Welcome to the MA program in Democracy and Governance!

Study Guide

This Study Guide is designed to provide both current and prospective students with a one-stop overview of the program, how it is structured and how it runs. Its objective is to help students tailor the program to fit their objectives, maximize their opportunities and make the most of their onward career.

Introduction

Any degree program in higher education is a combination of three inter-locking dimensions: knowledge acquisition, skills training and curriculum structure. Educational programs are generally crafted to convey knowledge on many different levels, ranging from the general to the specific. They are also designed to build life-long professional skills that will enable graduates to take on a variety of career pathways. Lastly, they are structured in a sequence that fosters a cumulative learning process and facilitates on-time completion. Where these three dimensions are in place, a fourth one can be added, which is whether the degree program takes place in an international learning environment or is mainly nationally based. Graphically this constellation can be depicted as seen to the right.

This Study Guide will lay out the MA program in Democracy and Governance based on these postulates. While some of these principles may seem abstract or philosophical, they are all constitutive of a particular vision of how to prepare young professionals for service in public affairs at the local, national or international level. We begin, therefore, with the overall curriculum objective.
1. Curriculum objective

The MA program in Democracy and Governance is designed to prepare aspiring young professionals for a career in public affairs, including government and administration, civil society, democratic politics or international organizations. Graduates of the program have a wide range of career options open to them including working:

- in civil service as a policy analyst;
- for an NGO as a project manager;
- in an advocacy group as an activist or community organizer;
- for a political party or interest group as a political analyst, campaigner or organizer;
- in the diplomatic service as a desk officer for regional affairs;
- in the media as a journalist covering politics and societal affairs;
- for an international organization as a development officer or field-worker.

The program’s point of departure centers on democracy and governance, since these two concepts are paramount phenomena of our time. They are central to understanding how modern politics works not only in single countries, but also in international relations. They are touchstones for analyzing and influencing political development in our world.

The program therefore develops a deeper understanding of these issues not only as overarching phenomena, but also in more disaggregated detail, meaning the policy practices, political institutions, social processes, and new-technology rudiments of democracy and governance.

The program also builds life-long skills in terms of how to analyze political change, communicate one’s analysis, work with others in collaboration, and develop leadership skills.

These objectives are also achieved through a sequencing of courses and activities that allow students a variety of educational experiences, while also ensuring timely completion of the program.

These three pillars – knowledge acquisition, skills training and learning sequence – are all embedded in an overall principle of international learning, meaning study is in a multinational English-language environment with both students and faculty coming from a variety of international backgrounds. A more detailed discussion of these principles follows.

2. Program principles

2.1. Knowledge acquisition
Knowledge comes in many different forms, ranging from general concepts and methods to specific phenomena or issues. The Democracy and Governance program is structured into five separate layers in order to cover this spectrum and ensure that graduates obtain a well-rounded education. Seen as modules, these layers bring together methods training, core knowledge about politics, specialized training fields, open electives and an independent research project.¹

A. Methods module (18 ECTS)
   i. A pre-condition for being able to perform good socio-political analysis is method. Method determines the credibility and usefulness of an analysis. Therefore, in this module the objective is to show students how to structure socio-political analysis, how to choose between different qualitative and quantitative methods and how to combine these skills in written analysis. Innovative learning methods such as the flipped classroom, independent fieldwork, computer labs and collaborative writing are used.

B. Core Competencies module (36 ECTS)
   i. Democracy and governance revolve around a key interrelationship between institutions, processes and principles. This means that democracy and governance should be seen as a combination of (a) procedural rules, (b) interactions that evolve as a result of those rules, and (c) norms that are followed in respecting those procedures. The Core Competencies module serves as the key conceptual and analytical part of the curriculum, serving to train students in these three dimensions of democratic development and modern governance. The six required courses cover issues such as:
      1. theories and principles of democracy: what is it that we mean by democracy, how do we compare democracies, how do we assess their performance?
      2. democratization: when, why and how do countries become more democratic? what are the social, political and cultural factors that

¹ Modules should not be confused with the sequence of courses that students will end up taking from semester to semester. These will be covered in the next section. The idea of modules is for students to see how different types of knowledge acquisition are structured in the curriculum.
influence democratization? and conversely when and how do countries become non-democratic?

3. governance: what are the different meanings of governance today? in what way is governance a broad principle for political rule, a framework for public administration as well as a norm for international development cooperation? what role should be played in governance by civil society and the third sector?

4. institutions and rules: how are democracy and governance undergirded by basic rules in a society and how do those rules get established? can institutions help to instill democratic norms or do norms precede institutions?

5. ethics, rights and identities: what kind of normative principles infuse democracy and governance? how are societal ethics, human rights and minority identities incorporated into contemporary politics?

C. the Specialization module (30 ECTS)
   i. There are different professional spheres where students can build careers and contribute to democracy and governance in the world today. This is why the D&G program includes three stylized specialization themes – governance, third-sector affairs, and regional politics – allowing students to develop a more specific path and professional orientation for their future career.

D. the Optional Courses module (6 ECTS)
   i. Any successful career in public affairs requires unique skills or interesting experiences. This is why the D&G program allows students to further tweak their degree with electives that may include foreign language study, other professional skills training or exposure to other disciplines. Students are free to choose their electives from across our university’s course offerings or during possible study abroad.

E. the MA thesis (30 ECTS)
   i. The capstone of the D&G program is the MA thesis, which represents above all an opportunity for students to examine a topic in-depth and thereby prepare themselves as true experts in a given domain. It is the pinnacle of specialization. At the same time, an MA thesis is a test of analytical skill, project management, writing ability and communicative abilities. Students are guided by senior faculty, but also must demonstrate an ability to work independently, stick to deadlines and produce results.

2.2. Skills training

A career in public affairs requires not only factual knowledge, but also professional competences. The courses in the Democracy and Governance program are designed to train students in different life-long, occupational skills that they can use in a variety of professional contexts. The skills are outlined below, along with the specific learning
activities within the program that promote these skills as well as their future applications in professional life.

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<th>Skills</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Applications</th>
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<td><strong>critical reflection:</strong> how to examine information and develop a critical perspective; how to reflect on differing viewpoints or opposing arguments</td>
<td><strong>within the program:</strong> reading diaries; formulating questions about a particular reading; group discussions, listening and debating</td>
<td><strong>future uses:</strong> reflecting on and interpreting political developments as part of political analysis, weighing alternative understandings and perspectives</td>
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<td><strong>conceptual skills:</strong> how to relate individual facts to generalized concepts or processes; how to abstract from the particular</td>
<td><strong>within the program:</strong> comparative conceptual essays; generalizing from case-studies; current events monitoring</td>
<td><strong>future uses:</strong> formulating an analytical conclusion or generalization “The issue here is XYZ.”; identifying appropriate solutions, responses</td>
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<td><strong>causal analysis:</strong> how to look for and establish links between phenomena; how to investigate both causes and consequences that may be related to a given phenomenon</td>
<td><strong>within the program:</strong> written assignments such as a research outline where students are required to form causal hypotheses; research papers</td>
<td><strong>future uses:</strong> formulating an assertion that certain social or political problems are caused by something or that certain actions will bring along particular consequences, e.g. during policy analysis</td>
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<td><strong>verbal communication skills:</strong> how to present analytical results or arguments in a cogent and compelling manner</td>
<td><strong>within the program:</strong> oral presentation of a reading diary entry, a position paper, a research proposal, or an MA thesis; includes using electronic media (PPT) effectively</td>
<td><strong>future uses:</strong> presenting orally an analysis or policy position to colleagues, superiors, a public audience, the media, or donors/stakeholders; communicating effectively with results</td>
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<td><strong>written communication skills:</strong> how to convey information and arguments to readers across a range of different writing forms</td>
<td><strong>within the program:</strong> putting together smaller-size, operational documents (policy briefs, position papers, informational summaries); or structuring longer analytical documents (proposals, research papers, an MA thesis)</td>
<td><strong>future uses:</strong> submitting written briefs or reports to superiors or other colleagues; publishing longer analytical studies for policy-makers or the public; preparing funding proposals</td>
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<td><strong>collaborative skills:</strong> how to work with others in a fruitful and effective manner; how to work out responsibilities and plan tasks; how to exchange views and come to consensus;</td>
<td><strong>within the program:</strong> group assignments involving common problem identification and problem solving; peer-review of writing assignments, providing constructive feedback; organizing independent study projects</td>
<td><strong>future uses:</strong> working on group projects, collaborating with stakeholders or funders, developing collaborative relationships with target groups</td>
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<td><strong>inter-cultural skills:</strong> how to understand different cultural or regional perspectives on social or political affairs; how to take these perspectives into account when working collaboratively</td>
<td><strong>within the program:</strong> seminar discussions and debates; discussing assignments or analyses during group assignments; learning in an international environment</td>
<td><strong>future uses:</strong> working with other nationalities in international organizations, other national administrations or partner associations; successfully carrying out collaborative projects or policy coordination among such colleagues</td>
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During their studies, students should be reflective in relation to the kinds of assignments they are asked to do: what should this task be teaching me to do (better)? How can I get the most out of this experience? Assignments or projects should not be seen as just hoops to jump through, but rather as learning opportunities, both regarding knowledge as well as skills.

2.3. Learning sequence

In order for knowledge acquisition and skills training to be effective, the two have to be timed into a sequence. This serves to create a cumulative and enriching learning process, while also facilitating seamless completion of the program. After all, the ultimate objective for students is to embark on a successful career and professional life!

Seen from this angle, the Democracy and Governance program is structured in the following manner so that students can fulfill their required and elective courses, while also having opportunities for study abroad, internships or other educational experiences.

During their first year (fall and spring semesters), students should focus on key courses from the Methods Module and the Core Competencies Module. This will allow them more flexibility during their third semester to pursue study abroad or an internship. Interspersed among these required courses should be different specialization courses as well as electives.

Finally, students should note that while most work on the MA thesis takes place during the final semester, thinking about this final assignment should begin already during the first semester, and it will be updated during the third semester through a thesis prospectus. See more under “MA thesis writing” below.
2.4 International learning environment

Because democracy and governance are global phenomena in the contemporary world, it makes only sense to study these issues in an international learning environment. This means not only learning in English, but also learning from (and through) the perspectives of students and faculty from different nationalities. Especially in the case of democracy and governance, perceptions, experiences and challenges differ. It is therefore essential for all those interested in the field to understand the way in which these standpoints vary.

Given Estonia’s own history as a post-communist country, it is perhaps not surprising that this experience shapes noticeably how we look at democracy and governance issues. However, these perspectives also need to be placed in an international context and that means learning just as much about democracy and governance issues in other world regions. Partly this is the task of faculty, but also of the students themselves drawing on their own different national backgrounds. The ethos of international learning is therefore not just to get to know other people, but also to understand their perspectives on democracy and governance issues and to see them as part of an international learning process.

3. Study abroad

For most students in the Democracy and Governance program, Estonia is not their home. As a result, being at the University of Tartu means already that they are ‘studying abroad’. However, even beyond this international experience that Tartu offers, there are opportunities for students to study at yet another university, should that be of interest.

Why consider a semester ‘abroad’? One reason involves finding courses or doing research in a country that may be part of a future MA thesis. If you are considering a certain country as a case study in your research, then find out if Tartu has a partnership agreement with a university there. This would provide an opportunity not only to do direct fieldwork, but also to get to know local experts (perhaps even find a co-supervisor).

Another reason may involve interesting topics that may not be taught in Tartu. For example, specific courses on African politics, international development policy or methods training. Students should be aware that not all universities may offer an extensive array of courses in English or they may even assume local language knowledge. Students are therefore encouraged to ask about possible courses as early as possible.

Note that the University of Tartu has specific rules about what courses may be taken abroad and how these credits are to be transferred back to your program. For example, students are required to pass at least 15 ECTS worth of courses per semester and that these must
count towards the curricular requirements of their degree. This means that students must complete a Prior Learning agreement before going abroad, and within that agreement they must demonstrate which courses will go toward which section of their curriculum.

If students follow the curricular sequence (suggested above) of completing both their Methods Module and Core Competencies Module during their first year, they will have greater freedom to choose their 3rd-semester courses should they go abroad. As a rule, students are recommended to consider study abroad only in their 3rd semester. Requests to go abroad earlier (during the first academic year) will not be allowed. Requests to study abroad during the 4th semester will be considered on a case-by-case basis, when a student has demonstrated that his/her prospects for completing the MA thesis are in good standing or the students expects to take an extension semester. Note that study abroad may also be subject to academic performance: students may be restricted from going abroad if their grade point average (GPA) is below a critical level.

Within the Democracy and Governance Program, courses from any of the other sub-fields of political science (i.e. international relations, public administration, political theory, or other area studies) as well as from a related social science (i.e. law, sociology, economics, media/communications studies) can be counted toward the Specialization Module. This means that the program is relatively flexible in terms of what qualifies as a Specialization Module course. However, the topic should be within the disciplinary bounds mentioned. If a course is outside those areas (i.e. studying a foreign language, a course in the humanities or the natural sciences), then these should be applied toward the Electives Module.

Further information about study abroad regulations as well as a complete list of the University of Tartu’s partner universities can be found on the Institute’s webpage.

4. Internships

A second way of broadening one’s horizons beyond academic study is to pursue an internship. From a career standpoint, internships are more and more prized, as they offer practical experience alongside university learning and therefore embellish a student’s CV. Within the Democracy and Governance program, internships should be a way of demonstrating the professional skills that were described above as part of the program’s study process. Students should seek during an internship to bring these skills to bear as much as possible.

A more precise Internship Manual is available on the Institute webpage. These materials will guide you toward finding a potential internship location, as well as complying with relevant rules and regulations.
5. MA thesis writing

The MA thesis is a culminating or capstone part of the Democracy and Governance curriculum. Its objective encompasses not only demonstrating a student’s ability to complete an independent research project, but also an opportunity for the student to profile him-/herself within a specific issue-area or to really tackle a problem that he/she sees as needing research.

To get the most out of this process, students should not see the MA thesis as merely a final paper to write before graduate, but as a cumulative process during the MA study. This is not least because the process will inevitably have its setbacks or choices to be made, all of which will require time to straighten out. Moreover, a very important expectation from the thesis is for the student to demonstrate his/her ability to complete a longer-term project independently. This means exhibiting sufficient responsibility, accountability and conscientiousness to carry out the assignment and earn the final degree.

Starting in the first semester

For all of these reasons, the focus on the MA thesis begins already in the first semester, when students are asked to prepare a preliminary thesis prospectus as part of the course Social Science Methodology. Students should use this opportunity to begin thinking about:

- what issue or topic would be most interesting to research?
- what kind of topic might fit well with my future career plans?
- what particular methods might need to be learned in order to pursue this topic?
- what kind of empirical information will be necessary?
- and what kind of research design would be most fruitful to employ?

Second semester: refining methods

If students have done a good job scoping out a future research area, they will be in a good position to learn more about specific methods they may need to hone during their 2nd or 3rd semesters. For example, if a student becomes interested in how democracy is measured by different international indices, they would be recommended to pay special attention to the quantitative methods course offered in the spring semester. Should a student’s interest lie in constructivism or process tracing, s/he would do good to concentrate on qualitative methods. The point is that if students wait until their 4th semester to discover these prerequisites, they will face considerable difficulty in completing the thesis or doing it well.

Likewise, students should use the 2nd and 3rd semesters to choose specialization courses that will deepen their conceptual and empirical knowledge of their research area. This may not always be easy, if a student’s topic is very particular. However, students should also
remember that sometimes such courses can be found in some of our Erasmus partner universities or via an internship.

Lastly, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} semester is a good time to reach out to one or more of the Institute’s faculty members in order to begin laying the groundwork for future supervision or for simply getting advice or perspective. Students can always contact the Program Manager, if they would like guidance as to which faculty member might be most appropriate for certain topics.

Third semester: putting together a prospectus

During the 3\textsuperscript{rd} semester, students are required to refine their project further into their first formal prospectus, which will be reviewed by the Program Manager and other relevant faculty members. The normal deadline for the submission of prospectuses is November 1 (or the Monday following that day, if the deadline falls on a weekend).\textsuperscript{2} Students should take care to prepare the prospectus in four steps.

First, they should review their earlier assignment from the Social Science Methodology course and any other developments in their research project since then. Needless to say, students are not obligated to continue with whatever topic they may have drawn up for that assignment. However, going back to that paper is a way of reviewing the methodological elements that will be expected in the formal prospectus. If the student wants to change his/her topic, this is the time to consider such a move and to work out the details.

By the end of these reflections, the student should formulate their ideas into a 1-2 page overview that clearly outlines the project’s main topic, research design and expected data-gathering processes.

With this preliminary outline, students should approach a possible supervisor from among the Institute’s faculty in order to obtain perspective and advice. It is not recommended that students approach faculty with very preliminary or vague ideas.\textsuperscript{3} It is part of the test of an MA thesis that an MA student is able to independently work out a basic research question and framework. Faculty are not responsible for providing students with topics, although faculty may sometimes announce topics that they believe would be useful to study.

If a student is unsure about which faculty member might be suitable for advising their project, they can consult the Program Manager for guidance. Students are allowed to choose an advisor from outside of either the Institute or even the University. (For example, if the student takes a course within another Institute or finds a good advisor from a partner university during their study abroad.) However, this person as a rule should have a PhD

\textsuperscript{2} Spring semester deadlines are outlined below.

\textsuperscript{3} “I want to study something about Country X.” or “I want to do something about immigration.”
degree or at least be familiar with academic writing. D&G program rules also require that all theses have an Institute faculty member serve as at least co-supervisor in order to facilitate the internal process of thesis completion. This is also for the student’s benefit, so that they can be sure to have one foot planted in the expectations and procedures of the program itself.

Lastly, with their advisor’s recommendations, the student should prepare the 4-page (1200-word) prospectus based on the following headings:

- **Thesis title.** The title should be concise and incorporate both the main research concept as well as its empirical scope. Often these two components are separated with a colon, with either the concept being followed by the empirical case or vice versa. Examples include, Europeanization in pre-accession states: Romanian taxation policy 2000-2007, or Alexander Lukashenko: The emergence of electoral authoritarianism. It is for this reason that students are advised to formulate their title last so that they can be sure to capture exactly what they plan to research. Note also that this title is preliminary. Students are free to modify the wording of their title before they hand in their final thesis.

- **Thesis supervisor(s).** The prospectus should give the name of the supervisor or supervisors. If the student proposes to have an external supervisor, they should briefly describe the background of that person. As noted above, the student should also list an Institute-based supervisor, so as to be sure that there is contact within the MA program. Note that students are not required to obtain an advisor’s formal signature for submitting the prospectus. By the same token, however, they should only list an advisor if they have spoken to that faculty member and obtained their oral agreement. When reviewing the prospectuses the Program Manager will speak to individual advisors. If it emerges that an advisor has been listed without prior consultation, the prospectus will automatically be rejected and the student will be asked to explain the situation.

- **Research problem.** This section of the prospectus should outline the research area or conceptual phenomenon that the thesis will address. The student should demonstrate his/her familiarity with the relevant conceptual or theoretical parameters of their topic. If the thesis is about, for example, social movements, the prospectus should give a brief outline of the concept drawing from relevant literature and giving a sense of how this framework will feed into the empirical research that will be done.

- **Research design and methods.** Here the student should outline the research design of the thesis (i.e. case study, comparative study, large-N) as well as any specific methods that will be used (policy analysis, document analysis, discourse analysis, statistical methods, etc.). Echoing what was written above, the prospectus should explain what methods the student has acquired so far in their studies that will be part of their thesis project. If the student anticipates further methods work will be needed, he/she should outline how they will go about this.
Empirical data and sources. The prospectus should outline the empirical information that the thesis will examine as well as how this 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, other materials) and how they plan on solving them.

Thesis structure. The prospectus should provide a preliminary structure for the thesis in the form of possible chapters and subchapters. The student should think how many parts the thesis might logically have and in what order these might be. Often a thesis will devote one or two chapters to explaining the thesis’s conceptual framework and then devote two or three chapters to empirical analysis. However, other formulas are also possible depending on the topic and research design.

Bibliography. The prospectus should conclude with a list of relevant source materials to be used in the thesis, but generally not more than 15-20 works. On the one hand, students are encouraged to cite these sources already when presenting their argument in the previous sections (i.e. built them into the preceding text). At the same time, the bibliography can also list sources that have not yet been referenced. Nevertheless, students should avoid producing merely a list of scholarly sources that seem to be interesting or were obtained during a superficial computer search. For the Program Manager, the bibliography is another way of checking that the student has become familiar with the necessary conceptual and empirical literature.

As noted above, the entire prospectus should be up to 1200 words (excluding the Bibliography). There is no need for a title page, but each heading should be clearly delineated.

The prospectus should be submitted electronically to the Program Manager via the address democracy@ut.ee by November 1 (or the following Monday, if this date falls on a weekend). If a second-year student does not expect to defend in his/her 4th semester, but rather in the 5th semester (because of study abroad or other extenuating circumstances), the student must still inform the Program Manager of this issue by the November 1 deadline. A second prospectus deadline of April 1 will be announced for those students who expect to defend at the end of the fall term (conventionally in January).

During the two weeks following a prospectus deadline, the Program Manager (together with other faculty members) will review each prospectus, and take one of three decisions:
- **fully approve** the prospectus and offer any additional recommendations as needed;
- **conditionally approve** the prospectus, provided the student addresses certain concerns or provides additional information;
- **return** the prospectus for more thorough revision.

In the case of the latter two decisions, students will be given another two weeks (until approximately December 1 and May 1, respectively) in order to re-submit their prospectus. Prospectuses that have been conditionally approved will then usually be definitively confirmed. Prospectuses that have been returned for revision can also thereafter be fully
confirmed, or conditionally approved if problems remain. Should a prospectus be returned for revision twice, the Program Manager may suggest that the student find another topic or advisor. Once a prospectus has been confirmed, its title and supervisor will be registered under the student’s record in the Study Information System (although these can also be changed later).

In accordance with Institute rules, only students whose prospectuses have been fully approved may be allowed to defend their thesis. If a student fails to submit a prospectus by the required deadline (or has had his/her prospectus returned twice for revision without ultimately getting full approval), and then simply submits a thesis for defense, the Program Manager has the right to refuse the thesis for defense before a proper review is carried out. This may include postponing the defense until the next period of defenses.

To summarize, the prospectus procedure serves two purposes. The first is to provide students with a mid-way point on their road to completing the MA thesis. It is a marker to help students remain on track. In addition, however, it is an important opportunity to gain feedback and help from faculty. Further information about working with a supervisor and completing the thesis successfully will be laid out below. However, the prospectus is the first step toward establishing such a relationship.

Fourth semester: competing the thesis

Ideally, a student’s MA thesis prospectus will have laid out a roadmap for how this final independent project will be completed. The prospectus will have sketched out different tasks to be undertaken such as data collection, data analysis, conceptual framing and the overall structure of the work. For all of this, students should develop a timeline between November and mid-May, at the end of which the thesis should be entirely completed.

An approximate timeline is laid out below. **NOTE: all advisors reserve the right to adhere to this timeline**, meaning they may require students to submit relevant outlines and drafts by a certain deadline, or they may otherwise follow up on the progress of their advisees within the framework of these deadlines. If a student falls behind these deadlines, he/she should inform the advisor and seek advice. If a student fails to adhere to an agreed deadline (i.e. does not respond to an advisor’s queries or submits inadequate work vis-à-vis a certain deadline), the advisor may make a recommendation to withdraw the student from the thesis completion process during the given semester and formulate plans for completing the thesis during the next semester.

Approximate timeline:

**November-December:** theoretically informed data collection, systematization, and analysis
If your project involves compiling a new dataset or working on an existing one, you should devote this period to carrying out this work and clarifying any data problems that remain. If you are working with textual information (speeches, documents, policy reports), you should make sure that you have all of the materials you need and that you begin your analysis of these in due time. If you plan on carrying out interviews, focus groups or a survey, you should begin immediately with developing the relevant base materials (an interviewee list, a set of structured interview questions, a broader survey questionnaire, sampling techniques, etc.)

Why should all of this be ‘theoretically informed’? Many of the questions that we ask in social science have been asked before in relation to other cases or prior instances. Students should take care to review such existing research also during this period in order to see how similar questions or approaches have been developed beforehand. In other words, don’t re-invent the wheel if you don’t have to. (Indeed, you may be critiqued later on, if you have overlooked important research that posed a question more precisely or employed better analytical methods.) Therefore, while data collection and analysis are on the one hand very practical tasks, they should also be designed so as to take into account existing approaches to the kinds of questions you are asking. This is part of cumulative social science.

The most important outcome from this stage of work should be a sense of the empirical message you intend to convey in the thesis. What do the real data show about the phenomenon that you are looking at? For example, if you are studying how taxation policy evolved in Romania during EU accession, then what will be your precise ‘story’ about the stages that this evolution had, and what will be your conclusion about this evolution (surprisingly fast, average, slow)? If you are testing income effects on the propensity to vote for right-wing parties, then what will your data finally show (strong effects, weak effects, step-wise effects)?

These questions are important to answer because they will serve later as a backbone for the entire thesis. If your empirical analysis seems to contradict earlier findings, you will likely frame the whole thesis with this message in mind; if your data confirm prior expectations, then your thesis will be written in a different way. In any case, the data will be what they will be. This is why a clear understanding of the empirical conclusions of your thesis is very important: it will help drive much of the rest, including the precise message and writing of the text!

Note also that this advice is different from what many students often think when they say “I’ll start with writing up the theory, and then do the empirics.” This can often lead to a conceptual or theoretical section in the thesis that doesn’t speak directly enough or engage with the empirical analysis, since it ended up being written before the author had a sense of what the empirical punchline is going to be. This is why working on a thesis (or any research project) can sometimes involve doing things in an order that is at first counter-intuitive.

**January: structuring the conceptual framework**

This period should be devoted to finalizing the structure of the conceptual framework that will be presented in the thesis. Much of this should draw on the conceptual work you already did during the prospectus stage: what are the key concepts that you are employing? what have key authors said about how we should understand these concepts? has there been an evolution in these understandings that is relevant for how you will be employing them? what are the key conceptual parameters in this literature that will underlie the empirical analysis that you will be doing? Likewise, if your thesis is positing a causal connection between phenomena, then what is the prior literature that has dealt with this connection before and what conclusions has it come to?

Note again, that how you craft this section will depend very much on the empirical message you should already know. That is, the conceptual section will be framed in one way if your findings are in

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4 Assuming, of course, that you’ve done a valid and accurate analysis!
accordance with existing research, and in another way if they are not. In this way, you will keep this section from being merely a 'literature review'; instead, it will have punch.

February 1: first complete outline

Having worked systematically on both your empirical and conceptual components, you should now be in a position to draw up a thorough outline of the thesis. This should be around 10 pages long. In contrast to the prospectus, the outline should now present the real thesis itself, meaning an annotated overview of each chapter or section. It should begin with a more precise title (in case your empirical and conceptual work have prompted you to re-think the original wording). It should also lay out the number and structure of the chapters as you intend to have them (will there be one or two conceptual sections? one, two or more empirical chapters?).

For each chapter or section, you should provide at least a page of general discussion of what you expect to cover here. For example, for the conceptual section(s), you should lay out the authors you will be using as part of your conceptual framework or causal model (include relevant bibliographical information). In the empirical section, you should describe your preliminary results and how you will present them (include any data tables if completed). In the introduction, you should try and summarize already now how you intend to argue the entire thesis. Naturally, this text will change before you complete the thesis. But use this outline as an opportunity to test the logic of your current understanding of your thesis. See if you can already encapsulate your main argument.

Your advisor should use this outline (a) to assess the overall logical structure of the thesis, (b) to get an overview of the conceptual framework, including the breadth and coverage of existing literature, (c) to get a sense of the empirical analysis, its validity and accuracy, and (d) to provide feedback on the general strength of the thesis. Therefore, his/her comments should relate to modifying the logical structure of the thesis, suggesting additional literature or approaches that should be addressed, making recommendations as to how the empirical analysis should be presented as well as pointing out where a certain argument might be weak.

March 15: first overall draft, up to 50% of completed text

Using your outline, it should now be possible to work on all of the individual sections, and build them up into final text. Sometimes, students prefer to write their thesis section by section, meaning that by March 15 they may have completed the entire conceptual part, but not yet touched the empirical section. If your advisor is OK with this definition of “50%”, then this is fine, as long as the advisor has seen via the outline what the overall thrust of the thesis will be. If you prefer to switch back and forth between sections (and complete 50% of each of them by the March 15 deadline), this is also acceptable, provided your advisor sees how the whole thing is coming together.

At this stage, the advisor should comment on (a) your overall writing style, (b) the logical succession of paragraphs and other arguments, and (c) other suggestions for how to complete the rest of the thesis. Note that your advisor is not responsible for carrying out language editing (although he/she may point out certain systematic errors). Therefore, if you would like to have someone look through your text, contact the University’s Center for Academic Writing and Communication (http://www.maailmakeeled.ut.ee/en/avok) in due time in order to still make the March 15 and subsequent deadlines.

May 1: second overall draft, 90% competed text

Based on your advisor’s earlier comments, you should now proceed toward completing a solid draft of the thesis that is approximately 90% complete. For example, this could mean having everything written, except the introduction and conclusion (since you will usually want to write or polish these once you have seen how your overall argument evolves across the chapters). Or it may mean having everything together, except a few conceptual or analytical sections.
In any case, this should be the draft that your advisor will give the most thorough reading of, checking for logical inconsistencies, overall structure, and points that could be stressed more or sections that are redundant or long-winded. Again, language editing is the responsibility of the student, although the advisor may point out sentences that are difficult to understand or could be revised.

Note that in most cases advisors will not read the actual, submitted version of the thesis. This is ultimately the responsibility of the student, for the thesis is in the end his/her independent work. Therefore, do not expect to get feedback from an advisor on the final weekend before submission. These issues should be clarified well in advance. If last minute issues arise, students should simply make decisions on their own as they would with any final piece of written work.

Note also that in the Democracy and Governance program there are no pre-defenses. It is responsibility of the student and the advisor to ensure that the thesis meets the essential requirements of the program. That said, students are always encouraged to seek advice from other faculty members if they would like to discuss analytical or conceptual issues regarding the thesis, or would like to have certain parts read by someone else. (Also, don’t forget your fellow students! They are sometimes the most valuable reviewers!)

May 20 (Monday of Week 15 of the semester): thesis submission deadline

During this Monday, students must hand in two printed and bound copies of the thesis to the Academic Affairs Specialist as well as upload an electronic version via Moodle. This deadline is absolutely strict. No extensions are given unless for verified medical reasons and a clear indication that the thesis will be forthcoming within 24 hours. In all other cases, students will be advised to prepare for the next semester’s thesis defense. This is necessary simply because it is not possible otherwise to adhere to the defense process that immediately begins thereafter. If a student believes he/she will not complete their thesis by this stated deadline, he/she should inform both the advisor and the Academic Affairs Specialist in a joint e-mail.

Following submission of the thesis, the Program Manager will consult with the advisor and make a determination as to whether the thesis meets the minimum requirements to proceed to defense. Should the determination be negative, the Manager and advisor will speak with the student in order to work out subsequent plans. All theses approved for defense will be assigned to an opponent, to whom one of the bound copies of the thesis will be sent. The opponent must submit his/her written review of the thesis at least 48 hours before the scheduled defense. The review is sent to the program manager and advisor with a preliminary grade recommendation (subject to reconsideration after the oral defense). A version of the review without the grade recommendation is forwarded to the student no later than 24 hours before the defense.

As a general rule, MA thesis defenses take place during the first full week of June (i.e. 6-8 June). Students should therefore reckon with being in Tartu during this period. Defenses via Skype are as a rule not permitted, since it is too complicated to engage in a proper public defense via such electronic means.

A further description of the defense procedure, formatting rules for the thesis and the assessment criteria used for grading theses can be found on the Institute’s website, under Studies >> Study Info >> Study Materials and Guidelines.

6. Graduation and career planning
Following the successful defense of their MA thesis, students must make sure they have completed all other outstanding curricular requirements (i.e. completed any other current courses or made sure that credit points earned elsewhere have been properly transferred and counted). Graduation ceremonies are generally scheduled for mid-June; the precise date is announced in early spring. If students do not plan to attend the graduation ceremony, they should inform the academic affairs specialist in order to arrange receipt of their diploma by mail.

As this Study Guide has stressed throughout, the Democracy and Governance program is about making you, the student, stronger in your future career and professional life. Planning for this next stage can take place as soon as you arrive in Tartu by looking around for internships or study abroad opportunities that might open up possible job prospects after graduation. It might also involve looking for study topics and themes that are linked to professional fields or societal problems in your home country, and to which you would like to turn your attention after returning. Staying on to work in Estonia with an NGO, a thinktank or an international organization is also an option, although the sector is limited in size. Employment opportunities with Estonian government offices is also limited, since such positions usually require Estonian language proficiency. Advice on future career plans can be sought from the Program Manager or other members of the faculty.

Irrespective of where students head after their graduation, we’d love to continue hearing from you! The Institute maintains an alumni liaison program, through which we hope to remain in contact with you for many more years! Consider becoming a University of Tartu Student Ambassador in your home country or elsewhere outside Estonia! Spread the word about study opportunities in Tartu – as well as about all of the other treasures of Estonia! And come visit us again during your travels in this region! You will always remain a member of our academic community!

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