

Revisiting a possible page limit for Undergraduate dissertations

— Iain Murray, 2020-02-11

We introduced a page limit for MSc projects last year. Teaching committee and my institute asked me to bring an item on considering a page limit for undergraduate projects this year.

MSc Policy: http://web.inf.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/project_page_limits_v2.pdf

Report on implementation:

https://web.inf.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/201909_msc_page_checking.pdf

Staff experience with the MSc limit: https://web.inf.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/msc_page_limit_supervisor_and_marker_comments.pdf

Please read the original policy before raising alternatives (such as word limits). Most staff who responded thought the policy was a positive change, although a minority remain strongly against.

Are the best projects long? Some of them, yes. However, in addition to the above analysis, I've since looked at last year's UG projects. In fact, the best projects were only slightly longer than the proposed limit (without any restriction to reign them in). Overall, excluding failing projects, there was no correlation between mark and number of content pages (Pearson correlation -0.005). Including failing projects gives a positive correlation, because failing projects are almost always short.

Staff opinions

15 teaching staff replied to a request for comments between 5–11 February.

- 10 were in favour of a page-limit policy broadly similar to the MSc one.
- 1 thought we need a substantially different policy (perhaps to accommodate different project types).
- 4 staff are against a limit (2 past project coordinators *strongly* so).

The full free-text responses (in the order received) from those staff who left comments are listed at the end.

Summary of issues

Please see the attached comments for the reasons behind the following diametrically-opposed views:

Writing concisely: Some staff think learning to present within constraints is an important skill. Others think a page limit is a distraction that wastes the time of the students who have done the most.

Impact on quality: Some staff felt the MSc limit improved the quality and focus of the submitted dissertations. Some staff felt it damaged them.

Ease of marking: There are staff who argue *from experience* for all points of view: that shorter projects are easier, harder, or about the same to mark.

A majority of staff who responded are in favour of a limit and felt the MSc limit was a positive change. However, the total number of responses is a small fraction of teaching staff. You can also see the strength of feeling behind the opponents of this policy for yourself.

Other issues raised:

- The MSc policy enforces use of L^AT_EX. For reference: 5 UG projects last year didn't use L^AT_EX.
- Some styles of project need to be longer. Long series of screenshots or additional statistics can be put in an appendix. So the argument is whether the marker needs to be led in detail through more than 40 pages of material in the main body to judge what the student has done.
- Number of pages for limit. Some staff argue for higher limits. If we standardized on single-spacing (which most UG projects used), a 40 page limit (on content pages) would already be longer than the MSc limit. Only 10% of UG projects had more than 60 content pages last year.

Proposal

The obvious two options before us are:

1. Adopt the MSc policy for UG projects. Perhaps with single-spacing instead of 1.5 line spacing.
2. No hard page-limit policy for UG projects.

There wasn't much appetite for developing more complicated policies.

Other possible actions:

- a) Update the marking criteria around the use of effective use of space. Lengthy, non-critical summaries of established topics should be marked as poor uses of space, as should circuitous arguments.
- b) Assign a role for teaching our UG4 students more report writing skills.

Staff comments

Philip Wadler

It is common for conferences to have a page limit on submissions, but also to allow any length of appendices on the understanding that the reviewers are not required to read the appendices. This might deal with the concern that sometimes a greater length is appropriate, while encouraging students to be concise.

Julian Bradfield

I do not see the need. I support some fairly strongly worded guidance, but I dislike hard constraints in all forms. Looking at some of the MSc marker comments, I see remarks about "padding". I often end up marking projects rather far from my area (because I feel that I should not restrict too much what I can mark, and because I like to see what others are doing), and I appreciate a decent explanation of background, even if it's not original. I'm not sure it takes longer to read 60 loosely worded pages than 40 tightly worded pages. (Disclaimer: I am well known for my "novelistic style", as one reviewer put it.)

Perdita Stevens

I would be against a super-short limit (15pp would not be enough, say) but I don't believe there is a natural length for a piece of work. The ability to use space well is an important transferable skill and, say, 40pp should be enough for a UG project - 40 good pages is plenty for even an excellent piece of work of this size to have its excellence explained. Students often assume longer is better and are resistant to being told otherwise. A page limit would make it clear. If we really wanted to be canny, we could allow extra pages at a penalty of, say, 1% per extra page.

Don Sannella

NB: I am on sabbatical this year so have not been able to be present at Teaching Committee meeting discussion of this topic. For that reason I refer to the discussion of the MSc page limit last year, since I was present there.

1. The main motivation for the MSc page limit was to save the markers work. Of course I understand that there is an issue of workload but if we can't spend the time required to mark projects then we shouldn't be taking the students in the first place. I just don't think that saving markers work should take priority over having students write up their work properly and having it marked properly.
2. I have marked a lot of projects and don't think that it is actually significantly more work to mark longer project reports than shorter ones.
3. Another justification for the MSc page limit was that we are training students to produce conference publications, which involves presenting things within a limited amount of space. I think that applies only to a small minority of our students, and a project report is nothing like a conference paper. [I don't know if this is also being given as a justification in the case of UG projects - if not, please ignore.]
4. I see appropriate length as part of the "Quality of the dissertation" marking criterion. That is one of the so-called "basic criteria", which means that poor quality is strongly penalised by the marking scheme - in the marking scheme, the upper limit for a project that is not at least good on all of the basic criteria is 59. Perhaps the guidance on writing should stress more strongly the desirability of being concise.

5. Thinking back to the UG and MSc students I have supervised over many years, the very best projects (which won best project awards, and twice also Scottish-wide awards) were never 40 pages or less. They were as long as necessary to present the work and no longer.
6. In 2019, I had probably the best MSc student that I have ever supervised. He got the project prize for the Computer Science MSc. The only thing that wasn't excellent in his report was the absence of important material that couldn't be included because of the page limit. He worked very hard to condense explanations to make things fit but the amount of background material that needed to be included - the project combined two research strands, that both needed to be covered - made it impossible to fit everything. And he spent lots of time on condensing good material that could have been spent much more productively. I just don't see the point of him spending time on this kind of thing rather than on doing good work and explaining it properly.

Frank Keller

I feel the page limit for MSc dissertations has worked well, despite much initial skepticism. It makes sense to also introduce it for UG4 projects. It should be an educational tenet for students to learn to write concisely. Most things they will need to write in their professional lives will have a page limit, and more generally, concision is a highly valued writing skill. It will be required, though, to provide students with examples of well written project reports, and to also encourage supervisors focus a bit more than before on writing style when they give students feedback.

Judy Robertson

I believe that the students most likely to be affected by the limit are the best students. But the best students should be able to develop the skill of writing concisely. Journals and conferences have limits which academics have to work round; it's a skill we have learned too.

Maria Wolters

If we do this, then we should ensure that UG students get one or two writing workshops in Semester 2 that focus specifically on tricks for writing concisely. We should also let all non-native speakers know that they should leave plenty of time for proofreading and maybe also look for a copy editor. Waffling tends to be encouraged in language tests, as it is an opportunity to show off one's grasp of complex grammar.

Bob Fisher

In the case of image data based dissertations, and often robotics disses, ideally the student will show lots of images of inputs, intermediate steps, and results. This could easily take up 10-20 pages of space to include an appropriate amount of evidence.

Sharon Goldwater

I support a page limit. I think the UG report format defaults to closer line spacing than MSc (1 instead of 1.5, if I recall correctly), so even using the same page limit would actually provide more space. I might be convinced to adopt a 50-page limit, but I think anything more than that is likely to encourage longer reports rather than shorter ones. I do not think supervisors individually should be able to opt out. I do think that providing more formal support to students for their writing would be useful, and I'm pretty sure that we could manage this as a School, if someone (other than the project coordinator) was given an admin or teaching role to do this, and students could opt in to peer review sessions with strict deadlines.

Mary Cryan

I think we are better off without having a page limit. From what I saw in MSc marking this past year, many (of the stronger students) end up with a big appendix - we're not supposed to read it, but I'm not sure that's fair.

If we are to have a page limit it should be higher than the one for MScs. 55 pages, say

Boris Grot

I believe the benefits of a page limit are two-fold. For students, they can focus on the core of the dissertation and not worry about "padding", which I have found to be a problem in the past with soft page limits. Students seem to feel that longer dissertations are somehow better. For staff, with increasing student numbers, this means less (often, significantly less) marking load. Less load → better marking quality.

Helen Pain

I have a number of comments to make.

1. Procedure: this issue was discussed and voted on last year. Why is it being revisited so soon?

2. Who benefits? The 3 most relevant parties are students, supervisors, markers. Students: Restricting project length requires more work by students to edit dissertations. They may leave relevant information out. [Note MSc comments]. Supervisors: have more work in helping students edit to fit the limit; they save little time when marking if they have read drafts already. [Note: I have supervised PPLS word limited projects - they take more work]. Second markers: main beneficiaries of this change. However, a longer, well written, project may be easier to mark than a shorter one with missing detail.

Those with less than a full supervision load get more second marking. Supervisors with a full load have less second marking.

THIS PROPOSED CHANGE REWARDS STAFF WHO DO NOT TAKE A FULL SUPERVISION LOAD, AND PENALISES STAFF WHO DO.

3. Different project types. We pride ourselves on our breadth of disciplines and related methodologies, and consequent dissertation styles. Some require more justification of methodology and/or design, accounts of pilot testing, illustrations, more detailed data analysis and more extensive evaluation and discussion. For full credit of work undertaken, and evidence of understanding and critical evaluation, some simply require more pages.
4. Quality v Length: Whilst there may not be a direct correlation between length and quality (though I do not see why failing projects are not included in this calculation) the best dissertations are nearly always over 40 and may be over 60 pages, and are often very good indeed. They win internal and external prizes and result in positive comments from external examiners (EE).
5. More concise dissertations: Ideally this would be great - but it is neither a specific criteria for the dissertation, nor the greatest priority for completion given limited timing - this should be addressed in papers written after submission.
6. Who cares? A previous poll of PhD students who were also UG/MSc did not support a page limit. The project organisers for recent years (HP/DTS) strongly oppose this proposal. Staff overall are divided on this issue.
7. Impact of page limit: If dissertations have to be resubmitted, and penalties incurred, this may have disproportionate impact on students' final degree class.
8. Logistics: if in order to check the page limit the dissertation must be formatted with latex, with a specific template. UG4/MInf students are not currently required to use one specific latex format. For purposes of feedback and citation style some supervisors (such as myself) would strongly prefer that they did not. This would be a policy change that would need to be further discussed.
9. Compromise: If it is decided that we really have to have a page limit (advantage to markers!), then I would argue for 60 pages (A4 paper, single spaced, 12 point font), excluding references and appendices. A 40 page limit will severely disadvantage a subset of staff and students.