

University of Sussex

School of Psychology



MSc Research Dissertation Handbook (935C8) 2016-17

Research Dissertation co-ordinator: Dr. Graham Hole

Module credits: 60

Contact: grahamh@sussex.ac.uk

Office: Pevensey 1, 2B24

MODULE INFORMATION & REQUIREMENTS

The information in this handbook applies to all MSc and MRes full-time students in the School of Psychology and all MSc and MRes part-time students in the School of Psychology in their second year. Please read this handbook carefully and keep it in a safe place so that you can refer to it again at a later date.

You should be aware that your Research Dissertation (which is worth 60 credits) should involve about 600 hours of work (including initial preparation and writing up as well as data-collection and processing). You must therefore leave adequate time for conducting this major piece of work (the most highly weighted in your degree).

The University of Sussex is committed to ensuring that all students are treated equitably and it has a long tradition of supporting students with a wide range of impairments. If you are disabled, or are a student with dyslexia or specific learning difficulties, then please discuss these, and any adjustments that you feel may be necessary, with your supervisor.

Module Aims

Whichever MSc / MRes course you are taking, your Research Dissertation is your opportunity to gain first-hand experience of carrying out a substantial piece of original empirical research, typically under the supervision of a member of faculty. For some of the students on the MSc Foundations of Clinical Psychology and Mental Health, supervision will be offered in collaboration with a field supervisor in the Sussex Partnership Foundation Trust. For students on the MSc Neuroscience, supervision may also be offered by staff in the Brighton and Sussex Medical School.

The Research Dissertation involves you designing, conducting, analysing and writing up a piece of empirical research. As part of this, you will experience and solve a range of the practical, methodological, conceptual and ethical problems that are typical within the research process.

Students are required to submit their Research Dissertation write-up (report) in the form of a manuscript submitted to a good psychology journal for publication, following the guidelines of the *American Psychological Association* (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th Edition, copies available in the library). This provides invaluable practice and preparation for submitting research manuscripts for publication.

The Research Dissertation is a heavily-weighted module, reflecting the importance given to original research within the overall structure of the Psychology Masters courses.

Objectives:

In carrying out their Research Dissertation, students should:

- Use a range of library and electronic resources in researching the chosen Research Dissertation topic
- Participate constructively in supervision sessions
- Acquire practical and problem-solving skills through making research questions operational
- Extend skills of critical reflection, logic and critical argument by developing a well-reasoned research rationale
- Consider, and demonstrate awareness of, the ethical implications of the proposed research
- Collect original data (although secondary data analysis may be possible in some cases, if agreed with the supervisor)
- Conduct appropriate analysis of the data
- Show an understanding of the research findings and be able to present them appropriately
- Produce a Research Dissertation report, modelled on a psychology journal article
- Demonstrate an appreciation of the limitations of their own research

Publishability of Research Dissertation

Sometimes a Masters Research Dissertation may be published jointly by student and supervisor, either as a publication in its own right or as part of a multi-study paper reporting additional related research carried out by the supervisor.

Research Supervision

Over the course of your Research Dissertation you are entitled to appropriate tutorial time with your supervisor (a minimum of 6 hours, but usually substantially more than this). This is something that is flexible and that will vary depending on the nature of your research project.

The supervisory practices of different supervisors will vary considerably, you should therefore discuss this with your supervisor and be clear which particular mode of supervision s/he expects to employ with you and how meetings between you will be organised.

You are also encouraged to take the initiative and discuss with your supervisor which of the “key milestones” (p. 12) apply to your research project and when you should be planning to reach them. You may find it helpful to come up with an advisory timetable detailing approximately when each relevant milestone should be achieved. This will help to ensure that your project progresses in a timely manner; it also represents a good opportunity for you to learn further time management and organisational skills.

Research projects can take a number of different forms: for example, they may involve quantitative or qualitative research, or both; some projects might involve lab-based research, others might require you to conduct interviews or collect questionnaire-based data, and still others might entail your analysing pre-existing data. Furthermore, students on some projects may act very much in a research assistant role, or may be involved in partial replications of existing research; other students may be pursuing their own ideas on original studies of their own design. Some students work as part of a research team or group, others work more independently. While there is wide diversity in the nature of research projects, this has no influence on their potential to achieve a first-class mark.

Please be aware that where you work as part of a group (typically a pair) it is essential that each member of your group addresses an independent and clearly defined research question. Thus, while a group of students might collaborate on the design and collection of the data, each group member must test clearly distinct hypotheses using the collective dataset. You should also conduct your own analyses independently of other group members and then devise the presentation of your results and think about your own interpretation as you would if you were working alone. The writing up should also be totally independent of the other group members.

Your supervisor will be permitted to read and comment on a complete draft of the Methods and Results sections of your report, and a statement of the aims/hypotheses, but not the other sections. This feedback is likely to make a significant difference to the quality of your report (and students in previous years have found it extremely helpful). You may also seek general guidance

from your supervisor in planning all aspects of your Research Dissertation write-up - and are encouraged to do so.

Please be aware that it is **your** responsibility to check with your supervisor when s/he would like to receive your draft of the Methods and Results sections of your report (and a statement of the aims/hypotheses), and when you can expect feedback on this draft. Your supervisor may be away for periods of time (including during the run-up to the submission deadline for the Research Dissertation report) and you will need to plan around this.

Your supervisor will make a statement on your contribution to all aspects of the research process, which will be taken into account when determining your final mark.

Please note that before considering publishing Research Dissertation work in conference proceedings, papers or other public formats you must first discuss this with your supervisor, as s/he would normally have to agree (as co-author).

Ethical Clearance & Risk Assessment

ALL students must gain ethical approval for their research **before** they begin data collection - failure to do so could incur significant loss of marks or compromise the validity of the project. Students must complete the appropriate Ethics form online via Sussex Direct (please see <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/staff/research/governance/apply>). Students are strongly advised to complete and submit this ethics form by **Friday March 10th 2017**.

Please be aware that while gaining ethical approval for low risk human research projects usually takes about a week, **high risk research projects require 1-2 months (and projects involving NHS patients 3-6 months); animal projects require a different form and the approval process can take several weeks. It is thus essential to start the process as soon as possible and make sure you leave adequate time.** You should refer to the User Guide for online ethical review application system provided (see User Guide link at: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/staff/research/governance/apply>). Please also refer to the BPS 'Code of Conduct, Ethical principles & Guidelines' available from the BPS website: <http://www.bps.org.uk> & <http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/bps/ethics-standards/ethics-standards>. Students wishing to work in the NHS context may be interested in the relevant information about additional ethical clearance at <https://www.myresearchproject.org.uk/>

You will not be entitled to use data collected before, or in the absence of, ethical approval. Please note, even if your research project involves secondary analysis of existing data, you still need to submit the appropriate Ethics form. Research

Dissertations for which no record of ethical approval is provided will not be marked.

You must include a section on the Ethical Issues that relate to your research project in the Methods section of the Research Dissertation report (see below). You should attach a record of ethical approval to the report itself, as part of the Appendices (see Appendices and provision of raw data and outputs below). A copy of your completed Ethics Form must be included on disk (see Appendices and provision of raw data and outputs below) but not printed in the report itself. No confidential participant details should be included with your submitted report. Furthermore, any information potentially identifying yourself should be anonymised.

Where your research project involves risk to you or the participants that is either greater than, or different from, that experienced in normal everyday life, you must also fill in the appropriate Risk Assessment form as part of the Ethical Review process. Some types of study will automatically require a Risk Assessment (e.g. unaccompanied visits off campus, fieldwork, work in biological laboratories or with non-human animals). Please discuss your Risk Assessment form (and whether you need to complete one) with your supervisor. A copy of the Risk Assessment form should be included on your disk.

Research Expenses / Recruitment / Laboratory Access

Please ensure that you read the document entitled: **Important information for Masters dissertation students relating to project administration (costs, printing, recruitment, lab access etc). PLEASE READ ME!**, which is on the Research Dissertation Study Direct site. This document has been prepared by Pennie Ingram and covers many useful and important pieces of information relating to the general administration of your research project (e.g., research expenses / recruitment / access to laboratory space). If you have read this document carefully and still have unanswered questions about such issues then please contact Pennie Ingram in the Psychology Office directly (P.M.G.Ingram@sussex.ac.uk).

Guidelines for Writing Up & Submitting the Research Dissertation Report

The Research Dissertation report should be written up as a scientific paper, in a style and format similar to that of an article published in a Psychology journal. **To enhance the legibility of reports and facilitate binding, please use a 12 pt font and at least one and a half line spacing, and allow a left hand margin of at least 2.5cm (1 inch).**

Follow the general style used in the *British Journal of Psychology* (available electronically from the library) or APA (American Psychological Association) journals (The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), 6th ed. is available in the University Library). Different types of research generate differences in reports: for example, a study quantitatively testing an experimental hypothesis will be written up in a different way from a study which uses qualitative data or case studies. In preparing to write up your Research Dissertation report, you should therefore look at published studies with a similar design to your research project (in the key journals in your particular field), and use these as models for writing up. You can discuss this with your supervisor who will be able to indicate relevant journal articles.

Your report should be no more than 7,000 words in length. Any footnotes and/or endnotes and quotations in the text are counted towards the word length, but the abstract, acknowledgements, references section, appendices, transcriptions of data, data in the form of quoted text (the latter being applicable to some research projects employing qualitative methods), tables, figures and table/figure captions do not count. Please note that 7,000 is not a target length - the aim is to produce a concise scientific paper and the word length needed to describe the methods and results, and to introduce and discuss them appropriately, will vary according to the type of research project and the nature of the data. Thus for some pieces of work a word limit of significantly shorter than 7,000 words (e.g., 5,000 words) will be entirely appropriate. Please provide a word count on the front page of the report. If the examiners consider that an

unfair advantage has been gained by exceeding the given word length they will reduce the mark.

Please ensure that your name does not appear anywhere in the Research Dissertation report, in order to maintain your anonymity.

Your report should include the following sections:

Title

The title should be precise and self-explanatory, detailing the central research topic

Abstract

The objective of the abstract is to provide an effective précis of the aims, method and results of your study. This section should be no more than 120 words in length and does not count towards the 7,000 words. You are advised to look at a number of published abstracts from work in an area similar to your Research Dissertation, and use these as models.

Acknowledgments

This section, which should come after the abstract and form a foreword to the report, must make explicit what your contribution to the work actually was (in terms of design etc.) and what aspects did not come from you. All contributions, including those from your supervisor, other Research Dissertation students, and DPhil students or postdocs involved in the research project, should be acknowledged. This is particularly relevant where you are using data that has already been collected by your supervisor - or jointly collecting data with another student for your Research Dissertation. You may find it helpful to discuss this with your supervisor. This section would not normally exceed 200 words and again does not count towards the 7,000 words.

Introduction

The aim of the introduction is to explain the background to the particular research you have carried out. It should outline whatever previous studies are necessary to highlight why your own work is necessary/interesting. You should explain how your research relates to previous research and what it adds to previous research. The introduction should finish with a clear statement of your aims/objectives. The aim of the introduction is thus to explain and justify the hypothesis or question which motivates your study.

Method

A good tip here is to model this section on a published example of research of a similar design. Use the usual subheadings (where appropriate): *Participants*, *Materials*, *Design*, and *Procedure*. You must also include a section on the Ethical Issues that relate to your research project as part of the methods section. You need to describe your methods in sufficient detail so that the reader could replicate exactly what you did. Explain who your sample were, how you recruited them, how you briefed and debriefed them. Describe your materials fully and explain how they were constructed, and explain exactly what

your procedure was. Justify why the methods and design you used were appropriate to test the hypotheses.

Results

The results section of your report should be structured around answering the questions which motivated your study - and which you have spelt out in the introduction. Summarise the data relevant to each hypothesis to be tested, and report on the analyses you have done of those data. Double check your statistics: have you chosen the right statistic to test the hypothesis? Is it the right statistic for the kind of data you have? If in doubt, check with your supervisor. Describe your results fully but save interpretation for the Discussion. Tables and/or Figures are likely to be useful in helping you communicate your results to the reader. Please note that you should not simply copy across figures and tables from a statistical package and insert them unedited in your text - prepare Tables and Figures to the standard expected in psychology journals using appropriate software, and make sure that they are properly labelled and annotated.

Discussion

Discuss your results in relation to the hypotheses and issues that motivated your study, and then in the light of any broader implications they may have. How do your results fit in with findings from existing studies in the literature? What do they add to the literature? What new questions do they raise? Be careful not to over-interpret your data: do not make claims about the implications of your research that are not justified by the data. Remember that, in both the introduction and discussion, you have the opportunity to discuss the implications of obtaining results in one direction or the other with respect to your hypotheses - and this may be particularly useful if you are presenting results that are not statistically significant but where sample size means that the power of the statistical tests you are using is low (and it remains possible that statistical significance may have been reached with a larger sample size). Think about any confounding variables, the reliability of your data collection procedure, the implications of your findings and how subsequent research could extend or clarify your work. Demonstrate awareness of the shortcomings of your research but do not engage in endless faultfinding.

References

References must be presented in a standardised format. Follow the style used in the APA (American Psychological Association) journals.

Appendices and provision of raw data and outputs

Include a copy of any questionnaires, interview schedules, consent forms or other directly relevant documents in your printed appendices, which form the final part of the report. You should also include a record of ethical approval in this section. In terms of the internal ethical review procedure, this will typically comprise a copy of the system generated email indicating that ethical approval was granted. Where any of these documents include your name, the identifier should be removed prior to printing and binding to maintain your anonymity. *Do*

not include computer print-out of statistical analyses, instead this may be included on disk (see below). One disk (CD or DVD) containing your raw data, SPSS outputs, a copy of your completed ethics form (and where appropriate your risk assessment form), and an electronic version of your complete Research Dissertation report as a Word document (which may be screened to check for plagiarism) should be attached to one of the two copies of the reports that you submit (on the second copy you can write - disk attached to other copy). This should be labelled with candidate number only to maintain your anonymity. Failure to include a disk with these contents may result in penalties. In extreme cases, when the raw data are not made available after a second request, the research dissertation may be awarded a non-retrievable fail.

Students must retain all data pertaining to the Research Dissertation, including original copies of any paper questionnaires and similar materials. These data may be asked for at any point during the marking and classification procedure where a query is raised, and each year a random sample of students may be routinely asked to supply them.

Binding & Submission

Two copies of the entire printed Research Dissertation report (including appendices) will be required at submission. You should soft-bind your Research Dissertation report with a simple plastic comb binding so that the pages stay together whilst being read. The appropriate cover-sheet should be inserted at the beginning of the report and included within the binding (this coversheet can be obtained from the reception desk at the Psychology School Office Pev1 2A13).

Useful references

- Field, A. (2013) *Discovering Statistics using SPSS*. 4th edition. London: Sage Publications (3rd edition available pre-publication).
- Pallant, J. (2010) *SPSS Survival Manual: A step by step guide to data analysis using SPSS*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education.
- Brace, N., Kemp, R. & Snelgar, R. (2009) *SPSS for Psychologists*. 4th edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harris, P. (2008) *Designing and Reporting Experiments in Psychology*. 3rd edition. Maidenhead: OUP.
- Field, A. & Hole, G. (2003) *How to Design and Report Experiments*. London: Sage publications.

Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria are given at:

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/internal/students/examinationsandassessment/criteria>

Submission of Research Dissertation Reports

Coversheets for the Research Dissertation are available from the Psychology School Office and should be collected, completed and inserted prior to binding. **Research Dissertation reports are submitted to the Psychology School Office.** Please direct all enquiries on submissions to the Psychology Office (psychology@sussex.ac.uk).

Assessments deadlines and methods of submission can be found on your assessment timetable via Sussex Direct.

Information on the following can be found at the link below:

- Submitting your work
 - Missing a deadline
 - Late penalties
 - Exceptional circumstances
 - Exams
 - Help with managing your studies and competing your work
 - Avoiding plagiarism and collusion
 - Assessment Criteria
- <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/internal/students/examinationsandassessment>

Key Milestones

Following are some key milestones which may apply to your research project. Not every milestone will apply to every project, so you are encouraged to discuss with your supervisor which milestones are relevant. You are also encouraged to agree an advisory timetable with your supervisor, detailing which milestones should be reached when. This will help ensure the smooth and timely completion of your research dissertation.

- Review the literature
- Formulate research questions / hypotheses
- Finalise study design
- Submit ethics application (please note this milestone is essential for everyone, irrespective of the nature of your research project)
- Data collection
- Data analysis
- Prepare and submit draft method and results sections (together with research questions / hypotheses) to supervisor
- Discuss feedback on this draft with your supervisor
- Write-up of final, complete dissertation