

## Faculty of Humanities Postgraduate Taught Programmes Committee

### Alternative Models for Dissertation

The Faculty of Humanities is currently in a position where the number of Postgraduate Taught students on Masters Programmes is growing, but the number of staff available to supervise dissertations is not growing proportionately. The purpose of this document is to initiate discussion as to how the dissertation element of a Masters programme can be modelled to maintain the quality of the student experience and continue to produce excellent graduates from Humanities' Masters Programmes.

This paper presents three approaches to considering the issues that the rising student numbers bring:

- Review programmes
- Remodel the dissertation
- Review supervision structures

All of these approaches impact on each other and some of the suggestions put forward could be considered in whole or in part with others. It should be noted that the University regulations for PGT programmes states that a Masters programme "normally" requires a dissertation. However, there are existing practices within the Faculty that are considered to be equivalent to a dissertation and these, plus examples from outside Humanities and from other institutions, should be considered in light of the supervision burden imposed by a traditional dissertation structure.

#### Review programmes

Accreditation of some of our Masters programmes by Research Councils can put some restrictions on the way in which we assess the dissertation element of our programmes. Although Research Councils are becoming more 'flexible' in what they will accredit, not having to confirm to Research Council requirements will give programmes more flexibility in the way the dissertation element is assessed and therefore more room to be creative in the way in which supervision burdens are addressed.

Accreditation of a Masters programme is beneficial:

- for students wanting to use the programme as part of a 1+ 3 programme, in preparation for PGR study and wanting to apply for funding.
- it counts in the RAE
- it can be seen as a quality badge

However, increasingly students are taking a Masters qualification to distinguish themselves in the employment market rather than as preparation for postgraduate research. **You may wish to consider a 'non-research' route for such students.** Such a route would still include research methodology within the curriculum, but it would be more focused on the awareness of methods and preparation for the assessment on the programme.

The 60 credits normally assessed by a dissertation would be assessed through equivalent formats. The Faculty of Humanities will not allow a Masters programme to consist of only subject-based units. There has to be a dissertation or equivalent style assessment of the programme's learning outcomes.

It is important to consider the skills which you and employers require graduates from your programmes to have and the ways in which they will be required to use them.

#### Remodel the dissertation

During 2007/08, the Faculty Teaching and Learning Office conducted a survey of dissertation models across the Faculty. This outcome of this survey has been circulated to the Faculty PGT Programmes Committee. The standard model for dissertations is the traditional 12 – 15000 word submission worth 60 credits. There are a few exceptions that could be transferable to other programmes in Humanities and would have a beneficial impact for staff in terms of supervision requirements.

**Group Projects:** The MBus Global Business Analysis in Manchester Business School. During the dissertation element, students have the option of undertaking an internship. The internship may be with other students from the programme and therefore would involve a group project being produced. In addition to the group report, students write an individual reflective essay. When considering a group based project or dissertation, the following should be taken into account:

- There must be at least 50% of the credits awarded on the basis of individual work.
- The MBus Global Business Analysis Director reported a significant lowering of supervision hours as those students participating in the group project were supervised as a group.
- The group shares data and resources.
- Peer support within the group plays an important role in terms of motivation and peer review of assumptions, research and analysis.
- There are employability benefits for students in terms of the skills gained from working in a group situation.
- Consideration has to be given to whether the group project is compulsory or optional. Not all students would be attracted to having the major element of their Masters programme partially assessed on the basis of the work of others.

**Research Papers:** MA programmes in Law.

Students take two 30 credit units entitled 'Long Essay'. During semester two they complete a 7000 word research paper based on a taught unit from Semester one. During the summer students complete a 7000 word research paper based on a taught unit from Semester two. There is no formal credit-rated Research Methods training unit as part of the programme structure but the School does deliver a series of 6 two hour lectures on legal research methods, writing a research paper and how the students' work will be assessed. There is then no formal supervision given to the students.

This has obvious advantages in terms of the reduction in supervision hours but there are still two pieces of work per student that require marking.

**Other models:** Some other models for consideration

- Group project whereby each student takes a different perspective. The advantages of group supervision, shared resources and group interaction apply but there is an individual piece of work for each student. The group acts as a Learning Support Group.
- Literary reviews
- Case studies
- Consultancy reports
- Data analysis

There will be a requirement for some Research Methods to be taught in all of these examples, but not necessarily to the depth of understanding as would be required to prepare students for PGR study. It is important to consider the skills which you and employers require graduates from your programmes to have and the ways in which they will be required to use them.

**Review supervision structures**

The Faculty report on dissertation models across Humanities highlighted that there is no one set model for structuring the supervision of dissertations. The Faculty has not set minimum requirements in this area but requires that the School is responsible for ensuring that the following aspects of supervision are considered, alongside the Faculty of Humanities' guidelines for the supervision of Masters Dissertations, which sets out the responsibilities of the student, the supervisor and the School

(<http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/tandl/pg/guidelinesandpolicydocuments/index.html>):

- **How many meetings with students?** The Faculty of Humanities has a requirement that students will receive a minimum of 3 hours of formal supervisory meetings (individual or group) distributed evenly during the dissertation process. The requirements for the number of hours of supervision beyond the Faculty minimum requirements will be discipline specific and therefore should be determined by the School. If a School is providing only the Faculty minimum requirements, there must be additional support mechanisms in place for those students. Such additional support mechanisms may take the form of drop-in sessions or workshop opportunities, providing non-subject specific support and allowing students to ask questions about structure, methods, presentation, etc.
- **Period of supervision:** The period over which supervision is available to students will be dependent upon the discipline specific practice.
- **Reading and feedback:** "[Dissertation supervisors] may or may not read individual draft sections, but are not obliged to read or approve the whole dissertation. Feedback from reading students work is formative and does not predetermine or prejudge the final examination of the submitted dissertation" (*Faculty of Humanities Guidelines on the Supervision of Dissertations*).

Therefore, there is no requirement for supervisors to read a minimum amount of draft material. Practices in reading and providing feedback will be discipline and/or individually specific.

It is important to establish a level of supervision that students are aware they will get during their studies. It is difficult to regulate against informal supervision over and above the established School/discipline model. Setting out that level of supervision from the outset will ensure that all students have an equal opportunity for supervision.

**Supervision for students granted an extension:** The School/discipline's requirements for supervision would still continue to apply, as set out for the student at the start of the dissertation process. Individual supervisors may agree to provide additional supervisory meetings with the students but there is no requirement to do so.

**Supervision for students resubmitting work:** Supervisors have a responsibility to communicate to a student the requirements to improve the standard of the work to a point where a pass mark could be achieved. There must be a written record of feedback to the student on their piece of work and the requirements for resubmission. It is the decision of the individual supervisor as to whether explanation of these requirements is provided through a meeting with the student, via written communication or over the telephone<sup>1</sup>. A student is entitled to ask for clarification of that feedback. However there is no requirement on the part of the supervisor to provide any formal supervision for that student. If this is provided, it will be at the discretion of the individual member of staff.

Inadequate supervision is grounds for a student to appeal against their results: "that the supervision or training of the student in respect of research for a dissertation or thesis or equivalent work was unsatisfactory to the point that his or her performance was seriously affected" (*Regulation XIX: Academic Appeals*).

**Please note: Any changes to the dissertation element of a programme, including the supervision structures, should be submitted to the Faculty PGT Programmes Committee for approval.**

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<sup>1</sup> For example, it would be difficult to arrange a meeting with an overseas student who has returned home to complete the resubmission and therefore a telephone conversation or email communication would be more appropriate.

## The Faculty of Humanities

### Document Control

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