**Department of Sociology- MA Dissertation Guide**

The structure of this document was influenced by the structure of Goldsmiths Dept. of Sociology Dissertation Guidelines.

**Overview**

For the MAs in Sociology in UCC you are expected to write a 20,000 word dissertation. In this Dissertation you will:

* Identify a sociological topic or problem and develop appropriate research aims and objectives to answer that problem.
* Synthesise relevant research findings and studies.
* Develop an appropriate method(s) to undertake the study and collect data.
* Analyse data and relate project results to existing research/sociological concepts.

**Emailing staff**

Please check your UCC email address frequently (at least once every few days) to make sure that you receive relevant communication from staff.

**Dissertation arrangements**

You will be asked to submit a draft research proposal for your dissertation in early Semester 2. On the basis of this you will be assigned a Dissertation supervisor.

**Dissertation supervision**

Your supervisor will help you to develop your research idea, give you advice on readings and research, help you with your overall structure. They will provide ethical clearance for your study. You will meet or make contact with your supervisor approximately once per month. Your supervisor will provide feedback on your ideas and on your work. Please stay in touch with your supervisor and do not ‘drop out’ of contact for long periods of time.

**Presentation**

As noted your dissertation will be about 20,000 words long. The structure is generally quite standardized (please see below for an example of a standardized structure), though your supervisor will provide advice if you want to vary the structure. Your supervisor will guide you through the structure of your project (results chapters, lit. review, methods, intro. and conclusion). The dissertation is to be handed in in September.

You can format your dissertation in any way that you choose (referencing and bibliography) as long as it is standardized throughout.

**Doing the dissertation**

Students choose dissertation topics that they are interested in so most find doing a dissertation to be an interesting experience. It is important to recognize though that it is also hard work and success requires maintaining contact with your supervisor.

**Dissertation areas**

You can choose to do your dissertation on any area of Sociology that you find interesting. Your supervisor will help you to narrow down your dissertation ideas. You can do a conceptual or an empirical dissertation.

You will be asked to think about an area of Sociology that you find interesting develop aims and objectives for a specific problem; undertake a literature review in the area; collect data; analyze results; and come to conclusions.

**Defining a research question**

Strong Dissertations are generally based on having an aim (the overall thing that your project is about- you should be able to state this in one line), and generally 3-4 objectives, which are specific subsidiary aspects of your aim that you want to investigate. Your supervisor can advise you on developing your aims and objectives. You need to make sure that your aims and objectives can be done within your project’s timeframe. Again, your supervisor will help you to keep on track with this. There are a lot of things you can do your dissertation on. Just choose one thing and focus on that. You will never be able to research everything.

**Dissertation methods**

You can use any method that is appropriate to answering your research question. You will decide on the most useful method, for example interviewing or focus group discussion, in conjunction with your supervisor. Your supervisor will also provide you with advice on analyzing the data that you collect.

**Ethical issues**

For an MA dissertation your supervisor will act as your ethics committee and talk you through any ethical issues that you might face and which you need to consider. It is worth reading the Declaration of Helsinki to see the types of issues that researchers need to consider when conducting research.

The risks of many student research projects are fairly low. Sometimes students may wish to conduct research on sensitive topics or vulnerable group. For MA dissertations we recommend:

* If you want to conduct research on a very sensitive topic such as self-harm, interview professionals who work with the client group.
* For an MA dissertation do not interview anyone under 18 years of age.
* If you want to do something very sensitive, you might need formal ethical approval from SREC in UCC. This could take a substantial amount of time and we would only advise it for Ph.D. research.
* Always consult your supervisor about ethical issues. Your supervisor will be able to provide you with advice about ethical issues relating to the use of specific methods, such as focus groups.

**Practicalities of research**

The key to success in doing a Dissertation is careful planning and having a realistic sense of what can be done in the time that you have. Time management is also key.

**Finding appropriate reading**

Appropriate readings for your dissertation can be found in the UCC library; and through searching databases such as Google Scholar or Pubmed. Generally you would be expected to read approx.. 40 articles or books for a dissertation (you don’t have to read the entire book). Your supervisor will provide you with advice.

**Plagiarism**

Avoid plagiarizing. Please google UCC plagiarism policy to see why. You get extra marks for referencing other people’s work, and lose marks for not doing so. If you are uncertain about how to reference, please consult your supervisor or google ‘how to reference in academic writing’.

**General reading**

There are loads of books in the library about how to do dissertations and research projects. They are all pretty much the same. Have a look and read the ones that you think are interesting. Your supervisor will provide you with specific reading for your specific topic.

**Dissertation structure**

Here is the typical outline structure of a dissertation (word counts are in brackets).

**Title page**

Title of your dissertation

Date of submission

Name of supervisor

Need a page for your acknowledgements

**Abstract (200 words)**

Summary of thesis in a short paragraph.

Background to topic and why it is important

Brief info. on your research questions

Brief info. on your methods

Main findings/conclusion of the research

**Intro. (2000 words)**

Begin with something catchy about what you are looking at and highlight why what you are looking at is important and interesting issue .

Then say something very generally about academic research in the area (not too much, just to say that there hasn’t been much research done- you’ll go into detail in the literature review).

Then say something about your research questions. Your aim is your overall questions; your objectives are your three subsidiary research questions.

Then have paragraph outlining the structure of the rest of the dissertation (chapter 2 will be the literature review, chapter 3 will be the methods, chapter 4 will be the findings etc.)

**Literature review (3000 words)**

Begin with paragraph outlining what type of information/articles you were seeking to collect, how you searched for material and your inclusion/exclusion criteria. Basically how you conducted literature review.

Three main sections, each summarising the literature you found in relation to each of your three subsidiary research questions. The findings/concepts you identify here will be important because you will come back to them in your discussion. You are highlighting important research findings and theoretical concepts that will help you to explain your own research (masculinity, privacy, social networks etc.)

Conclusion summarising main findings of literature review, plus saying where there are gaps in information/literature (which your study is seeking to address). So say something like there is a gap in information about how Irish college students conceptualise privacy or whatever.

**Methods (3000 words)**

In this section you need to walk the reader step by step through the process about how you gathered your data

Who was the study focused on (students, young adults)>why you decided to choose this group to answer your question.

Where was the study conducted (what general setting-e.g. university, why you chose this setting)

When was the study conducted-over what time period

What did you do-first say qualitative or quantitative>then say particular methods you used (interviews, surveys etc.)>why did you use these methods (interviews to gain insight, surveys to try to find out widely applicable information.

Practical challenges that you faced>describe these in detail>such as identifying people to interview, survey etc., difficulties you faced in gaining access and how you overcame those difficulties.

Ethical issues>confidentiality, anonymity etc.>getting consent/signing consent form etc.

How the data was analysed (we will go over this next week)

**Results (ideally 3 chapter 3000 words each)**

Each results chapter should cover one of your subsidiary research questions.

**Discussion (3000)**

If your results chapter is shorter your discussion will be longer.

Short description of your findings

You’ll have identified some key concepts in your lit. review (privacy, masculinity, social networks etc.)>you need to explain your results in relation to these concepts.

Example: Your literature review is on stigma, and you note that Goffman has two stigma concepts, discredited and discreditable stigma. Your project is interviewing people with STIs and you found that they often keep their STI testing a secret. You therefore interpret your results by saying that people keep their STI testing a secret because they have a discreditable stigma.

Talk about what is new in terms of the specific data you collected compared to what you mention in the literature>you found that 40% of students were worried about privacy, whereas previous studies found that 70% were>don’t introduce any new articles in this section that you haven’t already mentioned in the literature review.

Ideally you should have a short section if possibly saying how you think your study helps to develop and extend whatever concepts or theories (privacy, stigma) you were working with.

Limitations of the study>if your results are short because of low response rate or whatever you can have a large limitations section discussing why response rate might have been low.

Recommendations: any recommendations you can make to improve services or whatever because of your study results.

Conclusion>final one or two paragraphs where you talk about what is the overall message from your study.

**References**