Summary of MRP vs Thesis

I emailed 15+ universities across Ontario and Canada inquiring about their PhD program in Education, specifically asking whether they had a preference for Thesis based Master’s programs above MRPs. If the school did not have a PhD in Education, I asked about their PhD in English or Philosophy as I felt those were also programs that MEd students might be interested in. The answer from all universities (except Dalhousie who said they prefer a thesis over MRP, but MRP students can still be accepted) is that the admissions process is wholistic and that grades, strong references, and an excellent writing sample are what determines a student’s admission to PhD program. Representatives from McMaster university and others also mentioned that they regularly take coursework only Master’s students into their PhD program as well.

Take this response from OISE for example:

“As we do understand that some of our applicants are coming from different academic backgrounds, there is no preference over an MRP or a thesis. All applicants are considered on their individual merits for admission to any graduate program at the University of Toronto.”

The Graduate Program Coordinator at Guelph gave me an excellent response detailing what graduate school programs are looking for in a candidate. Here is his response verbatim:

“That's an interesting question. I'd have to say I disagree with your fellow graduate students. I do not think it matters at all (with one qualification, discussed later). Grad schools are looking for students with promise and ability, and there isn't any reason to think that only comes out in 2yr Thesis MA programs. When we look at students, we look for good grades, strong letters of reference, and especially a quality writing sample. That sample would never be a whole thesis (too long), but a shorter paper, or part of a thesis. If you have excellent grades, letters of reference that strongly support you (and make the case for promise and ability), and a really good writing sample, it doesn't matter if you have done a thesis or not. In my discipline, Philosophy, both the University of Toronto and Western University, two of the strongest programs in the country and in North America, offer only 1-year MA degrees, and their students are not at a disadvantage getting into PhD programs.

The thesis MA is a good degree for those who want to terminate their studies with a piece of research, and not go on. For some students that do want to go on, it might be a more manageable MA, since 1-year programs can be very demanding, with a lot of course work (and possibly TA work on top of that). This brings me to my qualification, mentioned above. A 2-year degree is not in itself better or worse (with respect to further studies), but it does give a student more time to become prepared for the application process for the PhD. It allows one more year to apply for external scholarships (SSHRC, NSERC, OGS), one more year to give conference papers and send out articles for publication, one more year to get connected in the academic world, one more year to generate an excellent writing sample. These things--scholarships and research outputs especially--give students a leg up on others without them. They are important items on a cv, as far as PhD admission committees go, and they may be more or less important, depending on the discipline (more important for Psychology, less for Philosophy, as examples). Look at it this way: suppose you want to go on to the PhD right after a MA. You will be applying for a SSHRC doctoral fellowship in Sept., of your first term as a MA student (January for OGS). You will have to do this on the basis of your BA work, since you have not yet completed MA courses. In a 2-year program, you can apply, as above, and then you can apply in Sept. of your 2nd MA year, as well. Then, you will have taken all your MA courses, and will have letters of reference from your current Profs. Hopefully, you will also have a conference paper or two that you have presented. So there is an advantage, I think, to the 2-year MA, but it's not got to do with whether or not a student writes a thesis. Its also an advantage that probably doesn't matter much to the very best students. Speaking about my own Dept., we have had students go on to excellent doctoral programs, from both our 1 and 2-year programs. “

In summary, it does not appear to matter whether you pursue a course based, MRP, or thesis-based Master’s, so long as you maintain good grades, make efforts to do research, and create good connections with professors to obtain strong references.