Dissertation Workshop

Introduction

1. Major part of most degrees
    a. Mark achieve
    b. Skills and experience gained
    c. Evidence for employers

2. Larger project than have done before: very different

3. That's why academic work build up in stages : Honours/MA/PhD

4. That's why we provide supervision

5. A lot of advise will seem obvious: but its surprising how many students ignore it and end up with problems

6. Always remember to read the regulations and be clear about deadlines

7. We normally state that the final dissertation should:
    - Be well conceived and acknowledge earlier research in the field, if appropriate.
    - Show your ability to undertake a substantial and informed piece of research.
    - Demonstrate your ability to collect, organise, and analyse material to communicate effectively

6. This is quite a challenge, so decide on a topic early, stick to it and be organised –don't leave it till the last minute

This Presentation

- Supervisors -managing
- Plagiarism
- Identifying a Topic
- Proposal
- Literature Review
- Planning and Execution
- Researching on the Internet
- Structure of the Dissertation
- Writing Style
- Assessment
- Questions

Supervisors

- The supervisory relationship provides a unique opportunity for a detailed exchange of ideas and plans, for the confirmation of good practice, for advice and for evaluative feedback. In short, the quality of the student supervisor relationship is extremely important.

- It is essential for you to keep in regular contact with your supervisor who will guide your work throughout the development of your dissertation.

You **should**:

- Arrange to meet your supervisor face to face

- Plan ahead. Supervisors are busy people, make advance appointments and do not just show up and expect to be seen. Make appointments for specific dates and times with agreed agendas, which can also act as deadlines and milestones to motivate you to complete particular stages of your work.

- Give your supervisor sufficient time to read your material in order for you to receive good feedback. Giving your supervisor work to read just prior to deadlines will not give him/her sufficient time to offer assistance.

- Keep written notes of the comments of your discussions with your supervisor. It is your responsibility to remember what is discussed and to remind your supervisor if necessary.

- Don't expect your supervisor to be around all the time, in particular ensure you ascertain the availability of your supervisor during the summer break.

You **should not**:

- Expect your supervisor to be a proof-reader. He/she is there to give you guidance not to do the work for you.

- Miss appointments unless it is absolutely unavoidable. If you are likely to miss an appointment ensure that you inform your supervisor as soon as possible.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism means the use of the ideas or others without acknowledging them as such. It is an academic tradition that the ideas or words of another are not used without acknowledgement. You must adhere to this tradition:

- PLAGIARISM IS AN EXTREMELY SERIOUS ACADEMIC OFFENCE.
- IF YOU ARE IN ANY DOUBT AS TO WHETHER OR NOT YOU ARE PLAGIARISING THEN YOU MUST SEEK THE ADVICE OF YOUR SUPERVISOR.
- PROVEN PLAGIARISM CAN HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

You can of course make use of the ideas of others. However, this must be acknowledged according to the following conventions:

- Each use of the ideas or words of another must be individually acknowledged. In addition, each work consulted must be listed in the reference section. The mere presence of a work in the reference section does not override the need for acknowledging each individual use of that work in a reference in the text and, though necessary, is by itself insufficient.

- Any use of exact words of another must be acknowledged by enclosing them in quotation marks and by stating their source. For example:

  'Confusing the industry with the market is one of the most frequently repeated mistakes in corporate strategy' (Kay 1996: 202)

- If any part of a passage from a publication is used this should be indicated by replacing the omitted words with a short series of dots. For example:

  'Economics is the natural integrative discipline for much of management science. But its past relative neglect of the firm…has severely limited the role it has to play' (Kay 1996:8)

- If you do not have access to the original source of a quotation but have found it quoted in the work of somebody else you should give the original source (which the author you have found should have quoted) and the reference where you found it. For example:

  Scherer (1970) quoted by Kay (1996:5)

- If you are not using the exact words of another but are making use of their ideas this should be acknowledged. For example:

  As Kay has argued macroeconomic forecasts are at best reliable for short periods ahead (Kay 1996:12).

- There are web sites on plagiarism and how to avoid it:

  http://condor.bcm.tmc.edu/Micro-Immuno/courses/igr/homeric.html
  http://english.tribble.wfu.edu/english/writing4.htm
  http://perth.uwlax.edu/murphylibrary/plagiarism.html

Identifying a Topic

- At the heart of your dissertation will be a single idea, a closely related set of ideas, which you wish to investigate. Unfortunately, there's no handy formula for finding an interesting topic.

- Experienced researchers will do a lot of work (reading, thinking and discussing ideas) before they decide on the topic they wish to investigate. To find an interesting topic takes time so start this process as early as possible.

- In choosing your project you should try to develop linkages with the topics you have studied so far.

- A good project will set out to apply concepts, principles and techniques, acquired through academic study, to problems or issues.

- Begin focusing as EARLY as possible on specific questions, issues and hypotheses. Avoid spending too much time thinking about gigantic, vague problems.

- Once you have a topic stick to it unless there is an really important reason to change
    - All topics end up being less interesting once you get into them
    - The old certainties go and moving forward gets difficult
    - This often accounts for the PhD ‘two year itch’ !

In choosing your topic, you will be well advised addressing the following issues:

- Acceptability of the project: You must come to an early agreement with the supervisor.

- Academic validity: You are required to locate the particular problem you are studying within a wider theoretical framework. Therefore, the breadth and depth of the literature available must be a factor in your choice of topic.

- Feasibility: It is important that you appreciate the resource and time constraints. Is the data available? How long will it take to have the data ready for analysis? Do not be overly ambitious.

- Motivation: Working on a project can be a long and lonely affair. It is therefore important to select a topic in which you are interested.

- Originality: Give serious consideration to the extent to which your contribution will be original.

Ninety-nine percent of the time you will be expected to make some sort of claim and use evidence to support it. If your dissertation does not have a main point, it cannot be arguing for anything. Dissertations should not just be a mere “information dump”.

The Proposal

- Use the “so what” test on your proposed area of investigation. It must represent an area of study that is actually worth pursuing. Illustrate the importance of your topic and demonstrate that it is a worthwhile topic for investigation.

- Explain how you will go about your research, what data you will collect/use and why/how. Define any special facilities/access that you will need and any necessary skills which you either have already or would need to acquire.

- Provide a timetable you intend to keep to in doing your research and writing it up.

- Provide some idea of the final format of the dissertation (i.e. chapter headings, areas covered etc.)

The Literature Review

- The literature review should demonstrate that you have a comprehensive knowledge of the research, theoretical and empirical, that relates to your proposed area of research. You must show how your research will build upon or extend the existing literature.

- A literature review is NOT merely a summary of other people's work. It is a critical look at the existing research in a particular area/topic.
    - Of course this will mean that you do summarise some of the relevant research in your chosen topic. However, you must EVALUATE this research. This will include detailing how the research is related and its relevance to your dissertation.
    - Don't simply provide a description of individual research. Select the important aspects of the research (e.g. the methodology) and clearly indicate how it relates to the other relevant studies (e.g. What other methodologies have been used? How are they similar? How are they different?).
    - You must then indicate how the research relates to your work (e.g. what is its relationship to your methodology?). A good review must provide the context for your research.

- By undertaking a review of your chosen topic you will of course enlarge your knowledge. You should also improve and demonstrate your skills in information seeking and critically appraising the relevant research.

- The idea of the literature review is not to provide a summary of all the published work that relates to your research, but a survey of the most relevant and significant work. A good review must:
    - be organised to demonstrate how the research is related to your dissertation and the research question you are developing
    - synthesise results into a summary of what is and is not known
    - identify areas of controversy in the literature
    - formulate questions that need further research

- In general, you should make sure that the following questions are answered:
    - What do we already know in the immediate area concerned?
    - What are the characteristics of the key concepts or the main factors or variables?
    - What are the relationships between these key concepts, factors or variables?
    - What are the existing theories?
    - Where are the inconsistencies or other shortcomings in our knowledge and understanding?
    - What views need to be (further) tested?
    - What evidence is lacking, inconclusive, contradictory or too limited?
    - Why study (further) the research problem?
    - What contribution can the present study be expected to make?
    - What research designs or methods seem unsatisfactory?

Before writing your review, consider the following questions:

- What type of literature review am I conducting? Am I looking at issues of theory, methodology, policy, quantitative research or qualitative research?
- What are the specific research questions that my literature review helps to define?
- What is the scope of my literature review? What types of publications have I considered? Have I failed to consider other sources?
- Have I critically analysed the literature I have read? Am I considering the strengths and weaknesses of the research, rather than just summarising them?
- Have I discussed studies contrary to my perspective?

Questions to consider for each individual piece of research include:

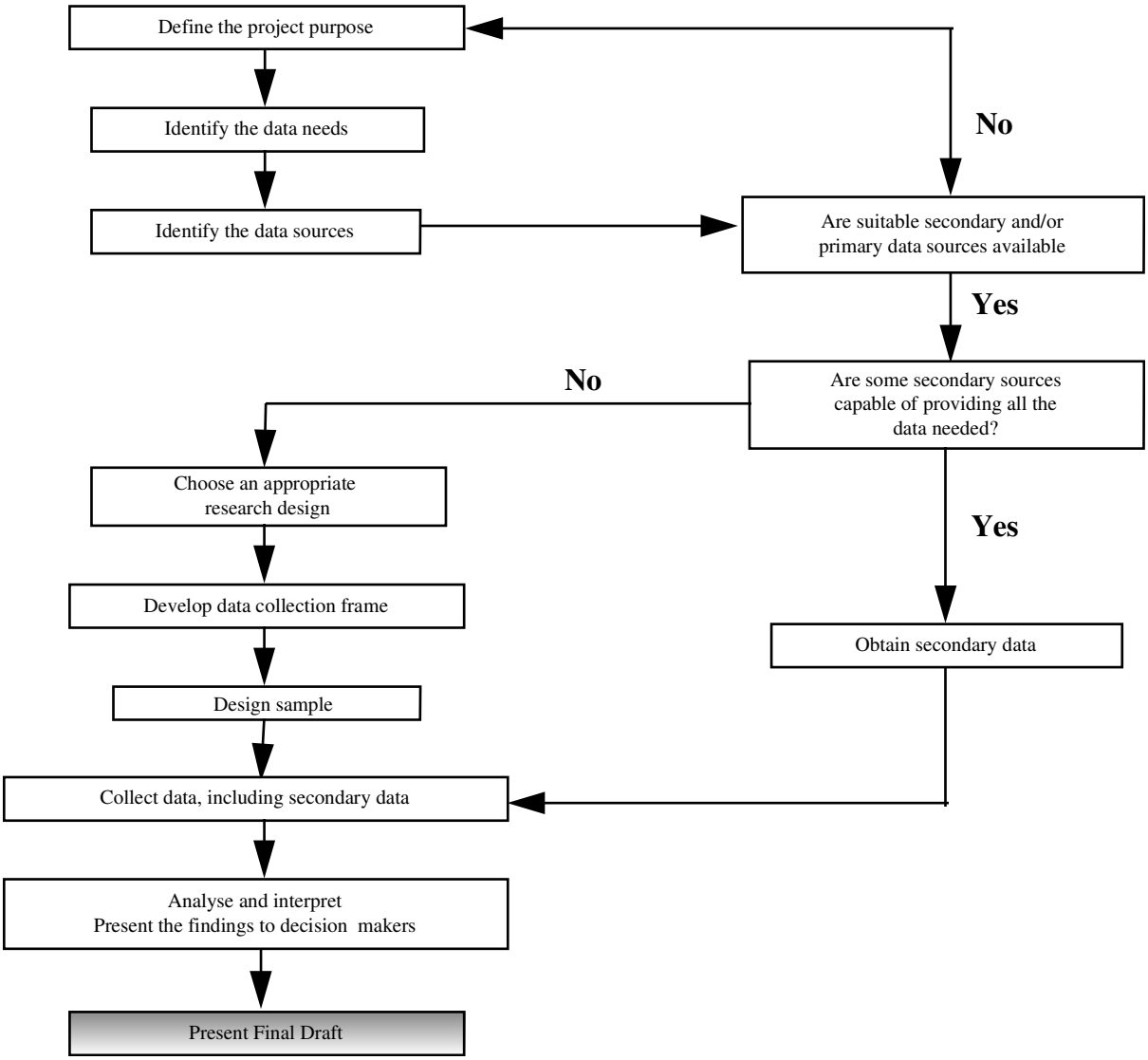
- Has the author formulated a problem/issue?
- Is it clearly defined? Is its significance (scope, severity, relevance) clearly established?
- Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?
- What theoretical framework has the author used?
- Are there any methodological flaws?
- Has the author reviewed and evaluated the literature relevant to his/her analysis?
- Does the author include literature taking positions he/she does not agree with?
- In quantitative analysis, how good are the basic components of the study (e.g. does it include diagnostics tests?) Are the conclusions validly based upon the data and analysis?
- In what ways does this book or article contribute to our understanding of the problem under study, and in what ways is it useful for practice? What are the strengths and limitations?
- How does this research relate to the specific thesis or question I am developing?

- The dissertation must not be purely descriptive. It should involve argument and counter-argument or objection. This will show the reader that you have a deep understanding of the issue you are discussing. By anticipating alternative views and those that may disagree with your position you are showing that your have thought things through.

Planning and Execution

- Good planning and execution are essential if you are to complete your dissertation and obtain maximum value from this learning experience.

- The following diagram suggests the sort of process you might go through in developing your research.



- You need to approach research systematically. It may be helpful to keep a journal and or to build up a file or portfolio of relevant documents, letters, notes of events etc.

- One of the potential difficulties of studying is that structured activities will generally take precedence over unstructured work. Spend time at the beginning in planning and establishing tasks, put them in order of priority with the estimated time required for completion.

- Try from the outset to set yourself a timetable and keep to it. The first task here is to estimate the amount of time you are likely to spend on each task.

- Students consistently underestimate the time to write-up research.
    - For the final manuscript the standard estimate is four hours per double-spaced, typewritten page.
    - Many students require more than four hours per page.
    - The summary and conclusions are often rewritten several times, so the standard time is doubled to eight hours per page.
    - Appendices, which may include computer printouts, copies of questionnaires, etc. can take considerable time to collate.

- The important concept is realistic planning and this must depend on realistic time estimates. The best estimates are usually made by breaking down the activities into small tasks and combining these estimates: include a pessimistic, optimistic, and best estimate for the hard-to-estimate activity. It is better to have an imprecise estimate than no estimate at all.

Researching on the Internet

- To ensure your literature review is comprehensive it is vital that you utilise all available electronic services available to you. The internet is extremely valuable.

- The library will provides access to several sources of online articles and online bibliography services. Given that these services are search engine based, it is highly recommended that you use these services when designing your project proposal.

- Internet searches will illustrate what research has been completed in your chosen topic and provide direction and possible questions to answer.

- These days they are also extremely important in ensuring that you review the literature adequately

Data

- Finding the appropriate data can be the most difficult part of the project. You should check that the data is available before deciding on a topic and make sure you are clear what the data is. You can use time series data, cross section data (observations at one moment in time over countries, regions, families, etc.), or panel data which combines time series and cross section.

- Make sure there are enough observations and variables. The sample size can be important in determining the techniques you can use and the precision of our results. Aim to have at least 30 observations for annual or cross section data; more for quarterly or monthly data. Unless you have experience of large data sets, or can get help in handling them, do not go much above 100 observations.

- Make sure you know the exact definition of your data and what they are measuring. Terms like income and prices are not acceptable as they give little information. The sort of questions you should consider are:
    - Are the data current or constant price?
    - What is the base year?
    - What is the coverage (Net or Gross, Domestic UK or GB)?
    - Are they seasonally adjusted?
    - Have the definitions changed over the sample period?
    - If it is constructed data, how was this done?
    - Is the data based on a sample?

- You may have to do a lot of work to make the data useable or comparable. If so provide information on this work, possibly in the form of a data appendix, so that you can be given credit.

- You may have to adjust the data in various ways to deal with missing observations, to splice series on different bases, or to convert them into a different currency. Published data are not infallible, so always be on the look out for possible mistakes.

- You should know something about the relevant history and institutions, such as important events, like strikes, wars, or changes of government.

- Once you have loaded the data onto the computer, you should conduct a descriptive analysis.
    - Print the data out and check carefully for typing errors.
    - Plot the data and note the distinctive features such as trends, temporal dependencies, seasonality, unusual observation, etc.
    - Calculate the means variances of your variables and their correlations.

- Repeat this process after you transform the data in any way:
    - growth rates or ratios (the savings rate, the velocity of circulation, the share of profits) are often more informative because they are not dominated by trends.
    - logarithmic transformations are often used in economic models as the coefficients can then be interpreted as elasticities; the change in the logarithm is approximately equal to the growth rate; variances are more likely to be constant; and many interesting economic hypotheses can be expressed as linear restrictions in logarithmic models.

- Where there are a number of possible measures for a series use all of them and try to decide which is best. You can report this in the project. e.g. Do wages respond more to the consumer price index or the retail price index? Do not decide a priori, test and find out.

- Keep detailed notes on the sources of data and anything you do to them. Its easy to forget at a later stage. You might end up with some adjustments you made and forgot about dominating your results.

- Keep at least two backed up copies of your data on separate discs, stored separately. There are many ways of loosing or corrupting disks and it can be a lot of work typing the data in again.

Structure of the Dissertation

Introduction: typically introduction would include the following elements:

- The background: briefly explaining and introducing the subject of your dissertation.

- The objectives: a clear and precise statement of the aims of your dissertation.

- The methodology: a concise statement of the theories and concepts employed in your research.

- The methods: details of the way you met the research objectives. For example, if this involved a survey you would have to give details of who was contacted, how they were selected, how many co-operated, and how the data was collected and analysed. Also provide your rationale for adopting a particular research method rather than another.

- An overview of the way the dissertation is structured.

- Avoid writing an introduction that is vague, disorganized, error-filled, off-the-wall, or boring. First impressions are important -capture the reader's interest, ensuring that they want to read the rest
- You don't need to write your introduction first.

Body of the Dissertation

- Clearly it is difficult to prescribe the structure for the body of your dissertation, but without question the main weakness with student dissertations is a lack of structure and narrative. Explain your objectives and take your reader logically through the evidence that led to your final conclusions and recommendations.

- Ensure that the arguments you are presenting are based on evidence rather than anecdote. They must be based on valid empirical or secondary data in a way that is consistent with existing theoretical perspectives on this issue.

- Ensure that arguments flow in a logical way that is clear to the reader. The chances are that if you have written 500 words without introducing a sub-heading then you are drifting into a "wooly" essay, as opposed to a tightly structured dissertation.

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

- Conclusions are often the most difficult part of an essay to write, and many writers feel that they have nothing left to say after having written the paper.

- The conclusion is often what a reader remembers best –it should be the best part of your dissertation.

Suggestions

- **Answer the question "So What?"**
  Show your readers why this work was important, meaningful and useful.
- **Synthesize, don't summarize**
  Don't simply repeat things that were in your paper. They have read it. Show them how the points your made and the support and examples you used were not random, but fit together.
- **Redirect your readers**
  Give your reader something to think about, perhaps a way to use your paper in the "real" world. If your introduction went from general to specific, make your conclusion go from specific to general. Think globally.
- **Create a new meaning**
  You don't have to give new information to create a new meaning. By demonstrating how your ideas work together, you can create a new picture. Often the sum of the paper is worth more than its parts.
- **Echoing the introduction**
  Echoing your introduction can be a good strategy if it is meant to bring the reader full-circle. If you begin by describing a scenario, you can end with the same scenario as proof that your essay was helpful in creating a new understanding.

Writing Style

- Your dissertation should be written using simple language. Avoid long-winded, rambling accounts with no natural flow or sequence.
    - It should be written in the past tense and usually, in the third person, not the first person singular. For instance, say “it could be argued that this shows...” and not “I think this shows...”.
    - The exception is where you are reporting your own action/decisions or where you wish to introduce a personal note in your final recommendations (e.g. “I think the way ahead is...”).

- Remember that most people redraft dissertations many times to reach the final polished version.

- It is also important to thoroughly check the report for errors, omissions or inconsistencies. Four checks are usually needed:

    1) a check for inconsistencies in the logical flow of the written arguments.
    2) a check for accuracy and constancy of numerical data;
    3) a check for spelling or typing error.
    4) a second typing and spelling check (try to get a friend or colleague to do this as you may be too close to it by this stage).

- Spelling mistakes, whilst of limited importance themselves, tend to lower reader confidence in the overall thrust of the argument, so make every effort to avoid them.

- Above all try the impossible –try to make it interesting to the reader!

Writing hints for beginners (puns intended):

- Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
- Prepositions are not words to end a sentence with.
- And do not start a sentence with a conjunction.
- Avoid clichés like the plague.
- Also, always avoid annoying alliteration.
- Be more or less specific.
- Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are (usually) unnecessary.
- No sentence fragments.
- Contradictions aren't necessary and shouldn't be used.
- One should never generalise.
- Do not use no double negatives.
- Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
- Eliminate commas, that are, not necessary.
- Never use big words when a diminutive one would suffice.
- Kill all exclamation marks!!!
- Use words correctly, irregardless of how others use them.
- Use the apostrophe in it's proper place and omit it when its not required.
- Puns are for children, not groan readers.
- Proof read carefully to see if you any words left out.

- Advice on writing skills is available at the following address:
  URL: http://www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide/

- Online guides to writing research papers:
  http://web.mit.edu/writing/index.html
  http://campusgw.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/manntom2.cgi?section=help&URL=newhelp/newhel

Assessment

Your dissertation will be assessed using something like the following criteria:

- The aims and objectives of the report should be clearly stated.
- The ability to use relevant theoretical knowledge should be demonstrated.
- A clear description of the research method(s) adopted and the reasons and the justification for the choice of method(s) should be provided.
- A clear description of sources of data, method of collection and analysis should be provided
- A justification for the appropriateness of data collected and data analysis should be provided and awareness of the limitations imposed by, and opportunities offered by, the chosen project design should be demonstrated.
- The research findings should be analysed and their implications set out clearly.
- Appropriate structuring of the report and presentation
- Succinct and coherent presentation of material.
- Acknowledgement and citing of all external sources throughout the report.
- www.carecon.org.uk