

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Guide to Research Projects for Master of Psychology (Forensic) 2011

Nature of research

Area

The project may be carried out in any area relevant to forensic psychology. The data may be collected in a forensic setting or be concerned with how people within the general population respond to issues of a forensic nature. Research into basic psychological processes (e.g., conceptual development, attitude change, social decision-making) is appropriate, provided the forensic significance of the findings is clearly indicated. Other thesis topics may address innovative approaches to forensic investigation, individual assessment, strategies for interviewing and counselling, skills training, program evaluation, and policy formulation.

Design

A wide variety of research strategies may be employed to meet the specific scientific aims of the project. Common strategies include experimental, quasi-experimental and correlational designs. The research may be theory-driven or exploratory, but in the latter case it is still necessary to spell out the theoretical context and indicate the significance of various potential outcomes. Qualitative data may be generated in some projects, requiring specific strategies (e.g., content analysis) to condense and organise the results and to allow conclusions to be drawn. Often quantitative measures may be extracted from qualitative data (e.g., ratings by judges), which facilitate analysis.

Single case designs and case series would normally be presented as part of a larger study in order to illustrate a particular issue. Theoretical or historical analyses are generally not appropriate since the intention of the project is to provide experience in the practicalities of carrying out a research or evaluation project in an applied area. Research based on existing data sets may be permitted where a case can be made that 1) the question of interest is best addressed by existing data, and 2) other aspects of the research process (e.g., theoretical analysis, data analysis) can be expanded to compensate for the absence of any contribution to the procedure and data collection. In all cases, care should be taken to ensure that there is sufficient scope in the project to satisfy thesis requirements. For example, mere norming of a psychological test would not constitute a thesis.

Participants

Participants (aka “subjects”) may be drawn from a variety of forensic settings, other special populations (e.g., schools), the general community, or from the Psychology 1 participant pool. Access to sufficient participants from the desired population within the time frame of the project is crucial to its viability. The School cannot guarantee access to the targeted population, although assistance will be given if possible to students who wish to collect data from specialised groups of participants.

Investigators

Often it is beneficial for a research project to be conducted in collaboration with other researchers. Firstly, it may be possible to work within an ongoing project, either within or outside of the School. While this arrangement may reduce the scope for determining the aims of the project, and to some extent the design and procedure employed, these costs may be offset by other benefits such as access to participants or payment of a salary. In most instances it should be possible to play a role in determining some aspects of design and implementation, and a primary role in analysis. Where aspects of the design have been constrained, it is important to spell these out in the thesis, provide a critical analysis of the design, and consider alternative approaches that might have been used.

A second example of collaborative research involves contracting to conduct a project commissioned or requested by some organisation. The benefits of such an arrangement are similar to those described above, but there is generally greater scope in determining the research strategy to meet the specified aims.

Finally, it may be advantageous in some projects for the research to be carried out by a small group (e.g., 2-3) of Masters students. This arrangement is particularly useful where a great deal of data collection and analysis is involved. Design and implementation of the project is shared, but each student writes an independent thesis.

Supervision

Each project has a primary supervisor and a co-supervisor, who liaise with the Masters Committee. The supervisor and co-supervisor are normally members of the academic staff of the School. However, one (but not both) may be a person with an academic or research position in another University unit (e.g., Law School). In many projects, particularly those conducted in forensic agencies external to the University, another person may have a major role in overseeing the design and conduct of the research. In such cases there should be close cooperation between the person concerned and the supervisor. The academic supervisor, however, is entirely responsible for supervision at the stage of analysis of results and writing of the thesis.

The completed thesis is marked by two members of the academic staff of the School. The supervisor is not involved in marking the thesis.

Statistical consultation

The supervisor has primary responsibility for advising on research design and data analysis. However, a supervisor who feels that additional advice is necessary can organise a meeting with an appropriate statistical consultant. Both the supervisor and student should attend such a meeting.

Resources

Computing: The Masters computer lab is located in Mathews Room 1101. Additional computers and printing facilities are in Mathews Rooms 209, 209A, 422 as well as on Level 8. Students are given their own Psychology account and are assigned a print quota. Students have access 24 hours a day/7days a week to these facilities.

In addition there are 3 bookable labs (907, 1002 and 1022) which are available to conduct research.

Computer labs are booked through Camilla Leung (c.y.leung@unsw.edu.au).

Equipment: Students may use School equipment available for loan from the Technical Support Unit in Mathews Room 148 (e.g., tape recorders, slide projectors), tests available from the Test Library in Mathews Room 803, and equipment under the control of their supervisor.

Consumables: Normally, photocopying and other consumables are paid for by the student or by other parties involved in the project.

Ethical issues

All research must comply with University ethical standards, no matter what the source of your participants. For all research you must go to

<http://www.psy.unsw.edu.au/research/resources/researchparticipation.html>

Details on ethics approval are available here including the application form. You must have an approved and signed copy of the application form back from the Head of School before you can commence your research. In addition to School approval, you may need approval from other bodies. This will be so, for example, if your research is supported by ARC or NHMRC funds. Your supervisor will have details.

In the case of collaborative research, it is important to clarify in advance the nature of the research relationship – for example, the issue of “ownership” of the project and of the data. In some cases it may be appropriate to spell out these issues in writing.

Publications

The thesis is to be presented as a **journal article suitable for publication in a specific journal** and students are encouraged to submit their research for publication in that journal and to present the research at relevant conferences. Order of authorship should be determined by the degree of contribution to the final product, including design, data collection, analysis and writing of the manuscript.

Timetable

Students, whether part-time or full-time, are normally required to enrol in PSYC7413 Research Thesis (Forensic) 1 (Semester 1) and PSYC7414 Research Thesis (Forensic) 2 (Semester 2) and submit the thesis by the end of Semester 2 of that year.

The timetable for research projects is outlined below. Applications for extensions will only be considered by the Masters Committee (the Program Director) when:

1. the application is in writing,
2. the delay is due to circumstances beyond your control (e.g., illness, equipment breakdown, constraints on collaborative research),
3. the circumstances are documented (medical certificate, statement by supervisor), and
4. the circumstances are notified as soon as they arise.

It is in your interest to control the scope of the project so as to be able to meet the research deadlines as well as other commitments (e.g., coursework, field placements).

Stage 1 2010

November 22: Complete form detailing preferences for topics and supervisors and return it to the Psychology General Office. The School attempts to achieve an equitable distribution of staff thesis supervision loads across Fourth Year, and Clinical and Forensic Masters. In order to achieve this it will not usually be possible for all students to receive their first preference.

December-February: In December the School will write to you advising of supervision and co-supervision arrangements. Liaise closely with your supervisor in designing the project, including finalising the topic, determining relevant theoretical background, designing the procedure, and sourcing of participants. Write a research proposal (8-10 pages), including a critical review of the relevant literature, the specific questions of interest, the procedure to be used, and the proposed analysis.

Stage 2 2011

April 1: Submit a research proposal to the Masters Committee via the Psychology General Office (Mathews Building Room 1011). Following approval of the proposal (the School will write to you in late April), you will need to arrange a panel meeting with your supervisor and co-supervisor, and any other parties involved in the research, to discuss the proposal. Finalise the procedure, and start work on the project.

Late June: You should check in with your supervisor in June (if you are not already in regular contact) to ensure that progress is satisfactory. If your supervisor is concerned that progress is unsatisfactory, your project will be reviewed by the Program Director and, in consultation with your supervisor and co-supervisor, a course of action will be decided to ensure completion of your project within the designated time. A second panel meeting can be arranged at this time to discuss progress and deal with any problems that may have arisen if you or your supervisor believe this would be of benefit. By this time the literature review should be completed, data collection is well underway, and a draft of the Method section is complete.

Early September: Data collection should be completed, a draft of the Introduction written, and analysis commenced.

Early October: Final draft of thesis should be available for your supervisor.

October 21: Thesis submitted.

Preparing your thesis

1. The thesis required is a journal article suitable for submission to a specific refereed journal. The journal should be a well-respected journal publishing standard-length articles. In your proposal you should indicate which journal you have in mind and this should be approved by your supervisor.

After you have determined the topic of your thesis and the appropriate journal you should obtain a copy of the "Instructions for Authors" for that journal. Often such instructions are printed in each copy of the journal, but sometimes a separate document must be obtained from the journal publisher. For many journals the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed. 2009) will be your bible in the preparation of the manuscript. See <http://apastyle.org/> for further details.

The length of the thesis should be approximately 7,500 words (including abstract but excluding references and appendices). Markers will give credit for clean and concise writing.

Copies of recent Masters theses written as a journal article are available from the School Test Library (Mathews Building Room 803). Given that your Fourth Year Honours thesis will normally have been written in the conventional format for an empirical dissertation you are advised to look at submitted Masters theses to see what is required.

2. Two copies of the thesis should be submitted in the standard covers supplied by the School. This is arranged through the Psychology General Office. You must also submit an e-copy of the thesis as well as the data collected in either SPSS or Excel to your supervisor, and an e-copy of the thesis only to the Test Librarian (Heather Proudfoot). After marking, one copy is retained by the supervisor while the second is available to be collected by you. You should make as many additional copies as you may need for your own purposes. For example, any organisation or individual who was particularly helpful to you in your research may appreciate receiving a copy of the thesis.
3. The only way in which your submitted thesis should be different from a manuscript which you would submit for publication in your selected journal is in the following:
 - You should include a title page indicating that what follows is a thesis submitted for your degree.
 - You should then include the **Certificate of Originality** shown below.
 - You may include figures, tables etc either (a) in the main body of the text rather than at the end of the document, or (b) at the end of the text as per a normal journal submission.
 - You may also include a separate Acknowledgments page if you wish. Long and sentimental tributes should be avoided, but you may feel that you wish to include acknowledgments which are slightly longer than those normally given within the manuscript, although the latter should be included as appropriate.
 - Figures and tables may be inserted into the text or may be supplied on separate pages which are appended to the manuscript.

Apart from these differences, the thesis should be exactly as required for the top copy of the manuscript to be submitted to the journal you have chosen.

- **As with any journal submission, you should include a covering letter to the editor of the journal.**

Certificate of originality

The following statement signed by the student should be included on a separate page between the title and acknowledgment pages:

I declare that:

This assessment item is entirely my own original work, except where I have acknowledged use of source material such as books, journal articles, other published material, the Internet, and the work of other student/s or any other person/s. This assessment item has not been submitted for assessment for academic credit in this, or any other course, at UNSW or elsewhere.

I understand that:

The assessor of this assessment item may, for the purpose of assessing this item, reproduce this assessment item and provide a copy to another member of the University. The assessor may communicate a copy of this assessment item to a plagiarism checking service (which may then retain a copy of the assessment item on its database for the purpose of future plagiarism checking).

Signature _____ Student's Name _____

Assessment

Once marked you will receive a percentage mark and corresponding grade for your thesis. It contributes 25 percent to the overall grading for the Master of Psychology (Forensic) degree.