**Alliance Manchester Business School  
MSc Business Analysis & Strategic Management  
2022-2023**

**Traditional and Project Based Dissertation Handbook**

1. **Introduction**

This document sets out the responsibilities and obligations of both students and Alliance MBS in the dissertation stage of MSc in Business Analysis and Strategic Management (MSc in BASM).

1. **Types of dissertations**

In MSc in BASM there are three types of dissertations that students may undertake.

1. Traditional dissertation
2. Project-based dissertation where the student sources the project
3. Project-based dissertation where Alliance MBS sources the project

In the case of b) and c) the dissertation can be individual or group based. If the dissertation is group based, it is expected that the dissertation would be about 5-6,000 words per group member, and each group member has to write an individual, professional reflective report on their learning during the project (about 5,000 words long). See details of such a report in appendix. The final mark for the dissertation is the mean average of the group and individual component.

Individual dissertations or individual projects should be about 10,000 words. However, supervisors can increase or decrease the word count as the subjects of the dissertations vary to a significant degree. In such a case, the dissertation supervisor has to express his or her agreement in an email sent to the Programme Administrator.

*I. Traditional dissertations*

Students may choose to write a traditional dissertation. It is the student’s responsibility to:

1. Define the topic of the dissertation
2. Outline the research project
3. Get the approval of the programme director
4. Find a supervisor for the dissertation. If the student was unable or does not want to find the supervisor, the programme director appoints an appropriate supervisor.

*II. Project-based dissertation where the project is sourced by the student*

Students may source their own project. The student must provide a project brief and a contact person (if relevant) on the pro forma used by the programme (it is uploaded to the Dissertation Blackboard page). The programme director may accept the brief, reject it or ask its modification. The decision is made according to the following criteria:

1. The project is sufficiently broad to result in a substantial piece of research work.
2. The project has sufficiently clear boundaries to result in a focused, doable piece of research work
3. The project requires academically rigorous methodology and the use of theoretical/conceptual frameworks and/or analysis.

It is the responsibility of the student to ensure that the client of the project (if relevant) permits the use of the data collected during the project in the student’s dissertation. The submitted dissertation may use pseudonyms if necessary.

*III. Project-based dissertation where the project is sourced by Alliance MBS*

Alliance MBS, mainly through the School’s Postgraduate Careers Service, sources potential projects for MSc in BASM. The project description is recorded in a pro forma document. The programme director may accept the brief, reject it or ask for modification. The programme director also defines the number of students allocated to the project. The decision is made according to the following criteria:

1. The project is sufficiently broad enough to result in a substantial piece of research work.
2. The project has sufficiently clear boundaries to result in a focused, doable piece of research work
3. The project requires academically rigorous methodology and the use of theoretical/conceptual frameworks and/or analysis.

In order to protect the reputation of Alliance MBS and the programme, only students who passed all modules in the first semester, or have only one mark between 40-49% and no mark below 40% may participate in such projects. Engagement with the Careers Services by the students is also a compulsory requirement.

1. **The project sourced by Alliance MBS**

This section sets out the general characteristics of the projects. ***The relevant points apply for projects sourced by students too.***

*I. Allocation of projects to students*

After the approval of the project by the programme director, the project is released to the students. Due to the divergent nature of the projects, the allocation of projects to a student or students is the decision of the client. It is based on a competitive process in which the interests of both the client and the student are considered. Students will be informed of the allocation mechanism at the time of releasing the project briefs to them, but in principle, students are shortlisted, interviewed and recruited by the client.

Students may apply to any number of projects, but they MUST accept the first offer.

Students who meet the requirements stated 2/III above will be guaranteed a client facing project.

Normally, the allocation of projects will be completed by no later than the middle of May.

*II. Preparations for the project work*

Students of MSc in BASM must attend a set number of soft-skilled workshops and meetings with a Careers Consultant. The concrete requirements will be stated in the beginning of the programme during the induction week, and the schedules will be issued by the Careers Services.

*III. Length of the project*

The projects are about 10-12 weeks long. Students are expected to work four days a week on the project. The fifth day is for reflections on the gained information/discussions/analysis, and also for meeting the supervisor (if a meeting is scheduled).

Students are expected to complete all data collection by mid-August, hence having sufficient time to finalise their dissertations. The dissertation is essentially a business report that meets the academic requirements in both content and form.

*IV. Supervision*

All dissertations are supervised.

Supervisors for projects are allocated by the programme director.

The method and frequency of meeting with the students is the discretion of the supervisors within the guidelines set by Alliance MBS and University of Manchester.

Supervisors are encouraged to have some contacts with the clients to enhance the learning experience of the students, especially in the form of interim and/or final presentations. However, this is the discretion of the supervisor, and not a requirement.

*V. Managing the projects*

Alliance MBS takes the utmost care to ensure that the sourced projects are safe for the students to work on, and the clients understand, and respect the University of Manchester’s relevant policies.

Students on the project must act according to the relevant policies of the University of Manchester, and endeavour to enhance the University’s, Alliance MBS’s and MSc in BASM’s reputation. They must also fill in the relevant forms, if applicable, at the beginning of the project (including the compulsory ethical form application).

Students must also inform the supervisor about the frequency and the ways in which they maintain the contact with the client.

If problems emerge during the project related to the client or the project itself the students should inform the supervisor and the relevant Careers Consultant as soon as possible. They may also inform the programme director.

Project problems (unless they come under the rules of mitigating circumstances) do not warrant an extension of submission deadline or any similar considerations.

*VI. Ethical considerations*

As not all the project allocations are known before May, the programme director will screen the projects prior to allocating them to students from the perspective of research ethics, and if necessary seeks advice whether the project requires an approval of the appropriate research ethics committee (if the ethical risk exceeds the minimal risk, as defined by Alliance MBS). This enables the students to carry out their projects without delay, yet meeting the ethical norms.

**Students undertaking a traditional Masters Dissertation** will be required to submit (as a minimum) a completed Dissertation Title and Ethics Statement form (signed by the student and supervisor) which can be found in the generic ‘MSc Dissertation Pack’ (available from the PGT Office/Programme Administrator) or on the school intranet, after completing the relevant web based application.

Students should familiarise themselves with the guidelines for postgraduate students set out on the MSc Dissertation Pack and on the school intranet.

**Assessment of project-based dissertations**

The assessment of the dissertations corresponds to the relevant regulations and criteria as set by the University and by Alliance MBS.

**Presentation of the dissertation (formatting, etc.)**

Students should refer to the generic ‘MSc Dissertation Pack’, available from the PGT Office/Programme Administrator. The submission is only electronic (no hard copy is required).

Appendix I

**What is a reflection report about?**

# *A guide to writing personal reflection reports for students working on group projects on MSc in BASM*

**1. Introduction: Why Reflect?**

*‘It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively.’ (Gibbs 1988)*

Reflective reports are opportunities to think back on the experiences for the purpose of critically evaluating the situations you faced, your perspectives of them, the perspective of others involved, the actions you took, and the consequences of those actions. The aim is to identify the progress in your own “theories of action” (*you might reflect back upon the business model course and the readings by Argyris as a refresher*).`

We all have theories of action. We expect outcomes and try to act in ways that lead to those outcomes. When expected outcomes happen, we are reinforced in our beliefs that our actions *caused* these outcomes. When expectations are not met, we are forced to revisit our theories to understand why these “exceptions” occurred. Revising our own theories of action is central to what “good” reflections are about.

Reflection is essentially “… a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution’” (Moon 1999: 23). Learning requires reflections because learning actually represents progress in our own understanding about what actions cause what outcomes. We begin life with little ideas about this, gradually build up a loose list of ideas, and, if we reflect, gradually refine those ideas building what psychologists refer to as mental “schemas” or “models”. In order to know we have progressed, we need to make public (*to ourselves at least*) what our “old” model was, why we think it needs to change, what aspects of that model need to change, and why those aspects (and not others).

The result is a new model that we take into the future and iterate over time as we build our expertise. This is what the reflection report is about. Making this public to yourself (and in this case the supervisor as well). Remember, the point is not to identify the “perfect” model (every model will fail sometimes), but simply to try as best we can to constantly look for ways to improve our chances of getting the outcomes we expect. This same idea underpins common management practices involved in, for instance, continuous improvement and the Toyota production process.

**2. What do “good” reflections look like?**

When assessing your reflective writing tutors expect more than a superficial *descriptive* review of your experience. On your projects, you are expected to keep a journal but you are not expected to give us that journal as your report. That journal is simply your evidence, a base, to describe the context upon which one begins the process of reflection. In writing your reports, this means that your task is to subject your experience to greater scrutiny.

Some tutors have their own recommendations on how and what they would like you to reflect on. PLEASE DISCUSS THIS WITH YOUR TUTOR FIRST.

As a starting point, this guide offers one way to approach the task. Reflections can take the form of a ‘structured debriefing’ (these are also often done in management at the end of project for instance). The structure of your report could look something like this:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Stage** | **Reflective questions** |
| **Description** of an event or outcome to reflect upon  *(reflections need some focus)* | *What is the stimulant for reflection?*  This is *both*   * an event or outcome(s) drawn from your experiences, and * an issue, or set of theoretical concerns (e.g., group work, expectation management, conflict resolution, motivation, confidence, etc.).   Defining the “terrain” of your reflective investigation (setting the learning agenda) is something you do in the beginning of the report.  Try to pick “high value” experiences that deal with things you want to improve in your professional career. |
| **Observations**  *(reflections need you to make public your subjective feelings about your observations and what you think these observations meant)* | *What was “good” or “bad” (useful, un-useful, etc.) about these experiences and why do you think this happened?*  The aim is to make public two things:   * *Value judgements* reflects presumptions you have about the *goals* of the situation. By starting with your value judgements and making them public, you allow yourself room to talk about *why* you believe those things. This exposes your presumptions about what the goals of the situation were about. * Explanations reflect presumptions about the *causality* involved in producing those outcomes. As you explain why you believe outcomes were good and bad, and why they happened, you start to make public your theory about what the goals of the situation were, and what caused the outcomes (the degree to which these goals were satisfied).   This is the start of you making public your own “theories of actions” you took with you and used when you entered that situation. |
| **Evaluation**  *(all judgements are based upon premises, assumptions we think are true. The difficult part of learning is how we subject those assumptions to the test.)* | *Were you right? Were you wrong? Either way, prove it. What really happened?*  We all tend to believe we are right (some of us always think we are wrong) but either way, we often do not check this. Checking this requires some form of evaluation. This is where theories of action come in. Theories of actions revolve three things:   * our presumptions about goals, * the presumptions about the extent to which outcomes satisfied these goals, and * our presumptions about what acts (our and other people) caused those outcomes   Once you have exposed your presumptions, the task is now to evaluate this as objectively as you can. State your presumptions and offer up proof for each of them.  This is the key part in any learning process. You can lie to yourself and only talk about things that “prove your case” and “hide” contradictions, or you can look at as many aspects of the situation you can to observe and them make a balanced judgement about how accurate your “model” is to reality. |
| **Stage** | **Reflective questions** |
| **Conclusions**  *(learning is an iterative process, a “cycle”, meaning the ideas you started with, the “old” model of action you acted with, must be revisited and changes, if any, accounted for)* | *Would you act differently? If so, why (and what is your “new” model of action you would take into the future), if not, why not (why is your old model the “best” of you can think of)?*  Tips: Good forms of reflection allow you to talk about this in detail and very specifically. Good forms of reflection also allow you to translate general theories (theories about good team working, motivation, time management, etc) into your own language, showing where you own ideas build upon previous theories, or deviate from them. Being detailed about your own model, and being clear how your model relates to ideas others have tried to make sense of as well, both show signs that progress is being achieve.  On the other hand, poor reflections do not allow you to say very much in terms of action plans to take into the future and only leave you with generalisations. Poor reflections do not allow you to translate theories into your own words and show, through your own experiences, how to use them or why they are wrong.  The more detailed you are able to get, the more signals you send to your tutors that you reflected upon your experiences deeply, marking you according to how deep they feel you got and how much you got out of it.  As you will invariably learn through life, and particularly when you consult, people want help with ideas they can use to act upon. “Strategies” are a starting point, but all strategies must eventually become more specific, enough to deal with the complexity of who acts and what those actions must consist of, and why? This is basically the challenge in all management, gaining a better understanding about objectives, how to achieve them, and how to determine whether you are going about it in better or worse ways. |

**Some useful references:**

Argyris, C. (1996). Actionable knowledge: Design causality in the service of consequential theory. The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science , 32(4), 390–406.

Argyris, C., Putnam, R., & Smith, D. M. (1985). Chapter 3. Theories of Action. In Action Science (pp. 80–102). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc Pub. [available for download at: [http://actiondesign.com/assets/pdf/ AScha3.pdf]](http://actiondesign.com/assets/pdf/AScha3.pdf%5D)

Gibbs, G, 1988. *Learning by Doing. A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. ([http://www2.glos.ac.uk/ gdn/gibbs/](http://www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/gibbs/)).

Moon, J. 1999. *Learning Journals: A Handbook for Academics, Students and Professional Development*. Kogan Pagel

Kolb, D. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey.

*For particular theories you might find useful to discuss, you might scan through any number of “organisational behaviour” textbooks in the library as a reference to ideas you might consider in your reflections.*

Appendix II

**Some suggestions for the structuring of a business report**

# ***(but seek the advice of your supervisor)***

1. Before starting this – although there is a notional word count for a group report (5,000 words per member), there is also a real rule for this: as many words as needed. Keep it in mind.
2. The report starts with an executive summary. It is a summary of your whole report. Imagine that you are writing it to your boss, or a senior manager of your client who did not have an active part of the project, and you want to assure the person that it is worth reading your report. Thus, it has to be as concrete as possible.

a. The executive summary has four main parts

* 1. Setting the scene (that is, what is the purpose of the report and why it is important – especially in a large organisation, the reader may not have been even briefed about your project)
  2. Methodology used (establishing credibility)
  3. Data deriving from the research (key findings)
  4. Recommendations (concrete)

There is no generic rule for the length of the executive summary – you may want to find it out from the client (and/or your supervisor) about their preference.

1. The report starts with an introduction. Here you are setting the scene, create the frame. You can rely on the brief of the project to create the logic of this section. If the brief had changed during the project (which is common, for example, the focus shifts or more things need to be accounted for), you have to provide an explanation for this, and not simply “our client wanted this” – you are acting in a professional capacity, so you have to spell out your agreement or disagreement, and how it influenced the project.

*While in general the report is written for the client, hence one would not add information what the client knows anyway, it is also your dissertation, so some background is needed for the examiners of your dissertation.*

Building the logic of the introduction is very, very important – it sets the scene, and it could put people off if it is unclear, or appears to be ad hoc.

1. It is likely that the Methodology section is the next chapter in your report. It is an important section, as it establishes the credibility of the data (and hence your analysis). If you used primary research, it has to be set out properly: how it was done, what were the research instruments, and you have to show your awareness that all these instruments have a downside risk, and hence how you dealt with them.

If you used only secondary data, it is still important to spell out, among other things: 1) what were the keywords for the search for the information (and the scale of information available for these keywords); 2) How did you verify the validity of the information gained; 3) how did you make sure that you did not miss information that were on the 5+ pages of your search; 4) if content analysis (that is, you interpreted the narrative in the source) was involved, how did you do this; 5) how did you deal with contradictory information.

In any case, you have to demonstrate that your methodology would pass the academic scrutiny.

1. Some business reports may require a full literature review, while in other projects it is more fragmented. Still, if you used any concepts, frameworks, then you need to, at least, briefly outline the basis of these (with appropriate references) and hence justify the use of them.

Your supervisor can advise you on this.

1. Reports may vary whether the data and the analysis are in the same section or in separate ones. Again your supervisor can advise you on this.

You can use pictures, graphs, figures, tables, etc. in this section – however, it is important that you actually interpret these in the text. It is not sufficient to say ‘as you can see in Table 1’ – you have to explain in the text what the reader can see there.

If you are using case studies (short ones) to illustrate your points, you can put them in a textbox, so it is separated from the logic of the main section, and you can then cross reference them.

Some of your data could be extremely detailed (and sometimes even boring). This can create a problem as it breaks up the logic of your report, yet they could be valuable for the client. In such cases you can just put the very detailed data into an Appendix, and emphasise only the main issues in the main text, while cross referencing the rest.

The analysis should follow your research questions – does not matter if you explicitly or implicitly stated them in the introduction (which you should have done).

During your studies you have come across a number of concepts whose terminology might be alien to the client. Alien terminology alienates people, so do not use them. Use those concepts for analysis (e.g. the four boxes), and translate them to the language of the client (for example, to the form of SWOT).

1. Recommendations are in the final section of your report. The general rule is “Nothing should be in the main body of your report that are not needed for the recommendations, and there should be no recommendations that are not supported by the main body of the report.

* 1. Importantly, recommendations are not just a list. It is a well-argued (and hence a relatively long) section of the report. It should entirely rely on information in earlier sections, that is, do not bring in new information.
  2. It should also emphasise the relative importance of the recommendations – so this is not an ad-hoc list, but points that should create a managerial focus (why the problem needs to be resolved and why now).
  3. So, generally speaking, the logic of each of your recommendations should be constructed along the following line:
     1. This is the problem we identified (or were asked to investigate).
     2. This is why the problem is important to be solved (i.e. the negative effects)
     3. This is the cause of the problem (*the problem is never the cause* – the problem is the way in which the cause manifests itself – if you can recall from the first semester: your task is to transform the problem of the business into a business problem).
     4. This is how we want to address the cause, and if your client follows it, this is why the cause, and hence the problem is eliminated.
     5. As a result of the elimination of the problem the business is benefited in the following way.
     6. Move onto the next recommendation.

1. Then you have your appendices – these are quite important, so make it sure that you are doing the right thing – if the information involved gives value to the client or supports your argument, but it is too elaborate, so it breaks up the logic in the main section, then it should go to the appendix. However, do not put anything in the appendix that are parts of your main argument or analysis.

1. In theory (although not in practice) you are writing your report backwards. As you have done the analysis, so you know your conclusions or recommendations, so you should be able to spell these out – now you can write the previous sections or chapters so that there is a single, unified logic that leads to these recommendations.

1. Referencing must be rigorous and precise. If you use many internet based references, it is perhaps a good idea to put the references into footnotes rather than following the Harvard method.

* 1. The key points about the internet references are the following:
     1. It should be easy for the client to look them up
     2. It should provide information of the time it was uploaded and the time you accessed it
     3. Every bit of information that is not simply your thought process should be referenced.
     4. Do not suppress contradictory information – you may discard them if you provide an argument, but you also need to make it sure that the client knows what you have discarded (and why).
     5. The internet is full of doubtful information – make sure that you try to check the validity (see earlier in the Methodology).

**If you are in a group**  
1. All of you are responsible for the entire report, which has implications

1. There is no such a thing as “my section”
2. You need regular discussions about each and every part. Nominate a different chair for each of these meetings. It will help the quality of the work.
3. Set clear milestones for the group members with sufficient buffer time – there is nothing more stressful when you find out a few hours before submission time that your colleague’s work is not up to the standards.
4. If you have more than three group members, nominate one member who would be doing the final editing (obviously it is an extra task, so you may want to account for this when allocating other tasks). Once the final editing is done, the group should have a meeting, and go through the whole report practically sentence by sentence.
5. If there are fewer than four people in your group, you should do the editing together, going through the existing drafts paragraph by paragraph, have the final version, read it through, and approve it.
6. The editing should not be done on the screen (unless you have a 32 inch monitor), but on a printed version of the report. Monitors (unless they are very big) are not designed for editing work when whole sections may have to be moved by several pages ahead or backward, for identifying repetitions, etc. However, this recommendation is dependent on the circumstances.