



Global College Malta

Doctorate in Business Administration – A quick guide for students

Global College Malta

Doctorate in Business Administration

A quick guide for students

A Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) is a research degree where you spend a significant amount of time investigating and analysing your chosen topic. A DBA will build upon the learning you will have gathered on completion of an MBA or MSc programme. Following a series of taught modules, you will then conduct a piece of research that makes a substantial original contribution to knowledge or understanding in your chosen field. You graduate with the degree title Doctor in Business Administration.

The structure of the DBA is different from that of a traditional doctoral programme. A traditional PhD takes around three years of full-time study to complete and consists of pure research with no formal course stage. The DBA comprises a combination of formal courses and research, the course stage, and the research stage. The course stage requires you to complete some taught modules. The research stage requires you to firstly, produce a viable doctoral level research proposal before you begin to work under the supervision of a college appointed expert to review literature, design a research method, collect data, and analyse results. At key stages, you submit work to the College for approval or acceptance.

The Nature of a DBA

You should appreciate from the outset that the Global College Malta DBA should only be undertaken after careful consideration. The time demands are likely to be considerable and there will be constant and changing pressures as you progress through the programme. The research stage is not to be taken lightly because it requires skills that you may not have had to exercise before. This may be the first time you have faced such a combination of demands. It may also be the longest time that you have worked on a single project alone and without the support of a team and other resources.

The course stage

The course stage will equip you with the theory, knowledge, tools, and techniques required to embark on a doctoral research programme. The expertise needed to develop the topic of your thesis and your understanding of the research process. The course stage comprises of four taught modules,

Next Steps: Development of research proposal and mentoring

In the fifth module, you will then develop an outline of your research idea. You will be matched with two supervisors or a supervisory team who have some knowledge in the field of your research interests. They help you to refine your research project and produce a realistic research plan. Your

research must set out your research ideas in a coherent form. Your appointed supervisory team will guide you to develop your research field, set research aims and objectives and develop the necessary research background. The College's Academic Dean and DBA delivery team will then review your planned research and determine whether it should be approved. The College's Academic Dean and DBA delivery team may reject a research proposal on a maximum of three occasions before recommending that you withdraw from the programme.

The research stage

On successful completion of your fifth module, you will start to work on your doctoral dissertation.

You need to work well independently to complete a DBA, as your supervisors will not tell you exactly what to read or how to design and carry out work on your thesis.

Every six months you will be required to submit a report outlining your progress to your supervisors. In your reports, you need to show a suitable amount of progression to continue with your DBA. Your supervisors also draft a report on your progress.

The typical structure of a DBA is as follows:

1. Abstract

Your abstract should be a summary at the beginning of the DBA thesis that sums up the research, summarises the separate sections of the thesis and outlines the contribution to new knowledge.

Your DBA abstract should answer the question: '*So what?*' In other words, what is the contribution of your thesis to the field? It should address the following six questions:

1. What is the reason for writing the DBA thesis?
2. What are the current approaches and gaps in the literature?
3. What is your research question(s) and aims?
4. Which methodology have you used?
5. What are the main findings?
6. What are the main conclusions and implications?

You cannot write your abstract until the study itself has been written. It will typically be the last thing you write (alongside the acknowledgements).

The tricky thing about writing a good DBA abstract is that you have not got much space to answer the six questions above. There are a few things to consider though that will help to elevate your writing and make your abstract as efficient as possible:

1. Give a good first impression by writing in short clear sentences;

2. Do not repeat the title in the abstract;
3. Do not cite references;
4. Use keywords from the document;
5. Respect the word limit (see below);
6. Do not be vague – the abstract should be a self-contained summary of the research, so do not introduce ambiguous words or complex terms;
7. Focus on just four or five essential points, concepts, or findings. Do not, for example, try to explain your entire theoretical framework;
8. Edit it carefully. Make sure every word is relevant (you have not got room for wasted words) and that each sentence has maximum impact;
9. Avoid lengthy background information;
10. Do not mention anything that is not discussed in the thesis;
11. Avoid overstatements; and,
12. Do not spin your findings, contribution, or significance to make your research sound grander or more influential than it is.

2. Introductory Chapter

The introduction serves three purposes:

1. It establishes your territory;
2. It establishes and justifies your niche; and,
3. It explains the significance of your DBA research.

The reader should be able to understand the whole DBA thesis just by reading the introduction. It should tell them all they need to know about:

1. What your DBA thesis is about;
2. Why it is important;
3. How it was conducted; and,
4. How it is laid out.

In your introduction you need to really nail home your contribution to new knowledge. Make it obvious.

3. Literature Review Chapter

Your literature review is used to make the case for your research by surveying the work that has already been done in your discipline (and sometimes beyond). It is a bit like a family tree. You use it to trace the lineage of your study. Putting it in its place.

A literature review has three objectives:

1. Summarise what has already been discussed in your field, both to demonstrate that you understand your field and to show how your study relates to it;
2. Highlight gaps, problems, or shortcomings in existing research to show the original contribution that your thesis makes; and,
3. Identify important studies, theories, methods, or theoretical frameworks that can be applied in your research.

There are typically nine steps involved in conducting an effective and persuasive literature review:

1. Pick a broad topic;
2. Find the way in;
3. Who is saying what and when;
4. Take notes;
5. Narrow down the field;
6. Narrow down the sources;
7. Snowball through the literature;
8. Think about questions that have not been asked; and,
9. Write early, write quickly, and write relevantly.

4. Theory Framework Chapter

The theory framework is the scaffolding upon which your thesis is built. When you are done writing your theory framework chapter, your reader should be able to answer these questions:

1. What theoretical concepts are used in the DBA research? What hypotheses, if any, are you using?
2. Why have you chosen this theory?
3. What are the implications of using this theory?

-
4. How does the theory relate to the existing literature, your problem statement, and your epistemological and ontological positions? How has this theory been applied by others in similar contexts? What can you learn from them and how do you differ?
 5. How do you apply the theory and measure the concepts (with reference to the literature review/problem statement)?
 6. What is the relationship between the various elements and concepts within the model? Can you depict this visually?

This means that a theory framework can accordingly take different forms:

1. It can state the theoretical assumptions underpinning the DBA study;
2. It can connect the empirical data to existing knowledge; and,
3. It can allow you to evolve propositions, concepts, or hypotheses that you can use to answer 'how' and 'why' questions.

Broadly speaking, a theory framework can be used to either derive certain testable assumptions or as a way of making sense of your data. In both cases, it structures your data collection by focusing your attention on a small subset of concepts.

You can, therefore, think of it as a toolbox. In your literature review, you outlined the problem that needs 'fixing'. The theory framework is a toolbox stuffed full of concepts, variables, or hypotheses (your tools) that you will then use to address the problem and do the fixing.

When you discuss theory, you are seeking to provide a background examination of what other researchers think about a phenomenon and how they have conceptualised it. You should discuss the relevance of theoretical approaches for your DBA study, and you should take care to consider the dominant theoretical schools in your field. This will show the College's DBA examiners that you have understood the state of the art.

You should do so critically and question the suitability of any theories that exist or that you are creating to your study. That means that you should discuss previous applications of theory to discuss what implications they have for your own research.

The reason you do this is that your discipline has accepted and 'tried and tested' ways of doing things. In many cases, this is an advantage, because it can serve as inspiration for your choice of concepts, hypotheses, or variables, and can influence your choice of methods.

In other cases, it may be that the existing theory is ill-equipped to account for your phenomenon. In either case, you need to demonstrate a good understanding of what that theory is discussing, both to demonstrate your skills as a researcher and scholar, but also to justify your own theoretical and methodological position. Plus, when you do settle on your own theoretical perspective, you must discuss how it relates to existing theory, even if the links are subtle or weak.

5. Methodology Chapter

Chances are that the methods chapter will be the most descriptive chapter in the thesis (it is worth noting that not all DBA theses will have dedicated methods chapters, especially those with more straightforward methods).

The job of a methodology chapter is:

1. To summarise, explain and recount how you answered your research questions and to explain how this relates to the methods used by other scholars in similar contexts and similar studies;
2. To discuss – in detail – the techniques you used to collect the data used to answer your research questions;
3. To discuss why the techniques are relevant to the study's aims and objectives; and,
4. To explain how you used them.

Your reader should be able to answer the following questions when they are done reading it:

1. What did you do to achieve the research aims?
2. Why did you choose this approach over others?
3. How does it relate to your epistemological and ontological positions?
4. What tools did you use to collect data and why? What are the implications?
5. When did you collect data, and from whom?
6. What tools have you used to analyse the data and why? What are the implications? Are there ethical considerations to consider?

The determination of a sample size is dependent on the study parameters and expected confidence with which the results need to be obtained. In determining an appropriate sample size DBA students will wish to bear in mind that they are undertaking work at MQF Level 8 with the objective of making an original contribution to new knowledge. Accordingly, DBA students will wish to pay close regard to the level of precision; the level of confidence or risk; the degree of variability in the attributes being measured (prevalence); and external validity.

6+7 EMPIRICAL CHAPTER/S

If the student thesis is a quantitative study, a pilot study is likely to be required. This chapter would detail the analysis on the pilot data, detailing any changes to methodology and thinking that the pilot study may have highlighted, followed by a further chapter on the main study.

For a quantitative study, the expectation is that the student's study meets the required academic benchmark for a doctoral thesis and thus satisfies the sample size requirements and any tests to prove validity and reliability of both the pilot and the main study.

For a qualitative study, the student can use this chapter to detail the analysis done from the transcripts or firsthand primary data derived from interviews, etc. The same principle of validity and reliability will apply for a doctoral study whereby it would be expected that the thematic saturation of covering that objective is conclusively achieved.

In the case of qualitative, mixed or longitudinal studies, a discussion should take place with the DBA programme director and supervisor(s) to ensure that the proposed methodology is consistent and achieves the academic rigour and MQF level required. It is suggested that whilst descriptive statistics can be important to help analyse any data captured from surveys, students cannot base or solely use such information as the analytical basis for a thesis. As such, first or second generation statistical tests need to be applied to either confirm or deny the proposed hypothesis or sub-hypothesis, as well as the thematic or grounded theory analysis employed.

6. Results Chapter

This is quite a straightforward section, largely because presenting empirics is a straightforward endeavour. It is technical, and fiddly, and people will skip over a lot of the details, but by the time you write your empirics you will be so familiar with them that a lot of the detail will come easily. The emphasis in the empirical chapter is on factual recount and summary. You will be categorising your findings into themes and using a variety of visual elements (tables, figures, charts, and so on) to present your results. You need to show the reader what your data 'looks like'. You need to do it well, too. If your data is presented in a messy way, your examiners might think that your thinking is messy.

When your reader is finished with this section, they should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What are the results of your investigations?
2. How do the findings relate to previous studies?
3. Was there anything surprising or that did not work out as planned?
4. Are there any themes or categories that emerge from the data?
5. Have you explained to the reader why you have reached your conclusions?
6. Have you explained the results?

You are providing sufficient detail that others can draw their own inferences and construct their own explanations. Think of it as presenting the case for a jury.

That means that an empirical discussion should:

1. Tell the reader how the data was collected, with reference to the methods chapter;
2. Tell them how they could access it if they wanted to replicate your study;
3. Discuss what the results look like (using visual aids, such as tables, diagrams, graphs and so on);
4. Provide rich summaries of the findings;
5. Discuss the gaps in the findings and analysis;
6. Analyse the results;
7. Discuss the implications of your findings; and,
8. Discuss the limitations of the findings.

The most important thing to remember when you are writing this section is that you are not discussing your findings, you are only presenting them. The discussion typically comes in a separate section.

7. Discussion Chapter

The discussion chapter is the place in which you discuss your empirics. The discussion chapter is where you start to develop your scholarly authority, and where you start to make truth claims about your interpretation of what is going on. By implication, that means it is where you start to agree or disagree with existing literature and theoretical ideas. It is in this chapter that you start to push the boundaries of knowledge.

That is a challenging thing to do, largely because you might have never had to do it before. All through your master's degree and undergraduate work you have learnt what other people have found. Now you are finding out things that no-one else knows.

The difference between a discussion and an empirical chapter is subtle. The empirical chapter(s) is/are where you present the facts of your study. They occupy the core of the thesis. The discussion chapter though is where you interpret and discuss your findings in relation to the thesis and wider discipline. That is why it occupies the synthesis stage of the research.

Your job when writing your discussion then is to interrogate and critically engage with your findings and relate them to the research aims, objectives, research questions and gap. Most of your innovative analysis and engagement with your findings will take place here.

The job of a discussion chapter is therefore to critically examine your findings with reference to the discussion in the background chapters of the thesis (introduction, literature review,

theoretical framework, and methods) and to make judgments as to what has been learnt in your work. The job of a discussion chapter is to tell the readers what your findings (may) mean.

The reason for this distinction between empirics and discussion is to make life easier for your examiners. They are looking at whether you are capable of both presenting observations in line with your methodology and interpreting their significance in the context of the thesis.

One of the biggest obstacles is synthesising your empirical data and being able to critically discuss it in relation to this broader context. To assist with this challenging task, you may wish to try the following:

1. You can start by writing a lengthy list of everything you have found.
2. See if you can sort and organise this list. Categorise each finding based on whether it is speculative or based in empirical fact. This is important because your discussion will need to be (but not too) speculative.
3. Try to categorise your different findings into themes.
4. Now try to find linkages between these themes.
5. Organise these themes into different section headings for the discussion chapter and try to evolve sub-headings.

When it comes to writing your discussion chapter, you can start by writing a few sentences that summarise the most important results. One danger when writing discussion sections is that they can be too wordy, offer too much interpretation and lack a clear structure. To avoid this, you should make sure that every element of your discussion section addresses one of the following questions:

1. What are the relationships between your observations?
2. Are there any trends and generalisations amongst the results? Are there any exceptions to these?
3. What are the causes of, or mechanisms behind, the underlying patterns you have uncovered?
4. Do your results agree or disagree with previous work?
5. How do your findings relate to the theoretical framework you developed, if applicable?
6. How do the findings relate to the hypotheses you developed, if applicable?
7. What other explanations could there be for your results? This issue is more pertinent if you are engaging in theory creation/inductive reasoning.
8. What do we now know because of your research that we did not know before?
9. What is the significance of these findings?
10. Why should we care about the findings?

Depending on how theory-driven your research is, you may need to use your discussion to engage in a process of theorisation, whether by confirming or refuting pre-conceived hypotheses or theoretical propositions or by constructing new ones out of the data and discussion. If you do, you need to relate findings to the various elements of your theoretical framework. How you do this will depend in part on whether you are working deductively or inductively.

When your discussion chapter is finished, your reader should be able to answer the following questions:

1. How do the findings relate to the theory and methods discussed previously?
2. Why have you reached the conclusions that you did?
3. How do your findings relate to the gaps in the literature you identified earlier?
6. What implications do the findings have for the discipline and for existing understanding?
7. How do the findings relate to your DBA research questions, aims and objectives?

8. Conclusions

The job of your Conclusion chapter is to:

1. Fully and clearly articulate the answer to your research questions
2. Discuss how the research is related to your aims and objectives
3. Explain the significance of the work and the extent to which your work contributes to new knowledge
4. Outline its shortcomings
5. Suggest avenues for future research

It is not the place to introduce innovative ideas and concepts, or to present new findings.

Your job is to reflect on your original aims and intentions and discuss them in terms of your findings and new expertise.

There are three main things to do in a conclusion:

1. Own your research by speaking with authority! You have earned the right to do that by the time you reach your conclusion
2. See the thesis and not the detail. Drive home the contribution that the thesis has made. Whatever it is, you need to shout about it. Loudly. Like an expert.
3. Each chapter is a piece of the puzzle and only when they are all slotted together do you have an entire thesis. That means that a great conclusion is one that shows that the thesis is bigger than the sum of its individual chapters.

By the time the reader has finished reading the conclusion, they should be able to answer the following questions:

1. Have you briefly recapped the research questions and objectives?
2. Have you provided a brief recount of the answer to those questions?
3. Have you clearly discussed the significance and implications of those findings?
4. Have you discussed the contribution that the study has made?
5. Do the claims you are making align with the content of the results and discussion chapters?

Struggling for motivation to write your conclusion? Remember this: it is the last thing your examiner will read before they draft their report and decide on the quality of your entire DBA journey with the College. That means last impressions count!

9. References

Your reference list should contain a list of all the sources you have used in the process of researching your DBA thesis. In general, a reference list should follow the latest Harvard or APA format and include: the authors' names; the titles of the works; the names and locations of the companies that published your copies of the sources; the dates your copies were published; and the page numbers of your sources (if they are part of multi-source volumes).

Presentation of your thesis

- Font – Headings should be presented in bold Arial 11-point, sub-headings in bold Arial 10 point and the main body of text in normal Arial 10 point. The main body of the thesis should be presented in black font
- Spacing – 6-point
- Distance from page edge – 2.5 cm in all directions
- Page numbers should be presented as a single number in the bottom right-hand corner of each page in Arial 10 point
- Type of binding – for the viva voce the DBA thesis should be spiral bound and printed double-sided. Once complete, the DBA should be formally bound with a hard black cover and using gold lettering. The College should be provided with two copies, one of which will be held in the College's library for general reference. The DBA thesis will be logged with the Malta Data Commissioner
- Ethical issues – all DBA students must follow the College's published Ethics Policy and Procedure (and accompanying forms). Only once the research has received any necessary ethics approval from the College can the project proceed
- Copyright statement – the copyright for the DBA thesis is held jointly between the DBA student and the College

- Figures and Tables – should be entered in the main body of the thesis and listed in the thesis Contents listing in numerical order
- Except for figures and tables, numbers in the main body of the thesis from one to ten should be written in full and numbers more than ten should be presented as numerals (for example, one, three, seven, 11, 14, 18, etc)

Wrapping Up

Each DBA is different, and your structure may diverge from the outline presented above. That is fine. Let your DBA thesis take you in the direction it wishes to but be mindful of whether you have ticked off all the major sections.

If you are not following the structure above, ask yourself why? Do you not have a dedicated methods chapter, for example, because your methods are straightforward and uncontested enough to be summarised in the introduction? Do you have a short literature review because there is not much literature to review? Have your supervisors encouraged you to adopt an unconventional structure? Are you familiar and comfortable enough with their reasons for doing so? You have an unusual set of aims and objectives that means your thesis is radically different. Would you be able to justify this choice at the viva, when quizzed?

In terms of DBA thesis word lengths, the following are intended as indicative guides for the length of each chapter in your thesis:

DBA thesis section	Indicative word length
Abstract	2500
Introduction	3000
Literature Review	10000
Theory Framework	10000
Methodology	8000
Results Chapter	12000
Discussion Chapter	12000
Conclusions	4000
References	As needed

What happens after I submit my thesis?

Once you have submitted your DBA thesis it will be reviewed by two examiners with knowledge in your area of research. Usually, your work is reviewed by one Global College Malta examiner and one external examiner. After the examiners have reviewed your written thesis, you have a viva (oral exam). During the viva, the examiners ask you questions about your research. After the viva, there are potentially four outcomes:

- a pass with no corrections being required to your DBA thesis; or,
- a pass with minor corrections being required to your DBA thesis; or,
- a pass with major corrections being required to your DBA thesis; or,
- a failure with a requirement to re-submit in an agreed period (normally somewhere between 3 months and a year).

When you have passed your viva and made any corrections to your DBA thesis, you are awarded with the degree title Doctor of Business Administration by Global College Malta.

Making the most of your doctoral supervision

Your supervisory team

All College DBA students will be allocated a supervisory team who will provide day-to-day support for your studies. Supervisory teams sometimes may also include an externally based subject expert or industrialist, depending on the nature of the research being conducted.

Role of the supervisory team

Regular review of your progress and development is extremely important to ensure that your studies, training, and support are appropriately planned from the outset; that your work is completed within agreed timescales; and that any potential problems can be identified and addressed as soon as possible. Most students attempt to submit by the end of the three-year course period rather than by their eventual submission deadline/end of registration.

Formal monitoring of your progress and development is essential to ensure that you are making the expected progress towards your goals. To that end, there are some important key issues and milestones for you to be aware of, and to follow.

The aim of the supervisory arrangement is to ensure that you have regular access to a breadth of experience, both in your research discipline and in terms of general training and support. As a DBA student, you are expected to actively engage with supervision to get the most out of the research support offered to you.

Making the most of your supervision

Building an effective relationship with your supervisory team is important for the success of your DBA research degree. Here are some ways in which you can develop an effective relationship:

- Set expectations at the beginning of the relationship;
- Meet regularly and prepare for these meetings. Ensure you lead the meeting and ask the questions you want to ask;
- Ensure you complete your progress reports. These are completed every six months. This process is initiated by your supervisor, and you will be notified by email once it is your turn to complete the task;
- Take note of your supervisors' concerns. You do not always need to agree with your supervisors but do listen to concerns they may have related to your research;
- Do discuss any development needs with your supervisors, they may be able to advise on the best development activities; and,
- If something is not going well, do not be afraid to admit your mistakes and concerns. Everyone had to start somewhere!

If things go wrong

Sometimes things may go wrong, and you may encounter difficulties that affect the supervisory relationship. If you feel confident enough, then do speak directly to your supervisor or supervisory team to find a resolution. Often or not, many issues just come down to a mismatch of expectations or miscommunication from either side.

If this would not be appropriate or you would feel more confident speaking to somebody else, then please speak to the College's Academic Dean. They will be able to advise you on the best course of action.

Earlier intervention is always best, so we would encourage you to seek support as soon as you may need it.

Author: Professor Chris Haslam