

## **Preparing Undergraduates for the Dissertation**

### **East Midlands Workshop Report**

Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2010

CETL Suite, Emmtec Building,

University of Lincoln

The workshop had been devised as a regional event – hopefully the first of many in the East Midlands – to discuss the key issues involved in preparing students, and indeed departments, for the undergraduate dissertation. The Subject Centre must thank Kate Hill from the History department in Lincoln for putting together an excellent programme of talks and discussions, with experienced academics from around the country speaking to a local audience. We hope that this report will provide some ideas of good practice in undergraduate dissertation work for those departments considering its introduction.

Dr Andrew Walker, the Head of Humanities at Lincoln welcomed delegates representing ten institutions from a largely local area ... whilst acknowledging that the first speaker, Colin Nicolson had travelled from Stirling to share his institutions experience of dissertations, particularly intermediate assessment. It is important to remember that undergraduate study in Scotland is a four year programme and the compulsory dissertation is considered valuable: 'a cap-stone on the degree'. Colin detailed the first year preparatory module at Stirling on 'approaches and methods in history' which teaches techniques and writing skills for the dissertation: acknowledged as a big jump for many students. By the third year, students start putting what they have learned into practise by submitting a dissertation proposal: getting them to think about what historians do – methodology, resources, literary reviews and mapping out the relevant historiography for their research. The timing of this proposal is key, being completed before the summer to allow for preparation and research over the holidays before the beginning of the final year. Along with the submission of a literature review or draft chapter in the first term of year four, this allows for the essential review of individual student progress. The review/draft chapter is not highly weighted, only 10% of the final dissertation grade, but forces preparation, action and focus, and reveals any support issues.

For further detail on the course programme offered at Stirling, please see Colin's powerpoint presentation and an example module handout also attached to this eLibrary resource.

James Sharpe went on to discuss the preparatory module at York: reinforcing Colin's presentation in the context of the English HE system. In 2002 the dissertation was given triple-weighting and procedures were reviewed to aid students and academics alike in a department where 240 students are completing a dissertation each year. Preparation begins in term one of year two, with the distribution of the dissertation handbook, followed by the requirement to choose a research topic and discuss/submit a working idea with their tutor by the end of term two, and sources and methodologies sessions. In year three students complete a special subject, in addition to the dissertation: usually detached as a topic, but which encourages research and primary sourcing. Some work may be submitted for tutor feedback no later than January, with the final dissertation completed early in the summer

term. An interesting development at York is the use of blogs. Each student is required to detail their chosen topic on a blog, and another student is invited to comment on it. The discussion groups are from mixed history subject areas, designed to encourage thinking and expression conceptually and methodologically rather than by chronology and topic alone. Subsequently, bibliographies are submitted to the blogs for further discussion, in addition to a face to face meeting with the tutor. Proposals are submitted in week nine of year two, followed by a further meeting with the tutor in week ten – preparing the students for research over the summer: a crucial time.

After lunch, John Martin and Heather Conboy discussed their work on ‘enhancing research and analysis skills for dissertations’ and how the approach to supporting final year study has developed. At De Montfort, a year two source project (mini dissertation) provides good preparation for the dissertation in year three. A research methods module had existed but it was felt that this did not provide enough focus for some students going in to year three as it did not balance the practical and theoretical. After seeking feedback from students the source project was modified, and offers a sound structure incorporating planning and project management exercises to instil the idea of organisation and spreading of dissertation work more effectively. In addition to exposing students to dissertation skills and structures in advance of year 3, the project management work is a useful, transferable skill.

John’s powerpoint presentation in the elibrary provides further detail on the source project. Included here are two examples showing thoughts behind the modified source project, and potential problems with the approach.

### Modified Source Project

The Challenge: Stretch & Provide Safety Net

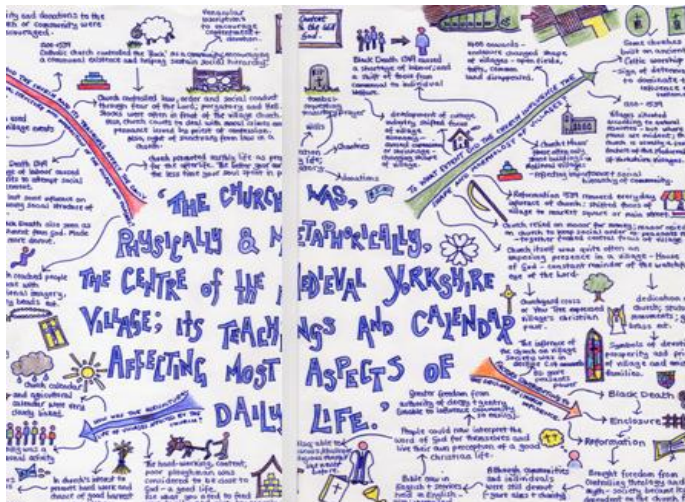
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### Reflections: Potential problems of this approach

Issues	Addressed by
<b>Danger of being too Prescriptive</b>	Stressing that Source projects provided are for example only: Students are actively encouraged to investigate a topic of their choice using the case studies as <b>templates</b> i.e. the number and type of primary sources which it is desirable to consult.
<b>Plagiarism</b>	Addressed through rotating the topics in the booklet and retaining a record of the those researched in previous years
<b>Parochial</b>	Addressed by encouraging students to undertake other visits if possible to national archival centres in order to investigate relevant topics. Make appropriate use of online archival sources.

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Di Drummond gave us an interesting model for the undergraduate dissertation with a smaller student cohort at Trinity University College, Leeds, incorporating reflection and transferable skills. It was noted that students do not always understand what they’re gaining directly from academic study in history in terms of skills for employment. Di discussed her work involving the use of structured learning logs to reflect on their learning (including the dissertation) and constructively note transferable skills during their study. This is then backed up by a questionnaire looking at the skills the students have developed and how these relate to future employment possibilities.



Some students found the reflection process very useful concerning their own learning processes and thoughts on research: less so on transferable skills and graduate employability. None actually used the learning logs directly, although one student produced an amazingly creative mind map of their topic and research.

Finally, Di discussed the role of oral presentation of dissertations at her college. It was widely agreed in the workshop that such opportunities can be a real benefit to students, but is not always feasible with a large body of students. This opened up further discussion on the differences in undergraduate dissertation programmes, relating to the size of the institution and student cohort. It is fair to say that there are some unique challenges and opportunities depending on the size of the student body: some of the issues were expanded upon in group discussion.

During the day two very constructive group discussion sessions were held looking at the following questions:

### Identifying topics and framing questions...

- What elements should a preparation module cover?
- How can students be supported to develop meaningful projects and titles?
- How closely do students' topics have to match staff research?
- Should proposals be assessed, and if so should this be pass/fail or a substantive part of the final degree classification?
- What should happen to weak proposals/students?

### Supporting students: materials and supervision ...

- What are the important elements to include in module handbooks/VLEs?
- How much supervision do students need and how much can we give them?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of group and individual supervision?
- Are there any benefits to interim assessment of the dissertation?
- If so, what form should this take and when should it fall?

These final paragraphs summarise the discussions, linking key issues from both sessions.

It was generally agreed that York provided a good model in terms of time-scales, assessment and support. Group work, visits to record centres, embedding historiography

and methodology in the course, training on library and online resourcing provide essential grounding – but the key is to provide all this before the final dissertation year. The focus should be on students taking responsibility, which can only be asked within a strong structure and with strict time-scales. Contractual obligations, coursework deadlines, supervision schedules and a limited bibliography should all be included in the dissertation handbook/VLE. Group discussion of dissertation topics is a useful exercise, but one-on-one meetings with tutors to set up the dissertation and monitor progress in the second as well as the final year is essential and should be compulsory. Inviting current third years to talk to second years about their experiences in a preparatory seminar is a useful way of getting key issues across. Again, group discussions may also be an interesting addition to individual supervision, and could be more empathetic/generic in nature – looking at dissertation issues more widely.

Matching staff interests to topics chosen by students is important, and should be done in year two. This can have an impact on the spread of dissertation workload within a department if some topics prove more popular than others: matching by theme rather than period or country may also need to be considered. However, mis-matching is an issue that could be picked up on by external examiners. It was felt that proposals and subsequent draft chapters/literature review/annotated bibliography should be assessed to ensure the students are coping with the rigours of a dissertation. To monitor progress early in the dissertation (possibly October/November), an annotated bibliography may be particularly useful – indicating if the students use of resources, reading and understanding is in place for successful completion of the dissertation. However, it was generally considered that initial assessments should only be given a pass/fail or insubstantial mark: with scope for up to 20% allocated for interim assessments.

To ensure that weaker students are not left to fail, structured, monitored contact with supervisors is important, including setting some of the milestones (discussed above) throughout the dissertation process: starting with encouraging staff to have lists of titles/reading available to help those falling at the first hurdle. This can include email supervision, but should not be the sole form of communication. There is a potential issue of balance in supervision between support and dependency, and this is where correct structures/supervision schedules can benefit all. It was also generally felt that the final supervision/submission of draft work should be set a few weeks before the dissertation hand in date, to allow the student time to work on amendments independently.

Thank you to all the delegates, and particularly the speakers who contributed to this constructive and informative day.

Your feedback on the discussions, or the usefulness of this report would be greatly valued by the Subject Centre, including ideas for further workshop themes.