferred to any other parties outside the University (beyond parties already identified as part of a research team or collaboration)?

Yes
 No

[Previous](#)

[Save](#)

[Save and Exit](#)

[Next](#)

Form navigation

Navigating the form using the buttons below will automatically save your data.

[Section 1: Project details](#)
[Section 2: Participants](#)
[Section 3: Data](#)
[Section 4: Research team](#)
[Section 5: Collaborating organisations and individuals](#)
[Section 6: Legal matters](#)
[Section 7: Final review](#)

- In Section 7, make sure you upload your consent form and information sheet, if your project requires them. See Section 6.3 above for guidance on this and templates.
- Once you have finished filling out the form, click 'Submit' and the form is sent to your supervisors email address.
- Your supervisor will then begin the review process set out in 6.4 above. You will receive an email from when this process is completed.
- If you need to update, revise, or check the status of their form, this can be done by logging in and viewing your submissions:
http://ethics.sps.ed.ac.uk/your_submissions

- If you have queries about the status of your application, contact your supervisor and/or programme director.
- You will receive an email from your supervisor notifying you of the outcome of their review.

5.9 Learning resources and advice

Your supervisor and programme director

A key part of your supervisor's role is to provide you with guidance on conducting your dissertation in accordance with University of Edinburgh's research ethics and integrity requirements, and passing ethics approval. They are your first point of contact for questions about research ethics. They can also help recommend reading material on ethics relevant to your discipline. If you have such questions before your supervisor has been allocated, for example while you are drafting your dissertation proposal, you should contact your programme director.

School workshops on dissertation research ethics

During Semester 2, the Deputy Director for Research (Ethics and Integrity), Dr Anna Chiumento, will run a workshop for PGT students on dissertation research ethics. The workshop will give key guidance on passing the ethical approval process so that your project can proceed in a timely fashion.

This workshop is compulsory for any students wishing to conduct research involving human subjects, and any students on the placement-based dissertation. This is the case regardless of whether you have received any programme-level training on research ethics.

Workshop date and location will be communicated to all students by email from the SDO.

Learning resources

Research ethics will be a new topic for many students. We recommend the following resources to help you develop your understanding about what constitutes ethical research, and how to put research ethics principles into practice.

- [Research ethics and integrity course for postgraduates – Institute for Academic Development](#)

This self-paced introductory course takes 3-6 hours to finish, and can be completed in stages. You will need to register to access the learning materials.

Library sources

The following texts provide useful introductions to ethical research for postgraduate social science students. All are available as e-books from the library.

Note: Treat these as entry points to provide a basic overview of research ethics in the social sciences prior to further study. Different disciplines may take slightly different approaches or perspectives on some issues, for which your supervisor or programme director are the key source of guidance.

- Clark, T, Foster, L, Sloan, L, Bryman, A (2021) *Bryman's Social Research Methods* (6th ed). Oxford, Oxford University Press, specifically Chapter 6 'Ethics and politics in social research', pp. 106-136.
- Robson, C & McCartan, K (2016) *Real World Research* (4th ed). Chichester: Wiley, specifically Chapter 10, 'Ethical and political considerations', pp. 205-240.
- Meskel, M & Pels, P (2005) *Embedding Ethics*. London: Routledge (for students conducting ethnographic research).
- [Research ethics guidance – ESRC – UKRI](#) UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is a government body responsible for funding academic research in the UK. Within this, the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) funds much social science research. As well as funding research they are influential in setting standards. Though primarily aimed at academic staff members rather than students, this website contains a lot of useful information and practical guidance on ethical research practice.

For any queries, please email sps.pgt.ethics@ed.ac.uk.

6. Risk assessment and insurance

6.1 Fieldwork and Travel

Most MSc dissertations for SPS programmes are “desk-based”, meaning they are based on readings of literature and secondary data and not on a student’s own fieldwork data. However, some MSc programmes let students conduct a *limited* amount of fieldwork for primary data collection, subject to practicalities, ethics requirements, and a risk assessment. Students should be aware that not all taught MSc programmes are designed to contain fieldwork-based dissertations, not least because students have no or very limited opportunities for training in research methods.

If students plan to do fieldwork, they should inform their PD early on and should ensure that they carry out the appropriate ethics (see above) and risk assessment forms (see below) well before beginning the fieldwork.

It is the responsibility of students to cover their own travel, accommodation and subsistence costs when carrying out fieldwork for their dissertations. However, the School is able to offer limited funding for primary research undertaken in the context of dissertation projects - <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/students/development-hub/funding/dissertation-fund>.

Any travel undertaken for dissertation research, whether within the UK or overseas, is

subject to a formal risk assessment procedure. Travel must not be booked prior to completion of a risk assessment. Projects judged to entail excessive risks to student safety or wellbeing will be blocked, and so it is important to begin the risk assessment application early. The University of Edinburgh does not take responsibility for the well-being and safety of students carrying out fieldwork, either in the United Kingdom or in other countries. It is therefore each student's own responsibility to take out adequate insurance – with the university's free travel insurance recommended, see below – and be alert to the demands that may be made upon them by unfamiliar circumstances.

Travel is not permitted to any countries or regions on the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) 'do not travel' list (also sometimes referred to as 'red list') and students should be aware that many factors (for example, civil unrest) may mean the *FCDO* does not deem it safe to travel to a location. Travel restrictions can be imposed very quickly and you should consider this when planning any international fieldwork or placement project. In addition, it is your responsibility to make sure that you will meet any visa, research permit or entry requirements for your planned destination.

6.2 Risk assessment process for standard dissertations

Please refer to the UK Government Foreign Travel Advice website for up to date information on international travel: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>

Travel outside of Edinburgh for fieldwork purposes requires submission of the [Travel Plan and Risk Assessment \(RA1\) form](#) to the Student Development Office ssps.student-development@ed.ac.uk at least three weeks prior to the date of travel. The sooner you submit the form the better.

- This must be sent from your University email address and must be approved before you depart.
- Please note it is the Student Development Office that will approve your risk assessment, not your supervisor.
- Travel should **not** be booked before your risk assessment form has been approved by the Student Development Office.
- You do **not** need to also complete Fieldwork Assessment Form FA1. If you are undertaking a Placement-Based Dissertation, please follow the risk assessment guidance in the section below specifically for PBDs.
- If the FCDO guidance for your destination changes significantly, it is your responsibility to resubmit the updated risk assessment.
- If there are any changes to dates, accommodation, etc. it is your responsibility to resubmit the updated risk assessment.

After the successful completion of this risk assessment, students must obtain the [University's free travel insurance](#) for the duration of their fieldwork. It is not health insurance though it does provide emergency medical cover. Please note, that if your fieldwork is based in your home country you will not be covered for any emergency medical expenses. Students can take out additional, personal travel insurance if they wish. If the risk assessment is not

approved, students are not permitted to travel, even if they purchase their own insurance.

6.3 Risk Assessment process for Placement-Based Dissertations

The risk assessment and travel approval for Placement-Based Dissertation projects is administered by the SWAY Placements Adviser. Placement students should not use the risk assessment or insurance links given above. Placement projects both in the UK and internationally, advertised or student-led must be risk assessed prior to any travel takes place. The relevant risk assessment will be shared with the student upon confirmation of their placement format (in-person -UK, in-person -overseas or hybrid). After completion and subsequent approval of this risk assessment, students will be covered under the University's travel insurance or the duration of their placement. Students can take out additional, personal travel insurance if they wish. If the risk assessment is not approved, students are not permitted to travel, even if they purchase their own insurance.

Please note, University insurance is not health insurance but does provide some emergency medical cover. You may wish to purchase your own health insurance. Please note, that if your placement is based in your home country you will not be covered for any emergency medical expenses.

More information on the relevant risk assessments for Placement-Based Dissertations are available on the Placement-Based Dissertation Learn site. Any queries should be directed to Heather Allan, SWAY Placements Adviser at swayplacements@ed.ac.uk

7. Leave of absence

Students who leave Edinburgh during the dissertation writing period (or any other part of the academic year) for more than 4 weeks at a time must ask their Student Adviser to complete a Leave of Absence Form for them. It is the responsibility of each individual student to check that their absence does not violate the conditions either of their visa and/or funding body.

8. Formal requirements

8.1 Maximum word count

The dissertation word count differs by programme. Any programme specific requirements around word count will be specified on your programme's dissertation Learn page. For most taught MSc programmes in SPS, the dissertation word limit is 15,000. For a small number of taught MSc programmes, the limit is 10,000. For the MSc by Research in SPS the limit is 18,000 words. Some programmes' dissertations include a portion of their 15,000 words as a research proposal. Placement based dissertations will involve a 12,000 word dissertation accompanied by a 3,000 word piece of reflective writing.

In all cases, the word count includes footnotes and endnotes (if any), in-text references, tables and diagrams, but excludes title, acknowledgements, bibliography, appendices, cover page,

abstract and the table of contents. Please note that appendices should be kept to a minimum and should not be used to substantially extend the core arguments of the dissertation.

In all cases, word count penalties will be applied if a dissertation exceeds the prescribed maximum limit.

8.2 Formatting

The dissertation should be typed in a standard font, such as Times, Times New Roman or Arial, set at 12-point text size for body text and 11-point text size for footnotes.

The full text should come in 1.5 or double line spacing, with standard margins and page numbers. Avoid running headers/footers as they distract from the content. The front matter consists of:

- Cover Sheet (available on the dissertation LEARN page), which acts as the front page. It must include the student's examination number (not the matriculation number), the dissertation title and actual word count.
- (optional) List of acknowledgements e.g. people who have supported you in the dissertation process – note that acknowledgements are not included in the overall word count.
- Abstract of the contents of the dissertation of no more than 200 words, which should be placed immediately after the cover sheet. [Consult journals for examples of abstracts].
- Table of contents that provides an overview of chapter headings, subsections and page number, should precede the main text.

9. Good Academic Practice and guidance on how to avoid academic misconduct

As with all coursework, in the dissertation you must take care to follow standards of good academic practice and to avoid academic misconduct. Academic misconduct can carry very serious penalties, even if you committed it unintentionally. If there is anything you are not clear about, you should speak with your supervisor.

It is your responsibility to read the University of Edinburgh's official information and guidance about academic misconduct and be aware of the regulations.

For School-specific guidance on this topic, please visit the School's website:

<https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/students/postgraduate/current/taught-msc/assessment/how-to-avoid-academic-misconduct>

For further details on plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct, and how to avoid them, visit the university's *Institute for Academic Development* webpages:

- [Good academic practice - Institute for Academic Development](#)

- [Video - Guidance on investigations into accusations of student misconduct, and the role of College and School Officers in these procedures.](#)

If you have any questions or would like to discuss anything related to matters of academic misconduct, contact your Cohort Lead or the School Academic Misconduct Officer (PG) at pgsamo.sps@ed.ac.uk

10. Submission Deadline and Penalties

Students must submit an electronic version (in .doc or .docx format **only**) of their dissertation to Turnitin Feedback Studio via the dissertation course Learn page by **Wednesday 13th August 2026 at 23:59 (UK time)**.

There is no requirement to produce and submit a paper copy. Electronic submission through Turnitin Feedback Studio is sufficient. Students must put their exam number (not matriculation number) in the file name. For information, help and advice on the submission process, please see [here](#). Instructions will also be emailed to students and made available on the dissertation LEARN page.

10.1 Late Submissions & Penalty

Students are expected to submit their dissertation on time. Submitting later than this deadline without an extension or extra time adjustment will incur a lateness penalty.

Dissertations submitted late incur a lateness penalty of 5 marks for each calendar day of lateness up to a maximum of 7 calendar days, after which a mark of zero '0' will be given.

Submission drop boxes will be closed 18 days after the main deadline i.e. 23.59 on 31st August 2026. Students will not be permitted to submit after this date for any reason, including those that have exceptional circumstances, in order to allow the work to be marked in time for the Board of Examiners and November graduation. Students who do not submit work will be awarded a mark of zero '0'.

Any submission errors that prevent the work being marked (i.e. wrong dissertation uploaded, corrupt file) will be handled as late, and reviewed on a case by case basis.

10.2 Word Count Penalty

The penalty for excessive word count in a piece of coursework on a SPS course is 5-marks. These 5 marks will be deducted regardless of how many words over the limit the work is (whether it is by 1 word or by 500). If the assessment is very far over the word count limit, a marker may also decide that any text beyond the word count limit will be excluded from the evaluation of the coursework, and the mark will be based only on the writing up to the word count limit.

11. Extensions and Exceptional Circumstances

Where a situation beyond your control has an adverse impact on your academic performance, including the submission of your dissertation, you can apply for a coursework

extension and/or for exceptional circumstances via the Exceptional Circumstances Service. Full details can be accessed via: [Exceptional Circumstances Service](#)

Students should note that IT failure and/or poor time management are not normally sufficient justification for the consideration of an approved extension. Students are advised to begin the submission process well in advance of the 23.59 on the deadline to avoid these issues.

Students who are unable to submit before the closure of the submission drop box due to exceptional circumstances which are applied for in a timely manner and subsequently approved, should note that the likely outcome is that they will be awarded a null sit and be granted an opportunity to submit the work during the next assessment diet of the following year (typically November or February). Their award and graduation will consequently be delayed.

12. Referencing and sources

As in all written coursework, all sources used in the dissertation needs to be accurately referenced. There are many academically valid referencing styles, and there is no single uniform citation style that students are required to adhere to. However, the Postgraduate Teaching Office recommends parsimonious in- text styles, such as the Harvard System, because any footnotes or endnotes count towards the overall word limit.

References need to

- **give complete bibliographic information** (or match with a relevant item in the bibliography).
- **indicate the relevant page number(s) for direct citations** (indicating page number(s) for indirect citations can facilitate marking but is not a necessary requirement), and
- **be consistent in style** (punctuation, spacing, font type and format).

Every dissertation should come with a full bibliography, which lists all sources used, in alphabetical order. This list should only include sources cited in the text, meaning that each item in the bibliography should have a corresponding citation. Students are allowed to use citation software such as Endnote or Zotero. The [Learning and Academic Skills Handbook](#) contains a section on referencing as well as links to further sources on the issue.

If you have questions about how to reference appropriately in your dissertation, discuss these with your supervisor.

13. Assessment Process and Results

All standard dissertations are marked anonymously according to the [postgraduate marking scheme](#). Two internal examiners read and mark each dissertation independently from each other, before comparing their feedback and agreeing a mark. The supervisor can be one of the markers.

13.1 External Examiner involvement

Once all dissertations are marked, a sample is sent to an external examiner, who reads the

dissertations and reviews the marks and feedback comments.

13.2 Confirmation of Final Marks and Feedback

Final marks of dissertations are ratified at Board of Examiners, usually in late October and published by **the start of November 2026**.

Anonymised dissertation feedback and overall degree results are published and available to students by **the start of November 2026** in the line with the University [Key Dates](#)

14. Freedom of Information Requests & Dissertations

With your consent, the School may retain a copy of your dissertation and make it available to other students to assist them in completing their own dissertation. Where your work is made available, it will be anonymized added to the dissertation library. The cover sheet you attached to your dissertation before submitting will ask if you are happy to consent to this.

The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 requires the University to make available to any enquirer any information held by the university, unless one of the legislation's narrowly defined exemptions apply.

If, with your consent, a copy of your dissertation is retained beyond the period of assessment, information contained within may be made available to any enquirer. If your dissertation contains confidential information, i.e. data that has been provided to you by external bodies under a Non-Disclosure Agreement or Data Processing Agreement, where confidentiality and integrity must be preserved; or personal or sensitive data belonging to research participants (information relating to natural persons who can be identified directly or indirectly from the information contained within your dissertation), you should not consent to your dissertation being retained.

If you do not consent to your work being retained we will destroy the work as per [Taught Assessment Regulation 49](#).

PART B: HOW TO WRITE A GREAT DISSERTATION

This section contains general guidance on dissertation writing. However, please remember that there may be programme-specific expectations which differ from the advice here. Your programme should provide additional guidance on these expectations, and assessment criteria. If in doubt about anything, please consult with your supervisor.

The dissertation is the element of an MSc degree that most clearly differentiates it as an 'advanced' course. It is also the point at which the student progresses from the externally structured study of set courses to independent self-structured study. For these reasons, it is vital (a) that you make full use of the experience and guidance of staff members, especially the supervisor, and (b) that both student and supervisor have a clear view of what is involved in successfully undertaking and completing your dissertation, and plan the process accordingly.

Theoretical and conceptual engagement

The dissertation should be grounded in the theory/concepts, empirical data, and methods of your programme. Students are not required to generate their own original empirical data, though they may do so where feasible and appropriate. Programmes differ in the extent to which they encourage students to conduct primary data collection through fieldwork, and the emphasis they place on research methods. Important in all programmes, however, will be the ability to apply relevant theoretical and conceptual insights to any empirical data used, and in turn to reflect critically on the adequacy of the chosen theories and concepts in the light of that material.

Defining your focus

The dissertation may vary in breadth of coverage. It must have a clear focus with definable boundaries. The subject should be chosen iteratively, on the basis of your own interests, discussion with teaching staff on your programme in the run-up to the dissertation (processes for doing this will vary by programme), your engagement with literature from your courses, and what is feasible in terms of the sources and time available. In the earliest planning stage, which should take place during the second semester alongside your other work, you should scan as many relevant sources as possible in order to narrow down your research topic. Once assigned, your supervisor will help you to further refine your project.

The dissertation is not an exposition of everything you have learned about your chosen topic. You must have a defined research question or problem – something specific you want to find an answer to. You are not writing a purely descriptive case study. Development of this question/problem is a crucial task that requires careful thought (see more below).

Working independently

The dissertation is not merely a literature or theory review. It is expected that you will show familiarity with the academic literature on your topic – and you should cite relevant literature to show this. However, you are expected to develop your own argument and conduct your own analysis on a specific and limited research problem. The dissertation is your own independent piece of research. Supervisors will not tell you everything you need to read, nor

will they take responsibility for the writing of the dissertation. They will provide initial guidance to get you started, then advise you at certain strategic points to ensure you are still on track and to alert you to any major problems/pitfalls. If you have problems you may approach your supervisor for advice. Don't depend only on your supervisor for advice: all staff members are willing to spend a few minutes to discuss research interests with any student in their weekly Guidance and Feedback Hours, and you should avail yourselves of this – especially at the early stages, when it may be helpful to have reading suggestions from everybody with relevant expertise.

1. Getting Started

The dissertation timeline will vary across programmes, as will expectations of what students should do for their dissertation. Your programme director will provide you with guidance on this. As soon as possible, identify your topic, your key research question, and think about how your readings and available source materials can answer that question.

It is a good idea to check from the very beginning that there is enough published material available on your proposed topic to make it viable to research – a quick search through relevant electronic databases (access them via DiscoverEd on the main Library web page) using relevant keywords should help. Most literature searches start with readings that are exactly about the proposed topic.

The next thing you should do is produce a fuller, projected outline of the dissertation. Minimally, this is like a table of contents, indicating the envisioned headings of the main chapters. But it is better to elaborate a bit, indicate some of the subsections you expect within chapters, and write a paragraph or two about what each chapter will do as well as a timetable for when you expect to meet your supervisor. This is not carved in stone, and can change as your work develops. But it is always best to work to a plan.

Once your supervisor has been assigned, make the most of initial feedback from your supervisor to hone your topic/question and identify key readings that will need to be done at the start. You should provide your supervisor with an abstract/dissertation summary and an outline of the dissertation as a basis for your first meeting, once supervision has formally begun.

If possible, try to complete the early stages of the work, which require meetings and may involve 'shaping' input from your supervisor, before the end of May/early June. Ideally you complete a full draft of the dissertation in July, and tie up a few loose ends till the August submission deadline. Your supervisor reads only one chapter, and is not allowed to read and comment on your entire dissertation. But supervisors may comment on the overall structure and organisation of the argument once the full draft is written. You could consider giving your supervisor a list of chapter headings with a short paragraphs, or an abstract of what each chapter contains.

2. Research process

Once you have worked out a topic, you need to develop a research question (some prefer

'research aim' or 'problematic'). When people say 'I want to look at....', they are identifying a research topic, but this is not a question yet. When our language shifts to 'I want to know why, how, what (etc.)....', that is a sign that a research question is taking shape. Formulating and articulating a well-defined and feasible research question/aim is crucial for the success of your dissertation.

The research question provides a specific angle from which to study your topic. It helps you focus your work and delineate its boundaries. However, establishing a research question right from the start of your project can sometimes be difficult. Ask yourself: what is it I want to find out? Often, research questions change during the research process. This is okay, as long as you are aware of how changes to your research aim affect the rest of your project.

The research question will be shaped by what you read but you certainly cannot read everything on your topic. Try to be discerning rather than exhaustive. Start by focusing on key texts and highest quality published work. To identify these, you will need to skim read comprehensively. You might find it useful to think of this process in two stages:

1.1 Stage I

- Coverage of field/topic, general familiarisation
- Grasp broad themes, theories and positions in debates
- Identify available bodies of literature and sources
- Isolate pertinent sources for your research question(s)

1.2 Stage II

- Focus on relevant material.
- Ask yourself: what research question am I asking? What claims am I making to answer it? What kind of evidence or argumentation do I need for them? Where would it be?
- While reading ask: how does this particular book/article/interview speak to my argument? Which claim might it support? Always read critically.

1.3 Stage III

- Dissertations are written with a wide array of ideas and data from a variety of sources. Ultimately, the presentation of these ideas/data has to be in a linear order (introduction-main body-conclusion). Ordering all the ideas/data so that they unfold your argument step-by-step is the key challenge of the writing process.
- Try using post-its for dynamic mindmapping: write down everything you find interesting on post-it notes. Record the source on the note, so you know where it is from. Then put all these post-its into thematic clusters. Then take the clusters and put them into an order that unfolds the argument. Then start writing. Keep reordering the post-its as you go along, either realizing that an

idea/data belongs to another thematic cluster, or that it cannot be fitted into your argument.

3. Structuring your argument

There are six basic structures that arguments in the social and political sciences commonly take. Typically, any dissertation has one overarching structure. There can be sections within dissertations that use another structure (e.g. the structure is overall "evaluative" but has some "comparative" parts in it). Sometimes an argument can be a combination of two structures, but even then, one structure will usually be primary. Almost every time when students "feel lost" and "don't know what to write next," it is because they have not yet worked out what the structure of their overall argument is.

1. **Categorical:** discuss items in any order, side-by-side. Example: There are different ways that societies make sense of why evil and misfortune exist when God/the Cosmos are supposed to be good (the problem of theodicy). There are three key explanations: predestination, karma, and dualism. **The argument is: different forms of the same/similar exist, and this is what they look like.**
2. **Evaluative:** discuss the pros, then the cons (and possibly the neutral) of a hypothesis, claim, statement, usually another author's. Example: Max Weber argues that there are only three rational types of theodicy. The arguments in favour of Weber are The arguments doubting Weber are **The argument is: a claim made by other scholars is correct, incorrect, or partially in/correct.**
3. **Chronological:** discuss early events first, later events later. Example: Historically, different answers to the problem of theodicy have been developed. Probably the earliest answer is dualism ... **The argument is: the world has changed, and there is a logic to that change.**
4. **Comparative:** discuss two or more examples by comparing them in different dimensions. Example: Dualism, karma, and predestination each provide a different answer to the problem of theodicy. Dualism holds that..., karma holds that ..., predestination holds that **The argument is: two or more similar things are similar or different in specific ways.**
5. **Sequential:** discuss items in a logical/hierarchical sequence. Example: There are many answers to the problem of theodicy. Some of them provide a complete and consistent solution. Other answers are mixtures and not wholly consistent... **The argument is: the world is ordered in a certain logical/hierarchical way.**
6. **Causal:** discuss the phenomenon, then discuss the causes, then discuss the effects, then discuss possible solutions. Example: The

“spirit” of capitalism developed from Protestant, especially Calvinist, ideas of predestination. In this way, the care for materialist gain became an “iron cage.” **The argument is: something happened, and there are reasons for why it happened.**

Three levels of what "an argument" is about

The overall argument of a dissertation usually focuses on one of three levels: conceptual, empirical, or methodological. It can entail combinations of two or even all three, but typically any argument concerns one of these three:

- 1) **EMPIRICAL DATA:** ("This is what the world is like") What are the facts? What is the empirical evidence used to make an argument? An argument can assess the validity of empirical data, and pitch different sources of evidence against each other.
- 2) **CONCEPTS/THEORY:** ("This is what it all means") How does an author make sense of empirical findings? An argument can be made that a certain concept/theory helps to make sense of empirical data, or that another concept is needed.
- 3) **METHODOLOGY:** ("This is how we know what the world is like") How where the empirical data collected? An argument can be made that a different methodology would have produced a different set of empirical data.

Each of these three dimensions can be written about with one of the six structures. E.g. a sequential discussion of ethnographic evidence; evaluate concepts and theories; compare the usefulness of different methodological approaches, etc.

4. Dissertation structure

Structuring your dissertation means unfolding your overall argument chapter by chapter, section by section, and sentence by sentence. The development of the argument should be logical and systematic, so that you produce a rational passage of argumentation. You need to communicate this unfolding process to the reader by signalling, at frequent and pivotal points through the text, where you and s/he have got to so far in that unfolding process of argument.

Break your work into chapters, sections, and paragraphs, and for each of them *think*: what is the central point I want to make in this chapter/section/paragraph/sentence?

Then, *think*: how does the point in this sentence contribute to the point I want to make in the paragraph; how does the point I’m making in the paragraph contribute to the point I’m making in the section; how does the point made in the section contribute to the core claim of the chapter; how does the central claim of the chapter build in to my overall thesis? Put those core points/claims at the beginnings of your paragraphs, sections and chapters. Link and signal from one paragraph to another, from one section to another, and from one chapter to another.

The usual structure of a 15,000 word MSc dissertation is an introduction (ca. 2500 words), three or four substantive chapters (each ca. 2500-3000 words), and a conclusion (ca. 1000-2000 words). As stated above, please note that word counts differ by programme. The introduction spells out the focus of the study and its objectives or research questions, explaining why these were interesting to the author and 'locating' them in the field. It should also include an outline of the subsequent chapters. In cases where a student collected his/her own empirical data, the next chapter (or final section of the introduction) usually provides an account and justification of the research design and methodology adopted. How the next substantive chapters are organised will depend on the nature of the research. However, you must ensure that your treatment is analytical, integrating conceptual, empirical and methodological insights. This integration may run through the body of the work or it may take place largely in an analysis chapter. The conclusion should reflect on the implications of your findings for wider theory and where relevant, for practice, picking up themes about the rationale of the study in your introduction.

Each substantive chapter should have a clear beginning and end which between them signpost clearly (a) how this chapter fits into the rest of the dissertation, (b) the structure of the chapter, (c) the main points which the reader should take from it.

Always ensure that your argumentation is as tight as possible and clearly presented. Note that introductory (as well as concluding) chapters are often best written last. If the dissertation includes a section on methodology, this is usually the best place to start the entire writing process.

5. MSc by Research Dissertation Structure (Research Proposal format)

The dissertation for an MSc by Research can take either the form of an independent research project which follows the structure of taught dissertations or that of a research proposal. The latter option is usually recommended when a student is planning to go on to study for a PhD.

If the dissertation is written in the form of a research proposal, it will contain an extended review of the literature, establishing the research questions, plus an extended discussion of the likely research design and any methodological issues. A short pilot study could complement the proposal. Alternatively, the dissertation may comprise a discrete piece of (usually empirical) research, possibly a pilot study for the eventual doctoral research or a standalone project. This will usually incorporate a literature review, research questions, research design and methodology, data collection and analysis elements, discussion and conclusions.

6. Relevant literature and referencing

Your dissertation must speak to the relevant literature. However, you are not required to devote an entire chapter to a formal literature review. Expectations around this differ by programme, and may also differ according to the approach you are taking. It is sometimes useful to write a 'background' as a draft chapter which includes descriptive material and a literature review to help you organize and clarify your knowledge of the field. However, this does not have to be included in your final dissertation in this format. In your final dissertation you should only provide as much background material as the reader really

needs in order to grasp the aim, justification, and context of your thesis. This can be organised in different ways – for example, within the introduction, within a background chapter or woven into the narrative of subsequent chapters. (You should discuss with your supervisor which might be most appropriate for your particular dissertation.)

Referencing is an important skill that helps you explain and develop the argument in your thesis. It is essential that readers are able to verify the claims made in your dissertation. Referencing enables them to check where you have found data, to ensure that you have understood the sources you cite, and to read further about your topic. References need to be complete and consistent. They *must* contain all the information necessary for a reader to retrieve the same information you found: author, title, page numbers etc.

References are used to identify data or evidence, unless it is commonly known, to identify particular arguments advanced by authors, and when quoting from a source. Please note that page numbers must be given even when you are not quoting, unless you are referring merely to the gist of the argument, or an argument that is developed throughout the text.

6.1 End/foot notes

Even if you are using in-text citations for referencing, you may still need to use footnotes or endnotes for content notes (providing supplementary or explanatory information to in-text content). However, use these sparingly, if at all. Your bibliography (or list of References) should include everything referred to in the text. It must be in alphabetical order by first author's surname. Every citation in the text must be matched to an entry on your list of references or bibliography, so check this throughout the final document.

6.2 Quotations

Do not load your dissertation with them in the hope that if you string enough of them together they will make your argument for you. Deploy them sparingly, usually when there is something particularly important or striking about the precise wording of the source, and ensure that they are accurate and appropriately referenced. A good guide is to quote if the author has put something in a way you cannot match, but otherwise to put it in your own words (but still cite). Quotations of more than 4 lines (or about 40 words) should be indented and in single-line spacing.

6.3 Sources

Be careful when using internet sources which are not online versions of published journals, texts or official documents. Be cautious with material which has not undergone the quality control or expert review of published academic material. Of course many of you will be using quality sources on the web – e.g. NGO reports, media reportage – which may be useful as primary sources. Indeed, the Internet may be best utilised as an extensive library for primary documentary sources, such as government publications, manifestos, official statistics, etc, which would otherwise be difficult to obtain. But in all cases you need to be critical about the sources you consult. Similarly, do not use print or broadcast media as a substitute for academic research. The media can, however, be useful for accessing primary sources, e.g. politicians' interventions, opinion poll data, or editorial content where this is relevant to your dissertation research. If you cite news sources as evidence of events, do so

only when a strong reason can be given for doing so.

You should also think critically about the quality of the journals and books you consult – there is a vast difference between a book published by a ‘vanity’ press and a serious University Press. Similarly, think about the author – are they a journalist? Is it a memoir? Or an academic account? What sort of evidence do they use? All three are valuable sources, but in different ways, and they should not be consulted uncritically. Finally, make sure you take good notes of your reading and maintain a comprehensive and accurate bibliography throughout.

7. Further writing tips

- Good habits count – get used to writing at least a few hundred words per day, every day of the writing up period (these won’t necessarily end up in the final text, but they’ll make you more prepared to create that text).
- One way of adding significant value is to finish your penultimate draft several weeks before the deadline. Read through it again carefully after a break to conduct edits - you will almost certainly spot passages to amend, strengthen, delete which you may have missed previously.
- Make sure you do a proof-read to catch errors. You could consider swapping dissertations with a friend and proof-reading each other’s. Proof-read for different purposes. Try to read your work separately for typos, spelling mistakes, sentence structure etc., and then for overall structure, argument etc. Check citations in the text against its counterpart on the bibliography.
- You might find useful published dissertation guides such as: Kathleen McMillan & Jonathan Weyers (2009) *How to Write Dissertations and Project Reports* (on HUB reserve in Main Library) or Rowena Murray, *How to Write A Thesis* (2006, e-book available through the DiscoverEd).
- Consider using computer software designed for long and complex pieces of writing, beyond MS Word. Top recommendations include: *Evernote* (for collecting sources found on the www: evernote.com), *Scrivener* (for organizing and writing: <https://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener/overview>), and *Zotero* for references.

PART C: PLACEMENT-BASED DISSERTATIONS

The following guidelines are only relevant to students doing a placement-based dissertation.

1. Features of placement-based dissertations

The placement-based dissertation partners students with host organisations to address specific real-world research questions. Placement-based dissertations provide excellent opportunities for students to think through theoretical ideas in real-world contexts and to gain transferable skills through applied, practical experience. Students work with a partner organisation for a period of 8-10 weeks. Placements may be located either in the UK or internationally, and some can be completed on a fully remote basis. Any in-person research is subject to both School ethics approval and risk assessment approval from SWAY.

The dissertation task given to you by the host organisation may vary in scope. Previous placement students have produced briefing papers, literature reviews, project progress reports, field monitoring reports, grant proposals, annual reports, policy documents, and field-based research outputs.

The data gathered during the placement forms the basis of the project report. At the end of the dissertation period, the report will be submitted to both the University (as the dissertation) and the host organisation. In addition to the report, you will submit a pre-agreed secondary output to the host organisation (for example, a two-page executive summary, blog post, short policy paper), and submit a piece of reflective writing to be marked alongside your dissertation.

Like all MSc students, placement students are expected to demonstrate their ability to engage critically and analytically with both empirical evidence and literature from the field, building upon relevant concepts and theory covered in the taught element of the degree. As with all dissertations, your work must have a clear focus with definable boundaries.

Placement-based dissertations will be based on a research question or theme agreed in advance with the host organisation. Students will be supervised by both an academic at the University and a member of staff at the host organisation. This supervisory team will help students to refine the project (e.g. questions, methods, literature) once a placement has been confirmed.

Working with external host organisations can be challenging. The University of Edinburgh accepts no responsibility for the success of placement-based dissertations and students who choose to undertake projects are advised that they should be fully aware of the risks of the placement research activities not working out as planned. Even in the event that collaboration with a host proves difficult, students will be able to succeed in their

dissertation through engagement with literature from their field and reflection on the process.

For further information about previous projects and host organisations, visit the *Placement-Based Dissertation 2025/26* site course, available through 'My courses' in Learn.

2. Placement eligibility

Placement selection is competitive and open only to students on approved MSc programmes noted below:

- *Africa & International Development*
- *Comparative Public Policy*
- *Conflict, Security & Development*
- *Global Environment, Politics & Society*
- *Global Health Policy*
- *Global Mental Health and Society*
- *International & European Politics*
- *International Development*
- *International Development (Online Distance Learning)*
- *Management of Bioeconomy, Innovation and Governance*
- *Medical Anthropology*
- *Public Policy*
- *Science & Technology in Society*
- *Social Research*
- *Sociology & Global Change*

Placements will be allocated based on academic performance in Semester 1 and evidence of relevant skills and interests. Full-time students require an average mark in semester one of 60% or higher. Part-time students require at least a 60% average mark across all courses previously taken. Students are required to complete a placement grade declaration form at the end of Semester 1 detailing their average mark and courses if pursuing the PBD route.

3. Securing a placement

Placements may be secured through either:

- **Advertised Placement** -Application to a project sourced by the SWAY Placements Adviser
or
- **Student-Led Placement** - Through individual student led negotiation with a host organisation

3.1 Advertised placements

Projects will be advertised to students via the *InPlace* system. Advertised projects have already been negotiated and confirmed with the host organisation. Each project outline will provide an overview of the subject matter, any specific practical/academic skills or previous experience required and may include suggested research methodologies. Some projects may contain very specific details of the work to be undertaken while others may be broader. All projects will require the student to take an active role in shaping the scope of the research. Once a placement has been confirmed, students should expect to work closely with their host supervisor to refine the project and agree a clearly defined research question.

Advertised projects will be released on **Wednesday 10th December 2025** via the *InPlace* portal. The student application window opens on *InPlace* on Monday 5th January 2026 and closes on **Monday 12th January 2026 at 12noon GMT**.

Students should read the project outlines carefully and consider whether the research area fits with their own interests, experience, and degree programme. Any questions about the projects should be directed to the SWAY Placements Adviser, swayplacements@ed.ac.uk, **not** the host organisation.

Eligible students can apply for up to 5 projects. Students can submit applications via an online system called *InPlace*. For each project students submit a CV and a tailored cover letter.

The placement selection panel will meet in early-February to consider all applications. The panel will usually propose one candidate per project. The CV and cover letter will then be sent to the host organisation for their approval. The host organisation will interview the proposed candidate (via video call) before final confirmation of the placement is provided.

Once a placement has been confirmed, students are expected to honour their commitment to the host organisation. Only in exceptional circumstances will a placement be changed or cancelled after a project has been accepted.

3.2 Student-led placements

Eligible students may instead choose to set up their own placement. Individuals interested in this type of placement should request a meeting with the SWAY Placements Adviser to discuss their research interests in more detail. The student will be responsible for initiating and leading all communications with the potential host organisation.

When the student has received confirmation that the organisation will host the project, they should contact the SWAY Placements Adviser for the placement to be approved and to begin the formalisation process- swayplacements@ed.ac.uk .

4. Placement structure and formalisation

Placements typically last 8-10 weeks and take place at the end of the second semester. Usually, students conduct their placement research in May and June with a further six weeks writing up their research.

All placements must be formalised through the completion of a **Confirmed Project Outline**. This document provides an updated version of the provisional project outline advertised to students in December, or, in the case of student led projects that the student submitted in February. The confirmed project outline ensures a common understanding of the placement project is in place **before** the student starts. The SWAY Placements Adviser will provide a template document which is also available via the PBD Learn Page. The Confirmed Project Outline must be signed by student, academic supervisor and host organisation prior to the start of the placement and a final copy submitted to the SWAY Placements Adviser, swayplacements@ed.ac.uk.

5. Supervision and support

Your supervisors (both academic and in the host organisation), your Programme Director and the Placements Adviser will support you throughout the entire placement process.

5.1 Academic Supervision

Academic supervision of the placement-based dissertations is the same as for desk-based dissertations. See Part A, sections 2-3.

5.2 Host organisation supervision

The host organisation will appoint a placement supervisor for the duration of the project. They will provide organisational support and advice, including guidance on how the research fits with the wider organisational aims, how and where to begin data collection and introductions to relevant individuals. The host supervisor may also provide guidance on the structure of the report.

5.3 SWAY Placements Adviser

The SWAY Placements Adviser can offer advice and support on how to organise and manage the practical aspects of the placement. Following the selection panel in early-February, the SWAY Placements Adviser will connect proposed candidates with host organisations to begin the formalisation process.

Pre-placement:

- Liaison with the organisation, defining the project and formalisation via the Confirmed Project Outline
- Guiding the student through the in-person placement activity approval process where appropriate

On Placement:

- The SWAY Placements Adviser will be the first point of contact while on placement for any issues relating to the practical aspects of the placement. Questions regarding the research content of the placement or structure of the final report should be directed to the academic supervisor.

6. The Dissertation and Reflection

In August, the student will submit a 15,000-word dissertation that is based on the work undertaken on the placement. The document will feature a 3,000-word reflective diary (based on material compiled during the placement), and a 12,000-word dissertation (N some programmes have a 10,000 word dissertation).

Please note, the deadline for this submission of the placement-based dissertation is the same as the standard desk-based dissertation (see Part A).

The reflective diary (maximum 3,000-words)

Throughout the placement, the student will send fortnightly progress reports to the academic supervisor and the SWAY Placements Adviser. These reports will later be compiled into a single document for inclusion in the dissertation (note, these reports can be edited upon completion of the placement and prior to the final submission of the dissertation). This is the Diary.

The diary should be written with the following goals in mind:

- Tracking the development of the placement
- Commenting in a reflexive and self-critical manner on methodological (e.g. 'positionality,' 'gatekeepers', access to data etc.) and ethical issues arising as the student executes the project placement.
- Reporting on the student's personal development within the work situation, making reference to the skills being developed.

The diary should include a description of the work undertaken, an analysis of how this work fits into the overall aims and objectives of the placement, a description and analysis of any obstacles encountered in fulfilling these aims and objectives, and a description and analysis of the attempts made to overcome these obstacles. The diary will not be shared with the host organisation and so you can write openly about challenges you have encountered.

Report for the host organisation

The dissertation must also be submitted to the host organisation. The diary portion of the dissertation should be removed. The agreed secondary output is only submitted to the host organisation (it is not marked) usually within one month of your dissertation submission date.