



MSc Dissertation Handbook 2020-21

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A copy of this document is also available [here](#).

PART A: POLICIES AND REGULATIONS

1. Dissertation deadline: Thursday 12 August 2021 at 23:59 (UK Time)

The dissertation deadline is set by the Graduate School and is the same for all MSc 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.

For students undertaking the **MSc Energy, Society and Sustainability**, please note the Dissertation deadline is **Thursday 5 August 2021 at 12:00 Noon (UK Time)**. Students are advised to follow the programme specific guidance in the MSc Energy, Society and Sustainability Dissertation Handbook, which will be available on the programme level Learn page. For further guidance, please contact the Programme Director kirsten.jenkins@ed.ac.uk or Administrator Kathryn Will, Kath.Will@ed.ac.uk.

2. Scope of the dissertation

Every MSc Programme in the School has 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 organise effectively 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. 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 can also be found in programme-specific handbooks and in the [Degree Programme Table \(DPT\)](#).

3. Available support and supervision

The first port of call for all questions relating to the dissertation is the MSc Programme Director (PD).

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.

Supervisors are allocated by PDs in liaison with subject areas. The supervisor accompanies students throughout the dissertation writing period. Most programmes allocate supervisors between January and March, and start the formal supervision period at the end of April. Some programmes start and finish the process earlier.

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.

Most dissertations are “desk-based”, meaning they are based on readings of the literature and not on a student’s own fieldwork data. However, some MSc programmes let students conduct a limited amount of fieldwork. Students should be aware that taught MSc programmes are not 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 risk assessment ([for more information on risk assessment, please see Section 7](#)). 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.

4. 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 and/or skype, esp. for placement-based students
- feedback on a dissertation outline or a schedule of work
- feedback on one draft chapter (but not the draft of the whole thesis)
- 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 Ethic approval below).

- help with issues regarding structure and cohesion of the argument

Students should not assume that they will be able to meet supervisors 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 provide theoretical frameworks or lists of specific readings. Should there be any problems impeding their work, students should raise this either with their personal tutor or with their supervisor. Work should be submitted in good time, and students should contact the supervisor and negotiate alternatives if unable to meet agreed arrangements.

Most supervisors will be away for parts (or most) of the summer, on holidays or carrying out research commitments. When they are not away, they may be otherwise heavily committed. Some subject areas will not offer any supervision in July (e.g. Sociology, which also starts the process earlier), most will offer no supervision during August.

5. Dissertation guidance and samples of previous years' work

Apart from the project-specific guidance provided by the dissertation supervisor and programme director, there is a range of more general resources students can consult. Please see [here](#) for an overview of guidance and resources available. All students have access to the [dissertation library of the Graduate School](#), which only contains dissertations that achieved a very good mark. The Library will be available from April 2021.

6. Ethics approval

The School attaches great importance to research ethics, and has developed rigorous procedures for ensuring proper ethical review and accountability. All research carried out by members of the School, including postgraduate dissertation projects, is subject to these procedures. All students should reflect on the potential ethical implications of their projects before fully embarking onto the research process. This will allow time to resolve or minimise any such problems, or to gain necessary permissions from third parties. Note that certain kinds of empirical research routinely require a more detailed level of ethical scrutiny, such as:

- work with children, young people or vulnerable adults.
- research related to medical issues
- work involving discussion or investigation of illegal activities
- research in which those investigated may not be aware that they are being researched, or may not be fully aware of the objectives of the research

All students are asked to fill in the online SPS ethics self-assessment form which can be found [here](#). The page also includes details on the process as well as for good practice guidance. Desk-based dissertations usually pose no ethical problems.

On page 1 of the form, students will be asked to specify their supervisor and/or course organiser. For students completing the form for their MSc dissertation, it is important that they list their dissertation supervisor here and leave the course organiser box BLANK. Otherwise, the form will be sent to the wrong person. If their supervisor does not appear in the drop down list, please select '*specify someone not in the list*' and add in their details.

All of the questions asked on the form are directly related to the type of research to be undertaken and so it should be a straightforward form to complete. The form can be saved and returned to at a later point, so students can clarify any issues with their supervisors as they complete the process. To resume a submission, go to http://ethics.sps.ed.ac.uk/your_submissions

Once submitted, the supervisor will be in touch via email. Students should check their Clutter and Junk folders on their University student email account in case any of the communications are sent there.

If for any reason students need to update, revise, or check the status of their form, this can be done by logging in at: http://ethics.sps.ed.ac.uk/your_submissions.

Note that fieldwork must not be started by students until they have received ethics approval.

7. Risk assessment and insurance

Any travel undertaken for dissertation research, whether within the UK or overseas, is subject to a risk assessment procedure. The University of Edinburgh does not take responsibility for the well-being and safety of students carrying out field work, either in the United Kingdom or in other countries. It is therefore each student's own responsibility to take out adequate insurance and be alert to the demands that may be made upon them by unfamiliar circumstances.

Risk assessment form:

http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/gradschool/current_students/taught_msc_students/dissertations/risk_assessment

All students travelling overseas must obtain travel/medical insurance for the duration of your placement. University insurance is mandatory and free. You must register for an insurance policy with the University and evidence of this policy must be obtained before any placement/fieldwork funding can be released.

Insurance application form: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/staff/business-travel/travel-insurance/insurance-applicationform>

To create a record of any planned overseas travel and attain approval by the School, students should fill in [this online form](#) well in advance of their field trips abroad.

COVID-19 advice for 2020/21:

Students may conduct fieldwork in the UK or in their country of residence subject to local public health guidelines. Students may be permitted to travel internationally for fieldwork provided they meet the following criteria:

- The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>) does not advise, “against all but essential travel” to their fieldwork country. This guidance applies to both UK and international students.
- The host country is not in a lockdown/ state of emergency/ facing any other significant crises
- Students are able to meet any visa/entry requirements for their host country
- Students have successfully completed a robust risk assessment two months before their departure date:

http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/gradschool/current_students/taught_msc_students/dissertations/risk_assessment

After the successful completion of this risk assessment, students must obtain travel/medical University insurance for the duration of their fieldwork and are not permitted to purchase their own insurance.

Insurance application form: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/staff/business-travel/travel-insurance>.

Placement-Based dissertations

Projects for the placement-based dissertations will be conducted on an online basis given the current number of FCDO travel restrictions across countries. If a student is allocated a project by the work placements team/ sourced their own project, the work placements team will decide in March if students would be able to travel overseas to their placements, and students will be requested to complete a risk assessment by the team. More guidance will be issued on this via the placement-based dissertation LEARN page in February.

8. 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 Programme Director or Student Support Officer 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.

9. Formal requirements

Maximum word count: A limit of 15,000 words applies to all 60-credit Dissertations for taught SPS MSc programmes (this includes the dissertations for the MSc by Research in STIS). For the MSc by Research in SPS the limit is 18,000 words. This includes the table of contents, tables and footnotes/endnotes, but *excludes* title page, abstract, bibliography and appendices. 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, penalties will be applied if a dissertation exceeds the prescribed maximum limit.

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:

- the 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 degree programme, the dissertation title, academic year and actual word count.
- an abstract of the contents of the dissertation of no more than 200 words, which should be placed immediately after the feedback sheet. [Consult journals for examples of abstracts].
- a table of contents that provides an overview of chapter headings, subsections and page number, should precede the main text.

10. Guidance on how to avoid academic misconduct (including plagiarism)

Plagiarism is giving the impression that information you have included in an assignment is your own idea or your own words, when actually it is not. Every year, students receive penalties for plagiarism despite having no intention of doing anything wrong, so it is really important that you understand how to reference ideas and indicate quotes from others' work correctly.

To avoid plagiarism, write in your own words (your own 'voice') as much as possible, including in your notes so to avoid accidental plagiarism, providing a citation (see below) to show whose ideas you are using. Close paraphrasing, i.e. using a chunk of someone else's text and just rearranging or changing some words, is plagiarism.

Use a recognised referencing system such as the Harvard system. Every time you include information such as facts or ideas from others' work, add an in-text citation, giving the author(s) and published date of the source (paper, book, website etc), like this:

Pro-environmental values do not necessarily lead to action (Barr, 2006).

Then list all the sources you have cited in a reference list at the end of the assignment. Do not use other students' work as sources for your own unless this is advised by the course organiser.

How to cite sources you haven't read yourself, ONLY if it's impossible to read them: If you read an article/book by Smith that refers to work by Zhang, and you want to discuss the work of Zhang in your assignment, read Zhang's work yourself and give your own summary of it. If that is not possible, then you should cite what you have read about Zhang's work in Smith's article/book like this:

Zhang, 2015, as cited by Smith, 2019 OR Zhang, 2015, in Smith, 2019

Using someone else's words (direct quoting): Use quotation marks (" ") to indicate where you have quoted (copied the exact words of) someone else, AND provide the reference, including page number(s) where the quote is to be found in the original source, like this:

Values are "guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity" (Schwartz, 1994, p.21).

Avoid using a lot of quotes; more than 2 or 3 in an essay normally means you are not expressing ideas in your own words enough.

If you copy statistics, tables, or diagrams directly from others' work, you should clearly state the source, including a page number if possible.

You must not copy from an assignment you previously submitted for credit, either at this university or another. This is self-plagiarism. If you retake a course, an assignment (or any part of it) submitted one year cannot be resubmitted in a different year. Similarly, you must not copy from a previously submitted assignment into a resit assignment for the same course, or from an assignment for one course into an assignment for a different course, either in the same year or a different year.

To detect plagiarism we use *Turnitin* software, which compares students' assignments against a constantly-updated global database of existing work. Students who have included plagiarised or self-plagiarised material in their work will be reported to an Academic Misconduct Officer for investigation. Penalties range from 10 marks deducted to the assignment grade being reduced to zero.

Do not put your work through *Turnitin* yourself before submission. This can lead to you being investigated for academic misconduct by making it seem that an identical assignment already exists.

Use of translation software/services and proof-reading services

You must not use translation software or services (including unpaid services of friends or relatives) to translate your assignments from another language into English, as this means the work is not yours alone. It is best to write as well as submit your work in English. You are allowed to write in another language and then translate the work yourself but this is not very efficient.

A proof-reader is a person who may make suggestions for minor changes to spelling, punctuation, grammar, and syntax in order to improve the readability of written assignments. There is a University of Edinburgh proof-reading service for students whose first language is not English, and for those who have a learning adjustment schedule allowing use of a proof-reader. You are also allowed to use a proof-reader (a friend, family member, or paid professional) who is not part of the University service but there are strict guidelines about what proof-readers are allowed to do. You must read these guidelines and share them with anyone you ask to proof-read your work who is not part of the University proof-reading service. If you do not follow the guidance, you may be reported for academic misconduct if the proof-reader has altered the work too much for it to be considered solely yours. The guidelines are available here: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/arts-humanities-soc-sci/taught-students/student-conduct/academic-misconduct>.

General Information

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

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/undergraduate/good-practice>

Also see this useful video and further information on the University website:

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/arts-humanities-soc-sci/taught-students/student-conduct/academic-misconduct>

If you have any questions or would like to discuss anything related to matters of academic misconduct, contact your personal tutor or the School Deputy Academic Misconduct Officer, Dr Nathan Coombs (nathan.coombs@ed.ac.uk).

11. Proofreading and good academic practice

Students are allowed to make use of a proofreading service to help ensure that formal mistakes, such as grammatical and spelling errors and problems with word order are kept to a minimum. Students can also rely on other paid or unpaid proofreading services as long as the proof reader only checks spelling, grammar, and general clarity of written English. They should not advise on issues of content, style, or argumentation. The use of services that offer more comprehensive editing and rewriting is not permissible. Any attempt of presenting others' work as one's own is taken as a serious academic offence, which can result in a 0% mark and the student facing a disciplinary procedure for academic misconduct.

12. Submission and penalties

Students have to submit an electronic version (in .doc or .docx format only) of their dissertation to ELMA by Thursday 12 August 2021 at 23:59 (UK time). Submitting later than this without an extension will incur a penalty. There is no requirement to produce and submit a paper copy. 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.

Submissions made after the deadline, without an approved extension, 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 0% (zero) will be given.

The dissertation must be submitted in the format recorded on ELMA and as per the emailed instructions. **A 5 mark lateness penalty will be applied if a student does not submit as per the instructions.** Work must be in the requested format, .doc or .docx (a submission in .pdf or other format would be incorrect). If a Course Administrator spots an incorrect submission, the student would be notified and asked to resubmit the work in the correct format within the following 24 hours. If the student failed to resubmit within this period, the standard 5 marks per calendar day lateness penalties would be applied.

No lateness penalty is applied if students have a justified and documented reason for late submission and arrange an extension in advance of the deadline. NOTE that computer problems or other technical failures are not regarded as valid reasons for requesting an extension.

Where there is evidence that the wrong piece of work has been deliberately submitted to subvert hand-in deadlines – e.g. in a deliberately corrupted file – the matter may be treated as a case of misconduct and be referred to the School Academic Misconduct Officer. The maximum penalty would be a mark of 0% (zero), which may have very serious consequences for the degree the student receives.

Exceeding the word count incurs a 5 mark penalty. These 5 marks will be deducted, regardless of how much you have exceeded the word count (whether it is by 5 words or by 500). The word limits are strict, there is no 10% or other grace on this.

Students must check their University email account up to 24 hours after the submission deadline for any communication from the Graduate School Office and be prepared to respond immediately.

13. Extensions

Extensions should be applied for in advance of the submission following the [appropriate procedure](#). Supporting evidence such as a medical certificate might be required for extensions of more than 5 calendar days.

Computer or printer failures are never regarded as adequate justification for an extension. Students are expected to back up their work regularly so that they have two independent up-to-date copies at all times. Students should also plan their submission well to work around potential delays due to high levels of traffic on University servers, which might affect their access to internet and/or IT facilities. Poor time management is also not normally a valid reason for an extension.

14. Referencing and sources

As in all written coursework, all sources used in the dissertation needs to be accurately referenced. There is no uniform citation style that students are required to adhere to. However, the Graduate School 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 for MSc Students](#) contains a section on referencing as well as links to further sources on the issue.

15. Assessment Process and Results

15.1 Marking Process

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

15.2 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.

15.3 Confirmation of Final Marks and Feedback

Final marks of dissertations are confirmed at Board of Examiners, usually in late October.

Anonymised dissertation feedback and overall degree results are released to students by **Friday 5 November 2021**.

15.4 Dissertation contribution to Degree Classification

The dissertation is a key component of MSc Taught degrees. Once a dissertation mark is confirmed, it is considered for overall degree classification. There are three award classes for MSc degrees: pass (from 50%), merit (from 60%), and distinction (from 70%). The University's Taught Assessment Regulation (TAR) 44 on borderlines states that Boards of Examiners must consider students whose marks are borderline for progression, award or classification purposes. Borderline marks are defined as marks from two percentage points below the class or grade boundary up to the boundary itself, e.g. marks of 58.00% to 59.99% are in the borderline range to merit.

In SPS, PG Boards of Examiners apply the following rules to decide borderline cases for award of Pass, Merit or Distinction:

Borderlines for Award of Merit or Distinction:

- (1) **Both** the coursework average and the dissertation mark must be at least in the borderline range to the higher award class (58.00-59.99, 68.00 – 69.99)
- (2) **50% or more** of the coursework marks fall in a class above that indicated by the mean coursework mark (e.g., marks for courses totalling 60 credits or more out of a maximum of 120 credits)
- (3) **Either** the coursework average **or** the dissertation mark must be in the higher award class.

Example A: a student with a coursework average of 70%, of which 60 credits have marks of 70% or higher (e.g., 85, 85, 85, 51, 51, 51), and a dissertation mark of 68%, would be awarded a distinction.

Example B: a student with a coursework average of 68.3%, of which less than 60 credits have marks of 70% or higher (e.g., 85, 85, 60, 60, 60, 60), and a dissertation mark of 70%, would be awarded a merit

Borderlines for Award of MSc Pass*

Where a student has achieved a borderline mark for their dissertation (48.00 -49.99), the following rules will apply:

- (1) Where the student has valid [Special Circumstances](#) for the dissertation, the Board of Examiners may consider awarding a pass (TAR 44.4).
- (2) Where the student does not have valid [Special Circumstances](#) for the dissertation, an award of pass will not be made. The student will be offered one dissertation resubmission attempt (TAR 58).

15.5 Graduation

Degrees are normally awarded at the University November Graduation Ceremony, which is arranged centrally by the University's Student Administration; the Graduate School arrange a drinks reception after the ceremony.

16. 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 feedback 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

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.

The dissertation should be grounded in the concepts, empirical data, and methods of the subject. Students need not generate their own original empirical data, though they may do so where feasible and appropriate. More important, however, will be the ability to apply conceptual insights to any empirical data used, and in turn to reflect critically on the adequacy of the chosen theories in the light of that material.

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 staff, and what is feasible in terms of the literature 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 sources as possible in order to narrow down your research topic.

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. Research is an activity in which you use your knowledge of the topic, engage critically with pertinent literatures and, in some instances, undertake empirical research.

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 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.

Getting Started

A good way to get an initial idea of what an MSc dissertation looks like is to consult the [Graduate School Dissertation Library](#). The Library will be available from April

2021. As soon as possible, identify your key research question and think about how your readings 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 – 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 reading 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.

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:

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)

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.

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.

Structuring your argument

There are six basic structures that arguments in the social and political sciences can 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.

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). 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 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.

MSc by Research Dissertation Structure (Research Proposal format)

The dissertation for an MSc by Research can take either the form 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.

Relevant literature and referencing

Your dissertation must speak to the relevant literature. However, you need not devote an entire chapter to a formal literature review. 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.

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.

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 sparingly, and ensure that they are accurate and appropriately referenced. Quotations of more than 4 lines (or about 40 words) should be indented and in single-line spacing. 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).

Sources: Be careful when using internet sources which are not on-line versions of published journals, texts or official documents. Try to avoid 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 – 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.

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 or earlier if you can. Put it aside and forget about it for a bit. Get it out again for the final edit two weeks before the deadline. You will almost certainly spot passages to amend, strengthen, delete which you may have missed previously
- Proof-read, proof-read, proof-read. Swap dissertations with a friend and proof-read each other's. Spell check. Check citations in the text against its counterpart on the bibliography.
- 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.
- 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 *Editor* (for good academic writing style: <https://www.serenity.software>)

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. For the academic year 2020-21 placement-based dissertations must be able to be completed on a **fully remote** basis. Some in-person research may be possible, subject to University approval (via the Study and Work Away team), local Covid-19 guidance and organisational capacity. Any students wishing to seek approval for in-person activity should contact workplacements@ed.ac.uk two months prior to the proposed start of their placement.

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 a pre-agreed secondary output is submitted to the organisation (for example, a two-page executive summary, blog post, short policy paper).

Like all MSc students, placement students are expected to demonstrate their ability to engage critically and analytically with both primary data and literature from the field, building upon relevant concepts and theory covered in the taught element of the degree.

The dissertation 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.

In general, the more focused the project, the easier it is to do a good job in the time and words available, including a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. In any case, the dissertation 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. The supervisory team will help students to refine a project once a placement has been confirmed.

The University of Edinburgh accepts no responsibility for the success of placement based dissertations and students who choose to undertake a projects are advised that they should be fully aware of the risks of the placement not working out.

For further information about previous projects and host organisations, visit the Placement Based Dissertation 2020/21 course, available through 'My courses' in Learn.

2. Placement eligibility

Placements selection is competitive and open only to students on approved MSc programmes:

Africa & International Development

Comparative Public Policy

Global Environment, Politics & Society

Global Health Policy

Global Mental Health and Society

Health Policy

International & European Politics (student-led only)

International Development

International Development (Online)

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. Students require an average mark in semester one of 60% or higher. Part-time students require at least a 60% average mark in semester one of their final year. Students are required to complete a placement cover sheet at the end of semester one detailing their average mark and course modules.

3. Securing a placement

Placements may be secured through either:

- Application to a project advertised by the Work Placement Advisor (a competitive placement) or
- Through individual student negotiation with the host organisation (a student-led placement)

Competitive 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, suggested research methodologies and any specific practical/academic skills or previous experience required. Some projects may contain very specific details of the work to be undertaken while others 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 at the end of semester one.

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 Work Placement Advisor (workplacements@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 by noon on **Friday 22 January 2021**.

- For each project students submit: CV
- Cover letter for each project applied for

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.

Student-led placements

Eligible students may choose to set up their own placement. Individuals interested in this type of placement should request a meeting with the Work Placement Advisor 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 Work Placement Advisor for the placement to be approved and to begin the formalisation process.

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 Memorandum of Understanding. This document sets out the roles and obligations of each party (student, supervisor, and host organisation). The Work Placement Advisor will provide a template document. The Memorandum of Understanding must be signed by student, supervisor and host organisation prior to the start of the placement and a final copy submitted to the Work Placement Advisor.

5. Supervision and support

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

Academic Supervision

Academic supervision of the placement-based dissertations is the same as for desk-based dissertations. See Part A, sections 3-4.

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.

Work Placement Advisor

The Work Placement Advisor 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 Work Placement Advisor 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 Memorandum of Understanding
- Guiding the student through the in-person placement activity approval process where appropriate

On Placement:

- Transitioning into the workplace – key skills
- The Work Placement Advisor 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 Placement Report and Project Diary

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 project diary (compiled during the placement), and a 12,000-word analytical report.

The diary (maximum 3,000-words)

Throughout the placement, the student will send fortnightly progress reports to the academic supervisor and the Work Placement Advisor. 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' and access, 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 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.

Report for the host organisation

The dissertation report must also be submitted to the host organisation. The diary portion of the dissertation should be removed and replaced with a two-page executive summary of actionable points.

7. Marking descriptors for placement-based dissertations

The assessment criteria for placement-based dissertations are slightly different from desk-based dissertations. The following marking descriptors are applied:

90-100% (A1)

Fulfils all criteria for A2. In addition is a work of exceptional insight and independent thought, deemed to be of publishable quality, producing an analysis of such originality as potentially to change conventional understanding of the subject, and/or potentially to change existing approaches to policy and practice.

80-89% (A2)

Outstanding work providing insight and depth of analysis beyond the usual parameters of the topic. The work is illuminating and challenging for the markers. Comprises a sustained, fluent, authoritative argument, which demonstrates comprehensive knowledge, and convincing command, of the topic. Accurate and concise use of sources in the relevant academic literature informs the work, the questions and the analysis, but does not dominate it.

70-79% (A3)

A sharply-focused, consistently clear, well-structured paper, demonstrating a high degree of insight. Effectively and convincingly argued, and showing a critical

understanding of conflicting theories, evidence and, where applicable a critical understanding of the policy/practice context. Excellent scholarly standard in use of sources, and in presentation and referencing.

60-69% (B)

Good to very good work, displaying substantial knowledge and understanding of concepts, theories and evidence relating to the topic as well as, where appropriate, knowledge of the policy/practice background. Answers the question or addresses the problem fully, by drawing effectively on a wide range of relevant sources and/or by generating relevant evidence. No significant errors of fact or interpretation. Writing, referencing and presentation of a high standard.

50-59% (C)

Work which is satisfactory for the MSc degree, showing some accurate knowledge of topic and/or context, as well as some understanding, interpretation and use of sources and evidence. There may be gaps in knowledge, or limited use of evidence, or overreliance on a restricted range of sources, or quality of recommendations for policy/practice. Content may be mainly descriptive. The argument may be confused or unclear in parts, possibly with a few factual errors or misunderstandings of concepts. Writing, referencing and presentation satisfactory.

40-49% (D)

Work which is satisfactory for Diploma. Shows some knowledge of the topic, is intelligible, and refers to relevant sources, but likely to have significant deficiencies in argument, evidence or use of literature, understanding of the policy/practice context. May contain factual mistakes and inaccuracies. Not adequate to the topic, perhaps very short, or weak in conception or execution, or fails to answer the question. Writing, referencing and presentation may be weak.

30-39% (E)

Flawed understanding of topic, showing poor awareness of academic, policy and/or practice context. Unconvincing in its approach and grasp of the issues. Perhaps too short to give an adequate answer to the question. Writing, referencing and presentation likely to be very weak. A mark of 38/39 may indicate that the work could have achieved a pass if a more substantial answer had been produced.

20-20% (F)

An answer showing seriously inadequate knowledge of the subject, with little awareness of the relevant issues or theory, major omissions or inaccuracies, and pedestrian use of inadequate sources.

10-19% (G)

An answer that falls far short of a passable level by some combination of short length, irrelevance, lack of intelligibility, factual inaccuracy and lack of acquaintance with reading or academic concepts.

0-9% (H)

An answer without academic merit; conveys little sense that the course has been followed; lacks basic skills of presentation and writing.