

Proposal to impose page limits on project reports

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Summary

The problem: project marking loads have been increasing steadily for the last several years, with many staff now required to mark 6-8 UG projects and 12 or more MSc projects. At the same time, many students feel (and may be told) that a 40-50 page project report is 'expected', implying that to 'excel', they should write more than that. Yet typically project reports include too much background and padding, and include all possible results rather than focusing on the most important ones.

Proposed solution: follow the lead of many other universities and other Schools within UoE. Impose a strict limit on the number of content pages permitted in the dissertation. We propose the following limits on the number of content pages (introduction through conclusion), assuming the current Infthesis format with 1.5 spacing:

- 35 content pages for UG/MInf projects
- 40 content pages for MSc projects
- 50 content pages for CDT projects

Brief justification: A key skill in academic writing is determining the relevance of each piece of evidence to the main claims, and learning to present arguments both clearly and concisely. We should do both our students and ourselves a favour and impose a hard limit on pages, rather than letting them write more and more without learning to edit.

Justification of chosen lengths

At present, there is some evidence that many students write towards a goal number of pages. This evidence comes from looking at a sample of about 30 MSc and 25 UG projects from this year. For some reason, nearly all the MSc students used the default 1.5-spacing, whereas nearly all the UG students used single spacing. Nevertheless, the average number of pages was nearly identical: 47 for UG and 48 for MSc. This is despite the fact that UG projects are only worth 40 points, whereas MSc projects are worth 60. We can conclude that, if nothing else, UG students are writing more than they ought to given the credit value of their projects.

Another relevant data point is that PPLS have a 10,000-word limit on MSc theses. This equates to roughly 32-35 pages in Infthesis format. I have marked several of these (basically NLP projects) in the last few years, including some excellent ones. I would argue that they are slightly too short, because there is often not quite enough space to include enough detail about the methods, but otherwise these theses tend to be just as good (if not better) than the Informatics ones. They include only the critical background information, and are forced to present results concisely. The best students, who may have done additional experiments, will briefly summarize them rather than including all the gory details.

A colleague in biology at Imperial reports they have a 50-page limit (including front and back matter) on their MScR, which is 90 credits.

The proposed 40-page limit on MSc theses would be slightly longer than the limit in PPLS. It is slightly less than the current average MSc thesis length, but at present most theses include large amounts of whitespace (e.g., entire blank pages between chapters, figures on pages by themselves,

etc). Half of MSc students are currently writing 45 pages or less, and could easily reduce to 40 by just getting rid of excess whitespace or minor editing. Of the other half, some of them may just naturally write less because there is no longer pressure to produce a longer thesis. There will surely be a few who have more trouble, but I would still argue that these should be able to edit appropriately, move some supporting material into appendices, choose figures and tables more carefully, and summarize more.

The limits on UG and CDT dissertations are based on their reduced and increased credit values relative to the MSc (though not completely linearly: it is assumed that UG students may have slightly fewer results, but still need space for background material.)

Implementation details

It is assumed that no exceptions to the page limit policy are permitted. Otherwise some students have an unfair advantage over others.

In order to implement the page limit policy, we would need to:

- Strictly enforce the InfThesis style. At present a handful of students do not use it or change fonts/margins/etc., and a large number of students change the inter-line spacing. Students would need to be told that this is unacceptable and attempts to circumvent the page limits by changing fonts/margins/etc may result in penalties.
- Provide clear guidance to students and markers that exceeding the page limit is not permitted, and that the quality of the dissertation depends on the student's ability to appropriately balance background information with new material, and decide what to include or not. Appendices would still be allowed, but it cannot be assumed that the marker will read them.
- Possibly update the marking forms to allow markers to indicate if a student has exceeded the page limit.