

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of Educational Studies

## MEd Graduating Papers and MA Theses

(Rev. August 1, 1997)

Like other departments in the Faculty of Education, the Department of Educational Studies offers two different masters degrees, the Master of Education (MEd) and the Master of Arts (MA). The MEd requires a “graduating paper” and the MA requires a “thesis.” Students often ask what distinguishes a graduating paper from a thesis. Answers can vary widely depending on who is responding to the question. Understandably, this is frustrating to students who rightfully expect some consistency in how papers and theses are thought about in the department and what criteria students are expected to meet when they prepare these important documents. The information below is intended to clarify how graduating papers and theses are regarded within Educational Studies and the process involved in completing each.

### MEd Graduating Papers

**Content and focus.** There is a great deal of latitude in what graduating papers address, what approaches are used, and how they are organized. Unlike MA theses, graduating papers are not regarded as training in research, but they are considered scholarly treatments of important topics or issues. Papers can, for example, be detailed critical analyses of literature, explorations of problems and proposals for addressing them, applications of theories or concepts to new or unusual circumstances, critical analyses of policies or programs, and proposals for innovative programs. Papers usually involve the analysis of existing data or source materials rather than the collection of original data. However, MEd students may, with the approval of their supervisors and clearance from the University’s Ethics Review Committee (see below), collect and analyze original data (interviews, surveys, etc.).

Graduating papers are typically presented in print form, but it is possible, with the approval of the supervisor and second reader, to produce a paper that is unconventional. Examples include computer applications (software), video productions, performance scripts, and similar products.

The department’s reading room (Ponderosa F101) contains recently-completed graduating papers and the Education Library has a microfiche collection of most papers completed from May, 1996 onward. Reviewing papers completed by students in your area of specialization will give you a good idea of the variety of topics addressed, different ways of organizing papers, and the effort involved in completing papers.

**Supervision and proposals.** Most students prepare their graduating paper toward the end of their program. Whenever students begin work on their papers, they should enroll in 590, Graduating Paper, in their area of specialization (ADED, EADM, EDST, HIED) and maintain registration until the paper is completed. The paper carries three credits in the MEd program and is marked pass/fail. Once you have a reasonably clear idea of the topic or issue you wish to address in the paper, you should discuss it with one or more faculty members who may be

interested in supervising your work. One of these people may be your Pro Tem advisor but you can ask any qualified member of the department's faculty to supervise your paper.

Once a faculty member agrees to supervise your paper, you should prepare a brief proposal in which you describe the purpose of the paper, the general approach you will take, the literature or other source materials you will use and the planned organization of the paper (a draft Table of Contents). Your supervisor will review this proposal and indicate what changes, if any, he or she expects you to make before it is approved. Once the proposal is acceptable, your supervisor will sign the cover sheet (see Attachment 1), have a copy of the approved proposal placed in your file, and notify the Graduate Secretary that your proposal has been approved.

If your paper involves collecting original data from people via surveys, interviews or observations you will also be required to prepare and submit a "Request for Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Subjects." This request is reviewed by the Behavioural Sciences Screening Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (commonly referred to as the "Ethics Committee") which must issue a certificate of approval before any data can be collected. The review normally takes 4-6 weeks. The procedure and forms for submitting this request can be obtained from the department's graduate secretary or from the Office of Research Services in the Instructional Resources Centre (IRC). Computerized forms and instructions are also available on a machine in the department's computer lab in Ponderosa H113.

**Second readers.** All graduating papers must be approved and signed by your supervisor and a second qualified faculty member. Selecting the second reader is done in consultation with your supervisor. Depending on the preferences of the supervisor, the second reader may be involved as early as the approval of the paper proposal or as late as when the paper is in near final form.

**Criteria for assessment.** Major papers are assessed using criteria that are typical in university graduate programs including how well the stated purpose of the paper is achieved, clarity of writing and organization, depth and quality of analysis, and use of source materials.

**Structure.** Graduating papers must contain the following elements: a title page in the same format as the library requires for theses; a Table of Contents that contains the chapter/section titles, major headings and the page number of each; when appropriate, a List of Tables and a List of Figures; the body of the paper; References or Bibliography; and, when appropriate, appendices.

**Acceptable styles.** Most programs in the department accept papers that conform to one of two major styles: the *American Psychological Association (APA) Manual of Style* (4th Edition) or the *Chicago Manual of Style* (14th Edition)—also found in abbreviated form in Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (5th Edition). It is important to check with your supervisor about acceptable style because some programs in the department encourage students to use other styles that are particular to those specializations.

**Process.** Students usually prepare drafts of chapters or sections of the major paper for review by their supervisor. These are revised until a complete draft of the paper is produced. This draft may be revised several times until the student, supervisor and second reader are all satisfied that it meets expectations. Once approved by the supervisor and second reader, one signed copy of the paper is submitted to the department's Graduate Secretary along with a completed and signed

Form 9601 that authorizes the Library to put the paper on microfiche. Payment of a binding fee is also required so that the paper can be added to the department's reading room collection.

## **MA Theses**

**Content and focus.** MA theses are formal reports of research and often conclude with a knowledge claim. The content and organization of theses vary widely depending on the topics addressed and research approaches employed. A thesis demonstrates your ability to design, carry out and report on a research project in which you apply accepted methods of scholarship to a question or issue of concern. "Accepted methods of scholarship" should be interpreted quite broadly to include any and all empirical, analytical, interpretive, and critical approaches regarded as legitimate forms of scholarship in the area of study. Reviewing recently-completed theses by students in your area of specialization will give you a good idea of the range of research topics addressed, methods employed, reporting formats used, and effort required to complete a thesis. All MA theses are available in the University Library.

**Supervision and proposals.** MA students usually begin work on their thesis proposals when they have completed most required courses. Whenever students begin work on their proposals they should enroll in 599, Master's Thesis, in their area of specialization (ADED, EADM, EDST, HIED) and maintain registration until the thesis is completed. The thesis carries 6 or 12 credits, depending on the program and scope of the study, and is graded. Once you have a reasonably clear idea of the area or question you wish to research, you should discuss it with one or more faculty members who may be interested in supervising your research. One of these people may be your Pro Tem advisor, but you can ask any qualified member of the department's faculty to supervise your research. Once a faculty member has agreed to supervise your research, you should discuss with him or her who should be invited to serve as members of your research supervisory committee.

Committees consist of the Chair (Research Supervisor) and two other faculty who are members of the Faculty of Graduate Studies. All three members may be from the department, but committees often include members from other departments. All members of the committee must approve your research proposal. In some cases an early draft of the proposal is prepared prior to or during the formation of the committee. Some students use this draft as a discussion paper with faculty who they are considering inviting to serve on their committee. Faculty have different expectations about how detailed a proposal should be, so you should discuss this early on with your research supervisor.

Proposals can range in length from a few pages to several chapters of the thesis and often are revised several times before they are approved. In general, thesis proposals include an introductory section that states the purpose of the research, provides a context for the study and makes a convincing argument that the study is worth doing (addresses the "so what?" question); a section that critically reviews prior research done in the area and relevant theoretical and conceptual work; and a section that describes how the research will be carried out including a description of methods and procedures that convinces the committee that you have the knowledge and skills necessary to complete the study. Proposals should also include a rough timetable for carrying out the study and writing the thesis. Once the proposal is considered acceptable by the committee, all members of the committee will sign the cover sheet (see

Attachment 2). Your supervisor will then have a copy of the approved proposal placed in your file and will notify the Graduate Secretary that your proposal has been approved.

It is the responsibility of your supervisor and committee members to insure that the scope and complexity of the research project are within the usual expectations for MA-level study. On occasion a student will propose a project that is much too ambitious for a MA thesis (sometimes even too ambitious for a PhD thesis). In these cases the supervisor and committee may insist that the proposal be revised until it reflects the work expected of an MA student.

If your thesis involves collecting information from people via surveys, interviews or observations, you will also be required to prepare and submit a "Request for Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Subjects." This request is reviewed by the Behavioural Sciences Screening Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (commonly referred to as the "Ethics Committee") which must issue a certificate of approval before any data can be collected. The review normally takes 4-6 weeks. The procedure and forms for submitting this request can be obtained from the department's graduate secretary or from the Office of Research Services in the Instructional Resources Centre (IRC). Computerized forms and instructions are also available on a machine in the department's computer lab in Ponderosa H.

**Criteria for assessment.** MA theses are assessed using criteria that are applied to the kind of research study that you carry out. To approve a thesis, your committee must be convinced that you have adequately demonstrated your ability to design and carry out a respectable research study and to describe the process and outcomes of that study in a clear, complete and cogent fashion.

**Structure.** Theses must contain the following elements: a signature/title page in the format prescribed by the Faculty of Graduate Studies (see *Instructions for the Preparation of Graduate Theses*); an abstract of no more than 350 words; a Table of Contents; when appropriate, a List of Tables and List of Figures, an acknowledgement (if you wish), the body of the thesis; References or Bibliography, and, when appropriate, appendices. Because theses are submitted to the University Library and become part of the collection, there are strict production requirements that must be met before they are accepted by the library. Follow the instructions provided in the instructions booklet and you will save yourself a lot of grief.

**Acceptable styles:** Most programs in the department accept theses that conform to one of two major styles: the *American Psychological Association (APA) Manual of Style* (4th Edition) or the *Chicago Manual of Style* (14th Edition)—also found in abbreviated form in Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (5th Edition). It is important to check with your supervisor about acceptable style because some programs in the department encourage students to use other styles that are particular to those specializations.

**Process.** Once the research proposal is approved by the committee, the student proceeds to carry out the research consulting with the research supervisor and committee members when needed. Students usually prepare drafts of chapters for review by their supervisor and committee. These are revised until a complete draft of the thesis is produced. This draft may be revised several times until the student, supervisor and committee members are all satisfied that it meets expectations. Once approved by the committee one of two things happens. If the student is in a program that requires a defence of the thesis, this is scheduled and the student presents the

research at a public meeting and answers questions posed by committee members and others.

Depending on what happens during the defence, the student may be asked to make changes to the thesis before submitting it to the University Library. If the student is in a program that does not require a defence of the thesis, there is usually a final meeting of the student and committee during which the student summarizes the research and answers any questions posed by the committee. Again, the committee may ask for changes to the thesis before it is submitted. The Faculty of Graduate Studies requires that the committee responsible for evaluating the thesis include a qualified faculty member who was not involved in advising the student in his or her research.

At some point in this final process, the supervisor discusses with committee members the grade that should be given for the thesis. The student is then informed of the grade that will be given. The thesis requirement for an MA program is satisfied when one unbound copy of the approved thesis is submitted to Special Collections in the University Library and one unbound copy is submitted to the department's Graduate Secretary. Payment of a binding fee is also required so that the thesis can be added to the department's reading room collection.

