

**The Thesis in the Master of Social Work Program
School of Social Work**

Thesis Process

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1. Focus of the MSW Program

The focus of the School of Social Work's MSW is on preparation for graduate level practice (including i.e., direct practice, community advocacy, research, policy) through course and field work which emphasize social justice.

2. The Thesis is an Option

Given the focus of the School of Social Work (SSW) the thesis is an option which may be undertaken by interested students. It can offer many personal and career rewards but it also demands a great deal by way of your commitment and resources. Below we discuss information and supports available to help you make your decision. However, do not hesitate to discuss your interest in doing a thesis with the Graduate Coordinator at any point in your deliberations or with a faculty member.

3. What is a Thesis?

Generally speaking, a thesis is a formal paper incorporating original research on a subject. The distinguishing mark of thesis research is *an original contribution to knowledge*. The Master's thesis is usually an independent research project that includes designing a study and performing most aspects of the research process. The finished product is a thesis, in the official "thesis" format. The purpose of a Master's thesis is to further individual educational development by requiring the student to plan, conduct, and report an organized and systematic study. Students may develop their thesis ideas in course work but cannot resubmit course material in full.

4. Do I Require a Master's Thesis to enter a Doctoral Social Work Program?

Most students in Canadian Doctoral programs enter on the basis of a Canadian MSW degree. Almost all MSW programs are based on a combination of course work, projects, and practicums. Some doctoral program require a Master's thesis and others do not. However, nearly all social work schools with Master's programs do provide the thesis option. A well executed Master's thesis should strengthen your application to doctoral programs since admissions to Doctoral Programs include consideration of the demonstrated capacity of applicants to work and think independently and creatively and to write well.

5. What are the Reasons for Choosing a Thesis?

There are a variety of reasons why you might wish to do a thesis. For instance:

- You are passionately interested in a particular topic and wish to explore it in depth.
- You want to build your research capacity and this will likely be the highest degree that you will earn;
- You view this as an opportunity to gain specialized knowledge and skills that may make you more attractive to certain employers;
- You want to use this as a means of exploring and enhancing your independent research abilities with a view to making a decision about whether or not to pursue a Ph.D. degree (see Appendix A).

6. Are There Academic or Other Pre-requisites Before Considering the Thesis Option?

You will need to be a self-directed learner who enjoys being intellectually challenged and is comfortable with thinking and working independently with limited supervision:

- Academic research can be a lonely business. You will need to be able to work independently and without the structure of classes with peers.
- You will usually have already demonstrated a high level of academic achievement, including for instance major papers that have received very positive comments from faculty, and grades in the A range. However even if you do not have these pre-requisites do not let this deter you from your interest in doing a thesis. There are exceptions to these norms.

7. What Can I Expect the Time Frame to be for Completion of the Thesis?

The thesis option usually requires a minimum of six months full-time, or eighteen months part-time beyond completion of the “courses only” option. These time-frames are partly based on the unpredictability of the research process. In addition, you will need to factor in time for the University level ethical review process required for all research involving human subjects. For information regarding Health Sciences Guidelines for research involving humans and the “Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans” see <http://www.dal.ca/~research/ethics.html>. (See Appendix B for typical thesis outline).

8. What Funds are Available to Support Completion of the Thesis?

One means of funding for many students is the extension of the student loan. Special funds for Master’s level university students, especially in the professions and social sciences and humanities, are very limited. Faculty of Graduate Studies scholarships provides funds which are normally used as entrance scholarships covering first year fees at the School of Social Work. Through competition a small amount of research funding may also be obtained through the Faculty of Graduate Studies. Within the School relatively small amounts of money may be obtained through teaching assistantships, through research assistantships, and through

Scholarship and Bursary Awards based on need and competition. Private associations and foundations provide more substantial scholarships to students whose research has a focus that relates to their concerns. Contact <http://researchservices.dal.ca/> for information regarding applications for funding. For national funding contact <http://www.sshrc.ca/> for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca> for the Canadian Institute for Health Research. The Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation can be contacted at <http://www.nshrf.ca>

Planning ahead is therefore important both so that you can explore all avenues for financial support, calculate the costs of engaging in the thesis option, and weigh whether your access to financial resources, and/or the potential debt load you will incur is justified for you.

When you register for your thesis you can choose whether to claim you are a full-time or part-time student. This can make a difference in terms of being able to apply for funding as often one needs to be a full-time student. Issues related to taxes may also be relevant.

9. What is the Advising Process for the Thesis Option?

- In September each year an initial information meeting will be held for all students interested in considering the thesis option. That meeting will give students an opportunity to discuss the thesis option.
- Students should then review the requirements for pursuing the thesis as stated by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and the School.
- After this students who wish to further explore the thesis option should discuss their interest with the Graduate Coordinator or potential supervisor at the School of Social Work usually by the second term.
- Once a supervisor has been chosen and they have agreed to this role, they assume the primary advising role.

10. Registration

Thesis students usually register for the thesis after having presented a formal proposal to the thesis committee. Following this students submit their ethical review to the Dalhousie Research Ethics Board. Once the Research Ethics Board has approved the research ethics application one registers for the thesis. Students may register as either full-time or part-time. Those applying for funding may need to register full-time.

11. Choosing a Thesis Supervisor

In choosing a supervisor you will of course want to consider whether they have an interest in your topic area. In addition you should consider whether you think that you can develop a good working relationship with that person. If you have an idea about who might be an appropriate supervisor you may want to approach them for an initial discussion of your interest. If you are

unsure about making such an approach you can consult with the Graduate Coordinator first. Research interest areas of all social work faculty are published in the School's website so you can check those out. Faculty of Graduate Studies regulations require that you have a thesis committee of at least two faculty members who are both members of your department and who are members of the Graduate Faculty of the University. (See SSW website for thesis guidelines document). You may also wish to read some of the work the potential supervisor has published.

- Students completing their MSW via distance education may experience some difficulty finding a thesis advisor. This does not mean you cannot do a thesis. If you are having trouble it is a good idea to contact the Graduate Coordinator for assistance.

12. Relationship with Your Thesis Supervisor

Guidelines for the ongoing conduct of the relationship are provided in the Faculty of Graduate Studies Calendar. If you have concerns that your working relationship with your supervisor is not going well and you are not able to resolve the issues with your supervisor be sure to seek assistance from the Graduate Coordinator or the Associate Director of the School.

13. Relationship to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

You are required to fill out an annual FGS Progress Report Form that includes information on your progress on your thesis. This is signed by your thesis supervisor and the School's Graduate Coordinator. This form can be obtained from the Student Services Coordinator at the school.

You are required to follow the Faculty of Graduate Studies regulations for thesis submission precisely (see FGS website).

14. Thesis Committee

The committee is typically comprised of a Supervisor and internal or second reader from the School of Social Work. Prior to the defence the Supervisor will determine who the outside reader should be (from another unit or faculty, or another university) and approach them. The supervisor will need to use their judgement about when to contact a potential outside reader ensuring that they leave enough time to meet anticipated dates of defence. The student should not be in contact with them prior to the defence or know them. The outside reader will receive the defence ready thesis at least 3 weeks before the agreed upon defence date. All members of the committee need to be members of the Dalhousie Faculty of Graduate Studies. If they are not they need to submit an application to Graduate Studies.

15. Thesis Proposal

The thesis proposal will be presented formally to the thesis supervisor and internal or second reader. The supervisor should ensure that a *Notification of Thesis Proposal Form* is completed. This form is available from the Student Services Coordinator who also keeps the completed forms on file. Committees vary in how they organize the sequence of reading a proposal and a

thesis. It is up to the supervisor. The supervisor will always get the written material either first or at the same time as the second reader. There is often some back and forth of drafts and comments. This is an opportunity to establish clear agreement on the direction of the thesis. This proposal should include a literature review, objectives of the study, methodology and discussion of ethics. Interview guides or other data collection tools should be included as well as references. The APA format should be used. Students can incorporate elements of the Research Ethics Board ethical review form in their proposal. Normally students will submit their Ethics Review form after presentation of their proposal. The graduate student should have their supervisor and second reader review the ethics submission.

16. Thesis Defence Preparation Process

Please note that the Supervisor is to contact the Outside Reader regarding availability for the defence **NOT** the student. The Outside Reader must not have worked with the student and not know them personally. The thesis must be submitted to the Thesis Committee and the Outside Reader at least **three weeks** prior to the defence. Please note that no changes should be made to the thesis once it has been formally submitted. This is considered the *defence ready thesis*. If you have any questions regarding the process for a defence, please contact the Graduate Coordinator within the School of Social Work. The Outside Reader should be told by the supervisor that a report is required at the time of the defence. A copy should be made available to the student at the defence and a copy should be placed in the students file in the Student Service Coordinator's Office.

The supervisor will ensure that the *Request to Schedule a Defence Form* is completed. This form is available from the Student Services Coordinator who also keeps the completed forms on file.

The Thesis Defence will be chaired by the Graduate Coordinator or their designate. The Chair of the Defence shall not have been a member of the Thesis committee and is a non-voting member of the examining committee. Please ensure that the date/time has been confirmed with your Thesis Committee and that your Supervisor has contacted the Outside Reader (external) prior to submitting this form to the Student Services Coordinator. Ensure that Graduate Coordinator or their designate is available before finalizing thesis defence date. The supervisor will book a room for the defence- normally the School of Social Work Conference Room. A written notice of the defence will be posted at the School through the main desk and an email will be sent out by the Student Services Coordinator informing all MSW students at the School of the defence. The supervisor is responsible for ensuring this happens.

17. Thesis Defence

The thesis defence is scheduled once the thesis supervisor and internal or second reader are satisfied the thesis is defence ready. All requested revisions by the supervisory committee have been completed. Students are responsible for providing forms for signatures at the defence and ensuring the thesis formatting is approved by the Faculty of Graduate Studies. The Graduate Coordinator of the School of Social Work will chair the defence unless it is for one of their students or they are unavailable. In which case either the director or associate director will be

asked to chair the defence. Students will present their research (literature, objectives, methods, findings, recommendations) for approximately 20 minutes. They are asked questions by the examining committee and the audience can subsequently ask questions. There is typically up to the three rounds of questions allowed for the examining committee. They may ask related questions in each round. Questioning begins with the Outside Reader, followed by the Second Reader and last the Supervisor. The Chair ensures that the examining committee is satisfied they have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions. Following the examining committee's questions, the student and audience leave the room and the examining committee will adjudicate the success of the thesis defence and subsequently call the student back in the room and provide the results. At this time the student will be informed of any changes they must make, given a copy of the outside readers report, and the time frame for these changes will be communicated. A copy of the external report by the outside reader, defence outcomes and recommended changes with time frame will be placed in the students file with the Students Service Coordinator by the chair of the defence. The outside reader's report is given to the examining committee and the student at the defence following the adjudication of the thesis. The supervisor may hold back their signature on the successful completion of the thesis until all the final revisions are completed. The examining committee may wish to see the final changes, but often designate the supervisor to review the final changes and ensure they are satisfactory.

Appendix A The "Thinking about It" Stage

The "thinking about it stage" is when you are finally faced with the reality of choosing a thesis topic and completing your degree. Usually the early phases of a graduate program proceed in clear and very structured ways. There are clear requirements and expectations, and the graduate student moves along, step by step, getting ever closer to the completion of the program. One day, however, the clear structure begins to diminish and now you're approaching the thesis stage. This is a new and different time. These next steps are more and more defined by **you** and not your adviser, the program, or the department.

1. **Be inclusive with your thinking.** Don't try to eliminate ideas too quickly. Build on your ideas and see how many different research projects you can identify. Give yourself the luxury of being expansive in your thinking at this stage -- you won't be able to do this later on. Try and be creative.

2. **Write down your ideas.** This will allow you to revisit an idea later on. Or, you can modify and change an idea. If you don't write your ideas they tend to be in a continual state of change and you will probably have the feeling that you're not going anywhere. What a great feeling it is to be able to sit down and scan the many ideas you have been thinking about, if **they're written down.**

3. **Try not to be overly influenced at this time by what you feel others expect from you** (your colleagues, your profession, your academic department, etc.). This will be one of the few opportunities you may have in your professional life to focus in on a research topic that is really of your own choosing.

4. **Don't begin your thinking by assuming that your research will draw international attention to you!!** Instead, be realistic in setting your goal. Make sure your expectations are tempered by:

- the realization that you are fulfilling an academic requirement,
- the fact that the process of conducting the research may be just as important (or more important) than the outcomes of the research, and
- the idea that first and foremost the whole research project should be a learning experience for you.

If you can keep these ideas in mind while you're thinking through your research you stand an excellent chance of having your research project turn out well. Taken from <http://www.msue.msu.edu.aee.dissthes.guide.htm>

Appendix B

An Example of a Thesis Outline

Note: This outline reflects information widely available in a large number of sources including those on the internet. The exact outline and content of your thesis will vary depending on the nature of your topic and research design and the suggestions of your thesis supervisor and committee. However, it should include most of these elements. The thesis should use the most recent APA style manual. It is available through the Killam library or abbreviated versions are available online.

Chapter 1 Introduction

There are generally five stages to the Introduction section. You should:

1.1 Give the background to the research

This section outlines the broad field of study and then leads into the focus of the research problem. This section is short and aims to orient the readers and grasp their attention.

1.2 Establish the overall field

Section 1.2 outlines the core of the research. The research problem is one or two sentences that cannot be answered 'yes' or 'no'; it is the broad problem that the researcher will examine more precisely in the hypotheses and is the problem prompting and placing a boundary around the research without specifying what kind of research is to be done.

1.3 Summarize previous research and indicate the research gap

The research problem should be important on several theoretical and practical grounds; for example, a thesis about child welfare services could justify its research problem through:

- importance of the study and/or the importance of the specific area of the discipline being investigated;
- relative neglect of the specific research problem by previous researchers;
- relative neglect of the research's methodologies by previous researchers; and
- usefulness of potential applications of the research's findings.

1.4 State the purpose of the research, outline it, and provide definitions

Section 1.4 is an introductory overview of the methodology, and is placed here in chapter 1 to satisfy the initial curiosity of the examiner. This section should refer to sections in chapter 2 and 3 where the methodology is justified and described.

Definitions adopted by researchers are often not uniform, so key and controversial terms are defined to establish positions taken in the research.

1.5 Provide a Conclusion

The final paragraph of each chapter usually summarizes the key achievements of the chapter.

Chapter 2 Literature review

The second chapter aims to build a theoretical foundation upon which the research is based. This is achieved by reviewing the relevant literature and identifying issues worth researching because they are controversial or have not been answered by previous research.

The survey of the literature in a thesis should not concentrate only on the area of the research problem, but also show links between the research problem and the wider body of knowledge.

Literature can be discussed succinctly in terms of:

- topics covered, including the year, the country and/or region, and the subjects in the research,
- survey and statistical methodologies used,
- findings,
- limitations and problems of the research, for example, was the data collection or its analysis appropriate?
- contribution to the body of knowledge, that is, how it compares with the Positions developed by other researchers.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Chapter 3 describes the major methodology used to collect the data which will be used to answer the hypotheses.

The chapter should have separate sections to cover:

- discussion of the research design;
- justification for the methodology in terms of the research problem and the literature review;
- for qualitative studies a discussion of the researcher's experience with the subject under investigation and how this might influence her/his approach;
- the unit of analysis and/or subjects or sources of data;

- the process through which decisions about sampling were made;
- instruments or procedures used to collect data, details of pilot studies and explicit concern about specific procedures used to handle internal and external validity;
- administration of instruments or procedures;
- limitations of the methodology if they were not explicitly discussed in section 1;
- any special or unusual treatments of data before it was analyzed;
- any computer programs used to analyze the data, with justifications for their use;
- ethical issues.

Chapter 4 Analysis of data

Chapter 4 presents patterns of results and analyzes them for their relevance to the research questions or hypotheses.

Chapter 5 Conclusions and Implications

5.1 Introduction

The master's candidate must clearly show that the research does make a distinct contribution to the body of knowledge. Thus the research's contributions to knowledge should be the explicit theme of sections 5.2 to 5.4.

5.2 Conclusions about research questions or hypotheses

Findings for each research question or hypothesis are summarized from chapter 4 and explained within the context of this and prior research examined in chapter 2. For each research question/hypothesis, the agreement or disagreement of the results with the literature should be made clear and the reason for disagreement thought through.

5.3 Conclusions about the research problem

Based on section 5.2, implications of the research for furthering understanding of the research problem are explored. Again the contribution of the research to the body of knowledge should be clearly developed.

5.4 Implications for theory

The full picture of the research's findings within the body of knowledge is provided in section 5.4, that is, it provides the theoretical implications of the research. This section aims to show readers that the research has not only made a significant contribution to knowledge in its immediate discipline/field, but also has implications for the wider body of knowledge.

If one or more of the models developed in chapter 2 have to be modified because of the

research findings, then the modified model should be developed in section 5.3 or 5.4. Indeed, development of a modified model of the classification or analytical models developed in chapter 2 is an excellent summary of how the research has added to the body of knowledge.

In brief, sections 5.3 and 5.4 are the conclusion to the whole thesis and are the research candidate's complete answer to the research problem.

5.5 Implications for policy and practice

Practical implications for practitioners and policy makers are covered in section 5.5.

5.6 Limitations

Section 1.7 has previously outlined major limitations of the research. This section discusses other limitations that became apparent during the progress of the research.

5.7 Implications for further research

This final section is written to help researchers in selection and design of future research. Further research could refer to both topics and to methodologies or to both. Removing some limitations mentioned in section 1.7 usually provides opportunities for further research.

References

The list of references is closely tied to the literature review in section 3. Most examiners scan your list of references looking for the important works in the field, so make sure they are listed and referred to in section 3.

Appendices

What goes in the appendices? Any material which impedes the smooth development of your presentation, but which is important to justify the results of a thesis. This includes for example, letter of recruitment, consent forms, and interview schedules.