

Different types of Dissertation Projects: descriptors and examples

Masters Dissertation projects may be very diverse and may combine different elements. We have defined five broad types. These are not always mutually exclusive but the definitions should help you choose the most appropriate proposal form for your project:

- Research projects - in the NHS these will need special Ethics approval
- Evaluation projects
- Service development projects
- Advanced professional practice projects
- Theoretical or literature based projects

Each of these is defined below and examples given:

1. Research projects

The National Research Ethics Service (NRES) defines research as "The attempt to derive generalisable new knowledge, including studies that aim to generate hypotheses, as well as studies that aim to test them." A key term here is 'generalisable'. If your project's aim is to derive new and *generalisable* knowledge from *empirical data* then it will be classed as research. (see examples 1 & 2)

2. Evaluation projects

NRES defines evaluation as "Designed and conducted solely to define or judge current care" i.e. an evaluation project investigates *something that is already happening* and does not introduce any *new* treatments or procedures. The conclusions of an evaluation project will relate to your specific local context and will not aim to be widely generalisable or transferable. (see examples 3 & 4)

3. Service Development projects

The aim of a service development project is to bring about an *organisational* change for which there is existing evidence, or in response to policy drivers. Any data collection and analysis, associated with a service development project, aims specifically to inform the local development and is not intended to have wider generalisability or transferability. Effective use of change management theory and methods will be central to a service development project. (see examples 5 & 6)

4. Advance Professional Practice projects

These are projects in which a student will apply *clinical or practice* methods, for which there is an existing evidence base, in a practice context or with a client group that may be new, or unfamiliar to the student. This is likely to take the form of implementing 'best practice' that has been developed elsewhere. In some cases it may take the form of developing innovative practice for which an evidence base already exists. Effective application of advanced clinical/practice skills and knowledge will be central to advanced professional practice projects. Project reports are likely to take the form of critical case studies. (see examples 7 & 8)

5. Theoretical or literature based studies

Theoretical and literature based studies do not involve any type of primary data collection and have no human participants. These studies will make exclusive use of knowledge and ideas that already exist in written documents. Such literature based studies may follow a 'systematic literature review' methodology and aim to answer a specific research question. Alternatively they may have a more exploratory and discursive aim in which case an appropriately rigorous methodology will be used. (see examples 9 & 10)

Examples of different project types:

Examples of Research Projects:

1. The student is a physiotherapist. She is interested in Tai Chi and is an experienced Tai Chi teacher. She believes that Tai Chi may make a valuable contribution to the treatment of a particular respiratory condition. No peer reviewed evidence currently exists to support her belief although she has some anecdotal evidence. She plans a randomised control trial where a treatment group of patients are invited to attend a weekly Tai Chi class and given Tai Chi exercises to practice. Clinical outcome measures will be obtained from treatment and control groups so that generalisable conclusions may be drawn regarding the effectiveness of the treatment.

2. An infection control nurse wants to improve the quality of nursing given to patients who contract MRSA while in hospital care. She intends to carry out a qualitative exploration of patient experiences with the intention of deriving transferable theory about the experiences of patients who contract MRSA. Her intention is to publish her findings in a nursing journal so that this theory might inform general nursing practice in relation to hospital acquired infections.

Examples of Evaluation projects:

3. The student works for a voluntary sector organisation which has just commissioned a six month long leadership development programme for team leaders. With the agreement and support of the programme's commissioners the student identifies a number of criteria against which the effectiveness of the programme can be evaluated. She then develops a robust methodology for collecting and analysing data which enables judgements to be made about the programmes effectiveness in meeting those criteria. Her findings inform future commissioning of programmes by the organisation.

4. The student is a Deputy Manager in the Echo department of a large NHS Trust. She is concerned that inter-observer variation in assessment of Left Ventricular Systolic Function by Transthoracic Echocardiography within the service may be compromising the quality of the service delivered. Her project establishes some baseline data regarding local inter-observer variation, enabling her to evaluate the extent to which such variation might be compromising local clinical quality. From this she makes recommendations aimed at local reduction of such variation to meet Clinical Governance requirements.

Examples of Service Development projects

5. The student manages an out-patient medical imaging service. National and local policy contexts require her to maximise efficient use of human and technical resources as well as meeting service user needs. She plans to extend clinic hours to meet patient need and offer staff more flexible work patterns. Her change management project includes a questionnaire based consultation with staff and service users regarding preferred clinic hours which informs the direction and extent of change. She also uses appropriate change management methods to bring about sustainable change.

6. The student is employed by the Strategic Health Authority to advise on training, development and human resource issues. She is required to review the human resource implications, across the region, of implementation of the NHS 18 week waiting time target within several clinical pathways. This involves gathering and analysing a range of different types of data, synthesising it into a management report and implementing measures to address issues that emerge. Her project makes critical use of organisational development

and change management theory. She writes up *part* of this extensive project as an MSc Dissertation.

Examples of Advanced Professional Practice projects

7. The student is an experienced Cognitive Behavioural Therapist (CBT). She has been asked to develop a CBT clinic for public sector employees who self refer with anxiety and depression. A strong evidence base for CBT with these conditions exists but the use of it with self referring clients in a workplace context is a new and specialised application of practice for this student. Her project consists of a series of anonymised, theoretically informed, case studies and a critical reflective journal in which she explores and critiques the application of CBT in this new context.

8. The student is a senior Occupational Therapist working part-time in an inpatient mental health unit. A strong evidence base suggests that increased service user activity levels are linked to improved rehabilitation and recovery. She plans to develop some training for support workers to encourage them to be more effective in engaging service users in daytime activities. Her project will involve devising and delivering an evidence-based development programme for support workers on the ward, supporting staff in the implementation of their learning. Her project presents this work as a reflective case study critically exploring the advanced professional practice role of senior occupational therapists in supporting therapeutic practice of other staff.

Examples of Theoretical or Literature based studies

9. A student is a residential care home manager. He wants to improve the ways in which elderly and infirm service users are involved in making decisions about their care. His study explores recent grey and peer reviewed literature on practice in this area with the intention of critically synthesising existing knowledge and developing some informed guidelines for his own work regarding good practice in service user involvement in the long term elderly care sector.

10. A student is a mental health nurse. She is interested in ethical issues related to the implementation of the Mental Capacity Act. She has done some Open University modules in Philosophy and writes, for her MSc dissertation, an extended essay in which she applies philosophical argument and inquiry to an exploration of some of the implications of the Mental Capacity Act for adults with severe learning difficulties.

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