ACADEMIC GUIDELINES

for Master Thesis projects in the IBMBA and GHRM MBA programs

College of Management, National Sun Yat-sen University

Approved in the International Programs Meeting on March, 26, 2026

This document explains what a master thesis is, which thesis types are allowed, and what minimum standards are required to pass.

1. Purpose of a Master Thesis

A master thesis shows that a student can investigate a management problem using theory and evidence, and explain what the results mean for decisions in organizations or markets.

- Students must use management theory to analyze a practical issue in an organization, industry, or institutional setting.
- Students must state a clear and interesting research question that matters academically and practically, with clear constructs and boundaries (key concepts and definitions, plus clear limits on context, population, and time period).
- Students must use a suitable method and explain why it fits, in terms of validity, reliability, and limitations.
- Students must show what is new or valuable in their work (for example: a new market, dataset, or improved model).
- Students must make evidence-based conclusions and recommendations and clearly state what they cannot conclude.
- Students must write to academic standards while remaining understandable to practitioners, using transparent sourcing and coherent argumentation.

2. Competency Goals

By the end of the thesis, students can:

- Turn a management issue into a research question and a conceptual model and explain why the design fits.
- Find and evaluate academic sources systematically and summarize what is known and what is unclear.
- Collect and analyze data ethically and correctly and explain limits without exaggeration.
- Plan and manage an independent project with milestones, documentation, and responsiveness to feedback.
- Write and present a coherent argument with correct citations and evidence-based implications.

3. Types of Master Theses and Minimum Standards

Choose the thesis type based on your research question and available evidence. Discuss the type early with your adviser, because the minimum standards differ. Minimum requirements for any thesis (all types):

- A clear and interesting research question and scope
- A logical structure (introduction, theory, method, results, discussion)
- A method section that explains exactly what you did
- Clear limitations and scope of inference
- Correct and consistent citations

The references provided below can serve as a starting point for students. However, there are many other textbooks and articles available; ask your adviser.

3.1.Qualitative thesis (for example interviews, focus groups, case study)

- Research purpose and question (what you want to understand and why): You must state a clear research purpose and one specific, answerable “how” or “why” research question. Explain briefly why a qualitative approach is appropriate for this question (Creswell and Poth, 2018).
- Sampling and case choice (who you studied and why the number is enough): You must describe the setting (case or cases), who you included, and how you recruited participants. Explain why this number of participants or cases is enough for the conclusions you want to make (Bouncken et al., 2025).
- Data collection record (what you did and when): You must provide your interview guide, focus group guide, or observation plan (in the text or an appendix). Keep a clear record of what was collected, when it was collected, and how research ethics were handled (for example consent and anonymization) (Tracy, 2010).
- Analysis approach (how you analyzed the data): You must name the analysis method you used (for example thematic analysis, grounded theory coding, pattern matching). Describe the analysis steps clearly (for example how you coded, grouped codes, developed themes), and show how your findings come from your data (Gioia et al., 2013).
- Credibility checks (how you improved trustworthiness): You must use at least one strategy to improve trustworthiness (for example member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation, negative case analysis, or reflexive memoing) and report what you did and what you learned from it (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
- Findings and limits (what you found and what you cannot claim): You must present findings as themes, patterns, or mechanisms supported by appropriate data excerpts. State clear boundaries and limitations so readers know what your conclusions apply to and what they do not apply to (Yin, 2018).

3.2.Quantitative thesis (for example survey, experiment, panel or archival data analysis)

- Theory and model (what you expect and why): You must define your key constructs, justify the proposed relationships using prior literature, and state hypotheses clearly (including the expected direction where appropriate) (Whetten, 1989).
- Measures (what you measure and how): You must report the full measures you used (items or indicators, in the text or an appendix), cite the source of each scale, and report reliability (for example Cronbach's alpha or omega). You must also report basic validity checks appropriate to your design (for example content validity rationale, factor structure checks, or other relevant evidence) (DeVellis, 2016).
- Sampling and sample size (who is included and why the number is enough): You must state inclusion and exclusion criteria and provide a defensible explanation of your sample size (for example power analysis, minimum detectable effect, or a clear feasibility and precision argument) (Cohen, 1988).
- Data screening and assumptions (what you did before analysis): You must report how you handled missing data, how you defined and treated outliers, and which model assumptions you checked (for example normality, multicollinearity, heteroskedasticity), including the decision rules you used (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019).
- Analysis and reporting (what you tested and what you found): You must use an appropriate statistical model and report results transparently, including effect sizes and confidence intervals (not only p-values). Where feasible, include at least one robustness or sensitivity check and report the software and key analysis steps so the workflow is reproducible (Wasserstein and Lazar, 2016).
- Interpretation and limits (what the results mean and what they do not mean): You must distinguish clearly between association and causation, discuss key threats to inference, and state implications that follow directly from your results and scope (Shadish et al., 2002).

3.3.Desktop thesis (systematic literature review or structured evidence synthesis)

- Review question and scope (what you review and why): You must state one clear review question, define the key constructs, and set clear boundaries (for example time period, fields, contexts). Explain why a review is needed and what it will add (Tranfield et al., 2003).
- Search strategy (how you searched): You must name the databases you used, provide the full search strings, record the exact search date, and state your inclusion and exclusion criteria. You must also document the screening steps you followed. PRISMA 2020 is a standard structure for reporting the search and screening process (Page et al., 2021; Tranfield et al., 2003).
- Study selection (what you included): You must document how many records were identified, screened, excluded, and included, and provide reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage. Use a flow diagram or an equivalent table (Page et al., 2021)
- Quality appraisal (how you judged study quality): You must apply at least a basic quality or risk-of-bias assessment suitable for the included study types, and explain how quality influenced the strength of your conclusions (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006).

- Structured synthesis (how you organized evidence): You must synthesize the evidence using a clear framework (for example themes, theory clusters, methods, contexts). Do not only summarize paper by paper. Include tables that map studies, constructs, samples, methods, and main findings (Webster and Watson, 2002).
- Contribution and research agenda (what you conclude and what comes next): You must identify gaps, inconsistencies, and boundary conditions in the literature, and derive a small set of logically grounded future research questions or propositions (Rousseau et al., 2008).
- Minimum deliverables you must include: search strings and databases, search date, inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening steps and counts (PRISMA-style flow), and a mapping table of included studies (constructs, sample, method, findings) (Page et al., 2021).
- An excellent desktop thesis must add a small set of self-collected empirical data (qualitative or quantitative) to triangulate, validate, or refine the review findings (for example expert interviews to validate themes, or a short survey to check the relevance of key drivers in a defined context). The empirical add-on should be small and feasible. It does not replace the systematic review. It is used to strengthen the synthesis, relevance, and implications (Tranfield et al., 2003; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

3.4.Other types (if requested by advisers)

Mixed-methods theses (qualitative and quantitative combined in a planned design, not merely "both types of data"). May be appropriate when you need exploratory insight plus generalizable testing, or when triangulation is central to the contribution (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

Engaged or interventionist designs such as action research, design science, or evaluation research, where a student co-develops and assesses a managerial intervention (for example: a process redesign, decision tool, or policy) under explicit methodological rules. These connect rigor with practical relevance, but require clear governance on validity and documentation standards (Van de Ven, 2007).

4. Useful References for Conducting a Master Thesis

The below list provides a starting point for conducting a master thesis project. However, there are many other highly-cited textbooks and articles on the subject.

American Psychological Association. (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.). American Psychological Association.

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Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (2019). *Using multivariate statistics* (7th ed.). Pearson.

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Wasserstein, R. L., & Lazar, N. A. (2016). The ASA statement on p-values: Context, process, and purpose. *The American Statistician, 70*(2), 129–133. https://doi.org/10.1080/00031305.2016.1154108

Webster, J., & Watson, R. T. (2002). Analyzing the past to prepare for the future: Writing a literature review. *MIS Quarterly, 26*(2), xiii–xxiii.

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