

# THE NORMAN PATERSON SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

## CARLETON UNIVERSITY

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### COURSE WORK, RESEARCH ESSAY OR THESIS: WHICH TO CHOOSE?

The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs offers students three options for completing their Masters degree:

- a). Course work option;
- b). Research essay worth one (1) full credit;
  - INAF 5908 for MA students;
  - INAF 5906 for MA/JD students.
- C). Research thesis worth two (2) full credits;
  - INAF 5909 for MA students;
  - INAF 5919 for MA/JD students.

Both the research essay and the research thesis options have the requirement of an oral examination.

This information is designed to give you some preliminary guidance on making your decision, which must be declared by **January 31**. You should discuss your decision with your potential supervisor or a faculty member. Please note that opinions on these topics will vary, so you should consult widely. The following views are an attempt to reflect the various views expressed in consultations.

#### 1. How does your choice affect your future education goals?

If you are thinking about continuing your studies at the doctoral level, you need to think carefully about how you complete your MA degree at NPSIA. While there are no overwhelming advantages to the research essay or thesis option, the completion of either does provide evidence of your capacity to undertake a concentrated and focused research project. In addition, a letter of support from your supervisor may be considered very informative by a doctoral admissions committee, and presumably you will also learn some valuable research skills. Coursework MA degrees are becoming more common, however, and may allow you to proceed more quickly to your doctoral studies. Discuss the question with your professors here at NPSIA and Carleton as well as with your professors from your undergraduate program. You should try and identify the programs you are likely to apply for and contact them directly to see if they have a preference.

#### 2. How does your choice affect your future work goals?

Again, there are no strong reasons for selecting one option over another on the basis of employment goals. Employers are unlikely to read research essays or theses. These vehicles may be more suited for signaling employment interests if you have a very precise employment objective that you think cannot be signaled through course work. However course work selection can also be used to signal interest in particular work. If you have chosen a very specific employment target, you might try and identify people working there to see if there is a preference. The network of NPSIA Alumni might be useful in this context.

### 3. What is the quickest way to finish?

While it is possible to finish your degree in 12 months with either the coursework or research essay option, students who choose the course work option tend to finish more quickly. Other activities that extend your program (exchanges, internships, Co-op) can be compatible with any of the program completion options.

### 4. When should you consider the course work option?

If you have already identified many courses that you want to take, or if you prefer exposure to a wider range of topics, the coursework option is ideal. Similarly, if you do not have a strong interest in pursuing a particular topic in detail, the coursework option might be best.

### 5. When should you consider a research essay?

Research essays are best handled by students who have a strong interest in a specific topic and a sense of the methodology that they want to pursue. You should also think about which professors they would like to work with and their availability. The research essay can be satisfying for both the student and supervisor if the topic is of common interest and there is enthusiasm on both sides. While not necessarily a factor in doctoral admissions, students interested in pursuing a PhD may benefit from a research essay if they are able to take advantage of a focused research endeavour with a supervisor in their area of interest from whom they can learn some of the techniques of research.

### 6. When should you consider a research thesis?

Theses are rarely done in the school due to the length of time they tend to take, the degree of rigour and the frequent use of field work as a common component. Only students with high grades (A- overall average) **on all of their other NPSIA credit courses** will be permitted to do a thesis. Students who fall below the A- average will have to withdraw from the thesis option and choose another. The other observations in point (5) above also apply to theses.

### 7. Where can you go for advice about your decision?

In all cases it is crucial that you meet with your field advisor regarding your decision, and with potential supervisors if you are considering either a research essay or thesis. You may also wish to speak to various faculty members, former students, the Associate Director and to the MA Program Administrator, to discuss your decision.

### 8. How do you declare your decision to the School?

Details on both the degree by course work, and the research essay/thesis options are available on the website of the School. The required form, *Notice of Intent for Program Completion*, identifying your choice of Course Work, 5906 or 5919 (MA/JD students), and 5908 or 5909 (MA students) is to be completed by **January 31**. [The link to complete the form is here](#)

### 9. Can you change your mind after this date and switch between options?

Yes, but you are strongly advised to avoid this event. Switching can affect your completion date and you will have to adjust your course work selection accordingly. Any faculty members involved in the decision must agree to any change, and permission must be received from the Associate Director.