

Thesis regulations research master programmes

Faculty of Humanities



Research Master's Thesis Manual

Preface

These regulations describe the most important steps in the process of writing a Research Master's thesis. As well as brief explanations of the learning objectives associated with the main steps in the process, this document contains the standard procedures for the thesis process which are common to all programmes.

In addition to this manual, a number of further documents are also provided on [VU.nl](https://www.vu.nl), which are partly procedural and partly advisory in nature: those documents include both important documents for the thesis process (such as the thesis agreement, the thesis plan of work, and assessment forms), and information on various aspects of the thesis process that can be useful to both students and teachers (such as an example of a work schedule).

For each Research Master's degree programme, further content-related requirements and procedures may apply. Where this is the case, these will be included in the thesis agreement which is available from the relevant programme on request.

When producing this manual, a conscious decision was made to produce a single document for both students and teaching staff. This ensures that both parties are aware of each other's opportunities, responsibilities, rights and duties. The purpose of the thesis manual is to help the process run as smoothly as possible, to prevent students from falling behind with their studies and to offer solutions in the event of ambiguities and/or problems. The term student in these regulations is gender inclusive, because this term has always been used in regulations and is seen as a technical term.

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1. What is a Research Master's thesis?

At the Faculty of Humanities, specialist knowledge of a specific subject is set within the broader cultural, academic and interdisciplinary context. The aim is to provide students with knowledge and understanding of specific issues while teaching them to adopt a critical approach vis-à-vis academic practice, the significance of the students' profession for individuals and for society at large, and the social role played by academics. The student is able to reflect critically on the methods and techniques used or the theoretical framework used. The thesis is a part of this learning process and can be seen as a test of academic skill and the culmination of the Research Master's programme.

The thesis shows that the student possesses knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to their specific field of study. This knowledge of a specific subject is embedded in a broad cultural and/or social context. The student also possesses theoretical and methodological insights in the field and the ability to apply these insights independently. The student will demonstrate that they are capable of carrying out research according to academic standards and of developing their own perspective on the material studied. The Student is expected to be able to contribute to generating new academic insights and to design, set up and carry out research independently. A Research Master's thesis involves innovative, critical and where possible interdisciplinary research and may serve as the first step towards studying for a PhD.

The thesis also demonstrates that the student possesses the following general academic and social skills and is able to apply them. These skills are derived from the Dublin descriptors.

- (knowledge and understanding): The student is able to systematically and expediently collect and interpret information. They are able to read, understand and analyse academic and other complex texts. In this way, the student acquires demonstrable knowledge and understanding that go further and deeper than the level of the Bachelor's programme, demonstrating that the student is capable of making an original contribution to the development and/or application of ideas;
- (application of knowledge and understanding): the student is able to apply knowledge, understanding and problem-solving skills in new or unfamiliar environments within a broader context that relates to their field of study. They are able to integrate knowledge and to work with complex material;
- (making judgements): the student is able to discern general themes and make connections which are meaningfully supported by a wide variety of primary and secondary literature and primary sources where relevant. They are able to formulate and defend a position independently, critically and honestly;
- (communication): the student is able to present a complex problem clearly and concisely in written or spoken form to an audience of specialists and non-specialists;
- (combination of the above): the student is able to write a scientific paper in clear, effective and academic language and to deliver it within an agreed period;
- (learning skills): the student possesses learning skills that offer him/her the prospect of a PhD degree and/or an academic career.

The study guide for the relevant programme lists the learning objectives of the Research Master's thesis. These learning objectives are linked to the final attainment levels of the programme, as defined in the Academic and Examination Regulations (which relate to the Dublin descriptors).

2. Form

The Research Master's thesis should be between 25,000 and 40,000 words in length (excluding appendices, footnotes, bibliography and illustrations). The thesis has a study load of 30 EC. A thesis is written as a fully self-contained research report according to the standard scientific structure, and thus contains the following sections:

- introduction including problem definition / research question;
- substantiation of the chosen method (including reasons for the selection of material);
- answer to the research question;
- notes, bibliography, source reference;
- illustrations, where relevant (including source references);
- appendices, where relevant (including source references);

The title page of each thesis within the Faculty of Humanities must include the following information:

- title of thesis, and secondary title where relevant;
- name of university, faculty and programme;
- name of student;
- student's address and telephone number;
- student's email address (university address and personal address);
- student number;
- name of supervisor(s);
- name of second reader;
- date and year of completion;
- final word count.

3. Preliminary phase, topic selection, supervisor(s)/mentor, entry requirements

3.1. Preliminary phase: tutorials

The purpose of the tutorials is to lay the groundwork for the thesis. Tutorials are provided by tutors (teaching staff members who hold a PhD and conduct independent research) and are small intensive workshops that are essential for the development of specialist knowledge by Research Master's students. The aim of the tutorial is to familiarise the student with a subject that they have selected themselves in order that the student can design and carry out independent research, find and work with relevant primary and secondary material that is relevant to the subject, analyse this material

using current methods and theories, ensure that the subject is consistent with the broader scientific framework, and present their work orally and in writing at the highest academic level.

Tutorials are designed to reflect the student's intended field of research, as formulated in the motivation letter written for their admission to the Research Master's programme. This will be done in consultation with the student's mentor, who will assist the student in their research training.

The remainder of the content of a tutorial is to be determined in consultation between the student and their mentor, and will correspond to the tutor's field of study. The way in which the subject is approached in the tutorial will depend on individual agreements.

The Research Master's student works on an umbrella question which will be integrated into the tutorials over the course of the programme. The tutorials will become progressively more specialised and geared towards preparing for the thesis. A single tutorial can also be followed outside VU Amsterdam, provided prior agreement is forthcoming.

3.2. Preliminary phase, topic selection, supervisor(s)/mentor

Upon admission to the Research Master's programme, the student will, on the basis of the research field(s) that they propose as stated in the motivation letter provided, be assigned a mentor who will generally become their thesis supervisor.

In close consultation with this mentor, and as part of the tutorials attended, the student will choose a thesis subject that corresponds to the research project of the supervising teaching staff member. The research is then conducted independently and the student is supervised individually by their mentor.

If a student has difficulty finding an appropriate supervisor, they should first contact the chair holder. If the chair holder, lecturer and student fail to find a solution, the matter will be referred to the Examination Board. The Examination Board will then designate a supervisor within ten working days, in consultation with the department head. Every thesis is assessed by the supervisor and an independent second reader who has not been involved in the production of the thesis (see section 4).

3.3. Entry requirements

The activities for the thesis form the conclusion of the study programme and will generally take place in the second semester of year 2. It is recommended that courses from previous semesters be completed before that time. If the programme stipulates as such, the student is expected to participate in the thesis colloquia and, once again, to present their ongoing thesis research.

If the research is connected to (or based on) thesis research that the student has already carried out (or plans to carry out) in the context of a different programme, then the research in question must, in the view of the Examination Board, contain a sufficient number of distinctive elements. The same

thesis/graduation study cannot, therefore, be submitted for two separate Master's degrees.

4. Thesis agreement and thesis plan of work

4.1 Procedure

Once a student has chosen a topic, the supervising staff member (mentor) and the student jointly draw up a thesis agreement or contract. The standard form for this can be found among the documents on VU.nl. This is a written record of the agreements made.

The identity of the second reader is determined; they are not involved in the process of writing the thesis in any way. The management team will ensure that the combinations of supervisors and second readers of theses will vary in each (year) group. The first supervisor is always an approved examiner affiliated with the department to which the programme belongs. The second reader is also an examiner approved by the Examination Board. Note: if the second reader comes from a faculty or university other than FGW, they must be approved by the Examination Board of the Faculty of Humanities. If desired, a programme may elect to appoint a second supervisor, for example from the field of professional practice, to provide substantive guidance. In such cases, the thesis must also be assessed by an independent assessor approved by the Examination Board, and will make for a total of three persons involved in the assessment of the thesis.

In addition, the student submits the thesis plan of work to the supervisor, detailing the substantive content. The timeline is part of the thesis plan of work. The standard form for a plan of work can also be found among the documents on VU.nl.

After the thesis agreement and the plan of work have been signed by the supervisor, the second reader and the student, these documents will be sent to the coordinator of the Research Master's programme. The student and the supervising staff member are responsible for the clear and correct interpretation of the thesis agreement and the plan of work. The coordinator generally checks whether the thesis agreement and plan of work are complete and checks the summary of the content. If the coordinator discovers any omissions or mistakes, they may ask the supervising staff member and the student to amend the thesis agreement and/or the plan of work. If the coordinator finds that a supervising staff member uses the same second reader more than is reasonable, they may ask that staff member to designate a different second reader. After any amendments have been made, the thesis agreement and plan of work must again be submitted to the coordinator for approval.

If the coordinator acts as a supervisor or second reader, they must ensure that another colleague carries out an independent, substantive check.

Please note: The approved thesis agreement and the accompanying plan of work form part of the student's digital graduation file, together with the thesis itself and the assessment form. If this file is not complete, the student cannot graduate.

4.2 Content and validity

The thesis agreement provides the supervisor and the student with clarity about the nature of the supervision. Students know what is expected of them and what they can expect from the supervisor. The same applies to the supervisor. The purpose of the thesis agreement is to prevent students from falling behind with their studies unnecessarily and to provide solutions in the event of ambiguities and/or problems.

The thesis agreement includes the following elements:

- the start date and the planned end date. On the end date, the student is required to submit the final product. The end date may be changed if both parties consider this to be necessary;
- name of the supervisor(s);
- name of the second reader;
- the description of the topic;
- agreements on the frequency of supervision meetings;
- the deadline before which the supervisor and the second reader will assess the final product. Between 1 July and 15 August, all teaching staff members will be unavailable for marking and assessment for at least four weeks. This includes theses;
- the number of credits available;
- additional agreements, where relevant;
- For interdisciplinary theses, the division of responsibility between the first and second supervisors may be formalised in the thesis agreement, where relevant.

The plan of work for the thesis structures the student's thoughts on the topic and their work, and lists the activities for the thesis.

The **timeline** is part of the thesis plan of work. Both the supervisor and the student must adhere to the timeline and they share responsibility for monitoring the process. The student should report any overrun as soon as possible to the supervisor and the Examination Board. If, due to the circumstances, the end date stated in the thesis agreement cannot be met, this can be altered as long as both parties consider it desirable to do so. The Examination Board will then be informed accordingly and will record the new date in the student's file. See Section 5.2 of this Manual for further details.

The supervisor will notify the second reader as soon as possible of any changes to the agreements regarding the content and process of the thesis.

5. Inter/multidisciplinary theses; graduation projects

For some programmes (or specialisations), students are expected to write a thesis that is interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary in nature. This means that these theses, if the programme coordinator thinks this is advisable, are supervised by two supervisors: one supervisor from the student's core subject, the other supervisor from the second field of specialisation. Dual supervision also means that the thesis will be assessed by a third reader. For interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary

theses, the various components of the programme should be integrated. The assessment of these theses should therefore focus on the multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach and the extent to which the various components of the programme have in fact been incorporated.

6. Supervision meetings

6.1 Form and frequency

Students are entitled to systematic supervision when working on the thesis. The supervisor and the student discuss the nature of the supervision in advance. Supervision should in all cases include the following elements:

- advice on the choice of research topic and on setting an appropriate scope for their work;
- approval of the design;
- instructions regarding the rewriting of inadequate sections of the thesis.

The frequency of the supervision meetings is also stated in the plan of work. The student makes agreements with the supervising staff member about the submission deadline for the various sections of the thesis in relation to the supervision meetings. As a guideline, the student is entitled to a maximum of eight supervision meetings. According to the standards for teaching load, a teaching staff member can spend a total of 40 hours on supervising a Master's thesis, including all marking.

The supervisor will provide written comments (in the margins or separately) on the work submitted. During the supervision meetings, the supervisor explains the comments to the student and advises them on how to follow them through.

When submitting the improved version of a text, the student must also submit the original. The corrected versions must be retained until the thesis is complete.

The supervisor provides feedback on drafted parts of the thesis twice at most. If a draft is still insufficient after feedback has been given twice, the supervisor will record this and it will form part of the final assessment.

The supervisor only gives feedback on the final version once (the final version is the thesis that is submitted to the teaching staff member as such, including all parts of the thesis - such as the declaration of originality). If the thesis still does not meet the required standards after this round of feedback, the assessors have no choice other than to fail the student for the thesis. The student will then have to take a formal resit for the thesis. If that is still insufficient, the student will then have to write a new thesis on another topic under the supervision of other lecturers.

6.2 Delays

If material is submitted to the supervisor late or not at all, the supervision interview is cancelled. Supervision meetings may not be cancelled less than two days in advance.

If a supervisor is unable to meet their obligations (due to long-term absence/illness etc.), the student is informed and the Examination Board organises a replacement in consultation with the chair holder.

If the student is unable to meet their obligations (due to long-term absence/illness etc.), the supervisor is informed. In such cases, the plan of work and the thesis agreement are revised.

If the student exceeds the agreed deadline for submitting the final version by *three months* without consultation and/or a written agreement about a new submission date between supervisor and student, they will automatically fail the thesis. The student will then have to start a new thesis with a new supervisor.

A general advice for both student and supervisors is to consult the academic advisor as soon as possible in case of (a threat of) delays. This also applies if the student experiences (health, mental or other) problems during the thesis process.

7. Assessment and assessment form

The student submits the definitive version of the thesis in PDF via Canvas and informs the supervisor per email. The final submission date is also included in the faculty graduation procedure (also known as the 'summer regulations'; see paragraph 10.1). The coordinator of the thesis module must ensure that all thesis supervisors are added to the Canvas module for the thesis, and that an upload point for the theses is set up here.

The final version of the thesis is assessed by the supervising staff member, who also carries out a plagiarism check, and an independent second reader using an assessment form. The second reader is not involved in the process of writing the thesis in any way. The degree programme also ensures that the same combination of supervisor and second reader will not be used regularly for other theses. The first supervisor is always an approved examiner affiliated with the department to which the programme belongs. The second reader is also an examiner approved by the Examination Board. Note: if the second reader comes from a faculty other than FGW, they must be approved by the Examination Board of the Faculty of Humanities. If desired, a programme may elect to appoint a second supervisor, for example from the field of professional practice, to provide substantive guidance. In such cases, the thesis must also be assessed by an independent assessor approved by the Examination Board and will make for a total of three persons involved in the assessment of the thesis.

The thesis is assessed based on the above-mentioned assessment form, which has been made known to the student in advance via [VU.nl](https://www.vu.nl) and/or Canvas. Both the supervisor and the second reader complete an assessment form independent of each other. If the supervisor and the second reader agree on the final grade, then the supervisor will complete the cover sheet of the assessment forms of the Faculty of Humanities (document can be found on [VU.nl](https://www.vu.nl)). If the difference between the assessment of the supervisor and the second reader is 1.0 mark or more, and including a summary

of the final assessment. The final assessment is determined through consultation between supervisor and second reader, they can also calculate the average of their individual grades¹.

The thesis supervisor forwards the final version of the thesis and the accompanying documents in digital form (assessment forms, thesis agreement, cover sheet) to the Education Office via onderwijsbureau.fgw@vu.nl, for archiving. This also applies if the thesis has been graded as unsatisfactory. A thesis that has been graded with a pass mark cannot be retaken.

Several special circumstances can occur:

- Should the assessors believe that the submitted version of a thesis is insufficient, then the student will have to submit a resit.
- The difference between the original assessments is between 1.0 and 1.99 points: fill in a summary of the final assessment on the assessment form.
- The assessors fail to reach a unanimous agreement: either because one assessor awards pass and the other a fail, or because there was a difference of 2.0 or more points in the original assessment, or because they cannot agree for other reasons. In that case, the supervisor submits a request to the Examination Board to designate a third assessor. The final grade will be the average of the three separate assessments N.B. A maximum of one of the assessments given may be a fail grade; i.e., if the average is a pass, but two out of three assessments are a fail, a pass cannot be awarded.

In the event that a thesis is again given a fail grade, the student will be required to start all over on a new thesis with a new topic and other assessors (supervisor, second assessor).

A schematic overview of all the steps in the assessment process can be found in appendix 1

If a student does not expect to finish their thesis on time for the assessment within the current academic year (in accordance with the faculty graduation procedure), then the supervisor and the student will conclude an agreement in writing about a new submission date.

In the event that no final version of the thesis is submitted within the current academic year, then the module for that year will be concluded with a No Show (NS) in the system. This is done by the Education Office. The NS will have no influence on the “cum laude” classification. The student can reregister for the module in the new academic year, and start a new thesis with a new supervisor.

The assessment forms currently used by degree programmes within the Faculty of Humanities can be found on [VU.nl](http://vu.nl). It is advisable to review the assessment form used at the start of the thesis process, because this will clarify which criteria are used to assess the work.

Further information on the cum laude classification is available in the [Examination Board’s Rules and Guidelines](#).

¹ Please note: a final grade of 5.5 will be rounded up to a 6.0! See OER article 3.6.2

8. Academic misconduct

At the front of the thesis, after the title page and before the table of contents, the student must

state, in a signed *declaration of originality*, that they have written the thesis himself/herself and included appropriate references to the work of others cited in the thesis or used in it. An example of this declaration is available on [VU.nl](https://www.vu.nl). When the completed thesis has been submitted, the supervisor performs a plagiarism check. If there is a thesis coordinator for the entire programme, they should also supervise the plagiarism check. This can be done, for example, by checking the scores of the automatic plagiarism checks in Canvas, and alerting supervisors to deviating scores or other cases that require further investigation.

If academic misconduct is suspected, the supervisor notifies the Examination Board. The Examination Board will deal with the case according to the procedure and powers of the as stated in their Rules & Guidelines (see [VU.nl](https://www.vu.nl)).

9. Disputes

If a student is unhappy about a certain situation, they should contact the supervisor at the earliest opportunity. If the meeting with the supervisor does not have the desired effect, the students may first contact the academic advisor or lodge a complaint using the complaint form on [VU.nl](https://www.vu.nl) (under 'Lodging a Complaint').

10. Conclusion

10.1 Presentation

The student may be asked to give a presentation based on their thesis research, followed by a question and answer session.

10.2 Graduation procedure

Every year, the Education Office, in consultation with the Examination Board, draws up an overview of the graduation procedure (submission dates, publication of grade, graduation dates, degree awards ceremony), which can be consulted on [VU.nl](https://www.vu.nl).

10.3 Final assessment

The supervisor will inform the student of the assessment. This is done in any case via the completed assessment form and cover sheet, but the supervisor may also provide additional explanation orally.

10.4 Archiving

The supervisor sends the definitive version of the thesis in PDF together with the assessment documents and thesis agreement (also in digital form) to the Education Office, which will digitally archive the documents.

The final version of the Master's thesis, approved by the supervisor, must be uploaded by the student via www.ubvu.vu.nl/VU.nlid. When uploading the thesis, the student will also be asked to indicate whether it may be viewed by others. As part of this process, the student submits a short summary of the thesis for the digital archive.

10.5 Copyright

The copyright of the thesis rests, in principle, with the student. Should the thesis or a part thereof be published, the student is to include a statement that it was written within degree programme X at VU Amsterdam under the supervision of Professor Y. The student and the supervisor should reach clear agreement on this matter. NB: The student is not the owner of data or works made available by the supervisor.

For other rules regarding graduation procedures, please refer to VU.nl.

