

**Maastricht School of Management**

**MASTER'S THESIS MANUAL**

**2014 – 2015**

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Purpose of this Document

This document provides students, supervisors, evaluators and administrators of MSM's Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Master of Management (MM) programs with guidelines regarding:

- The content, presentation and assessment of the MBA/MM Thesis.
- The tasks and responsibilities of all those involved in the MBA/MM thesis process.
- Procedures to be followed in preparing the MBA/MM thesis.

The document provides standards for the preparation and assessment of this major academic requirement, and supporting administrative procedures, in order to maintain MSM's thesis process and thesis output at the highest level of Dutch and international academic quality, and at the levels required for MSM's continued accreditation.

The information is based on the collective experience of many faculty members who have worked with hundreds of MSM students over the past dozen years, and the feedback provided by the MBA board, external thesis evaluators, and other advisors<sup>1</sup>.

### 1.2 The MBA/MM Thesis

Managers continuously make decisions on a great variety of issues. Research helps them define and diagnose these issues and find options to resolve them. Think about market research on consumer preferences, research on the perceived work-life balance by employees, a risk-benefit analysis of a new foreign investment, or research on how a supply chain can be made more sustainable. Such research can be conducted by the firm's research department, trainees or external consultancy firms. Being able to design, manage and critically assess research reports is therefore a must for the modern manager. That is why MSM's MBA program involves drafting and defending a thesis.

The thesis is an empirical study using a theoretical framework and a solid methodology. The thesis must connect with a practical or conceptual topic in an area treated by an MSM specialization course. Alternatively, the thesis may integrate several areas of knowledge dealt with in the MBA/MM courses. It is the outcome of an *independent* but supervised process of reviewing, questioning and synthesizing existing knowledge; systematically collecting and analyzing data in order to contribute to extant knowledge and draft appropriate recommendations.

The thesis should start with either an organizational, managerial or societal problem or an academic issue found in the academic literature. However, whatever the starting point of the research, it must be conceptualized into a research question and a conceptual model using a theoretical framework.

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge the contributions of Prof. Dr. Ir. Ben Veltman, Chairman of the MBA Board and former MSM Interim Director, who was directly involved in a number of discussions leading to this manual; Prof. Bruce Schneider, former MSM Professor and author of a preliminary document on ways of improving the final dissertation process at MSM; and Prof. Ludovico Alcorta, who authored v.2.0 of the manual (much of which has carried over into v3.0). In preparing this manual the experiences from other academic institutions have been consulted and drawn upon, in particular those of Erasmus and Nyenrode universities.

This conceptual model motivates and guides the empirical data collection and analysis. As such, the thesis requires a solid review of the literature to select and use a theoretical perspective to examine the organization, managerial or societal issue under study, as well as applying scientific methods and an academically rigorous writing style. Drawing on their thesis research findings, students can then indicate how their study contributes to the existing literature and provides insights into the (organizational/managerial/societal) issues facing the industry/organization studied, also evident in practical recommendations for the different stakeholders of their research.

### **1.3 Skills Development through the Thesis Requirement**

The thesis provides candidates the opportunity to enhance different skills. These skills include:

- *Project management* skills by engaging in and organizing an independent research project over the course of 1 year.
- *Knowledge management* skills by bringing together the different strands of knowledge acquired during the course-work stage of the MBA or MM and expanding this knowledge base through the thesis research project. This allows students to develop expert knowledge on a particular topic in his/her field of interest.
- *Analytical* skills by conceptualizing the research dilemma, reviewing the literature, analyzing the data and extracting conclusions and recommendations that are meaningful and have a direct bearing with the issue at stake.
- *Methodological* skills by becoming acquainted with diverse research approaches, methods of data collection and analysis and ethical standards of research.
- *Communication* skills by engaging in academic writing and presenting and defending one's work to peers and external reviewers.

### **1.4 The Value of the Thesis**

The MBA thesis counts for 16 credits (ECTS), which is a substantial proportion of the 70-ECTS degree program. (In the MM program, the thesis counts for 15 ECTS out of 67.5 total program credits). A passing grade for the thesis requirement is 5,5 or above. Only exceptionally good papers can earn a distinction grade of 8 or above.

## **2 Preparing the MBA or MM Thesis**

### **2.1 Thesis Topics**

#### **2.1.1 Acceptable topics for MSM**

The thesis is an in-depth study of a clearly defined problem. A thesis should contribute to the existing knowledge base, whether it be scientific or business-oriented. Thus, a topic must be chosen which can lead to a thesis satisfying these two criteria.

The problem should fall within the disciplines of the focus segment undertaken by the student or should be a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together different fields of knowledge studied during the MBA or MM, in the context of a management problem.

Maastricht School of Management has an official research focus:

*MSM invites research proposals relating to the School's theme of 'problems of public, private, and intercultural management in emerging economies.' This theme encompasses topics relating to measurement, analysis and evaluation; entrepreneurship; information technology and organizational transformation; management of public agencies; problems of globalization; competitiveness and technology strategy; human capital development; capacity-building; e-commerce and economic development; ethics and governance; and international joint ventures and alliances. We particularly value comparative and cross-border studies, but proposals focused on a single country may also be accepted.*

This focus leaves considerable latitude for a student's choice of topic, and some management topics outside this focus may be allowable.

The topic must have a strong logical connection to issues of management. Many MSM students are employed by the government, NGO, and educational sectors. MSM, however, is not a school of public policy, social work, or education. Pure policy, social issue, or education theses cannot be accepted. MSM can entertain only theses addressing the *management* of public, non-profit, or educational agencies.

Problems that cannot be feasibly dealt with in the time allocated for the research and/or are broad and overtly ambitious in terms of resource requirements should be avoided.

### 2.1.2 Choosing a thesis topic

Research begins with a general interest in a broad topic, which is progressively narrowed to a research problem and then to a research question or hypothesis. The problem is then analyzed theoretically or empirically and a logical explanation provided.

Ways to find a research problem:

- Think about what you are good at. What interests you?
- Issues within your organization, company, or industry that need addressing
- Topics that read about during a course
- Current issues mentioned in journals
- "Future research" sections in publications

If you do not have immediate ideas, then try the following:

- Discuss and brainstorm with fellow students and faculty
- Asking employers and colleagues at work
- Ask a faculty member whether s/he is engaged in an interesting project on which you can help, and of which you could "own" a piece.
- Look at recent Requests for Proposals (RFPs) of research funding agencies.
- Look at recent "research priorities" as published on the web sites of these funding agencies and also those of government agencies, and consortia such as the Marketing Science Institute.
- In what areas have recent research prizes been awarded by scholarly societies? This might indicate "up and coming" domains for fruitful research.

- It is highly recommended that the candidate choose an interesting and challenging research question. It is permissible - even wise - to choose a topic that advances your post-MBA career plans.
- The question should be limited in scope, sufficiently narrow that it can be examined in-depth, facilitating the collection of information and data, and allowing the candidate to show understanding of the issues and literature.

## 2.2 Additional Requirements for a Good Thesis

### 2.2.1 New knowledge and original perspectives

Simply gathering and presenting information, comparing and/or correlating data, or questions leading to yes/no answers are not enough for a thesis. A Master's thesis must present the conceptualization of a research dilemma and the collection, analysis, and interpretation of empirical data, yielding new knowledge and insights about the causes and effects of the research dilemma that was studied. It thus involves a critical review of the existing literature and how this thesis contributes to this knowledge base.

### 2.2.2 Logical rigor and operationalization

Translating a research dilemma into a research question involves the conceptualization of research, involving theoretical approaches like supply chain theory, leadership theory or stakeholder theory and designing a conceptual model with abstract concepts and the relationships between these concepts. Such concepts need operationalization so that they can be measured empirically and potentially implemented. This involves:

- A clear explanation of the variables used,
- How they were operationalized or measured,
- What other factors may be at play in the problem, and
- A detailed description and justification of the method selected to address the research question.

Theses involving primary data must also show:

- What research strategy was adopted
- Which data sources were used and how these data were collected
- The criteria or standards set to ensure replicability, and
- How the validity and reliability of the measurement instruments were ensured.

Good theses should critically compare the writer's own methodological choices with those of other researchers who have looked at similar problems.

### 2.2.3 Focus and continuity

It is very important that you stay focused on your objective during the preparation of the thesis. The goal is not to write all that you know about the topic or subject of your choice, nor to produce the thickest volume of typed material. The goal is to analyze the subject in an organized manner and to derive meaningful conclusions and/or recommendations.

Continuity means:

- A consistent, logical argument that extends throughout all chapters and sections of the thesis.
- Good transitional sentences and paragraphs that allow the reader to follow your train of thought.

- Introductory and concluding sentences in each section that allow the reader to reinforce his/her understanding of your argument. “Tell us what you’re going to tell us; tell us; then tell us what you’ve told us.”
- Making sure that your conceptual model follows logically from your literature review; that your hypotheses follow logically from your conceptual model and research question; that your data collection logically serves your hypothesis test (this includes disciplining yourself only to include questions in your survey that directly address your research question); that your conclusions flow logically from your analysis; and that your recommendations are logically justified by your research conclusions.

#### 2.2.4 Research ethics

Please refer to section 3.13 of MSM’s Education and Examination Regulations. Reviewing this section in detail is extremely relevant because MSM does not tolerate any academic misconduct and there are important repercussions for people who engage in such behavior.

#### 2.2.5 Confidentiality

If you promise *confidentiality to your (survey) respondents* – usually a good idea, for most kinds of research questions – you should not reveal their identities or personal details in your written thesis. However, you must keep this information in your file of research notes, maintaining this file in a safe place for a period of years against the possibility that MSM officials need to question you about the specific procedures that led to your research claims.

All theses will be placed, electronically, in the MSM library. Theses with *confidential company information* can be placed, on request, in a non-accessible place in the library for a maximum period of two years. Following this period, such theses will be placed back in the main collection.

It may be the case that the organization you study requires a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). If this is the case, you need to contact the program coordinator. Your supervisor but also the external examiners who evaluate the thesis at the thesis defense will need to sign such NDAs. If an NDA is required, please make sure you organize this as early as possible.

Table 1: Assessment Criteria of the Thesis

| <b>Assessment Criteria</b>   |   |
|--|---|
| Knowledge  | <b>Introduction (10%)</b>   |
|  | (a) Student convincingly presents the managerial problem and frames the need to address this problem adequately.  |
|  | (b) There is consistency in Problem Statement – Research Objective – Research Question & Research Approach as described in the methods section.   |
|  | (c) There is consistency in major RQ and minor RQs  |
|  | <b>Literature review (20%)</b>  |
|  | (a) The literature used is of sufficient quality (e.g., relevant literature in relation to problem statement, use of peer-reviewed journals, books from renowned publishers and reports from authoritative institutes, literature is up-to-date). |
|  | (b) The core concepts are clearly presented (e.g., definitions, dimensions) and relations between concepts are elaborated.  |
|  | (c) The review shows evidence of the student's 'dialogue with the literature', organized in a logically structured fashion as shown in the subheadings.   |
|  | (d) The review forms the basis for the conceptual model that guides the research.   |
|  | <b>Methods (15%)</b>  |
|  | (a) Student motivates why the chosen investigation method is the most appropriate one for answering his/her RQ.   |
|  | (b) Student clearly describes the data sources collected and motivates why the selected data sources are relevant.  |
|  | (c) Different stages/procedures in the data-analysis process are distinguished and transparently described.   |
|  | (d) There is use of methodological literature (e.g., use of methods textbooks, reference is made to other articles that have used the same survey).   |
| (e) Student shows evidence of reflexivity on the strengths and weaknesses of the methods deployed, his/her role in the research process and research ethics. |   |
| Application  | <b>Findings (20%)</b>   |
|  | (a) Findings are presented in such a way that the RQs are answered in a structured and clear fashion.   |
|  | (b) Findings are analytically sound in that complete and convincing meaning is given to the findings.   |
|  | (c) Findings are discussed in that alternative explanations are identified and judged.  |
|  | (d) Findings are convincingly presented, using sufficient and relevant evidence in the form of tables, graphs and illustrative quotations.  |



Table 2 (continued)

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Critical Thinking      | <b>Discussion and Conclusions (20%)</b>   |
|                        | (a) Student knows how to relate his/her findings to the literature, indicating how his/her thesis contributes to this existing literature base (for instance, do his/her findings confirm what has been found in other studies and if not, how do they differ). |
|                        | (b) Student is able to indicate how his/her thesis findings contribute to a better understanding of the issues facing the industry/organization studied, also evident in practical recommendations for the different stakeholders of his/her research.          |
|                        | (c) Student acknowledges the limitations of his/her research, but concurrently translates these limitations into recommendations for future research.   |
| Communication          | <b>Defense (10%)</b>  |
|                        | (a) The presentation presents a persuasive case for the thesis (i.e. well structured presentation, clear explanation, nice slides - e.g., not too much text on slides)  |
|                        | (b) The student engages with the audience, takes the proper posture, speaks clearly and interestingly, explains accurately and concisely (thus within the time!) and is courteous to the addressees.  |
|                        | (c) Careful listening and understanding of questions and arguments is shown and clear and convincing answers provided: student displays mastery of the subject  |
| Self-Directed Learning | <b>Working independently (5%)</b>   |
|                        | (a) Question for supervisor: the student has worked independently on his/her thesis.  |

### 3 MBA or MM Thesis Procedures

#### 3.1 Thesis Processes

Students should distinguish two processes involved in preparing a thesis.

On the one hand, there is the (*empirical*) *research process*, which entails defining a research topic, reading and reviewing literature on this topic, drafting the problem statement, designing your methodology (i.e. research strategy, developing measurement tools (like a survey, which involves the operationalization of concepts), data sources, data analysis), collecting, processing and analyzing the data to answer the research questions, and, finally, reflecting on the findings in the light of the existing literature and the managerial/societal issue the organization/industry examined faces (see Figure 1 ).

## The research cycle



Figure 1: The Research Cycle

On the other hand, there is *the writing process*, requiring a precise, concise, and complete presentation of the ideas, literature, method, findings and conclusions in a written form. The two processes, though they overlap in some stages, do not coincide in time, shape or form, and therefore require different planning, approach, skills and attitude.

An excellent guide for academic writing can be found on this website:

- <http://owll.massey.ac.nz/main/academic-writing.php>.

Please pay particular attention to the referencing and plagiarism explanations:

- <http://owll.massey.ac.nz/main/referencing.php>
- <http://owll.massey.ac.nz/referencing/quoting-and-paraphrasing.php>
- <http://owll.massey.ac.nz/referencing/apa-style.php>
- <http://owll.massey.ac.nz/referencing/plagiarism.php>

### 3.2 Thesis Evaluation

This is the last stage in the research process and involves presenting, defending and assessing the dissertation. Final thesis evaluation will be carried out by two external evaluators. These are distributed to the external evaluators roughly two weeks before the thesis defense. The external examiners take on the leading roles in the evaluation process while the supervisor role is more that of providing information about the student and the research process. More specifically, only the external examiners grant the final thesis grade.

The oral presentation (defense of the thesis) will take approximately 60 minutes. It is a public ceremony except for the final discussion by the thesis committee. The first 20-25 minutes will require the student to briefly and concisely state the following:

- The title and objectives of the study.
- The motives or reasons for the study.
- The approach taken in the investigations and/or research.
- The key findings.
- The most important conclusions/recommendations.

The next 15-20 minutes will be used by the evaluator(s) for in-depth questioning about the thesis. Their questions may relate to the following:

- The literature used.
- The methodology deployed.
- The research findings.
- The limitations of the study/future research ideas.
- The managerial implications of the study.

Tips for the presentation:

- Do not copy pages of your paper; use bullet points of key words (NOT whole sentences).
- Watch for misspellings.
- Practice your presentation with a stopwatch to check your presentation takes 15 minutes and you will thus be in time.
- Dress in business attire for the defense.
- During the presentation, avoid constantly looking at the screen; look at your audience.
- Do not read your text.
- Stand up while presenting.
- Bring your raw materials/raw data on your laptop (like interview transcripts, data-matrix tables) to the defense (in case examiners question your data collection and analysis).

After the examination, the student and supervisor will be requested to leave the exam room. During this time, the evaluators will agree on the final mark. The evaluators will have a pre-prepared individually filled thesis evaluation form on which their joint assessment will be based. The final mark can be achieved by mutual consent, either by agreeing on each assessment criteria or by averaging individual marks. The thesis evaluation form will then be filled and signed by the external evaluators. The signed form indicating consensus, and the individually filled forms, together with any written comments and/or annotations, will be submitted after the finalization of the ceremony to the Program Coordinator.

The student (and supervisor) will then be called back into the examination room and will be informed of his/her overall performance. However, the final grade will be announced after the grades have been collected by the program coordinator.

### **3.3 Format**

Please refer to the thesis template document to ensure your thesis is formatted correctly.