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The Value of the Undergraduate Dissertation – Perceptions of Supervisors

Working paper presented at the University of Huddersfield’s Connect 2 [Teaching and Learning Research Enterprise], Teaching and Learning Conference, 13 September 2010, Venue: the Business School, University of Huddersfield

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Abstract

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, Marilyn. and Sandra. Acker 1998; Webster, Frank. *et al.* 2000; Pathirage, Chaminda. *et al.* 2004), and even less into the perceptions and attitudes of their academic supervisors. The research reported in this paper is part of the project entitled: ‘*Dissertation in the Business and Management Undergraduate Curriculum: Value Adding and Value for Money?*’ The second phase of the project complements a quantitative study of student achievement (see Anchor, John. R. *et al.* 2009), by investigating perceptions of the undergraduate dissertation by members of staff. The data for this part of the project was collected by means of a questionnaire survey sent to staff within the Departments of Leadership & Management (L&M) and Strategy and Marketing (S&M) at the University of Huddersfield Business School; a sample for follow-up interviews was also self-identified in the responses to the questionnaire survey. Issues focused upon in the questionnaire and interviews include whether students have the capacity to undertake a dissertation, their [staff] perceptions of its values and impact upon their results, and staff views of the demands that dissertation supervision places upon them. This paper focuses particularly on staff perceptions of value. The main findings are that the dissertation still has currency today, but needs to be evaluated to ensure that it is meeting the needs of different stakeholders. Further, that despite the existing academic rigour of the dissertation, the lecturers believed that it also gave students the ability to reach a level whereby they become autonomous learners.

Introduction and Context

This paper is part of an ongoing study ‘*Dissertation in the Business and Management Undergraduate Curriculum: Value Adding and Value for Money?*’ which was funded by the Teaching and Learning Committee at the University of Huddersfield. The focus is primarily on the Departments of ‘Leadership and Management’ (L&M) and ‘Strategy and Marketing’

(S&M), as these two departments employ a dissertation module as part of their curriculum and assessment.

This paper builds upon research already undertaken by Anchor *et al.* (2009) entitled ‘*Undergraduate Dissertations and Student Performance in Business Studies and Marketing, 2004-2009: Evidence from the Business School*’.¹

Anchor *et al.* (2009) reported on the association between dissertation marks and final year average marks. Additionally, the report explored if the ‘sandwich placement’ year, undertaken by some students, influenced the dissertation grades compared to those who had not undertaken a placement year. The dissertation is compulsory for business studies students, and optional for both the marketing, and management students. Anchor *et al.* (2009) found no statistical difference between those students, where the dissertation was compulsory, and those who had a choice. Although the data will be subject to more sophisticated analysis, the initial result – that the dissertation seems to make no statistically significant difference to overall marks – calls into question its value, especially if it is in some way, for either students or staff, more ‘costly’ to undertake. Therefore, the project has complemented the quantitative phase by means of a qualitative study of staff perceptions. In doing so, a large amount of data has been collected, upon which this paper draws.

The purpose of this particular paper is to examine and discuss supervisors’ perceptions of the value of the dissertation. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, some

¹ However, the earlier study relates only to business studies and marketing students. The reason for this was that during the period that the evidence was collected, the ‘marketing department’ was for a time, part of the management department. In addition, during this period, management students were only allowed to undertake a project, which is distinct from the dissertation in both word length and credits. The dissertation is a 40-credit module and the project a 20-credit module. It was only in September 2009 that management students were able to take the dissertation. Therefore, the report by Anchor *et al.* (2009) does not include figures from the then management students (now leadership and management) in its findings.

relevant literature is reviewed. Second the research method is outlined. Third, the findings are presented. Finally, the conclusions are presented.

Overview of Literature

When researching various texts on the value of dissertations, it soon became evident that there is little written on subject. Of those texts that do address undergraduate dissertations, many authors approach the subject from an assessment point of view (Hand, Len. and Debbie. Clewes 2000; Webster, Frank. *et al.* 2000; Pathirage, Chaminda. *et al.* 2004; Anchor, John. R. *et al.* 2009; Attwood, Rebecca. 2009), or from a supervisory point of view (Stefani, L. A. J. *et al.* 1997; Hammick, Marilyn. and Sandra. Acker 1998; González, Christina. 2001; Styles, Irene. and Alex. Radloff 2001). Cullen (2009: p. 2) argues that: “The individual style of the supervisor has been purported as a major influence to the relationship, but the way in which the style influences the relationship has been largely ignored.” Hammick and Acker (1998: p.336) add to the complexity 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, they soon lose sight of what they are researching, and start to apply the postgraduate research model, as is, to undergraduate research. There are similarities, but it needs to be remembered that the processes employed when supervising at doctoral or masters’ levels 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, Jennifer. and Frances. Slack 2004: pp.176-177)

There are many texts on postgraduate supervision (see the works of: Acker, Sandra. *et al.* 1994; Hockey, John. 1994; Cryer, Pat. 1996; Fallows, Stephen. 1996; Graves, Norman. and Ved. Varma 1997; Hockey, John. 1997; Delamont, Sara. *et al.* 1998; Jarvis, Peter 1999; Eley, Adrian. R. and Roy. Jennings 2005; Sharp, John. A. *et al.* 2006; Deuchar, Ross. 2008; Wisker, Gina. 2008), which offer a comprehensive insight into this process. Although assessment and supervision/supervisor relationship components have a major influence on the value of the dissertation, these are not the direct focus of this paper.

Another factor that is apparent from reading around the subject is that authors tend to use the terms dissertation, thesis, and project interchangeably (Hammick, Marilyn. and Sandra. Acker 1998; I'Anson, Rachel. and Karen. A. Smith 2004). However, for this paper, we will keep the terms separate 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 project. The project is a '20 credit' module, where students do not have to undertake primary research (although this is strongly encouraged), and is of a more practical nature. The term 'thesis' we will reserve, in this instance, for Master's 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.

It is widely accepted that the undergraduate dissertation is a well respected and highly valuable piece of work (Booth, Charles. and Jane. Harrington 2003; Todd, Malcolm. *et al.* 2004). Attwood (2009: p.1) reports Professor Dai Hounsell (Vice-Chancellor 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: p. 335) quoting Hemingway (2001: p. 241) write that the dissertation has:

...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 to this, the dissertation is probably one of the most important and intense pieces of work a student may get involved with (Webster, Frank. *et al.* 2000; I'Anson, Rachel. and Karen. A. Smith 2004; Pathirage, Chaminda. *et al.* 2004). 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, Irene. and Alex. Radloff 2001). Stefani *et al.* (1997: p.284) 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 also add not only written examinations, but also coursework. It is accepted that some coursework is intensive, and does offer some of the skills mentioned above, but they very rarely offer the student the ability to apply particular research methods. A further component of the dissertation is that it is often used as a discriminator at exam boards in relation to the honours classification (Webster, Frank. *et al.* 2000; Booth, Charles. and Jane. Harrington 2003). 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 often look at the grade awarded to the dissertation to help inform their decision as to whether or not to raise the degree classification (Hand, Len. and Debbie. Clewes 2000; Webster, Frank. *et al.* 2000). Having said this, Hand and Clewes (2000) do warn against ‘upward drift’ of grades, and ‘degree inflation’ (this issue did not manifest in the findings). The final grade of the degree classification has become

important to students, and with the dissertation being worth 40 credits (at the University of Huddersfield Business School), it is seen by students as a major component of that classification (Pathirage, Chaminda. *et al.* 2004), when other modules are worth 20 credits. Hand and Clewes (2000: p.6) writes: “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, Chaminda. *et al.* 2004).

It has been discussed above how authors have drawn upon research on postgraduate supervision texts to apply to the processes of the undergraduate dissertation supervision. González (2001) discusses how the areas between these two distinct activities are becoming greyer. 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.scied.science.doe.gov/scied/JUR.html>, or ‘Invention – Journal of Undergraduate Research’: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/rsw/undergrad/cetl/ejournal/>). This practice is more common in research intensive universities (González, Christina. 2001), but in principle it should also be applicable to universities that are traditionally more teaching-focused (Barnett, Ronald. 2000; Booth, Charles. and Jane. Harrington 2003; Barnett, Ronald. 2005; Barnett, Ronald and Roberto Di Napoli 2008). However, some commentators believe that undergraduate students do not have the necessary skills to undertake this venture. For example, Booth and Harrington (2003: p.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.

They went on to argue that the sole use of VLEs and/or distance learning would be totally unacceptable in providing the necessary skills needed to undertake research, especially given that the weighting of the dissertation may account for up to a third of the final grade in some institutions (Booth, Charles. and Jane. Harrington 2003). Booth and Harrington (2003) argue (which reflects the majority of the interviewees' beliefs in this study), 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, Charles. and Jane. Harrington 2003: p.29)

However, it is also argued 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, Malcolm. et al. 2004: p.336).

Given the pressures on resources in many universities, this suggests that the undergraduate dissertation might be under threat, especially if it is perceived that undergraduates are ill prepared to take advantage of its pedagogic potential.

Having raised some of the issues apparent in the extant literature, this paper reports the findings from research into the attitudes of dissertation supervisors at the University of Huddersfield Business School.

From the above, it has evidenced to us that further empirical research is needed to ascertain if the same results occur when researching other lecturers' views (who supervise undergraduate dissertations in other business schools around the UK), on the value of the undergraduate dissertation. More so, as the literary research undertaken for this paper does not appear to take

into account lecturers/supervisors' views on this subject matter, but instead focus on assessment and/or supervisory style and processes, and/or from a postgraduate perspective.

Method

The approach taken for this study was from an exploratory/interpretive perspective, as we wished to understand how dissertation supervisors (lecturers) make sense of their academic world and in particular their experience and their perceptions of the value of the dissertation. The research was conducted within two departments of the Business School. There are four departments within the Business School, but the Department of Accountancy and the School of Law do not use the dissertation as part of their assessment activity. As such, the study was undertaken in the Department of Leadership and Management (L&M), and the Department of Strategy and Marketing (S&M).

The sample of lecturers (n=67) comprised of twenty-four full-time lecturers in the Department of Leadership and Management (L&M), twenty-nine full-time lecturers in the Department of Strategy and Marketing (S&M), five lecturers on fractional contracts in (L&M), and nine part-time lecturers based in S&M. The sample also comprised of different ethnicities, age groups, and years in teaching and supervising dissertations; this gave use a good representative sample of lecturers across the different departments.

Electronic semi-structured questionnaires were sent to all 67 lecturers, of which 21 were completed and returned, giving a 31.34% response rate. Follow-up emails were sent, but no further completed questionnaires were received. In addition to the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted, where eight full-time lecturers 'self-identified' on the questionnaire that they wished to take further part in the study, by agreeing to be interviewed. Only six of the eight lecturers were interviewed, as two lecturers due to work commitments, had to cancel.

On 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 undergraduate dissertations, and so on. We decided to use this questionnaire, as the second half was completed, which we felt added to the information gained from this data source. The first half was subsequently recorded as 'missing data'.

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 is preserved, and the names of the interviewees were changed in accordance with the above ethical guidelines. To this end, where quotes are used from the interviewees, their identity simply appears as Int. 1 etc.

The questionnaire was piloted to ten lecturers, where their views were sought on its clarity, and if it could be improved in any way. Further, this allowed us to ascertain if the questionnaire was collecting the data we needed to answer the research question outlined in

this paper (see Appendix A). The interview schedule was piloted on the first three members of staff agreeing to take further part in the study. Again, debriefing was undertaken to ascertain how the participants felt about the questionnaire, its structure, and if it needed changing in any way; two further questions were added.

The PASW (SPSS) software package was used to analyse the quantitative data from the questionnaire, and for the open-ended questions, content analysis was used, which looked for common threads or themes within the responses. The six interviews were tape-recorded (informed consent was acquired from each interviewee before the tape recorder was switched on – none of the interviewees objected to being recorded), and fully transcribed; the duration of each interview was 50-60 minutes. Each interviewee received a copy of their transcribed interview and was given time to read the document and sign it 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 documents were signed. Content analysis was again employed, looking for common themes within the text. Descriptive statistics (crosstabulation) were then used to analyse the findings from the data.

Findings

This paper draws on only part of the primary data (quantitative and qualitative) collected for the study, due to the range of data gathered, and as such, we draw on data relevant to the themes raised in this paper. As already highlighted, a central purpose of this study is to ascertain the perceived value of the undergraduate dissertation, and what the dissertation (from a lecturers/supervisors' perspective) offers the student, or whether the students have the academic nuances to undertake a dissertation, as highlighted by Booth and Harrington (2003).

The question of 'value' was put directly to the lecturers, both in the questionnaire and in the interviews. The results from the quantitative 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 and you said 'out there', so if we mean out there as being the jobs market, the employers. Lots of those people that are in senior positions in organisations have undertaken dissertations as part of their degree, they know what was involved and 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 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.

It can be seen therefore that the dissertation [from lecturers' perspectives'] may still have currency in today's business environment concerning student employability. Two factors may be manifesting here, in respect of the University of Huddersfield being a post 1992 university, and subsequently a teaching led university, and the also that the research was conducted in the 'Business School'; other schools may show different results. 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 concurs with the views of Stefani *et al.* (1997) and Todd *et al.* (2004), cited above.

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.

From this, one can see that this lecturer perceives that the dissertation only has value if the student is going to remain in academia to study for further qualifications, or considering publishing from their dissertations. Further, the interviewee discusses the processes, that is, she feels the students obtain more from the skills they develop via going through the process, rather than possibly the new knowledge the student may identify, if any. 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 by the company she was employed with at that time. She commented:

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 conclusion from this then is that the dissertation has value, but there is some question as to what that value is. When reflecting on both Int. 4 and Int. 5's comments above, one could be argued that there is value in the processes, if not in the content. Additionally, that the skills gained from undertaking the dissertation has value to employers, as outlined earlier by Int. 1.

The next question put to the lecturers was whether they felt that the undergraduate dissertation should be compulsory, optional or abolished. From the quantitative data, 13 (61.9%) of the 21 lecturers that took part in the study indicated that they believed that students should be required to undertake the dissertation (See Table 1).

Table 1 Should the Dissertation be Compulsory, Optional, Abolished

Gender * In your opinion, should the dissertation be: Crosstabulation

Count

		In your opinion, should the dissertation be:			Total
		Compulsory	Optional	Abolished	
Gender	Male	8	4	1	13
	Female	5	2	0	7
	Missing Data	0	0	1	1
Total		13	6	2	21

This is in line with the views of Booth and Harrington (2003) above, where they recommended that *all* students should undertake the undergraduate dissertation. However, six of the twenty-one lecturers believed that students should not be forced to undertake the dissertation, and two believed the undergraduate dissertation should be abolished. One of these two lecturers believed that the dissertation needs to be abolished and 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.” Here the lecturer was referring to the lack of commitment by some students to undertake such a task. The qualitative data showed that four lecturers (two from L&M and two from S&M) concurred with the viewpoint that the dissertation should be compulsory. 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.

So for this respondent the undergraduate dissertation has currency, reflecting the views of Webster *et al.* (2000) and I'Anson and Smith (2004). Int. 3 believed it should be compulsory, as he felt that it was the culmination of the degree process:

...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 also believed it should be compulsory, because like Int. 6, she felt it helped with the progression on to masters' programmes. However, she also added that:

...they need research skills, if they go into the work place, 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.

Here 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, 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 fundamentally about the development of knowledge and forever pushing forward those boundaries (Truscot, Bruce. 1943; Barnett, Ronald. 2005), with a view "To produc[ing] persons capable of active contributions to society..." (Newman, John. Henry 1996: p. xvi). In that, they [the student] may find gainful

employment, and possibly bring into that employer fresh ways of thinking and new skills and knowledge.

Int. 1 believed that the dissertation should be optional for the very reasons outlined above, 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; she felt that:

...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.

This statement supports the findings from the quantitative data in Table 1. Int. 2 had similar perceptions to Int. 1 in wondering whether all students would benefit, adding that: "...if you [the student] do it badly [the dissertation], 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) highlights similar concerns when discussing the dissertation is probably the most intensive piece of a work a student is likely to undertake, especially at undergraduate degree level. However, they go onto 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, Frank. *et al.* 2000: p.73). This was a key concern for many of the lecturers taking part in this study.

The question was asked whether the undergraduate dissertation had no value and whether it should be replaced with something more practical to assess the students' learning of their three/four years of study; the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Dissertation Value versus Practical Assessment

Gender * The academic U/G dissertation has no value in today's environment, and should be replaced with something more practical. Crosstabulation

Count		The academic U/G dissertation has no value in today's environment, and should be replaced with something more practical.				Total
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Gender	Male	1	1	3	8	13
	Female	0	0	6		7
	Missing Data	1	0	0	0	1
Total		2	1	9	9	21

From Table 2, one can see that 2 lecturers strongly agreed and 1 agreed that the dissertation should be replaced with something more practical. However 18 (85.71%) disagreed with the suggestion that the dissertation should be replaced with something more practical. This is highlighted when Int.6's comments:

Yes it is, and probably more so now, because of the work load. But put the work load to one side, it is fantastically 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.

Conclusions

From the above discussions, it can be clearly seen that the undergraduate dissertation is seen to be important and valuable by some of the lecturers as an indicator of the student achieving a plethora of skills. The lecturers saw the dissertation as important in allowing students to become autonomous learners. The majority of lecturers therefore thought the dissertation should be compulsory, which is in line with Booth and Harrington's (2003) viewpoints. However, it was raised that just because the dissertation was embedded in the culture of undergraduate degree assessment, that there is no reason as to why it should not be developed. This issue was investigated as part of this research, but will appear in another paper, as it was too large a discussion to cover at this point. This does not mean that the dissertation's processes cannot be reviewed to ensure we are still producing both academic, and employability skills, and ensuring that the dissertation is meeting the needs of all stakeholders. This is one recommendation of this paper; however, this would need further discussions with academic faculty who supervise dissertations, and not just the senior management teams and/or quality committees.

There were also concerns raised that if the dissertation is compulsory, it may disadvantage those students that are not of a calibre to undertake this course of study – though this raises the question of whether the students are suited to university-level study. However, as long as they pass, the dissertation could just be seen as one more element of assessment, and it is not unusual for the outcomes of different assessments, and different forms of assessment, to vary significantly for individual students.

Given that in the US and the UK there are journals now that take high quality research articles to be published from undergraduate dissertations, then this throws further evidence towards

the development of the dissertation and its delivery. If students are intellectually capable to gain a place on the degree, then it should naturally follow that at the end of three or four years of study (depending on whether or not they have taken a placement year), our students should be of a level where they can achieve outcomes comparable with students from other universities. One caveat to remember here is that only a small number of undergraduate dissertations are of a calibre that they can publish from. The journals mentioned above, are refereed journals, and go through the same processes as other quality journals. To this end, although the dissertation processes are important, as indicated in this paper, so is the content, and it is here that we may wish to also focus our efforts on in the future. Nevertheless, some of the lecturers felt that the dissertation should be optional, allowing the less academically orientated students a choice, or that the students do not have the necessary skills to undertake a dissertation. Some lecturers, felt that the dissertation should become more practical in its nature, and more orientated towards business than academic theories and practice; two lecturers responding to the questionnaire felt the dissertation should be abolished and replaced with something more practical. Having said this, it has been shown that the dissertation is considered by many lecturers to be practical, in that it allows students to choose their own topic of study, develop and undertake primary research, manage their own time, manage a major project, and write up a piece of individual work that is unique to them – a process that enhances skills useful in the workplace.

This study was exploratory in nature, complementing previous quantitative analysis of dissertation marks. The project team has now amassed a significant amount of data. Now that many of the issues and some preliminary findings have been identified, it is recommended (in line with one of the research objectives for this project) that the research be extended outside

the University of Huddersfield Business School, to ascertain the views of lecturers from other business schools in other universities.

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