

Guidelines for the completion of the dissertation component for the coursework masters in the Faculty of Science

RELEVANT BACKGROUND

There has been confusion as to the scope and format of the dissertation component of a Masters degree by coursework and dissertation. This has seen minor-dissertations oscillate between the undesirable extremes of being too small (e.g. when prepared for submission to a specialist journal with strict word limits) or strangely formatted (e.g. having a separate literature review appended to an otherwise standard formatted manuscript for submission to a journal). Both extremes have attracted unfavourable comment by external examiners.

The aim of this addendum to the Faculty of Science MSc and PhD handbook is to clarify the Faculty perspective on what is expected with respect to this deliverable and to hopefully arrive at sensible compromise between these two extremes.

The minor-dissertation is by definition smaller in scope than a standard Masters by dissertation only. The objective however is similar viz., a training in research to equip candidates with skills necessary for employment, or for further independent research. The dissertation need not involve original research, nor distinctly advance knowledge of the subject nor be potentially publishable in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

RECOMMENDED FORMAT

The general format of a minor-dissertation should follow that of a Masters by dissertation only, with an abstract, introduction, methods, data/results, discussion and references sections. Where the dissertation departs from a journal submission is that it should include an introduction with an appropriate review of the relevant literature that places the work in a broader context. Importantly we expect the candidate to integrate this literature review with a clear 'problem statement' motivating for the research to be undertaken in addition to a clear 'aims/hypotheses' towards the end of the introduction. There is further scope for more graphs and tables in the results section than many journals would permit and hence scope for the candidate to provide more evidence relevant to their particular research question. The discussion could be more expansive than a typical journal submission and should once again place the key research findings in a broader context.

Should the project comprise data sets/analyses that are better treated separately then these may be written up as separate chapters with their own short introduction, methods, results and discussion. However these chapters must be bounded by the general introduction and a conclusion that synthesises the findings of the respective chapters. Please note that this format would be the exception for a minor dissertation and not the norm.

While it is not possible to specify a lower limit to the size of a dissertation, a general guideline is that a minor-dissertation should not exceed 20 000 words. Experience suggests that a minor-dissertation would be in the order of between 10 000 and 15 000 words or 40 to 60 pages of double spaced text including figures and references.