

MDDN597

Master of Design Technology

Research Portfolio Outline 2025

This Research Portfolio Outline should be read in conjunction with the Master's Thesis Regulations, the Assessment Handbook, and the Library Statute.

All relevant documents for the MDDN Research Portfolio and postgraduate policies may be found on the MDT Teams site.

Points: 90

Assessment: Assessment of a completed research portfolio is based on the mandatory requirement outlined in this document

Postgraduate Program Director: Areito Echevarria, areito.echevarria@vuw.ac.nz

Supervisors: Students will be assigned a supervisor by the Programme Director

Location: Miramar Creative Centre

Prescription

This is a project-based 90-point research portfolio that forms the research pathway of the 180-point Master of Design Technology (MDT) degree. With the approval of academic staff and in consultation with a supervisor, students undertake a substantial animation and Visual Effects (VFX) research project. This consists of significant contribution to a group project, combined with an individual investigation. The final research by design outcome should demonstrate mastery of design thinking, development, and expression.

The MDDN Research Portfolio

The Master of Design Technology program emphasizes excellence in both Artistic and Technical achievement in the field of animation & VFX. The research portfolio creates a formal structure for the process of animation and VFX research in this context by applying design research methodologies to the process of filmmaking. On completion of the Research Portfolio, the student will have a structured approach for conducting animation & VFX research.

Students will work both individually and in groups (see below). Students will meet regularly with their supervisor - as a group once a week, and individually as required. The group sessions consist of workshops and seminars designed to develop the short film projects that form the basis of the research portfolio. Students will be required to participate in weekly crits and present work in progress as directed by the Programme Director.

The research portfolio output consists of two components - a group project, and an individual written thesis. The two components work together to form a coherent output, with the written thesis serving

as a formal documentation of the student's research contribution to the group project. The two components are closely related and should not be situated as separate projects.

Group Project (75%)

Working in groups of 4-7, students contribute as a key crew member on a short (6 minutes max) animated or live action VFX film, taking on one or more key creative and technical roles. Examples of roles could include: writer, director, animator, fx animator, lighter, compositor, modeler etc. The role or roles will include key contributions to all phases of production including:

- Ideation & Pitching
- Research and Development
- Production
- Postproduction

Through this process the student will conduct animation and VFX research to make a significant contribution to the completed film, developing novel approaches and methodologies in the process.

The output of the Group Project will include:

- The short film, 6 minutes max
- Behind the Scenes video (BTS), 6 minutes max - documenting the production process
- Delivery package - Exhibition and distribution strategy document, A package of Stills, posters, and other promotion material.

Although this is a group project, all students will be assessed separately on their individual contribution, there is no group assessment. Should a group lose a team member due to unforeseen circumstances, the assessment criteria will be adjusted accordingly, and the course coordinator and program director will discuss with the team members how to proceed.

Written Thesis (25%, 3,000–7,500 words)

This written component should be a concise research paper that presents a novel technique, methodology, or workflow developed by the student during the production of the accompanying animated film. The research focus is normally on practical application, creative problem solving, and technical and artistic insights, rather than introducing low-level technical research.

Requirements

Word Count: 3,000–7,500 words

Format: Structured as a formal design research paper, including:

- Abstract (summary of the technique/method)
- Introduction (context, problem statement, and significance)
- Related Work (discussion of prior approaches or influences)
- Methodology (detailed explanation of the technique or workflow)
- Case Study / Application (real-world implementation in the animated film)
- Critical Evaluation / Discussion (effectiveness, challenges, and insights)
- Conclusion & Future Work (reflection and potential improvements)
- References (properly cited sources)

Focus & Content

- **Novelty:** The paper must introduce a new or improved technique, workflow, or methodology that enhances some aspect of animation, visual storytelling, or production.
- **Practical Application:** The research should demonstrate real-world relevance, supported by implementation details and results from the animated film project.
- **Clarity & Accessibility:** While technical details are important, the writing should be accessible to a broad creative and academic audience.

This thesis serves as a critical reflection and research contribution supporting the animated film, demonstrating both innovation and rigorous investigation into a novel creative or technical approach.

Key dates – 2025

Part A	
Jul 7 (wk01, Tri 2)	MDDN597 begins
Aug 01 (wk06, Tri 2)	<p>One-Month Research Proposal Due</p> <p>The research proposal consists of a written document outlining the students proposed individual research work area. It is submitted to the Animation & VFX Committee for approval (pdf submitted digitally). The committee review the soundness of the proposed research. The proposal is expected to be between 1500-2000 words and follow the approach and template presented in seminars to students.</p>

Aug 15 (wk06, Tri 2)	<p>1st round short film pitches Due</p> <p>This is a live pitch presentation to faculty and students proposing a potential short film idea for the group project. Each student will individually pitch an original story idea of their own. The pitches are reviewed by the Animation & VFX Committee. The Committee selects the projects that will move into production and become the group projects. This is usually between 2 and 4 films. The selected projects are announced within 1 week of the pitch so that teams can be formed for the group projects.</p>
Oct 10 (wk 13, Tri 2)	<p>2nd round short film pitches</p> <p>The teams jointly present a refined pitch of their short film group project in front of students, faculty, and industry experts for feedback. The students will also present their individual research areas, and how it relates to the group project.</p>
Part B	
Nov 17 (wk 01, Tri 3)	<p>Production Commences</p> <p>Scripts are finalised and all the group projects begin production.</p>
Dec 05 (wk 04, Tri 3)	<p>Progress review</p> <p>A draft outline of the individual written thesis is sent to supervisors for review</p>
Dec 19 (wk 05, Tri 3)	<p>Picture Lock</p> <p>The edit is locked and sent to the sound team.</p>
Feb 6, 2026 (wk 10, Tri 3)	<p>Film & BTS delivery</p> <p>DCP delivery of the short film and BTS due.</p>
Mar 12, 5pm (wk 03, Tri 1)	<p>Thesis Due</p> <p>Written Thesis (3,000–7,500 words) submitted digitally. Theses are sent to an Examination Panel consisting of faculty and industry experts for review.</p>

Mar 19 (Wk 04, Tri 1)	Screening and Examination The films and BTS videos are screened at a cinema theatre in front of an industry audience. The Examination Panel reviews the material and convenes as a group on site to make an assessment.
After decision to award degree has been made	Submission of Research Portfolio to Library Once the research portfolio has been examined and awarded a passing grade, and after required editorial changes have been completed, the digital document is deposited in the VUW Library via self-deposit service, and fill in the 'Degree completion' form. If any physical objects or other supplementary material has been approved for submission, these should also accompany the research portfolio at the time of submission: https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/library/research/thesis-guide/submit-your-thesis

Note – VUW graduation ceremonies are held annually in May and December. However the examination process for the research portfolio ends well after the deadline for applying to attend the May graduation, therefore MDT graduates wishing to attend a graduation ceremony will normally attend the December graduation.

Mandatory Requirements

Students must complete all of Part A to the satisfaction of the MDT programme director and Head of School to be permitted to progress to Part B. This is in addition to the requirement for students to maintain a B+ average for Trimester 1 and 2 in order to progress into Tri 3 of the MDT program.

Examination

Each research portfolio will be assessed by a panel recommended by the Head of School and appointed by the Associate Dean (PGR). The examination panel will include academic staff members from the School of Design Innovation and industry experts. Examiners will convene as a group to assess both the Group Projects and the Written Thesis. The examination panel will provide an examiner's report and recommended grade for each student.

Group Project assessment criteria

The group project assesses soft skills, teamwork, and creative and technical ability.

- Ability to work consistently, efficiently, and flexibly
- Ability to work under pressure, and to deadlines
- Ability to work well within a team
- Team leadership / followership skills

- Technical and artistic ability
- Troubleshooting and problem solving
- Effective application of the research topic to the group project

Written Thesis assessment criteria

- Critical examination of an existing body of knowledge, histories, theories, and contexts relevant to the research proposition
- The effective formulation and deployment of research methods appropriate to the research
- Application of creative and critical thinking in the development, resolution and presentation of a design research project and any associated outputs
- Reflection and critique of the value of the design research undertaken and its relationship or contribution to existing knowledge or practice;
- The structuring of a coherent written thesis that clearly communicates findings and outcomes to relevant audiences in an appropriate format.

Final Grade

MDDN597 has one assessed item: the research portfolio. While the portfolio has two assessed items - the group project and the written thesis - students will receive a single letter grade.

If a student is required to revise and resubmit, the only grades which can be awarded are either C-, D or E. No candidate can be awarded merit or distinction endorsements for any degree for which any part of the research portfolio has been resubmitted.

Grades from all courses completed towards the 180-point MDT degree are included in the determination of whether the degree is awarded a merit or distinction.

Supervision, Workload and Enrolment

Students are expected to maintain satisfactory progress throughout the course of the research portfolio programme by attending and presenting at all scheduled contact times, and submitting their progress reports.

Supervision

Students will work under the guidance of a primary supervisor appointed on behalf of the University by the Head of School. The primary supervisor will generally be a member of the academic staff of the School of Design Innovation. Secondary and/or external supervision will be appointed as warranted. Supervision will occur regularly, either individually or in group tutorials.

Workload

The expected full-time workload is up to 40 hours per week. This time will be split between group work, reviews, and independent study.

Variations of Enrolment: Suspensions, Extensions, Half-Time, Termination, Withdrawal

Variations of enrolment may include suspension of study; extension of time; termination of candidature; and withdrawal from the programme. Owing to the group nature of this portfolio, any variation is likely to have a significant impact on other students in the group therefore suspension of study or extension of time will only be approved in exceptional circumstances. Half-time enrolment is not possible in this programme.

Students can discuss any exceptional personal circumstances and requirement for a variation in confidence with the Associate Dean (PGR). Provisions are set out in the Master's Thesis Regulations. <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/documents/policy/research-policy/masters-thesis-regulations.pdf>