

Student and Staff Perceptions of the Undergraduate Dissertation – The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.....

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Abstract

As undergraduate dissertations become almost a standard element in tourism and hospitality education programmes it is timely to investigate the role, experience and impact of this element of tourism education. To date education research, in the area of dissertations, has been concerned with issues such as supervision, how students select topics, the issue of feedback for students, methods of assessment and student and staff experiences and perceptions. Research on tourism and hospitality students in particular is extremely limited.

The objective of this paper is to investigate in-depth perceptions of the process and experience of both supervisors and students. This paper presents the results of surveys which were undertaken with supervisors and undergraduate students at 3 different points in the dissertation process. The research addresses questions such as what is the student experience of undertaking a dissertation? Do supervisors believe that this role is rewarding and beneficial? What are the key concerns for both student and supervisor? Do these concerns change over time? How do students and supervisors describe the role of the supervisor? What key skills does completing a dissertation develop in students?

This paper adds to our current knowledge about the student and staff experience of undergraduate dissertations. The findings of this research will assist in the improvement of the supervision process, the management of dissertations in academic institutions, provide students with a realistic preview of the process and inform staff and students of each others views.

Introduction to and Rationale for Research

The dissertation, according to Smith (2005, p.337), 'holds a revered place within the undergraduate curriculum' and in the eyes of students, educators and employers is 'a, or even *the*, defining element of an undergraduate degree'. Todd et al. (2006, p.171) suggest that the dissertation is 'relatively unique within the curriculum in that it gives students free choice of what they can study'. Smith (2005) identifies that most dissertation research is centred on the supervisors' views of supervision and marking with much less emphasis on the students' lived experiences. In a similar vein Todd et al (2006) and Rowley and Slack (2004) acknowledge the dearth of material on undergraduate supervision and suggest that the majority of dissertation literature is directed at masters and doctoral students. Therefore it imperative and timely that this valuable aspect of the undergraduate, level eight, honours degree programme is reviewed and evaluated in the context of both student and supervisor experiences.

The research purpose of this paper is to investigate the staff and student experiences in one case study programme at an Irish higher education institute over a period of seven months. This is a qualitative exploratory study but provides thought provoking Irish hospitality and tourism empirical data that will hopefully stimulate a long overdue debate. The motivation for this paper stems for the positionality of the authors as both are actively involved in undergraduate dissertation supervision. The key questions that are posed in this paper are what is the student experience of undertaking a dissertation? Do supervisors believe that this role is rewarding and beneficial? What are the key concerns for both student and supervisor? How do students and supervisors describe the role of the supervisor? What key skills does completing a dissertation develop in students?

It is acknowledged that the terminology employed to describe this form of assessment varies from 'research project', 'honours project', 'management report', 'dissertation' and 'thesis', however for the purpose of this paper the term utilised is dissertation. According to I'Anson and Smith (2004, p.20) a dissertation may be described as a 'piece of academic research (primary and/or secondary), varying in length from 5,000-12,000 words'. In the main this assessment accounts for a significant credit weighting in the students' final award calculation.

It has been argued (Rowley and Slack 2004) that the role of the dissertation is changing as curricula now include a vast array of assessments that promote deep independent learning outside of the actual dissertation process. Yet Smith (2005) acknowledges the continued pedagogical value of the dissertation. Todd et al (2004) asserts that the curriculum changes have only assisted students in their development of the autonomy and self reliance demanded by the dissertation process.

The first section of this paper presents a concise review of secondary literature pertaining to the key stakeholders in the dissertation process, the supervisor and the student. This is followed by an overview of the research methodology and analysis of the key primary findings.

The Role/Experience of the Supervisor

Discussion has arisen around the most appropriate term to describe the role held by the educator in this ‘supervisory’ or ‘advisory’ capacity. For the purpose of this paper the educator will be referred to as the supervisor. Rowley and Slack (2004, p.180) acknowledge the importance of the supervisor in what may be a demanding supervision process where they ‘play a pivotal role in supporting students towards realising their potential’. In an Irish context the national framework of qualifications grid of level indicators alludes, in two places, to the role of the dissertation in level eight qualifications and specifically the guidance of the supervisor. In the category of knowledge and skill, the framework identifies that level eight students should be able to ‘use and modify advanced skills and tools to conduct closely *guided* research, professional or technical activity’ (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland 2003, p.17).

The foundation of the supervisor / student relationship is based on the fact that ‘the supervisor has travelled this road before; the student has not, and does not know where the road leads’ (Rowley & Slack 2004, p.178). In fact Rowley and Slack are not the only authors to use the travel analogy to describe the dissertation ‘journey’ (McMichael 1993, p.15). While the supervisor may travel the road with the student, it is apparent that supervisors believe that responsibility for the dissertation rests firmly

with the student (Todd et al 2006). In the ethos of widening participation the diverse mix of students in higher education also creates a need for a diversity of approaches to supervision (Rowley & Slack 2004). From an institution of higher education perspective this journey of one to one supervision can create efficiency and cost challenges of greater depth than those experienced in other academic modules (Smith 2005).

Specifically for the supervisor, similar to the student, this journey presents both good and bad experiences along the way, these experiences include the formation of a working relationship/boundaries with the student, understanding the student's learning style, providing academic guidance and cultivating student motivation, enthusiasm and engagement (Smith 2005). According to Todd et al (2006, p.172) one of the most satisfying experiences of supervision for the supervisor is to 'see students enthused and engaged in their learning experience'.

When compared to the postgraduate supervision experience (Rowley & Slack 2004, p.177) undergraduate supervision is seen as a 'truncated' process comprised of 'brief encounters' in comparison to the duration of and degree of interaction evident at postgraduate level. These 'brief encounters' mark a series of stages in the supervision process including: identification of the research topic, question and objectives, reviewing the literature, constructing an appropriate research design, data collection, data analysis, developing conclusions and proffering recommendations. In addition to these key phases assistance with time management and personal organisation and the technical aspects of the dissertation including grammar, spelling, referencing and presentation were cited by Todd et al (2006) as facets of the supervisor role. McMichael (1993, p.16) commented that the relationships that results from effective supervision may be termed 'mentoring'.

In accordance with this idea of stages Todd et al (2006, p.166) discovered that the level and type of supervisor involvement altered throughout the academic year. From a 'hands-on' supervisor role at the outset to a 'background' role with the passing of time and the changing needs of the student. It was also identified that clear dissertation guidelines were paramount to the success of the process.

The Role/Experience of the Student

From a student perspective a sense of engagement with one specific topic area is developed over a number of months from topic selection to dissertation submission. This process enhances a student's capacity for deep autonomous learning, enhances their employment related transferable skills (Todd et al 2006) and develops a sense of freedom, independence, achievement and pride that may be lacking in other areas of undergraduate study (Smith 2005). However as suggested by Silén (2003, p.4) this autonomy in learning may be both frustrating and stimulating or as she suggests create combined feelings of 'chaos' and 'cosmos'.

Students see the supervisors' role as conveying academic guidance in addition to motivating the student by setting targets and timelines (Todd et al 2006). Key student perceptions and experiences related to the dissertation process (Todd et al 2004) include the development of a sense of personal ownership and an acknowledgement that the dissertation is an authentic form of assessment that requires greater personal investment than other course work. Challenges highlighted by dissertation students included a feeling of uncertainty about what lay ahead and difficulties at the stage of identifying a research question. It was also apparent from Todd et al's (2004) study of students that time was a key concern, in particular the impact that the dissertation had on other course work. Students valued the support of the supervisor particularly in respect of the constructive feedback acquired, the subject expertise available and advice related to shaping the dissertation and time management.

As it was conveyed at the outset of this paper despite the important role of the dissertation, in the higher education experience, research into this area is 'patchy' (Todd et al. 2006, p.164). The following section describes the research methodology employed and the findings of this study which will hopefully contribute to the development of a clearer picture of Irish hospitality and tourism students' and supervisors' dissertation journey.

Methodology

This research was undertaken during 2009/2010 with final year students who are completing a 10,000 word dissertation, and supervisors in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism. All current supervisors were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding the experiences and opinions relating to this role. All responses were anonymous. Seven of a possible ten staff completed the questionnaire.

As the objective was to conduct a dynamic study which would take account of changing opinions over time all 38 students were asked to complete three questionnaires at different points in the process. In the early stage in February a low response of just five questionnaires were received, at the second stage in March, 16 students responded and in the final, post dissertation submission, 24 students completed the questionnaire. The broad themes that became apparent in analysis of the completed questionnaires were the role of the supervisor, the skills developed as a result of the process and the experience and concerns of both students and supervisors. Each of these themes are analysed below.

Role of the Supervisor

The role of the supervisor is a key concern in the literature; this study shows that the most common phrase used to describe this role by supervisors is that of mentor, this is in line with the work of McMichael (1993). While students do not use this term, they talk about the role of the supervisor as one who gives 'advice', 'feedback' and 'guidance' and 'helps me figure out the path I want to take'. This clearly portrays a supporting role. When asked overall how you would describe the role of your supervisor in the process 14 of the 16 respondents used the word 'helpful'. This reflects the findings of Rowley and Slack (2004) whereby the supervisor guides the students along their journey. Interestingly there does not seem to be any divergence between what supervisors and students see as the key role of the supervisor in the process.

The important role of the supervisor is apparent, so we must be aware of their concerns and attitudes in the process. In the first instance why do staff choose to supervise? Interestingly in the case of three respondents they had not specifically

chosen to do this task and in one case s/he said 'I would prefer to opt out at this stage, I do not wish my name to be linked to most of the work I have supervised over the last 5/6 years'. Other supervisors liked the supervision role as they 'enjoyed working on a one-to-one basis with the students' and stated 'it can be interesting seeing them [students] take ownership of an idea and there is an opportunity to "catch" the good students and direct them further'. This reiterates the benefits of supervision as identified by Todd et al (2006).

Skills developed

The reason why dissertations are so often core modules on programmes is because it is believed that they facilitate the development of key skills and knowledge which are essential for honours degree students. This paper wanted to examine the views of students and supervisors regarding this issue.

From a supervisor perspective, there are mixed feelings about whether the dissertation is rewarding and beneficial for students. One comments that 'it is the main piece of work they will do in college which requires them to use a variety of the skills they have picked up in college life' and another states 'definitely, it is challenging, allows scope for initiative and creative thinking and to develop their own interests and indulge in reading around an area of interest'. This is in line with the views expressed by Rowley and Slack (2004) and Todd et al (2004).

On the other hand two supervisors mentioned that the impact varies from student to student, as one stated 'on the one hand I have witnessed students evolve and mature in their approach to learning throughout the dissertation process and take control of their learning. Whereas on other occasions it just doesn't suit the student and it's a bit of a hit or miss situation'.

Of the 24 students who completed the questionnaire in May, 23 of them listed a variety of skills that they believed they have developed as a result of completing the dissertation while one felt that s/he had not gained any new skills. Commonly cited skills include writing skills, interviewing skills, referencing, analyzing information, and research skills. So from an academic perspective these key skills have been

developed and can be tested with the inclusion of a dissertation in programmes. However it is also interesting to note the more general types of skills that students believe they have acquired as a result of the experience: they include time management, dedication, organisational skills, patience, people skills, and skills of persuasion, attention to detail, confidence and persistence. These are capabilities which add to an individual's character and so can influence them in all areas of their life after the experience of the dissertation is long over. This issue of transferable skills has also been addressed in the literature (Todd et al 2006).

Concerns

Primary concerns for students revolve around completing the dissertation in time. So in the March responses students are primarily concerned with getting interviews and worry that they will be able to complete the primary research. However even at this stage there is an awareness of the time pressures with 13 of the 16 respondents noting their concern over whether they will be able to finish on time and many also note the difficulty of balancing this workload with that of completing assignments for other modules. This issue of time management and demands on students' time is also very evident in the literature (Todd et al 2004).

The concerns for staff revolve around the ability of students, this echoes the issue of student diversity identified by Rowley and Slack (2004) and learning styles (Smith 2005). One stated that his/her concern is the students 'lack of understanding of what is required for a thesis', another notes the 'haphazard approach to compilation of the final document due to lack of time'. For some their concern is that the student will fail and others note the lack of communication from students who do not respond to e-mails and do not attend meetings. On a personal note one supervisor noted that her concern was that she could hold her patience and restrain herself with underperforming students. This displays the breadth of concerns from the staff perspective, in terms of their own actions, the actions or inactions of students, and the interaction between supervisor and student.

The Experience

From the student point of view the dissertation is a valuable experience overall with 16 out of 22 using positive words and statements to describe their overall experience of completing the dissertation. Common positive feelings that were cited were 'being proud', 'a sense of relief and satisfaction' and being 'delighted to have it finished'. Those that reported more negative experiences talked about it being 'tiring' and a 'very confusing experience'. Overall five used the phrase 'hard work' to describe the process and another seven used the word 'stressful'. So clearly undertaking a dissertation is time consuming and influences students in both negative and positive ways and even those who have an overall positive experience of completing the dissertation do experience stress and are aware of the hard work that is necessary in order to complete. These experiences are also captured by Silén (2003) with her notion of 'cosmos' and 'chaos'.

When asked whether supervising dissertation students is a rewarding and beneficial experience for supervisors all but one respondent believed that it is. They note that it means 'you never stop learning', another says 'it often takes me to new areas of research and literature that I have previously not been involved in'. Others liked the impact it had on students with one saying 'it is very satisfying to see them [the students] get excited about an idea, take ownership of it and work to produce the best document they can'. The person who did not believe the experience to be rewarding said 'it used to be when students had more ability', and this is corroborated by another who said the experience is rewarding and beneficial 'when you happen to have two excellent students who formulate their own excellent research questions, on their own initiative and make good progress'. Clearly the student one supervises impacts on the experience as a supervisor.

Conclusion

This research provides a good insight into the dissertation experience for students and supervisors. The findings can help inform those acting as supervisors, prospective students and those managing and developing dissertation modules. From a supervisor's point of view it is useful to have an understanding of the emotions expressed by students regarding the dissertation process and although anecdotally many supervisors comment on the lack of commitment and engagement by students

with the dissertation, one-third of the respondents in this study found the process stressful and voiced concerns about their ability to complete on time and to complete primary research work. Being aware of such concerns can influence the way that we interact with the students we supervise.

It is also useful to make students who are beginning the dissertation process aware of the overall positive experiences that students report upon completion, as a student in the middle or beginning of the process cannot believe that feelings such as being 'proud' and 'satisfied' will emerge at the end. Other tips such as 'start early' , 'meet regularly with your supervisor' and 'choose a topic you are interested in' are things that supervisors and those organising the dissertation modules say repeatedly to students but hearing other students saying this at the end of the process may lend added weight to the message.

Encouraging students to see the dissertation as something bigger than just a hurdle they have to overcome in order to complete a programme, but instead as something which will enhance their key skills would be beneficial. Students at the end of the process see the value in terms of key skills that they have developed. Again enlightening participants of this advantage early on may encourage a greater sense of commitment and eagerness about the process while it is ongoing rather than just on reflection at the end.

From a practical point of view the findings of this research will influence our development of support materials for students who are beginning a dissertation next year. These materials will include interviews with students who have completed the process and supervisors who have seen the benefits and advantages of dedicated and interested students.

This research fills a gap in our knowledge in Ireland, and elsewhere, about the undergraduate dissertation experience in tourism and hospitality students. It simply sets the ball rolling as there are many other issues of concern that need to be investigated. These include, examining different methods of supervision, analysing the student supervisor relationship, investigating the perception of the importance of the dissertation among industry members, assessing the students' perceived impact in

terms of how acquiring these key skills has aided them in gaining employment and in doing their job, comparing the undergraduate and postgraduate experience. The list could go on. This is a rich vein of research which can influence the way we offer, promote and operationalize dissertation modules throughout all of our schools and departments.

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