

Non-Traditional Thesis/Dissertation

– A Guide for Faculty Members and Graduate Students

A non-traditional thesis/dissertation is a work that differs from the commonly used monograph or manuscript-based formats, including, but not limited to, creative, experiential, or applied work. York University has a proud tradition of supporting emerging forms of scholarship through graduate students' primary research projects and allowing the strength of their work to be captured in novel ways.

As stated in the Executive Summary of the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS): Report of the Task Force on the Dissertation (September, 2018):

“The purpose, meaning, and scope of the PhD are changing in response to profound changes in both the academy and society. University researchers are increasingly engaged with other societal sectors and across disciplinary boundaries to address contemporary challenges. Doctoral graduates are contributing to society in increasingly varied ways and contexts. To engage in these diverse forms of research and to work and communicate both within and beyond the confines of the academy, doctoral students and graduates require new competencies. As the core of the PhD, the doctoral dissertation is diversifying in its forms and content in step with these changes... The report concludes with a call to action for universities. The dissertation is changing, and it is crucial that our policies and practices acknowledge and facilitate this reality, so that we can fulfill our mandate to promote and ensure the highest standards of scholarly rigour.”

Graduate students should be made aware of the formats supported in their program for disseminating their research while recognizing that the thesis/dissertation is a document which must be examined by an audience that includes members from outside one's discipline and field.



It is critical that students and supervisors have a productive dialogue on the suitability of the proposed format, and that there is a mutual comprehension for how the research project will take shape. While innovative approaches to research should be celebrated, they can come with considerable challenges, further underscoring the importance of reciprocal expectations and a supportive foundation to ensure the viability of the project.

✳ Important Considerations for Students

- Does the proposed form and format of the project hold scholarly merit?
- Are the practical applications of the project in line with expectations for one's future aspirations?
- Is there relevance in pursuing an alternative mode of research?
- Can the project be realized in a reasonable timeframe and without undue duress on both the student and supervisor?
- Over time, can one stand behind the thesis or dissertation and justify its contribution to the relevant field(s)?
- Does the outcome of the research project reflect the direction one would like their work to be adjudicated e.g., exhibition, prototype, software application, etc.?
- Is what is considered of value to the research appropriately disseminated through non-traditional means?
- Can it be clearly articulated what a particular medium embodies and if that object can perform a representation of the proposed format?

✳ Important Considerations for Faculty Members

- Does the proposed format align with the quality of the research and academic standards of the discipline?
- Can the modalities proposed be appropriately assessed?
- Can the supervisory committee sensibly ensure pursuit of the research the student wants to conduct? Is it in line with the identity of the program, and can the student be sufficiently supported throughout the endeavour?
- Can the learning outcomes of the program be adequately met under the proposed project?
- Are there appropriate resources in place in the program to support oversight of both the substance and format of the project?
- Do the wants and expectations of the student align with the expertise of the supervisory committee?
- Will the student face any undue barriers in their research pursuits considering any internal/external factors in light of the proposed format?

Next Steps >>>

Graduate students and faculty members should converse early and often on the proposed project and its possibilities, and to reach a thorough understanding concerning next steps for the research. Parties are encouraged to make use of this guide to inform these ongoing conversations and to help determine a feasible plan of action.

For research projects that differ from the commonly used monograph-based thesis/dissertation, approval is subject to confirmation from the supervisory committee concerned that relevant supervision and sufficient support for the completion of such work can be provided. Non-traditional theses and dissertations must be in accordance with Faculty of Graduate Studies and program requirements and procedures.