Part One

Essential Preparation for Your Dissertation
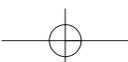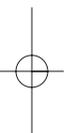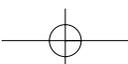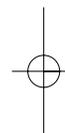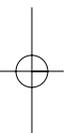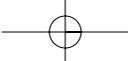
1 What is a Masters?

Increasingly more and more people are undertaking a masters level degree course (MA, MSc and MBA). The majority of these courses entail a dissertation of between 10,000 and 15,000 words. The dissertation is still seen as an essential element of the masters degree. In this chapter we look at what we mean by a masters dissertation, at the range of skills, capabilities, attitudes and qualities doing a masters will give you, at how a masters is normally assessed and at the different kinds of dissertation you can do. Our basic premise is that doing a masters dissertation is much more than a skills-based exercise. The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to answer some basic but essential questions:

1   **What is a masters dissertation?**

2   **What kind of document is a masters dissertation?**

3   **How long should a dissertation be?**

4   **What kinds of skills and capabilities will you need to do your dissertation?**

Doing a masters dissertation should, we argue, allow you to experience a series of higher-level educational, intellectual and ethical issues which help you to grow as a person and a professional. We begin, therefore, by placing the masters in the conventional context of the Bachelors and Doctorate degrees.

The masters as a licence to do research

It was only in the late nineteenth century that the titles we know as the Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate became formal academic qualifications generally recognized around the world. Although they have their origins in the ancient universities when they were Church institutions, the range of modern higher degrees owes little to these origins. Table 1.1 shows the traditional roles of the main university degrees alongside a definition of current roles.

Although the scheme in Table 1.1 has its origins in the time when the Church controlled universities, and degrees, diplomas or licences to teach were awarded by the Church, the only remaining vestiges of this are the academic gowns used to signify different qualifications. In the 1400s the cleric masters wore black robes lined with lamb's wool or rabbit's fur (for warmth) that were trimmed with exotic fur, usually miniver, which also trimmed their hoods. A feature of their robes was colour. Medieval masters enjoyed a wide variety of colours for their robes to such excess that Oxford and Cambridge Universities under Henry VIII began prescribing academic dress as a matter for university control. The drab blackness of robes only became a feature during the seventeenth century when Puritanism dominated the universities and the Church. The range of colours we see today designating masters in different disciplines had its beginnings in the United States. From 1895 American universities and colleges opted to follow a definite system of colours and standards for academic gowns; for economics the colour is copper, for education light blue and for social work it is citron. British and European universities follow no such standards except that each university or awarding body has generally settled on using one colour to signify their institution.

The only other link to the ancient past is the nature of the masters as a licence to practice. In the modern sense this licence is an acknowledgement of research skills and abilities. In modern masters courses the dissertation is research oriented. It is intended to help the student acquire the necessary skills and capacities to undertake a substantial piece of coherent research. Taking this as our starting point, we will focus on the

TABLE 1.1   BACHELORS, MASTERS AND DOCTORATE RESEARCH

Degree	Traditional and current role	Research features
Bachelors	A measure of a general education in terms of developing the skills of critical evaluation but specializing in a topic, e.g. twentieth-century history.	Small-scale independent project usually related to a taught module and used as the 'honours' element of the degree.
Masters	Originally a licence to practice theology and now a measure of advanced knowledge of a topic.	An independent piece of research focusing on the selection and analysis of a topic, design of the research, its execution and presentation as a dissertation.
Doctorate	Originally a licence to practice as a teacher in a university and now signifies authority on the current knowledge of a subject with the ability to make a contribution to that knowledge.	An independent piece of research focusing beyond the selection and analysis of a topic, design of the research, its execution, demonstration of a high and consistent level of analysis, evaluation, and contemplation to make an original contribution to knowledge and presentation as a thesis.

masters dissertation as a piece of independent research to be successfully completed as part of a masters course.

What is a masters dissertation?

Within the context of the modern taught masters course, the dissertation is a signifi-cant and substantial learning activity. Its purpose is to give you the opportunity to demonstrate your 'mastery' of the skills of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, argumenta-tion and data collection and handling by applying them to a specific topic. In addition there are other skills, such as writing, qualities, such as determination, and attitudes,

such as honesty, which are necessary and we will come to these shortly. Taken together these abilities are expected to be acquired and applied to produce a coherent and reasoned piece of research.

The language used to define the dissertation tends to differ between various universities and awarding bodies. This language includes terms and phrases such as the following, but as you can see they are generally unhelpful:

♦ **an extended treatment of a topic;**

♦ **research done for a masters degree; or**

♦ **a piece of empirical research and writing.**

The following definition from Yale University states that the dissertation student attains:

> technical mastery of the field of specialization, is capable of doing independent scholarly work, and is able to formulate conclusions that will in some respect modify or enlarge what has been previously known. (Yale, 1975: 182)

Masters level research is, therefore, a display of your ability to identify a topic, justify that topic, write clear aims and objectives which are interrelated, search and review the relevant literature, design data collection tools, apply those tools, manage the data collection and make sense of it. This may also include making conclusions and recommendations. It is these abilities, listed in Table 1.2, which make the masters dissertation technically a substantial piece of work and significant both intellectually and personally (Appendix 1 provides an extended list of these).

DISSERTATION OR THESIS?

The statement from Yale (in the section above) is a definition of their doctorate (PhD) and not masters degree. This highlights a difference between many British and American universities. Most universities in North America call a PhD a dissertation and the masters a thesis, while most British universities call the PhD the thesis and the masters the dissertation. In this book we will use the word 'dissertation' for masters research and 'thesis' for doctorate research. This is because, when used in a research

TABLE 1.2   SKILLS, CAPABILITIES, ATTITUDES AND QUALITIES OF THE MASTERS

Standard expectations of the Masters			
Skills	Capabilities	Attitudes	
Brevity and succinctness	Synthetical thinking	Proactive	
			Integrity
Citation and attribution	Analytical thinking	Ethical	
			Objectivity
Copy-editing	Argument analysis	Trustworthiness	
Decision-making	Effective thinking	Responsible	Honesty
Defining and classifying	Problem definition	Persuasive	Self-confidence
			Adaptability
Document design	Managing projects	Self-awareness	
Drafting and editing	Self-management	Cultural awareness	Determination
Information finding	Graphical presentation	Reflective practitioner	Finisher
Meeting deadlines			Self-discipline
Numeracy and statistics	Giving and receiving feedback	Anthropological	Experimentation
		Research orientation	Self-evaluative
Record keeping	Concept application	Self-development	Sense of humour
Target setting	Theory application	Self-control	Storytelling
Time management	Data management	Inter-disciplinary	Consistency

Note: See Appendix 1 for an expanded version of this table

proposal or monograph, the word 'thesis' means theory maintained by an argument and as such refers to the dialectic nature of a piece of writing. While a masters has some elements of argumentation and discussion the reason for these is not the production of an original contribution to knowledge. The role of argument and theory in the masters is limited to justifying the topic, rationalizing the methodology and data collection techniques and discussing the findings in relation to the use of the methodology and literature. In the doctorate theory and argument are used more extensively to discuss and evaluate ideas, concepts and data in depth as well as breadth.

THE DISSERTATION AS PART OF A MASTERS COURSE

As part of a course the masters dissertation is often specified using aims and learning outcomes. Some typical learning opportunities (or education aims) may be:

♦ **to provide a range of learning opportunities to allow students to acquire a sound understanding of the origins, nature and consequences of various methodological traditions;**

♦ **to enable students to appreciate the technical and intellectual aspects of research design and application including the management of a project; and**

♦ **to allow students to appreciate the diversity and opportunities of research in the discipline (for example, psychology, economics, literature and so on).**

The research you do for your dissertation is a learning activity, the purpose of which is that you are expected to acquire masters ability to do capable and competent research. Hence, your dissertation is the physical evidence that you have acquired and been able to apply at an appropriate level and in an appropriate way your learning so as to be accredited as a competent researcher.

Your learning is often expressed by masters courses as learning outcomes. The following is a typical set of learning outcomes, based on those you can see in Table 1.2, for the dissertation element of a masters course:

1 **To make connections between methodological assumptions, research design and soundness of findings.**

2 **To distinguish between the main types of research (for example, applied, strategic, evaluative and so on) and be able to select and justify appropriate type(s) for a given problem or topic.**

3 **To design and apply a range of tools for the collection of data, including the literature search.**

4 **To apply a range of techniques of analysis for the evaluation of argument and construction of argument to justify the research.**

5 **To use the literature as a corpus of knowledge to extract key theories, arguments, concepts and findings in ways which are critical and evaluative and provide a synthesis.**

6 To appreciate the ethical issues in the application of research methodologies, data collection techniques and evaluation of the literature.

7 To analyse, arrange, tabulate and present findings in a way that is clear, coherent and systematic, including the construction of references and the bibliography.

These general learning aims and outcomes form the basis for the assessment of the dissertation and, in some cases, the research proposal and the dissertation as separate pieces of work. The usual method, however, is to use the research proposal as a tool to identify your research interest and give you a plan for your dissertation. To cover this practice we will look at criteria for assessing research proposals in a later chapter and focus here on the details of the criteria used to assess the dissertation.

Criteria used to assess a dissertation

The only evidence that you are of 'masters quality' is your dissertation. The educational aims and learning outcomes are normally assessed by employing hierarchical marking schemes that tend to go from the general to the particular. In general terms your dissertation should:

♦ **focus on a specific problem or issue;**

♦ **relate the problem or issue to the relevant literature;**

♦ **have a reasoned research design;**

♦ **provide an analytical and critical approach to the literature and topic;**

♦ **maintain scholarly standards throughout; and**

♦ **use sound arguments with valid and reliable evidence.**

TABLE 1.3 CRITERIA FOR A MASTERS DISSERTATION

Level	Aims and objectives	Literature review and citations	Topic rationale	Methodology and data collection	Argumentation and critical awareness	Presentation, structure and succinctness
100%	Extremely well-expressed aims and proper objectives, employing terms in a methodologically coherent way so that objectives are evidently capable of actualizing the aims.	Excellent review of the literature, clear arrangement and selection of key texts, thorough, consistent critical evaluation of main ideas, theories, arguments, approaches and findings synthesized and focused on the topic puzzle. Excellent citations demonstrating consistency, detail and accuracy.	Excellent use of argumentative structure, evidence and analysis to demonstrate thorough analysis of the topic to justify the research questions or hypothesis stated. Excellent use of the literature to provide authority and backing.	Excellent rationale for methodological approach including data collection tools. Highly appropriate and effective with a strong justification in terms of the definition of the topic and research questions set. Ample evidence of reading and learning from the methods literature. Overall research design is clear and systematic with validity and reliability clear.	Excellent use of argumentative analysis and argumentative structures to analyse and synthesize the literature, topic, methodology and data collected. Arguments are developed with evident clarity and logic in an unbiased and objective way. Extremely high standard of critical analysis and evaluation. Conclusions and/or recommendations directly linked to form the findings.	Excellent presentation throughout using clear and succinct expression, with sectioning and arrangement to form a coherent dissertation, use of figures and tables to present ideas and data. Figures and tables properly labelled. Highly effective use of language and scholarly conventions. Use of correct grammar.

(Continued)

TABLE 1.3 (CONTINUED)

Level	Aims and objectives	Literature review and citations	Topic rationale	Methodology and data collection	Argumentation and critical awareness	Presentation, structure and succinctness
69%	Clear aims and objectives but expression could be more succinct to employ terms so as to be logically coherent and focused or ensure that all objectives are linked to the aim and can actualize it or may not have enough objectives.	Good review of the key texts with clear arrangement, may lack consistency of critical evaluation or elements not fully synthesized or lacks thoroughness but is focused on the topic. Good citations may need more detail in some instances.	Good justification of the topic but may lack full use of argumentative structure and evidence to demonstrate a thorough topic analysis. Should have used more sources to provide authority and backing.	Highly appropriate methodological approach identified and data collection tools selected. Evidence of reading and learning from the literature. May lack strong justification or clarity in design or strong links with the definition of the research questions. Some awareness of validity and reliability criteria.	Good use of argumentative structures and techniques of analysis. May lack consistency across chapters and within chapters or lack clarity and logic or contain some unsubstantiated statements or make conclusions and recommendations not fully embedded in the results.	Good presentation with clear structure, might have benefited from better sectioning or use of figures and tables or better expression. Some sections not integrated into the whole. Grammar is good with few mistakes as is language use.

(Continued)

TABLE 1.3 (CONTINUED)

Level	Aims and objectives	Literature review and citations	Topic rationale	Methodology and data collection	Argumentation and critical awareness	Presentation, structure and succinctness
59%	Reasonable aims and objectives but may not fully use the correct terms *or* make a clear distinction between one or more of the objectives *or* have too many or too few objectives to meet the aims.	Adequate literature review identifying most of the key texts but lacks thoroughness or critical evaluative stance or clear arrangement and does not fully demonstrate ability to synthesize ideas. Acceptable citations but lacking detail, consistency or accuracy in some.	Relevant topic identified but lacks convincing argument to link analysis with research questions or hypothesis stated. Little use of sources to provide authority and backing.	Satisfactory methodological approach and data collection techniques identified but may lack clear justification between methodology and data collection tools *or* detail for the design or demonstrable relationship with the research questions set. Little evidence of reading and learning from the literature or need to have valid and reliable data.	Some attempt to employ argumentation but at a basic level not demonstrating a sound understanding of argumentative analysis *or* its need throughout the dissertation *or* containing too many unsubstantiated statements and assumptions. Weak conclusions *and/or* recommendations poorly expressed.	Basic use of structure but chapters mostly separate entities not integrated by the focus on the topic. Better sectioning needed along with more figures and tables, and consistent use of effective expression. Grammar has some common mistakes.
	Weighting 15%	Weighting 20%	Weighting 15%	Weighting 20%	Weighting 15%	Weighting 15%

It should also be coherent and not a series of separate and inadequately related elements. Before we look at how this can be done, Table 1.3 shows the main criteria used to make an assessment of a typical dissertation and although these have a small bias towards the traditional dissertation they are mostly relevant for other types of dissertation. When looking at these criteria remember that your institution will probably have a different way of formulating them and you should obtain these and discuss them with your supervisor.

MARKING RANGES AND FAILURE

As a piece of course work that is assessed and has a credit rating, the dissertation is normally marked out of 100. This marking may be in percentages from 0 to 100 per cent, or in alpha from A to F. Oddly, such work rarely attracts a mark of 0 or 100 even though the range is from 0 to 100. Our position is that if the mark range is 0 to 100, then the full range should be used. This means a dissertation that is deemed excellent by the markers should be awarded the full mark or very near to it. A mark of 70 per cent may be deemed to be excellent, but is in fact a 30 per cent failure. How can this be so when to gain the full mark of 100 per cent it requires a 30 per cent improvement? I believe that if a mark range is set at these limits, then they should be used and shown in the criteria used for specific masters degrees. Table 1.4 follows this through and shows the conventional mark range below 50 per cent. We have not included this as part of Table 1.3 because a mark of 40 per cent is equivalent to a 60 per cent failure mark.

CRITERIA AND THE EXAMINER

In some of the chapters that follow we will look more closely at different elements of the criteria in Table 1.3 and Table 1.4, to see what they mean in practice and how they can be adapted for assessing different kinds of dissertation. As you can see, the criteria are sets of interrelated expectations that your examiners are looking for from your dissertation. In Table 1.5 we have reformulated these as a series of questions examiners may use to show the relationships between the skills, capabilities, attitudes, qualities – the standards and technical requirements for a dissertation.

Table 1.5 also shows the reiterative nature of the criteria in terms that when combined they are used to assess both intellectual and technical abilities. Various criteria are

TABLE 1.4   50 TO 60 PER CENT ATTAINMENT

Level	Aims and objectives	Literature review and citations	Topic rationale	Methodology and data collection	Argumentation and critical awareness	Presentation, structure and succinctness
49% ←	Aims and objectives barely acceptable, should be better due to lack of clarity, wording, clear distinction between aims and objectives not evident, objectives not proper or consistent.	Barely acceptable review of the literature, not all key texts identified and reviewed, lacks appropriate depth and thoroughness, weak evaluation lacking critical elements, and clear focus on the topic. Poor citation of sources, lacking consistency, details and accuracy.	Generalized topic area identified possibly capable of research but lacks focus due to insufficient analysis. Weak argument with few or no sound links to the research questions or hypothesis. No significant use of sources.	Highly generalized identification and simplistic comparison of methodological choices and data collection tools. No evidence of reading and learning from the literature. Weak explanation of choices and research design with weak links to the nature of the topic. No attempt to address or demonstrate an understanding of validity and reliability.	Opinionated generalizations with no tangible evidence of sound argument. Highly descriptive and commonsensical using simplistic analysis. Analysis is superficial and conclusions and recommendations barely linked to findings. Considerable amount of bias and little recognition for substantiation of claims.	Sloppy presentation throughout with no evidence of concern for standards or a demonstration of scholarly conventions. Little or no use of figures and tables, under- or over-use of sectioning and no evidence of proofreading.
Less than 40%	You should not be left at this level if you listen and take advice from your supervisor.	You should not be left at this level if you listen and take advice from your supervisor.	You should not be left at this level if you listen and take advice from your supervisor.	You should not be left at this level if you listen and take advice from your supervisor.	You should not be left at this level if you listen and take advice from your supervisor.	You should not be left at this level if you listen and take advice from your supervisor.

TABLE 1.5   THE EXAMINER'S QUESTIONS

Criteria	Expectation as a question
Prior understanding	Has a demonstration been given of an understanding of a masters dissertation? Is this expressed through the soundness of the work, especially arguments, data collection and handling?
Perseverance and diligence	Have relevant databases for the literature search been identified? Have print as well as electronic sources been searched? Has the search been expanded and narrowed accordingly? Have clear and consistent records been made of the search? Is there an evaluation of the search?
Literature review	Have key concepts, ideas, theories, arguments and data been identified in the literature? Is the review comprehensive, covering both topic and methodological literatures? Have all necessary elements been categorized, compared and synthesized from the literature in a scholarly way? Are the citations clear, consistent and detailed? Has the literature been critically evaluated? Have all ideas and statements been fully attributed?
Coherence and thoroughness	Are the aims and objectives clearly stated and logically linked? Is the research design justified and capable of actualizing the aims and objectives? Does the justification amplify the aims and show use of argumentation and the literature? Have the data collection instruments been tested and evaluated? Are they a reliable and valid means to appropriate data? Is the data presented clearly and in full? Are anomalies in the data fully explained? Is the discussion of the data closely linked to the data? And are conclusions linked and related to the literature? Have clear links been made between the conclusions, data, literature and objectives?

(Continued)

TABLE 1.5 (CONTINUED)

Criteria	Expectation as a question
Justification and argumentation	Is clear justification (rationale) given for the project? Are definitions used properly? Is the issue, topic or problem clearly stated and justified, including the recognition of unstated assumptions? Are sound arguments used in the justification, evaluation of the literature and conclusions? Are different kinds of argumentation analysis used appropriately? Is the difference shown between informative and relational statements? Are the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning understood?
Scholarly standards	Have sources been correctly and fully cited and all proper attribution of ideas given? Is the bibliography as expected, containing all necessary seminal works? Is there sound use of research design to show understanding of internal and external validity, difference between description and explanation and different kinds of statements? Is this an ethical piece of research that conforms to the ethical standards of the university or profession? Are any moral statements justified and balanced with open discussion of alternative positions?
Methodological understanding	Are the origins, nature and consequences of different methodological traditions understood? Is sound justification given for the use of specific methodological assumptions? Is understanding shown of the relationships between methodology and data? Is there an overall research design incorporating methodological assumptions, data collection techniques and understanding of validity, reliability and limits on generalizability?

(Continued)

TABLE 1.5   (CONTINUED)

Criteria	Expectation as a question
Discussion, conclusions and recommendations	Is the discussion related to the review of the literature? Are statements and arguments clearly justified by the data or the analysis of arguments? Do conclusions follow from the evidence and argument presented? How do the conclusions relate to the aims and objectives set for the project? Are the recommendations properly arranged – recommendation, benefits, consequences and costs? Are they realistic, appropriate and based on the data or analysis?
Reflective practitioner	Are observations made which show ability to reflect and evaluate on what has been done? Is the evaluation related to the aims, objectives and management of the project? Are problems and gaps identified? Have areas for further research been suggested? Has the significance the research might have for practice been indicated (particularly relevant for vocational courses)?
Presentation	Is the dissertation well written in terms of proper grammar, including spelling and punctuation? Is the style and format that required by the university? Is the arrangement logical? Has editing been done to make it clear and coherent and of the right length? Are appendices appropriate? Is this dissertation as good as any other from a comparable university? Can this dissertation be released into the public domain for other researchers to use?

emphasized in different places in a dissertation but are, nevertheless, expected to be displayed throughout it. For example, argumentation is expected to be clear and succinct in the justification but have more depth in the review of the literature. However, this is not as complex as it may seem and we can see this by looking at different types of dissertation.

Different types of dissertation

Depending on the subject discipline and qualifications offered by your university, you will normally have the option of doing one of three types of dissertation: the traditional 'academic' dissertation; the 'literature review' dissertation; and the 'work-based' dissertation. This is a crude distinction and is in no way meant to indicate that one is somehow better than the other in terms of scholarship or practical value. All three types are equally valid if done properly as the same high standards are expected of all. There are no prescriptive criteria to determine which of the three you should do, but we do have some general advice that may be of help.

If you are studying for your masters on a part-time mode while working, then the work-based dissertation may be more suitable than the academic dissertation. This is because you will have some ready-made topics waiting for you in your place of work. If your employer is sponsoring your masters, then they may also expect you to do research that will have some benefit for the organization. In this case you are more likely to gain the necessary support from your organization to use them as your research topic. There are some problems with this and the main one is doing research on your employer and on a topic that is not too controversial. Work-based dissertations may result in findings and interpretations which your employer or someone in a senior position in your organization does not like or even see as criticism. Therefore the selection of a topic needs to be carefully considered.

The traditional dissertation may be more suited to students on a full-time mode masters course. This is because they will not only have a little more time than their part-time peers, but will have constant access to the library and other resources. It is also likely that they will be attending formal classes and therefore will not have opportunities to access an external organization. This does not mean, if you are a full-time student, that you cannot use an external organization for the basis of your research. There may be some advantages to using one, especially that you can take trips into the field knowing you can return to the relative political safety of your university.

In Chapter 5 we look more closely at the different types of dissertation, including the literature review dissertation. The following bullet points are, however, some of the features of the traditional and the work-based dissertations to help you think about which may be more suitable for you:

Traditional dissertation	Work-based dissertation
♦ Focused on a topic arrived at from using the literature.	♦ Focused on a specific work-based problem of significance to the sponsoring organization.
♦ Aimed at explanation, exploration or description of a puzzle.	♦ Aimed at drawing out options, recommendations and action lines.
♦ Grounded in the literature and based on key arguments and theories.	♦ Informed by the literature on 'best practice' in other organizations, industries and sectors.
♦ Provides relevant background information to justify the puzzle using argumentative structure and evidence from the literature.	♦ Provides relevant background information such as statistics, reports and evidence.
♦ Use of an appropriate methodological approach dependent on the definition of the topic and data needs.	♦ Use of an action-oriented methodological approach, usually action research.
♦ Use of relevant secondary sources including statistics for comparison.	♦ Use of secondary and primary data for comparison and validation of 'before and after' or for recommendations.
♦ Production of an academic dissertation normally in the format of a research dissertation.	♦ Production of a work-based dissertation normally in the format of a research report.

That there are different types of dissertation means it can be beneficial to look, before you chose which university, at the experience of different academic departments to see what preferences they have. Their preferences and experiences may be related to the kinds of learning and teaching styles they use, which may also have an influence on how comfortable you will feel doing your research (and masters) with them.

How long does it take to do a

masters dissertation?

This may be a key question for you if you are doing a vocationally-oriented masters or, like most students, have limited resources and will find it more economic to do your dissertation in the shortest time possible. As a benchmark we can say from experience that the time required for planning, reading, collecting data, analysis, doing critical evaluative and comparative thought, drafting and writing, editing and polishing a 15,000-word dissertation is substantial. Figure 1.1 shows how we normally expect a student to use at least 600 hours to complete a dissertation. If your university requires a 20,000-word dissertation, then add on about another 125 hours. As a general rule of thumb, if we use word output as our measure, every 1,000 words needs about 25 hours. This is, of course, general because much depends on the nature of your topic, what kinds of data are required and, importantly, how you work and what time you can give to your research in a normal week.

The longer you take to complete your masters, including your dissertation, the more it will cost you financially. However, if you wanted to, you could take up to five years to do your masters. The general unforeseen events of life sometimes mean that you may have few choices and have to take this longer route to your goal. If this becomes the case for you the key point is *never give up* – if you have started it, finish it!

If you are a part-time student you will probably be used to working approximately 15 hours a week on your course. On the basis of this calculation it would take you about nine months to complete your dissertation if you continued at this level of output. You will, however, have semester breaks and university vacations when course work requirements may be lower, and these can be used to get on with your research. On this basis you will need to allow approximately 75 equivalent days of full-time work (eight hours a day) for your research. This is the ideal that in real life rarely happens. You are more likely to have concentrated periods of work when you move your dissertation on considerably and then have lean periods when it seems very little is being done. The main point is to keep thinking about your research and keep talking to your supervisor throughout, regardless of how much or how little you have managed to do.
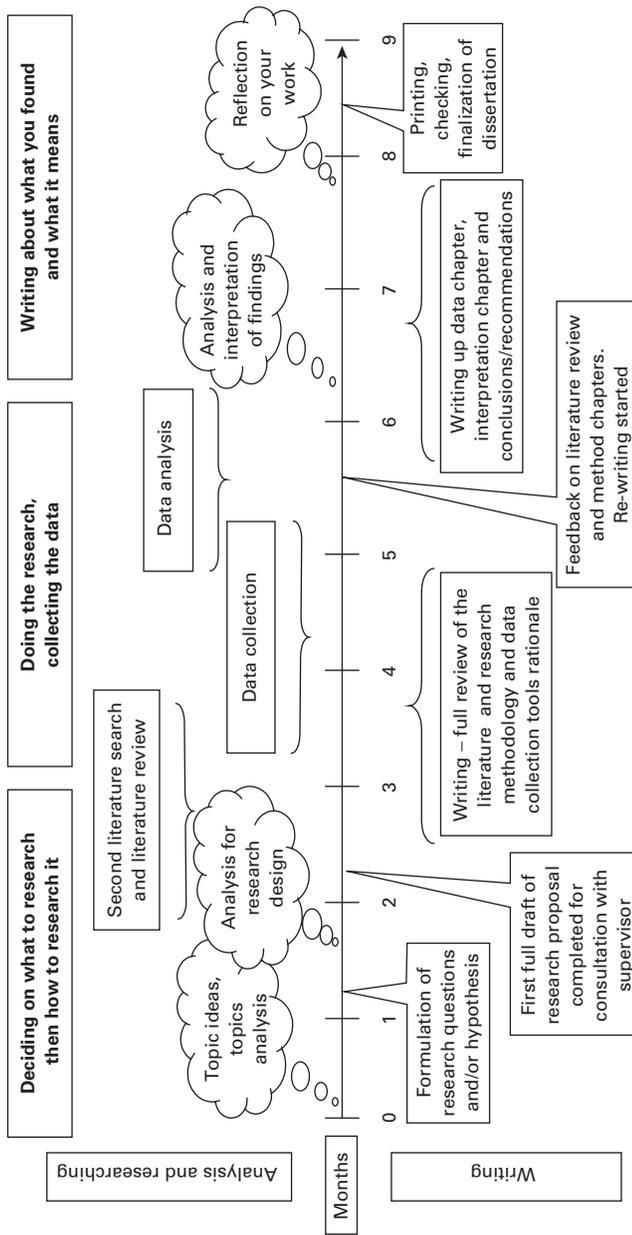
FIGURE1.1 TIMESCALE FOR A MASTERS DISSERTAION

The point about the supervisor is important and should not be missed. Whether you are full- or part-time, maintaining regular contact (telephone, in person, e-mail) – and by this we mean at least once every two weeks – is crucial. It does not matter if you have not been able to do much since last talking to them, but by knowing you are expected to stay in contact will act as a motivator to you when you need it most. Your supervisor will be able to help you maintain commitment to your research and will often be able to suggest what you can do to keep progressing your research when other things are not going according to plan.

You will have realized by now that doing a masters dissertation requires a substantial amount of commitment and dedication from you. Do not underestimate the transition from everyday life or from a taught course to an almost wholly self-motivated piece of work. You will face many pressures as other people, including your family and friends, will not fully understand what you are doing, the concentration required and the time you are taking from your relationships with them. Doing research can be a lonely experience. This may seem a little depressing, but we want you to be realistic about your progress whatever route you take. Your supervisors will appreciate what you are experiencing and will not want you to take longer than necessary to achieve your masters degree with a good dissertation. They will be as proud of you as your family and friends when you walk across the stage to collect your certificate and graduate as a master. If, however, the plan does not work out as expected, do not give yourself pressure or give up but take a realistic option by re-enrolling, paying a fee and completing your dissertation at a less stressful pace.

Are you capable of doing a

masters dissertation?

When contemplating doing or just beginning a masters course with a dissertation a number of worries are often expressed by students. A common one is, 'I can't write 15,000 words!' It is highly probable that you can write 15,000: from experience of supervising many masters dissertations, it will most likely be the case that you will have the problem of getting your writing down to only 15,000 words. You only have 15,000 words to report on all the work you will do. Most students have this kind of fear when beginning their dissertation and although it is natural it is often unfounded.

A MASTERS IS NO MOUNTAIN

Doing a masters dissertation is a large undertaking but it is not an academic mountain. It is like walking ten kilometres when you have only ever walked one or two. In academic terms you may have only written essays and reports of, say, up to 3,000 words. Think back to your undergraduate days – how many assignments did you do and what was (approximately) the total word count? It will have been substantially more than 15,000 words. Therefore you have written a large amount of material; the only difference this time is that the dissertation will be one piece of work. It will, however, be made up of many different elements. Before looking at this we need to dispel some other common misconceptions.

Look at the following statements and think about which you agree with:

1   **You need to be determined to do a masters dissertation.**

2   **You need to be *exceptionall*y intelligent to do a masters dissertation.**

3   **You need to have commitment to doing research to do a masters dissertation.**

4   **You need to have a first class honours degree to do a masters dissertation.**

5   **You need to have a willingness to learn to do a masters dissertation.**

Statements 2 and 4 are false and statements 1, 3 and 5 are some of the attitudes you do need to do a masters dissertation. For most people who successfully complete their dissertation a large degree of that success is their attitude and approach. A useful way to success to is to think of a dissertation as a series of tasks. If broken down into a logically sequenced set of tasks, such as searching the library catalogue, searching the Internet, beginning to compile the bibliography and so on, a dissertation looks less daunting and very manageable. Manmohan Bains, a student with Indian/Punjabi heritage, expressed this as the 'eating an elephant problem'. He asked, 'How do you eat an elephant?' And answered, 'One mouthful at a time.' Although an unusual way to put it, the point is clear. Do not be put off at the start, but if you break any large enterprise into smaller tasks you are more likely to achieve your goal.

In the chapters that follow we will show you how to divide a dissertation into tasks which are relatively straightforward to do. The result will be something that is greater than the sum of its parts, a masters dissertation you can be proud of.

Where to do your masters

This chapter finishes with some thoughts which may be useful when choosing where to do your masters research. If you are intending to use your masters to move into a different job, give you capital for promotion or begin a career in research, then the university department you choose may be a factor in your success. Different departments are often associated with different kinds of research – some will be oriented towards pure research and others applied research – and within these you will find specialisms which are often due to one or more members of staff. It pays to do a little research on where you would like (or can) do your masters before you begin. A note of caution would be, however, not to take too much notice of national league tables for universities because they are not always valid measures of actual quality. A more reliable means is to gather all the information published on your possible institutions and then contact them for details on staff, resources, research strategy and the culture of the department.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

You will need to know what the research interests of the staff are, what they have published and how many successful masters students they have supervised. On resources ask them about what book-based and information communications technologies are in the department. How many computers do they have and of what specification? What other facilities do they have, such as printing, technician support and, importantly, student common rooms? Also inquire about the research collections in the library, including access to electronic sources and resources, especially the databases you will need.

If the department is serious about research, then expect it to have a detailed research strategy that provides information on the kinds of research it aims to undertake and support. Finally, because you will spend a substantial amount of your time working in the department, find out what its culture is like. By this I mean: is the place friendly, are first names used, is there an atmosphere of mutual support between staff and students, and are staff generally available for informal chats, do they have an 'open door' policy and is the departmental secretary friendly? You can find most of this out by visiting the department. Signs of a good department for research include such things as the state and content of notice boards informing students of what is going on, of research activities and seminars, visiting speakers and new books. Also look for a sense of humour. Do current students look happy? Ask them what it is like to do a masters in this department, focusing on the support they are receiving from their supervisors.

LEARNING AND TEACHING STYLES

Different academic departments (sometimes called 'Schools') tend to have different approaches to teaching and learning. This makes for diversity among universities and other institutions and allows for different kinds of research to be undertaken and, importantly, different views about the nature of research to be expressed. However, the teaching and learning preference of one department may not be the one suited to your own personal learning style. Honey and Mumford (1992) provide a detailed questionnaire to help you identify your learning style preference. The four main learning styles they describe are summarized in Table 1.6.

Even from this brief overview of the different styles you should be able to recognize features in some that you can associate with. It is not necessary to choose one rather than another. It is OK to associate with features from more than one of the styles. The purpose of introducing these is to help you to identify different learning styles used by different academic departments and, as we will see in Chapter 5, also help you to choose the type of dissertation most suited to your own learning style. You can begin to do the first of these – assessing the learning opportunities of different departments – when you visit the departments offering the masters courses you want to do. The kinds of questions to be addressed are listed below, and in part answers to these will be evident in the attitudes of staff, stated curriculum of the course and in the types of dissertations which have been done in a department.

1   **Questions for activists**

♦   **What will I learn that I didn't know before?**

♦   **What specific and general research skills will I acquire?**

♦   **Will there be a variety of different activities or is the course based on lectures?**

♦   **Will it be OK to make mistakes and have some fun?**

♦   **Will I have tough problems and challenges?**

2   **Questions for reflectors**

♦   **Is enough time given over for reflection to assimilate ideas and think about issues?**

♦ **Are there sufficient facilities and opportunities to gather all relevant information about a topic?**

♦ **Will there be group discussions in which sharing of ideas and experiences happens?**

♦ **Do staff encourage listening to the views of others and give time for people to formulate considered responses?**

♦ **Is the teaching and tutoring based on pressure to respond?**

TABLE 1.6   LEARNING STYLES

Learning style	Features
Activist	'What's new? I'm game for anything.' Activists learn best in situations where: • there are new experiences and problems to be solved; • they can engross themselves in the 'here and now'; and • there is a sense of competition and pressure.
Reflector	'I'd like time to think about this.' Reflectors learn best where: • they are encouraged to watch and think about activities and problems; • they have time to assimilate the facts and arguments before commenting; and • they have the opportunity to review what has happened.
Theorist	'How does this relate to that?' Theorists learn best where: • they have time to explore methodically ideas and theories; • they are in structured situations with clear objectives that nevertheless stretch their intellect; and • they can question basic methodological assumptions and the logic of arguments.
Pragmatist	'How can I apply this in practice?' Pragmatists learn best where: • they can see practical links between theory and a problem, especially in the workplace; • they have a chance to try out applications and evaluate their effectiveness; and • they can concentrate on practical issues facing real organizations and people.

3   **Questions for theorists**

♦ **Will I encounter complex ideas and theories which will stretch my under-standing and abilities?**

♦ **Do staff have a robust understanding of theoretical traditions in the social sciences?**

♦ **Does the curriculum have a clear structure and purpose both technically *and* intellectually?**

♦ **Shall I be with people of a similar calibre to myself?**

4   **Questions for pragmatists**

♦ **Will we be addressing real problems and actual issues rather than hypotheti-cal ones?**

♦ **Will we be exposed to specialists and experts who have relevant and up-to-date experience?**

♦ **Is the curriculum clearly skills-based and practical?**

♦ **Will there be lots of useful tips and techniques?**

COURSE SPECIFICATIONS

Additional pieces of documentary information you can request include the 'subject standards', course specification and module booklet. Most courses in higher education are required by the governing bodies to use the subject standards (benchmark statements) to specify their course. This includes providing statements on the aims and objectives of the course as a whole and on individual modules that are a part of the course, showing how the learning outcomes of each module contribute to the learning outcomes of the course as a whole. This course specification will give a good idea of what kind of educational philosophy, teaching and learning styles a department uses in the design and organization of its curriculum. It will show you to what degree they focus on a range of skills as a set of expectations which you should
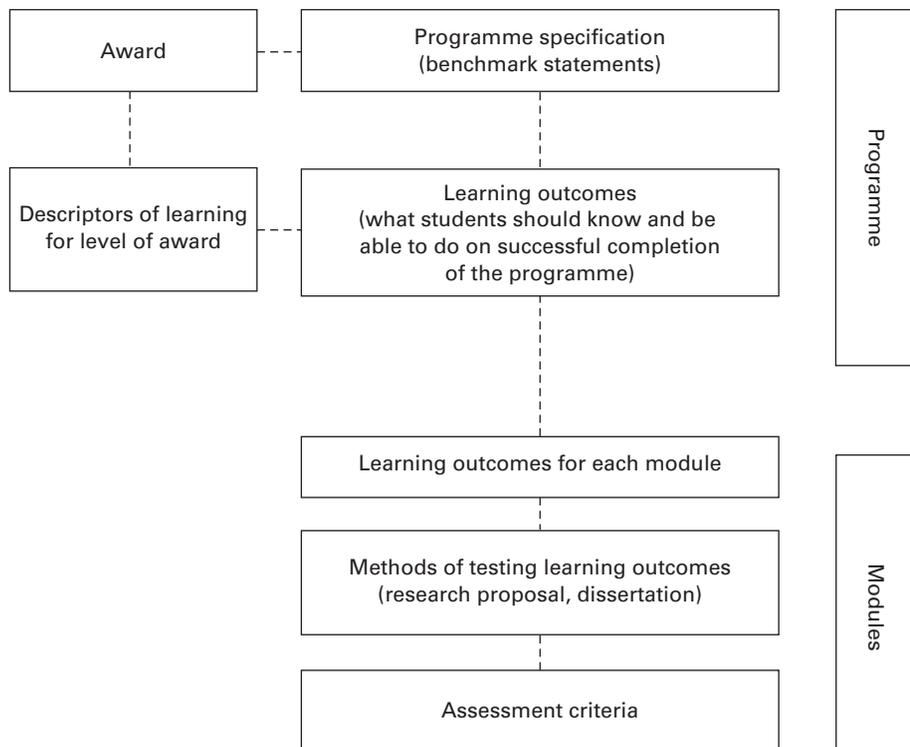
FIGURE 1.2   THE LEARNING OUTCOMES APPROACH TO MASTERS COURSE DESIGN

achieve at the end of the course. Your course tutor will probably explain to you the scheme of their masters course. Many follow a generic template represented in Figure 1.2. This is based on what is known as the learning outcomes approach to course design.

A well-thought-out and organized masters programme will have a clear coherence. This means there will be a clear set of statements describing the level for a masters qualification. Different universities have their own ways of stating award descriptors. These would normally include higher level cognitive and practical abilities of the type shown in Table 1.3 and Appendix 1, which are based on benchmark expectations for a knowledge manager. Each module on the course should then explain how specific learning outcomes will be acquired through doing that module and how they will be assessed, using what kind of criteria. Hence a module may state that a student will be able to give evidence of the application of knowledge. This may be expressed using

verbs such as define, solve, manipulate, relate, use, assess and so on to state what, in the methods of assessment, will be tested. As a scheme the programme should be coherent, and by looking at the course documentation and at previous work done by students you should be able to make a sound evaluation of how well organized a particular masters course is.

Implicitly or explicitly the programme specification will also indicate the kind of person they expect to encourage both intellectually and professionally to succeed in their course. Table 1.3 indicates the kind of specification that I use when talking to new enrollers on masters courses. A more detailed one can be found in Appendix 1 that was developed for a masters in Knowledge Management for practitioners. Do not be put off by the length of the lists in each of the columns. Its purpose is to show you the range of skills, capabilities, attitudes and qualities that a good masters course, with research, will make available for you to exploit for your own personal development. Clearly, you will not have the time to acquire all of these and you will already be able to demonstrate many of them.

This is an important stage in beginning your masters and if you have a choice between universities then exercise it. You may find some interesting and significant differences between departments. In particular, it is not always the case that the department with the highest formal rating for research is necessarily the most supportive of research students or close enough to the job market to encourage useful topics. Look, therefore, beyond ratings to other indicators which suit your teaching and learning needs and choose a department that offers you the maximum learning opportunities to develop both professionally and as a person.

SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER

This initial chapter has attempted to provide you with an introduction to what a masters dissertation is about and has made the following main points:

♦ A masters dissertation is an exercise in research that demonstrates you are capable of doing research at masters level.

♦ A masters dissertation is a coherent piece of work and not a series of separate chapters.

♦ There are three main types of dissertation, the traditional, the work-based and the literature review dissertation, and the same high standards of scholarship are expected of all.

♦ A good dissertation demonstrates more than the acquisition of skills. It is testimony to the capability, attitude and qualities of the student to be accredited as a competent researcher.

♦ A dissertation is a major undertaking but it is not a mountain that only a few can climb; rather it is something many people are capable of achieving.

Further reading

Walliman, N. (2001) *Your Research Project: A Guide for the First-time Researcher*. London: Sage. Chapter 1 uses a range of quotes to indicate just what research is and what it is about.

Honey, P. and Mumford, A. (1992) *The Manual of Learning Styles*. Maidenhead: Peter Honey. Exactly what it says it is and includes exercises to assess your own preferences.

Learning gateway and learning styles. http://www.getting-on.co.uk/toolkit/learninggateway.html. One of many good Internet resources on learning styles.