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# Enhancing learning support for Masters dissertation students in management & business

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## Background & rationale

This paper reports on a project that has formed the pilot phase of a development initiative that aims to progressively enhance the learning support available to students completing postgraduate dissertations in management and business.

The origins of the project lie in reflection on conversations with students, and with colleagues at Wolverhampton and elsewhere, regarding their experience of undertaking, or supervising, research at Masters level. There seemed to be quite a widespread perception of a developing gap between students' general appreciation of the characteristics of a Masters dissertation, and their grasp of the generic process by which a specific, researchable project is formulated, implemented and written-up within an appropriate timescale. The evidence of a subsequent review of literature lent weight to the view that the rate at which methodological debate is evolving, particularly in the multidisciplinary domain of management and business, is resulting in some mixed and confusing messages on the characteristics and expectations of Masters dissertations being received by postgraduate students.

Three key themes, identified from the process of literature review, informed the design and development of a revised model of learning support for dissertation students:

1. The need for better guidance for postgraduate students on the role and requirements of Masters dissertations. It is now widely recognised that it is no longer safe to assume in postgraduate education that candidates will have developed a base of research and writing skills at undergraduate level which can be translated into and built upon (Zuber-Skerrit 1992; Phillips & Pugh 1994; SRHE1997 onwards; ESRC 2001; Walliman 2001; Blaxter, Hughes & Tight 2001)
2. The need to help students to appreciate the significant advances which have occurred in thinking about the distinctive nature and purposes of management and business research; to realise that they have a responsibility to read widely in the vibrant methodological literature which has emerged; and to apply it appropriately to their personal research project (See for example: Tranfield & Starkey1998; Jankowicz 2000; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2000; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 2002)
3. The need to integrate web-based dimensions into postgraduate modules, so that management learning in University programmes reflects managerial practice: managers and other knowledge workers increasingly collaborate, explore issues, acquire data and learn through electronic interaction. (McConnell 1997; Salmon 2000)

## The innovation

### 1: Creating a new learning resource framework

In 2001/2 students on the Business School's postgraduate general management programmes received entirely revised and extended documentation concerning the dissertation. The first edition of the 'Researchers' Resource Handbook' (Edwards 2001) was designed to assist students with the process of planning, implementing and writing-up an independent research project. In addition to sources in the literature, its content and the approach it introduced drew on feedback from students, tutors and administrators at Wolverhampton, from discussions with external examiners, and a wide range of contacts with academic colleagues at other business schools. The aim was to provide clear guidance for our students, based on embedding best practice into a significantly enhanced, more holistic and distinctive approach to challenging and supporting postgraduates through their dissertation process.

Throughout the Researchers' Resource Handbook, emphasis was placed on the independent, self-directed nature of the dissertation. However complementary emphasis was also placed on helping students to appreciate that the independent effort expected of them would be neither unsupported, nor supported only by their supervisor. In practice they were encouraged to consider themselves and their dissertation as the hub of a rich network of research support resources.

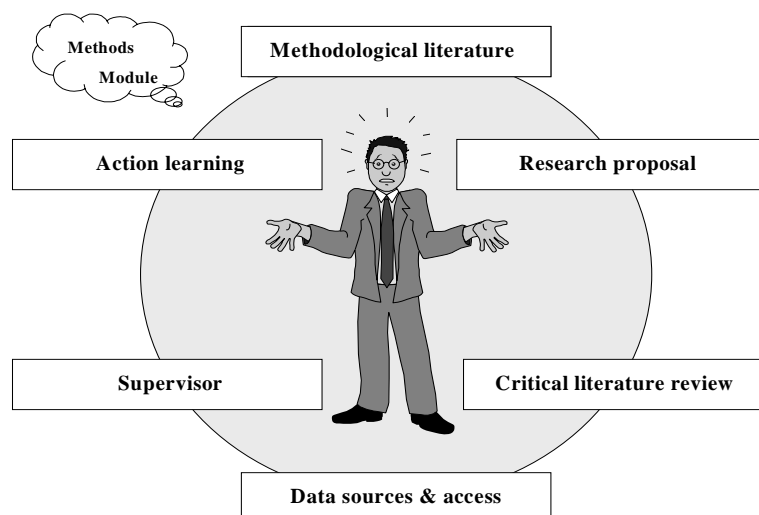


Figure 1

Before commencing the dissertation all students in the pilot groups had undertaken a module that introduced them to research methods in management and business. In past years it has not been unusual to find students who found it difficult to apply this prior learning 'about research' to actually 'doing their own research'. Two common feedbacks from supervisors have been, firstly that sometimes students have been slow to contact them to set-up supervision appointments and secondly initially individuals tend not to have a sufficiently clear research topic in mind. In response to the first issue the Researchers' Resource Handbook set out very clearly when students were expected to start thinking about and actively engaging with their research, and detailed the sequence of events leading-up to completion and submission of their dissertation. The model of the learning support environment described in Figure 1 was designed to widen individuals' perception of the resources around them, to build upon previous learning, and to assist them in selecting a research topic.

Via the research methods module students began to access two types of key resources for dissertation students: (1) academic staff with expertise in research and interests in research methodology, and (2) the rapidly expanding academic literature on research methods in management and business. The formal research proposal that students were required to prepare can be seen as an important research resource (3) since, once approved by the supervisor, it provided the route map that each individual planned to follow and could be seen as an aid to both effective project management and personal resource utilisation. The process of preparing the proposal triggered students' engagement with two further key resources: the specific academic literature from which they would draw key ideas, techniques and possibly evidence (4) and negotiating access to sources of relevant primary and secondary data (5). Students were encouraged to appreciate that entering into dialogue with others is itself a key input to a successful research project, and to see that their research would benefit not only from a positive relationship with their supervisor (6), but also from proactive participation in structured learning sets (7). Both supervisions and set workshops were intended to challenge individuals to progressively refine and sharpen their research ideas, and to develop their capacity to articulate and communicate complex issues confidently. By introducing action learning sets into the dissertation process, it was intended that students should be able to draw on a previously under-exploited resource: their peers. It was also expected that, on average, students should present themselves for supervisions better prepared to engage in higher level discussion, and so be better placed to benefit properly from the expertise and guidance of their supervisor.

## 2: The role of action learning

Experience at Wolverhampton has shown that Masters dissertation students, both from particular awards and across the portfolio of postgraduate awards, have many developmental issues and concerns in common. In the past these have tended to be addressed partly via the information issued in written guidance documents and partly on an individual basis, in one-to-one supervisions. While both approaches remain important, one outcome of the redesign of the dissertation process was the view that such issues and concerns might also be effectively and efficiently dealt with in a group setting. Group work is of course a feature of postgraduate programmes, but previously has in fact only featured intermittently and to a limited extent in the dissertation module.

The approach that was adopted derived from two distinct traditions of group activity.

- (i) **The workshop model for skills development.** In terms specifically of the development of skills in dissertation research and writing, variants of a model based on systematic problem-based workshops have been successfully introduced into many programmes. (Zuber-Skerrit 1992). The nature of the workshops and the focus of activities typically tend to evolve over time. Workshops of this kind are concerned both with getting a particular research project started, carried out, and written-up and with the development of students' understanding of the research process.
- (ii) **Action learning set methodology.** Action learning was identified as an appropriate methodology around which to structure the dissertation group working process, and workshop programme. The fact that learning sets are underpinned by widely accepted educational theory, in particular Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and Pedler's (1986;1997) model of the learning process, contributed strongly to the rationale for employing the methodology. The approach to operating dissertation sets that was introduced follows from McGill and Beaty's (2001) view that action learning is a continuous process of learning and reflection supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done.

For postgraduate students at Wolverhampton the successful completion of a Masters dissertation is the key task that has to be done.

### 3: Learning set arrangements and workshop schedule

For dissertation workshops students were allocated to a learning set, at the beginning of the semester in which they are expected to commence their dissertation. This was scheduled to meet on six occasions throughout the semester.

## Action learning workshops

Workshop 1 <b>Getting Started</b>	Workshop 2 <b>Research Proposal</b>	Workshop 3 <b>Literature Review</b>
Workshop 4 <b>Data Collection</b>	Workshop 6 <b>Analysis &amp; Interpretation</b>	Workshop 6 <b>Writing-Up</b>

Figure 2

As shown in Figure 2, successive workshops were tailored to assist set members with preparing their research proposals; searching and reviewing literature; devising data collection strategies; conducting data analysis; and planning the writing-up stage of the research process. A number of learning sets were scheduled to meet simultaneously, with a module tutor present to facilitate each set meeting as appropriate. Set members were expected to share contact details, in particular email addresses, and were encouraged to continue set discussions and exchange ideas and working papers between set meetings.

Students were given guidance on how to prepare for each set meeting. After the first set meeting it was suggested that students prepare written notes in response to a series of focal questions. Figure 3 is an example, used as a basis for preparation of discussion in the third workshop.

### Doing your literature review...

- Explain how you have organised the literature search process
- Summarise the key outcomes of the literature review in relation to your research idea
- Describe the ways in which the development of your research design has been influenced by the outcomes of the literature review



Figure 3

During set meetings each student would, normally, take it in turns to discuss their work and identify issues on which they seek help, advice or guidance. Students listened to and contributed to each other's dissertation discussion.

#### 4: On-line learning support

Piloting the use of action learning sets as a feature of the new learning support model was a key aspect of the project. Initially these were operated on a face-to-face basis, via the scheduled dissertation development workshops. During the pilot, when relationships between set members and with supervisors have been formed, an on line learning resource topic was set up on the Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework (WOLF) and sets were invited to extend their dialogue into an on-line forum. The rationale for introducing an on-line dimension to the dissertation process was based on the identification of a desire to enhance the continuing support offered to students in the period allowed for completion of their dissertation, when they are not in regular attendance.

Reports that action learning approaches had been successfully taken on-line in Masters programmes elsewhere (McConnell 1997; Skinner 2001) provided independent evidence that over a period of time it may prove possible to progressively incorporate action learning on-line into WBS' dissertation learning support model. Salmon's (2000) five-step model of building-up teaching and learning on-line informed what in practice will be a gradualist approach taken to the introduction of on-line activities within the masters dissertation process at Wolverhampton.

## Outcomes

Two cohorts of dissertation students participated in the pilot phase of what will be a continuing development initiative. The membership of each cohort was far from homogeneous, but in broad terms the two cohorts were quite distinctive. The first cohort comprised some 37 individuals drawn from the part-time MBA and, typically, was comprised of older well-experienced individuals who are currently employed in roles of managerial or professional responsibility in organisations across the West Midlands and Shropshire. The second cohort of some 21 individuals was drawn from two full-time programmes, MBA and MA International Business. This cohort, again typically, was primarily comprised of younger less experienced individuals from the UK and overseas who aspire to careers in international management and business administration. Students in both cohorts, part-time and full-time, were working to common parameters in relation to commencement and time allowed for completion of their dissertations.

Members of the pilot cohorts have until December 2002 to complete their Masters dissertations, following completion of their programme of taught modules in June 2002, so it will be some time before it will be possible to draw final conclusions concerning the impact which efforts to enhance learning support have made. The observations that are made in the following paragraphs are based on feedback from focus group discussions. These were informed by reference to monitoring evidence.(e.g. patterns of attendance; critical incidents) collected by tutors and explored students' perceptions of the different facets of the enhanced learning support model, by inviting participants to identify and talk about what had and what had not helped them to tackle the challenges of 'doing a masters dissertation'.

## Revised documentation

Students in both cohorts responded positively to the first edition of the Researchers' Resource Handbook. The extended introduction to the Masters dissertation was seen as helping students to clarify their understanding of the nature and requirements of research

at this level. The expectations of many were positively modified by the perception that their project is at the hub of a varied network of research support resources. Overall, feedback from group discussions confirmed that students found this document useful as a practical route planner. It assisted with initial topic selection; with setting a sensible scope on the research; and with crafting a feasible research design.

## Learning sets

Introducing learning sets, and indeed the expectation of regular participation in structured group work met with a more varied response. Both part-time and full-time cohorts were characterised – in ornithological terms - by three kinds of student response. The majority of set members were ‘residents’: regular participants in scheduled set workshops. Other students exhibited the characteristics of ‘seasonal migrants’: attending inconsistently. A small minority of students were undoubtedly ‘rare visitors’: declining the invitation to action learning. Feedback from those students who had regularly taken up the invitation, and the experience of tutor facilitation, indicated that both ‘rare visitors’ and ‘seasonal migrants’ were regarded as having “lost out” an important developmental opportunity. From the student perspective there was a general realisation that structured dialogue with peers is beneficial to personal research, in two key respects. First, as one individual put it: “talking with and listening to others in set discussions has given me new and unexpected ideas”. Secondly membership of a set was reported as generating a supportive form of peer pressure that helped individuals to engage promptly and then to sustain momentum with their project. From a facilitator’s perspective the set forum helped to identify key themes – such as “problems of research design”, “scope creep”, “the need for practice in research writing” – as key issues to be addressed in plenary work with both part-time and full-time student sets. Additionally, in relation to full-time students for whom English was not the first language, working in sets proved beneficial in enhancing cross-cultural communication, and in revealing and addressing potentially significant difficulties regarding knowledge and understanding of the research process and its varied challenges.

## On-line resources and interaction

The majority of students in each cohort responded positively to both the revised, more holistic model of dissertation learning support and to the face-to-face action learning sets that were introduced during the first semester of the pilot project. In contrast the response to the opportunity to extend their operation into an on-line environment was not adopted by sets in either cohort.

Individuals subscribed to the topic set up to support ‘Masters Research in Management & Business’ within WOLF, made available at the start of the project’s second semester. They accessed resources posted locally on the topic, or followed links to remote resources. However set activity did not migrate to the on-line environment in either cohort, but rather tended to continue on a face-to-face basis (in some cases supported by general email contact), or to become dormant (with individuals preferring to seek support through contact with their supervisor). There appear to be two clear learning style preferences here. Firstly students found WOLF very helpful when it acted as a repository of reference material, and enabled them to access and download relevant resources at times and from locations that suited them. Secondly, students appeared to be much less inclined even to experiment with use of WOLF as an interactive medium of debate and discussion: a clear preference being expressed for face-to-face dialogue rather than asynchronous discussion, the primary reasons being the perception that the additional benefits of written exchanges were unclear, and certainly likely to be outweighed by the time costs of drafting contributions and logging onto the discussion forum regularly.

It was also interesting that the propensity to subscribe was noticeably more marked amongst younger, full-time students. When this was raised in discussion, responses suggested that part-time students, conducting research within their own organisational setting, have a

tendency to feel able to focus relatively narrowly on gathering ideas and evidence from or through the workplace. In contrast full-time students may typically consider a larger number of project options from a much wider pool of possibilities.

## Evaluation & future developments

Figure 4 attempts to convey an indication of the progress that has been made to date in terms of introducing action learning as an innovation within the Masters dissertation process at Wolverhampton.

### Innovation diffusion to date...

Medium	Leaders	Early majority	Late majority	Laggards
Face-to-face	✓	✓	✓	
Email	✓	✓		
VLE	✓			

Figure 4

We are at an early stage in exploring the potential contribution that learning sets may make to the quality of students' experience in completing their dissertation; and we are at a lower point on the learning curve with regard to the potential for action learning in an on-line, virtual learning environment. Evaluation of the pilot to date has suggested that students have benefited from upgraded documentation, accepted and found some benefit in participating in face-to-face learning sets, but have been sceptical of the value of engaging with on-line interaction. On balance the project has helped to move matters along in the desired direction regarding the support which is available to students completing dissertations.

In creating a WOLF topic dedicated to 'Masters Research in Management & Business' a great deal has been learnt about the design and development of virtual learning support for students engaged in Masters research, and also benefited wider understanding and practices relating to the adoption and roll-out innovations in on-line learning. Participation in the BEST 2002 Conference (Edwards 2002) was valuable in a number of ways, and in particular confirmed that colleagues at a number of UK Business Schools are experimenting with innovative ways of supporting Masters research and/or action learning on line.

The next phase of development will be set within the parameters of the model of enhanced learning support that have been established, and will build on the experience and pedagogic insights gained in the pilot project. A key task for 2002/3 will be to develop and update the learning support documentation to strengthen the resources available to support students in preparing research proposals. We also need to determine how far, and how fast, it may be appropriate to attempt to move from a relatively 'looser' to a 'tighter' invitation to dissertation students to engage in action learning, and to do so in the context of a supportive, and continuously developing on-line environment. Looking forward as far as 2003/4 further exploration of the potential for action learning and action learning on-line is likely to be driven forward by firming up the 'rules of engagement' for dissertation students, perhaps along the following lines:

- *Insistence* on written preparation and follow-up for action learning set workshops, initially focused on a series of meetings devoted to the development of a research proposal, and subsequently refocusing on the themes of implementation and then of writing up
- *Requirement* that, at least in the meetings focused on the preparation of the research proposal working notes are posted to learning set members via WOLF (using the Group Folders facility) in advance of face-to-face meetings
- *Expectation* that WOLF facilities (Forum, and possibly Chat) are used as a medium of peer discussion, dialogue and exchange of ideas

Of course while such imperatives may serve to pump prime initial take-up, students will only become committed to the invitation to participate in action learning and action learning on-line if they can be persuaded it will be beneficial to do so. Undoubtedly many participants in the pilot project have realised the benefits of action learning, but many others are less persuaded. Figure 5 is an adaptation of Salmon's (2000) staged model of engagement with on-line learning, designed to capture the message that experience of the present project has suggested that it will take a period of years rather than the span of a single academic session to effectively develop many on-line learning contexts and to fully embed pedagogic innovations within them. It is not only a matter of variability in student response and learning style; there are significant issues of learning resource design and pedagogical practice to be addressed from the staff side. Furthermore it will, as the title of the figure suggests it will take considerable energy and commitment to progress up this particular form of 'Salmon leap'!

### Moving up the 'Salmon leap' ... ?

Salmon (2000) model stages	2001/2	2002/3	2003/4
5: Development			
4: Knowledge construction			
3: Information exchange			
2: Online socialisation			
1: Access & motivation			

Figure 5

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