



Supervisors' perceptions of the value of the undergraduate dissertation



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ABSTRACT

Dissertations are a common feature of final year undergraduate study. Although there is some research on students' perceptions of the dissertation, it appears there is less research concerning supervisors' perceptions of the value of the undergraduate dissertation. Data for the study was collected via a questionnaire administered to staff within two departments at the University of Huddersfield Business School in the UK; with follow-up interviews. Considerations of the study included whether lecturers perceived that students have the capacity to undertake a dissertation, the value and impact the dissertation may have upon student results, and the demands dissertation supervision places upon supervisors. Key findings are that the dissertation still has currency and offers transferable skills that may have value to employers. One emergent finding was to consider a 'cut off' point, in terms of previous academic performance, such that the dissertation route would be open only to the more able students.

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1. Introduction and context

Dissertations are a common feature of final year undergraduate study, but there has been little research into their impact on student performance and satisfaction (Hammick & Acker, 1998; Pathirage, Haigh, Amaratunga, Baldry, & Green, 2004; Webster, Pepper, & Jenkins, 2000), and even less into the perceptions and attitudes of their academic supervisors. The purpose of this paper is to examine and discuss supervisors' perceptions of the value and costs (in terms of resourcing) of the dissertation for the student, supervisor and the institution.

The paper is structured as follows: first, relevant literature is explored; second, the research method is outlined; third, the findings are discussed; and finally, the conclusions and recommendations are presented.

2. Literature review

It is widely accepted that the undergraduate dissertation (UD) in the UK is a well respected and highly valuable piece of work (Booth & Harrington, 2003; Todd, Bannister, & Clegg, 2004). Attwood (2009, 1) reports Professor Dai Hounsell (Vice-Principal of the University of Edinburgh) as saying: '...it is now rare to find a degree programme in the UK that does not involve a dissertation or project that students carry out in their final year that is "summative" – counting towards a degree classification.' Todd et al. (2004, 335) citing Hemmings (2001, 241) may concur, writing that the dissertation has:

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...a privileged place within many degree programmes. Viewed as the culmination of the degree, the dissertation is seen as the mechanism through which students construct a synthesis of theory, published studies, methodological understanding, the selection, and application of appropriate research methods, analysis, and decision.

Further, the dissertation is probably one of the most important and intense pieces of work a student may be involved with (l'Anson & Smith, 2004; Pathirage et al., 2004; Webster et al., 2000). The dissertation allows the student the autonomy to select the subject of their research, and to make decisions, self-regulate and manage their dissertation (Styles & Radloff, 2001). Stefani, Tariq, Heylings, & Butcher (1997, 284) add to both the complexity and possible value of the dissertation in terms of assessing other skills when they write:

Honours projects [dissertations] provide us with an opportunity to help students develop a variety of valuable skills, assisted with tutoring on a one-to-one basis. They also provide us with the opportunity to assess a number of important facets of students' abilities, which are not at present readily assessed using other conventional methods, such as traditional written examinations.

We would add not only written examinations, but also coursework. It is accepted that some coursework assignments are intensive and offer some of the skills mentioned above, but they rarely offer the student the ability, or opportunity, to apply particular research methods in these individual pieces of assessment. A further feature of the dissertation is that it is often used as a discriminator at exam boards in relation to the honours classification (Booth & Harrington, 2003; Webster et al., 2000). For example, if a student is on the borderline between a classification of 2:2 or 2:1 the exam board and the externals may take into consideration the percentage mark awarded for the dissertation to help inform their decision as to whether or not to raise the degree classification (Hand & Clewes, 2000; Webster et al., 2000).² Having said this, Hand and Clewes (2000) do warn against 'upward drift' of grades, and 'degree inflation'.³

The final grade of the degree classification has become increasingly important to students and, with the dissertation being worth 40 credits (a third of their 120 credits for final year studies at the University of Huddersfield Business School). It is seen by students as a major component of that classification (Pathirage et al., 2004), in comparison with other modules that are worth only 20, 15 or 10 credits. Consequently, students may be optimistic of achieving a good mark for the dissertation, in that it may aid them in achieving their desired goal of attaining a first class honours degree or 2:1 classification. Hand and Clewes (2000, 6) may be in accord with this statement when they write, 'A 2:2, although seen as a respectable award in earlier times, may now often be regarded as unacceptable by students and employers alike.' As such students may place the attainment of a good grade in the dissertation high on their list of priorities (Pathirage et al., 2004).

Although there appears to be relatively little written on the subject of the UD, there are numerous texts on postgraduate dissertations (Acker, Hill, & Black, 1994; Cryer, 1996; Delamont, Parry, & Atkinson, 1998; Deuchar, 2008; Eley & Jennings, 2005; Fallows, 1996; Graves & Varma, 1997; Hockey, 1994, 1997; Jarvis, 1999; Sharp, Peters, & Howard, 2006; Wisker, 2008). However, because of the different level of study, such insights should be used with caution. Moreover, the focus of such texts tends to be upon providing guidance for the conduct, supervision and writing up of research; not to examine research into the dissertation itself.

Of those texts and papers that do address UDs, many authors approach the subject from an assessment point of view (Attwood, 2009; Hand & Clewes, 2000; Pathirage et al., 2004; Webster et al., 2000) or from a supervisory point of view (González, 2001; Hammick & Acker, 1998; Stefani et al., 1997; Styles & Radloff, 2001). Other aspects have been neglected. For example, Cullen (2009, 2) states that: 'The individual style of the supervisor has been purported as a major influence to the relationship [between the supervisor and the student], but the way in which the style influences the relationship has been largely ignored.' Hammick and Acker (1998, 336) add to the complexity of the discussion, when they argue that in order to understand dissertations and how they are supervised, one has to '...comb through readings on the postgraduate experience of academic work generally.' However, these authors tend to drift from their focus on UD supervision, and start to apply the postgraduate research model to undergraduate research. There are similarities, but processes employed when supervising postgraduate work – especially at doctoral level – may not necessarily be ideal processes to apply to undergraduate supervision.

Unfortunately, only limited lessons can be translated from research on postgraduate supervision to the undergraduate processes because as compared with postgraduate supervision, the undergraduate supervision process is much more truncated. Rowley & Slack, 2004, 176–177

Another factor to consider is that of diversity of terminology; some authors tend to use the terms *dissertation*, *thesis* and *project* interchangeably (Hammick & Acker, 1998; l'Anson & Smith, 2004). However, in this paper the terms are kept separate, partly to prevent confusion, but also because in the Business School at the University of Huddersfield a 'dissertation' is a '40 credit' module and is more academic in its approach than the '20 credit' 'project' that some students undertake instead. The term 'thesis' we will reserve, in this instance, for masters' and doctoral level qualifications, although we do accept that the dissertation may be viewed as a thesis due to its length – 12,000–15,000 words.

² In the UK, undergraduate degree classifications are 1st, 2:1 (upper 2nd), 2:2 (lower 2nd), 3rd, pass and fail; predominantly students aim for the 1st and 2.1 classifications, which are typical grades that students perceive potential employers are looking for.

³ This issue did not manifest in the findings.

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