MSc Digital Education

Dissertation Guide

Ninth Edition; September 2017

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Having successfully completed 120 credits on the programme and reached the dissertation stage, you are now about to undertake your research project. Most masters students find this an exhilarating, if sometimes daunting, prospect. It is not easy to design and carry out a study with the potential to provide new insights but it can be immensely rewarding, providing concrete proof that your hard work is coming together into one coherent whole.

The dissertation represents a natural progression in your studies – this last stage will perhaps require more from you in terms of self-directed study, originality and independence of thought than the previous courses, though anyone who has got this far will be well positioned to demonstrate this with energy and commitment! You will have an academic supervisor who will provide you with individually-tailored guidance and will give you regular feedback on your progress. Your supervisor is there to help you at each stage in the research process and will have expertise that is specifically relevant to your planned project. This will help to ensure that you remain on track, meet your personal deadlines for the completion of each part of the planned research, and submit your dissertation on time.

The courses you have already taken provide a very solid base from which to move into this final stage. You will now have the opportunity to investigate in much greater depth a topic of personal and professional interest to you and to carry these interests forward in a unique way, by adding to the body of knowledge in the field of digital education.

This guide

This brief guide aims to help you to complete your dissertation successfully within the required time period – one year if you are a part-time student, or by mid-late August if you are studying full-time.

The information it contains falls into two main categories. First, Chapter 2 provides guidance and advice on how best to navigate your way through the process of carrying out a research project: from searching the existing literature through to writing up your findings succinctly and clearly. This section is designed as back-up material for the work you will already have completed on the Research Methods course, and the content here is supplemented by the advice you have already had in your *Programme Handbook*.

Second, this guide provides important information on the University's regulations and procedures relevant to this stage in your studies – from first registering for the dissertation through to graduation. This information can all be found in Chapter 3.

Obviously no brief generic guide can hope to provide all students with the highly specific advice they may find they want at each of the various stages of working on their dissertation. The differences in methodological approaches used within the range of topics likely to be of interest to MSc in Digital Education students make this unfeasible. However, this guide does aim to alert you to some of the very basic principles you should bear in mind in planning and carrying out research. More detailed guidance on the project you are planning will be available from the personal supervisor you will be assigned.

What's expected of you

Studying for a masters degree is no easy option at any stage. Studying at this level often involves considerable personal sacrifices. It also typically demands great amounts of energy and, at times, even greater amounts of patience. The dissertation stage is no exception. Here, you may also find that no matter how well you plan, things do not always work out as predicted in the world of research. It is wise to be prepared for this!

One important thing is to be realistic about what can reasonably be achieved by anyone within the fixed time scale, and word count (15,000 words), allowed for the dissertation. Whatever is done and however well it is done, a master's dissertation can only make a small contribution to knowledge in the field. This does not mean that findings of dissertation projects are not valuable, only that the required scale of the work should be kept in perspective.

It can be helpful to remind yourself at regular intervals of exactly what is expected from you in assessment terms. The formal assessment criteria for the dissertation are reproduced below. In essence, your objective should be to produce a dissertation which clearly demonstrates that, in your chosen field, you can:

– reflect critically on the relationships between theory and practice

– review, organise and evaluate existing knowledge and practice

– collect and present original data, or synthesise existing data and literatures, in a way which has the potential to inform and influence practice and scholarship in the field of digital education.

Bearing these criteria in mind – and the time constraints under which you will be operating – it is obviously better to carry out a small study which poses a limited but well-defined research question and produces clear and meaningful results than to devise a study which asks 'big' questions but provides no real answers. Findings from the first kind of study may not be immediately generalisable beyond the context in which the data were collected but they can provide a sound basis for future, larger-scale studies carried out by yourself or others. These issues are dealt with in greater depth in Chapter 2. All that needs to be said here is that good planning can make even a very small-scale study into a useful and satisfying one.

Research options

The kind of research you conduct for your dissertation will be negotiated between you and your supervisor, but may take a variety of forms. You may wish to base it in empirical work, collecting or generating new quantitative or qualitative data as a way of approaching your research. Empirical work must always be undertaken within an understanding of what is manageable given the time and resources available, and specific guidance on this will have been given through the Research Methods course.

You may, alternatively, wish to write a dissertation which is more 'desk-based', working extensively with the theoretical or conceptual literatures, or drawing on existing research findings, and offering

you the chance to formulate and present in some detail an area of new thinking of your own on a certain topic.

Above all, the dissertation is an extended piece of scholarship in which you have the opportunity to study in depth a topic chosen on the basis of your own interests, the staff available to supervise, and the feasibility of the topic proposed in the light of resources and time available. It is distinguishable from assessed course work by the greater depth of investigation, analysis, comprehension and critique demonstrated. Masters students are not expected to research their work as exhaustively as is typical of a higher research degree such as a PhD – the masters dissertation is primarily a teaching, learning and examining medium, not a medium for the presentation of research.

Additionally, we are committed in this programme to giving you the chance to explore the opportunities which digital media present us for re-thinking the way in which academic knowledge is presented. Many students may already have done some work on this in their assignments for their taught courses. Your supervisor will be happy, therefore, to discuss with you options for presenting your assignment in formats alternative to the standard, paper-based one which is still the norm for masters dissertations. The nature of the knowledge presented in such forms must still be distinctively *academic*, and must always take a scholarly, critical and formal approach to the research presented. So if you wish to present your dissertation using hypertext or video, as a game, as an extended development project and so on, you must give careful thought to how you are going to meet the formal requirements of the dissertation and demonstrate an appropriate level of critical analysis, academic knowledge and reflection on the nature of enquiry. This may include an element of formal, print-based writing alongside the digital artefact, in the form of a rationale of at least 2000 words. Precisely how this will be negotiated is something that you will need to discuss at some length with your supervisor, if you decide you wish to go down this route.

Managing your workload

It is a good strategy to interweave working on each of the various stages in your dissertation so as to avoid periods in which you feel you are marking time and making little progress. Many students find it useful to establish a timetable for their research from a very early stage – it is, in fact, a requirement of the dissertation proposal that you provide such a timetable for your work. When doing this, breaking the workload into manageable 'bites' and working backwards from your intended submission date can be helpful. Be sure, however, to incorporate some 'slippage' time in your projected timetable to cover any changing circumstances or unforeseen difficulties.

Chapter 2 will lead you through key elements of the process of planning and doing your research. This chapter also includes good advice on how to approach the task of writing up your findings so as to avoid an unnerving last minute rush when your deadline for submission looms. You are strongly advised to start writing from an early stage**.** Remember: no matter how well you may have carried out the research, it is how it is reported in the dissertation that is assessed. It is always unsatisfactory to have to submit any piece of work which you know could have been better. Make sure therefore that you allow yourself sufficient time to write up your study to the best of your ability.

Working with your supervisor

Chapter 2 contains important information and advice on supervision. It is worth emphasising here, however, that it is essential that you keep in regular contact with your personal supervisor and make efficient use of his or her expertise at all stages in your research. Your supervisor has the experience to alert you to important factors which may need to be taken into consideration in your research design, for example, and can enable you to incorporate these in sufficient time to avoid unnecessary problems arising.

It is inherent to the nature of research that unpredictable difficulties can sometimes arise. Few are likely to prove to be insurmountable given sufficient additional thought by yourself and some well-informed advice from your supervisor. Even in the worst possible scenario, she or he will be on hand to help you to devise a 'rescue plan' should one be needed.

Your supervisor will be also be around to provide you with the encouragement you may find you need at times when your research may not be going as smoothly as you might have hoped. It is not at all unusual for even the most able of students to encounter spells during which they feel they are making insufficient progress, to begin to harbour doubts about the approach taken in the research design, or to worry over how to interpret their data. Should you encounter any period in which you think you are having significant difficulties, there are two important things to bear in mind:

- you are very far from the first person to feel this way

- most students do successfully submit their dissertations, and on time.

After communication with your supervisor you will probably regain your sense of direction very quickly. You would not, after all, have come this far in the programme if your tutors and supervisor did not feel you had the ability to work successfully at this level. Chapter 2 of this guide tells you more about the supervisor-student relationship as a way of helping you to understand fully your mutual roles and responsibilities. This will help you to plan your sessions with your supervisor and to gain maximum benefit from them.

You will need to work out with your supervisor the best way of managing your contact with each other. For a few MSc in Digital Education students, face-to-face meetings are an option. Don't feel you need to avoid this just because this has been primarily a distance programme. For most, however, visiting Edinburgh is not likely to be feasible. You can therefore arrange to meet with your supervisor on Skype, on the phone, in Collaborate or wherever suits you both. Simple email exchanges are often the best way of exchanging thoughts, but you shouldn't hesitate to seek out real-time chat in one medium or another if you feel it would help.

Networking with other students

Although your supervisor is likely to be your most important sounding board while working on your dissertation, you should also take advantage of the expertise of your fellow students, particularly those who are also at the dissertation stage of their studies. At an early stage in planning your research, for example, it can often be fruitful to discuss your preliminary ideas with someone who either shares your particular interests or who has different professional experience. Feedback from a different perspective can often help to focus your thinking and clarify issues central to your research

questions. Other students may also be able to help you to access volunteer participants, provide contact information for colleagues who could be useful to you in your research, or master a tricky software package. Don't hesitate to make contacts where they can be useful and supportive for you!

Assessment criteria and grading

The dissertation will be assessed according to the criteria and marking scheme described in the Postgraduate Common Marking Scheme. Please see the programme handbook for details of marks, grading and distinctions.

Categories

There are six general categories to the dissertation assessment criteria:

— Knowledge and understanding of concepts

— Knowledge and use of the literature

— Planning and implementation of research/investigation (to be applied as appropriate)

— Constructing academic discourse

— Framing and analysing practice

— Development of professional practice

Knowledge and understanding of concepts

A   The assignment shows that the student has engaged critically with the main concepts and theories relevant to the field of study, without any misunderstanding, and has been able to integrate his/her understanding into a coherent framework

B   The assignment shows that the student has to a fair degree engaged critically with the main concepts and theories relevant, without any misunderstanding

C   The theories and concepts dealt with in the assignment reflect those relevant to the field, and are handled in a way that demonstrates that the student understands these concepts, although there is some minor misunderstanding

D   There is evidence of a degree of understanding at the conceptual and theoretical level in what is assessed in the assignment but there are some omissions or misunderstandings in the student's handling of the theories and concepts relevant to the field

E   There is little or no evidence of understanding of the theories and concepts relevant to the field, or the theories and concepts are handled in a way that shows considerable misunderstanding or omission

Knowledge and use of the literature

A   The student has used most of the key references relevant to the field of study, and has integrated the ideas from all this material into a coherent and analytical framework

B   The student has drawn on a wide range of appropriate sources, and has integrated the key ideas from these sources into a coherent and analytical framework

C   The assignment shows that the student is familiar with a sufficient range of key sources, and has been able to use these sources relevantly and with a degree of critical understanding

D   The student has drawn on a limited range of relevant sources and these texts have been used for the most part relevantly but with superficial understanding

E   There is little or no evidence of familiarity with any of the relevant sources, and/or those sources, which are used, are largely used irrelevantly or with misunderstanding

Planning and implementation of research/investigation

A   The research question(s) is/are clear and operational definitions fully specified; data collection method is justified with detailed evaluation of alternatives; both reliability and validity are evaluated; presentations of findings are clear and thorough; ethical issues have been considered; conclusions are drawn and evaluated

B   Research question(s) is/are clear and there is some discussion of operational definitions; data collection method is justified with some reference to alternatives; some awareness of validity, reliability and ethical issues; clear presentation of findings; a range of conclusions are drawn

C   Research question(s) is/are clear; data collection method is justified but with little evaluation of alternatives; some awareness of data limitations; adequate presentation of findings; some conclusions are drawn

D   Research question(s) is/are only sketchily outlined; some justification for data collection method; lack of critical evaluation of data; unclear presentation of findings; conclusions are unclear

E   Research question(s) is/are not specified; no rationale for data collection method; no evaluation of data; confused or incomplete presentation of findings; no attempt to draw conclusions

Constructing academic discourse

A   The quality of the writing, expression of ideas and conformity to conventions of referencing are consistent with the quality required for publication in an academic/professional journal

B   Consistent understanding is demonstrated in a well-structured, clear and appropriate manner which conforms to conventions of academic writing

C   The assignment demonstrates understanding and expression/application of ideas in a style which is mostly logical, coherent, fluent and appropriate to the conventions of academic writing

D   For the most part the dissertation demonstrates a logical and coherent understanding of the subject matter but sections of the argument become confused or undeveloped or stylistically inappropriate and do not conform to the conventions of academic writing

E   The dissertation lacks a logical and coherent framework or the expression of the ideas is confused or undeveloped or stylistically inappropriate or does not conform in any way to the conventions of academic writing

Framing and analysing practice

A   There is extended analytical discussion of practice which frames it very appropriately, making skilful use of relevant research / appropriate framing perspective(s) from the research and professional literature. (This may often involve showing clearly how relevant research relates to practice and how practice may challenge and extend the findings of research.)

B   There is analytical discussion of practice which frames it appropriately, making use of relevant research / appropriate framing perspective(s) from the research and professional literature. (This may often involve showing how relevant research relates to practice and, in a limited way, how practice might challenge and extend the findings of research.)

C   Analytical discussion of practice is provided, but this discussion could have been pursued with greater vigour / in greater depth, and drawn on a wider range of relevant literature.

D   Some analytical discussion of practice is provided, but this discussion is somewhat limited and does not draw in any depth on relevant literature and research findings

E   The dissertation largely consists of anecdotal or descriptive content, or of unsupported assertions or unquestioned assumptions

Development of professional practice

A   There is clear evidence of well-principled development of practice, with a sound rationale for the purposes pursued and the strategies employed

B   There is clear evidence of the thoughtful development of practice

C   There is evidence of the careful development of practice but some limitations in the progress achieved and/or the rationale provided

D   Some evidence of how practice has been taken forward is presented, but this evidence is not very extensive / practice itself does not appear to have been analysed and developed in any depth

E   Very little indication is given of how practice has been taken forward or of thoughtful planning

Assessment procedures

Your dissertation will be marked by two members of staff with expertise in the field and in the process and practice of research. One of these, the 'second marker', will normally be your supervisor. An external examiner will verify the standard of marking throughout the programme. You will be given feedback on your dissertation, as well as a final mark.

Before you begin your research

You must have submitted your research proposal, and had it approved. For most students, the proposal will form the final assignment for the taught Research Methods course – you can adapt this proposal once you begin on the dissertation component, but the final version, agreed with your supervisor, must be submitted to the Course Administrator and the Programme Director, before you enrol for the dissertation (which can be at any time). Those who have applied for "Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning" (RPEL) for Research Methods will submit a proposal as part of that application.

The proposal form is given in Appendix 2 and is also available electronically via the "Programme Handbooks" link in the Hub.

You must also submit an Ethical Declaration Form which is now done electronically. You will find information and the form at http://www.morayhouse.education.ed.ac.uk/pgstudentportal/

Your supervisor has to sign off this proposal and you cannot enrol for the dissertation until this has been done. You cannot begin collecting human data until your ethics proposal has been signed off.

Cost of the dissertation

The dissertation is worth 60 credits, and you will receive an invoice for the full amount after you fill in the dissertation enrolment form and your supervisor confirms that your proposal and ethics form are satisfactory. The current cost for the dissertation is listed at http://online.education.ed.ac.uk/questions/how-much-does-it-cost

There is now an option to pay for the dissertation (only) by instalments – see http://www.ed.ac.uk/finance/students/fees/self-funded/instalments

We wish you the best of luck as you embark on this invigorating, challenging and enjoyable period of your studies with us!

Chapter 2: Planning and doing your research

Deciding on your research topic

The process of deciding on a topic is one of 'progressive focussing', one which begins in the Research Methods course, and continues in partnership with your supervisor. Most students begin with a rather vague, general notion of the area in which they would like to work and end up with a precise plan which specifies not only the aims of the research but also the practical steps which must be undertaken to pursue those aims.

When deciding on a research topic, you should have three sets of criteria in mind:

- the generic assessment criteria for the dissertation (these were given in Chapter 1)

- the professional, personal and academic relevance of your topic

- issues of practicality, logistics, and access.

Many students choose a topic closely related to their field of work – there are obvious practical advantages in this (getting physical access to participants, and permission for their participation, may be easier if the researcher also has a professional locus and is not just 'cold-calling'). Such an approach also helps you to weave your studies closely, and usefully, around your professional context.

Bear in mind, however, that a close professional involvement in the area to be studied can create its own difficulties in terms of your ability to make honest conclusions about, for example, the practices of colleagues, or the particular nature of institutions with which you are involved. Your supervisor will be able to talk through these issues with you, if you think they might be relevant to your own topic.

As your topic develops into a research plan, you should also keep in mind that this plan must be capable of being adequately addressed within the constraints of time and other resources which will be available to you. It is important to be realistic about what can be done and to assess these demands against other competing calls on your professional and personal time.

The supervisory relationship

While you have the responsibility for carrying out your research and producing the dissertation, your supervisor has both a professional obligation and a personal commitment to assist you to progress through the process as competently and confidently as possible. In essence, your supervisor is there to guide you in focusing your study, to advise on relevant literature, to monitor your progress, to read and comment on draft chapters, and where appropriate, to advise on any ethical or safety implications of the work you are planning.

Students need to correspond with their supervisors regularly and to hand in material at agreed times. Supervisors should respond promptly and appropriately, making constructive suggestions during each of the different stages. Within these frameworks, however, each pairing of individual

student and supervisor has to set about fashioning a mutually satisfactory working relationship that is efficient, effective, and sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing needs and circumstances.

The ease with which a productive relationship is established and sustained depends to some extent on how good a match can be achieved between student and supervisor - in terms, for example, of subject knowledge, research interests, methodological approach, working style and personal rapport. But even in very favourable situations, openness and trust on both sides are required if the kind of relationship that will help you to make the most of your dissertation is to evolve. It usually helps if at the outset expectations are made explicit and appropriate ground rules are discussed, as this sort of clarity helps prevent any future misunderstandings.

Some of the questions you may find helpful to discuss at an early stage, for example, include:

- – What are your general feelings about the project and what are your initial ideas on how to tackle it - intellectually and practically?

- – What obligations do you and your supervisor have to each other, and what are the time and effort implications for both of you?

- – How are you planning to pace your work on the dissertation and do the time frames seem sensible?

- – What do you see as the most demanding sub-tasks that lie ahead and how does this square with your supervisor's perceptions?

- – Which specific aspects of your research project is your supervisor willing and able to help with, either directly or indirectly, in what ways and to what extent?

- – How does this fit with the amount and type of support you are expecting to need and hoping to get?

- – How do you plan to communicate – phone, email, messaging, blogging, face-to-face? And how often?

These are just some of the questions that it will be worth thinking about and discussing together. You may need to return to these questions to several times over the course of doing the dissertation, since just as the questions will change with time so too will the answers. If at any point anything is bothering either of you about how the supervisory relationship or the research is progressing, the chances are that things will work better if these concerns can be aired and shared.

A common pattern is for there to be a lot of interaction between supervisors and students at the beginning of the research process and then again towards the end when the dissertation is being produced. This works well in many cases. It may be less appropriate when the study is conducted part-time, over quite a protracted time span and in competition with other commitments – in these circumstances students can derive considerable benefit from using the supervisor as a sounding board during the middle stages in order to reflect on and integrate developments, as well as to remain well motivated.

Some difficult judgements must be made by the supervisor – not just about how much attention and assistance to offer an individual student at different times during the dissertation, but also about how to treat all their students in an equitable fashion. It is important to bear in mind that while you will have only one main supervisor, he or she will have supervisory responsibilities for other students who are completing their dissertations. It can often be helpful to remember that your supervisor is not your sole source of academic and personal support. Sometimes he or she will refer you to someone else in the School or elsewhere if that person is better equipped to provide with the particular information you are currently seeking. You may also have academic or professional contacts of your own that it would be sensible to capitalise on. Other people's perspectives and experience can greatly enrich your thinking. Discussions with interested and interesting colleagues can also often provide additional reassurance that your research questions are indeed relevant, that your approach is sensible, and that you are on the right track to provide information that will be useful to others in your field.

Working on a dissertation can sometimes seem a very isolated experience, especially in comparison to working for courses at earlier stages in the Masters because you are no longer part of a group who communicate regularly. It is worth keeping in touch with other dissertation students so that you can share experiences, talk through ideas, and identify options – either before or after consulting with your supervisor. Such discussions will not only clarify matters: they can also help put things in perspective by making it evident that your particular issues or concerns are not only being experienced by others, but may well be simply part and parcel of the challenge of doing a dissertation.

Preparing a proposal

Most students on the MSc in Digital Education will be taking the Research Methods course, which asks you to prepare a 2000-word dissertation proposal as part of the final assessment for the course. While it *may* prove to be the case that the research proposal that you submit for Research Methods is not the final basis of the dissertation research which you finally carry out, all else being equal, it will be. The element of flexibility in this is intended to reassure you. There may be unforeseen circumstances which mean that you have radically to revise your proposal before embarking on the dissertation research. Your final dissertation proposal, and ethics proposal, should be agreed with your supervisor before you formally enrol for the programme. The agreed proposal should be sent to the programme secretary and the ethics proposal submitted electronically at http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/research-support/ethical-approval before you enrol.

The structure of the proposal

Different sorts of projects will have different elements, so the details of the structure and content of the proposal will be different. In essence however, you should indicate how you plan to go about your research and give the following specific information:

- an **abstract** - approximately 200 words that summarises the project's topic, aims and methods.

- a clearly communicated **research question** or specific topic

- a **'background'** section which presents the historical context for the work through an indication of the relevant literature, including a description of the key literature and theory you expect to use;

- a **methods section**, which outlines the design of the project and the methods to be employed, considering the strengths and weaknesses of those methods in your research context, and the practical opportunities and constraints that exist, including issues of access to resources and participants;

- a brief section which indicates **how data are to be stored and managed**;

- an **ethics section** (backed up by the ethics application in an appendix) which considers the key ethical issues that might arise in the context of the proposed research, and how those will be handled;

- a **realistic timeline** for the conduct of the work right up until submission of the dissertation;

- a brief "**risk analysis**" which considers some of the potential pitfalls, plans for their avoidance, and contingency plans if these cannot be avoided.

Using digital media and new forms of academic writing

It is worth re-stating here that the Digital Education programme team is committed, given the technological context of this area of scholarship, to encouraging any participants who want to submit a dissertation using media other than plain text. Any who would like to pursue this option should discuss this with their supervisor at a reasonably early stage, so the details of the submission format can be discussed and agreed. Whatever the format of submission, the key criterion of assessment will be the quality of the scholarship which it represents.

Ethical considerations

It is likely that any research dissertation presented on this programme, and based on empirical work rather than on the published literature, will involve work with people. You might want to look at the usability of a particular interface to be used in a digital education situation, or to look at attitudes towards a particular educational approach, or to evaluate an innovation in comparison to a traditional alternative. All of these would involve studying people in some way. It goes without saying that other human beings are not objects to be used by the researcher for his or her own purposes, but are free agents with rights that need to be respected and defended. It used to be common to refer to the 'subject' of a study, but the term 'participant' is now considered more appropriate, to indicate the willing nature of the relationship and to perhaps work against certain constructions of the power relation that exists between researcher and informant.

The ethical basis of our work as researchers must be a respect for, and courtesy towards, the people with whom we work. This can probably best be summed up as a 'do as you would be done by' approach. We should never allow the people in a research study to be subjected to any discomfort, distress or other indignity that we would not consider utterly acceptable to ourselves. Such a guide is not going to be adequate by itself however – while our own personal intersubjective sensitivity will

be a good start, we will need to test our intuitions against those of respected colleagues, and against the accumulated wisdom of professional bodies and ethics committees.

Informed consent

The principle of 'informed consent' is a useful generalisation, in that participants in any research should understand clearly what they are letting themselves in for, and be in a position to decide for themselves whether or not they wish to participate. You will find a useful article on informed consent on the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods site:

> Wiles, R., Heath, S., Crow, G. & Charles, V. (2005). Informed Consent in Social Research: A Literature Review. ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.
> http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/85/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-001.pdf

It is essential to ensure that you collect all the necessary consents for your study prior to collecting any data. You should obtain some form of written consent from, or on behalf of, all of those participating directly in your research. If carrying out your research in a work setting, you may also require the consent of the employer or local authority. Such consents can only be meaningful if they are given on the basis of sufficient information about who you are, what the purpose of your research is, and what it is likely to entail for those involved in it. Therefore, in seeking consent, you should provide clear information on the following:

- your aims (including any likely practical application)

- your methods and procedures (including who will participate, where, when, how and for how long)

- how confidentiality will be maintained

- what type of feedback will be given to participants and collaborators.

If you plan to video or audio record sessions, you should say so, indicating if anyone other than yourself will have access to the recordings. You should also make it clear whether the recorded material will be erased or kept for any other purpose after the study is over (and if so, for what purpose).

Some of you may wish to carry out your studies with children in a classroom setting. It is a common misconception that teachers act 'in loco parentis' in the classroom and have the same rights as parents over children during school hours. This is incorrect. Any data collection which involves children and utilises tasks which are not strictly curriculum-related or which requires the gathering of information which would be beyond the normal run of classroom discussions requires parental consent.

It is worth adding, in the context of educational research, that there are likely to exist particular power relations between students and their teachers which may make it more difficult for a member of the less powerful group (the students) to refuse a request made of them by a member of the more powerful group (the teachers). As the research which we as educators conduct may often involve the willing participation of our own students, we need to be particularly sensitive about just what is happening when we say, 'You don't mind, do you?'.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Anyone who helps with your research in any way, regardless of age, has a right to expect that whatever data or information they provide – whether through observation, conversation, interview, or formal testing – will be treated in the strictest confidence and that their right to privacy will be respected.

For almost all research purposes, it is necessary to store and analyse data. Bear in mind that, whether these data are kept on computer or manually, the provisions of the Data Protection Act apply. These provisions are particularly relevant where the data are eponymous (i.e. where the subjects can be personally identified) and may cover not only the collection and storage of the data but also their accessibility to others and their eventual disposal. It is your responsibility to find out how the law applies to your data and to ensure that you comply with it.

Confidentiality issues can be particularly difficult to handle when you are working within your own organisation as it can sometimes be misinterpreted as an unwillingness to share your findings. It is nevertheless important to remain alert to any possible infringement of confidentiality when discussing your work with colleagues and when formally reporting your findings. It is all too easy unwittingly to write up your results in a way that would allow a semi-knowledgeable person to guess very accurately in which institution your study was carried out or even in some cases which particular individual provided the data or 'anonymous' quotes. Even if your data collection is to be entirely desk-based, drawing on material from secondary sources, there may still be issues of confidentiality that will need your attention when it comes to writing up your findings.

Below you will find a useful paper on anonymity and confidentiality:

> Wiles, R., Heath, S., Crow, G. & Heath, C. and Charles, V. (2008). The Management of Confidentiality and Anonymity in Social Research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. 11(5) pp.417-428.

Ethical approval

The School of Education at the University of Edinburgh a research ethics approval procedure which is described on the School's web site, http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/research-support/ethical-approval. As part of the initial stage of working with your supervisor and registering for the dissertation, you should give your supervisor a completed ethical approval form for your proposed project. You will have completed this form as part of your proposal assignment for Research Methods – you may want to make modifications based on your assignment feedback before passing it on to your supervisor. As you will see from the site, the final submission of the ethics form is now made electronically. **As a masters student you *do not* have to take your proposal through our ethics committee** unless it is likely to be ethically problematic – in other cases, your supervisor will take responsibility for approving the application for your project, and this is also done electronically.

In addition to the ethical approval application you are required to submit, certain professional bodies have established well-articulated written codes of practice in relation to research ethics. Some examples of such codes of practice are linked below. It may be that professional organisations with which you are involved will have similar codes, and it may be useful for you to consult these.

British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines

The British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics

The American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct

The British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association

Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (ESRC) Research Ethics Framework

Online research

There may be some particular issues of ethical conduct involved in doing research online. It was suggested above that our intersubjective insights will provide a good guide to what is appropriate and sensitive behaviour in a research setting. Yet it is known, and it is our frequent direct experience, that technologically mediated communications can disrupt social perceptions, and thus we feel a need to introduce "netiquette" guidelines for online interaction. It is likely therefore that we need to be especially alert to the interpersonal aspects of our online research behaviour. A few useful resources are:

Jones, C. (2011) Ethical issues in online research, British Educational Research Association on-line resource. Available on-line at https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Ethical-issues-in-online-research.pdf

Bassett, E. H., & O'Riordan, K. (2002). Ethics of Internet research: Contesting the human subjects research model. *Ethics and Information Technology,* 4(3), pp. 233–247.

You may also find it helpful to refer to the Association of Internet Researchers ethical recommendations, which addresses many of the particular issues of online research in helpful way.

Drawing up a timetable

You will have drawn up a timetable for your research as part of your proposal for the Research Methods course. This timetable is likely to be revised and refined after detailed discussions with your supervisor.

The time available

If you are participating part-time you have a year to complete the work, from the time at which you formally enrol for the dissertation component of the programme. If full-time, the dissertation project has to be completed, and the written account submitted, by late August of the academic year in which you began work.

The weight of work expected of the part-time and the full-time participant is exactly the same. The full-time student will probably have a more acute sense of urgency however, and will be less likely to be lulled into a false sense of security about available time. The part-time student may be at greater risk of running short of time, or taking on a project which is too large in scope, for the very reason that they start out with a full year.

While the weight of work required of all students is the same, part-time participants may want to construct a research design that explicitly takes advantage of the longer period of time over which the work can stretch. But remember that spreading work over time increases the likelihood that circumstances will arise to break the continuity of your work. A less risky approach may be to get the data generation stage of your work out of the way quickly, and spread the analysis and writing stages more thinly. In any case, **we recommend that you plan a project that you think will take 8 months to complete, leaving yourself 'wiggle room' in case of unexpected events or issues that may arise**.

The need to plan

As with any extended but time-limited undertaking, it is essential to map out in advance what you intend to do and when, both as a guide to future action and as a check on the practical feasibility of your initial plans. Of course whatever timetable you work out and agree upon with your supervisor is to some extent provisional and will have to be implemented flexibly. No-one can predict quite what lies ahead so it is worth building in some slack to accommodate the unexpected, as well as anticipating the need to flesh out and adjust your schedule as the project proceeds. Establishing clear timelines for the sequencing and duration of all of the component tasks entailed in carrying out your research and writing up the dissertation is vital, however. The resulting timetable will point the way ahead, providing a template for the setting of realistic deadlines and a yardstick by which to measure your progress.

The process of coming up with a timetable can be quite difficult, since it involves teasing out the nature and implications of the various research questions and classifying tasks in terms of their relative time and effort requirements. The latter must then be matched up with the demands and patterning of your other personal and professional commitments, and decisions made as to how you are going to make sufficient space for the work required for your dissertation. You will need to plan forwards in identifying and ordering the tasks, and backwards from the due date in order to slot each of the tasks into appropriate time frames.

This is likely to involve making some tricky tradeoffs in order to carve out reasonable compromises between what you might want to do in an ideal world, what is necessary to satisfy the assessment criteria (probably less), and what is practically manageable. While the amount of detailed planning that can be achieved at this stage will depend somewhat on the predictability of the likely course of your research project and on your own individual circumstances, it is worth persevering and drawing up a timetable for your work as far ahead as you sensibly can.

The process of discussing and drafting out a project timetable – with the assistance of your supervisor – is often very helpful in clarifying your thinking about the key issues. It helps in evaluating the relative merits of alternative methodological approaches, obliging you to consider these in some greater depth before embarking on serious data generation. At the most general level you will need to check out what time segments (months, weeks or days) are already 'blocked out' for yourself (and your supervisor) by work and other commitments. You will also need to decide what overall time balance to strike between the research and the writing aspects of the dissertation, so that the end product (the account by which your work will be judged) really can do justice to your research activities.

Being realistic in your expectations

It is common, partly because this aspect is somewhat distanced from your more immediate concerns, to underestimate the time that needs to go into drafting, reviewing, revising and polishing the report of what you have done (how you did it, why you did it that way) and what you have found out (the light shed on your research questions and the significance of your findings). Similarly we sometimes forget that data rarely 'speaks for itself' and that analysing and making sense of the data may take as much effort as the collection phase.

Time and task management, as well as interactions between the two, lie at the heart of devising a timetable for the research and the writing up. In order to make best use of the resources you can allocate to the dissertation and to arrive at an appropriate plan, you will want to take into account, for example, both how you generally prefer to organise your studying (e.g. little and often or more concentrated 'chunks') and what adaptations you anticipate making according to the sorts of tasks underway at any particular time. You will also need to discuss the patterning and mode of contact with your supervisor, and again how that might change depending on the tasks in which you are currently engaged.

Among other sorts of questions worth considering are, for instance, whether you will be developing research instruments that need piloting; whether there are specific 'windows of opportunity' for making contact with informants or consulting other data sources; whether writing will be done in tandem with other activities; what kinds and level of feedback will be given on draft chapters and when.

Although getting to grips with this kind of planning can be quite a daunting prospect, the benefits to your confidence and competence are likely to be considerable. You will have a much better-grounded appreciation of what lies ahead, a shared agenda and understanding with your supervisor about how you will move forward, and a clear notion of the ways and means by which you will be able to achieve your objectives.

Doing a literature review

The main aims of doing a literature review are to expand your knowledge of the subject area within which your dissertation topic will be undertaken, and to provide a context for the reporting and discussion of your own research findings. The review will make you aware of contentious issues within your field of interest, and enable you to build on findings from earlier relevant work. As you become more familiar with what has already been produced, you will find new information, ideas and methods that will be of great assistance in sharpening up the focus of your own study and determining the detail of your chosen approach.

Since the amount, type and coherence of the pertinent literature will vary considerably depending on your chosen area, it is important to get a broad feel early on for what is available and what is not. Identifying significant gaps in knowledge and understanding in your particular area can be as important as demonstrating familiarity with published findings. You may be faced with an

embarrassment of riches and have to be quite selective or, equally challenging, have to work very hard to ferret out sufficient material to put your own research into some meaningful context. Either way, you will need to be systematic and consistent in the way you both conduct and record the results of your literature search. You will also need to be consistent in taking a *critical* approach to the literature – it is not enough simply to describe previous work, you must also be able to say why it is useful, or how it fails to be useful, where you think the findings and theories of others are insightful and robust, where you think they fail, and what the implications of this are for your own study.

Start by trying to locate the materials (books, journal articles, research reports, official papers, records, software, web sites) that seem most central to your concerns, and then work outwards to identify additional materials to which the core resources may themselves make reference. When you do find an article which is recent and of direct relevance to your work, one of the most effective sources is the list of references cited by that author (and of course the references which they in turn cite, and so on).

Take stock of the resources most immediately accessible to you – in local libraries and other repositories, or through reading lists or 'leads' given by academic staff and fellow professionals, as well as launching into a more widespread bibliographic search via the internet.

If you negotiate this mass of potential information effectively, it will not be long before you find yourself looking, in more or less depth, at a large and increasing number of sources. As you proceed, do make sure that you keep a careful record of where your search has taken you, the materials that you have located, the bibliographic details, and your estimate of their potential value to your study. We strongly recommend that you get to grips with some kind of bibliographic management software like EndNote, Zotero or Mendeley for doing this. Your programme handbook has more information on managing references and citations and conducting literature searches.

Although the literature review is likely to be a relatively early undertaking, you need to remain on the lookout throughout the rest of your dissertation period for anything new that appears or which you overlooked in your initial trawl. As you get immersed in your research and new ideas develop, you may find that shifts of focus occur which mean that certain materials decline in significance and others enter the frame. Remember there is inevitably going to be some fluidity over time in what constitutes 'the literature' for your dissertation topic. In view of this it may be sensible not to immerse yourself too deeply in the literature until you have a clear sense of what you are reading to find out about, and how you will *use* what you are reading. Keep your specific topic in clear focus at all times and be realistic about just how deeply you can immerse yourself in the literature at this level of study (which is not after all a masters by research or a PhD).

Writing the dissertation

The process of writing your dissertation differs in a number of ways from the assignments which you have submitted for your taught courses. These differences reflect to some extent inherent differences in length and content but also the intended shift in this final stage towards more independent study and more analytical thinking. There is no one method of writing up material which works for everyone. If you have evolved a successful way of writing assignments, it should be possible for you to adapt this for your dissertation. It can be helpful to reflect on how successful you think your procedure for writing assignments was and what aspects of it might need to change when writing in greater depth and at greater length. It makes very good sense to start drafting parts of your dissertation from the earliest possible stage, so that you can receive feedback and support from your supervisor on your writing style and quality.

Word limits

Remember that it is essential that you adhere to length requirements, as dissertations which are significantly over-length will be returned for revision and examination will be delayed. **The required length is 15,000 words**. The 15,000 words count includes any footnotes and tables but does not include the reference list and appendices. We do not expect that dissertation length will be exactly 15000 words, but do advise that your finished work is close to that figure. If the length is markedly over or under the-limit, you are likely to lose marks. There will be no penalty applied simply for going over or under the word count, up to 10% either way. However, do note that dissertations that are repetitive or contain superfluous information may well be marked down for poor academic writing. When you start writing, you may think that it will be difficult to report at this length but often the hardest task proves to be to keep within these limits. Remember that the independent research project carried out in this final stage in your studies is not intended to rival the kind of work which can be carried out within a PhD programme of research.

Structuring the dissertation

There is no one acceptable format for a dissertation and the structure you adopt will depend on your choice of topic and how you have approached it. There are similarly no set regulations on the number of chapters it should contain and so how you divide your work up into sections will be driven to some extent by the 'story line' of your own particular piece of work.

Putting the right information together, in the right place, and in the right sequence, is essential. You need to be particularly alert to the fact that while you are very familiar with your research and its aims, the reader has no way of knowing what you did, with whom or why until you tell them. It may help to think about your structure in terms of answering the following questions:

- What was your aim, the reason for undertaking this piece of research?

- Why is it important?

- What arguments are you trying to make?

- What evidence have you got to reinforce those arguments?

- What conclusions can you draw?

Each dissertation is an individual piece of work and the ways in which different students choose to write up their work varies. The sequence of presentation outlined below is offered simply as an example of the kind of structure you might consider – it is not intended to be directive or the 'final word' on how your dissertation should look on submission.[1] While every dissertation will have a title page, table of contents, references and introduction, the structure and nuancing of other elements – 'findings', for example – will vary significantly depending on the kind of research methodology you adopt, and your own epistemological orientation toward research. However, a notional structure might look something like:

1. Title page

2. Abstract

3. Acknowledgements

4. Table of contents

5. List of tables/figures

6. Introduction

7. Review of the literature

8. Research design and method

9. Presentation of findings

10. Discussion of findings

11. Conclusions

12. References

13. Appendices (if any)

The following gives some indication on how you might organise your material under these various headings.

Title
The title should indicate the precise nature of your study. In choosing a title, avoid being too vague, too detailed, or promising more than your dissertation will actually deliver.

Abstract
This should be a brief account of what you did and what you found (no more than 500 words). It

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[1] For other models for writing up research, have a look at some of the introductory texts such as:

Bell, J. (2010) Doing *your research project : a guide for first time researchers in education, health and social science*. (Maidenhead, Open University Press)

Davies, M. B. (2007). *Doing a successful research project : using qualitative or quantitative methods*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan)

should indicate the area of interest, the questions addressed, the methods used, the findings, and the conclusions, recommendations or implications which can be drawn from these.

Acknowledgements

This is an opportunity to thank all those who made your study possible, those who offered advice, were sources of information or otherwise facilitated your study. Personal thanks to your supervisor, family or friends can be included but the wording should be appropriate for an academic publication.

Table of contents

This should list numbered chapters (with sub-headings where appropriate), tables and figures, any appendices, and references, with the associated page numbers alongside each.

List of tables/figures

This should be a list of numbered tables and figures, if you have used these, again with associated page numbers.

Introduction

The introduction should set the study in context and provide the reasons for your professional and academic interest in it. The significance of the topic should be discussed and related conceptual frameworks outlined. Your specific research questions should be presented and some preliminary information on how you set out to investigate these given. It can also be useful to indicate at this early stage any limitations to the scope of the study or on the validity and generalisability of the findings to be reported.

Review of the literature

This should be a *critical* survey of the most important and recent work by others that provides part of the context for your own research. It is neither necessary nor advisable to include *all* the literature you will have read relating to your topic. In organising and condensing what you have found, it can be helpful to use sub headings to categorise by topic or theme. The literature review allows you to demonstrate your ability to evaluate and synthesise past and current literature. It is not therefore sufficient simply to list key texts and state the contents. You are expected to identify your assessment of the quality of the research, where authors differ, how the literature has changed over time, and where there are differences in findings. You should always avoid unsupported assertions. Statements of opinion should be backed up by evidence, with quotations carefully selected and used only where they specifically contribute to your line of argument. Don't speak through other writers' voices; it should be clear why *you* are citing your sources.

Research design and method

This should include information on the specific research question(s) addressed, the epistemological foundation you are working from, the research design adopted, and the justification for taking this approach. Any changes made in the method as a result of, for example, piloting the data collection instruments or difficulties encountered in implementing the original method should be mentioned. A timetable of the data collection process can be given if this is relevant.

Presentation of findings

How you present your findings will depend in part upon the nature of your data – quantitative or qualitative. Qualitative data are likely – depending on methodology chosen – to be organised around

themes with carefully chosen extracts from interviews used to illustrate your key points. As with quantitative data, the important thing is to present your findings clearly, succinctly, and in a logical order. It is often the case with qualitative data that it makes more sense to write up the presentation and discussion of findings in the same section or chapter, rather than separately, as given here.

Quantitative data can be presented as graphs, tables and so on, and should be accompanied by brief figure legends indicating the nature and source of the data represented. You may wish to present some of the less significant or more detailed data as appendices (see below). This can be a useful way of avoiding their presentation impeding the flow of the argument in the main body of the text.

Discussion of findings
Here, you need to discuss the meaning and the implications of your research and to assess how far you have answered the questions you set out to investigate. You should also relate your findings to existing literature in the area. Where more than one interpretation of the findings can be supported by the data, the range of possible explanations should be assessed and each critically evaluated. Even if your data do not provide you with all the information you expected or if your findings are in the opposite direction to that predicted, this does not mean that the data have no value. Research often raises more questions than it answers. At least now you are in the position of being able to refine the questions you might wish to address in any future studies on the basis of the evidence you have collected and not merely a 'hunch'.

Conclusions
What you set out to investigate and what your investigations have revealed should be clearly summarised here, as should what you see as the implications for professional practice and/or policy. The relevance of your study to current theoretical debates and other findings in the literature should be presented. You may wish to make evaluative judgements or suggest avenues for action or further research.

It is important that you do not overstate what can be claimed on the basis of your findings. Inevitably the scale of your research will have been limited by the time available at this level of study. You must therefore be scrupulous in highlighting any weaknesses or limitations on the interpretations you place on your findings, as in the final analysis you have some degree of responsibility for the use to which others might put them. Problems can arise if your ideas are put into practice by others without sufficient knowledge of the potential limits on their applicability.

References
The object of providing a reference list is to enable a reader of your work to find the source from which you obtained your information. In this, the books, articles and so on that you list should be arranged in alphabetical order of author's surname and, in the case of multiple publications by the same author, by date. Your *Programme Handbook* contains detailed guidelines on citation and referencing, and we would recommend you refer back to this for help in compiling your reference list for the dissertation.

You and your supervisor can agree on a different format if you are already familiar with a particular system or if most of the literature in your field uses one particular referencing style. If you are hoping to publish your findings in a periodical at a later date, you may wish to adopt the referencing

system specified in its instructions to authors. Whichever system you use, however, it is important that you use it consistently.

Appendices

In general terms, material should only be included as an appendix if it contains information essential to the interpretation of your findings but would take up a disproportionate amount of space if included in the main body of the dissertation, disrupting the flow of presentation of information. Materials you might consider for inclusion as appendices are questionnaires, interview schedules, or raw data sets.

Presenting your dissertation in an alternative format

The guidelines above refer primarily to conventional paper or web-based dissertations, and you may, of course, wish to explore an alternative format, media and mode in your own piece of work – for example, you may wish to produce a dissertation written in hypertext, one which incorporates video or other media, or one which is otherwise experimental. If so, you should discuss options for doing this with your supervisor early on. The final piece of work needs to be archivable *in some form* for our programme records and our external examiner, which means that you should also discuss this issue at an early stage.

If you present your dissertation in an alternative format that is heavily multimodal or non-textual, you may also decide, in consultation with your supervisor, to write a rationale for what you have done. This rationale should be of approximately 2,000 words, and you can negotiate with your supervisor the precise balance of digital/print word count you are aiming for. The rationale should detail your reasons for adopting your chosen format – reasons based in the literature as well as in whatever practical or professional factors are involved – and explore what it is you have tried to achieve by presenting the dissertation in this way. It should also detail any specific access issues which assessors will need to take into account.

From initial drafting to the final product

Drawing up a timetable for producing your dissertation is part and parcel of the overall planning exercise, and leaving all of the writing until the end of your data collection can produce unnecessary stresses. If you don't make a start on drafting sections at an early stage, you run the risk of getting out of the habit of writing, feeling daunted by the sheer amount to be done, or losing track of the main contours of what you want to say in the different sections. You may also miss the opportunity to clarify and refine your thoughts through getting them down on paper.

The section dealing with your research design, the methodology used, and rationale for your approach, can be a good place to begin because it is largely familiar and well established territory. The literature review is a similar proposition, although the emphasis placed on particular elements might well shift as you proceed with data analysis and interpretation. Other writing may have to be more broad brush and provisional, with – for example – bullet points or reminder pointers inserted rather than polished text.

Initial drafts may consist of unlinked chunks likely to need expanding, cutting down or repositioning later on, but it is very encouraging to know that you have made a start on building up the component parts of the dissertation, and that there will be enough time left to capitalise on your

own self appraisal and others' feedback. Writing is an inherently iterative process, with initial drafts usually substantively improved in subsequent revisions. The important thing is to start writing at an early stage so as to allow this process to run its natural course. Re-writing is re-thinking. Students often surprise themselves by how much their original perspective on a topic may have changed by the time they submit the final version of their dissertation. This reflects true professional and academic development and is something to take pride in.

In working up your draft chapters you need to switch from the writer's perspective and give some thought to the reader. Your markers will be checking out the presentational aspects of the dissertation, the structure and relevance of the content, the way the research is integrated into the account and the soundness of the arguments. You should therefore bear in mind the specific assessment criteria which will be applied.

You should also aim to make your dissertation interesting to read, and should try to ensure your readers can appreciate why you thought your research questions were worthy of investigation and to understand why you chose to investigate them in the way you did. Put your work clearly into context and help them to see why you think your findings should be of interest to them. This is especially important if you may want your findings to get out into the field and be used – i.e. to be publishable. The more attention you pay to the quality and liveliness of the writing now, the easier it will be to repurpose it later in the form of a journal article, for example.

Stage 1: The first draft

If you find it difficult to start writing, try to create an outline or a flow diagram by writing a list of your main ideas and then adding details such as supporting and contradictory evidence to each of these. There is no rule which says that you must draft sections in the order in which they will appear in your final dissertation. Some students find this a useful approach but some supervisors would argue that the introduction and conclusion should be left until last and that a sensible starting point is the literature review. The way you approach it is up to you but try always to keep in mind the necessity to link sections together in a way that will make sense to a first-time reader who may have a sound knowledge of research methodology but be less familiar with your particular area of interest.

Stage 2: Reviewing and editing

Many students often spend insufficient time on this stage and as a result they fail to do themselves justice. In scheduling your time you should allow a generous amount for this stage. The basic aim of this stage is to check that you have included all the material you wish and expressed your ideas in the best possible way. Compiling a check-list of the aspects of your material that you will evaluate at this point can be helpful, such as structure, coherence, content, consistency of style, text formatting, and citations and references. If you can persuade a friend to read over your material, this can also lead to errors being identified which you may not have spotted, as well as highlighting any potential ambiguities in the terminology you have used or any contradiction in how you have expressed your thoughts in different sections. Many supervisors will not read several drafts of the same section so it is sensible to review and revise them for any of the more obvious improvements that could be made before asking for feedback from your supervisor.

Stage 3: Final polishing

It is equally important to make sure that you allow sufficient time in the final stages to proof read

your material – ideally asking a colleague or friend to read it, too, for errors and for overall sense and flow. Typographical errors are easily missed and can make an otherwise perfectly clear sentence into one that is impossible to follow. Typographical errors can also greatly irritate the reader, who may begin to wonder why they should bother to read your dissertation when you clearly haven't read it closely enough yourself! Although spelling and grammar checkers on word processors can assist the proof-reading process, you need to be aware of their limitations and check very carefully those points they do not cover. It is not the responsibility of your supervisor to proof-read your final draft.

This is also the stage at which you need to be alert to any possible infringement of confidentiality in reporting your research.

One last important point: At all stages in the drafting process, make sure that you identify direct quotations from the work of others (whether published or not) by placing them inside quotation marks and making a full reference to the original source. It is common to work directly from notes taken at an early stage and these often contain direct 'lifts' from the article or book you were consulting at the time. Further down the line, it can be easy to lose track of the fact that these were not your own words or thoughts. A series of short sentences from different sources is as much an instance of plagiarism as is one long quotation from a single source, no matter how unintended it might have been. If you refer to or summarise the ideas, findings or judgements of another person, you must mention the name of the person concerned in the text of your dissertation and include a full reference in your bibliography.

Similarly, it can be very tempting to recycle aspects of your own work, such as previous assignments or even published work. Self-plagiarism of journal papers is still plagiarism, so the citing conventions should still apply. Reuse of parts of assignments is seen as deceit by the University and is strictly forbidden. For guidance on this, see http://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/undergraduate/good-practice/collusion

And finally….

Above all, try to enjoy the process of researching and writing your dissertation – it is, after all, the culmination of all your hard work on the programme. The experience of writing at full stretch, of formulating and presenting convincing arguments, and of analysing and synthesising other interesting work in your field, is one of the real joys of academic work. It is your chance to say something serious, which will be taken seriously and judged as such. Best of luck with it!

Chapter 3: Regulations

The following offers a summary of the key processes and regulations as they relate to the dissertation. Please refer to the *Taught Assessment Regulations* at : http://www.ed.ac.uk/academic-services/policies-regulations/regulations/assessment for details of the regulations that apply across the University. Please also refer to your Programme Handbook for details relating to more general regulations and procedures.

Brief summary of the stages

- Complete 120 credits, including the compulsory research methods course.
- You and your supervisor agree the proposal.
- Fill in the online ethics form.
- Complete enrolment form and send copy of proposal to the programme secretary.
- The secretary will formally enrol you and this will generate an invoice.
- Complete the dissertation within a year (part-time) or by end of August (full-time).
- Submit the dissertation online and send a copy to the programme secretary.

Further details follow.

Supervision

a) Your supervisor will be appointed in discussion with you. This will normally take place shortly after you complete the Research Methods taught course. If you think you are ready to start but have not yet been allocated a supervisor, contact the Programme Director.

b) Chapter 2 considers the nature of the supervisory relationship.

The proposal

a) You will submit a proposal for your research as the final assignment for the Research Methods course. You may adapt this proposal after beginning the dissertation component, but should finalise it, in consultation with your supervisor, in the before your dissertation study.

b) Appendix 2 contains the proposal form you will need to complete and agree with your supervisor – you may send them your Research Methods proposal instead of the form, if you wish.

The ethics form

a) This should be submitted electronically at the portal at http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/research-support/ethical-approval and will be signed off by your supervisor. (You will probably not be able to access this portal until you have been allocated a supervisor.)

b) You must not start gathering data on human beings until your ethics approval has been granted.

Enrolment

a) For part-time students, once you have completed 120 credits of study to the required standard, and your supervisor has approved your research proposal and ethics application, you should enrol for the dissertation component which can be found at https://www.moodle.is.ed.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=131 (the link takes you to the MSc in Digital Education Moodle site). Full-time students will automatically proceed to dissertation assuming they have passed their taught courses at the required level. See the programme handbook for details of the required standard that must be met to progress to the dissertation.

b) Please send the programme secretary a copy of your proposal at the same time as you enrol - digitaled@ed.ac.uk.

c) Once you have submitted your application form for the dissertation, the programme secretary will consult with your supervisor to ensure they have approved your proposal and ethics form. You will then be enrolled for the dissertation, and will see it listed in your list of courses in MyEd. You will also be invoiced for the dissertation at this point.

Payment

a) Once you have submitted your application form for the dissertation, and your enrolment has been confirmed, the Fees section of Registry will be asked to raise an invoice for the full amount of the course. The cost of the dissertation is three times the cost of the taught courses (reflecting its credit rating – 60 credits).

b) If you do not go on to submit a dissertation, you will not be eligible for any refund on the total cost of the course.

c) Fee-waivers if you withdraw from the dissertation course can only be considered in the most *exceptional* medical circumstances. Invoices are payable within 30 days of receipt; however, there is the possibility of payment by instalments - http://www.ed.ac.uk/finance/students/fees/self-funded/instalments

Deadlines

a) Part-time students must submit their dissertations within one year of beginning the dissertation course. You must also complete your entire award within the prescribed period of study (you can find your 'maximum end date' in MyEd, or can ask the programme secretary or your personal tutor for this information).

b) Full-time students must submit their dissertations by late August of the year in which they are studying. Exact due dates are provided each year in the programme Moodle site at https://www.moodle.is.ed.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=131

Submission of the dissertation

The final dissertation should be submitted to the Moodle site
https://www.moodle.is.ed.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=131 and you should also send a copy
by email to the Programme Secretary at digitaled@ed.ac.uk. Remember that it is your
responsibility to ensure that the dissertation arrives by the due date, so it will be wise to
check if you do not get an acknowledgement that it has been received.

On the Moodle site, you will see that you are required to include the following declaration:

> Having reviewed the programme handbook and course-specific guidance on good
> academic practice, and reflected on the nature of plagiarism and the ethical
> representation of academic knowledge, I confirm that this piece of work is
> submitted without any misappropriation of sources.

The format of the dissertation

The written elements of the dissertation should be formatted as described below if you are
submitting it as a single document. If you are submitting part or all of your dissertation in an
alternative, digital format, you should submit either the digital file or a link to the
dissertation, along with some form of archived copy (a PDF or similar, if possible), to the site
at https://www.moodle.is.ed.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=131

Number of copies to be submitted – as described above, submit a copy to the site, and by
email to the Programme Secretary.

Paper – A4.

Layout – 4cm left-hand margin; 2cm top margin; 2.5cm right-hand margin; 4cm bottom
margin. Single or double sided.

Spacing – 1.5 line spacing for the body; quotations and notes in single spacing.

Pagination – all pages numbered; tables and illustrations numbered.

Character size – at least 10 point.

Character style – main text in a serif font (Times New Roman or similar); headings and labels
in sans serif (Arial, Helvetica or similar).

Title page – the title page should include:
Title of thesis
Author's name
At foot of page:
      Name of degree
      University of Edinburgh
      Year of presentation

Binding – electronic submission is requested.

Re-submission

A failed dissertation, or one which passes at Diploma level, may not be re-submitted.

Appeals

If you believe you have been treated unfairly through the assessment process, you may appeal. It is important to note that the appeal process cannot be used to challenge academic judgment. That is, a student cannot submit an appeal simply because they believe that they deserve a better mark. There is more information about appeals at
https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/support_and_advice/the_advice_place/academic/appeals/

Graduation

a) Once dissertation marks have been confirmed by the Board of Examiners, students will be notified formally of their eligibility to graduate and of the next available graduation.

b) Masters students can graduate in person or at the virtual graduation in November. For more on graduation dates, see the Student Administration web site at:

http://www.ed.ac.uk/student-administration/graduations

Appendix 1: Descriptor for the dissertation

Dissertation (MSc in Digital Education); Credit rating: 60 credits, SCQF 11

The Dissertation is a major, 60-credit study demanding a high level of individual application and commitment to research and enquiry. It provides you with the opportunity to identify, reflect on and explore a topic that has implications for your own professional development and scholarly interest. The Dissertation will involve a critical interrogation of the relationship between academic theory, professional practice and the design, ethics and interpretation of research.

Following successful completion of the PG Diploma phase, normally concluding with the *Introduction to social research methods* course, you will be allocated a supervisor for guidance and support.

Course learning outcomes

On completion of the course you will be able to:

On completion of the dissertation, you will be able to:

- specify a topic of enquiry suitable for a dissertation and justify its theoretical significance, relevance and practical feasibility
- identify and reflect critically on relevant up-to-date literature, research reports and other scholarly evidence with specific reference to the research process chosen
- collect and analyse evidence, justifying the approaches and techniques used, demonstrating that the study complies with relevant ethical guidelines, and identifying the implications of these decisions
- critically examine the contribution and limitations of the study undertaken in theoretical and applied terms

Teaching methods

You will negotiate with your supervisor the most appropriate times for supervision meetings and review. The supervisor has an allocation of 14 hours for reading, commenting and discussion with the student.

Course assessment

A dissertation of 15,000 words or equivalent.

Appendix 2: Dissertation proposal form

[This is also available in the Hub and on the MSc in Digital Education Moodle site.]

To be approved before commencement of the research. You may substitute this form with your Research Methods proposal assignment (modified as needed) if you wish.

Please submit your proposal to your supervisor at the start of your dissertation period. You will also need to fill in an ethics form at http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/research-support/ethical-approval

Dissertation proposal (2000 words)

Name:

Title (may be provisional):

Supervisor (if known):

Abstract

Research question or topic

Background and relevant literature

Methods

Data storage and management

Ethical issues

Timeline

Risk analysis