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## To align or not to align? Research methods and its relationship with dissertation marks across sport undergraduate degree programmes within a UK-based HE institution



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### ABSTRACT

Much research has referred to the complexity of research methods modules within undergraduate degree programmes. Less attention has been paid to the objective understanding of alignment between research methods and final year dissertations. This study explored relationships across Sport and Exercise Science (SES) and Sports Therapy (ST) programmes within a UK-based Higher Education institution. Analysis revealed females (N = 73) outperformed males (N = 117) at Levels 4/5, and SES students outperformed ST at Level 6. The Level 5 statistics assessment explained the lowest variance in the dissertation, suggesting poor alignment in curriculum design. Future research should consider the efficacy of statistics-based modules.

### 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom has undergone significant change. More young people than ever are opting to enter HE, with an increase of 22,000 university places being accepted between the 2013 and 2014 cycles (UCAS, 2013), despite the increase in tuition fees. It is universally recognised that HE aims to advance and disseminate knowledge through a culmination of teaching and learning (Brennan, Durazzi, & Sene, 2013). In more recent years, however, it has also become an expectation that universities provide access to advanced vocational skills and professional training in order to fully prepare students for employment (Haigh & Clifford, 2011). It can be argued that this places increased pressure on HE institutions to ensure that all students receive a high quality university experience, regardless of their socio-economic background (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Marginson, 2016). Additionally, differences in both academic and socio-economic background may lead to students entering HE with varying levels of expertise related to academic writing and critical analysis skills which may also pose a significant challenge for universities and academic staff (Bostock & Wood, 2012).

Within science undergraduate degree programmes, there is evidence of a 1.5:1 male to female ratio, with this increasing seven-fold in respect to science teaching staff (Webb, Lubinski & Pearson Benbow, 2002). Additionally, it has been suggested that academic

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performance is also influenced by gender, with 50% more male students achieving first class degrees than their female counterparts (McNabb, Pal, & Loanes, 2002). However, at the opposite end of the spectrum, males are also more likely to achieve third class degrees or fails than females. Sander and Sanders (2007) suggest that at the University of Wales, male undergraduates receive a final degree mark that is 2% lower than females, although this does vary across degree programme. Attempts have been made to explain these gender differences, with researchers noting that they may occur as a result of a multitude of factors. These include the quality of the institution for which gender types are predisposed to attend, biological factors/ability, gender stereotyping relating to assessment and type of programme studied (McNabb et al., 2002). Recent research in the field of education has also noted the potentially negative impact a male environment may have on student (particularly female student) learning and overall experiences, labelling this phenomenon 'lad culture' (Phillips & Young, 2011). It is arguably then essential that Level 4 modules provide all students with the necessary core skills to succeed throughout their university study, regardless of student education, gender or background.

Much research has also referred to the complex nature of research methods modules within undergraduate degree programmes (Ball & Pelco, 2006; Braguglia & Jackson, 2012; Lehti & Lehtinen, 2005). These types of modules have been widely criticised by both staff and students within HE for being 'uninteresting' and 'dry' (Schutt, Blalock, & Wagenaar, 1984), with students feeling nervous and often anxious about the topic and subsequently displaying a 'scrape by with just a pass' attitude, particularly for more applied programmes (Campisi & Finn, 2011). This in turn may lead to difficulties with students progressing through levels of study and/or degree completion. This type of module could also be seen as particularly problematic and/or off-putting for female students who often perform worse than their male counterparts in maths-science subjects. (McNabb et al., 2002).

As noted by Gladys, Nicholas, and Crispin (2012), difficulties experienced within research methods modules may negatively impact on the student's dissertation project, where the concepts acquired, particularly statistical techniques, need to be applied. Interestingly, while students in the main held positive views of the relevance of a research methods module within a teacher education course, around 80% of all students viewed the module as both stressful and difficult (Gladys et al., 2012). This leads to considerable pressure being placed on lecturers, who are faced with the challenge of making research methods modules interesting to students, whilst ensuring they gain the necessary knowledge of the complexities of research and also have the means to apply that knowledge when conducting their own research project (Edwards & Thatcher, 2004).

Whilst a number of studies have focused on the views of staff and students relating to problems with research methods modules, particularly those involving quantitative approaches, less attention has been given to the objective understanding of the alignment between research methods modules at Level 4 and 5, and final year dissertation modules. For example, Gladys et al. (2012) focused on the views of students undertaking research methods modules, yet failed to thoroughly investigate the precise link between performance within research methods and final year projects. Similarly, Benson and Blackman (2003) used an activity-based approach to restructure the design of a research methods module. They concluded that students struggled to make the perceptual link between the learning outcomes of the module and the application of this knowledge within their own final year dissertation research project.

Despite these clearly formulated issues within HE, there is a paucity of research which investigates the teaching of research methods and what students actually learn within these modules (Wagner, Garner & Kawaulich, 2011). Furthermore, it has yet to be implicitly investigated if research methods modules are adequately preparing students for carrying out their own research projects at Level 6, i.e. if there is a relationship between performance in research methods and dissertation modules. The aim of this study was to explore the relationships between research methods assessments and modules across Levels 4–6 of Sport and Exercise Science (SES) and Sports Therapy (ST) undergraduate programmes at a UK-based university.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Following the attainment of ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee, student marks for research methods modules, and individual assessments, were retrieved from departmental archives. To ensure anonymity, all student data was prescribed a unique ID and information related to any demographic factors (such as home postcode) were removed and not analysed as part of the current study. The research team adhered to the principles outlined within the University's Research Ethics Framework (2014) alongside the British Educational Research Association guidelines and ethical framework, throughout the study. The sample comprised 190 students (males = 117, females = 73) who studied on Sport and Exercise Science (SES: Total = 93; Males = 69; Females = 24) and Sports Therapy (ST: Total = 97; Males = 48; Females = 49) undergraduate degree programmes in 2009–2012 and 2010–2013. Inclusion criteria required that students completed all elements of their respective programme, with none submissions excluded from the analysis.

## 3. Data

The SES and ST students both completed the same research method modules at Levels 4 and 5, and the same dissertation module at Level 6. The aforementioned modules were delivered by the same members of staff and did not undergo any minor modifications between 2009 and 2013. With the exception of the research methods and dissertation modules, no other modules were shared between the two programmes. Student marks were collated for individual assignments within the research methods and dissertation modules, as well as the overall mark for each module. The Level 4 research methods module (L4(T)) comprised the completion of a single written examination. The Level 5 research methods module (L5(T)) consisted of two methods of summative assessment: a

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