

1  
**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
POST-GRADUATE COMMITTEE**

**Guidelines concerning differences between mini-dissertations, dissertations and theses**

Although there are differences between departments in the Faculty, there are also common tendencies regarding the skills, competencies, length, depth of research, and type of methodology required by supervisors of mini-dissertations, dissertations and theses. Some of these tendencies can be clarified in the interests of uniformity, but with due cognisance of the fact that departments have to be able to negotiate their individual positions.

It is therefore suggested that these guidelines should be refined in each department in accordance with their specific needs. Once departments have formulated the guidelines to meet their particular needs, these should be applied consistently.

Many of the uncertainties seem to relate to defining the differences between mini-dissertations (for Master's by course work) and dissertations (Master's by research). In the Faculty and at other tertiary institutions, mini-dissertations are variously called mini-dissertation / research paper / essay / paper / research report (in Afrikaans, most of these seem to be encapsulated in *skripsie*). Each of these terms seems to have shades of meaning that are not clear; this lack of terminological clarity amongst departments and institutions makes articulation difficult.

Another issue that makes standardisation and articulation problematic is the different weightings given to MA coursework mini-dissertations by different departments. The credits and notional hours for a Master's degree are established, according to the NQF levels, at 240 credits, but not all departments simply allocate 120 credits to the course work component and 120 to the mini-dissertation. The weighting given to the mini-dissertation differs, but most departments allot between 80 and 120 credits (the exceptions to this are mostly in the School of Arts where other requirements have to be met, but the total credits of the research components still have to comprise at least 50% of the degree).

It is suggested that the length for mini-dissertations, dissertations and theses should be conveyed in words rather than pages, using a formula such as the following:

ca 320 words per page @ 12 point Arial in 1½ line spacing and 3cm margins all round  
or  
ca 370 words per page @ 11 point Arial in 1½ line spacing and 3cm margins all round

It is clear that the differences between the three research documents cannot be reduced just to length; rather the level of research and writing skills expected from students need to be articulated, where possible, by the Faculty and each department. All course work master's degrees (except the M Phil) provide access to doctoral studies, so departments need to determine that the research skills and outcomes of the Master's mini-dissertation are commensurate with their requirements for entry to doctoral studies.

It is equally clear that it is not necessarily the topic that is linked to a certain level. Most topics can be tackled at different degrees of intensity, but the methodological and theoretical approaches required distinguish between a mini-dissertation, dissertation, and thesis. It is suggested that departments establish guidelines that are applicable to their critical core. In order to avoid confusion, these departmental stipulations should be made available to external examiners.

TYPE OF DOCUMENT	Mini-dissertation (coursework MA) 120 credits	MA Dissertation by research 240 credits	Thesis PhD / DPhil / DLitt 480 credits
<b>LENGTH IN PAGES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Differences in weighting will influence the expected length – with a few identified exceptions, departments tend to allocate between 80 and 120 credits</li> <li>- Suggested average length (excluding bibliography) = 50 – 90 p (16,000 – 29,000 words)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Weighting is the same in all departments, namely 240 credits for a dissertation</li> <li>- Suggested average length (excluding bibliography) = 120 – 150p (38,000 – 50,000 words)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The thesis is usually allocated 400 credits and the examination/defence 80 credits.</li> <li>- General international tendency towards shorter theses <i>ca</i> 200 pages (possibly when linked to course work)</li> <li>- Suggested average length (excluding bibliography) = 150 – 300p (50,000 – 100,000 words)</li> </ul>
<b>RESEARCH PROPOSAL APPROVED BY DEPT RESCOM &amp; ETHICS COMMITTEE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes</li> <li>- Length of proposal – ca 1500 – 2000 words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes</li> <li>- Length of proposal – ca 2000 – 3000 words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes</li> <li>- Length of proposal – ca 3000 – 3500 words</li> </ul>
<b>THAT HAVE TO BE DEMONSTRATED SKILLS/COMPETENCIES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informed knowledge of critical core of discipline</li> <li>- Basic/rudimentary research skills</li> <li>- Basic knowledge &amp; application of quantitative/ qualitative methods</li> <li>- Ability to articulate position within theoretical and methodological frameworks of discipline</li> <li>- Ability to initiate independent research</li> <li>- Very specific, focussed delimitation of topic</li> <li>- Collating and ordering existing information</li> <li>- Synthesis of data/overview</li> <li>- Presenting and testing theory</li> <li>- Variety of approaches, possibly mainly descriptive/empirical research, depending on discipline</li> <li>- Able to position own work in scholarly discourse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informed knowledge of critical core of discipline</li> <li>- More extensive research skills; familiarity with and control over chosen research methodology</li> <li>- Advanced quantitative/qualitative methods</li> <li>- Ability to articulate position within theoretical and methodological frameworks of discipline</li> <li>- Independent research</li> <li>- In-depth exploration of topic</li> <li>- Focussed delimitation of topic</li> <li>- Analysis and synthesis of data</li> <li>- Expanding on theory and existing information</li> <li>- Variety of approaches, possibly descriptive/empirical/problem solving/argumentative research, depending on discipline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comprehensive knowledge of and insight into critical core of discipline</li> <li>- Sophisticated research capabilities and command of field</li> <li>- Sophisticated writing and rhetorical skills</li> <li>- Independent research and contribution to field</li> <li>- Ability to articulate position within theoretical and methodological frameworks of discipline/field</li> <li>- Advanced quantitative/qualitative methods; discourse analysis, etc</li> <li>- Ability to work in interdisciplinary fields as necessary</li> <li>- Generation and application of new theory/theory building</li> <li>- Generation of new knowledge and insights</li> <li>- Generation of conceptual insights</li> </ul>

		– Able to position own work in scholarly discourse	– Analysis and synthesis of data – Variety of approaches, mainly argumentative/creative/problem solving research, depending on discipline – Able to position own work in scholarly discourse
<b>ORIGINAL RESEARCH / CONTRIBUTION</b>	– Not necessarily	– Not necessarily	– Yes
<b>LITERATURE STUDY</b>	– Yes – essential but usually of limited extent	– Yes – essential, in-depth; primary sources required	– Yes – comprehensive; primary sources required
<b>MINIMUM NUMBER OF SOURCES THAT SHOULD BE CONSULTED?</b>	– Not necessarily, depends on discipline and topic; rough guideline of 30 – 50 sources	– Not necessarily, depends on discipline and topic; rough guideline of 120 - 150 sources	– Not necessarily, depends on discipline and topic; rough guideline of 300 sources
<b>EXTERNALLY EVALUATED</b>	– Yes	– Yes	– Yes
<b>NEED TO PASS INDEPENDENTLY</b>	– Yes	– Yes	– Yes
<b>NEAT PRESENTATION, CORRECT REFERENCING TECHNIQUES; ACADEMIC REGISTER</b>	– Yes	– Yes	– Yes
<b>RESEARCH DOCUMENT AVAILABLE IN LIBRARY</b>	– Not always – depends on department	– Yes	– Yes

06/2003