Master of Arts (Coursework):

Guide for Examiners of Dissertations or Studio Projects

The Master of Arts (Coursework)

The Master of Arts (Coursework) is a 180 point taught masters programme, that is completed in either 12 months or over three semesters. At the University of Otago, 60 points is considered a full time work-load for a student in one semester. The programme of study is divided into three evenly weighted parts as follows:

* Coursework comprising 60 points in papers generic to the Humanities (e.g., academic writing, methods, key debates in the humanities)
* Coursework comprising 60 points in papers in their subject/discipline
* Independent research presented in a dissertation or studio project that comprises 60 points in their subject/discipline.

The Dissertation or Studio Project

A dissertation or studio project should contain the results of a piece of independent research conducted under supervision. The dissertation or studio project should be the size and scope that a diligent and competent candidate might reasonably be expected to complete **as one third of a course of full-time study spanning a period of not less than twelve months and not more than three semesters**. It is normally 20,000 words excluding appendices, footnotes and bibliographies.

Dissertations are examined by two examiners, with one normally external to the University. Where there is no significant difference in marks between examiners, the final mark for the dissertation is usually an average of the marks recommended by the two examiners. Where there is a significant difference in marks between examiners, the examiners are requested to consult, through the Convenor, and arrive at a final mark.

Differences are considered to be significant when the marks differ by more than 10%, or fall either side of an award grade (distinction, credit or pass – see below). If a significant difference in marks cannot be resolved by consultation, the dissertation and anonymised copies of the examiners’ reports will be sent to a third person who will act as a referee. The referee is normally external to the University.

Grading Criteria

The dissertation is at Level 9 in the NZQA framework, and is worth 60 points – that is equivalent to one semester of full-time work. An outstanding dissertation will be a well-written, polished, well argued and substantiated piece of independent research that:

* Demonstrates specialized knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge;
* Demonstrates critical awareness of issues in the field of study or practice;
* Displays skills in research and/or advanced scholarship by developing and applying new skills, or specific techniques and knowledge to existing or emerging problems
* Shows mastery of the field of study or practice to an advanced level
* Demonstrates the independent application and/or highly specialized knowledge and skills in research and/or advanced scholarship within a discipline or professional practice

The following grades are used at the University of Otago:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| A+ | 90 - 100 | B+ | 75 - 79 | C+ | 60 - 64 | Fail D | 40 - 49 |
| A | 85 - 89 | B | 70 - 74 | C | 55 - 59 | Fail E | Below 40 |
| A- | 80 - 84 | B- | 65 - 69 | C- | 50 - 54 |  |  |

The following provides further guidance on grading the dissertation or studio project.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A+  90%+ | Outstanding and original – clearly written with a well integrated and carefully demonstrated argument that shows specialised knowledge of a range of alternative views and interpretations. An extremely well documented and presented piece with astute critical analysis. |
| A  85-89% | Excellent – successful reinterpretation of a body of material or interpretation of new material. Does not show the same originality as an A+ but is a well written, documented and argued dissertation with excellent use of source material and demonstrating good critical analysis. |
| A-  80-84 | Very competent – critical, balanced, well researched, informed and clearly presented with good documentation and an attempt to incorporate critical analysis but not with the same level of sophistication expected of an A. |
| B+  75-79 | Competent – clearly written but the level of research is not as extensive and/or the argument is not as successfully demonstrated throughout as for an A dissertation. It might, for example, be a well researched but less than successfully argued piece or the critical analysis might be limited. |
| B  70-74% | Research fails to show sufficient understanding of a range of alternative views and interpretations; or the thesis lacks balance in the argument; or there is an ineffective connection between the argument and evidence; or there is little critical analysis. Satisfactory presentation and documentation. |
| B-  65-69% | Inadequate research that does not show a sufficient grasp of the literature; little or no critical analysis; ineffective use of evidence to support the argument; poor presentation or careless documentation |
| C+,C,C-  50-64% | Limited achievement – basic flaw in the development of an argument; poor research and documentation; little understanding of alternative views and interpretations or critical analysis; poorly structured and written. |
| Fail  0-49% | Inadequate or incomplete. |

The University awards a Master of Arts (Coursework) degree **with distinction** to a candidate whose overall mark (including papers) falls in the range 80 to 100 (A-, A, A+), and **with credit** to a student whose overall mark (including papers) falls in the range 70 to 79.

Examiners' Reports

Examiners are asked to provide a **recommendation** including a **grade** and mark, and a **written report** on their assessment. One of the options below should be chosen on the basis of the thesis **as submitted**.

**(1) Recommendation, Grade and Mark**

Examiners are requested to recommend one of the following three options:

(a) The dissertation should be accepted without amendments; **or**

(b) The dissertation should be accepted subject to minor editorial corrections, as indicated in the reports and to be completed at the discretion, and to the satisfaction, of the convenor of the examination; **or**

(c) The dissertation does not meet the criteria for the award of the degree (i.e. it fails), and should be rejected.

In addition to recommending one of the above options, examiners are also asked to award a **mark** and **grade** on the basis of the dissertation **as submitted**. A mark and grade should be awarded irrespective of the particular option recommended by the examiner (for example, if option (c) is recommended, amark and grade must also be awarded).

**(2) Written Report**  
The examiner’s written report should provide comments about the dissertation for the benefit of the candidate. It is most useful if the comments in the report could be presented in three sections:

* Major
* Minor
* Recommended editorial corrections (these may be marked up on a copy of the thesis if that is easier).

If option (c) is chosen (see above), the report should contain details of the major deficiencies in the dissertation or studio project. Please note, in some circumstances, a candidate may revise and resubmit their dissertation or studio project. Should that eventuate, it is helpful if the reports contain sufficient information for the student to make these revisions. If the examiner feels strongly that no resubmission should be allowed, this should be noted in the report and justified.