



*Doctor of Business
Administration (DBA)
Dissertation*



PART I: ABOUT DISSERTATION

1. Introduction

A dissertation is the product of a research project. This document will use different terms, such as thesis, dissertation, project report, or research report, to refer to postgraduate theses and dissertations or final research projects.

1.1 Importance of dissertation in a Postgraduate Programme?

The dissertation gives you the opportunity to create, extend and unify your understanding of a selected topic and so demonstrate that you can indeed apply knowledge and techniques gained through research at a sophisticated level.

1.2 "What will I get out of completing the dissertation?"

You will become a specialist in the area you chose to investigate and be able to apply experiential learning, problem solving, analytical and decision-making skills to providing solutions to real-world situations. More importantly, you will learn to manage yourself, carry out a research and to accept responsibility for determining what you are required to do, as well as carrying it out.

Thus, in conclusion the dissertation is the vehicle that will promote your capacity to take initiatives and develop independence of thought in a supportive framework - qualities universally identified as being essential to industrial and commercial needs.

2. What is research?

In this section, we discuss the nature of the research experience you will be undergoing. It is important to put the dissertation in perspective. You are undertaking a large-scale research, which requires new knowledge and solutions.

By the time, you have successfully completed your dissertation you will have become an expert researcher. This means that:

- (1) At the most basic level, you have produced something that your peers will be interested in.
- (2) In order to do this, you will have demonstrated expert knowledge of what is happening in your chosen area.
- (3) You will have displayed the astuteness to discover where you can make a new and useful contribution to your chosen field of study.



- (4) You will have shown in-depth knowledge and understanding of the research techniques that are currently being used in your area and their limitations.
- (5) You will have communicated your results effectively.
- (6) You will have demonstrated the international context emphasised throughout this Programme. You will be aware of what is written by other researchers worldwide.

This list indicates that in order to successfully complete your dissertation, you must acquire a wide range of skills. You must be able to carve out a researchable topic, to master the techniques required and put them to appropriate use and communicate your findings.

Your supervisors will of course support you throughout your dissertation. One thing is clear. You cannot achieve a pass if you do not know what the standards are. There will be opportunity through both formal and informal discussions with your supervisors and by reading other dissertation to discover the standards you ought to aim for.

Probably the most visible and long-lasting product of your research will be the dissertation. A copy of this is usually kept so that other students can reference it, possibly long after you have graduated. It is very important, therefore, that this is up to standard as far as both the presentation and content are concerned. We can give advice on the presentation in this guide.

The appropriateness of content will partly come from discussions with your supervisors.

2.1 What is required in my research dissertation?

Your research dissertation will need to achieve the following: -

- a written dissertation (survey, analysis and artefact) which may contribute to the body of knowledge and is original in nature

or

- 'practical problem-solving' - for example involving the development of a software package or formulating a solution to a real-world business problem e.g. a marketing strategy.

Your dissertation is really a scientific experiment, although you will very rarely think of it as such. The most important outcome from this experiment is what



you have learned (and reported in your dissertation) and produced (artefact). There may be other products from the work, for example, a software package, but these are far less important.

The process by which you carry out the research is also exceedingly important; and should be reported within the dissertation. This gives confidence to any reader that you have approached the problem in a systematic way, and that they may have some confidence in your findings.

From this perspective, your dissertation should be:

A process involving the evaluation of existing research may be primarily concerned with seeing how appropriate the work is to a new problem area. Simply reporting the existing work is not enough (so do not attempt a survey in isolation). Your research will therefore have a distinct focus, with a certain uniqueness about it. You will then need to evaluate your findings from the research and suggest a solution (artefact) to the research that you have undertaken.

Finally, remember that some research projects may not yield positive results. The research may have been performed very successfully, but the result is not what we expected or desired. This is no reason for thinking that you have failed. The knowledge gained is far more important than the result, at least from the point of view of achieving the award.

2.2 Are there any restrictions on the area of the dissertation?

There is considerable flexibility on the topic you choose for your dissertation. DBA degrees cover all disciplines and different programmes may have specific requirements.

2.3 Common 'roadblocks'

Before we finish this section, let us explore some of the more common 'roadblocks' you will face during working on your dissertation: -

- Initially you may tend to be over ambitious in the scope of your dissertation - and your supervisors will recommend that you limit your study.
- You may focus too much on the product that you are producing, rather than the knowledge gained. This again can be very time-consuming.



- You may discover lots of interesting material when researching in the library, but its relevance to the dissertation might be very tenuous. Try not to be diverted from the main 'experiment'.
- You may be descriptive in your approach when the need is to analyse and explain your topic. Be rigorous.
- You may lose contact with your supervisors - to learn the craft of research you must be prepared to take the initiative and arrange to consult regularly with your supervisors.
- You may underestimate the importance of managing your own time and materials effectively.

3. The Finished Product - The Dissertation

The dissertation may be substantial and may take a variety of forms but the DBA dissertation should be between 40,000 and 60,000 words.

There are standards expected for the presentation of a dissertation. Typically, the format of the dissertation should contain the following sections: -

Abstract - outlines the problem

- gives summary of the results
- no more than 1 page in length
- should be one paragraph

Contents

- including page numbers

Introduction

- specifies the problem (the what/who)
- gives the context/environment
- states briefly the approach you will be using (how)

Main body of the dissertation, presented as several chapters covering

- detailed background description to work/problem
- what you propose to do to solve the problem
- rationale behind the design



- results and evaluation / critical appraisal
- artefact/deliverable
- evaluation of the artefact

Conclusions

- summarise results / findings

References/Bibliography

Appendices

3.1 Abstract requirements

An abstract is an essential component of your dissertation and requires thought and attention. It is the reader's first impression of your research and should encapsulate and surmise your entire dissertation in around 300-500 words. The reader should be able to read your abstract independently of your report and have an understanding of (1) what you set out to do and why (purpose of your study), (2) how you did it (methodology) and (3) what you found out together with any recommendations that you may have (results and conclusions).

Remember that an abstract is not an introduction and nor is it a plan of what you intend to cover in the main report. It is a complete summary of your dissertation and is thus written last. With the addition of your name and the title of your research it should be possible to catalogue or index your abstract, and for others to assess the potential value that your investigation has to their own research.

3.2 Writing Technique

The biggest problem with writing any document, particularly one of a technical nature, is that we tend to forget whom we are writing for. This is a very simple trap to fall into but is the one that is likely to cause us the most trouble, particularly if the examiners of a dissertation cannot understand what is being reported.

Whilst the 'golden rule' might be always to write for the reader, you must take care that you appreciate who the reader might be.

It is therefore essential that you write for the right reader, at least if you want to be successful.



3.3 Writing Style

The overriding principle is that communication is about conveying messages.

If you map these very general 'rules' onto different parts of a dissertation, you find:

Introduction

- Message: What the dissertation is about
- Qualifiers: Why it is a relevant topic for research.
- Appropriateness to different application areas
- What techniques it draws upon

Topics Coming The forthcoming chapters

- Why they are relevant (at a high level)
- Summary What you hope to discover / identify (A hint at the conclusions)

Within each Chapter

- Message: What the chapter is about.
- Qualifiers: Why the chapter is in the dissertation
- What its contribution is to the dissertation 'message'
- Topics Coming An indication of the sections within the chapter, with the rationale (briefly) for why you are including them
- The individual sections would then follow
- Summary Reinforcement of what has been presented within the chapter (i.e. its message).

Within each Section

- Message: What the section is about.
- Qualifiers: The relevance of the section
- How it contributes to the message of the chapter
- Topics Coming An identification of sub-sections etc.
- Summary Reiteration, if necessary

This same format can be applied recursively throughout the entire dissertation.

PART II: DOING THE RESEARCH



4. Getting Started

4.1 Choosing your topic

You have considerable freedom in choosing a topic to research so long as it builds on aspect(s) of the Programme you are studying for to date and meets the overall aims of the DBA programme. Make sure it is a topic which you can see yourself researching into for some time - many researchers have come to grief simply because they lose interest in the area they are investigating.

Talk to your supervisors about your idea(s) in order to establish its potential. You may have several topics that you feel are worthwhile - consider both work-based/related dissertation as well as topics that are of personal interest to you.

Your topic should then be developed in-depth by the end of the 1st year of your study and presented to your supervisors and other appointed academic staff for approval.

4.2 Working with your supervisors

You will be allocated a supervisor for the duration of your dissertation. It is vital that you communicate with the supervisor, as his or her experience and expertise will provide you with insights into the research process and ensure that you remain focussed on your dissertation area.

Good rapport and communication between you and your supervisor are the most important elements of supervision. Remember you will need to communicate regularly with your principal supervisor in preparing your proposal, and then in the planning and implementation of the research.

4.3 Writing your proposal

So, you have chosen a topic and discussed it with your 1 supervisor and possibly with other teaching staff - you have now to write a dissertation proposal.

Your proposal should

- identify the area of study
- show how the area of study relates to your study programme
- include a dissertation development plan and an identified dissertation critical path
- identify the resources necessary for the successful completion of the dissertation
- describe the anticipated results and products where appropriate



The purpose of this proposal is to ensure that you have a viable topic and adequate resources to complete your research successfully.

Your proposal will be examined to ensure that the topic is suitable for your award.

5. Deadline

5.1 Timetable

To maximise your chances of completing your dissertation to your declared deadline you should draw up a timetable that contains several target deadlines for you to aim at.

5.2 Ethical Issues in your Research

It is vital that research should not ‘harm’ an individual in any way. As such you should consult your supervisor to ensure that you consider the ethics of what you are doing.

Research should:

- Not involve vulnerable subjects (e.g. children/elderly)
- Not involve deception in gathering primary data and evidence.
- Avoid exposing participants or researchers to increased levels of physical or psychological harm or likelihood of damage to reputation or competitive standing.
- Avoid situations where employees give data or opinions which might be problematic if revealed to other employees or management of the organisation.
- Always obtain informed consent from participants.

6. How to keep going when the going gets tough

6.1 Psychological stages you might go through.

We have already discussed the intellectual challenge of this dissertation but neglected so far to emphasise the fact that there is also a considerable emotional component to the experience.



As you start your research you will be full of enthusiasm but as time progresses this might wane. You will experience a variety of emotions.

Isolation - Up to now you have had regular contact with fellow classmates - this will diminish as you complete all the modules.

Boredom - it is not unusual to feel 'fed up', confused and completely 'stuck' about halfway through your dissertation. This 'getting nowhere' syndrome is common – the monitoring and repetitiveness of concentrating on the same thing for an extended period are quite common. Both seem to be an integral part of learning how to be systematic about research and disciplining yourself to continue.

Frustration - You will frequently feel that nothing is 'going' your way. The book you want will take several weeks to arrive - your supervisor will not always be available for consultation at the exact moment you experience difficulties - the pressures of work increase. Or new avenues will open as you progress with your dissertation that are really interesting and may seem worth pursuing – you need to be very careful at this time as, to complete your dissertation you must be focussed and not be side-tracked.

6.2 Support Groups

How can you best prepare yourself for this emotional drain? Several support groups are readily available if you get organised: -

Firstly - by the time you start your dissertation you will have made many friends - you will have an established network - use it! Make a list of webchats/email addresses / telephone numbers - circulate it and arrange to meet regularly to discuss dissertation related problems, offer mutual criticism and encouragement, and/or have a good 'moan' if you feel like it.

Once you can share these feelings and to talk about them and their effect on your work, you will start to feel better. As one of the groups confronts the problems, the others will be able to help, and when it comes to their turn, they will remember how it was and know that it is possible to get through it.

You could also use this group to help you keep deadlines. Each of you states what work you want to do and sets a time limit for its completion. This commitment serves as a motivator.



When the date arrives you meet, as already arranged, and talk about your progress. If you have done what you intended, then set another time limit for the next piece of work. If you have not done what you intended, discuss with the other(s) why this is so, what the problems were and how you feel about not having got to where you were aiming.

Secondly - use your supervisor. You should have established a good working relationship with your supervisor - ask for advice/guidance - but remember it is your research - do not expect your supervisors to do the work for you!!

Thirdly - your family and friends have supported you throughout your studies on this Programme. During your dissertation you might consider using them in a more active role.