

**GUIDELINES FOR THE
MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION RESEARCH REPORT**

Revised January 2023

*Local Government Program
Department of Political Science, University of Western Ontario*

The Research Report is the capstone requirement for the MPA program. It is a program milestone that must be completed to graduate. The Research Report is automatically assigned to each MPA student during their first term of enrollment. It appears as “Master’s Research Project” on their web academic report and official transcript. Students prepare and submit their Research Report Proposals in PA 9914 Research Design and Methods. They are also matched with their academic supervisor as part of this process. Full-time MPA students take Research Design and Methods in their first semester and are thus encouraged to begin to identify a research topic soon after entering the program. Part-time MPA students usually take this course during their second year in the program. Towards the end of their studies, students present their research in progress in PA 9917 Issues in Local Government. Most students complete and submit their Research Report during their final summer term of enrollment.

This document provides guidelines for students and their academic supervisors with a view to making the Research Report requirements and process as clear as possible. Any questions about the Research Report should be directed to the Director of the Local Government Program.

A. Objectives of the Research Report Requirement

The Research Report is intended to fulfill both academic and professional objectives and is considered an integral part of the student's learning process. The Research Report requires the student, supported by an academic supervisor, to design and complete an original piece of social science research. The Research Report is viewed as a capstone to the MPA program in the sense that it should demonstrate the student's mastery of the theoretical and methodological understandings that have been acquired during the course work.

Its main objective is to apply what has been learned in the MPA courses to:

- (1) an analysis of some aspect(s) of political and/or administrative processes within the local government sector, or
- (2) an analysis of a policy problem at the local level, or
- (3) a critical conceptual, theoretical, or normative analysis of one of the contemporary debates in public administration at the local level.

Academic Objectives

1. Demonstrate conceptual skills and mastery of relevant academic literature

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The Research Report should demonstrate the student's ability to conceptualize at an abstract level by providing a review of literature relevant to the chosen topic and using this to help frame investigation into a concrete analytical research question.

Students graduating from an academic master's program should be able to develop a theoretical or conceptual framework to guide original investigation of a research question. Developing this framework requires abstract conceptualization skills, including the ability to analyze academic and practitioner-oriented literature in relevant fields, and the ability to synthesize what the student has learned from this literature in order to guide investigation of the question under study. These abilities are developed in several MPA courses, including Research Design and Methods, Theories of Public Administration, Advanced Local Government, the Policy Process in Local Government, Organizational Behaviour, and Local Government Management.

2. Demonstrate research skills

The Research Report should demonstrate the student's ability to conduct independent, original research by collecting and analyzing relevant information from appropriate sources. The information should permit the student to critically examine or test a concrete research question that they have developed.

Students graduating from an academic master's program should be able to approach the question "How do you know?" in a rigorous, objective manner. The Research Report should demonstrate the student's grasp of research methodology, as addressed in the Research Design and Methods course. This includes the ability to frame a clear question, develop an appropriate research design, and select and implement approaches to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of information that is appropriate to the question under study and to the conceptual framework the student has developed. Whenever information is derived from interviews, focus groups or surveys, there must be a full explanation as to why, how and from whom the information was collected.

Various research approaches are acceptable for acquiring information, including survey research, case studies, in-depth interviews, observation, analysis of quantitative data from governmental or other reliable sources, interviews with individuals or focus groups, analysis of documents or records, etc. A well-focused theoretical analysis that draws upon published work to break new ground may also be acceptable, although the vast majority of Research Reports are empirical in nature. It is expected that the research report will do more than provide a review and analysis of previously published work: it will demonstrate the student's research abilities and capacity for critical analysis.

3. Demonstrate Communication and Reporting Skills

The Research Report should demonstrate the student's ability to communicate clearly and effectively, in a manner that is free of errors of grammar, spelling and style, and that meets academic standards.

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The report should be logically and coherently organized and should be focused on systematically addressing the question the student has chosen to address. There should be an introduction to the report that sets out the issue under study, and a conclusion summarizing what has been learned or accomplished.

All sources consulted must be listed in a list of references at the conclusion of the report, and sources must be cited in accordance with accepted academic practice.

See the style guides referenced later in this document for guidelines.

Professional Objectives

1. Be Relevant to Local Government

The Research Report should demonstrate the student's ability to address an issue having some connection to local government, local government administration, and/or local communities. The issue under study should be important to local government, and in some cases the research may result in recommendations or options for the stakeholders who have an interest in the subject of the research.

Students graduating from an MPA program specializing in local government should be able to identify and examine issues important to local communities or to the local level of government. Students with career interests in the not-for-profit sector, or in federal or provincial government, are permitted to select a topic and research question relevant to their interests, but with some local connection.

The research report should provide explanations and analyses pertinent to public administration and stakeholder interests at the local level. A student may wish to select a topic that is related to a current issue or case in their local government workplace. This is encouraged; however, *it is important to remember that the research report is an academic project, not a consulting exercise or work assignment whose purpose is to meet an employer's requirements or expectations.* The student and academic supervisor will need to ensure that the MPA research meets the academic objectives set out above, while at the same time contributing to the student's career-related objectives. It may be necessary to consider how to manage the organizational politics surrounding the topic under study, if the student's workplace is the research site.

2. Be Concise and Focused

The text of the Research Report should be about 40 to 50 double-spaced typewritten pages in length – a maximum of about 12,000 words.

It should focus on a specific topic, develop a well-considered research question on this topic, provide a review and analysis of literature relevant to the topic, develop a conceptual framework and research strategy to answer the research question, and discuss the collection and analysis of information that tests or demonstrates the framework's utility for its specific purpose.

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The Research Report is not intended to be a master's thesis or a broad review of a topic. Its purpose is to demonstrate that the student can apply theory to empirical situations, problems, or cases. The report should focus on a specific question or set of questions, select the most relevant literature and theory for the analysis of the question(s), and collect and analyze data to answer the question.

B. The Process and Schedule for Developing the MPA Research Project

MPA students should begin to consider various possibilities for their research project soon after they enter the program. Students are encouraged to take the opportunities presented by course-related essay requirements to become more familiar with specific topics and to test out their feasibility as research topics. Students are also encouraged to discuss their initial ideas about a potential research focus for the Research Report with the Program Director and/or with course instructors.

The preliminary task towards finishing the Research Report is completion of the Research Proposal. This process takes place as part of the evaluation requirements of PA 9914 Research Design and Methods and occurs in two stages.

First, students will submit a brief abstract about their proposed research project through a standardized online form. This will not be a fully developed proposal. It will include their name, the project title, a brief description of the research question, method, and anticipated findings or goals (maximum 300 words), whether it is expected that information will be gathered from human subjects, and subject keywords. The abstract will be submitted between the second and third weekend of the fall Research Design course. The specific due date will be determined annually by the Director and the Research Design instructor. The Director will assign each student an academic supervisor based on their proposed project abstract. Students are encouraged to discuss their research interests in advance with possible supervisors, and to identify in their abstracts any supervision preferences they may have.

In consultation with their supervisor and the instructor of the Research Design course, each student will then prepare and submit their Research Proposal. The Research Proposal will include a research question and description of a research design, among other things (see Section C for more detailed instructions). The due date for the Research Proposal will be determined by the instructor of the Research Design course. The proposal and the feedback received on it, are intended to serve as the basis for the writing of the final Research Report. The Research Proposal is deemed approved on successful completion of the Research Design course.

A student may choose to pursue an entirely new topic after completing the Research Design course. In this eventuality, a revised proposal must be approved by the Director and the supervisor. This is different from the natural evolutions that projects will inevitably take along the way and for which new proposals are not required.

The student bears final responsibility for completing the Research Report by the due date, and for meeting the academic and professional objectives. It is strongly recommended that all students submit a full draft for review by their supervisor at least

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two weeks prior to the due date (see section F for information on deadlines). **Full-time MPA students all complete the Research Report in the summer term.**

C. The Research Proposal

Proposals are developed in the Research Design and Methods course. At a minimum, final proposals should include the following elements:

1. Cover sheet showing the student's name, whether a full-time or part-time student, and a working title for the project.
2. A statement that presents the specific research question and a justification of why it is relevant and important.
3. A review of the literature that outlines what is already known about the topic to lay the groundwork for the proposed research project.
4. An outline of the proposed research design, including:
 - a. a description and justification of the choice of units or cases,
 - b. whether the research is cross-sectional or longitudinal,
 - c. a description and justification of the necessary information sources and strategy for collecting them,
 - d. a plan for analyzing the information that is collected, and
 - e. a discussion of research ethics (if dealing with human subjects)

Please refer to the more detailed proposal requirements distributed in the Research Design course.

D. The Role of the Supervisor

MPA research is usually supervised by a full- or part-time LGP/Political Science faculty member. As soon as a student is assigned a supervisor, they should contact them to set up a time for an initial discussion about their project. This initial discussion should include clarifying mutual expectations, a review of the project abstract, and proposal brainstorming. After the proposal has been approved, the student and the supervisor should set out a schedule for next steps and deliverables. These may include a detailed research design, a complete literature review, initial empirical results, initial write-up of analysis, and the first full draft of the Research Report. Specific deliverables and timelines, as well as frequency of communication between student and supervisor, are to be worked out by mutual agreement. As mentioned above, it is strongly recommended that all students submit a full draft of their Research Report for review by their supervisor at least two weeks prior to their submission due date. Supervisors also grade the final submission.

E. Research Ethics Review

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If data are to be collected from individuals by means of interviews, a survey or other means, the supervisor should advise the student as to whether it is necessary to submit the project for Research Ethics Review. If the research involves interviews that ask for information about the respondents' attitudes, experiences or other personal information, an ethics review is required. If interviews are conducted only for the purpose of gathering information about policies, programs, or other information about organizational activities, then generally speaking, an ethics review is not required.

The primary ethical considerations relevant to most MPA projects are to ensure that participants in research are protected from risk and from threats to their personal rights and dignity, and that they are participating voluntarily in scientifically valid projects. This means ensuring that participants are fully informed about the research, so that they are in a position to give informed consent to participate or not, without being coerced.

Research Ethics Reviews for MPA research reports are approved through the University's Office of Research Ethics. The process involves the student setting up an account on WesternREM, and then submitting an ethics review protocol through that system. Supervisors must also have a WesternREM account, as they are responsible for signing off on student Research Ethics submissions.

Guidelines and supporting documents for Research Ethics submission can be found at: http://localgovernment.uwo.ca/masters/courses/final_research_paper.html

The Research Ethics process takes a substantial period of time. Students should expect to spend several days preparing a draft ethics submission; turnaround for feedback from the Ethics Office averages 2-4 weeks, after which the student may be asked to make revisions and resubmit. Therefore, it is important for students who anticipate making an ethics review submission to budget sufficient time for this.

Research ethics and Western's review process are discussed in the Research Design course.

F. Final Submission of the Research Report

DEADLINES

Fall Term Completion

Proposal Due Date: During Research Design course

Final Paper Due Date: November 30th

Graduation: February (In Absentia)

Winter Term Completion

Proposal Due Date: During Research Design course

Final Paper Due Date: March 30th

Graduation: June

Summer Term Completion

Proposal Due Date: During Research Design course

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Final Paper Due Date: July 30th
Graduation: October

Extensions beyond these deadlines will be granted only in extenuating circumstances, and requests must be made in writing to the Program Director.

The student is responsible for submitting one digital copy of their completed Research Report to Program Administrative Staff. No hard copy is required. The format of the report must conform to the MPA Research Report Style Guide (attached). The digital copy is to be e-mailed to the Program Administration at: localgov@uwo.ca by 11:59 p.m. on the due date.

Since MPA Research Reports are academic papers (see discussion of Objectives above) that may deal with politically sensitive matters, students may want to ensure that access to their report remains restricted after it is handed in. Thus, when submitting their final version to the program, students should indicate the level of confidentiality with which they would like their Research Report to be treated. The choices are:

1. Public: The report will be electronically distributed to anyone who asks.
2. Limited Circulation: The report is available only to current MPA students to review. Students are asked not to quote from the report and to delete it once they have reviewed it.
3. Confidential: The report will not be distributed to anyone.

If students do not indicate a confidentiality status, the default is “Public”. In other words, unless students specifically request otherwise, copies of the completed Research Reports will be available to all who request them through the Local Government Program Office.

The submission deadline is firm. Late submission is likely to jeopardize graduation and lead to the necessity of registering for another academic term. Special circumstances, such as illness or other compassionate reasons, or the unavailability of a supervisor, should be brought to the attention of the Director as soon as they are known so that appropriate accommodation can be arranged.

G. Evaluation of the Research Report

The Research Report will be graded by the student’s academic supervisor. The grade and comments will be returned to the student no later than two weeks after their submission due date. In their assessment, the supervisor will consider the degree to which the Research Report fulfills the academic and professional objectives set out earlier in this document. They will also take into account the student’s efforts to incorporate any earlier feedback that they may have received from them. Supervisors are encouraged to include written comments in a separate document. They may also choose to make comments within the text of the report.

The Research Report milestone is recorded on transcripts as either a “Complete” or “Incomplete”. However, supervisors are encouraged to provide students with a numerical

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grade based on the following guidelines. A grade of 69% or less is considered “Unacceptable”; a grade of 70% to 87% is considered “Acceptable”; a grade of 88% or more is considered “Outstanding”. An assessment of Unacceptable is considered a fail. Students must pass the Research Report to graduate from the program. Students who receive a failing grade from their supervisor must schedule a meeting with the program Director to discuss their options, including the appeal option below. An assessment of Acceptable or Outstanding is considered a pass. An Assessment of Outstanding is expected to be unusual and is awarded only to the very best papers.

After receiving a grade and feedback from their supervisor, students may (if they so choose) request a second reading by another faculty member. This request must be made within a maximum of three business days. The second reader will be chosen by the Program Director from among current LGP/Political Science teaching faculty. The grade assigned by the second reader will be averaged with the grade assigned by the advisor to produce the student's final grade.

It is understood that copyright remains with the author. A student who wishes to apply to have her or his report kept confidential because of its sensitive nature should indicate this when the report is submitted.

H. MPA Research Report Style Guide

All MPA research reports are expected to conform to the following guidelines.

Length: about 40 to 50 double-spaced typewritten pages of text (maximum of about 12,000 words), not including reference list and any appendices.

Title page: should conform to the attached model

Abstract: should be no longer than 250 words, and state (a) the research question, (b) methods used, and (c) findings or recommendations

Subject keywords: include up to six subject keywords from the prescribed list.

Geographical keywords: list all municipalities, provinces (if outside of Ontario), and countries (if outside of Canada) analyzed in the paper

Page numbering: each page of text must be numbered.

Order of sections is as follows:

Title page

Page showing report title, abstract, and subject and geographical keywords
acknowledgements (if used)

Table of Contents, including chapters or sections, and appendices

List of tables and charts (if applicable)

Text of the report, divided into chapters or sections

References: listed in alphabetical order using an academically accepted format
(see below)

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Appendices (if any)

Style guide for footnotes, citation of sources, and references

Students should adopt a consistent and accepted style for handling citations and references. Detailed guidelines for several styles, including ASA and Chicago (preferred), are available at: <http://www.lib.uwo.ca/essayhelp>

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and is not acceptable. For a definition of what is meant by plagiarism, please consult the Department of Political Science's statement on plagiarism, available at:

http://politicalscience.uwo.ca/undergraduate/frequently_asked_questions.html

Invitation to members of the Local Government Program at The University of Western Ontario:

Municipal World magazine would be pleased to consider submissions from students or graduates of the Local Government Program at Western. Highlighting research undertaken as part of the program and/or issues of interest to Canadian municipalities, article submissions should be approximately 1200-1500 words in length. Please note that Municipal World does not accept articles that have been previously published or accepted for publication elsewhere. Editorial guidelines are available online at <https://www.municipalworld.com/editorial-guidelines/>.

MODEL TITLE PAGE

Organizational Structures in the New City of Toronto:

An Analysis of Post-Amalgamation Organizational Structures
and Matrix Management in the City of Toronto and its
Urban Planning and Development Services Department

Subject keywords: Planning, Public administration

Geographical keywords: Toronto

MPA Research Report

Submitted to

The Local Government Program
Department of Political Science
The University of Western Ontario

David Oikawa
July 2010