

## **GUIDELINES FOR MASTER DISSERTATION**

28 February 2020

This document presents the guidelines of the Master (MA) dissertation for students enrolled in the Master in International Affairs and the Master in Development Studies. Together with the general [Guidelines for Master Dissertations](#), students will find here the pedagogical objectives and expectations for writing and submitting an MA dissertation as part of the Interdisciplinary Master programmes.

### **1. General**

The MA dissertation is the culmination of the two-year Master programme. It is a piece of independent writing carried out by Master students under faculty supervision. It addresses a (set of) research question(s) that are pertinent to international affairs and/or international development, depending on the programme of studies. Students are expected to have a solid grasp on their topic of interest, demonstrate a general command of the relevant literature and the various disciplinary contributions, as well as a rationale for why the concepts and methods employed are the most appropriate to address the research question(s).

The interdisciplinary MA dissertation requires that students write a paper of minimum 15'000 words to maximum 25'000 words, excluding footnotes and bibliography. The MA dissertation is worth 30 ECTS. Students will need to present an original research question addressing an issue relevant to international affairs and/or international development. They should present an overview of how relevant disciplines have addressed a given research question and provide a comprehensive but succinct analysis of how this research question has been addressed and an account of how their dissertation will seek to offer a genuine contribution to the existing literature. They are required to conduct original research and analysis that can draw on a variety of methodologies that best correspond to the objectives of the inquiry.

### **2. Supervision and Second Reader**

Students may choose a supervisor among any of the Graduate Institute's faculty members. Faculty members are free to accept or decline the supervision request. A visiting professor or lecturer may be entitled to supervise a dissertation if they teach more than one semester at the



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Institute. However, the Director of Studies could make an exception and accept supervision by a visiting professor/lecturer who only teaches during the Spring semester.

The supervisor then chooses a second reader, as specified in the [Implementation Guidelines to the Academic Regulations](#).

### 3. Content, Sections and Structure

An MA dissertation for students in the Master in International Affairs and the Master in Development Studies should comprise the following elements:

**Abstract:** The abstract should be no longer than 150 words. It should state the topic of the thesis, describe the methods used, and highlight the main findings and/or conclusions.

**Table of Contents:** The table of contents should list the main sections/chapters of the body of the thesis.

**List of Figures, Illustrations and Tables (optional):** The list should contain all titles or descriptions, as well as the page number on which each figure, illustration, or table is found (as in a table of contents), so that readers can locate the items in the dissertation.

**Introduction:** This section summarises the context and issues at stake, and should typically answer the following questions:

- What is the research question of the study?
- How is the research question significant in terms of current questions on global governance and/or international development?
- What is the specific contribution that the MA dissertation seeks to make to on-going academic and policy debates?
- What is the overall structure of the MA dissertation?

**Literature review:** This section should situate the topic of investigation within the general literature that has been written on this topic. The students should demonstrate that (i) they possess advanced knowledge of an important subject in the degree field; (ii) they have knowledge and awareness of scholarly bodies of literature in related disciplines; and (iii) are able to pose and adequately address a specific, substantial and feasible research question relating to the subject from a perspective suitably grounded in the literatures. In general, this section should typically answer the following questions:

- How is the research question addressed by existing scholarly literature, and specifically by different disciplines in the social sciences?

- What specific contribution does the dissertation seek to make, for whom, and how?

**Conceptual/theoretical framework:** Building on the literature review, this section should offer working definitions of the core concepts used in the formulation of the research topic, reflecting on what debates there might be surrounding the use and understanding of certain terminologies. It would refer to a set of theoretical debates, conceptual frameworks or hypotheses that will guide the empirical analysis.

**Methodology:** This section will describe the methodological approach(es) taken by the dissertation for data collection and analysis, including a brief discussion of the potential strengths and limitations of the methods chosen. It will present and discuss the forms of primary and secondary data collected through the research process, and how they relate to broader issues of case selection, sampling and levels of analysis. Data sources, units of analysis, sampling, etc. should be carefully explained and documented in the text, footnotes or appendix. If relevant, the data generated through interviews, questionnaires, field research, etc. will also be presented and discussed.

**Analysis:** This section constitutes the heart of the dissertation: it develops a detailed analysis of the primary and secondary data collected during the research process, and embeds the findings in the existing literature. Key issues addressed by this section include:

- What does the evidence suggest with regard to the specific research questions posed and hypotheses (if applicable)?
- What challenges (practical or conceptual) were encountered during the research process, and what bearing did they have on the analysis offered?
- How do the findings relate to the conceptual framework of the dissertation, existing literature and on-going scholarly debates?

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings elaborated in the previous section, this concluding section should reflect on the overall contribution of the dissertation – in terms of furthering academic debate, suggesting avenues for future research, and possible applications for policy and practice (if relevant).

**Bibliography:** This section should include all the primary and secondary sources materials generated and/or consulted for the MA dissertation.

**Appendix (optional):** This section may include additional documents drawn on during the research process such as lists of interviews or data.

### 4. Format, Quotation Style and Plagiarism

The MA dissertation extends from a minimum of 15'000 to a maximum of 25'000 words, excluding footnotes and bibliography, as well as a 150-word abstract.

Students can choose a reference style amongst those commonly used as long as they apply it *consistently throughout the manuscript*. It is highly recommended that students work with a standard style guide in order to guarantee consistency and to correctly cite references, such as for example the *New Hart's Rules: The Oxford Style Guide*, edited by Anne Waddingham and published in its second edition in 2014 by Oxford University Press.

Students are particularly reminded to take note of the Institute's [internal guidelines governing citations of sources and plagiarism](#). Students are also encouraged to refer to the Institute's [online repository](#) to consult dissertations submitted in previous years.

### 5. Sources

Students may use a range of sources, including primary and secondary sources, quantitative and qualitative data, as well as written, oral, audio-visual, and online sources. The use of primary sources or original data generated from the students' own field research is compulsory.

As for secondary sources, students are expected to conduct extensive research and thorough readings of different strands of literature relevant to the research topic. They are further encouraged to make use of documents written in various languages. Strong research ethics are required. Ethical issues such as preserving the anonymity of interviewees or using dubious sources should be discussed with the supervisor.

### 6. Research Ethics

Students writing their MA dissertation are required to submit to the highest ethical standards, based on the principles of non-discrimination, social responsibility, respect, honesty and integrity. They are expected to respect the dignity, rights and safety of research subjects, collaborating researchers, and communities they work with. Researchers should at all times comply with best practices to minimise risk and avoid harm, protect vulnerable groups and persons, respect confidentiality and privacy, and observe the legal provisions of Switzerland and the countries in which they are operating.

The [Research Ethics Guidelines](#) define the Graduate Institute's position towards research ethics and contain a series of general recommendations. Together with the [Research Ethics Checklist](#),

these documents offer guidance to allow students to self-assess whether their research is ethically sensitive and to take appropriate measures as needed.

### 7. Evaluation criteria

The evaluation criteria include:

- Originality, clarity and strength of the research design; clarity in framing the issues, clarity of argumentation.
- Command of the relevant literature and depth of analysis of the research data and findings.
- Command and use of appropriate methodology, concepts and theories.
- Analytical skills, critical and nuanced thinking.
- Writing skills, capacity to synthesise complex issues, structure and format of the text.
- Ability to integrate the comments of the supervisor(s) and to revise the manuscript accordingly.
- Autonomy and initiative.

### 8. Supervisor's involvement and calendar

- Students must upload an electronic copy of their *detailed dissertation plan* on the Institute's intranet before the end of the third semester (no later than the deadline set up each year by the Director of Studies). The supervisor is expected to give feedback on the *detailed dissertation plan* in a reasonable timespan.
- Students must upload the *final version of their dissertation* on the Institute's intranet during the fourth semester (no later than the deadline set up each year by the Director of Studies).
- Supervisors agree with students on a calendar regarding exchanges on work progress and draft(s).
- Students should let enough time between submitting a final draft, getting their supervisor's feedback and revising the manuscript accordingly before uploading the final version. The timing should be agreed with the supervisor.

*Failure to hold deadlines can be disqualifying. Please refer to the Graduate Institute's [Academic Regulations](#) and [Implementation Guidelines](#) for the specific rules and regulations applying to MA dissertations.*