

## Marking guidance for dissertations

### The importance of dissertation marks

The marks for level 6 and level 7 dissertations play a very significant role in determining the outcomes for BA and MA students:

- dissertation modules are large (40 credits at Level 6, 60 at level 7);
- level 6 marks have more weight than Level 5 marks in determining outcomes and classifications for the BA;
- when a student's overall mark for their award falls just below a grade boundary (putting them in the 'zone of discretion'), a dissertation mark above that boundary is one of the factors the exam board must take into account when deciding whether to give them the higher classification; and
- for the MA, a particular classification normally requires that *both* the student's overall average mark *and* their dissertation mark be in that class.

### Double marking

TEIs are free, within the limits set out in the Common Awards [policy on double marking and moderating](#), and other relevant policies, to design their own procedures for marking dissertations. The following, however, is the approach currently used by the Department of Theology and Religion in Durham, and whilst we do not *require* TEIs to follow it, we do *recommend* it.

The Common Awards policy states that '**Double-marking** is to be applied to all dissertations and major projects.'

The approach we recommend is that the **first marker** should normally be the supervisor for the project, as (especially where dissertations cover quite specialist topics) the supervisor is the person most likely to have expertise relevant to that specific project. They are also likely to understand the resources available to the student, and the context within which they undertook the project. In this approach, the first marker would assign a mark to the dissertation, and draft detailed feedback for the student.

The **second marker** can then play a somewhat different role. The Common Awards policy notes that 'Where double marking is used, there is *no University requirement that it must be carried out blind or unseen* (where the first marker's marks and the rationale for them are not communicated to the second marker until after they have completed their marking).'

In our recommended approach, the second marker will see the dissertation *complete with the first marker's marks and draft feedback*, though with the student's details anonymised. The second marker will quite likely not have the subject expertise required to judge the substance of the dissertation as confidently as the first marker, but they should normally be an experienced marker at the relevant level. They can therefore concentrate on

- (i) assessing the general academic qualities of the piece, such as its clarity and cogency;
- (ii) checking that the first marker's mark and feedback appropriately reflect the marking criteria and the module learning outcomes.

In such an approach, the second marker may often provide no additional feedback for the student themselves, but they might ask the first marker to revise theirs.

In **multi-centre TEIs** where more than one centre has students taking dissertations, it is also good practice, where possible, to ensure that first and second markers come from different centres, so that the standards employed in all centres are kept in sync.

### **Learning outcomes**

The Common Awards [assessment guidance pages](#) do not provide distinct assessment guidelines or marking criteria for dissertations, pointing people instead to the generic guidance for 'Essays and other written assignments'.

Markers should, however, refer to the learning outcomes for dissertation modules. For example:

#### **Level 6 dissertation learning outcomes**

(Excerpts from the module outline for [TMM3362](#)):

By the end of the module students will be able to

- Demonstrate a coherent, systematic and detailed understanding of key concepts and processes of inquiry involved in the intellectual disciplines and research methods appropriate to the area of theological study within which the dissertation topic falls, including critical engagement with recent research methodologies and findings.
- Extend and apply their knowledge and understanding of the chosen area of theology, ministry and mission to new and complex contexts, reflecting critically on their impact on the life and ministry of the

church, and showing sensitivity to the problems of religious language, experience, and the limits of knowledge.

- Identify, gather, analyse and critically evaluate textual source materials, including material from primary sources and scholarly research, and communicate their findings with clarity and fairness to specialist audiences.
- Critically evaluate ideas, arguments and assumptions, using them to construct and communicate coherent and well-reasoned arguments, showing critical awareness of their own and others' beliefs, commitments and prejudices, to specialist audiences.
- Take responsibility for a task that involves the exercise of initiative, independent inquiry, and the effective management of time, resources and use of IT; meeting deadlines; evaluating the project and learning from it.

### **Level 7 dissertation learning outcomes**

(Excerpts from the module outline for [TMM42360](#); note also the dissertation modules for other MA programmes [TMM46560](#); [TMM47060](#); [TMM48060](#)):

By the end of the module students will be able to

- Demonstrate a systematic understanding and depth of knowledge of an area of study or of professional practice in theology, ministry and mission that is informed by the methodologies and findings of research and original thinking at current boundaries of the subject.
- Understand, assimilate and evaluate critically advanced scholarship and research methodologies and findings in the chosen area(s) of theology, ministry and mission.
- Demonstrate an understanding of a range of methods of analysis and inquiry in theology, ministry and mission, and an in depth engagement with methods applicable to their chosen field of research or enquiry.
- Give a critical and comprehensive account of a range of methods for relating their chosen field of study to aspects of faith, church and society.
- Apply their knowledge to undertake independent investigation of an area of study or of professional practice, reaching valid conclusions, some of which may be original, and report these findings effectively within the conventions of the relevant academic or professional community.
- Contribute to the debate at the forefront of their chosen area(s) of study or practice.

- Evaluate and apply methodologies, develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, propose new hypotheses.
- Reflect theologically in a sophisticated and rigorous manner, exercising sound judgement when engaging systematically and creatively with complex, unpredictable and ambiguous realities in the church and the world today.
- Carry out systematic and creative research into complex issues and communicate their findings with clarity, sensitivity, fairness and imagination to specialist and non-specialist audiences. Demonstrate initiative, self-direction and independence in tackling and solving problems, and in planning and implementing tasks.
- Exercise their independent learning skills to pursue further professional development or academic study.

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February 2025