

STUDY GUIDE OF THE MASTER'S PROGRAMME IN "INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND REGIONAL STUDIES"

The following guide contains study requirements, suggestions, and recommendations for students enrolled in the Master's programme in International Relations and Regional Studies (hereinafter, IRRS) offered by the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies (hereinafter, the Institute). It also focuses on the planning and definition of the master's thesis writing process.

The thesis writing process reflects both the principles of the Institute and the approach to studying and teaching that have been adopted by the programme.

This guide is designed to provide MA students with an overview of the program and of the process of writing the MA thesis, how it is structured, and how it is conducted. The objective of this document is to help students tailor the program to fit their objectives, maximize their opportunities, and make the most of their career after graduation.

Substantive, structuring and formatting requirements can be found in the Institute's guideline for formatting papers.

1. LEARNING PROCESS

The IRRS curriculum uses active learning as its form of study. Active learning is a learning process in which knowledge is obtained through active participation and experience. Such an approach helps students form independent perspectives, find common ground between courses and the real world, and develop transferable skills. Students use previous knowledge and knowledge and skills obtained throughout the programme in order to understand, address, and process theoretical and practical issues in the field of international relations and area studies.

Through one-on-one-mentorship, the programme and its leadership support the personal and academic development of each student. The programme's teaching staff consists of a dynamic community of scholars with internationally acknowledged experience in research and teaching and combines various teaching cultures and educational backgrounds. The programme adopts an interactive and open non-hierarchical approach with learners.

Learning methods may include (but are not limited to) the following:

1. Different approaches to active learning (e.g., simulations, roleplaying games, debates, seminar discussions, study visits, case analysis);
2. Lectures, seminars, and internships;
3. E-learning and online education;
4. Independent work (e.g., student-led activities in lectures and homework).

The IRRS curriculum uses both differentiated (A-F) and non-differentiated (pass/fail) standards for grading.

Students are allowed to take exams if they have registered for the course and fulfilled necessary criteria to take such exams. The examiner (the responsible lecturer or individual appointed by said person) is responsible for assessing the fulfilment of aforementioned criteria. For additional details, refer to *Requirements for final theses, forming of the defence committee, appointment of a reviewer, and for the defence and second defence at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies*.

1.1. Logic of Programmes

The IRRS programme combines the comprehensive study of international relations as an academic discipline and political practice with an in-depth understanding of particular geographic regions, including the European Union, Russia and Eurasia, and the Baltic Sea region. The programme is a suitable fit for those aiming for careers with an international focus, be it in diplomacy, public service, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, and academia.

How do states, international organizations and other actors pursue their interests, reinforce their identities and interact with one another in a complex and volatile international environment? How effective, adequate and fair are regional and global norms, rules, and institutions that regulate such interaction and how can these be upheld and improved? Bridging academia and the “real world”, our programme emphasizes not only acquiring knowledge, but also applying it.

The programme offers extensive knowledge regarding contemporary international relations, traditional and critical approaches to security, foreign policy analysis, conflict management and resolution mechanisms, international law, and politics, society, and international relations in the EU, Russia and Eurasia and the Baltic Sea region. These regions grow out of our faculty’s research interests and reflect Estonia’s historical experience at the border of Europe and Russia - experience which is highly relevant to other countries located between larger powers.

1.2. Logic of Modules

The IRRS curriculum consists of modules: an obligatory methods module, an IR core module, specialization modules in area studies, an elective module, an optional module, and the MA thesis module.

The volume of the IRRS curriculum is 120 credit points that are calculated in units of study, i.e., credit points of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (or ECTS). The curriculum consists of the following five modules:

1. Methods module (18 ECTS)
2. IR core module (30 ECTS)
3. Specialization modules in area studies (24 ECTS)
4. Elective module (12 ECTS)
5. Optional module (6 ECTS)
6. MA thesis module (30 ECTS)

The obligatory methods module provides students with an overview of social science methodologies, introduces the main research approaches in the study of international relations, and teaches how to use these methods in applied problem-solving settings.

The obligatory IR core module introduces students to the most recent developments in International Relations, including key principles, legal aspects, and practical implications for policy-making in the foreign and security policy domains, as well as theories of conflict management in intra-state and international settings.

The specialization modules in area studies include the following tracks:

- *European Studies*: The module is designed to provide an overview of theoretical and legal foundations of the European integration, EU institutional structure, functions and policy-making as well as of the EU's role in international politics.
- *European Union – Russia Studies*: The module is designed to provide an overview of the important operating principles of the European Union, the Russian Federation, and the countries located in their common neighbourhood. It focuses on evolving vacillating conditions of bilateral relations affected by the rapidly changing political and socio-economic environment.
- *Russian and Eurasian Studies*: The module is designed to provide an overview of Russia's internal and external developments in the post-Soviet space, where integration occurs through cooperation and conflict, as well as through economic and military influence.
- *Baltic Sea Region Studies*: The module is designed to provide an overview of regional cooperation potentials of the Baltic Sea Region. It focuses on history, identity politics, diverging socio-economic and political systems, regional conflicts, and attempts at cooperation.

The elective module is designed to supplement the IR core module and specialization modules in area studies with electives that a) broaden the theoretical scope of IR knowledge; b) support specialization modules with cases from other parts of the world; c) strengthen the practical skills part of the programme.

The optional module offers students the possibility to further personalise their learning experience by choosing courses outside of the curriculum to deepen their knowledge and improve skills in the fields that they consider more relevant for their academic development and personal growth.

The aim of the master's thesis (i.e., thesis module) is to study a question or a problem related to the IR field thoroughly; to collect original empirical data and analyse it in the light of proper theoretical framing and methodological considerations.

1.3. Curriculum Completion

Students are responsible for planning their own learning process. Students are required to follow the curriculum to which they have been matriculated and the specialization study

track they have chosen (European Studies, European Union – Russia Studies, Russian and Eurasian Studies, or Baltic Sea Region Studies), complete the required modules, and the obligatory courses as described in section 1.2 of this guide.

Courses from the core module (36 ECTS) and methods module (18 ECTS) are required to complete the curriculum. Courses from the chosen specialization study track (24 ECTS) are also required. The choice of study track needs to be formalized by the end of the first semester. Students can choose courses that suit them among those proposed in the elective module, accounting for a total of 12 ECTS. Students can choose any courses offered by the University of Tartu (hereinafter, UT) in order to fill their optional course credits (6 ECTS).

Based on the logic of the curriculum, all extracurricular courses – with the exception of the ones offered by the Institute (P2EC, SVJS, SHRG, SORG), including language courses, will fall under optional course credits.

Courses taken in foreign universities, preferably during the third semester, will be carried over into the curriculum. Students must submit an application and a study plan and form a learning agreement before beginning studies in a foreign country. The courses in the syllabus must be approved by the programme director. Courses taken in a foreign country will generally be replaced by courses of the Institute that have similar content and learning outcomes. If the student takes a course that cannot be replaced by a course in the Institute, they must provide an explanation letter that allows the ECTS to be transferred to the core module or specialization module. Students are advised to consult with the student coordinator before going to study abroad.

2.1 Internship

The programme supports students' internship experience and practical application of acquired knowledge. The internship application, formalization, finalization, and feedback report are conducted through the [internship portal of the institute](#). Prior to the submission of an internship application, the programme director is informed by the student about the internship plan, rationale, and learning objectives in written form.

The internship has the aim to introduce students to actual work in the field they are studying. It helps them in understanding theoretical knowledge through practical work, applying what they have learned in a real-world working environment, understanding the workflow of an institution related to their field of study and observing different workflows, and developing their independent work skills and habits. The internship and traineeship in another organisation are approved by the programme director.

The internship counts as a separate course, 6 ECTS (240 hours) of the elective module. The internship in a working environment must be a purposeful and long-term activity (between four and eight weeks) that takes place under the supervision of the organisation as well as a supervisor from the Institute. The internship must be conducted in accordance with the curriculum's aims and learning outcomes and must be in a related field or, more generally, develop the student's research and analytical skills. The internship course is non-differentiated. The final grade will be given by the university supervisor, based on the organisation's appraisal and the student's internship report. When the student receives a

positive rating from the organization where he or she worked and the university supervisor confirms the internship report and the organization's appraisal, the internship is complete. The best timing for internship is summer months after the second semester, or during the winter break between the third and the fourth semesters.

2. MA THESIS

An MA thesis is an independently written research paper, conforming to *Requirements for final theses, forming of the defence committee, appointment of a reviewer, and for the defence and second defence at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies*, that shows the MA student's theoretical and practical knowledge and his or her ability to use literature from the field, as well as substantiates his or her positions, expressed in written form. The MA thesis is an analytical research paper with a clear problem statement where scientific methods are applied to a concrete object of research. An MA thesis is not a reference to existing research or an essay on personal observations and evaluations.

The MA thesis in the IRRS curriculum must contain a theoretical component and should contain an empirical component as well. The first part of a scientific, as well as an applied MA thesis, contains a theoretical approach or general regularities of a research problem. In the following sections of the thesis, these approaches/regularities are applied to researching a specific problem.

3.1 Choice of topic and thesis supervisor

The student proposes a MA thesis topic and chooses a supervisor among the available faculty people and their research expertise. The programme director and the module's respective coordinator are also available for assistance and advice. Lecturers, researchers, or doctoral students who hold at least a MA degree and work at the UT can serve as thesis supervisors. Exceptionally, a supervisor might not have a UT affiliation, but in this case, an internal co-supervisor must be appointed. A MA thesis can have either one or two supervisors if a suitable supervisor has been found and such supervision has been approved.

Based on the content and aims of the curriculum, the IRRS MA thesis must be related to disciplinary area covered by the studies. Additionally, students should keep in mind the following points when choosing their research topic:

- Topicality and originality of the topic;
- Concreteness and delineation of the topic;
- Availability of literature and empirical information of the field;
- Personal interests and ability.

When choosing the topic, students should make sure that they do not choose a thesis with the same topic as an already defended thesis or a thesis currently being defended. Students are allowed to write several papers on related fields, but it is important that each thesis provides a novel research contribution. Therefore, a MA student should browse the MA theses defended in the IRRS curriculum (available in DSpace).

3.2 Cooperation with supervisor

Students must cooperate with their supervisor when writing their thesis.

Students consult their supervisor on questions of topic choice and during the writing process, and follow deadlines and suggested timeline (see *Requirements for final theses, forming of the defence committee, appointment of a reviewer, and for the defence and second defence at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies*). Students must inform their supervisors of possible changes in their problem statement or topic wording.

Students turn to their supervisors for consultation or to solve problems and answer questions that arise during the writing process. Students have the right to receive feedback on their thesis within an agreed amount of time and in the agreed form. The supervisor will answer any principal questions that may arise during the writing process, will point out mistakes and weak points in argumentation and structure; assess research methodology and terminology; correctness of referencing; and the style of language of the thesis. The supervisor is not a co-author or editor; it is not the supervisor's job to write the thesis or correct language or stylistic mistakes. If necessary, the supervisor offers advice on preparation for defence.

The supervisor of an MA thesis has the right to refuse further supervision to an MA student if the student does not follow deadlines, recommendations or has changed the topic to something the supervisor deems out of the competence of either party. The student has the right to change the supervisor if there are serious shortcomings in terms of providing guidance and feedback. In both cases, this has to be approved in written form by the programme director.

3.3 Presenting and assessing the extended MA thesis research plan (prospectus)

Students develop their prospectus individually. Students may be supported in the development of their prospectuses through ad hoc seminars organized by the programme. As an exact delineation of the topic, the formulation of the aim and research tasks, and a logical structure of work are essential to the quality of the thesis, it is important that these aforementioned points are thoroughly considered before initiating the writing process starts.

The prospectus must be submitted to the programme director by **1st November** if the student wishes to defend in the following spring semester, or by **1st April** if the student wishes to defend in the following fall semester. The prospectus is either accepted or rejected, and before being finally accepted, it may pass several “revise and resubmit” rounds. It is also possible that the student will be instructed to modify the topic and/or supervisor.

The prospectus is crucial in defining the topic, setting an objective, and logical structuring of the thesis. It should include the following elements:

- *The title of the thesis*, which should be concise and specific, yet reflect the research topic and provide a clear picture of the nature of the research problem. Note also

that this title is preliminary. Students are free to modify the wording of their title before they hand in their final thesis.

- *The thesis' author and supervisor(s)*.
- *The research problem*, which must be exactly delineated and defined, should show the nature of the problem, its topicality, and importance. This section of the prospectus should outline the research area or conceptual phenomenon that the thesis will address. The student should demonstrate his or her familiarity with the relevant theoretical parameters and relevant literature related to this topic. If the thesis is about, for example, international terrorism, the prospectus should give a brief outline of the concept drawing from relevant literature and giving a sense of how this framework will inform the empirical research that will be done.
- *The aim and main research question* need to be explicitly and clearly stated.
- *The thesis' structure*. The planned table of contents must be presented, preferably listed as chapters and subchapters. Research tasks set in the prospectus contribute to creating the thesis structure.
- *The theoretical framework and methodology* outline which theoretical perspective the thesis applies in order to address the stated research question and indicate the research method the student intends to apply and appropriately justify the choice. Here the student should outline the research design of the thesis (i.e., case study, comparative study, large-N). The chosen research methods have to be executable by the student.
- *The overview of the data collected, used and analysed* should outline the empirical information that the thesis will examine as well as how these data will reflect the research problem or main conceptual framework. The student should also explain what kinds of problems may arise (e.g., availability of data, sources, and other materials) and how they intend to solve them.

The *Bibliography* should contain a list of the main source materials – e.g., books, scientific articles, – used in the thesis. Theoretical sources and sources of empirical data, statutes/legislative acts, and other literature supporting the analytical part of the thesis needs to be introduced separately. The list introduced in the plan is not final and it can be updated during the writing process. The bibliography should be in accordance with the requirements set in the *Guidelines for writing and formatting papers*. The prospectus, including the final thesis topic and supervisors, is to be confirmed by **1st December** or **1st May**. After the prospectus is accepted, the student initiates the writing of the thesis.

The guidelines and formatting requirements for the thesis prospectus are described in the *Requirements for final theses, forming of the defence committee, appointment of a reviewer, and for the defence and second defence at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies*.

3.4 Presenting and defending the MA thesis

In order to defend the MA thesis and obtain an MA degree in social sciences, the thesis must be, respectively, preliminary reviewed and finally, defended. Review process is organised by the programme director three weeks before the submission of the final MA thesis. MA theses defences generally occur during the fall semester (January) and in the spring semester (end of May or beginning of June).

3.4.1 Composition of the defence committee

The defence committee is comprised of representatives of Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies. In addition to MA programme lecturers, the committee may include practitioners if deemed so necessary.

3.4.2 Preliminary review

The goal of the review process is to ensure that theses presented for defence are in conformity with requirements and only theses that pass a preliminary review are allowed to be defended. Theses presented for review must be at least 75% complete, must contain a table of contents, list of abbreviations (if necessary), main part (divided into chapters), references, and appendices.

Preliminary reviews are organized individually. They consist of a meeting involving the student, supervisor, and module coordinator or programme director.

The draft thesis must be presented electronically to programme director **one week before the pre-defence**. Each individual review lasts 20 minutes and includes a Q/A session and feedback session. It is not graded. As the result of individual review process, the students will receive one of the following propositions:

1. Thesis is ready for consideration
2. Thesis is not ready for consideration

The student is informed of this decision in written form. The student has the right to request for reasons of acceptance or rejection, as well as suggestions for improvement.

3.4.3 Defence

A MA student may defend the thesis if he or she has completed the curriculum, passed the preliminary review process, and presented necessary documents, including the MA thesis, by the deadline. They also require their supervisors' written approvals that confirm the accurateness and qualification of the final thesis with set academic standards. All grades must be in the Study Information System **no later than two days** before the final defence.

The final thesis, including the non-exclusive license and supervisor approval that the thesis is ready for consideration, must be submitted to the Academic Affairs Specialist electronically (see *Requirements for final theses, forming of the defence committee, appointment of a reviewer, and for the defence and second defence at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies*).

The MA thesis defence is held openly in front of the defence committee in person, or exceptionally, in a remote format (see *Code of Conduct for Remote Teaching & Learning*). Generally, the MA thesis defence proceeds as follows:

- Introduction by the committee chairman;
- Oral presentation by the candidate (up to 15 min);
- Opinion of opponent (if the opponent is not present, with reasonable excuse, a member of the committee will read the opinion);
- Debate (response to the opponent and, if necessary, additional questions from the opponent);
- Questions and statements from the defence committee and audience;
- Opinion of the supervisor (if the supervisor is not present, with reasonable excuse, a member of the committee will read the opinion);
- MA students closing statement.

An oral presentation should be prepared for the defence. As the presentation's length is only up to 15 minutes, it should not state the obvious or well-known positions. The MA student must briefly explain the thesis' aim, describe the choice of object of research, present results, a detailed overview and an assessment. The presentation needs to clearly illustrate the student's contribution to the topic of research. It is recommended that visual aids be used to illustrate the presentation (PowerPoint, etc.).

3.4.4 Review of the final thesis

A reviewer delivers a written review no later than **two business days** before the defence to the Study Affairs specialist, who forwards the review to the MA student. The opponent's task is to provide an objective assessment to the text according to the structural and formatting criteria laid down in the *Requirements for final theses, forming of the defence committee, appointment of a reviewer, and for the defence and second defence at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies*. Generally, the following aspects are outlined in the review:

- Assessment of the topicality of the research.
- Assessment of the relation of the thesis to topic.
- Assessment of established goal(s) and research tasks (if completing these can lead to an established goal).
- Assessment of thesis structure (e.g., coherence, balance, consistency,).
- Assessment of the level of analysis and comprehensiveness of material (such as clarity, relevance, thoroughness, correctness and logic of analysis, validity of conclusions, material combination skills, adequateness and sufficiency of material).
- Assessment of sufficiency, relevance and level of literature (e.g., relevant and recent articles from recognised international journals or simply some journal articles).
- Assessment of adherence to the rules of citation (e.g., all facts and opinions, including statements, causal descriptions can be verified based on primary sources)
- Assessment of linguistic correctness.
- Assessment of formatting.

- Assessment of set tasks and goal attainment.
- Assessment of the thesis as a whole.
- Opponent's questions concerning the subject matter of the thesis for the student, the answers of which determine the student's knowledge of the topic and skill of argumentation.

The supervisor expresses his or her views orally during the defence, or if not physically present, then in written form while largely focusing on the same issues as the opponent.

3.4.5 Grading

The committee will take into account the following while assessing the thesis:

- The thesis' conformity with assessment criteria (*see Requirements for final theses, forming of the defence committee, appointment of a reviewer, and for the defence and second defence at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies*).
- The MA student's performance during the defence (such as the content and style of presentation and the answering of questions).
- The opinion of opponent and supervisor.

After the MA thesis defence, the committee will have a closed discussion to decide whether to confer the MA candidate a MA degree. The committee is not obligated to go by the opinions of the opponent or the supervisor.