



MRes MPhil PhD Programme.

Dissertation Guidelines

These notes provide guidance about the dissertation component of the MRes/MPhil/PhD programme. **Key Dates, Teaching Sessions and Resources**

1. A series of Research Methods lectures and workshops is provided to assist in the choice of a dissertation topic, the bibliographic and data search, the preparation of the dissertation proposal, the use of econometrics software, and the writing of the dissertation:

Research Methods Activity 1: Ideas, questions and research in economics (January)
Research Methods Activity 2: Masters-level writing in economics (January)
Research Methods Activity 3: Information skills: bibliographic resources (January)
Research Methods Activity 4: Information skills: data resources--ESDS (January)
Research Methods Activity 5: Empirical econometrics skills—Stata (June)
Research Methods Activity 6: Empirical econometrics skills—EViews (June)
Research Methods Activity 7: Writing a dissertation in economics (June)
Research Methods Activity 8: Managing the dissertation project (August)

2. Submission of Dissertation Proposal: on or before 25th March 2015.
3. Submission of Dissertation: on or before Monday 14th September 2015, 4pm.
4. Dissertation Helpdesk

During the main dissertation writing period, an on-line (Moodle) Helpdesk facility will be operated by PhD students to provide resources and assistance with data-handling and econometric programming matters. In the meantime, the Helpdesk Moodle page provides a repository of reference materials.

Content and Style of Dissertation

You are studying for an MRes/MPhil/PhD; therefore, your dissertation should display your mastery of Economics concepts and methods.

Whilst your dissertation can obviously draw on what you have learned in the programme, it should go significantly beyond a rehearsal of material from the lectures.

- A Good Dissertation
 - Must display skills, techniques and mastery of MRes material
- Key question for markers and students
 - Could the student have written this without MRes courses and course material or its associated cognate literature?

The way to display your own mastery of economics is through undertaking an original piece of scholarship and/or research. This can take a number of different forms. The following list is indicative, not exhaustive.

Econometric/Empirical Dissertations

These can take a number of forms:

- You could take a model which has been estimated on one set of data and re-estimate it on another set of data, explaining clearly the rationale for choosing this different data set and explaining any differences in results.
- You could take an existing model that has been estimated on a particular data set, and reformulate and re-estimate it to take account of some theoretical and/or econometric developments that you and/or others think should be incorporated. Again, you should justify these developments and critically appraise the results.
- You might want to try to calculate some important economic magnitude: e.g. certain deadweight distortionary costs; the valuation consumers place on certain environmental benefits etc. You should outline the concept, justify the technique, explain the source of the data, and critically assess your computed numbers.
- Even if you don't have a fully-fledged model, you will need a basic theoretical framework to organise ideas in a coherent way. Be clear on how the theory maps into the empirical analysis.
- Be clear about data sources and spell out the definition of all variables. Present and discuss descriptive statistics for all the main variables.

Economic Theory Dissertation

You might wish to set up a simple economic model in order to address a question of interest. Typically, this might require modifying some existing model, by using a different assumption, or using an existing model to address a different question. It is important here that you are able to formulate assumptions precisely, and prove whatever results you derive.

This may involve taking an existing theoretical model, focusing on some aspect of it that is not necessarily particularly central and deriving some additional insights. For example, in a recent case, a student took a model of opting-out from public services and looked at how equilibrium varied with income inequality. Another approach is to construct the outlines of a model of some phenomenon as conceptualised in economic terms; this has been done successfully in the past in relation to drug-taking, child-trafficking, public sector corruption and so on.

Policy Analysis

You might undertake a critical analysis of some previously under-explored policy or policy issue. In this case, you would be expected to set out the critical economic principles that were involved, examine whatever empirical information was both relevant and available, and then critically appraise existing or proposed policies.

Analytical Surveys of Theoretical or Empirical Literature

If your dissertation is to consist entirely of a survey, then it must be considerably more than just a listing of who said what: You will be required to provide a clear outline of the intellectual development of the subject. You should try to demonstrate and explain (i) the extent to which different contributors were addressing similar or different questions; (ii) in what sense and how far one contribution marks a significant improvement over earlier contributions. Moreover, the topic you survey must lie significantly outside the scope of existing surveys given either in the literature or in your lectures.

- As with all dissertations, you need to have a clear question that you address –
- Do not produce a 'shopping list' of models

- Confine detailed attention to approx. 5-8 papers (note that for this type of dissertation in particular, your ability to identify the key papers and frame your question is an important part of the thesis task)
- Demonstrate you have understood the models e.g. work through a model in detail
- Demonstrate you have understood the hypothesis testing framework and why it was chosen
- Critically analyse the papers (take them to pieces, consider each piece, put them back together again, discuss how the pieces relate to each other)
- Use common notation to analyze the different models

Some additional points to note on content

- Whatever the style, the dissertation must relate the work that is presented to the existing economics literature on the subject. Depending on the nature of the dissertation, the appropriate extent of this review of existing literature will vary; for a relatively narrowly focused topic there may be only half a dozen relevant papers, whilst for a dissertation on a broader topic which has been the subject of extensive past work, a longer review of the literature will be appropriate. However, in all cases, this element must be present, both to show that you have mastered the existing literature, and to help the examiners judge the nature of the contribution your dissertation makes.
- Remember that even negative results can be very useful. Students often get very stressed about this. If you try a particular exercise (e.g. on new data) and it does not work out as you expected, or it turns out that you make less progress than you expected, then, as long as this lack of progress was not entirely foreseeable at the outset, and as long as you can propose both reasons for the “negative” findings and what lessons can usefully be drawn, you can still gain very good marks on your dissertation. It is not up to your supervisor to solve the problem of “negative” findings.

Some points to note in choosing a topic

- If you are going to undertake an empirical/econometric dissertation, be very clear beforehand about how you will obtain the data you need. If the data-set is public, check whether it is available and can get accessed through the Department or one of our research centres. Check also the format in which the data are stored and how much cleaning or processing they might need. If you are going to collect your own data, allow plenty of time for doing so, and for processing the data before you can start to analyse them. Always have a fall-back strategy in case the data prove more troublesome to get hold of than you anticipated. In all events, the source of the data must be fully and properly documented in the dissertation.
- Make sure the topic you select is sufficiently narrow and well defined to be tractable. As explained below, you have only 10,000 words, and about three months in which to work on it. There is a severe limit to how much progress you can make.

Supervision arrangements

The supervisor has two main roles:

- **guidance**, to help you define an appropriate topic, and
- **monitoring**, to ensure that the dissertation you submit is genuinely your own work.

Guidance

At the time you submit your dissertation you will also be required to submit a form, signed by your supervisor, stating that you have written the dissertation under his/her supervision, and provided any verbal or written accounts of the progress of your research requested by your supervisor.

Format and Submission of the Dissertation

Length

The dissertation **should not normally exceed 10,000 words, excluding the bibliography and any annexes**. This length target reflects our view that quality is more important than quantity. Dissertations which exceed 10,000 words will not receive extra marks simply for the extra length; examiners faced with a dissertation which grossly exceeds the limit may, at their discretion, choose to ignore the excess material.

At the margin, it is almost certainly better to put extra effort into improving a relatively short text, to ensure that the arguments are rigorously and clearly expressed, and that data and results are accurately documented and clearly interpreted, than to add pages and pages of additional material of only peripheral relevance to your subject.

In some cases, particularly where dissertations based on quantitative empirical research are involved, you may find that providing full documentation of your data sources and methods uses up a lot of the available 10,000 words. In these cases, it would be acceptable to put the detailed material in a separated Annex, outside the word limit. However, if you do this, you must ensure that your main text explains your data and sources adequately, and give a clear overview of what the annex contains.

Format

Dissertations should be printed on plain white, A4 size paper (210 x 297 mm), with a 12 point font, 1.5 or double-spacing, and margins on the binding edge of the page no less than 40 mm (1.5 inches). Other margins should be no less than 20mm (.75 inches). Double-sided printing is acceptable (as long as pages are legible); otherwise, print on one side of the paper. Dissertations should be (plastic) comb bound with a clear acetate cover.

Templates for the required components of the dissertation—title page, declaration page, abstract, table of contents, table of figures (if any), references, appendices, etc.—are hosted on the Economics MRes Administration Moodle page for you to refer to: <https://moodle.ucl.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=10421§ion=8>

Diagrams must be drawn properly, and numbered consistently throughout the dissertation, Figure 1, Figure 2, etc.; Table 1, Table 2, etc.

References and sources

Dissertations should have a full list of references, set out at the end of the dissertation, in the standard format used in most economics journals:

For articles in journals:

Bloggs, C. (1994), "Economics and Pollution", The Journal, Vol. 77, No. 3, pp 77-99.

For books:

Bloggs, C. (1994), Economics and Pollution, Somewhere University Press, Somewhere.

Where your dissertation draws on arguments, information or results from existing literature, this should be clearly referenced at the relevant place in the text. The usual format for this is "... as Bloggs and Bloggs (1993) have shown...", or "A recent study (Bloggs, 1994) found the following effects..."

The list of references must include all sources explicitly referred to in the dissertation and only those sources. In other words, if you have used a source you need to make sure it is referred to in the text and listed in the references. On-line material must include the URL and the date accessed.

For empirical dissertations, all tables should have a clear set of notes with them so that the table is self-contained.

For more detailed information, consult a guide to the Harvard System of citing and referencing, which you will find online and in the library.

Plagiarism

You should be aware of the College's policy regarding plagiarism, which is described

here: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/current-students/guidelines/policies/plagiarism>

If you are in any doubt as to what this means, you should consult your supervisor. All dissertations must be submitted electronically to the Turn-it-in plagiarism detection system (as well as in hard copy).

Examples of dissertation content which would constitute plagiarism include:

- (i) Copying the words used in a textbook or paper written by someone else (whether published or not) without clearly indicating, through the use of quotation marks and a cited source, that the words are not your own.
- (ii) Closely paraphrasing the words of a textbook or paper, to have the same effect as (i) above, albeit with minor differences in wording.
- (iii) Using an argument or line of argument from a book or paper written by someone else, without indicating the source, and in such a way as to suggest that the argument is your own.
- (iv) Presenting data, for example in a table that has been obtained from a book or paper written by someone else without showing clearly the source from which the data was obtained.

There is an imprecise boundary between (a) plagiarism and (b) work which is unoriginal and over-dependent on the work of other people. A dissertation which contains lengthy passages (e.g. a number of pages) which follow the sequence of arguments in another paper (or in a limited number of other papers) may involve plagiarism, even if the sources used are cited, if it is not made sufficiently clear that the relevant sections follow so closely the organisation of material in the other paper. However, even where this relationship between the dissertation and the other paper(s) is made clear, and where plagiarism does not therefore arise, a dissertation which takes such a derivative form would be likely to be regarded as unoriginal and excessively dependent on other works, and would therefore be liable to receive a low mark.

You are reminded that plagiarism is not confined to copying material from published books and papers. Copying material from unpublished papers, government papers, or consultancy reports, or your own previous work constitutes plagiarism in exactly the same way. Likewise, material drawn from web sites should be clearly identified, with details given of the source and - since the contents of web sites can change - of the date at which the material was accessed.

Dissertation Timetable

By 26th March 2015, you must submit the dissertation proposal form to Daniella Harper. This requires that you give a provisional dissertation title, and the name of a member of staff who has provisionally agreed to supervise your dissertation. You should attach to the proposal form a one-two page outline of the proposed work.

You will normally do the bulk of the work on your dissertation after the examinations, i.e. from mid-June onwards. By the middle of August you should aim to have a substantial part of the dissertation drafted, and to have a clear idea of the remaining work needed, and a timetable in mind for when you will do it.

Bear in mind in planning your work that your supervisor will probably want to go on holiday at some time during the summer, and that he or she may also be attending academic conferences, especially

during late August and early September. The period after your scheduled final meeting with your supervisor in early August should be regarded as a "writing up" period, during which you should plan to complete your dissertation without further meetings with your supervisor.

The final deadline for submission is Monday 14th September, 4pm.

Submission of your Dissertation

Submit the final version of your dissertation to the plagiarism detection system Turnitin by Monday 14th September, 4pm 2015.

Dissertation Deadline Extension

Extensions to the deadline will normally only be granted on grounds of prolonged serious illness or family bereavement. They should be requested in writing to the Programme Director as soon as possible and in any case before 1st September 2015.

Extensions to the deadline will not normally be granted for computer or photocopier failure, or other similar reasons.

Dissertation Marking

Dissertations will be marked by two members of the examination board, and moderated by the external examiner. You will not be informed who the markers are for your dissertation, and will receive no feedback from the examiners.