

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM



EXECUTIVE MBA BIRMINGHAM

THE MBA DISSERTATION

Introduction

The industries and professions which MBA graduates will join and lead are becoming more knowledge intensive. This creates a need for managers who are capable of, amongst many other things, researching different aspects of organisational and market activity and analysing and interpreting data. MBA graduates need to be able to unravel complex situations, think critically, diagnose problems and justify choices and actions based on sound evidence. The MBA dissertation presents a learning vehicle through which you can further develop such skills. The dissertation allows you to research and analyse a business problem or issue and come to reasoned conclusions and recommendations. The process will help you develop an in-depth knowledge and understanding of a highly specialised subject, a critical understanding of research methods and the ability to apply research and project management skills in practice. In addition, if you undertake a consultancy-style dissertation for a client organisation, you will develop further skills associated with negotiation, client engagement and communication.

You will ultimately be required to submit a dissertation of between 10-12,000 words, setting out your understanding of current theory and literature, the evidence you have gathered, your analysis and interpretation and, finally, your conclusions. You will be supported in this task by one-to-one supervision, research workshops and WebCT materials.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the dissertation, you should be able to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of:

- The different perspectives in management research and how to defend a particular perspective;
- Relevant literature and theoretical frameworks in a chosen research area;
- Appropriate and ethical methods of qualitative and quantitative data collection;

- Appropriate methods of data analysis, including relevant software and statistical techniques where appropriate;
- How to relate theory to research findings, draw relevant conclusions and consider the implications and limitations of the research which has been undertaken.

In addition, by the end of the dissertation, you should have enhanced your skills in being able to:

- Undertake a substantial piece of independent and original research;
- Use relevant literature and theoretical concepts;
- Think critically and analytically, challenging viewpoints, ideas and theoretical concepts;
- Defend a chosen research methodology;
- Work and learn independently to plan and organise a major project;
- Present a coherent, well-argued and convincing research document, following appropriate conventions for academic writing and referencing.

Choice of Topic

The dissertation is your opportunity to specialise in researching a particular area of business administration. The topic will be your choice and it must have sufficient appeal to maintain your interest over a lengthy time period. You should try to link your topic to the next steps in your career. Researching a particular issue, sector or industry may help directly in securing your next post or promotion after the MBA.

Dissertations must link directly to an aspect of the MBA programme, but can take a number of different forms. The following types of dissertation are indicative:

- A desk-based study focusing on relevant academic frameworks and a critical examination of secondary data to explore an emerging theoretical or strategic issue. In this type of study you would choose your issue - such as customer loyalty in the financial services sector – and you would systematically and critically review the literature and secondary data. Your task would be to synthesise and analyse the information you find and draw conclusions. Any area of business administration is acceptable.
- An empirical study commissioned by an organisation (either your own or an external client) using relevant theory and data to solve an organisation's problem. In the Business School we regularly receive requests from companies for research to be undertaken and, in this case, you would work as a 'consultant' to try to answer the research questions posed by the organisation. This type of project can look very good on your CV, as it will

demonstrate that you can apply your skills to solving real life organisational problems. Alternatively, you may wish to undertake a project for a current or recent employer, if you plan to resume work for them after your MBA. This type of company-based project will have four stages. First, you will undertake a critical literature review to develop a theoretical framework to help structure your thinking about the research problem. Second, based on wide reading, you will develop an appropriate methodology to explore or test your ideas. Third, you will undertake the practical research or investigation, which is likely to involve fieldwork and interviews. Finally, you will compare your research results with the theoretical framework you developed in your first stage, and/or develop a set of recommendations based on your findings.

- An empirical study using relevant theory and data to analyse the strategy or management practice of a case study company or a range of companies. An example of the former would be testing a hypothesis that companies in the UK tend not to use portfolio analysis in selecting their strategies. An example of a case study approach would be to determine the importance of corporate culture and the management of change in a particular company. As in a company-based study, there will be the same three stages: the critical literature review, the field research and comparison.

Assessment of a Dissertation

In all three different types of dissertation, assessment will focus on very specific requirements. You are studying for a Masters qualification and this means that certain academic standards must be achieved. You are required to submit a report of 10-12,000 words, and in this document you will need to demonstrate:

- Evidence of relevant reading and effective use of literature and theoretical frameworks. You must undertake extensive reading and make use of the work of previous researchers who have developed theories, models, concepts or frameworks relevant to your research problem.
- Evidence of the effective design, critical discussion and execution of an appropriate research methodology. You will be assessed on your ability to choose and justify the right approach to your research (for example, an inductive or deductive approach) and the right data collection methods. You will be assessed on how rigorous and objective you have been in executing your chosen method.
- Evidence of critical and analytical thinking. You will need to demonstrate that you understand the strengths and weaknesses of the theory, concepts and models you come across in your research and also the different data sources you use. Any recommendations will need to be based on an objective and critical assessment of your findings.
- A high standard of written presentation, adhering to academic conventions. A Master's thesis is an academic document and needs to meet minimum standards. In particular, there should be no evidence of plagiarism and you must use the Harvard system to

reference the literature you have read and used to develop your ideas. At the back of this folder you will find a copy of the University's policy (and penalties) for plagiarism and also guidance on how to use the Harvard referencing system.

Supervisors

Please bear in mind that a supervisor is only able to take on a small number of dissertations each year and so it may not be possible for all students to get the supervisor they prefer. Before confirming supervisors, the Programme Director will consider the nature of the research (whether it matches the expertise of the supervisor) and also the workload of the supervisor.

The supervisor's responsibility is to give guidance in the planning, execution and writing of the dissertation. Your responsibility is to work diligently and to seek advice from your supervisor at periodic intervals. It is YOUR responsibility to arrange meetings with your supervisor and to keep up-to-date in submitting work on time. It is good practice to talk with your supervisor at an early stage in the process and agree on a working relationship.

Essential Reading

Saunders, M.N.K., Thornhill, A. and Lewis, P. (2009) *Research Methods for Business Students*, FT Prentice Hall.

Additional Reading

Anderson, J. and Poole, M (2008) *Assignment and Thesis Writing*, Chichester: Wiley.

Bearden, W.O. and Netemeyer, R.G. (1999) *Handbook of marketing scales: Multi-item Measures for Marketing and Consumer Behaviour Research* (2nd edition), California: SAGE Publications.

Belk, R.W. (2008) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, Cheltenham.

Bell, E. and Bryman, A. (2006) The ethics of management research: an exploratory content analysis, *British Journal of Management*, 17, 1:15.

Brace, I (2004) *Questionnaire Design*, London: Kogan Page.

Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2007) *Business Research Methods*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press.

Coghlan, D, and Brannick, T. (2009) *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organisation*, London:Sage.

Cresswell, J.W. (2008) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Third Edition, Sage, London.

- Curasi, C.F. (2001) A critical exploration of face-to-face interviewing vs computer-mediated interviewing, *International Journal of Market Research*, 43 (4) p361.
- Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2003) *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, Sage, London.
- De Vaus, D. (2001) *Surveys in Social Research*, 5th Edition, Routledge, London.
- Diamontopoulos, A. and Schlegelmilch, B.B. (1997) *Taking the Fear out of Data Analysis*. London: The Dryden Press.
- Foddy, W. (1993) *Constructing Questions for Interviews and Questionnaires: Theory and Practice in Social Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fombrun, C.J. (2003) *The advice business: essential tools and models for management consulting*, Prentice Hall.
- Gibbs, G.R. (2002) *Qualitative Data Analysis: Explorations with NVivo*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Hart, C. (1998) *Doing a Literature Review*, Sage: London.
- Keizer, J and Kempen, P. (2006) *Business Research Projects – A Solution-Oriented Approach*, Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Kinnear, P.R. and Gray, C.D. (2008) *SPSS 16 Made Simple*, Psychology Press Ltd, Hove.
- Lancaster, G. (2004) *Research Methods in Management: A Concise Introduction to Research in Management and Business Consultancy*, Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Macfarlane, P. (2002) Structuring and measuring the size of business markets, *International Journal of Market Research*, 44 (1), pp 7-30.
- Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Neville, C. (2007) *The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism*, OUP.
- Ryan, R., Scapens, R. and Theobald, M. (2002) *Research Method and Methodology in Finance and Accounting*, Second Edition, Thomson Learning.
- Sadler, P. (2001) *Management Consultancy: A Handbook of Best Practice*, Kogan Page.
- Salant, P. and Dillman, D.A. (1994) *Conducting Surveys*, New York: Wiley.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1997) *Grounded Theory in Practice*. London: Sage.
- Symon, G. and Cassell, C. (1998) *Qualitative Methods and Analysis in Organisational Research: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.
- Vause, B. (2005) *Guide to analyzing companies*, The Economist.

Wickham, P. (2004) Management Consulting, Harlow, FT Prentice Hall.

Toppin, G. and Czerniawska, F. (2005) Business Consulting, The Economist.

Module Title	MBA Dissertation
School	Business School
Department	Management
Short Title	Dissertation (MBA Commerce)
Module Code	07 08001
Descriptor	
Member of Staff	Malcolm Kirkup
Level	Masters Level
Credits	60
Semester	2
Pre-requisites	
Co-requisites	
Restrictions	None
Contact hours	18
Exclusions	
Delivery	(1) Taught workshops; (2) Research proposal; (3) Supervised and independent study.
Description	<p>This module is the opportunity for MBA students to focus on a highly specialised project of personal interest, to develop a knowledge and understanding of research methods and to apply their research skills in practice. Students will be prepared for this task through the taught component of the Dissertation which will cover research design, use of literature and theory, data collection methods, data analysis and research ethics. Dissertations must link directly to an aspect of the MBA programme, but can take a number of different forms. The following types of Dissertation are indicative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An empirical study using relevant theory and data to analyse the strategy or management practice of a case study company or a range of companies; • An empirical study commissioned by an organisation (either the students' own or an external client) using relevant theory and data to solve an organisation's problem; • A desk-based study focusing on relevant academic frameworks and a critical examination of secondary data to

	<p>explore an emerging theoretical or strategic issue.</p> <p>In all cases, assessment for a Dissertation will focus on four crucial requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of relevant reading and effective use of literature and theoretical frameworks; • The effective design, critical discussion and execution of an appropriate research methodology; • Evidence of critical and analytical thinking; • A high standard of written presentation, adhering to academic conventions, including full referencing according to the Harvard System (http://www.i-cite.bham.ac.uk/referencing.shtml).
<p>Learning Outcomes</p>	<p>By the end of this module, successful students will demonstrate: A knowledge and understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The different perspectives in management research and how to defend their particular perspective; • Relevant literature and theoretical frameworks in their chosen research area; • Appropriate and ethical methods of qualitative and quantitative data collection; • Appropriate methods of data analysis, including relevant software and statistical techniques where appropriate; • How to relate theory to research findings, draw relevant conclusions and consider the implications and limitations of their research. <p>Enhanced skills in being able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake a substantial piece of independent and original research; • Use relevant literature and theoretical concepts; • Think critically and analytically, challenging viewpoints, ideas and theoretical concepts; • Defend a chosen research methodology; • Work and learn independently to plan and organise a major project; • Present a coherent, well-argued and convincing research document, following appropriate conventions for academic writing and referencing.
<p>Assessment</p>	<p>Research Proposal (1500 words) - 15% Dissertation (10-12,000 words) - 85%</p>

