



## **Capstone Project Guidelines for Graduate Level School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA)**

The capstone project is an integral part of the graduate curriculum at SPIA, designed to provide students with an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in a real-world or practical context. This document outlines the guidelines for the capstone project to ensure consistency, rigor, and academic integrity.

### **What is a capstone project?**

A graduate-level capstone project is the final, comprehensive assessment for students in their degree program, designed to demonstrate their cumulative learning and competencies. Unlike internships or theses, the capstone project requires students to work collaboratively in groups to address a real-world issue in partnership with an external organization. This project is the culmination of their academic journey, integrating knowledge and skills from coursework, internships, and previous experiences.

In the capstone project, students are tasked with applying the concepts, theories, and techniques they have learned throughout their studies to solve practical problems presented by the partner organization. This involves conducting collective research, planning, and problem-solving in a real-world setting, allowing students to experience the interdependence and teamwork required in professional environments.

The project culminates in a comprehensive report, showcasing the students' ability to conduct research, plan strategically, and work effectively as a team. The successful completion of this project, which takes place in the final semester of the program, earns students 18 ECTS credits and serves as a key indicator of their readiness to transition from academic life to professional careers.

Capstone projects can take various forms, including but not limited to a *policy research*, which involves an in-depth study on a specific policy issue within the student's field of study; a *case study*, which entails a detailed analysis of a particular problem relevant to the field; and, *service learning*, which involves a project that includes community service or partnership with a community organization.

To be eligible, students must be in their final year of the graduate program and have completed the prerequisites as specified in the curriculum.

### **What is the main goal of the capstone project?**

The primary goal of the capstone project is to provide students with a comprehensive, real-world experience that synthesizes their academic learning into a practical, team-based project. By engaging in this project, students are expected to demonstrate their ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practical challenges, enhance their understanding of dynamics of problem-solving, and develop essential professional skills. The

capstone project aims to ensure that students are well-prepared for professional roles, capable of contributing effectively to collective goals and working collaboratively within diverse teams.

### **What are learning outcomes of the capstone project?**

By the end of the capstone project, students are expected to achieve the following learning outcomes:

- 1) Demonstrate a clear understanding of the project assignment, its objectives, and the expectations set by the partner organization.
- 2) Apply appropriate research methods and strategies to gather relevant data and information critical to the project's success.
- 3) Increase their knowledge of the specific project topic and apply this knowledge effectively to solve real-world problems.
- 4) Gain a deeper understanding of how organizations operate, including internal processes, and will expand their professional networks through interactions with industry professionals.
- 5) Effectively manage roles and responsibilities within their team, ensuring that all members contribute optimally to achieve the project's goals.
- 6) Manage appropriate communication with their project mentors (academic and organizational supervisors), including providing periodic updates and interim reports to ensure alignment with project goals.
- 7) Prepare and deliver a professional-quality product (e.g. a report) that meets the organization's needs within the agreed timeframe and deadlines.
- 8) Prepare and deliver a formal presentation of their project to an audience of peers and faculty, demonstrating their ability to communicate findings and solutions effectively.

### **What are the steps in the capstone project?**

**Group Formation:** The capstone project process begins with the careful formation of student groups. These groups, typically consisting of 3 members, are strategically assembled to ensure a diverse mix of skills, experiences, and perspectives. Group formation is a critical first step, as the success of the project heavily depends on effective collaboration and teamwork. Each member brings their unique strengths to the table, and the group dynamic is fostered through mutual respect, open communication, and a shared commitment to the project's goals. Establishing clear roles and responsibilities within the group early on is essential for efficient progress and successful outcomes. The way groups are formed depends on the respective academic supervisor's choice, where the supervisor may choose to assign group members himself/herself or leave the choice to students. Formation of groups should be completed by the end of the **4<sup>th</sup> week of the Fall semester** of the student's last academic year.

**Choosing and Approval of Capstone Project Topic:** Once the groups are formed, the next step is to choose a capstone project topic from the list provided by the academic supervisor. This phase involves brainstorming and discussing potential topics that align with both the students' interests and the needs of the external organization they will be working with. The chosen topic must be relevant, feasible, and significant enough to warrant a comprehensive investigation. After selecting a topic, the group must seek approval from their academic supervisor, ensuring that the project meets academic standards and organizational expectations. This step is crucial as it lays the foundation for the entire project, guiding the research, analysis, and final deliverables, and should be completed by the end of the **10<sup>th</sup> week of the Fall semester** of the student's last academic year. Accordingly, the students should submit the "Capstone Topic Approval Form" to their respective academic supervisor (see Appendix 1).

**Working on the Capstone Project:** With the topic approved, students move on to the most intensive phase of the process: working on the capstone project. Students are expected to start working on the project as soon as the Spring semester of the student's last academic year starts, since the usual capstone workload may require several weeks of research, data collection, analysis, and write-up. The group collaborates closely, applying their cumulative knowledge and skills to tackle the project's challenges. Regular meetings, both within the group and with the project mentors (academic and organizational supervisors), are vital during this phase to ensure that the project stays on track and that all members are contributing effectively. The group must manage time efficiently, divide tasks according to each member's strengths, and continuously refine their approach based on feedback. This phase is marked by the development of the final product, whether it be a comprehensive report, or another professional deliverable. For timely feedback from project mentors and to allow sufficient time for possible revisions and corrections, students are expected to submit their first project drafts by the end of the **10<sup>th</sup> week of the Spring semester**.

**Presenting the Final Output of the Project:** The capstone project culminates in the presentation of the final output. This presentation is a critical opportunity for students to showcase their work to an audience that may include peers, faculty, and representatives from the partner organization. The group is expected to deliver a polished and professional presentation that clearly articulates the problem addressed, the research conducted, the solutions proposed, and/or the impact of their work. This step not only tests the students' ability to communicate complex ideas and solutions effectively but may also serve as an assessment criterion for their overall project performance. The presentation is followed by a Q&A session, where students must defend their work and demonstrate a deep understanding of the project. Successful completion of this step marks the end of the capstone project journey, signaling the students' readiness to enter the professional world. The respective logistics and time of the group presentations are determined by respective academic supervisor.

### **How is the capstone project evaluated?**

The evaluation and assessment of capstone projects are conducted on a **Pass/Fail** basis, emphasizing the successful completion of the project rather than assigning traditional letter grades. The primary responsibility for evaluating the project lies with the academic supervisor, who plays a central role in determining the criteria for assessment. While the **academic supervisor** is the main evaluator, they have the discretion to incorporate additional assessment mechanisms, such as feedback from the **partner organization**, **peer reviews**, or any other method deemed appropriate to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the project.

A crucial aspect of the supervisor's role is to ensure that the grading process is fair and that all group members are held accountable for their contributions. This includes taking measures to prevent free riding, where some members might contribute less but benefit equally from the group's overall success. The academic supervisor ultimately decides how the work of each group member will be assessed, and while rare, it is possible for one member to fail the course while others pass, depending on individual contributions and performance. This system is designed to uphold the integrity of the grading process and ensure that all students are fairly evaluated based on their efforts and engagement in the project.

### **What are the quality-related expectations from students in Capstone projects?**

In addition to the formal requirements mentioned above, it is essential to maintain academic integrity throughout the project. Students must ensure that their work is original and free from plagiarism. Proper

citation and referencing of used sources are mandatory. Any form of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, will result in disciplinary action, which may include failure of the project.

Furthermore, ethical considerations are also crucial, particularly for projects involving human subjects or sensitive data. Students must obtain the necessary ethical approvals before commencing their research to ensure the integrity and ethical standards of their work. Adherence to ethical guidelines ensures that the project is conducted responsibly and ethically.

### **What is the format and length of the Capstone Project assignment?**

The Capstone Project paper should be **between 12,000 and 15,000 words** (approximately 4,000-5,000 words workload by each student), including footnotes but excluding bibliography, unless otherwise agreed upon with the supervisor. It is required that students use APA Referencing and Citation style as technical guides.

Students must adhere to the following standards and format when writing up the Capstone Project paper:

- The capstone paper must be written and submitted in English.
- The capstone paper must be typed on standard sized paper. The left margin should be 32 mm – 39 mm (1.25 – 1.5 inches). Top, bottom and right-hand margins should be 25 mm (1.1 inches).
- Students must use 12-point font size and Times New Roman style. Students may use 14 or 16-point type to identify chapters, sections and sub-sections.
- The capstone paper should be double-spaced. Quotations longer than two lines should be single-spaced and indented from other text. Footnotes and bibliography should be single-spaced.
- The capstone paper must have clearly divided chapters or sections. Students should use a new page at the beginning of each new chapter or section.
- The pages of the capstone paper must be numbered consecutively and centered at the bottom of the page.

### **What are the content items of the Capstone Project paper?**

The project paper should contain the following sections in the specified order:

- Title page
- Approval page
- Statement of authenticity
- Abstract page
- Table of contents
- Text: An introduction, the chapters or sections forming the body of the paper, and a conclusion
- Footnotes (if any)
- Bibliography/references
- Appendices (if any)

The following paragraphs specify what should be included in the sections mentioned above:

**Title page** (this page should be neither numbered nor counted (see Appendix 2))

- the name of the University
- the graduate program
- the award for which the capstone is submitted (i.e. the Master of Arts in Diplomacy and International Affairs, or the Master of Public Administration)
- the title and subtitle
- the students' full names, which should be same as shown on the cover page, the approval page and the name required on your diploma
- the contact e-mail address
- the city and date of submission

**Approval page**

The approval page mentions the academic supervisor and the Dean of the School. This page is neither numbered nor counted (see Appendix 3).

**Statement of authenticity page**

The authenticity statement asserts that the paper is the work of the students and that all sources are appropriately cited. This page is neither numbered nor counted (see Appendix 4).

**Abstract**

The abstract provides a concise summary of the entire study, typically including the following elements: the purpose or objective, which states the main research question or goal; the methods, summarizing the research design and key techniques used for data collection and analysis; the results or findings, highlighting the most significant outcomes; and the conclusion, which briefly discusses the implications and contributions of the research. Occasionally, keywords are included to represent the main topics. The abstract should be succinct, usually between 150-250 words, and offer a clear overview of the study, allowing readers to grasp its essence without reading the full paper.

**Table of contents**

The table of contents must contain the following sections with page numbers: introduction, chapters and/or sections and sub-sections, the list of tables (if any), the list of figures (if any), bibliography, and appendices (if any).

**Main body of capstone paper**

The main body of the text must clearly indicate chapters, sections, and sub-sections. Each chapter, or section, must begin on a new page.

**Footnotes**

This section includes citations for specific points in the text, explanatory notes that provide additional detail without disrupting the main narrative, clarifications of terms or concepts, acknowledgments of contributions relevant to certain sections, and cross-references to other parts of the paper or related works. Footnotes help keep the main text clear and concise while offering readers access to supplementary information and context as needed.

## **Bibliography**

The bibliography must fully and accurately include all sources used throughout the paper. Students should make sure that whatever has been cited throughout the paper is referenced in the bibliography, and whatever has been referenced in the bibliography has been cited at least once in the paper.

## **Appendices**

This section includes supplementary materials that support the main content but are not essential to the narrative of the paper. These materials provide additional detail or documentation that may be useful for readers who want a deeper understanding of the project (raw data, questionnaires or surveys, additional figures or tables, technical details, supporting documents, supplementary analyses, glossaries or lists).

Appendix 1. Capstone Topic Approval Form



**Capstone Topic Approval Form**

Program: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Names: \_\_\_\_\_

Capstone Project Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address:

Phone number:

**APPROVED by:**

Academic Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

DD/MM/YY

Appendix 2. Sample of Title Page

**ADA UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**  
**MASTER OF ARTS IN DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL**  
**AFFAIRS**

**CAPSTONE PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE**  
**REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN**  
**DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

**New Security Threats in the Caspian Basin Region: How Much of a**  
**Challenge for Azerbaijan?**

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Baku, April 25th, 2024



Appendix 3. Approval Form

**ADA UNIVERSITY**

**Program:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Student Names:** \_\_\_\_\_

**APPROVED by:**

Academic Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Dean of the School: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

DD/MM/YY

Appendix 4. Authenticity Form

**STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY**

I have read ADA University's policy on plagiarism and certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this paper, entitled (*insert title here*), is all my own work and does not contain any unacknowledged work.

Full Name and Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name and Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name and Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name and Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name and Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

DD/MM/YY