Thesis Guide

Rules and guidelines for writing a master’s thesis in business studies within the Department of Business Administration

Reykjavik University Department of Business Administration
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**Introduction**

All students in a Master of Science (MSc) programme must write a master’s thesis. A master’s thesis is the document that presents the author’s own research and findings and is submitted in support of candidature for a Master of Science degree. A master’s thesis is more than just a requirement towards a MSc degree. It is an opportunity to deepen the knowledge and understanding of a certain topic area within a field of study, and to train students in working independently. With all of that in mind, it is important that the thesis is completed in a professional manner. Students must allocate sufficient time for preparation as well as work on the thesis. This guidebook has been designed to assist students in their work. The most important feature of a good thesis is its content. The guidebook will provide help to get started and outline content requirements as well as formal aspects such as structure and format.

1. **General rules of procedure and guidelines**

1.1 **Learning outcomes**

**Knowledge:** Collection of facts, concepts, theories and techniques acquired by students. The student should

- be able to account for the basic building blocks of a good research project,
- understand and account for the empirical conditions in the studied field (e.g. a market and industry),
- have a solid understanding of the fundamentals of the methodology applied in the thesis (e.g. concepts and techniques),
- be able to account for relevant theories concerning the research field,
- know what constitutes a good research question.

**Skills:** The ability to apply knowledge to the different tasks of the research process. The student should be able to

- demonstrate independence and effectiveness in conducting the thesis research,
- develop an effective research question and setting a clear focus of the thesis,
- *adopt, adapt* and *argue* for a relevant methodology,
- critically analyse empirical data,
- discuss independently implications of results/analysis on relevant theory,
- provide answer(s) to stated research question(s),
- discuss possible implications of results, for example, for managers in a relevant industry.

**Competences:** The ability to apply knowledge and skills. At the end of the thesis-process, students should be able to

- design basic research projects,
- conduct basic independent research,
- systematically evaluate research in their field of expertise,
- communicate and apply expert knowledge gained from the thesis process.

1.2. ECTS credits and workload
The workload for a master’s thesis corresponds to 30 ECTS credits in total. A master’s thesis can only be written and submitted by one individual. Work on the thesis shall be based on independent contributions by the student under the guidance and supervision of the supervisor. The writing of a thesis is entirely the responsibility of the student.

_Students can apply to divide their work on a thesis so that it extends over two semesters, 15 ECTS credits each semester._ An application about extending the thesis over two semesters must be submitted to the Program Administrator before first day of teaching in the semester the student starts writing the thesis. This is subject to approval and availability of the supervisor. Application form may be found in Appendix 4.

One ECTS credit normally consists of 25-30 hours of student workload. It should therefore be clear that a 30 ECTS-credit thesis is the result of usually no less than 750 hours of work.

1.3. Choice of topic
The choice of thesis topic is the responsibility of students but requires the approval of the supervisor, who can reject proposals for theses or set conditions for their acceptance.

The general objective of the thesis is that students _show their ability to work independently on a topic related to their field of study_. For example, if you are a student in the MSc programme in Marketing, your subject area must be related to marketing. In the same way, a subject area for a student in the MSc programme in Corporate Finance would be related to corporate finance.

A master’s thesis will commonly combine both theory and empirical elements. A thesis should be based on an issue and a research problem that needs answering or clarifying. The problem should then be developed into a research question. The student attempts to answer the research question by gathering and analyzing data and consulting literature on the relevant topic.

The importance of a clear research problem and question cannot be overstated. Firstly, it provides a compass that guides students in their research, helping them to decide the content of their thesis, including what kind of data is needed, evaluating its relevance, and placing the
research within the research literature. Secondly, a clear research problem will help the reader to understand the purpose of the thesis and thereby to evaluate its relevance and quality.

A good research problem is clear and precise. A student may not come up with the perfect research problem before starting work on the research, but it is a good idea to make sure that it is continuously revisited so it can be refined. The research problem needs to result in an open question, as opposed to closed. Example: ‘can companies live up to CFA’s corporate ethical standards?’ is a closed question and possible to answer with a Y/N. On the other hand, ‘how do companies enforce CFA’s corporate ethical standards?’ is an open question implying a descriptive approach. This can be defended, however, to make it explicit that the research also leads to a discussion it is possible, for instance, to formulate the following supporting question: ‘how can companies improve their adoption of CFA’s corporate ethical standard?’ In addition to this there is usually a need to clarify the exact meaning of research questions and concepts, for example, what do ‘enforce’ and ‘improve’ mean; what is CFA and why is it relevant?

Occasionally faculty might be looking for students to work on a certain research topic or to assist in research projects. These may provide opportunities to develop ideas or even to use existing data. Students should not hesitate to contact a faculty member for advice and consultation. Please note that the thesis administrator does reserve the right to refuse any suggested thesis topic for certain reasons (e.g. non-availability of a qualified supervisor, triviality of topic, etc.).

When developing topics/ideas, students can start by:

- Investigating the possibility of using an existing issue or problem from within an organization, or within an industry, where they have already gained work experience.
- Researching different types of business databases for a comprehensive literature review (including, for example, journal research articles, business magazines and published theses) which could lead to a list of ideas within certain topics of interest (e.g., international human resources, marketing and communication, leadership, public management or entrepreneurship).
- Reading through academic articles on a subject of interest and noting the “further research” issues often mentioned in the concluding section of most of these papers.

In any case, it is strongly recommended that students carefully examine topics that can fit their personal interests and career goals, and then seek advice from RU faculty members.
It is worth noting that forming a research topic is quite a demanding part of the thesis project. Developing a topic and research question takes a great deal of work and independent thinking.

**Choices of subjects should be considered early.**

A master’s thesis can be written in the context of a specific company. Students should consult the thesis supervisor or the thesis administrator before committing to any topic. They should make sure to clarify this with representatives of the organization before starting work on a company research. Sometimes a company requests a confidentiality statement, a template may be found in Appendix 5.

**1.4. Content of a master’s thesis**

A master’s thesis should contain:

- A clear research question and objective of study.
- An extensive and relevant literature review relating to the objective and research questions. It should define the issue, give sufficient and relevant theoretical background information on related research, and relate the research question to previous research results. It sets the thesis in context and builds up the rationale for the objective and research question of the thesis.
- Precise information on methodology; what data was gathered, how and why (students can gather primary and/or secondary data depending on relevance to answering the research question).
- Meticulous reporting on the results (data findings).
- Evaluation of the findings with reference to the stated objective.
- Discussion on how the findings relate to the literature and how theory is supported, altered or rejected based on the findings.
- Discussion on limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

**1.5. Research methodology**

Concerning the issue of research methodology, it is important to note that, at least in principle, all methodologies are acceptable (e.g., qualitative or quantitative, one company case study, survey research etc.), provided that the methodology and design of study is appropriate and in alignment with the study’s objective and research question.
Students are expected to propose the methodology/ies for the research in a research proposal, and the supervisor should give feedback in this regard.

Recommended publications on research methodology should be consulted when designing a research project. This will help students to choose the appropriate methodology for a topic. It is very important that there is a match between the research question and the research methodology chosen, and students are expected to rationalize their choice of methodology.

The student, collects primary data for the objective of addressing a particular research problem. This includes conducting surveys or interviews, making first-hand observations or conducting experiments. So-called secondary data is data originally collected by someone else, typically not for the objective the student has and is made explicit in the research question. Secondary data sources include existing databases, reports, reviews etc. The type of data gathered (primary or secondary) depends on the objective of the research and the nature of the research question. Most important is to find out what type of data is best suited to answer a proposed research question.

1.6. Research Proposal course
The master thesis process starts the semester before the student plans to hand in the thesis by signing up for a Research Proposal course. The course yields no ECTS credits but helps students to start thinking about a thesis topic. During the course, the student must submit a Preliminary Research Proposal (PRP) and a Research Proposal. Failing to do so can result in the student’s exclusion from continuing and handing in the thesis during the given term.

The PRP is the first exercise in outlining a thesis topic, but students should aim to be as specific as possible. It should contain the same themes as a Research Proposal (see below), but in a much shorter format (2 – 5 pages). Before the process of developing the PRP, students may want to meet with internal faculty members and discuss ideas. At the beginning of the thesis semester, students are required to have written a detailed Research Proposal that will then be either approved or declined (subject to revision) by their supervisor.

A Research Proposal should include:

- A clear statement of objectives and a well-defined and focused research question
- Brief literature review - This includes a summary of the main findings of selected scholarly articles in the relevant field of study.
- Proposed methodology - What type of data collection is proposed to embark upon
Potential outcomes and possible implications
Timeline for work
A list of references

The proposal can be up to 15 pages. The proposal is subject to the approval of the supervisor.

1.7. Supervisor
RU’s core faculty does most of the theses supervision. A complete list of faculty should be available on RU’s website (www.ru.is). Core faculty includes Adjuncts / aðjúnkt, Assistant Professors / lektor, Associate Professors / dósent and Professors / prófessor. Students are at liberty (not obligated) to contact faculty and discuss potential supervision before handing in the Preliminary Research Proposal. However, at that stage it is not possible for students to negotiate supervision with individuals outside RU’s core faculty (e.g. part-time teachers). If the Preliminary Research Proposal, Research Topic and Thesis Registration Form is handed in without a supervisor, thesis administrator will recommend a suitable and available supervisor. Students are advised to consult the programme administrator if in doubt as to who can qualify as a supervisor. A student’s choice of supervisor is subject to the approval of thesis coordinator and the choice of thesis subject depends on the approval of a student’s supervisor.

Students need to keep their supervisors informed about the progress of their thesis on a regular basis. Students can expect to be asked to give a presentation before a faculty panel once or twice during the thesis process. Students should follow the deadline scheme provided in Section 2.1, failure to do so may result in exclusion from the process.

In order to structure the process of writing the thesis and monitoring the progress, it is highly recommended that students set up a work schedule with the supervisor as early as possible. A major factor in successful thesis writing is time management and working with deadlines. The University’s policies stipulate that the supervisor and the student have to agree on timelines and procedure for the thesis process. Section 2.1 provides an overview on processes, time and deadlines involved.

Success in the thesis work is however entirely in the student’s hands, they are responsible for managing the overall process from proposing the research topic to submitting the finished

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1 The Department of Business Administration is obligated to utilize its core resources and faculty for supervision before looking elsewhere. However, this does not exclude the use external supervisors, for instance, at times when members of core faculty are not available.
work, including e.g. registering the topic, scheduling appointments with the supervisor, and reporting/presenting the work in progress.

Supervisors and students should agree on the form of their communication and consultations. Students are strongly encouraged to prepare a plan with dates and deadlines for the different stages of writing.

If serious problems or differences occur in the collaboration between a student and a supervisor, students are encouraged to contact coordinator(s) of the thesis process (names should be available in Canvas).

2. Deadlines, submission and grading

2.1. Deadlines
Writing a master’s thesis is a time consuming task. It is usually the largest written assignment that a student works on. For that reason, good preparation and continuous planning make a big difference in terms of productivity and quality. Students are required to start outlining the thesis project proposal in detail during the semester preceding the semester they plan to write their thesis. When a student has outlined a detailed project proposal, s/he is expected to work full-time for four months on the thesis before handing it in.

The deadlines for submitting the master’s thesis are set up as follows according to graduation dates. If the stated hand-in date is during a weekend or a national holiday it moves to the first following workday.

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<td>Summer</td>
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<td>April 15</td>
<td>May 15</td>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>August 15</td>
<td>September 15</td>
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<td>Fall</td>
<td>April 15</td>
<td>June 1</td>
<td>August 31</td>
<td>October 15</td>
<td>December 1</td>
<td>January 2</td>
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Table 1: Important deadlines

2.2. Final draft submission
A final draft of the thesis should be handed in to the supervisor a few weeks prior to the final submission date. A final draft should include all sections and material (literature and data) in addition to analysis and discussions. Students should not plan for adding new data after the
submission of the final draft, unless instructed to do so by the supervisor. Late submission of a final draft is highly discouraged. Although an almost completed work has been submitted, plans should be made for having plenty to work on after receiving comments from the supervisor on the final draft.

If the submitted final draft is insufficient, the supervisor can recommend that the student should ask for extension to the next term or that the master’s thesis work be discontinued. Supervisors are required to consult with the thesis coordinator in such cases. If a student asks for extension, s/he must register for the following semester and pay tuition according to the RU pricing scheme for 15 ECTS at the master’s level.

2.3. Final submission of master’s thesis

Only digital copies of thesis are to be submitted. A digital copy is to be uploaded to Canvas in a PDF format, within the relevant deadline specified in Section 2.1. The upload to Canvas is also a submission to Turnitin\(^2\), a plagiarism detection software. No theses will be accepted after the published deadline. Students are not permitted to withdraw a submitted thesis.

The thesis must then also be submitted electronically (digital copy) to Skemman\(^3\) repository.

Final thesis should be open for reading in the repository Skemman, in accordance with RU Open Access Policy. However, access to a final thesis can be closed by the author, e.g. if the thesis contains confidential information. A student wishing to restrict access to a final thesis must submit an application about the closing of a final thesis. The application is subject to the approval of supervisor (Appendix 3) and RU Department of Business Administration. A signed application is to be submitted with the upload to Skemman.

A student can, at any time before the final hand-in date, request for an extension to the next term. The extension is subject to the approval and availability of the supervisor. The student is required to register for the following semester and pay tuition according to the RU pricing scheme for 15 ECTS at the master’s level.

2.4. Examiners

Thesis coordinator(s) appoints an examiner. Supervisor and examiner jointly evaluate and grade a student’s thesis. Each student receives a brief statement explaining his or her grade. In cases

\(^2\) More information on plagiarism and Turnitin can be found at [http://en.ru.is/referencing/plagiarism/](http://en.ru.is/referencing/plagiarism/).

\(^3\) Guidelines to submitting a thesis to Skemman and other relevant information can be found at [http://www.ru.is/skemman](http://www.ru.is/skemman) For more information or question regading Skemman, please contact RU's library.
where examiner and supervisor are unable to reach a unanimous evaluation and grading, a second examiner may be appointed. The second examiner should seek to integrate both views and recommend a conclusion.

2.5. Grading
Thesis grades will be provided according to the usual grading system from 0 to 10. A passing grade for a thesis is 6.0.

If a thesis is graded below 6.0, the student has failed and is not allowed to resubmit. In this case an additional examiner will also have read the thesis and approved the grade. Even though a resubmission of a failed thesis is not allowed, the student can request to be re-registered for a master’s thesis. In the case of re-registration, the student will have to pay full tuition (30 ECTS). The student will be required to submit a detailed research proposal for a new thesis. Nevertheless, data collected for the former thesis can be re-used if approved by the supervisor. Under most circumstances of re-registration, a new supervisor will be appointed. The new supervisor will have to approve the new research proposal and the data used. Re-registration for a master’s thesis is only permitted once.

3. Guidelines on the form and layout of theses

3.1. Length
The length of a 30 ECTS-credit thesis shall be in the range of 25,000 to 30,000 words, as counted in a word processing program. This refers to the body of substance of the thesis, excluding abstract, table of content, list of references and other lists, as applicable, and appendices. Footnotes count as part of the thesis. If the length of a thesis is not within these limits, it can be dismissed.

3.2. Structure of the thesis
A thesis should include the following:

- Title page
- Abstract and up to 6 keywords
- Affidavit confirming that the student was the original author of the thesis and that the thesis has not been submitted for a similar purpose in another educational program. (cf. Appendix 2 of this thesis guide)
- Table of contents
- List of tables and figures
Thesis, structured in hierarchically numbered chapters containing sections addressing the following:* 
  o Introduction
  o Problem/issues statement and research question/s
  o Literature review
  o Conceptual framework (model based on the literature review)
  o If applicable, hypotheses and/or possible results.
  o Methodology
  o Results / analysis of empirical data.
  o Discussion
  o Conclusion and recommendations
  o Appendices
  o List of references

* It may be that not all themes mentioned here are applicable to your thesis. On this topic, please consult your supervisor.

3.3. Title page of the thesis
Instructions on how to create a cover for the master’s thesis may be accessed on http://en.ru.is/rusb/information-for-current-students/#thesis.

3.4. Abstract
Each thesis should be handed in with an abstract of 200-300 words. It is important that an abstract includes a research problem, main substance of thesis and principal conclusions.

3.5. Formatting
The following formatting requirements apply to the final document containing a submitted thesis:
  □ Font type: Times New Roman
  □ Font size: 12 pt for text body, larger sizes for headings, smaller sizes for tables etc.
  □ Spacing: 1.5
  □ Margins: left 3.5 cm, right 2.5 cm, top 2.5 cm, bottom 2.0 cm
  □ Footnotes: all notes are to be provided in the form of numbered footnotes
4. Use of sources, assessment of sources and ethical matters

4.1. Use of sources
Sources need to be cited for virtually everything that does not originate directly from the student himself or herself, except in the case of generally known facts. Plagiarism is a serious matter. This means, basically, that other people’s ideas cannot be presented as one’s own. Sources must therefore always be cited. This means that it should always be possible to trace all sources. Anything that is written without a source being cited is the student’s own. Rules on integrity in work methods and penalties for violation are laid down in the RU General Rules on Study and Assessment⁴ and the RU Code of Ethics⁵. The APA Style is the preferred referencing style for all written work within the Department of Business Administration. You will find the latest version of the APA Publication Manual in RU’s Library. There are also online sources you could use, but be aware that you are using the latest version of the APA Style. If you run into problems citing one or more of your sources you are welcome to ask for assistance at the RU’s Library Research Assistance or book an appointment with an information specialist at library@ru.is.

Students must sign a Declaration of Research Work Integrity (Appendix 2) and include that form in the binding (after the cover page). By signing the declaration, the student is confirming that he/she has read RU’s Code of Ethics⁶ and that s/he fully understands the consequences of violating the rules.

4.2. Quality of sources
Source critique is the process of determining whether a source is reliable or not. For example, newspaper articles are generally unsound sources by themselves, while peer-reviewed scholarly articles are sound sources. Primary sources should always be used where appropriate.

All sources (e.g. transcribes from interviews and survey data) used in writing the thesis need to be preserved, as supervisor and examiner may wish to see them.

4.3. Research resources
You are welcome to ask the Library and Information Services at RU for assistance in regards to your research work. In addition, students working on their thesis can book an appointment

⁴ See https://en.ru.is/rules/general-rules-on-study-and-assessment
⁵ See https://en.ru.is/the-university/strategies/
⁶ See https://en.ru.is/rules/study-and-examination-rules/code-of-conduct/
with an information specialist at library@ru.is. The library offers several resources to assist you in your thesis work e.g. books, journals, databases, etc. (Appendix 1)
Appendix 1 - Resources

The library of Reykjavik University offers several resources to assist you in your thesis work. Leitir.is the library system hosting a national catalogue and gives access to information about material in most libraries in Iceland. For example, college, public, administration, institution, expert, and school libraries at all levels. Students have access to a database of master theses: http://leitir.is

Journals and articles in English: http://en.ru.is/journals / http://ru.is/timarit

The RU library can order books and photocopies of articles from journals which are not available in the library or in subscribed databases (inter-library loans). These services are especially intended for RU faculty and for students preparing their final thesis.

Inter-library loans in English: http://en.ru.is/rusb/interlibrary-loans / http://www.ru.is/bokasafn/millisafnalan

Off-Campus Access:

You have remote access to all e-resources subscribed to by the RU library.

http://en.ru.is/remoteaccess / http://ru.is/fjaradgangur

For further information, see also:

http://en.ru.is/library / http://www.ru.is/bokasafn
http://en.ru.is/library-a-z / http://www.ru.is/bokasafnid-a-o/

Repository of academic and research documents:

http://skemman.is/en/ / http://skemman.is/is/

You can follow the library on Facebook at http://facebook.com/bokasafn
Appendix 2 - Declaration of Research Work Integrity

Declaration of Research Work Integrity

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature of any degree. This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

By signing the present document, I confirm and agree that I have read RU’s ethics code of conduct and fully understand the consequences of violating these rules in regards of my thesis.

...............................................................................................................................

Date and place  Kennitala  Signature
Application for Non-Disclosure of Thesis

Student name
Kennitala

Title of thesis:

Reason for non-disclosure application

End of non-disclosure period (maximum of 5 years)

Please note that in order to inform the public about the research output of the Department of Business Administration, abstracts of theses are not covered by this non-disclosure agreement. If there is a greater need to protect not only the details contained in a thesis, but also the compressed information included in an abstract, it is the student’s own responsibility to keep the abstract devoid of all proprietary information.

Application for non-disclosure of thesis must be signed by the student and the supervisor.

Date, Signature of Student

Date, Signature of Supervisor
Partial submission of the master thesis

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<th>Hand in date for the first semester:</th>
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<td>☐ December 15 (Fall semester)</td>
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<td>☐ September 1 (Summer)</td>
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<th>ECTS credits and semesters:</th>
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<th>Name of the supervisor:</th>
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To acquire 15 ECTS credits for a partial submission of the thesis, a student is required to deliver a work effort that amounts to at least 375 hours.

Upon signing this agreement, student and supervisor confirm that they have agreed on a project schedule for the first thesis semester that amounts to 15 ECTS credits, as well as how they intend to communicate during the semester.

By May 15\textsuperscript{th} or December 15\textsuperscript{th} the supervisor has to confirm whether or not the student has fulfilled requirements and over the semester delivered work that amounts to 15 ECTS credits. The confirmation is submitted to Program Administrator and the student receives a pass/fail grade.

Date, Signature of Student

Date, Signature of Supervisor
Trúnaðaryfirlýsing

Nemandi er bundinn trúnaðarskyldu um hvað eina sem hann verður áskynja í vinnu sinni fyrir Fyrirtækið varðandi starfsemi Fyrirtækisins og tengdra félagu og/eða viðskiptavini sömu aðila. Gildir trúnaðarskyldan bæði utan og innan Fyrirtækisins og helst áfram eftir lok verkefnisins.

Í trúnaðarskyldunni felst að nemandi má ekki á þeim tíma sem hann vinnur fyrir Fyrirtækið, með hvaða hætti sem er, beint eða óbeint, upplýsa neinn aðila um gögn, þ.m.t. gögn varðandi viðskiptavini, svo sem viðskiptamannalista, viðskiptatengsl, tæknilegar-, viðskipta og/eða fjárhagslegar upplýsingar, sem tengjast með beinum eða óbeinum hætti Fyrirtækinu og/eða tengendum félagum, sem nemandi veit eða á að vita að skulu vera leyndarmál og/eða bundin trúnaði.

Í 16. gr. c. laga um eftirlit með viðskiptaháttum og markaðssetningu nr. 57/2005 segir meðal annars:

*Sá sem fengið hefur vitneskju um eða umræð yfir atvinnuleyndarmálum á réttmætan hátt í starfi sínu fyrir annan eða í félagi við annan, sbr. 1. mgr., má ekki án heimildar veita upplýsingar um eða hagnýta sér slikt leyndarmál. Bann þetta gildir í þrjú ár frá því að starfi er lokid eða samningi slítið.*

Undirritaður nemandi við Háskólann í Reykjavík hefur í tengslum við verkefni sem hann/hún vinnur að hjá Fyrirtæki ____________________________ kynnt sér framangreint auk reglna um atvinnuleyndarmál í lögum nr. 57/2005 og heitir því að virða í hvívetna trúnaðarskyldu gagnvart Fyrirtækinu.

______________________________
Staður og dags:

______________________________
Nafn og kennitala