



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Feather, Denis, Anchor, J.R and Cowton, Christopher J.

The Value of the Undergraduate Dissertation: Perceptions of Supervisors

Original Citation

Feather, Denis, Anchor, J.R and Cowton, Christopher J. (2011) The Value of the Undergraduate Dissertation: Perceptions of Supervisors. In: Paper presentations of the 2010 University of Huddersfield Annual Learning and Teaching Conference. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 41-56.

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/9655/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

The Value of the Undergraduate Dissertation – Perceptions of Supervisors

Working paper presented at the University of Huddersfield's Teaching and Learning Conference 13 September 2010, Venue: the Business School, University of Huddersfield

Dr. Denis Feather

Department of Strategy and Marketing
University of Huddersfield Business School

Email: d.feather@hud.ac.uk

Dr. John R. Anchor

Head of Department of Strategy and Marketing
University of Huddersfield Business School

Email: j.r.anchor@hud.ac.uk

Professor Christopher. J. Cowton
Dean, University of Huddersfield Business School.

Email: c.j.cowton@hud.ac.uk

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 and Acker, 1998; Webster *et al.*, 2000; Pathirage *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 *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 and Strategy and Marketing 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 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 perceived academic rigor of the dissertation, the lecturers believed that it gave students the ability to reach a level whereby they become autonomous learners.

Keywords: supervision, undergraduate dissertation, undergraduate research, business, management, academic skills, employability

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' and 'Strategy and Marketing', 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 dissertations. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, some 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 this subject. Of those texts that do address undergraduate dissertations, many authors approach the subject from an assessment point of view (Hand and Clewes, 2000; Webster *et al.*, 2000; Pathirage *et al.*, 2004; Anchor *et al.*, 2009; Attwood, 2009), or from a supervisory point of view (Stefani *et al.*, 1997; Hammick and Acker, 1998; González, 2001; Styles and 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 the undergraduate research. In reality 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 and Slack, 2004: pp.176-177)

There are many texts on postgraduate supervision (see the works of: Acker *et al.*, 1994; Hockey, 1994; Cryer, 1996; Fallows, 1996; Graves and Varma, 1997; Hockey, 1997; Delamont *et al.*, 1998; Jarvis, 1999; Eley and Jennings, 2005; Sharp *et al.*, 2006; Deuchar,

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 in 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.

2008; Wisker, 2008), which offer a comprehensive insight in to this process. Although assessment and supervision/supervisor relationship components have a major influence on the value of the dissertation, these are not the foci 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 and Acker, 1998; l'Anson and 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 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.

It is widely accepted that the undergraduate dissertation is a well respected and highly valuable piece of work (Booth and Harrington, 2003; Todd *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 *et al.*, 2000; l'Anson and Smith, 2004; Pathirage *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 and 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 in these particular pieces of assessment. 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 *et al.*, 2000; Booth and 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 and Clewes, 2000; Webster *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 *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 *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. See for example the US 'Journal of Undergraduate Research': <http://www.scied.science.doe.gov/scied/JUR.html>, or 'Invention – Journal of Undergraduate research'. A journal open to all disciplinary areas, produced, edited and managed by students and staff at the University of Warwick and Oxford Brookes University: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/rsw/undergrad/cetl/ejournal/>. 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; Booth and Harrington, 2003; Barnett, 2005; Barnett and 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 and 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 and 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 *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. The next section outlines the research method.

Method

The approach taken for this study was from an exploratory/interpretivist perspective, as we wished to understand how dissertation supervisors (lecturers) make sense of their academic world and in particular their experience and 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, and the Department of Strategy and Marketing.

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.

Electronic semi-structured questionnaires were sent to all lecturers in these departments, of which 21 were completed and returned, giving a 31.34% response rate. This was a disappointing response given that the questionnaire was in-house. Follow-up emails were sent, which resulted in a few more questionnaires being completed, and gave us the final 21 completed questionnaires. In addition to the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted; eight lecturers 'self-identified' on the questionnaire that they wished to take further part in the study, by agreeing to be interviewed. Unfortunately, no part-time lecturers identified that they wished to take a further part in the study. Six of the eight lecturers (willing to take further part in this study) were selected via the use of 'purposive' sampling (Robson, 2002; Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Here we used our own judgment to select candidates for interview that allowed us to offer validity to the research by ensuring certain categories were represented, for example: age, length of time in teaching, gender, ethnicity, departments, and availability for interview.

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. It was 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 therefore 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 Dean of the Business School was approached for, and gave permission to conduct the research with the staff. The anonymity of the members of staff is preserved, and the names of the interviewees have been 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 first piloted to ten lecturers, and their views sought on the clarity of the questionnaire, and if it could be improved in any way. In addition, this allowed us to ensure that this vehicle of data collection 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 a further part in the study. Again, debriefing was conducted after the interview to ascertain how the participants felt about the questionnaire, 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 (see Appendix B).

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 the 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, as the amount of data produced, and the different issues raised, are too numerous to discuss in just one paper. As already highlighted, a central purpose of this study is to ascertain the perceived value of the undergraduate dissertation, and this is where this paper will focus.

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 may still have currency in today's business environment. 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, it can be clearly seen 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. 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 welcomed piece of research for 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, it 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 studies, thirteen 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) 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 believe 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." 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 l'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 the 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 all about the development of knowledge, and forever pushing forward those boundaries (Truscot, 1943; Barnett, 2005), and "To produce persons capable of active contributions to society..." (Newman, 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.

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 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: p.73).

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.

Funding

The authors are grateful for funding from the Teaching and Learning Committee of the University of Huddersfield.

References

Acker, S., Hill, T. and Black, E. (1994) Thesis Supervision in the social sciences: managed or negotiated?, *Higher Education*, Vol. 28 pp.483-498.

Anchor, J.R., Benešová, M., Cowton, C.J. and Feather, D. (2009) '*Undergraduate Dissertations and Student Performance in Business Studies and Marketing, 2004-2009: Evidence from the Business School*', Undergraduate Dissertations and Student Performance in Business Studies and Marketing, 2004-2009: Evidence from the Business School, University of Huddersfield, Available at: www.hud.ac.uk

Attwood, R. (2009) Well, what do you know?, *Times Higher Education*, Publication Week: 29/01/2009, London, www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=405152§ioncode=26, [01/08/2010].

Barnett, R. (2000) *Realizing the University in an age of supercomplexity*, Maidenhead: SRHE and Open University Press.

Barnett, R. (2005) Introduction, In *Reshaping the University - New Relationships between Research, Scholarship and Teaching*, (Ed, Barnett, R.), Berkshire: SRHE and Open University McGraw-Hill Education, pp. 1-8

Barnett, R. and Di Napoli, R. (Eds.) (2008) *Changing Identities in Higher Education - Voicing Perspectives*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

BERA (2004) Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004), *British Educational Research Association*, [online] Available at: www.bera.ac.uk/publications/pdfs/ETHICAL1.PDF [Access Date: 13/01/2008].

Booth, C. and Harrington, J. (2003) Research Methods Modules and Undergraduate Business Research: An Investigation, *International Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 3 (3), pp.19-31, www.heacademy.ac.uk/IJME/ijme/business/resources/detail/ijme/IJME_vol3_no3_booth [10/08/2010].

Cryer, P. (1996) *The Research Students Guide to Success*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Cullen, S. (2009) Resource Guide to Dissertation Supervision on Taught Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programmes, *The Higher Education Academy Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Network*, [online] Available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/hlst/resources/detail/resources/dissertation_supervision [Access Date: 09/08/2010].

Delamont, S., Parry, O. and Atkinson, P. (1998) Creating a Delicate Balance: the doctoral supervisor's dilemmas, *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 3 (2), pp.157-172.

Deuchar, R. (2008) Facilitator, director or critical friend?: contradiction and congruence in doctoral supervision styles, *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 13 (4), pp.489-500.

Eley, A.R. and Jennings, R. (2005) *Effective Postgraduate Supervision - Improving the Student/Supervisor Relationship*, Berkshire: Open University Press.

Fallows, S. (1996) Support for New Supervisors of Research Students, In *Enabling Students Learning - Systems and Strategies*, (Eds, Wisker, G. and Brown, S.), London: Kogan Page, pp. 150-157

González, C. (2001) Viewpoint - Undergraduate Research, Graduate Mentoring, and the University's Mission, *Science - American Association for the Advancement of Science*, Vol. 293 (5535), pp.1624-1626, www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/293/5535/1624 [02/08/2010].

Graves, N. and Varma, V. (1997) Working for a Doctorate, In *Working for a Doctorate - A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, (Eds, Graves, N. and Varma, V.), London: Routledge., pp. i

Hammick, M. and Acker, S. (1998) Undergraduate Research Supervision: a gender analysis, *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 23 (3), pp.335-347.

Hand, L. and Clewes, D. (2000) Marking the Difference: an investigation of the criteria used for assessing undergraduate dissertations in a business school, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 25 (1), pp.5-21.

Hockey, J. (1994) Establishing Boundaries: problems and solutions in managing the PhD supervisor's role, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol. 24 (2), pp.293-305.

Hockey, J. (1997) A Complex Craft: United Kingdom PhD supervision in the social sciences, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, Vol. 2 (1), pp.45-70.

Huddersfield University Ethics Committee (2005) University of Huddersfield Ethical Guidelines for Good Practice in Teaching and Research, *University of Huddersfield*, [online] Available at: http://www2.hud.ac.uk/shared/shared_rwg/documents/vgc_regulations/ethical_guidelines.pdf [Access Date: 10/08/2010].

I'Anson, R. and Smith, K.A. (2004) Undergraduate Research Projects and Dissertations: issues of topic selection, access and data collection amongst tourism management students, *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, Vol. 3 (1), pp.19-32, www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/johlste/vol3no1/0054.pdf [10/06/2009].

Jarvis, P. (1999) *The Practitioner-Researcher - Developing Theory from Practice*, New York: Jossey-Bass.

Newman, J.H. (1996) The Idea of a University, In *The Idea of a University*, (Ed, Turner, F.M.), London: Yale University Press, pp. xii - 218

Pathirage, C., Haigh, R., Amaratunga, D., Baldry, D. and Green, C. (2004), 'Improving Dissertation Assessment' *Education in a Changing Environment*, University of Salford,

- Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research*, 2nd edn., Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rowley, J. and Slack, F. (2004) What is the future for undergraduate dissertations?, *Education and Training*, Vol. 46 (4), pp.176-181.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2007) *Research Methods for Business Students*, 4th edn., Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Sharp, J.A., Peters, J. and Howard, K. (2006) *The Management of a Student Research Project*, 3rd edn., Aldershot: Gower Publishing Limited.
- Stefani, L.A.J., Tariq, V.-N., Heylings, D.J.A. and Butcher, A.C. (1997) A Comparison of Tutor and Student Conceptions of Undergraduate Research Project Work, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 22 (3), pp.271-288.
- Styles, I. and Radloff, A. (2001) The Synergistic Thesis: student and supervisor perspectives, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 25 (1), pp.97-106.
- Todd, M., Bannister, P. and Clegg, S. (2004) Independent inquiry and the undergraduate dissertation: perceptions and experiences of final-year social science students, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 29 (3), pp.335-355.
- Truscot, B. (1943) *Red Brick University*, London: Faber and Faber Limited.
- Webster, F., Pepper, D. and Jenkins, A. (2000) Assessing the Undergraduate Dissertation, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 25 (1), pp.71-80.
- Wisker, G. (2008) *The Postgraduate Research Handbook*, 2nd edn., Palgrave Study Skills, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Appendix A



The Business School

The costs and benefits of doing an undergraduate dissertation

The purpose of this survey is to gauge staff perceptions of the value of undergraduate dissertations, and to ascertain whether colleagues believe students are gaining valuable experiences and skills from undertaking the dissertation; also to ascertain if staff feel they have the necessary training, skills and time they believe are needed to supervise students.

We [Professor Chris Cowton, Dr. John Anchor and Dr. Denis Feather] would be grateful if you would please complete this questionnaire in full. This should take approximately 10 minutes.

Please answer all questions, ticking one box only, unless otherwise indicated.

FIRST SOME FACTS ABOUT YOU

Q1. Your gender is:

Male _[1] Female _[2]

Q2. Your Department is:

Strategy and Marketing _[1] Leadership and Management _[2]

Q3. The subject specialism you teach is (Please state your subject area):

Q4. Which category does your age fall into?

20-24 _[1] 25-29 _[2] 30-34 _[3] 35-39 _[4] 40-44 _[5] 45-49 _[6]
50-54 _[7] 55-59 _[8] 60+ _[9]

Q5. How would you describe your ethnic origin?

White _[1] Black Caribbean _[7] White British _[13]
Bangladeshi _[2] Black Other _[8] White Other _[14]

Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/>	[3]	White & Asian	<input type="checkbox"/>	[9]	Asian Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	[15]
Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>	[4]	White & Black African	<input type="checkbox"/>	[10]	Other Mixed	<input type="checkbox"/>	[16]
Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/>	[5]	White & Black Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/>	[11]	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	[17]
Black African	<input type="checkbox"/>	[6]	White Irish	<input type="checkbox"/>	[12]	I prefer not to answer	<input type="checkbox"/>	[18]

Q6. Do you teach full-time or part-time at the University of Huddersfield?

Full-time [1] Part-time [2]

Q7. How many years have you been teaching at HE Level?

Less than 1 year [1] 1-5 [2] 6-10 [3] 11-15 [4] 16-20 [5]
 21-25 [6] 26-30 [7] 31+ Years [8]

Q8. Do you hold a teaching qualification?

Yes [1] ([Go to Q9](#)) No [2] ([Go to Q10](#))

Q9. Which teaching qualification is it? ([Please state](#))

Q10. What is your highest qualification held to date?

First Degree [1] Masters Degree [2] PhD [3] EdD [4] Other.....

Q11. Are you a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy?

Yes [1] No [2]

VALUE OF THE UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION

Please tick one answer only, and [read instructions for each question carefully](#).

Q12. Do you supervise undergraduate dissertations?

Yes [1] No [2]

Q13. Do you feel equipped to supervise undergraduate dissertations?

Yes [1] No [2]

Q14. Have you ever received any guidance in the supervision of undergraduate dissertations? Yes [1] No [2]

Q15. Indicate your opinion of the following statement: "A supervisor should have expertise in the student's chosen dissertation topic."

Strongly Agree [1] Agree [2] Disagree [3] Strongly Disagree [4]

Q16. The current allocation for dissertation support is six hours per student. Do you perceive this to be?

Too much [1] Too little [2] About right [3]

Q17. Please indicate your opinion of the following statement "Rather than subject expertise, a supervisor only needs to know the necessary processes to help the student be successful in their dissertation."

Strongly Agree [1] Agree [2] Disagree [3] Strongly Disagree [4]

Q18. In your opinion, should the dissertation be: [[Tick one box only](#)]

Compulsory? [1]

Optional? [2]

Abolished? [3]

Q19. Please give reasons for your answer to Q18.

Q20. Please indicate your opinion of the following statement “The academic undergraduate dissertation has no value in today’s environment, and should be replaced with something more practical.” [\[Tick one box only\]](#)

Strongly Agree _[1] Agree _[2] Disagree _[3] Strongly Disagree

Q21. Please give reasons for your answer to Q20.

Q22. Please rate the following statement: “The undertaking of a dissertation affords the student the opportunity to demonstrate their depth of knowledge in a subject better than two extra taught modules.” [\[Tick one box only\]](#)

Strongly Agree _[1] Agree _[2] Disagree _[3] Strongly Disagree _[4]

Q23. Please rate the following statement: “The dissertation is a valuable piece of independent work the student can use to evidence to employers the many skills they have learned in their time at university.” [\[Tick one box only\]](#)

Strongly Agree _[1] Agree _[2] Disagree _[3] Strongly Disagree _[4]

Q24. Please rate the following statement: “The dissertation affords the student the opportunity to develop their own research independence.” [\[Tick one box only\]](#)

Strongly Agree _[1] Agree _[2] Disagree _[3] Strongly Disagree _[4]

Q25. What do you think are the main benefits for undergraduate students of undertaking a dissertation?

Q26. What do you think are the main challenges for undergraduate students of undertaking a dissertation?

Q27. Have you ever written a paper or article with an undergraduate student, based on their dissertation?

Yes _[1] ([Go to Q28](#)) No _[2] ([Go to Q30](#))

Q28. Was this article published?

Yes _[1] ([Go to Q29](#)) No _[2] ([Go to Q30](#))

Q29. Where was this article published? [\[Please state\]](#)

Q30. Are there any other comments you would like to make about your experience of supervising undergraduate dissertations?

Q31. [\(Optional\)](#) Would you be willing to take further part in this study by agreeing to be interviewed? ([Please see Final Instruction 2 below](#))

Yes †

No †

Q32. (Optional) If yes please state your name here:

FINAL INSTRUCTIONS

1. If you wish to add any further comments please write them on an additional sheet of paper and attach to this questionnaire.
2. If you would be willing to be interviewed on this subject (which should take about an hour of your time), please ensure you have ticked the 'Yes' box in question 31 above and given your name so we can arrange a convenient time and place to meet.
3. Finally, please check that you have answered all the questions fully.

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

Please return the questionnaire to Dr. Denis Feather.

Appendix B **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR STAFF**

Introduction: **(The below must be read to the staff member before the interview commences)**

The questions below constitute a provisional framework, and the interview will be semi-structured in nature. As such I expect to pursue any unanticipated issues that arise during the process.

The purpose of this study is to look at the perceptions of colleagues about the value of the undergraduate dissertation, and their experiences of supervising the dissertation.

Permission has been given by the Dean of the Business School to approach colleagues to gain their insights and opinions on this subject matter, and I must stress that your anonymity will be preserved in any written reports growing out of the study, and your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence.

Having said this, may I have your permission to tape-record the interview, as it will aid in terms of speed, efficiency, and ensuring your responses are accurately recorded and transcribed. I will hand the tape-recorder to you, and if at any time you feel uncomfortable with the interview, please feel free to switch the recorder off. Also, please feel free at any time to interrupt the interview, and ask for clarification of a question or to criticize a line of questioning.

This is an 'aide memoire' for the interviewer and should not be given to the interviewee. The interviewer is free to explore any relevant issue(s) raised by the interviewee. It is advised that the interviewer familiarises themselves with the questionnaire the staff member completed prior to the interview.

Main Questions	Notes and Follow up Questions
Q1. Start the interview by thanking them for agreeing to meet with you and to be interviewed. Then explore number of years teaching, and how long they have been supervising undergraduate dissertations.	Try and make them feel at ease before moving into the more in-depth questions
Q2. Ascertain if the individual is a full-time or part-time member of staff.	Explore their specialist subject area(s)
Q3. Ascertain which department they are in, and what research if any they are undertaking.	Explore any interesting issues that may be raised.
Q5. Explore the following issues in regard to the dissertation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they think it is too much work? • Do they think they have the necessary skills to supervise the dissertation? • Do they think it is challenging? • Do they think it is something the student can feel proud of? • Establish if the staff member has received any training on supervising dissertations. 	Ask to elaborate on single answers or key issues.
Q6. How do they feel about the number of hours allocated for dissertation supervision?	Ask them to elaborate on their answer(s)
Q7. Do they believe the staff member should have expertise in the area the student has expressed an interest in researching?	Ask them to elaborate on their answer(s)
Q8. What do they think of the opinion that a supervisor only needs to know the processes to guide the student successfully through the dissertation?	Again, explore any interesting points raised.
Q9. Ask the interviewee if they believe the dissertation should be compulsory, optional, or abolished.	Ask them to elaborate on the point they make and any other interesting issues raised.
Q10. In their opinion, do they believe the dissertation affords the student the opportunity to demonstrate their depth of knowledge on a subject better than exams or two extra taught modules?	Again ask them to elaborate on any interesting points raised.
Q11. Do they think the dissertation should be replaced with another form of assessment?	Ask them to elaborate on their answer.

Q12. Ask them their opinion of whether or not the dissertation has any value in today's environment	Ask them to elaborate on their answer.
Q13. Explore what they feel have been the main benefits of undertaking the dissertation for the student.	Ask them to elaborate on any interesting points raised.
Q14. In your opinion are there benefits to colleagues in supervising undergraduate dissertations?	Explore any interesting points raised, i.e. what sort of benefits?
Q15. If the option was available, would you rather do something else other than supervise undergraduate dissertations?	If yes. What would they give it up for? If No. Why not?
Q16. What do you perceive is the optimal number of students to supervise?	Explore the reasons for the answer(s) they give.
Q17. What is the largest number of students you have supervised in any one year?	Ascertain how many they supervised this year, if they do not proffer this information.
Q18. What is the least number of students you have supervised in any one year?	
Q19. Do you believe the dissertation should be revamped?	May have to elaborate on the term revamped!
Q20. Should there be a pan-school dissertation?	
Q21. Is there anything that we have discussed, or that I have not touched upon that is relevant to the discussion that you wish add?	

Conclusion:

Thank you very much for helping us with this research, and for your time. Your opinions on the questions I have asked will be very helpful in understanding whether or not the undergraduate dissertation offers value to our students. Also, it will give an insight as to whether or not the undergraduate dissertation should remain as an assessment process.