

Supervising Master's Dissertations

A guide to good practice



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SECTION 1

Using this guide

This document aims to inform and support good practice in the supervision of Master's / Level 7 dissertations across the full range of subjects taught at the University. The focus will generally be taught Master's programmes leading to the award of MA or MSc. However, the content will also be generally applicable to the award of Master by Research or Master of Research (MRes.), and to Level 7 of Integrated Master's programmes (M Theatre, etc.). Established variations on the dissertation format should be borne in mind, for example in the Master's in Advanced Clinical Practice (MACP), in which the dissertation element may take the form of an audit or service evaluation as well as a piece of research.

The award of MPhil., however, due to its status as a prelude to or an exit award from PhD (Level 8), falls outside the scope of this guide.

The document also aims to help supervisors and their students to understand and reflect on the full extent of their working relationship, and make it as effective as possible. It is not in any way a prescriptive set of rules, nor a set of entitlements.

Although there is an emphasis on collaboration throughout, the guide is primarily intended for a staff readership, especially members of staff who are new to supervising Master's-level work. But it may also be useful as a point of reference for discussion between staff and students in the early days of a given project, while the supervisory relationship is taking shape.



SECTION 2

The philosophy of the dissertation and the value of independent research

According to the [QAA Characteristics Statement: Master's Degree](#), the principal purposes of Master's programmes include: 'enabling students to focus on a particular aspect of a broader subject area in which they have prior knowledge or experience through previous study or employment' (p. 3); and 'enabling students to focus on a particular subject area or field of study in greater depth than they encountered during the course of previous study or experience (this may include enabling students to develop knowledge of a new subject or field of study in combination with a relevant subject area in which they have prior knowledge or experience, or enabling students to undertake inter or multidisciplinary study)' (p. 3).

The QAA Characteristics Statement additionally denotes typical attributes of Master's graduates as including: 'in-depth and advanced knowledge and understanding of their subject and/or profession, informed by current practice, scholarship and research. This will include a critical awareness of current issues and developments in the subject and/or profession; critical skills; knowledge of professional responsibility, integrity and ethics; and the ability to reflect on their own progress as a learner' (p. 3).

The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies states that Master's degrees will be awarded to students who have demonstrated 'a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice' (p. 28). The FHEQ also states that holders of Level 7 qualifications will be able to 'deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences' (p. 28).

These general attributes of Level 7 programmes are applicable to Master's dissertations, and should be borne in mind by both students and supervisors.

Research at Level 7 may to an extent be defined by contrast with Level 6 (Undergraduate) and Level 8

(doctoral). Many Master's students are in fact making a transition between a Bachelors degree and doctoral research; but even those who go no further in academic study after their Master's can be understood as working in this transitional stage. At Level 6, a student's research is characterised by supported independence: they are responsible for pitching a unique idea for investigation, but in practice their work will largely build on existing knowledge; effective supervision supports the student to become as independent as possible, often by providing and gradually removing different forms of 'scaffolding'. A student studying for MPhil. / PhD, on the other hand, is expected to make a plausible claim for full originality from the very start: doctoral work is original by definition. A student writing a Master's degree / Level 7 dissertation should understand themselves to be a fully independent scholar from the start of their project; and they should have the ambition for the project to culminate in originality.

Level 6 dissertation (BA, BSc)	Supported independence
Level 7 dissertation (MA, MSc)	Full independence, aiming for originality Complex, specialised, ambitious
Level 8 thesis (PhD)	'Original and significant contribution to knowledge' required from the outset

Effective supervision, therefore, will respect the independence of the student's research project, and aim to facilitate its realisation, rather than dictate its direction. This distinction may not always be as clear-cut in practice as we might wish; there may be a 'grey area' around appropriate influence and good advice. Consequently, it's important to keep the supervisory relationship under review in relation to the right principles, and to hold regular reflective dialogue with students.



SECTION 3

Shared responsibilities of student and supervisor

Good practice in supervision will entail establishing some clear 'rules of engagement' at the start of the process, providing the student with written confirmation of what is expected of them, and what they can reasonably expect from their supervisor. Aspects of the dissertation process which student and supervisor will undertake together might include:

- completion of process documents relating to HSE risk assessment, and ethical clearance
- constructing a specific but flexible timeline to final submission of the dissertation
- maintaining a log of supervisory interactions, including agreed actions to be completed before the next meeting
- reviewing work in progress / drafts together, in the light of the supervisor's annotations and other feedback
- and finally, writing and signing agreement to these arrangements.

SECTION 4

Quantity and timing of supervision; the dissertation 'journey'

Under the University's standard calendar for taught Master's programmes, most students will do the majority of their dissertation work over the summer – between the end of semester 2 and late September. If a course follows this timeline, dissertation research and writing can generally be undertaken without competing demands from other (taught) modules. However, there will be exceptions and complications to this pattern. It is important for the student and supervisor to devise their own specific timeline to submission, and to keep it under review.

The dissertation module specification will normally state a maximum quantity of individual supervision to which the student is entitled: both student and supervisor have

to work within this total, from the project's inception to its final submission. Normally this total will be unaffected by tasks and assessments which precede the dissertation module, for example on research methods modules. Dissertation modules may vary between stating a single figure for the total supervision time, and a more detailed breakdown into specific activities. Usually dissertation work will fall outside the School's standard policy on feedback on drafts, since supporting work in progress is intrinsic to the writing and supervision of dissertations.

Some students and supervisors will find it useful to devise a GANTT chart or other visual diagram, distributing the project into phases and activities on a timeline. This may suit researchers who like a highly structured and systematic approach, especially where writing has to be planned in relation to time-specific data-gathering. However, this is very much a matter of preference, and while GANTT charts are used as standard in PhD thesis projects, which last three years or more, the more limited timeline of a Master's dissertation may not always justify their use. Time management should be focused and practical, and not become a distracting end in itself.



The production of the first full draft of the dissertation is an important landmark. Students and supervisors should set a provisional date for this early in the project timeline; and the date should be sufficiently far in advance of final submission to allow for a thorough process of review and revision.

The supervisor must be familiar with general University procedures on Mitigating Circumstances, and with the policy on extensions which is specific to undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations (which typically address unforeseeable problems with data collection etc.). In the case of unforeseeable problems or disadvantages, it is likely that the supervisor will need to direct the student to further specialist support in the University. However, they will always be the first point of contact, and must be able to give the student informed advice.

SECTION 5

The supervisor's role and its boundaries

In the context of a Master's degree, completion of the dissertation marks a departure from taught modules and allows the student to demonstrate a high degree of independence through identifying and developing mastery in a specific field and understanding and mastery of research methodology. Central to the development of such independence and success in the dissertation is the role of the supervisor. Whilst the student will often retain the support of a separate Personal Academic Tutor (PAT), the supervisor is the main point of contact and support for the student. It is important to acknowledge that anxiety concerning the role of the supervisor and an explanation of the supervisory role are common to both new supervisors and students (Grant, 2005). Consequently, clarifying the role of the supervisor and establishing a successful relationship between supervisor and student is essential.

The role of the supervisor is multifaceted and subject to debate. Although individual supervisors possess their own unique attributes and approach to supervision, and although a number of different models exist that discuss the role of the supervisor (McCallin and Nayar, 2012; Wagener, 2018), it is possible to suggest a list of areas that effective supervision may encompass to address the needs of students. In relation to all aspects of the supervisory role, it is important for supervisors to determine how they will offer sufficient time for supervision.

Support (Wisker, 2008) or responsiveness to individual needs and a degree of adaptivity (de Kleijn et al., 2015; de Kleijn et al., 2016) can be acknowledged as a significant attribute for supervisors and link to their key role. In particular this can be conceptualised in relation to the student's degree of dependence / autonomy at particular times (de Kleijn et al., 2015), an assessment of their 'readiness, motivation and situation' (Macfadyen et al., 2019, p. 991), and the degree to which the supervisor recognises and responds to this to build 'personal agency, autonomy and confidence' (Cornelius and Nicol, 2016, p.4). To aid in the understanding of student needs and to assist in the development of a responsive and adaptive relationship, it could be worthwhile to initially share information regarding academic and professional experience and the reasons for undertaking the Master's programme. This also might be supported with a short list of questions and in addition to establishing an effective working relationship might also highlight 'issues of cultural, conceptual and disciplinary differences' (Cornelius and Nicol, 2016, p.8). This is certainly beneficial as it helps to avoid making assumptions regarding students.

To summarise,

We conclude that [effective] supervisors carefully observe students in terms of competence, determination and context and, based on the diagnosis of these characteristics, decide on what supervision strategies would benefit the students most, in terms of division of responsibilities, being more explicit to students about standards, quality and consequences, providing more, or less, critical feedback and sympathizing with their situation. (de Kleijn et al., 2015, p. 129)

In supervising a Level 7 dissertation, there is risk of compromising the independence of the student's project by actively modifying its central concepts or organising structure. As such, setting appropriate boundaries for the supervisory relationship is a theme for the supervisor to reflect on, and for discussion and agreement between student and supervisor in the initial stages of the project, and on an ongoing basis.

In supervision, a clear distinction should be made between guidance and intervention. Supervision should consist of advice and commentary and should avoid specific directives. Legitimate supervisory involvement might include:

- giving advice on the suitability and feasibility of the proposed theme
- helping to determine the scope of the project, in relation to the eventual word limit
- providing advice on methodology
- providing advice on sources of all kinds
- monitoring progress, including reading draft material and providing verbal and written feedback
- establishing an encouraging and respectful relationship, in which student and supervisor can discuss frankly
- advising on presentation and referencing conventions.

The supervisor must have a detailed familiarity with the validated assessment requirements of the dissertation module, and its associated Learning Outcomes (LOs). The LOs and assessment criteria should be discussed explicitly with the student at the start of the process, and the importance of maintaining relevance to the LOs should be picked up in feedback on work in progress.

The supervisor should assist the student in establishing a clear plan of work to maximise the available time for the dissertation, with clearly demarcated time allocated to the different stages of the project, such as: ethical clearance; primary data collection (where appropriate); secondary reading and literature review; and the drafting and revision of chapters. It is often useful to escalate supervisory contact as the project reaches its later stages. Time is a key resource: if the dissertation module specification stipulates a maximum amount of contact, this should be measured out carefully (see section 4).



“A series of supervisory meetings can be planned together. But it is the student who should have primary responsibility for initiating contact. It may be useful to plan for some virtual meetings, by telephone, video conferencing, or online interaction, in order to maintain continuity of support when it’s difficult to meet in person.”

The monitoring of work in progress constitutes a great deal of the supervisory role. Students will often equate the quality of the supervision with the constructive feedback they have received on their drafts, and to what extent this has helped them to improve their work. It is often useful to establish an informal agreement on how much reasonable notice a supervisor should receive in order to provide feedback on a draft at a scheduled meeting, and, reciprocally, what is a reasonable time for a draft to be ‘turned around’.

Another part of the supervisory role links to intellectually challenging, questioning, and stimulating the student (Macfadyen et al., 2019; Wagener, 2018; Wisker, 2008) to encourage the development of ideas, theoretical conceptualisation, and the resolution of problems. To be effective in this endeavour and to achieve growth, it is recognised that such challenge needs to be facilitated in a climate of safety (Macfadyen, 2019). Hence the supervisor needs to nurture the student and build confidence through a supportive and empathetic environment (Anderson et al., 2008).

Due to the essential importance of feedback to the learning / researching process, it’s a good idea to allude to the term and concept ‘feedback’: students should be in no doubt that the advice given them verbally at meetings is feedback, just as much as the annotations provided on written drafts. Good feedback is: detailed and specific; direct and honest, and yet supportive and tactful; practical – it can be acted on; and creative – it offers new ideas.

Commenting on draft work is an important part of the supervisory role and also links to the significance of enabling students to identify targets. This can be in terms of providing ‘feedback’, but also ‘feed-forward’ to develop understanding and identify realistically achievable but challenging goals (de Kleijn et al., 2016). Whilst feedback ought to develop criticality, to assist in the achievement of goals, this needs to be achieved without undermining motivation.

Whilst much feedback will be directly related to academic development, it is also an important role for the supervisor to enable the student to deliver work that adheres to academic guidance and current academic conventions (Cornelius and Nicol, 2016; Macfadyen, 2019).

Even if the dissertation has a different module leader, the individual supervisor is the most important quality ‘gatekeeper’ for each student. It will be the supervisor who ensures that the work is conducted within agreed protocols relating to issues such as: Health, Safety & Environment (HSE) risk assessment; ethical clearance; GDPR and responsible data storage; academic integrity and plagiarism avoidance; etc.



“Another important principle is to avoid giving premature or misleading advice on likely grades or outcomes. The supervisor should remain aware of the boundary between offering encouragement and pre-empting the assessment process.”

SECTION 6

Record-keeping

Students undertaking independent projects at any level should expect to receive and to maintain records of the supervisory process. A log of supervisory interactions is primarily a way of ensuring a systematic and structured approach to the work of creating and revising the dissertation; but it has other benefits too.

The accumulating record of supervision can be positive and motivating for the student, since it shows the evolution of their work – how a complex and sophisticated project emerges gradually from sketchy or uncertain beginnings. The log also provides some security and protection for both parties: (1) the student is able to cite earlier advice they have received, for example if they feel that there has been inconsistency or contradiction; (2) and in the case any disagreement or dispute, the supervisor can easily demonstrate both the quantity and quality of the supervision and support they have provided. While the log is essentially a shared resource between student and supervisor, it can also provide a valuable source of contextual information for moderation or other quality process, or indeed to mediate any dispute or breakdown in communication. If the log is consulted by a third party, good practice in relation to data protection must be observed, and it may be necessary to anonymise.

An effective record of supervision will reflect the collaborative nature of the relationship. A given dissertation module should use a standard template of some kind, for consistency of experience. For preference, this should be a shared document that is agreed and ‘signed off’ by both student and supervisor. This can be achieved on paper, or via Word docs and email etc., of course. But a shared online document of some kind would be a better solution, since it can be kept live and updated by either party. A shared folder on the OneDrive would facilitate this, or an e-portfolio in a module VLE.

There are some suggestions for a basic supervision log opposite, with generic examples of the kind of notes one might make. There’s a lot to be said for keeping this relatively simple, and not over-elaborating for the sake of it.

Date of meeting	08/11/2021
Draft discussed	Draft submitted on 31/10/2021 Revised section of Ch. 1 (literature review)
Review of actions from 30/09/2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Re-formatting of bibliography for accurate MHRA referencing: done ▪ Read and comment on article by A
Agreed actions	<p>[student]:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make corrections and revisions to literature review in light of feedback; save and park, and move on to primary research for Ch. 2 ▪ Send [supervisor] a short draft for annotation by 28/11/2021 <p>[supervisor]:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Take advice from module leader on requirements for dissertation structure (number of chapters etc.) ▪ Enquire about progress with application for ethical clearance, and feed back to [student]
Date of next meeting	04/12/2021

SECTION 7

Ethical clearance

All research projects undertaken at the University are subject to ethical review. Even when a given project seems to present no significant ethical challenges, since it does not make use of personal data, or human or animal subjects, the procedure must be followed, and a record will be available if needed in the future. Active involvement in the process helps to inculcate good research values in the student, which will set them in good stead for doctoral or other higher-level work in the future.

The University's Ethics Policy defines a 'researcher' as any student or member of staff who engages in research (1.2). Section 3 of the Policy sets out the role for supervisors of students' research, identifying four main areas of responsibility: (i) to support their students towards a greater understanding and engagement with ethical issues in research; (ii) to ensure their students are fully aware of this policy; (iii) to approve Applications for Ethical Approval as set out in this policy; and (iv) to attend appropriate staff development events on ethics to ensure their knowledge is up-to-date and relevant (3.1). The last point here acknowledges that the research policy environment can and does change; communication should be kept open with relevant coordinators at School and College level, to ensure currency.

Section 4 of the Ethics Policy deals with the required process for students of taught courses (UG and PGT), stating that students should complete an initial Application for Ethical Approval form, and discuss it with their supervisor. If the answer No is given to all key questions relating to animal and human subjects, the project may be approved by the supervisor (4.2); it is expected that in practice most Master's research projects will fall into this category. However, if the supervisor considers the project to raise particularly complex issues, or to fall outside their expertise, they may refer the project for further scrutiny by the College Research Ethics Sub-committee (4.3).

As in the case of academic integrity (see section 8), a Master's student's engagement with ethical review should not be merely a matter of compliance with rules, but include a self-aware and self-critical understanding of the principles involved. The student should preferably see ethical review not as an obstacle to be negotiated or overcome, but as a supportive process which helps them to evaluate more completely the implications of their research project and how it impacts on others; this understanding in turn should enrich the final dissertation.

SECTION 8

Academic integrity

The supervisor's role includes establishing and maintaining awareness of academic integrity issues; they should help the student apply good practice at every stage of their academic research.

Students should develop an awareness of academic integrity and acknowledgement issues that goes far beyond the basic checking and 'plagiarism avoidance' that often typifies undergraduate study. For a student working on a specialised Master's dissertation, the prospect of someone wanting to read their work for academic benefit (and not just in order to assess it) should be more real. In this sense, the need to maintain academic integrity can be positive and aspirational, e.g. future scholars will benefit from your work, and will want to follow up on some of the sources you have used. By the same token, students should find the concerns of a scholar whose work has been appropriated without acknowledgement easier to empathise with. Discussing these themes with a supervisor at any stage of the project will help a student to feel part of the academic community of their subject, and regard other scholars, past and present, as their colleagues.

The basic checking for unacknowledged indebtedness may seem less onerous in this context. Supervisors should advise on the handling and mediation of sources in the drafts that they read. Dissertation module leaders may consider setting up Turnitin® drop-boxes for more mechanical checking, so that students can diagnose any emerging problems.

SECTION 9

Mentoring, careers advice, and continuation

Students' experience of Master's-level study can be relatively brief: most will complete their course, including the dissertation, within either one or two academic years. As the culminating piece of work on a Master's degree, the dissertation points the way to other opportunities and challenges, whether these are academic or professional.

A supportive supervisor may provide guidance on career planning, for example signposting the student to resources in the University Careers and Employability Service, and encouraging them to build a network of professional contacts (alternatively this may fall within the role of the PAT).

In the specific case of taught Master's programmes, it is important to remember that students will progress into all kind of careers and professions; we should not assume that doctoral study is a natural or inevitable ambition. Some

students will undertake an MA or an MSc for specific and/or short-term reasons, often connected with progression in their ongoing career, and not least for personal growth and development. PhDs are not for everyone. Mentoring and careers advice, like every aspect of supervision, must be suited to the needs and interests of the individual.

Depending on the practice of the given Master's programme, the dissertation supervisor may or may not also act as the student's Personal Academic Tutor (PAT); accordingly, practice will vary regarding provision of references. However, a good supervisory relationship can certainly continue after the completion of the dissertation project and after graduation. A former supervisor will probably have the most detailed familiarity with the student's academic work at its most ambitious, and will know a great deal about their interests, aptitudes, and working methods; that's valuable knowledge, which can be used to help, support, network, and generally encourage students in their future endeavours.

Some of the most valuable support a Master's student receives – especially those who do continue onto doctoral work and academic careers – can be informal mentoring and career advice. In some cases – especially in scientific disciplines where co-publication is the norm – a student can be supported to revise some of their Master's work and prepare it for professional dissemination, in the form of a journal article, poster presentation, conference paper, etc. The supervisor can have a key voice in this transformative process.

SECTION 10

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