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MAASTRICHT SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Maastricht School of Management
Series in Intercultural and Global Management

How to Write Your MBA Thesis

Stephanie Jones
Khaled Wahba
Beatrice van der Heijden

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How to Write Your MBA Thesis

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Stephanie Jones PhD
Khaled Wahba PhD
Beatrice van der Heijden PhD

HOW TO WRITE YOUR MBA THESIS
A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE FOR ALL MASTER'S STUDENTS REQUIRED TO
WRITE A RESEARCH-BASED THESIS OR DISSERTATION

Meyer & Meyer Media

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Series Editors: Ronald Tuninga & Fred Phillips



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**MAASTRICHT SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT SERIES
IN INTERCULTURAL AND GLOBAL MANAGEMENT**

Series Editors Ronald Tuninga and Fred Phillips

Volumes To Date

Stephanie Jones, Khaled Wahba, and Beatrice van der Heijden, *How To Write Your MBA Thesis: A Comprehensive Guide for All Masters' Students Required to Write a Research-Based Thesis or Dissertation* (2007)

Joop Rémé, Geert Heling, and Silvio DeBono, *Leading Change in Business and Corporate Social Responsibility* (in press)

Stephanie Jones and Silvio DeBono, *Managing Cultural Diversity* (in press)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

This series makes excellent, affordable textbooks available to students in countries where such books have been unavailable heretofore. By emphasizing the international, multicultural, sustainability, and social responsibility dimensions of management, and by giving special attention to change issues in transitional economies, these volumes aim to define the way management subjects should be taught to multicultural audiences. Our goal as editors is to have the series seen as the imprimatur of the best textbooks in the field, and thereby influence the future of teaching international business.

Each book is a concise but complete treatment of the topics covered in a core course, as currently taught in Maastricht School of Management's MBA program. (Books for some specialized topics may be considered in the future.) Every reader should close a volume in this series and say, "This book told me what I really need to know about this subject."

Targeted readers include MBA students in MSM's overseas outreach programs, students enrolled in other universities, and practicing managers in many countries. Our authors write for readers of a high intellectual caliber, having good command of international English, who wish to be world-class managers, whether in their home countries or abroad, whether for indigenous companies or for foreign multi-nationals.

We nonetheless believe it is not fair to such readers to frame all content in terms of problems and persons representing business in the OECD nations. Volumes in the series therefore depict business situations drawn from many of the countries where MSM is active, and characters representing diverse ethnicities and genders. We have chosen authors with broad experience on multiple continents.

We do not assume readers have access to the books, periodicals, databases, research journals, and fast reliable Internet connections that are taken for granted by MBA students in the OECD countries. Thus, each textbook in the series is a self-contained course on its topic, at least as far as possible. Each book is suitable for a condensed course format, but also allows teachers the flexibility to use the book for online or face-to-face eight-week courses.

For more than a half century Maastricht School of Management (MSM) has focused on international cooperation. As a key player in the global education field, MSM is one of the few management schools that systematically combine education, technical assistance and research in its professional services. Offering high-quality management degree programs (MBA, DBA and PhD), MSM also implements management development research and international projects. With more than 2000 students annually graduating in nearly thirty countries, MSM is the largest international business school of the Netherlands.

MSM has worked for years at the interface of public- and private-sector management of transition processes in culturally diverse environments. MSM's guiding principle is the enhancement of performance of the private and public sectors to support balanced economic development. MSM provides technical assistance and specific training to government agencies, semi-government agencies, NGOs, post-secondary education institutions and the private sector, including small and medium enterprises. MSM offers graduate programs at campuses in China, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kuwait, Malawi, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Moscow, Namibia, the Netherlands, Peru, Rwanda, Suriname, Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Ronald Tuninga and Fred Phillips

PREFACE

Dear Student – this book is for you, as you approach the final (and possibly the most difficult) task of your Masters' program in business and management. You are facing the tough prospect of writing an impossibly long thesis based on a huge amount of reading, research and practical investigation, and perhaps you are already feeling quite exhausted at the thought of it.

Don't worry! Help is at hand. We have collectively helped hundreds if not thousands of students and we continue to help them on a daily basis, in many different countries of the world. We want you to write the best possible thesis, because it's good for everyone – you, your supervisor, your university, and future faculty members and students who can learn from your work. And maybe even the wider world of business and management too in the greater community. It may be the start of a life-long interest, publications and even doctoral studies. In particular, keeping academic standards and research quality high are essential in an increasingly competitive market for jobs and opportunities for you, and for the standing and accreditation requirements of your university.

There are many books available on the market to help you with your thesis. Why should you read this one when you have so much to read already?

- This book is practical and tells you what you really *need to know*.
- This book is short and accessible, and you *can easily find what you need*.
- This book includes a step-by-step guide to exactly what *you need to do to get it right*.
- This book is *easy to read*, and has been designed for the increasing numbers of MBA and Masters' students worldwide studying in English when this is not their native language.
- This book includes lots of *real, clear examples* of what to do and not to do, so you can *easily understand what's needed*.
- But, this book is not trying to include a detailed guide to research methods. This is outside of the scope of this short, practical text. You will need to attend courses and read other books for this.

Whatever you choose to study for your thesis, *enjoy*. Be *interested*. Be *enthusiastic*. You have to keep going for several months on this, so you must like it.

See you at the graduation ceremony!

Your friends,
The Authors
Kuwait, Cairo & Maastricht
2007

We would like to acknowledge the detailed input and ongoing support of our colleague and friend Joop Remme in the preparation and editing of this manuscript.

1. YOU

YOUR AMBITIONS FOR YOUR THESIS – THE NOBEL PRIZE OR HAPPY WITH A PASS?

GETTING STARTED – DECIDING ON YOUR TOPIC

PLANNING YOUR SCHEDULE - TO HIT THE DEADLINE

Your thesis must start with you – because it says a lot about you! How serious are you about your work and your studies? How creative and imaginative are you? Are you ambitious to climb the corporate ladder and become a manager – or a more senior manager? Are you an entrepreneur and want to start – or further develop – your own business? Do you care about people (relationship-oriented) or about getting the job done (task-oriented)? Or are you interested in an academic career path?

What are the circumstances in which you are studying, in terms of the country where you live and work, and the particular problems and challenges you may be facing in your work environment? What are the “hot” issues in your region, which are impacting on the way business and management are conducted? Controversial business and management issues and practices can include localization of the workforce in Kuwait, setting up a new business in Egypt, the future of the state-owned enterprises in China, inflation in Ghana, direct foreign investment in Tanzania, the impact of EU membership on foreign trade in Malta, banking failures in Zimbabwe, training and development in local companies in Peru, the impact of ageing and “dejuvenization” on the labor market in the Netherlands – the list is endless. You can never have the excuse that you can’t find a topic!

In what areas of business and management are you most interested? And do you see things objectively (rationally, factually) or subjectively (more emotionally, allowing for lots of different perspectives)? These are all important considerations, because they impact on your choice of thesis topic, your approach to your research, and your subsequent success in this important piece of work. If your thesis is not YOU, you’ll find it difficult and unrewarding and won’t do so well. But if it is YOU, you’ll enjoy it and do a good job, which is the purpose of doing the thesis altogether!

There are many examples of students whose theses have been a big help to them – in their future studies, their professional skills, their immediate jobs and their longer-term careers.

Zhong Zhi Fen is a part-time MBA student in Shanghai working in credit control and treasury in a large manufacturing business, and one of her on-going problems is how to create policies to give credit to customers. She didn’t want to keep refusing to give them credit because then they would seek another supplier and her company would lose the business. But she wanted to avoid the defaults on payments and bad debts that her firm had experienced in the past. So in her MBA thesis, she developed a set of criteria for credit rating based on her reading of the available literature, and in consultation with other experts, and now she uses it every day!

Pablo is a sales manager in a small truck retailing business in Mozambique that is facing declining sales. His idea was to promote the after sales part of the business to help offset this loss of revenue, exploring the possibilities of developing maintenance and repairs, spare parts, and general servicing. Within the after sales area, what were the main factors impacting on customer buying decisions? He was looking for a topic for his MBA thesis, and discussed the idea with his boss, who paid him a project fee for carrying out the research and sharing the results!

Zena, a part-time student in Malaysia, had always been interested in family businesses, although she was not working in this field. She was always intrigued by the challenge of passing a business from father to son or daughter – and how to manage the transition. She carried out a series of case studies, of family businesses she discovered, which were facing this particular issue. Her intelligence, knowledge and professional, objective interest impressed these family business proprietors a good deal. One elderly gentleman, who was becoming increasingly worried about how to handle this transition, asked her to prepare a detailed report on their particular case, for which he gladly paid Zena a consulting fee. He then invited her to join the company!

In each of these examples, students focused on topics of real interest, which not only sustained them through the long months of work involved, but also helped them to make advancements in their careers. It is well worth pursuing this direction of thought in the early stages of trying to decide a thesis topic.

WHY IS YOUR UNIVERSITY OR BUSINESS SCHOOL ASKING YOU TO WRITE A THESIS?

This is for several very good reasons, which all help to achieve the overall goal of preparing you for greater success in the international business environment. There are skills and insights you can gain from writing a thesis that you cannot learn from any other part of your Master's program. Many universities and business schools worldwide have abandoned the need to write theses, especially in MBA programs. We think this is a shame, because you – the student – can learn so much from this exercise! And if you are interested in advanced level academic work, and in publishing your efforts, at least you will have more of an idea of what's in store for you, and will have had some preparation. The outcome of your thesis will also give you a detailed study that could be used to compare with the work of others in an international forum. It could contribute to the learning of others as a case study about your country or region.

So, in summary, what does your thesis do for you?

- Provides you with the opportunity to engage in a project of independent research and thinking, in depth;
- Develops your conceptualizing, analytical thinking, critical reasoning and synthesizing skills, bringing together different strands from your Master's program studies;

- Enables you to become acquainted with diverse research approaches and methods of data collection and handling;
- Helps you to be able to extract conclusions and recommendations, relating them to problem solving and practical implementation;
- Strengthens your ability to communicate ideas and information in a logical and coherent manner;
- Engages you in the type of writing and use of language that is required for academic and professional publications;
- Encourages you to take an independent view, outside of the pages of your textbook, which you might now challenge;
- Enables you to apply managerial concepts, ideas and methods to your own field of interest, and build up a specialization, make a contribution in your chosen field, and gain a more practical insight to your studies as you can relate them to your daily work;
- It could even be a marketing tool to help you when searching for a job, and be an important talking point on your CV!

Arguably, the skill of writing a thesis is even more valuable than ever. It used to be the case that many managerial decisions were “shooting from the hip” on instinct, because data was hard to get and took a long time to process and analyze. As a result, fast decision making was preferred over well-founded decision making. Now, the reverse is true and there is too much data available to the manager (and the researcher) from every angle. You must develop skills in synthesizing and judging the relative value of data to be a successful manager and business leader these days, and this applies increasingly to all countries. It was easier and quicker when there was less data out there, or you had a good excuse not to use it!

But your thesis must not be a report or consulting project, even though – in a different form – it could be used for this. It must exhibit a full scholarly infrastructure, as well as producing practical managerial recommendations. It is a delicate balance of the theoretical and empirical. This may sound contradictory, but this juxtaposition of the academic and practical is all part of being an outstanding international manager and business’ person today. Your thesis will build on the work that you have done in course work and assignments, and will be based on an academic discipline you have studied in your Master’s program, but will need (and develop) a new skills’ set which can be extremely valuable for the future. There will be considerable learning (and satisfaction) in producing a rigorously defined thesis to a high scholarly standard, but there will be a lot of practical insights from the exercise too. Any report you need to produce at work will be ‘a walk in the park’ compared with the work involved in this!

In short, the activity of thesis writing helps you to become a researcher, so that you can confidently investigate a problem, and make theoretical and practical contributions to knowledge.

YOUR AMBITIONS FOR YOUR THESIS – THE NOBEL PRIZE OR HAPPY WITH A PASS?

You may be a student with a long record of success already and see your thesis as ‘the jewel in the crown’. It is essential for you to do your very best, as you don’t want to let down your strong record of success to date. Many universities and business schools will only award Overall Distinctions to students gaining Distinction grades in most of their subjects and ESPECIALLY in their thesis. You may be thinking of Doctoral work in the future, and see this Master’s thesis as a stepping-stone on the way. As we will discuss later, to a great extent Doctoral work is a completely different exercise, but at least your Master’s thesis will give you a taste of real research. If you do well in your Master’s thesis, this is not necessarily an indicator of strong performance at Doctoral level. But if you struggle with your Master’s thesis, maybe Doctoral work may not be for you – or at least not yet!

For those setting their sights high for a Distinction in their thesis, there are no short cuts. There is a long, hard road ahead. Everything must be perfect. The research problem must be really important (and not just for the thesis), and the research questions highly relevant, especially to the country where you live and work. The literature review must be exhaustively detailed and the sources carefully analyzed, with maturity and insight. The chosen methodology must match the chosen problem, and the data must be analyzed in the most appropriate way. It must be realistic and viable, in terms of collecting data in your particular country, with all the issues that may involve.

After the analysis, every drop of value and interest must be squeezed from the data. The conclusions and recommendations must be very well thought out and important for both scholars and non-specialist readers. The referencing must be impeccable, with every comma and full stop in the right place. This thesis will literally take many hours of work, every day for months. It must be edited, revised, improved and polished – several times before it can be delivered.

For a really **first-rate, top-notch thesis**, you will need to go beyond the satisfactory and acceptable, into new areas of originality, creativity and academic rigor. You will need to produce a thesis showing:

- New knowledge and insights about the causes and effects of the problem you are studying;
- Original perspectives, which have not been thought through before;
- A new view of your country or region, within the local context, showing insights into the local environment and its unique issues;
- Logical rigor, so that it all makes sense;
- Operationalization of the concepts, so that they are “brought down to earth” and practical, and the results are measured;
- Clear implementation of abstract ideas;
- A penetrating understanding of all the factors at work;
- A justification of your methodology;
- Replicability, so that another researcher could replicate the same results based on the same data;

- A clear focus with all aspects of the thesis concentrated on this;
- Continuity between all sections and readability.

For example, Randha, studying for a Master's degree in Human Resource Education in Cairo, was definitely a Distinction student. What made her special, according to her supervisor, was that "she used her brain to think critically and to find an optimal balance between theory and practice. All the time, she was challenging every word, looking for justification, for evidence, and not accepting everything at face value. She never compromised on the time she gave to her thesis, and made a high level of sacrifice of her personal life and a lot of her business work too. She was also good at finishing. Excellence alone is not enough for a Distinction; you have to be good at execution".

How many Distinction theses might be expected per cohort? Clearly, this varies a great deal between different institutions, and it also depends on the size of the cohort, and how long the institution has been offering the program. Over 20% might look like the university or business school is quite generous in marking, or the institution has been able to develop really good students, especially over a number of years. Less than 10% looks like the university or business school is being quite tough, or is not strict on admission criteria. But you can be sure that an international school with a high reputation will be very careful on giving out a large number of Distinctions. You will have to earn it!

How do you know if you have the abilities to be a good researcher? **Competencies for a good Master's thesis researcher** have been identified in recent research as including several personality traits and working skills, grouped into three clusters: interpersonal, intellectual and intrapersonal skills.

Interpersonal competencies can be defined as interpersonal skills and networking, listening ability, oral communication and observation, presentation skills, and written communication. Intellectual competencies include analytical and critical thinking skills, being able to organize data, computer knowledge, conceptual thinking, decisiveness, evaluation and innovation skills. It also includes Internet searching ability and knowledge of research methodologies, data collection and analysis methods, planning, reading and summarizing. Intrapersonal skills, however, include showing accuracy and quality consciousness, commitment and dedication, curiosity and information seeking, flexibility, initiative, integrity, persistence and dedication to results. Intrapersonal skills have been defined as including self-confidence, self-management and self-motivation.

See the next table, which explains the competencies you need for excellence in thesis research and writing, with examples of these competencies in action: