



Dissertation Handbook 2023/24

MSc Strategic Communication & Public Relations (Joint Degree)

Module code: PREPP14 Dissertation

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The information in this Handbook might change as/when required. Students will be notified over email and issued a new Dissertation Handbook in case any changes occur.

Introduction

The dissertation element of the course gives you the opportunity to design independently your own academic research project in an area of your own interest. A dissertation requires independent learning and you are responsible for the progression of your work. This Handbook is prepared to help you plan your work successfully.

Since public relations and strategic communication is an interdisciplinary subject, research can be approached from a variety of perspectives. For example, literature in organisational communication and organisational behaviour is relevant to issues of corporate culture; literature on ethics key to corporate social responsibility; media and journalism studies are relevant to studying interactions between public relations and the media; feminism literature is key to gender in public relations and marketing is relevant to consumer public relations and sponsorship. However, all students should bear in mind that one of the key criteria is **the relevance of your study to public relations and strategic communication theory and practice**, which must be made explicit throughout the dissertation. You can tackle a practical, empirical study or a literature-based theoretical subject focused on analysis and argument. Your supervisor will help you to hone your project into an acceptable format, but you will need to spend considerable time on your own, thinking about how best to tackle your chosen topic.

It is really important that you are genuinely interested in your own project; a dissertation is *not* a rather long essay but a project that you will need to eat, sleep and breathe for a few months.

The dissertation requires considerable time and commitment. You are recommended **not** to embark on a work-placement or to begin employment while attempting the dissertation unless it is connected to the research project (e.g. participant observation, action research, data gathering).

The dissertation requires you to demonstrate **academic expertise**: that is, the ability to use libraries, archives and journals, and to track down obscure sources where required. It requires you to be research **capable to contribute to the body of knowledge, not only advancement of practice**. You are also expected to understand theories of knowledge that inform the various methodological approaches and to interpret these in terms of your research. Applied research exploring practice issues can be very rewarding, but work-based projects are usually not suitable for an academic dissertation (except when agreed with your supervisor in collaboration with a non-academic partner) as they tend to be focused on technique and strategic advice rather than contribution to the body of knowledge, and timelines are often unsuitable.

You can choose to complete your dissertation at the University of Stirling (UoS) or

Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF). Depending on the institution you choose, your dissertation process, supervisory arrangements and deadlines might differ slightly. These differences are detailed in this document and will be communicated to you throughout the dissertation period. However, the dissertation procedure, requirements, guidelines, ethics approval process, supervision, marking criteria and the final due date are the same at both institutions.

Your dissertation is due on **16 September 2024**, regardless of whether you undertake it at UoS or UPF. Students completing their dissertations at UPF will also **have to present their dissertations at a public defence on 16 July 2024**, which is a formal requirement for MSc dissertations in Spain. At UoS, there is no public defence.

Stirling students will normally start with their dissertations in May. At UPF, the process might start earlier due to the earlier draft dissertation deadline for public defence and UPF closure in August for the summer break (see the *Work schedule* section below for details).

Dissertation aims and objectives

Aim

To demonstrate an understanding of research procedures and to implement these in a dissertation on theory and/or practice relevant to public relations and strategic communication.

Objectives

Within the dissertation students should:

- Specify and justify a particular approach and reveal underlying assumptions behind that approach. These may include positivist/functionalist, phenomenological/interpretive approaches or philosophical and historical approaches.
- Specify and justify the research methods chosen and implemented. Techniques may include a range of qualitative and quantitative methods for data gathering (e.g. survey, interviews, focus groups etc.) and data analysis (e.g., statistical analysis, thematic analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis etc.).
- Present a critical, coherent and analytical piece of writing.
- Demonstrate scholarship and sensitivity in handling sources and data. Dissertations should cite original rather than secondary sources wherever possible. Data should be clearly presented and subject to critical analysis.

Supervision and the dissertation contract

The supervisor's role is to assist in the development of a suitable project and methodology.

They will:

- Agree with you a timetable for delivery of draft chapters.
- Agree with you on most suitable points of contact (e.g. meetings, Skype, MS Teams, online sessions, email, phone).
- Point you in the direction of useful sources and references.
- Normally review and give feedback once to each chapter and once to the dissertation as a whole.
- Give advice on structure and content within ten days of receiving a draft (except when they are on holiday or absent at conferences).
- Review initial drafts (including research instruments, e.g. questionnaires, interview guides) and critique them.
- Review raw data, e.g. SPSS files, transcribed interviews, focus groups and other forms of data if appropriate.
- Review early workings of analysis.

A supervisor will not:

- Give you a topic or tell you what to research.
- Edit or rewrite your work.
- Do your data analysis.
- Re-read more than one draft version of each chapter and one version of your full draft dissertation unless agreed otherwise.

You can help your supervisor to help you by:

- Writing to deadlines.
- Keeping your supervisor informed about your progress and letting them know if you are encountering difficulties.
- Always submitting your best work to your supervisor, even if the material is 'in draft' – your supervisor may return work to you that is not properly checked for spelling and grammar or is not properly structured or referenced.
- Being properly prepared for each supervision session by having a clear idea of the ground you want to cover and the questions you want to ask (e.g. agenda).
- Not expecting your supervisor to correct spelling and grammatical mistakes or to do proof-reading.
- Not emailing large quantities of text just days before a deadline with a request for comments and critique the next day!

Work schedule

It is your responsibility to produce a workable schedule for your dissertation. This should be discussed and agreed with your supervisor at the first meeting.

Important points for consideration:

- Submission deadline is **Monday, 16 September 2024** at UoS and UPF;
- The submission deadline for the first full draft of your dissertation with all the chapters as completed as possible will be before the public defence at UPF (normally at the end of June or early July) and at the beginning/mid-August at UoS. Please note that the definite deadline for the first full draft will be confirmed by your supervisor and/or Programme Director.
- **Drafts will not be accepted and commented on after the deadline** – you should receive your feedback at a public defence at UPF and approximately two weeks before the submission date at UoS and will then need time to finalise your draft for submission.
- **Public defence (UPF only):** your dissertation project **must** be publicly defended in front of the Faculty Committee, which consists of three faculty members. The public defences will take place on 16 July 2024. The purpose of the defence is to demonstrate your ability, intellectual maturity and capacity to present original research work conducted under the guidance of a supervisor.
- **All the dissertations, regardless if they are undertaken at UoS or UPF, need to go through the University of Stirling's ethics approval procedure and be approved by the General University Ethics Panel (GUEP).** This can take quite a bit of time and you will need to plan your ethics application and submission accordingly to avoid unnecessary delay to your research progress and stress. Please see the *Ethics procedure* section below for details.
- Please keep in mind that you should allocate **at least one third of your time** to data gathering and analysis. Do not procrastinate and start with your data collection/generation as soon as possible after you receive your ethics approval.
- Draw up a clear work plan and schedule for all the different tasks you have to do – tackling a dissertation entails quite a lot of administrative work and project management is an important transferable skill that you will gain from the process in addition to the analytical and critical thinking skills.
- **Students undertaking their dissertation at UoS:** Please ensure that you record dissertation supervision meetings on Canvas (there is a link in the PREPP14 Dissertation module page under Assignments → Supervisory Engagement Point). It is good practice to record key issues discussed and agreed in supervisory meetings, action points and deadlines for completion of key tasks associated with the dissertation. The Dissertation engagement point pro-forma can be found in the Appendix 2 and on Canvas (the Learning and Teaching page).

The importance of working closely with your supervisor and not delaying the start of your empirical data-gathering cannot be overemphasised. 12,000 words may look like a few assignments, but it is an entirely different process and you need all the time you can get.

Timetable of Events¹

	UPF	UoS
Idea generation and topic selection	Semester 1 /MMAPP12 & response to feedback	Semester 1 /MMAPP12 & response to feedback
Revision of Research Proposals (if deemed necessary)	April 2024	April 2024
Submission of proposals Course team reviews proposals and allocates supervisors <i>If you would like to discuss your dissertation ideas prior to allocation of supervisors, you should contact your Programme Directors, who will be happy to arrange a meeting with you.</i>	Communicated by UPF	1 May 2024
Dissertation workshop	5 March 2024	16 May 2024
Dissertation begins	April 2024	w/c 13 May 2024
Finalised research proposal & first supervisory meeting <i>Students to organise initial meeting with their supervisor as soon as the supervision allocation is announced and agree a schedule of deadlines; ways in which contact will be maintained and discuss questions arising from research proposals.</i>	Mid-/late April 2024	Mid-/late May 2024
Submit ethics application	May/mid-June 2024	Early/mid-June 2024
Students to make contact with potential participants, host organisations, establish samples, and confirm to supervisor that access is to be granted and that project is feasible.	May/June 2024	June 2024
Field work/empirical research	June 2024	June/July 2024
Draft submission	30 June 2024	August 2024 (TBC by your supervisor)
Public defence	16 July 2024	N/A

¹ The timetable is indicative and is designed to help you with planning your project. The final timetable depends on the arrangements you have with your supervisor and the nature of your project. You will be informed via Canvas and your Stirling and UPF university emails of any central changes to the key dates.

Summer break at UPF (please note that UPF will be closed during the break and staff will be on leave)	1 August – 26 August 2024	N/A
Final Submission	16 September 2024	16 September 2024

Key considerations in selecting a topic

- Avoid very general and broad subjects which cannot be handled in sufficient depth in 12,000 words and in a relatively short period of time.
- Be sure that you are clear about the relevance of your subject to public relations and strategic communication.
- Consider what source materials are available. If very little has been written on your topic you may be able to go to complementary studies for frameworks and theories relevant to your topic (for example in the fields of media, journalism, advertising, management, organisational studies, feminism, cultural studies, psychology, politics, persuasion, strategic management etc.) in order to develop a theoretical framework or hypothesis for your own research. You are very likely to have to source other disciplines in order to understand properly the public relations context you are researching, for example, tourism (if tourism public relations is the topic); management (if the role of public relations in organisational strategic development is the topic); communication and media studies (if journalism-public relations relationship is the focus); museum studies (if your question explores public relations in arts); sport studies (if sports public relations is the topic); feminism (if you are researching gender in public relations) etc.
- Give some consideration to the quality and significance of existing literature, e.g., a newspaper article or a blog may contain some interesting ideas but is based on unsubstantiated opinion; a journal article will be more analytical or based on specific empirical studies, peer reviewed and therefore carry greater weight. You will need to use your judgement to assess the relative significance of these different sources and to justify their importance and the extent to which you have relied on them. You will also need to consider how research in the subject area has changed and developed and the reasons for these changes.
- Give some consideration to the approach, methods and assumptions of previous research in the area – are you building on a particular school of thought or attempting to synthesise/challenge existing literature to develop a new approach, which could be tested via an empirical pilot study or quantitative research?

Work-related projects

It is unlikely that a piece of work for an employer or work placement supervisor will exactly fit the requirements of the dissertation either in scope or presentation, unless the project is agreed and approved by your supervisor in collaboration with the professional practice or a non-academic partner (for example, in the framework of already established knowledge transfer partnerships). Either way, if you decide to tackle a work-related project, you need to be sure that the research can be conducted within the time available and that there is no possibility that the project will be cancelled or postponed leaving you without a project or empirical evidence. It is worth discussing with the non-academic partner/your employer whether there are particular areas they wish researched. However, you will need to bear in mind that non-academic partners and employers may not have a good understanding of the requirements for a dissertation and may come up either with something very general or with something, which in itself would not comprise a dissertation. You may need to explore a few possibilities before choosing an area for research. **It is vitally important that a work-related project is fully scoped and agreed with both your dissertation supervisor and the non-academic partner concerned.**

It is customary and courteous for students to offer non-academic partners/employers a copy of their dissertation if it is in a relevant area and particularly where the organisation has offered research facilities (e.g. by allowing you to conduct a communications audit, access their premises or giving you access to data or participants). However, this does not mean that the non-academic partner/employer can in any way control what is written in the dissertation or the way in which it is written.

You are advised not to attempt a work-placement or to begin employment while researching and writing up your dissertation unless it is connected to the research project (e.g., participant observation, data gathering).

Ethics approval procedure

Please keep in mind that **all** dissertations, regardless if they are undertaken at UPF or UoS, need to comply with the University of Stirling's ethics regulatory process and be approved by the [General University Ethics Panel \(GUEP\)](#). **Failure to obtain ethics approval before commencing your research will result in deduction of marks for understanding ethics in MSc research.**

The procedure is as follows:

1. **You need to complete the online application on the [Ethics Review Manager \(ERM\) system](#) in collaboration with your supervisor. You can access the system by clicking on the link above or through your University Portal ('Apply for Ethics' link).**

The form needs to outline your research plans clearly and transparently and be fully completed. Quite a few applications get rejected, because students do not describe their research comprehensively or clearly enough, inadequately address the ethical issues and procedures involved in their research or fail to submit required supplementary forms for certain types of research (e.g., Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, Fieldwork Risk Assessment). Please put your supervisor's name and email in the 'Supervisor contact details' section. Please also make sure you **share the form with them and give them 'Read', 'Write' and 'Share' credentials**. This is necessary, so they can assist you with completing the application and process your approval.

For students completing their dissertations at UPF: Please note that UPF staff currently does not have access to the ERM, so they cannot be put in the system as your supervisors, nor can they view your application in the system. Instead, you need to insert contact details of the Stirling Dissertation Module Coordinator (Dr Alenka Jelen) who acts as your supervisor in the ERM and give her 'Read', 'Write' and 'Share' credentials. While completing the form, you will need to do it synchronously with your UPF supervisor or print/share the pdf report with them (you can create the report by using 'View as PDF' function in the left-hand menu in the ERM). Once you complete the form together with your UPF supervisor, you need to request the signature from your supervisor aka Dissertation Module Coordinator. The Module Coordinator will review and coordinate the approval of your application with your UPF supervisor.

2. If your research involves live participants (e.g. online surveys, interviews, focus groups, ethnography etc.), you will need to prepare Participant Information Sheet and Participant Consent Form and upload them at the end of ethics application form. Please note that you must complete Risk Assessment form if you are planning to do any type of fieldwork away from campus. The forms, guidance and templates can be found on [GUEP website](#) (scroll down to the 'Principles, guidance and forms' section) and on Canvas (see the Learning and Teaching pages). Prepare these additional forms in consultation with your supervisor.
3. Once you complete your application in collaboration with your supervisor, please request your supervisor's signature and enter their email in the relevant section. Your supervisor and a CMC ethics reviewer will then review and approve your application.
4. Once you receive the approval letter from GUEP, you can proceed with your empirical research.

Please keep in mind that the ethics approval procedure can take approximately **two weeks or longer in case your application needs to be revised or gets rejected**. That is why it is very important that you submit the application and relevant forms at your earliest convenience (soon after the first meeting with your supervisor or as soon as

you determine your methodological approach) to avoid any delays in your research process and stress associated with it. **You are not allowed to do any empirical research or fieldwork until your ethics application is approved, even if your research does not include people.**

Research approaches

Your dissertation must clearly indicate the research approach taken, its underlying assumptions and explain why this is appropriate. You should select appropriate methodology and supply referenced explanations and justifications as well as describing research protocols and instruments and structure of the dissertation.

The methodology chapter should not read like an essay on methodology in general, but a clear and succinct explanation (informed by relevant methodology literature) of what you did, how you did it and why you did it. You need to relate ideas about methodology to your particular project. Nevertheless, you should still explain and justify the research paradigm you have chosen and the reasons why you chose it. Remember, the nature of your research question determines a research paradigm and the research paradigm offers a range of research methods and techniques. The dissertation should therefore flow smoothly and logically from the question(s), theses or hypotheses. Choosing methods and techniques (e.g. survey) without clearly defined research questions or hypotheses will lead to problems because you have 'put the cart before the horse'.

Likewise, be sure that you fully understand the possible research paradigms, approaches, methods and techniques, and their strengths and limitations. It is very common for public relations students to express a desire to do, for example, a 'case study' without fully understanding the parameters or demands of this approach. Make sure that you do not fall into this category and that you **read at least one book** on, for example, case studies **before** your first supervision meeting.

Dissertation structure

Public relations dissertations on our programme normally undertake empirical research (unless agreed with your supervisor that you will tackle a literature-based theoretical subject focused on analysis and argument). You should consult appropriate methodology books in deciding the structure of your dissertation. In particular, see:

- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J.D. (2018) *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th ed). Los Angeles: Sage.

- Daymon, C. & Holloway, I. (2011). *Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations & Marketing Communication* (2nd ed). London: Routledge.

There are also several books and articles on public relations paradigms and the use of research methods in strategic communication and public relations, and a number of these are listed in your Research Methods module and on your module Reading List (see Canvas for details).

The outline of the dissertation structure below is intended to show the type of approach which might be adopted for an empirical dissertation. The chapters and their elements should serve as **guidelines**, not 'boxes to be ticked' and rigidly followed; you have to work out and justify what is appropriate in your project, paying a special attention to logical and coherent structure of your work. Very inductive or ethnographic studies, for example, may legitimately place their literature review towards the end of their dissertation. However, you are recommended to discuss the structure and content of your work with your supervisor.

Dissertation usually consists of the following chapters:

1 Introduction

The introductory chapter explains what the research topic is and why it is of interest to the field of public relations and strategic communication. The scope and boundaries of the research and the research setting in which the study will be conducted are outlined.

In your introduction, you should give a clear account of the research problem that you set out to investigate, making sure that you indicate key theoretical and empirical issues involved. The purpose and research question(s) should be clearly articulated. You should also explain the research focus and how you have interpreted the research questions. If you have changed your research aims and objectives during the course of your study, then these changes should be described and justified and you should make a clear statement about the problem that you finally tackled. Outline your methodological approach to your study. Your literature is not reviewed here, but you should outline theoretical framework and the scope of the literature reviewed.

The introduction should include:

- Clearly summarised research purpose placed within the domain of public relations and strategic communication theory and practice.
- Outline of the research setting, organisation, cultural and national background.
- Justification of the relevance of research topic to public relations theory and practice.

Some students find this a difficult chapter to write, most have to re-write it more than

once before it proves satisfactory. You may find it easier to write it when you are nearer the end of the project than at the beginning. Avoid rambling about the project as a whole. Keep the introduction focused and concise.

2 Literature Review

QUANTITATIVE

Function of a Literature Review

In quantitative research, the literature provides direction for the development of research questions and hypotheses to be tested empirically. It serves as a basis for comparison once the empirical work has been completed and the data analysed. The literature is used deductively as a framework for research questions or hypotheses. By reviewing fundamental theory and analysing key concepts (variables) the literature review provides both the background and the content of the remainder of the study.

QUALITATIVE

Function of a Literature Review

In qualitative research, the literature review is used inductively, that is to say, it is not used as a basis from which particular research questions are generated but as a background discussion on key concepts, critical theories, and historical material. There is considerably more variance in both the scope and the position of the literature review in the dissertation as a whole.

The purpose of the literature review in qualitative research, if it is at the beginning of the dissertation, is to frame the topic. You should aim to present to the reader a road map to the various fields and themes that bear upon your research question. At the end of the research, the author should compare and contrast their findings with the literature.

However, if a case study or ethnographic piece of research is being conducted, then literature may be used more fully at the end as a tool to help interpretation once the researcher has identified patterns, concepts or categories in their research. The final placement of the literature review should be discussed with your supervisor.

You should be selective and structure this section to give a clear overview of the main types of literature available in this field, remembering to explain throughout why the literature is relevant to your study. **The literature review is not a catalogue, detailed list or even a descriptive summary of sources; neither is it an essay about your research idea supported by references. The literature review is an overall critical review of main themes in various fields relevant to your project. It outlines theoretical framework and**

highlights what has and has not been written or researched in your area of interest. It should also demonstrate to the reader that your project is original. You may choose to organise your review by discipline, theme, or historical chronology.

The literature review should include²:

- An introduction, which clearly indicates the aims of the review and the reasons for the structure you have chosen.
- Position your research within the main public relations paradigms and approaches (systems/excellence paradigm; critical; feminist; communication; rhetorical etc.).
- Clear definitions of key concepts (variables in quantitative projects) to be explored.
- A discussion of the theoretical perspectives of previous authors in your field or related fields.
- A summary of the main empirical findings of previous research and other relevant data. You should put emphasis on ideas, empirical findings and conclusions, which are important for your dissertation, including those you challenge and reject and those which have proved to be useful to you in developing your own ideas and which have influenced you and your study.
- Your own criticisms of other writers' assumptions, perspectives and arguments which brings out the reasons for the direction of your own research.
- Concluding summary of your reasons for the structure and direction of your own research.

3 Methodology

The methodology chapter outlines your epistemological position and the precise way in which the research has been conducted. This may include the selection of methodology, chosen method(s) and their implications, sampling strategy, a number of participants/materials, reasons for their inclusion, the way the data has been collected/generated and the method used to systematically explore or analyse data. The key to this chapter is to illustrate a systematic and rigorous way in which data was acquired and analysed so that if anyone would wish to replicate or conduct a similar study, they could follow your steps exactly. You should not engage in a detailed description of methods in general, but you need to explain exactly how and why the methods were applied to your research and what kind of implications this has for the findings of your study.

You need to make references to research literature to demonstrate awareness and understanding of appropriate methodological approach and research methods for your topic. There are many specialist texts on research methodology, methods and techniques

² Please note these bullet points serve as guidelines of what should ideally be included in your literature review and not as compulsory list of steps to be rigidly followed in the listed order. Your literature review needs to be – above all – coherent, well-argued and logically structured.

and you will need to read the ones relevant to your research approach to support your dissertation methodology. **The methodology chapter provides a well-justified and theoretically informed account of your research process and should, as such, be written in the past tense.**

This section should include³:

- Discussion and justification of research focus/problem.
- Main research question and supplementary questions (qualitative and quantitative research) or hypotheses (quantitative research) with their explanation and justification.
- Epistemological underpinnings of your methodological position.
- Outline of the research strategy (overall approach) chosen to tackle the research problem which should be clearly linked to a research paradigm (quantitative, qualitative or mixed method; if qualitative, which approach e.g. case study, feminist approach). Please make sure that the chosen approach is logically connected to the research questions or hypotheses.
- A detailed account and justification for the methods adopted.
- Explanation and justification of data collection/generation process and instruments (e.g. sampling strategy; survey, coding sheet or interview guide design; participant observation; selection and use of texts or documents etc.).
- Processes of recording and analysing data. This section may be usefully linked with appendices, in which you include support materials, for example, annotated transcripts to show how coding was carried out, lists of codes etc.
- A clear outline of the nature of data analysis undertaken, e.g., correlation, causal, significance, etc. for quantitative and, e.g., grounded theory approach, theoretical coding, thematic analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis etc. for qualitative research.
- A reflexive account of the process of research, including challenges and problems and the way in which you tackled these, your positionality and its influence on research and the relationship between researcher and research(ed). This may include a reflection on how your situation affected your research and the adjustments you have made (these can also be in the introduction and conclusion as appropriate).
- Discussion of ethical issues, including in research that does not involve humans, with appended GUEP approval letter/Ethics Approval Form, Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form etc. if applicable. **A failure to obtain GUEP's approval and/or provide relevant forms will result in deduction of marks.**

³ Please note these bullet points serve as guidelines of what should ideally be included in your methodology chapter and not as compulsory list of steps to be rigidly followed in the listed order.

- Issues relating to scientific criteria of reliability, validity and generalisation (please keep in mind that these criteria have different meanings in quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods traditions) and discussion of strengths, weaknesses and limitations of your research approach.

All research instruments (e.g. questionnaires, coding sheets, interview guides) should be appended. You should note, however, that e.g. full transcripts of interviews or datasets appended on their own are of little or no value; it is your analysis of the interviews or data that is important. It is helpful, therefore, to append one annotated transcript to give an example of how you coded and went about analysing such data. You should also append coding schemes, list of codes/concepts, models, tables etc. to show how you have analysed and reduced your data.

4 Findings

Showing your data is in many ways the most important and challenging part of your dissertation. This is also where your own creativity and intelligence come into play. Reviewing literature and choosing your methodology are preparatory steps; displaying your data and making use of it is the core of your dissertation. By the time you come to do this, you may be quite tired having worked solidly at your research for a considerable time. Don't let this make you forget what is really important in your dissertation. **Make sure that you devote enough time, dissertation space and energy (at least one third) to data gathering, analysis and writing up your findings.**

You need to present your findings in a clear and accessible way. Spend some time thinking about the ordering of this section. You need a clear, logical structure which makes your empirical findings accessible to the reader and which enhances your argument. You need to explain to the reader why you are selecting and emphasising some findings. Do not forget to **comment** on data, **discuss** findings and **relate them to the reviewed literature and theory in your literature review chapter**. It is important to go beyond description of results, move to higher levels of abstraction and clearly outline the main patterns in your data and research. Explain what you think is important and why do you think it is important.

Integrate various sources of data (e.g. surveys, interviews, organisational promotional literature, newspaper articles) together with concepts drawn from academic literature in order to develop your ideas and to present a coherent and convincing argument that addresses your research questions or hypotheses.

Take care to present the data so that the reader gets an accurate picture of what you found out. The presentation should be exhaustive (no gaps), easy to follow, and

purposeful (framed by your aims, hypotheses and/or research questions). It may be helpful to visualise your data, include diagrams, tables, models and in some cases illustrations or photographs, depending on the nature of the study.

Take into consideration:

- The general theoretical perspective that you are adopting.
- The specific assumptions, arguments and empirical materials you need to present.

And/or refer back to:

- A particular model/conceptual scheme/theoretical framework/frame of analysis that you are using/developing.
- The range and volume of data which you have to present, e.g., ways of summarising routine data and findings (tables, charts, diagrams, infographics etc.) and of highlighting significant data.
- The use of secondary sources to put your primary sources in context.
- Any obvious weaknesses/lacunae in your own material.

5 Discussion of practical implications/applications of research

This section is often integrated in your findings chapter (particularly in qualitative research), but you might also want to keep it separate.

Decide whether you wish to make specific recommendations, or just draw out the general implications of your work. Make clear the premises on which you base your discussion/recommendations. Be explicit about the types of context/situations for which your findings and conclusions are relevant, and the limits beyond which they do not or may not apply.

6 Conclusions and implications

State what you have been able to establish during the course of your work. What answers do you have for your research questions? What does your work mean? Relate your work and its conclusions to previous literature and research - does your research back up these or refute them? Indicate fruitful areas of future research but make it clear where your recommendations are based on imaginative or contemplative speculation. Be careful to avoid raising new issues in relation to your own work that might leave the examiners and readers wondering why you did not tackle them in your previous chapters.

Your final chapter should:

- Sum up the main findings of your project.
- Draw out the broader implications – what do all the findings mean?
- Explain how your research relates to existing public relations and strategic communication theories and concepts.
- Explain how your research relates to public relations and strategic communication practice.

Overall:

Make sure that you leave enough time at the end of the dissertation process to check over your work and present it in the best possible way. 'Presentation' in this context is not about 'glossy' layout or typefaces, but about clearly structured and well-planned chapters, which have introductions and conclusions and lead the reader seamlessly through the document. Once you have had your final feedback from your supervisor (together with comments from the Public Defence Committee at UPF), you will have around two to three weeks to finalise your draft (and arrange for printing and binding at UPF) before submission.

Submission and presentation of dissertation

- 1 **At UPF, dissertations should be submitted by 16 September 2024.** An electronic copy in PDF format must be emailed to master.dcom@upf.edu and four hard copies must be submitted to the Department Secretary's Office. Dissertations should be presented on A4 paper, typed and double-spaced on one side of the paper only. The minimum margin requirements are 4cm left hand margin and 2cm right hand margin. The recommended type-size is 12pt. A type face suitable for a book or a long document should be selected; *sans serif* faces should be avoided.

More details on submission and presentation of your dissertation at UPF are available [here](#).

At UoS, dissertations should be submitted by 16 September 2023 by noon. An electronic copy saved as a Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) or PDF (.pdf) document must be submitted via the digital assessment submission facility in Canvas (PREPP14 Dissertation module) or in case of technical difficulties emailed to the CMC Postgraduate Office (FAH-CMCPG@stir.ac.uk). Dissertations should be double-spaced. The recommended type-size is 12pt. A type face suitable for a book or a long document should be selected; sans serif faces should be avoided.

PLEASE NOTE: Neither the Programme Director nor your supervisor have the authority to alter the final submission date without an approved extension. If you require an extension, you need to apply through Canvas (at UoS) or contact master.dcom@upf.edu at UPF. We can normally grant extension requests for up to 14 days for dissertations, providing there is a justifiable reason for it (e.g. medical circumstances, compassionate circumstances or unavoidable detention elsewhere). For longer extensions, you will need to apply for extenuating circumstances (see the Stirling's [Assessment policy and procedure](#) for details).

- 2 **Dissertations should not exceed 12,000 words and will be returned if they exceed this limit.** This number **excludes** abstract and keywords, acknowledgements, references, tables, diagrams, graphs and appendices. Please keep in mind that these should not serve as a 'dumping area' for the text that does not fit in the word count, but merely as a supplementary text illustrating and supporting your main arguments made in the dissertation.
- 3 Provide an exact **word count** for the whole dissertation in the Table of Contents.
- 4 A sample of good dissertations is deposited in the library at the University of Stirling and/or available online and on Canvas. Please note that methodology teaching has varied during the time the course has been running (1988 – present) and that this is necessarily reflected in dissertations.

Students should be aware that an electronic copy of their dissertation may be selected by Communications, Media & Culture for retention in the University Library at the University of Stirling where it will be accessible both to members of the University and external examiners through Library access provisions and might be used for teaching purposes. If you do not wish your dissertation to be retained for these purposes, please inform the CMC Postgraduate Office (FAH-CMCPG@stir.ac.uk) upon submission (this includes students doing their dissertations at UPF).

Students doing their dissertations at UPF should be aware that dissertations awarded 'distinction' (a mark of 'excellent') must be published in RECERCAT, a digital repository for Catalan research universities and research centres, with a view to increasing their visibility. Student authorisation for the publication must be submitted together with their dissertations.

5 **Content and Layout**

1. Title page
2. Declaration
3. Agreement

4. Acknowledgements (optional)
5. Abstract and keywords
6. Table of contents
7. Main text (see the *Dissertation structure* section)
8. References
9. Appendices

5.1 **Title page**

At UPF, the title page should include:

- Title
- Author
- Supervisor
- Date published: **Academic year 20--/--**
- Name of the collection: **Research projects of the Department of Communication postgraduate programmes**
- Subcommunity name: **Department of Communication**
- University name: **Universitat Pompeu Fabra**

You can view a template [here](#).

At UoS, the title page should include:

- Title
- Author and academic credential
- Degree fulfilment
- University name: University of Stirling
- Date: month and year

An exemplar of a title page can be found in the Appendix 1.

5.2 **DECLARATION (SAMPLE)**

Declaration

- 1 This work is composed by me.
- 2 This work has not been accepted in any of my previous applications for a degree.
- 3 The work of which this is a record is done by me.
- 4 All verbatim extracts have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of my information have been specifically acknowledged.

Signature:

Date:

5.3 AGREEMENT (SAMPLE)

Agreement

I agree to Communications, Media & Culture using my dissertation for teaching purposes. I understand my dissertation may also be made available to future students and in the library.

Signature:

Date:

5.4 ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

Dissertations must be accompanied by an abstract (maximum 150 words at UPF and around 250-300 words at UoS) that summarises the purpose of the dissertation and its content. Keywords, stated below the abstract, should be no more than 200 characters.

5.5 TABLE OF CONTENTS

At a minimum this should include a list of chapter numbers, chapter titles and page numbers relating to the start of each chapter. If diagrams, figures and tables are used these should be labelled and listed in a separate 'figures and tables' contents. Word count should be included at the bottom of the table of contents.

5.6 MAIN TEXT (see the *Dissertation structure* section above)

5.7 REFERENCES

This should include only works specifically referenced within the dissertation text. References should be arranged alphabetically. At UoS, you need to use Harvard Stirling referencing style. At UPF, you can choose a referencing style, but the chosen style needs to be consistent.

5.8 APPENDICES

Appendices should be numbered and placed at the end of the dissertation (after the Reference list).

Appendices typically include:

- Your research instruments (e.g., questionnaires for surveys, coding schedule and coding manual for content analysis, topic/interview guide for ethnography/interview research etc.).
- Evidence of data collection/generation (e.g., a sample of a transcript, coded text, protocol, fieldnotes, statistical analysis, a list of analysed texts etc.).
- Data analysis (e.g., results of each descriptive variable, statistical tests and result tables in quantitative research, a list of codes, codes scheme and models in qualitative research).
- The ethics application form, GUEP ethics approval letter and, if applicable, Fieldwork Risk Assessment, and templates of Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form.
- Any other relevant information related to your research.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the use of someone else's ideas without due acknowledgement and is a serious offence. Direct quotes from a source must be presented as such. Paraphrased material must also be fully acknowledged. It is **not** acceptable practice to write a paragraph-long paraphrase of several sentences and acknowledge the author with single citation.

Plagiarism includes (but is not limited to):

- Using the exact words of a published author without referencing the source
- Summarising another person's work without acknowledgement
- Substantial use of another person's ideas without acknowledgement
- Unattributed use of internet materials
- Paraphrasing a conceptual framework, research design, interpretation or any ideas of another person whether written or verbal without referencing the source according to the guidelines above
- Copying another student's work or ideas
- Using your own previous work (so called self-plagiarism)
- Stealing, mutilating or otherwise interfering with library materials

Please note that self-plagiarism, i.e. including your previously submitted work for assessment on this programme or for any other academic award verbatim in your dissertation constitutes plagiarism and should be avoided. Your dissertation should be an original piece of work and while you can use knowledge and ideas developed in previous assignments, you should not be merely copy-pasting from them.

Assessment and marking

At least two internal members of academic staff mark the dissertations and external examiners review dissertations and assessment practices. Both universities use common Dissertation Grading Sheet while assessing your work (see Appendix 3).

At UoS, two markers mark the dissertation independently and agree on the mark.

At UPF, students have to present their dissertation at a public defence (in-person or online) in front of the Faculty Committee, which provides recommendations for improvement and makes an initial assessment. The students have a possibility to submit pre-recorded presentations for the public defence in advance; however, they might have to attend further discussion of their work after the public defence (either in person or online) upon the request of the Committee. The dissertation is then marked by the supervisor or another member of academic staff after the submission, taking into account Committee's recommendations and how students addressed these.

Grading your dissertations is a rigorous and lengthy process. Your dissertation grades are confirmed at and will be communicated to you after the Autumn Exam Board, which usually takes place at the end of October. This applies to dissertations submitted at both UPF and UoS.

Conclusion

The dissertation offers you the opportunity to pursue your own interests and to define an area of research. While it is hard work and needs careful planning, it is also a very rewarding experience. There is one final piece of advice to bear in mind and that is to **remember that you should retain a strong focus on public relations and strategic communication.**

Finally, we hope that you have found this Dissertation Handbook helpful and that you enjoy working on your dissertation!

Appendix 1: Title page sample (University of Stirling)

Community Relations and Landfill: The Case of Tossa de Mar

Julie Palmer BA (Hons) University of Leicester

Dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
MSc in Strategic Communication & Public Relations (Joint Degree)
University of Stirling and Universitat Pompeu Fabra

University of Stirling

16 September 2024

Appendix 2: Dissertation engagement point pro-forma



FACULTY OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

MODULE CODE: PREP14

YEAR: 2023/24

Reg. No.		Student Name:
Supervisor:		
Programme of Study:		
Date of Meeting:		
<p>Summary of action since last meeting:</p>		
<p>Brief outline of key issues discussed in this supervision meeting:</p>		
<p>Taking on the feedback received, agreed future actions:</p>		
Who	When	What
<p>Update on ethics and planned fieldwork (where and when) if applicable. (This should be kept under review throughout the supervisory process.)</p>		

Date of next meeting	
----------------------	--

Agreed by Supervisor	
----------------------	--

Appendix 3: Dissertation Grading Sheet

MSc in Strategic Communication and Public Relations (Joint Degree)

Student Name	
Title of Work	
1st Marker	
2nd Marker (Stirling only)	

1. Introduction

Criteria	
1.1	Summary of the research purpose placed within the domain of public relations and strategic communication theory and practice.
1.2	Outline of the research setting / organisation / cultural / national background.
1.3	Justification of the relevance of research topic public relations and strategic communication theory and practice.
Comments	
Assessment	

2. Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

Criteria	
2.1	Aims of the review and reasons for the structure chosen.
2.2	Research is positioned within the main public relations and strategic communication paradigms and approaches.
2.3	Discussion of the theoretical perspectives of previous authors in the field or related fields.
2.4	Summary of the main empirical findings of previous research and other relevant data stressing those ideas and empirical findings which are important for the dissertation.
2.5	Criticisms of other writers' assumptions, perspectives and arguments which brings out the reasons for the direction of the research.
2.6	Clear definitions of key concepts (variables in quantitative projects) to be explored.
2.7	Concluding summary of the reasons for the structure and direction of the research.
Comments	
Assessment	

3. Methodology

Criteria	
3.1	Discussion and justification of research focus/problem.
3.2	Main research questions and supplementary questions (qualitative and quantitative research) or hypotheses (quantitative research). Explanation and justification.
3.3	Outline of the research strategy (overall approach) chosen to tackle the research

	problem which should be clearly linked to a research paradigm.
3.4	Detailed account and justification for the methods adopted.
3.5	Clear justification of data collection/generation process and instruments
3.6	Reflexive account of the process of research, including challenges and problems.
3.7	Discussion of ethical issues (if applicable).
3.8	Reliability, validity and generalisation and discussion of strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the research approach.
Comments	
Assessment	

4. Findings

Criteria	
4.1	Presentation of the findings in a clear and accessible way.
4.2	Integration of various sources of data.
4.3	Use of secondary sources to put primary sources in context.
4.4	Discussion of practical implications/applications of research.
Comments	
Assessment	

5. Conclusions and implications

Criteria	
5.1	Summary of the main findings of your project.
5.2	Implications.
5.3	Relation to existing public relations and strategic communication theories and concepts.
5.4	Relation to public relations and strategic communication practice.
Comments	
Assessment	

6. Structure, Style and Presentation

Criteria	
6.1	Structure and presentation.
6.2	Writing, spelling and syntactical correction.
6.3	Adequate and updated bibliography.
Comments	
Assessment	

Additional comments:

First Grade:

Second Grade (Stirling only):

Agreed Grade:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 4: Postgraduate Common Marking Scheme

Extracted from the [University's Quality Handbook](#)

A student's level of achievement is denoted by the mark (a whole number in the range 0 – 100) achieved under the University's Common Marking Scheme. The descriptors are used, where appropriate, in marking coursework, examinations and dissertations. They should be used in parallel with subject-specific mark descriptors

UoS mark	UPF mark	Equivalent Grade	Descriptor of Attainment of Learning Outcomes
90+	10.0	Distinction	Meets all the requirements to attain 80 – 89 but in addition demonstrates an exceptional degree of originality and exceptional analytical, problem-solving and/or creative skills.
80 -89			Meets all the requirements to attain 70 – 79 but in addition demonstrates outstanding quality evidenced by an ability to engage critically and analytically with source material, exhibits independent lines of argument, is highly original and uses an extremely wide range of relevant sources where appropriate.
70 - 79	9.0 – 9.9		Excellent range and depth of attainment of intended learning outcomes, secured by discriminating command of a comprehensive range of relevant materials and analyses, and by deployment of considered judgement relating to key issues, concepts or procedures.
60 - 69	8.0-8.9	Merit	Attainment of virtually all intended learning outcomes, clearly grounded on close familiarity with a wide range of supporting evidence, constructively utilised to reveal appreciable depth of understanding.
50 – 59	5.0-7.9	Pass	Attainment of most of the intended learning outcomes, some more securely grasped than others, resting on a circumscribed range of evidence and displaying a variable depth of understanding.
40 – 49	3.0-4.9	Fail - Marginal	Appreciable deficiencies in the attainment of intended learning outcomes, perhaps lacking a secure basis in relevant factual or analytical dimensions.
0 - 39	1.0-2.9	Fail - Clear	No convincing evidence of attainment of intended learning outcomes, such treatment of the subject as is in evidence being directionless and fragmentary.
X	0	Fail	Failure to comply with published module requirements.