

# Guidelines for doing a MSc Thesis at SLM

Course code SLM-80336



**Soil Physics and Land Management Group (SLM)**  
**Environmental Sciences Group (ESG)**

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# 1. Intake procedure

In order to define *where* to do your thesis research, *what* topic you will work on and *who* will supervise you, make an appointment for the MSc-thesis intake with our thesis and internship coordinator Xiaomei Yang ([xiaomei.yang@wur.nl](mailto:xiaomei.yang@wur.nl)). The intake should be planned well ahead of the start of your thesis work. A good moment for this, is period 3 or 4 of the first MIL year when the three chair groups collectively organise a Thesis and Internship Fair.

For MIL-A the thesis contains 36 ECTS (course code SLM-80336 = 6 months). You can opt for 3 additional credits which will come on top of the standard 120 EC MIL programme, in consultation with your supervisor. If you do so, make sure the code of the thesis in Osiris is changed by the time your grade is registered in Osiris (see final phase).

Prepare your intake by thinking about the topic(s) you would like to work on. You can do this by studying the different thesis topics in our **SLM thesis booklet**. Once a year this list is updated, often around the thesis fair that is held annually in February/January. Preferably, your thesis work will be integrated in the current research of the SLM group. However, the topics are not limited to the available topics in the thesis booklet and we do encourage students to come up with their own ideas!

During the intake meeting you can express your interest in one or several possibilities and for the time period that you want to carry out your thesis work. Thereafter, Xiaomei will consult SLM staff members or foreign staff members about your interest. They will be asked whether they are willing and able to be your supervisor and can host you in the preferred time. As soon as Xiaomei has received one or more reactions you will be informed by e-mail. You are then invited to make direct contact with one or more possible supervisors. After that you will have to inform Xiaomei in order to finalize the intake procedure. Thereafter you will mainly deal with your supervisor.

## Checklist intake procedure

- Plan an intake with Xiaomei Yang
- Prepare the intake by studying the topics in our **thesis booklet**
- Get in contact with the supervisor(s) suggested by Xiaomei
- Inform Xiaomei once you have agreed on a topic with a supervisor and ask to be added to the SLM thesis Brightspace.

***Note!*** Also when you have agreed with a supervisor on a topic, e.g. during a course, you have to inform Xiaomei about this!

## 2. Preparation phase

Once you have found a topic and a supervisor, you can now start preparing your thesis. With your supervisor you discuss how your thesis will be organized, how supervision will take place, agreement on important dates etc. This is laid down in the **MSc Thesis Learning Agreement**. Two important points of attention for the learning agreement:

- Prerequisite courses: discuss with your supervisor which courses are needed to write a thesis in the topic you want to work on. If you have knowledge relevant to the thesis, which are not part of followed courses at WUR, please mention this to your supervisor.
- Dual supervision: when you have two supervisors, you have to mention the share (%) of supervision of each of the supervisors. This is even more important when you have a supervisor from SLM and another chair group. Both supervisors will have to sign the contract.

Once you have discussed all the points of the learning agreement with your supervisor you can fill it in in OSIRIS. The supervisor will then have to confirm it.

In addition, you draft a **Data Management Plan** in which you discuss how you will deal with data collection, ownership and data storage. Within the SLM chair group, this DMP is attached as an annex to the Thesis Learning Agreement. Check the **SLM thesis Brightspace** for the latest version.

When you are travelling abroad, make sure you fill a **Request Travel to Risk Areas**. Send this form to your supervisor, to be signed. Make sure you send this form well in time before you leave (but no later than 2 weeks before your departure date). Check also the MIL guidelines for further explanation and requirements.

When you have filled in all these documents, you can **start a case in Osiris** for the administrative registration of your thesis. You can find how to start a case **here**.

### Checklist preparation phase

- Register your thesis in Osiris
- Discuss, fill in the learning agreement in OSIRIS and make sure your Supervisor confirms the learning agreement
- Draft a Data Management Plan (DMP) and get approval by your supervisor, upload the DMP to OSIRIS
- Fill the form to Request Travel to Risk Areas
- Register your stay abroad in Osiris and follow the mandatory safety courses (see MIL guidelines for further explanation)
- Send the above documents also the SLM secretary Rianne Maasen, so she can save the documents (**Office.SLM@wur.nl**)

- Ask Rianne Maasen where you can find a workplace for MSc thesis students, usually GAIA A010

### 3. Proposal phase

Ideally you have defined your thesis topic before period 5. In this period you follow the course WRM-32306 Research Approaches in Land and Water Management, in which you write your first version of the thesis proposal and receive feedback from both staff and fellow students.

Once you have finished your proposal in the Research Approaches course, you may need to adapt the proposal a bit with the input from your own thesis supervisor. In order to prevent big adjustments, it is advisable to have a clear idea of your thesis at the start of period 5 (agreed with your supervisor).

Your proposal should be explaining *why* and *how* you are going to conduct your research. It should be simple and to the point (about 5 pages). The following elements should be part of your research proposal:

- preliminary title
- context and background (Theory)
- problem definition
- research objectives
- methodology
- time schedule
- reference list

When your supervisor approves your proposal, you can start data collection.

To support you during your thesis, you can join the **SLM MSc thesis rings**. Under the guidance of one of our staff members, thesis students meet bi-weekly to discuss questions related to writing their thesis or any other obstacles faces. The thesis rings are a great way of supporting each other in the sometimes lonely thesis process ! Contact Loes van Schaik ([loes.vanschaik@wur.nl](mailto:loes.vanschaik@wur.nl)) to join the thesis rings.

#### Checklist proposal phase

- Attend WRM-32306 Research Approaches in Land and Water Management (P5)
- Have your proposal approved by your thesis supervisor(s)
- Join the SLM thesis rings

## 4. Data collection/analysis phase

Once your proposal is approved by your supervisor and you have filled in all the required documents, you can now start the fun part of your thesis: data collection and data analysis.

When you are collecting your data abroad, you have to adapt to working conditions and norms/values that are different from your own. Please be aware of this before and while you travel. You can think of differences in hierarchical structures, ethics, dress codes etc. We advise you also to think / reflect upon your positionality as a researcher and in some cases also about your positionality as a 'western' researcher. **Be aware that you are the guest, as well as a representative of WUR!** Always ask permission to enter someone's property / plot.

The use of laboratories and equipment for fieldwork **if available** has to be agreed upon by your supervisor and can be arranged by addressing to Harm Gooren ([harm.gooren@wur.nl](mailto:harm.gooren@wur.nl)).

During data collection the student informs the supervisor(s) regularly on progress made or any obstacles faced (agree upon interval of updates in the learning agreement). When you come back from field work, you also inform your supervisor. Table 3 gives a number of activities and products in the execution phase.

During your fieldwork, you can already do a first analysis of the data and discuss this with your host supervisor (if you have one).

After 6-8 weeks of starting your thesis, you will have a **progress evaluation** with your supervisor(s). During this evaluation, you can discuss any issues related the progress of your thesis. The form that is used for the evaluation, can be found on the **SLM thesis Brightspace**. Your supervisor will register the outcome of the evaluation (go/adjust/no-go) in Osiris. More information can be found in the course guide on Brightspace.

### Checklist data collection/analysis phase

- Plan a progress evaluation
- Regularly update supervisor(s) on progress / obstacles
- Store data according to your Data Management Plan
- Analyse and discuss data with your supervisor(s)
- Write a first draft of your results

## 5. Writing phase

In the writing phase you are now ready to finalize the last bits of your thesis. During this phase you evaluate/discuss your findings and come to conclusions. While writing your thesis keep in mind that the purpose of the thesis is to prove that you are capable of doing original, scientific research. So, organize your work accordingly and don't make it longer than 25-45 pages (depending on your agreement with your supervisor). Examples of previous MSc-thesis can be found on the MIL Brightspace. The most common language for your thesis is English. In exceptional cases you are allowed (if your supervisor agrees) to use another language. This must be agreed upon in the Learning Agreement. Please take note that at least the following elements should be part of your thesis:

1. Cover page (see **SLM thesis Brightspace**)
2. Abstract (max. 0.5 page)
3. Introduction: problem definition, state-of-the-art, theory/concepts, research objectives/questions.
4. Material and Methods: how was the problem studied and which theory has been used?
5. Results: what were the findings and/or applications?
6. Discussion: how should your findings be interpreted? How does it relate to previous research? What are the limits of your research? Critical reflection & ethics
7. Conclusions & recommendations: what do these results mean in the local context and how could somebody else continue (research, policy, implementation)?
8. Literature & annexes

When you have a first draft of your thesis ready, ask your supervisor for comments and agree on when you will receive feedback (usually your supervisor needs 1 week). **Only hand in a concept thesis that is complete** (e.g. have all chapters and annexes) and that has gone through a spelling checker. Also upload your thesis in the SLM thesis Brightspace to **check for plagiarism!**

After having discussed the comments you have one chance to improve your draft. Preferably, this should not take more than 1 week. The final copies have to be submitted in PDF to the supervisor at least two weeks before the oral exam.

### Checklist writing phase

- Join the SLM thesis rings (if you haven't done so yet during the proposal phase).
- Submit a draft thesis to your supervisor(s)
- Upload your draft thesis in the SLM Brightspace to check for plagiarism
- Submit your final thesis in PDF to your supervisor(s) 2 weeks before your oral exam.

## 6. Final phase: colloquium

After the concept thesis report is finished but before the examination you have to give a colloquium. The meaning of the colloquium is that 1) you gain experience with defending the conducted research (set-up, results, conclusions). discussing the research problem, the objectives and the results of the research, and the people that attend can get acquainted with this research. A colloquium will last 20 minutes and is followed by a discussion of max.10 minutes. It is strongly advised to have a test colloquium a few days prior to your colloquium (**you can do this also as part of the MSc thesis rings**). Your performance will be assessed according to the MSc thesis rubric (see chapter 7) and contributes 5% to your final grade.

Reserve a date **one month in advance** with your supervisor and inform the secretary ([Office.SLM@wur.nl](mailto:Office.SLM@wur.nl)).

The secretariat will take care of informing staff and students to attend your colloquium. Three weeks before the colloquium date an abstract (max. 500 words) including name of the student, date, and title of the thesis has to be sent by the student to the secretariat.

Note that each MIL student has to **attend 6 colloquia** of other students and act as a reviewer of one of your fellow-students. See also the MIL guidelines for an explanation. Your thesis grade will only be registered once you have submitted this form.

### Checklist final phase: colloquium

- Plan a date for your colloquium and inform the SLM secretariat at [Office.SLM@wur.nl](mailto:Office.SLM@wur.nl)
- Have a test colloquium (with fellow students)
- Attend 6 colloquia of other students and submit the form in Osiris



## 7. Final phase: assessment

Learning outcomes of the MSc-thesis can be found in **the general course guide of the MSc thesis**.

In consultation with the examiner and supervisor, an **oral examination (defence)** is planned. Make sure you have submitted your thesis in PDF two weeks before this date, so both examiner and supervisor have sufficient time to read your thesis! During the defence both examiner and supervisor will ask you questions on your research (e.g. objectives, set-up, results, conclusions). Make sure you are prepared for this, by reading the thesis again before your defence.

The assessment will be done according to the **general MSc thesis rubric**, which can be found on the **SLM thesis Brightspace**.

After your defence, the examiner will register your grade in Osiris.

**Note!** In case you have agreed with your supervisor to extend the amount of ECTS for your thesis, make sure this is adapted in Osiris before your grade is entered.

### Checklist final phase: assessment

- Plan a date for your defence with your supervisor/examiner
- Prepare for your oral examination by reading your thesis
- Once you passed your thesis, don't forget to **celebrate this big achievement!**
- Fill in the evaluation of the thesis (you will receive an automatic email for this)

## 8. Rights, duties and complaints

The student can claim a good and regular supervision. Therefore, clear appointments with the supervisor(s) are made (and written down in the contract) at the beginning of the thesis work.

The student has to deal with the rules and the habits of the Chair Group. The student can use the facilities of the Chair Group, but exclusively in consultation with the supervisor(s) or technician(s).

Supervisors have to be well informed about relevant literature on the thesis subject and have to discuss this with the student. Supervisors will have to take care of the timetable of the student and to look after the progress of the work and when needed to support the student and avoid extension / delay.

Complaints related to the thesis work must be reported to the responsible staff member or the Head of the Chair Group (Coen Ritsema). In all cases eventual problems have to be solved preferentially with the supervisor, before a complaint is sent in.

Against dispositions of examiners an appeal can be lodged as described in the **Student Charter**. The student with complaints can eventually take up contact with the programme director (Bert.Bruins@wur.nl) or with the dean's office.