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 (T'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 intensive and offer some of the skills mentioned above, but they rarely offer the student the ability, or opportunity, to apply

...assessing other skills when they write:

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 the dissertation itself. Of those texts and papers that do address UDIs, 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 et al., 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; T’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.
It has been highlighted, above, how authors have drawn upon postgraduate supervision texts to discuss the processes of UD supervision. González (2001) discusses how the distinctions between these two discrete activities (postgraduate and undergraduate supervision) are becoming blurred.4 This practice is more common in research intensive universities (González, 2001) but in principle should also be applicable to universities that are traditionally more teaching-focused (Barnett, 2000, 2005; Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008; Booth & Harrington, 2003). Nevertheless, some commentators believe that undergraduate students do not have the necessary skills to undertake this venture. For example, Booth and Harrington (2003, 28) write:

We were amply persuaded by our respondents that many level two and three students are presently incapable of, for example, evaluating the contribution of an academic paper, do not know how to use libraries effectively, and cannot demonstrate the use of appropriate academic structures such as referencing. That this is at all acceptable to any higher education institution we find a matter of some concern.

One argument in relation to this comment could be that, due to the development of learning technology – that is, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) such as Blackboard, Wikis, iPods, Podcasts, and social networks – students might be losing the ability to research material for themselves, as it is literally at their fingertips. Booth and Harrington (2003) may be in accord with this view when they argue that the sole use of VLEs and/or distance learning does not provide the necessary skills needed to undertake research. More so, given that these authors may be referring to 20 credit modules, whereas the weighting of the dissertation may account for up to a third (or 40 credits) of the final grade in some institutions (Booth & Harrington, 2003). Booth and Harrington (2003) further argue that,

...all [italics in original] students should be required to undertake a dissertation. In our view, an extended piece of individual academic research is what characterises an honours degree. Booth & Harrington, 2003, 29

However, Todd et al. (2004) suggest that there could be a high price to pay in the resourcing of the UD, in that,

Despite the perceived pedagogical value of the dissertation... there is evidence that in some higher educational institutions there is pressure to abandon it as being too ‘expensive’ in the context of mass undergraduate provision. Todd et al., 2004, 336

From this overview of literature, several points have emerged. For example, the dissertation is viewed by some as an important component of the experience for undergraduate students at honours level. Further, there is some concern about the value of the dissertation regarding resourcing implications for the university. In addition, there is little research into perceptions of the UD from a supervisor’s perspective. As such, in this paper we investigate supervisors’ perceptions of the value of the dissertation to students and of the potential cost of resourcing the UD.

3. Method

This paper reports an initial pilot study with a view to undertaking a larger empirical study dependent upon the findings at a later date. The research was undertaken from an interpretivist perspective, as we wished to understand how dissertation supervisors (lecturers) make sense of their academic world (Robson, 2002; Silverman, 2002) and, in particular, to draw on their experiences concerning the value and cost related to the supervision of the UD.

The primary research was conducted within two departments of the Business School at the University of Huddersfield in the UK. There were four departments within the Business School at the time of the data collection, but the Department of Accountancy and the School of Law do not use the dissertation as part of their undergraduate assessment activity. Therefore, the study was undertaken in the Department of Leadership and Management (L&M) and the Department of Strategy and Marketing (S&M). The population of these two departments comprised of 67 lecturers at the time, of which 24 were full-time lecturers in L&M and 29 were full-time lecturers in S&M; 14 lecturers were on part-time contracts – 5 in L&M and 9 in S&M. The lecturers in these two departments had a wealth of experience in the supervision of undergraduate dissertations. Some had been supervising students in excess of thirty years; at the time of the research, the least experienced had six years of supervision experience. At the time of the data collection, there were around 250–300 final year students across the two departments. The lecturers who took part in the research supervised 10–20 students each; most were also involved in masters and/or doctoral supervision.

In relation to the qualifications of the supervisors, the minimum qualification held was a Master’s degree, the highest being that of doctorate. Their fields of expertise comprised leadership, management, marketing, operations management, strategy, risk management, economics, business ethics, corporate governance, sports marketing, international business, small business enterprise, organisational behaviour, human resource management, events, direct marketing, integrated marketing communications, marketing strategy, and work, society and organisations.

A questionnaire was piloted to ten lecturers. Their views were sought on its clarity, and whether it could be improved in any way. In addition, this allowed us to ensure that this vehicle of data collection was acquiring the data we needed to answer the research questions outlined earlier.

4 She shows that in both the US and the UK undergraduate research is becoming more valuable, and that journals have been developed to accommodate the publication of good undergraduate research (for example, see the ‘Journal of Undergraduate Research’: http://www.sciencetodoe.gov/scried/JUR.html, Or ‘Invention Journal of Undergraduate Research’ http://www2.warwic.ac.uk/1ac/soc/sociology/rsw/undergrad/cetl/ejournal/).
Semi-structured questionnaires were sent electronically to all 67 lecturers in the two departments. 21 were completed and returned, giving a response rate of just under a third (31.3%). Follow-up emails were sent, but no more completed questionnaires were received. We decided against approaching the heads of departments to ask their staff to respond, as we felt that the questionnaire might be completed under duress, and subsequently provide a biased view. Furthermore, since the research was an exploratory pilot study and hence not capable of generalisation, there was less incentive to increase the response rate than might otherwise have been the case. The PASW (SPSS) software package was used to analyse the quantitative data from the questionnaire.

One respondent refused to complete the first half of the questionnaire, which asked for gender details, length of service, how long they had supervised UDs, and so on. We decided to use this questionnaire, as the second half, containing answers to the substantive questions, was completed; the first half was, therefore, recorded as ‘missing data’.

In addition to the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted; the interview schedule was piloted on the first three members of staff agreeing to take further part in the study. Again, debriefing was undertaken after the interview to ascertain how the participants felt about the questions on the interview schedule, its structure, and if it needed changing in any way. The only amendment made was to add two further questions at the end, which came out of the first pilot interview.

Out of the 21 respondents, 8 lecturers ‘self-identified’ on the questionnaire that they wished to take part further in the study by agreeing to be interviewed. All were full-time lecturers. Due to workloads and other duties, only 6 of the 8 lecturers were interviewed. These interviews (50–60 min in duration) were digitally recorded and transcribed fully. Content analysis was used to look for common themes or recurring threads and/or words (Robson, 2002; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). Each interviewee received a copy of their transcribed interview, and was given time to read the document and sign off, if they agreed that it was an accurate recording; or they were allowed to make any changes if there was anything they were not happy with. No changes were made, and the documents were signed.

The research complied with the University of Huddersfield ethical guidelines (Huddersfield University Ethics Committee, 2005), and the British Education Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2004). The anonymity of the members of staff and their rights in compliance with these guidelines are preserved. To this end, the names of the interviewees have been changed in accordance with the above ethical guidelines and, where quotations from the interviewees are used, their identity simply appears as Int. 1 or Int. 2 and so on.

4. Findings

The question of the ‘value’ of UDs was put directly to the lecturers, both in the questionnaire and in the interviews. The results from the questionnaire data showed that 18 (85.71%) out of 21 respondents believed that the dissertation had value in today’s environment. On this point, Int. 3 stated:

Anybody who’s been through the dissertation process knows its value…they know what was involved…they know the challenges, and they know what it took to succeed in their dissertation. They know the value of it in…not only the knowledge, skills and abilities that the student demonstrates by doing it well. But also the mental discipline that it demands, and that must be valuable as an indicator of a student’s worth to an employer.

Int. 1 echoed this viewpoint, believing that the dissertation could show that a student had both academic and practical skills needed by employers:

Yes, I do think it adds value to businesses. I could sit there and I would hope any of our undergraduate people…could sit there [in an interview] and say, do you know what? I organised myself and this is how I organised it. What a fantastic thing to say in your interview, so yes I think it adds value to our students and it brings value in to the business.

The views in these quotations were echoed by many other lecturers in this study, and offer an inference that the dissertation may still have currency in today’s business environment. This is in line with the views of Stefani et al., (1997) quoted earlier, where they argued that the project/dissertation affords the students opportunities to develop a new skills set. Having said this, the view does not align itself with some of Booth and Harrington (2003) respondents’ views, that students are not capable of undertaking the dissertation and lack the necessary skills. Nevertheless, Booth and Harrington (2003) do argue that the dissertation does offer value, and is a good extended piece of individual research, which for them identifies the honours component of a degree.

In respect of academic skills, Int. 2 stated that the dissertation offered the students the ability to exhibit the knowledge they have gained over the course of the degree:

…the dissertation is an indication of the student’s ability to apply critical analysis, to work independently, to produce a cohesive piece of work…it’s basically the summary of the university experience.

This again concurs with the views of Stefani et al. (1997) and with Todd et al. (2004). However, although Int. 4 believed the dissertation had value, she stated that she was ‘struggling with an internal dilemma’, saying:

Do I see any value? Well given how many years…and I can’t remember what’s in my dissertation, and I can’t remember ever having referred to it after completing it, and it was a…well I’ve got to do it as part of the degree…I don't think it’s easy to put a measure on the value. I think as a product then maybe it doesn’t have value unless this person can in an
academic setting publish from it and things, and if they’re going on to do a masters, but the value to me is the process of it.

Here, one can see that this lecturer perceives that the dissertation only has value (for her) because of the process, rather than the topic studied. However, not all were dismissive of the content of the dissertation. From her own experience as a student, Int. 5 believed that her dissertation, albeit 30 years old, was a welcome piece of research for the company she was employed with at that time.

Yes, my dissertation...was a management plan for a tourist attraction, and the tourist attraction could not afford to pay a consultant to go in and do the work for them, so I did it. So I got something out of it as well...I learnt a fantastic amount from doing that. It was a lot more than going out and getting a questionnaire completed, and it was also you don’t just write up the questionnaire, you’ve then got to discuss your findings...It wasn’t just an academic piece of work, you do get a lot out of it.

The initial inference from this then is that the dissertation has value, but there is some question as to what that value consists in. When reflecting on both Int. 4’s and Int. 5’s comments above, it could be inferred that there is value in the process of undertaking the dissertation; if not in the content; additionally, that the balance of skills (academic and practical) gained from undertaking the dissertation has value to employers, as noted earlier by Int. 1 above.

The next question put to the lecturers was whether they felt that the UD should be compulsory, optional or abolished. From the quantitative analysis, 13 (61.9%) lecturers indicated that they believed that students should be required to undertake the dissertation.

This is in line with the views of Booth and Harrington (2003), who recommend that all [our emphasis] students should undertake the UD. However, 6 of the 21 lecturers believed that students should not be forced to undertake the dissertation, and 2 believed the UD should be abolished. One of these 2 lecturers believed the dissertation needs to be replaced with something more practical and related more towards business. The second lecturer felt that the dissertation needed to be abolished due to the ‘...the lack of student input’. What was being referred to here was the laissez faire [our emphasis] approach some students take toward ownership, commitment and time-management of their studies, when undertaking the dissertation. This then could be an argument for considering a ‘cut off’ point (see discussion), where students who do not obtain the necessary grades or evidence they have the ability to undertake the dissertation, are counselled about, or directed towards, other options available to them. However, Int. 6 commented that:

...there’s nothing else that brings everything together like the dissertation does. It brings the knowledge base together, it brings their skills and competencies and time management...all of those elements that a graduate should have by the time they leave us; that’s the only piece of work that brings them together in this way. It also allows them the ability to bring in new skills, new knowledge bases etc, and there’s nothing else that allows them to do that, and because it is a substantial piece of work, it can carry, and does carry substantial currency post graduation.

Therefore, for this respondent the UD has currency, reflecting the views of Webster et al. (2000) and l’Anson and Smith (2004). Int. 3 also believed it should be compulsory, as he felt that it was the culmination of the degree process, stating that...

...it’s the nugget that the student takes away, it’s the realisation of everything that they’ve been doing over the last three or four years. It should be the thing that pulls it all together, the final challenge, and the final triumph; it should be that for students.

Int. 5, like Int. 6, felt it helped with the progression on to master’s programmes. However, she also added that:

...they need research skills, if they go into the workplace, they need research skills. They also need to be autonomous learners, that’s what the whole process of the degree programme is about...I think at the end of the day it’s about developing students that are capable of moving on to the next level, and the dissertation lets them do that.

This lecturer believes that the dissertation helps the students become more independent and able to think for themselves. However, it is recognised that not all students can achieve this (Booth & Harrington, 2003), which is why some of the lecturers believed that the dissertation should be either optional or abolished altogether. Int. 4 was still maintaining the role of ‘devil’s advocate’. Believing that the dissertation should still be compulsory, she adds:

...actually do I [believe it should be compulsory], do we really know enough about what we should be producing in terms of those academic graduate skills, basically, employability skills. Is there something else that actually would gain just as much or greater benefit from doing, that’s why I kind of have this debate, it’s always being there, does that mean that tradition should always uphold, and it should always continue to be there, should we not be looking at the curriculum and how we can develop it?

This is an interesting point, as higher education is seen by some to be about the development of knowledge, and forever pushing forward those boundaries (Barnett, 2005; Truscot, 1943) whereas for others, higher education is there ‘To produce persons capable of active contributions to society...’ (Newman, 1996, xvi). That is, they [the student], may find gainful employment and possibly bring to their new employer fresh ways of thinking and new skills and knowledge.
Int. 1 believed that the dissertation should be optional, in that not all students are capable of undertaking such an intensive piece of academic work. She felt that the students needed guidance on whether or not they should undertake a dissertation or project.

...I think there are some students that would be better not doing a dissertation, they would possibly be better...they haven't got the motivation, they haven't got the time management skills...I think we need to guide students very carefully (maybe), about their choices if it became an option thing.

Int. 2 had similar perceptions to Int. 1 in wondering whether all students benefit, adding that: ‘...if you [the student] do it [the dissertation] badly, it’s a serious dent in your overall mark, so think carefully about whether you want to do this.’ Here Int. 2 was seeing the bigger picture, and the outcomes if the student did not get it right or indeed dropped out of the degree course because of it. Webster et al. (2000) highlight similar concerns when commenting that the dissertation is probably the most intensive piece of work a student is likely to undertake, especially at undergraduate degree level. However, they go on to say that ‘Our project arose from concerns as to whether students...were receiving adequate guidance on precisely what was expected of them from their dissertations.’ (Webster et al., 2000, 73). This was a key concern for many of the lecturers taking part in this study.

The question concerning whether UDs had no value was put to the participants in the study, and if so, whether it should be replaced with something more practical when assessing students’ learning over their 3–4 years of study. The response from 2 lecturers was that they strongly agreed that the dissertation should be replaced with something more practical. However, 18 (85.71%) disagreed, which was supported by Int. 6, who he said that:

...it is fantastic challenging in terms of what it tests the students for, the time management, the writing skills, the collecting data, the relationships, all the thoughts and many more. A fantastic piece of work that brings together...it really does...it brings together...the three years and the placement year. It brings together all what they've done in these years and it's quite unique in that sense, and no other piece of work, no other module, no other experience (apart from the work experience), nothing else touches it; not even a project allows the student to demonstrate by bringing those core skills and competencies together. The problem is, a lot of them don’t have those core competencies and skills at dissertation level, which is another issue.

5. Discussion

From the evidence put forward, it becomes obvious that there are some tensions between the lecturers concerning the capabilities of students to undertake a UD. As outlined by Int. 1 above, she feels it may be better to offer the student a choice, which is either to take the dissertation, or to play more to their strengths and possibly undertake a more practical project. This would allow for the subsequent resources needed to accomplish this task to be redeployed and better utilised by management. This would be in accord with Todd et al.’s (2004) views that due to the large number of students now attending universities, and the inability of some students to cope with the requirements of completing the UD, some universities are now considering abandoning the dissertation altogether. Although many of those who took part in the study believed that the dissertation had real value and currency today, the fact remains that due to resource limitations in higher education, some real choices have to be made in the allocation of resources. It is here that we feel that Todd et al.’s (2004) views should not be merely cast aside, but given due consideration, and as already indicated, there might need to be some form of ‘cut off’ point introduced. This cut off point could be based on the student’s performance in their second year and in consultation with the student (when the time came for them make a choice for their final year studies), as to what would be their best option.

Thus, rather than simply requiring all students to undertake a dissertation or leaving the choice purely to them, an alternative would be to make the dissertation available to only a limited set of undergraduates – say those who have averaged 2:1 standard in the their second year or who have an average mark reasonably close to the threshold. The dissertation may then be viewed as a ‘reward’ for good performance – in which case it might seem reasonable to make it an option. Some believe that, at present, the dissertation provides the ‘honours’ part of the undergraduate experience. However, what we are suggesting here is that this becomes a real differentiation between those students performing at higher levels (in academic terms), compared with those students who are performing less successfully in academic terms.

From a managerial perspective, given the perceived resource costs of UD supervision, it could be viewed as a means of rationing a relatively high cost activity. From the supervisors’ perspective, it might be viewed as a means not only of reducing overall workload, but also of endeavouring to ensure that they only have to supervise more capable students, rather than weaker students who are more likely to struggle with a dissertation and provide a less satisfactory experience for the supervisor. If weaker students did indeed struggle more with a dissertation than with other modules, not requiring/allowing them to undertake a dissertation might also help to improve their overall degree results. This is a question that would merit further research.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

A large proportion of the lecturers we surveyed and interviewed view the UD as an important and valuable indicator of what the student is achieving, evidencing a plethora of skills learnt whilst at university. They saw the dissertation as
important in allowing students to not only become autonomous learners, but also to develop further practical skills that are transferable into employment. The majority of lecturers therefore thought the dissertation should be compulsory, which is in line with Booth and Harrington’s (2003) view. However, a minority of lecturers was less convinced of the value of the UD for all undergraduates, and recognised that the supervision of UD is relatively resource-hungry.

It has been identified in this paper that consideration should be given to introducing a possible cut-off point, whereby those students who may be less capable of undertaking a dissertation be counselled and provided with alternatives to aid their development in other ways, perhaps pursuing a project of a less academic, more practical nature.

The literature review undertaken for this paper suggested that previous research has not taken into account lecturers’ views of UDs but instead has focused on assessment and/or supervisory style and processes, or it has focused on postgraduate research. Having researched the views of UD supervisors at one UK business school, we suggest that further research should take place at other institutions in the UK and beyond, not least because the UD is a significant part of the activity of many business schools. In addition to this, we make two further research suggestions:

1. Students’ perceptions could be researched and compared with those of their supervisor and;
2. Quantitative analysis of the relationship between students’ previous academic performance and dissertation mark could be undertaken with a view to determining whether the dissertation tends to disadvantage weaker students – or, indeed, to help them.

References


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