

Positive futures for final year undergraduate dissertations and projects (0071)

The argument

For the last half century or more the final year undergraduate dissertation has been seen as the gold standard for British higher education. However, it is coming under pressure for reform as student participation rates have increased, the number studying professional disciplines has grown, and staff-student ratios have deteriorated. Some programmes have abandoned the dissertation altogether, but there is a danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. The debate over the future of the dissertation provides insights into broader discussions about the purpose and future of higher education. Rethinking the dissertation involves thinking creatively about how most of the learning outcomes associated with the final year project may be retained, while giving students a range of other outcomes which are more relevant to their interests and future careers. Rather than thinking of the dissertation as a homogeneous activity undertaken by all students, one option may be to present them with alternative formats, experiences and outputs. Some of the research-based capstone projects in North America and Australasia may provide useful models. This paper explores a range of interesting alternatives from different disciplines and countries, discusses the issues associated with implementing them from the perspective of staff and students, and suggests some research questions which need investigation. It draws on the findings of a two-year project funded by the English National Teaching Fellowship Scheme.

Critiquing the traditional dissertation

The traditional honours dissertation is under pressure because of the resources required to support it, the lack of preparedness of some students to undertake it, its perceived inappropriateness to vocational disciplines, and its apparent lack of relevance to some courses or future careers (Booth & Harrington, 2003; Price & Feehily, 2004). It appears to be based on the traditional three/four-year full-time model of higher education rather than the increasingly diverse provision, including part-time and work-based learning. Yet for many it remains the 'acid test' for students, towards the end of their degree, to demonstrate independent work on a major project, showing that they can think and work like a member of their discipline or profession (Todd *et al.*, 2004). Whilst recognising the strengths of the traditional dissertation, what are also needed are alternative or additional honours projects that provide students with a forward-looking experience and equip them to thrive in an uncertain world. A key challenge is to ensure that the standards of alternative or additional projects match those of the dissertation.

Learning from elsewhere

Much may be learnt from practices elsewhere where formal undergraduate dissertations are less common. In the US The Boyer Commission (1998) recommended that all undergraduate programmes should "*Culminate with a capstone experience*. The final semester should focus on

a major project and utilize to the full the research and communication skills learned in the previous years” (p27). The case for capstone courses has also been made in Australia (Holdsworth *et al.*, 2009), where at least in professional courses they are often seen as preparatory courses for future employment. In Europe the reshaping of the length of the undergraduate degree through the Bologna process has forced rethinking about whether, how and when to ensure a research emphasis. This paper presents a timely investigation of these related phenomena.

The project

Our project’s focus is on students undertaking research and inquiry based projects in their final (honours) year, but the projects are wider in their conception, function, form, location and how they are disseminated than the traditional dissertation. This raises issues about the nature of research in different disciplinary and professional settings and whether, particularly in the professional disciplines the traditional extended research essay is the most appropriate model. Performing arts, design and fashion courses have over time favoured the production of artefacts displayed at end of degree shows. Consultancy and science communication projects are used in some bioscience courses (Luck, 2008); community-based projects feature in the social sciences (INTERCHANGE, nd; Mashiter, 2009); while tasks in other subjects may be employer-linked (Greenwood, 2007; Milwood *et al.*, 2007). Connected to this is a debate about how the findings of honours projects can be more effectively disseminated, for example, through public exhibitions or undergraduate research conferences and journals (Healey & Jenkins, 2009).

The project aligns with the Government’s intention that higher education should play an important role in supporting economic development (Bolden *et al.*, 2009). “Employers and universities are dependent on one another to prepare tomorrow’s graduates” (CBI, 2009: 4). QAA Scotland is examining how enhancing research-teaching linkages can improve the development of employability attributes (Gunn, 2010). Alternative projects are one key way of addressing this issue.

The paper

In this paper a new typology of dissertations and capstone projects is proposed, which is used as a framework to explore key issues including:

- The purpose of final year projects
- The advantages and disadvantages of alternative forms of final year projects
- The role of real world employer- and community-based projects
- Issues in supervising, assessing and disseminating final year projects.

Extensive use is made of mini case studies of practices from different disciplines and countries. Where appropriate they are illustrated by the reflections of the staff and students. The full case studies are available on the project web site at:

<http://insight.glos.ac.uk/tli/activities/ntf/creativehops/pages/default.aspx>. The emphasis of the paper is on ‘What can we learn from the variety of types of final year undergraduate dissertation or capstone project and what are the key research questions concerning them

which need investigation?’ We conclude that the dissertation has a positive future. However, if it is to remain strong and vibrant and continue to provide a transformational experience for most students it needs to evolve to become more flexible. We need to acknowledge that not all students want the same things from their degree programmes and that a choice of alternative or additional formats, experiences and outputs is required. We also need to appreciate that the nature and form of these choices will rightly vary in different disciplinary, interdisciplinary and professional settings.

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