

2010

MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH

DISSERTATION HANDBOOK



Faculty of Health Sciences
School of Population Health and Clinical Practice

DISCIPLINE OF PUBLIC HEALTH

NOTE: This Handbook is updated every year, and published on the website of the Discipline of Public Health. <http://www.health.adelaide.edu.au/publichealth/teaching/>
Please check that you have the most recent version.

This document is intended to supplement the information published in the latest issue of the University of Adelaide Postgraduate Calendar available on the University website at <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/policies/2923/>

1. Getting Started

a. What is a MPH Dissertation?

The MPH Dissertation provides an opportunity for students to design, execute and report on a small research project in an area of public health. It should reflect what the student has learned from the core and elective work of the degree program. Unless exempted* by the Discipline of Public Health, the dissertation will take the form of a paper suitable for submission to an appropriate peer reviewed journal. The content of this paper must reflect the research topic.

*Exceptions will be rare but may be necessary in some circumstances to avoid significant disadvantage to a particular student.

b. *Eligibility to Enrol*

Normally, students will only be accepted into the MPH Dissertation program if they have completed all six core courses and two electives (i.e. the Grad Dip PH) and have achieved an average mark of 70% or more. You may be permitted to enrol if you have only one or two of these courses to complete.

Students intending to use a quantitative method in their dissertation are expected to have passed or to be studying concurrently either Epidemiological Research Methods and/or Biostatistics.

Students intending to use a qualitative method in their dissertation are expected to have passed Social Science Research Methods for Public Health at Credit level or above, and are encouraged to undertake an additional 3 units in a relevant course in social theory or a more advanced qualitative research methods course available elsewhere in this or another university.

c. *Developing a Dissertation Topic*

Whilst undertaking coursework in the Master of Public Health (MPH) you should have been considering the field of research that you might explore for your dissertation.

The research question you choose should have direct relevance to public health ie: it should illuminate an issue that is relevant to the health or disease of groups, as distinct from a biomedical research project which would tend to focus more on biological and clinical aspects of a disease process in individuals. Some dissertations involve the systematic collection and assessment of numerical data, usually to test a hypothesis or to analyse a proposition. Others involve the systematic collection and assessment of qualitative data. It is equally acceptable to undertake a dissertation which makes a systematic, extended critique of a concept such as health promotion, or critically analyses concepts or activities relevant to public health policy or action. All dissertations must include considerably more than a review of other people's work and they must be the student's own project. A dissertation should not be confused with a

research project such as a research officer/project officer carries out under the direction of others as part of his/her employment.

Students should begin to think about this early in their program, and start exploring the feasibility of focusing on a research question which genuinely interests them and for which they can provide or arrange the necessary resources. *Finding a substantive research question or issue in an appropriate public health topic area can be difficult.* Academic staff of the Discipline are happy to discuss dissertation ideas and topics with individual students, and students are encouraged to take up this opportunity at an early stage. You can choose to investigate a question of your own or to link into one of the on-going research programs in the Discipline. The Discipline website indicates areas of research interest as well as specific programs. <http://health.adelaide.edu.au/publichealth/research/>

d. *Finding a Supervisor*

Once you have decided on a topic or a least an area of interest, you need to find a supervisor. Initially you should discuss this with the Convenor of Postgraduate Coursework Education, hereinafter referred to as the *Program Coordinator*.

Your supervisor will be an academic staff member in this Discipline. His/her role is to help you define and shape the dissertation, to guide you through the dissertation process, and, where appropriate, to refer you to other sources of guidance in areas beyond the supervisor's field of expertise.

On occasion, for example, when expertise in a particular topic or research methodology is not available within the Discipline, external associate supervision may be arranged. The role of an external associate supervisor is that of an adviser. Primary responsibility lies with the discipline supervisor, who, as early in the process as possible, should consult with the associate supervisor and with you to determine your agreed approach to the project.

For an indication of the research interests of Discipline academic staff, see our web site.

e. *Dissertation Development Workshop*

Prior to embarking upon their Dissertation or early in their candidature, each student is normally required to attend a Dissertation Development Workshop. These Workshops are usually offered twice each year, or may be available as previously videoed sessions. The aim is to enable students to be well informed about the nature of the commitment they are undertaking with their dissertation. Do keep a look out for when the MPH Administrative Officer issues a general invitation to potential participants in the next Workshop. If, for some reason, you are unable to attend one of the Workshops, please make an extra effort to discuss the requirements and expectations with your supervisor. In addition, all students are encouraged to attend research seminars regularly held in the Discipline and in the School of Population Health and Clinical Practice.

2. Getting Enrolled

a. *Dissertation Enrolment is by Semester*

Dissertation enrolment is similar to course work enrolment, ie it must happen prior to the beginning of a semester, and normal coursework rules regarding withdrawal and deadlines for results apply. It is clear therefore that the Dissertation Proposal development process needs to take place during a break between semesters or during the semester prior to the one in which you intend to enrol. Full time students will complete their dissertation in one semester; part time students in two. Submission dates, which will be during the swot week/examination period at the end of each semester, will be advertised at the beginning of each semester. As with all coursework, extensions may be granted, on medical or compassionate grounds, if application is made prior to the advertised submission date.

In your planning and preparation you are advised to take official time constraints on candidature seriously. A dissertation which drags on often becomes a burden, and not necessarily a better product.

b. What Does It Cost?

The dissertation costs the same as four three-point courses. In brief, what that will amount to depends on the arrangements that applied when you were accepted into the program. If you were accepted as a Commonwealth Government Supported student, the dissertation component attracts a CGS fee in the same way that the coursework does. If you were accepted as a full fee paying, non-CGS student, the dissertation component will attract whatever fee applies at the time you enrol in it. The FEE-Help scheme may apply.

3. Submitting a Dissertation Proposal

a. Developing a Dissertation Proposal

By the prescribed date [four weeks before the beginning of the relevant semester], you will, in consultation with your supervisor, prepare a Dissertation Proposal for submission to the Program Coordinator, who will convene a panel to review the proposal.

Guidelines for MPH Dissertation Proposals

Candidates must submit a statement of about 750 words describing the field of study which they propose, sketching the chief scholarly elements of the field, and nominating a principal supervisor.

It does not have to be grand and it does not have to be long. It should include the following elements:

Date: Please date the first, and any revised, proposal submitted.

Student: Full name and student identity number

Supervisor: Names of all supervisors – Discipline of Public Health supervisor, and any associate supervisor external to the Discipline (include this person's address).

Title: No more than 160 characters including spaces.

Introduction: What is the problem to be investigated? Why is it a public health issue?

Scholarship: What have other people had to say about this issue? What work has been done on this problem in the past? This should indicate how the question being posed sits within the field of current knowledge.

Research Question/Argument: How will you go beyond what others have learned? What question will this dissertation investigate? Why is this question important? What are your aim and objectives? While it is not always necessary to formulate hypotheses, it is necessary to formulate a clear research question. This section will indicate what will be original about your work.

Methodology: In this section you are expected to specify, briefly, your research design. This will vary considerably from student to student, depending on the dissertation topic and on the disciplinary approach which informs and determines your investigation and analysis. It may include the reason for selection of a particular methodology, discussion of particular difficulties anticipated in the research design and the ways in which you propose to overcome them, methods of sample selection, data collection, controls or comparisons to be used, methods of analysis, the time frame, the specific role of the student as researcher, and any other relevant practical aspects.

This section will also provide information about the resources needed to complete the research. For example, do you have access to existing data bases or the time to gather your own? Do the necessary historical sources exist for your enquiry? How will you go about conducting interviews, and with whom, and how will you analyse interview data?

In general, the methods described must be appropriate for the research question and must be described in sufficient detail for members of a review panel to be confident that the research is feasible, and that it will be intellectually rigorous.

Note: Field work is not a requirement for MPH dissertations unless the dissertation question requires field work to answer it.

Statistics in MPH Dissertations: Methods of statistical analysis have advanced so far in recent years that there may be important issues of which you are unaware despite the statistics course(s) you have taken for this degree. Before submitting your Dissertation Proposal, you should discuss with your supervisor whether specialist statistical advice should be sought in order to avoid embarking on a project which may call for a level of statistical analysis for which you are not currently equipped nor likely to master in the time available.

Ethics Approval: It is necessary for all persons associated with the University of Adelaide to obtain ethical clearance for any activity involving human experimentation. You should determine whether your research needs ethics approval, and if it does, seek approval from the appropriate Ethics Committee (in most cases that of the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee) before you submit your proposal to the Program Coordinator for approval. The application will be in your supervisor's name, with you mentioned as another person involved. A copy of the University's policy document on ethics approval is available from the University's web site at

<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/ethics/human/> This site also has a link to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans, which you should read.

Data storage and retention: Wherever possible, original data must be retained in the department or research unit in which they were generated. Researchers are responsible for ensuring appropriate security for any confidential material. You must indicate what kind of data will be generated and how much, where the data will be kept and for how long, what resources will be required to do this, who will have access and who will keep a record of the data held?

Along with the data should be stored (i) the protocol that led to the data being generated/used; (ii) a data dictionary (if the data set itself is not self-documenting); and (iii) a statement of data ownership (dated), agreed by the students, supervisor(s) and any other relevant stakeholders.

The Data Management and Analysis Centre is willing to store such data sets (and keep them current) after discussion with student and supervisor.

Journal Template: Here you will specify the name of the peer-reviewed journal whose conventions and publication style you will be following. Longer dissertations are not discouraged: such matters as word length follow from the journal you choose as a template. Please attach a copy of the journal's "Notes for Contributors", and indicate the type of manuscript to be submitted, e.g. review paper, original research paper etc. Dissertations are expected to be full papers rather than short communications, editorials etc. The journal must be a recognised peer reviewed journal with a public health interest.

b. Submitting Your Proposal

When you are ready to submit your dissertation proposal to the Program Coordinator, get your supervisor to write a brief memo supporting the proposal (see Appendix 1), and then send a copy of your completed proposal and the memo to the Administrative Officer, who will circulate a copy of the proposal to each member of the review panel.

Members of the panel will provide feedback on the proposal to your supervisor. It is not unlikely that they will suggest some amendments, and occasionally may suggest that the proposal be re-submitted. If this happens in your case, you should not take it as a sign of failure or deficiency on your part. It is more properly seen as an example of collegial collaboration and support - and it will almost certainly lead to a strengthening of your proposal and your subsequent research.

4. Doing the Research

a. *You and Your Supervisor*

It will be important to your success and to your happiness and efficiency during your candidature, for you and your supervisor to establish a good working relationship from the beginning. Together you should work out a schedule of discussions and meetings and be clear about what you require from this contact. If you are not happy about the supervisory relationship, you should talk about this with your supervisor. He or she has agreed to work with you, and will be just as keen as you are that the process works well and leads to your success. If there are difficulties in the supervisory relationship that make such discussion impossible or uncomfortable, do not just do nothing. Make a time to talk to the Program Coordinator about it, and earlier rather than later.

b. *Your Dissertation Seminar*

All students present a Dissertation Seminar during the second half of their candidature. This should take the format of a paper presented to a learned society, and is intended to provide you with experience in presenting a research paper in public. This may seem a bit daunting, but it can actually be very helpful to you and your supervisor, by providing you with constructive feedback. It also helps other members of the Discipline learn more about you and your work,

and this increases the chances of ongoing conversations, sharing of ideas and general support. The Seminar is required but not examinable.

A detailed timetable will be negotiated with students. Each presentation may last for an absolute maximum of 15 minutes, and will be followed by 10 minutes of discussion. Timing will be carefully monitored - reason enough for a rehearsal! Advanced audio-visual materials are not required. However students must present with a Power Point presentation. Do ensure that your presentation is readable *from the back of the room*. An overview of issues to consider when preparing Power Point slides is available on the University website at: http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/stud_resources/#pptDesign

Your supervisor (or a nominee) will attend your Dissertation Seminar, and afterwards will expect you to be available for a feedback discussion covering:-

- Your communication skills:
Was your presentation interesting, lively, imaginative, and coherent?
- Your handling of questions and discussion:
Did you demonstrate real understanding and a capacity to reflect on issues raised?
- What you have learned from the audience feedback.
- The extent to which your presentation demonstrated satisfactory progress towards meeting the criteria for a Dissertation.

If you are unable to be present on the day, or if you have a problem that will impair your presentation, you should contact the MPH Program Administrative Officer as soon as possible. An alternative date and/or timing will generally be granted only on medical or genuine compassionate grounds, and may only be granted by the Program Coordinator (or nominee).

c. Extension of Candidature

If candidates cannot complete the planned dissertation and want to obtain extra supervision for their dissertation outside of the enrolment period, a formal application must be submitted to the Program Coordinator through the Administrative Officer. The application must justify the request and explain the reasons for extension of supervision. The application must be lodged at least two weeks before the end of semester at which the candidate had anticipated finishing. Normally the maximum period of time for extension is one month. Students need to be aware that delay of submission may result in delayed graduation until the following year.

5. The Final Steps

a. Preparing Your Dissertation for Submission

The dissertation must be prepared according to the conventions and publication style of your chosen journal template. The supervisor must certify that the student has prepared and retained all appropriate supporting documentation, and the student may be asked to make this available to the examiners. As most MPH students have not been through the process of preparing a manuscript for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, you should seek guidance from your supervisor. A common pitfall is being repetitive, and inefficient in tabulation of data. Your supervisor may be able to suggest a tabular presentation format which is clearer and

more concise. This is what a Journal Editor will be looking for, and may reject a paper simply on these grounds.

You should avoid bald sentences such as:

The questionnaire was adapted from that of Bloggs and Smith (1987). or

The samples were analysed by standard MTT and 8OHD methods (Standards Australia, 2003)

If you are unsure about whether to include something, you might want to add an appendix (e.g. an important article, or questionnaire).

Using the first example above, you could say

The questionnaire used in this study is given in Appendix 2 and was adapted from that of Bloggs and Smith (1987). This is a standardized 16-element general health questionnaire routinely used in mental health studies of remote indigenous communities in Canada. [The important thing is that the examiner now has details of the questionnaire and a feel for the context of its use]

Using the second example above, you could say

The samples were analysed by standard MTT and 8OHD methods (Standards Australia, 2003) which are routinely used for studies of cellular DNA damage in exposed populations. The MTT (3-(4,5-Dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide) assay is a standard colorimetric laboratory assay for measuring cellular proliferation. The 8OHD (8-hydroxydeoxyguanosine) assay is a measure of the amount of hydroxyl radical damage to genetic material. These two tests are complementary. [Here the examiner can appreciate that these are routine cytogenetic lab tests and that they are complementary. In the absence of this information a non-expert examiner might well be wondering why these particular tests were carried out]

Remember that when you are this close to completing your dissertation, your supervisor is your best friend. Use your supervisor to guide you on how much explanatory content to incorporate. In some cases, there may not be any need for extra words.

b. Statement of Contributorship

In line with policy adopted by many journals, the MPH dissertation is to include a statement of contributorship, which is the preferred term rather than authorship. You must acknowledge any help given or work carried out by any other people or organisations. This is in addition to the usual signed statement to the effect that the dissertation contains no material that has been accepted for any other degree nor unreferenced material written by another person. If you have sought professional editorial advice, the name of the editor and a brief description of the service rendered should be included in the acknowledgements. Should the professional editor's current or former area of specialisation be similar to yours this should be noted.

The contributorship statement should cover:

- Original idea for the project
- Study protocol
- Literature search
- Obtaining data
- Data analysis
- Discussion
- Editing drafts

c. *Submitting Your Dissertation*

Hand two copies of your dissertation to the Administrative Officer, a certification by your supervisor (see Appendix 2) and the journal's *Instructions for Authors* and we will do the rest.

d. *Determination of Results*

The dissertation will be examined by two examiners, who will normally be members of the Discipline academic staff, or affiliated academic titleholders, and who are most likely to be familiar with your research topic.

Dissertations will be marked using a non-graded pass/fail marking scheme. The two examiners will assess each dissertation and provide a report and a recommendation (pass/fail). Reports will be reviewed by a panel comprising the Discipline's Program Coordinator, the Head of the Discipline of Public Health, and a senior Discipline academic, or their proxies. The panel will assign the final grade of non-graded pass or fail; and normally will make the examiners' reports available to you.

Students who receive a fail grade may, at the discretion of the panel, be given an opportunity to resubmit their dissertation for examination.

For those who pass: one copy of your dissertation will remain the property of the Discipline of Public Health, and your supervisor(s) will usually appreciate a copy. You will not be required to make corrections to your dissertation in response to the examiners' comments, but you may wish to correct obvious grammatical and typographical errors before these copies are deposited, though no other amendments may be made. With your consent, we wish to publish on the Discipline web page an electronic copy of your title and abstract.

e. *Graduating*

The Degree will be awarded in person or *in absentia*, at one of the university's commemoration ceremonies. The Discipline encourages you to attend the ceremony and receive your degree in person.

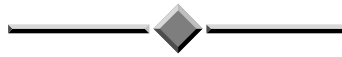
Graduation at the completion of your studies is not automatic. You must apply to graduate. See "Information about Graduations" at <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/student/graduations/>

f. *Publishing from Your Dissertation*

The examination process does not depend *in any way* upon whether or not you actually submit your dissertation to a learned journal for publication. However, we hope you will be keen to inform the academic, professional and consumer community, especially because someone new to a research field may have a fresh perspective. Having put in so much work already, do give it a go! It will also look good on your CV! Don't let time get away from you: we encourage you to submit within three months of the examination.

For further advice on this task, we do require that within two weeks after the examination process has concluded, the student and supervisor(s) meet in order to discuss comments and suggestions in the examiners' reports.

For work published from your MPH dissertation, the name of the Discipline of Public Health must appear on the front page as the student author's home – even if you are employed elsewhere at the time of publication. (Two addresses can be listed if your employment has been relevant to your publication). The student should be first author on any such publication. The supervisor(s) may be minor authors, having had the opportunity to read and make worthwhile comment upon the publication, and provided they can meet the terms of the journal's author statement.



6. Checklist: Don't Miss Any Steps!

1. Start thinking about a research topic early on in your GDPH coursework, and be open to suggestions and new ideas.
2. Attend Discipline seminars, especially those where work on a dissertation is presented.
3. Preferably well in advance of the enrolment date, choose a topic that will engage your energy and enthusiasm, and a supervisor with whom you feel able to work. Develop your proposal in consultation with your supervisor and attend a Dissertation Development Workshop.
4. Enrol. Remember – dissertation students must enrol prior to the beginning of semester, as with all other coursework.
5. Determine whether your research needs ethics approval, and if it does, seek approval from the appropriate Ethics Committee (in most cases that of the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee)
6. Submit your Dissertation Proposal to the Program Coordinator four weeks before semester begins. This must include the journal template (Instructions for Authors) and a letter of support from your supervisor.
7. Amend your proposal and re-submit to the Program Coordinator if necessary.
8. Do your research and write your dissertation, with regular support and advice from your supervisor.
9. During the second half of your dissertation candidature, present a Dissertation Seminar.
10. Prepare your manuscript for submission, in consultation with your supervisor.
11. Submit two paper copies of your dissertation, through the Administrative Officer by the prescribed month (June for dissertations completed in Semester 1, and November for dissertations completed in Semester 2); and also send in an electronic copy of your title and abstract. Make sure that your supervisor has seen the final version, and provided a note certifying that the supporting documentation is available. Include Instructions for Authors of the chosen journal.
12. Await written confirmation of the result of the examination.
13. Meet with your supervisor(s) in order to discuss comments and suggestions in the examiners' reports.
14. Submit (electronically) the title and abstract of the final Dissertation
15. Apply to the University to receive your degree at the next ceremony.
16. Accept our congratulations. **Relax. Celebrate.**
17. Do think seriously about publishing your completed research. Seek advice from your supervisor.



Appendix 1: Support by Supervisor on Submission of MPH Dissertation Proposal

I

support the Dissertation Proposal entitled

.....

.....

by who is a MPH candidate

in the Discipline of Public Health, University of Adelaide.

I am happy to act as supervisor.

Signature:

Date:



Appendix 2: Certification by Supervisor on Submission of MPH Dissertation

I being the supervisor of

..... who is a MPH candidate

in the Discipline of Public Health, University of Adelaide, certify that I have sighted the documentation

supporting the Dissertation entitled

.....

.....

and I am satisfied that the documentation is sufficient as the basis for presentation.

Signature:

Date: