

Change to assessment method: Research Methods: Planning Research

Research Methods: Planning Research is the third of the three 10-credit generic research courses offered to the School's MSc students. Students on most Moray House MSc programmes are required to take Planning Research before starting their dissertation. The course is considered part of the dissertation stage of their MSc, rather than the coursework stage; that is, its 10 credits plus the 50-credit dissertation make up the dissertation stage of the MSc.

At present the course is assessed by a written research proposal of 2000 words. In light of our experience of running the course over the past three years and discussions within the Research Methods teaching team, we propose to amend this to a new form of assessment – a research proposal poster – as discussed below. In doing so, we hope to address a number of practical difficulties faced by staff and students during previous runs of the course.

a) The Current Assignment

The current assignment was designed primarily to assess students' ability to select a suitable topic and methods for a small-scale research project appropriate for an MSc dissertation. As such, it serves as a feasibility study which programmes and supervisors can use to guide students' progress. It also (after some timing issues in year one were addressed) replaces the non-assessed dissertation proposals that many students were previously asked to write for their programmes.

The first year of the course saw some confusion from students about what their proposals should contain, which was addressed by providing more explicit guidance in subsequent years. We also adjusted the assessment criteria for the assignment to more closely reflect the requirements of a proposal rather than an essay. The result is that the assignment has become highly structured, and a rather mechanical process for students and markers alike: as long as the numerous criteria are addressed (and these are shared with students beforehand), it is hard for students to do very badly, but equally it is hard for them to excel. For markers, assessing 30-35 proposals at a time can be a challenge, as the structure means there is insufficient variety in tone compared with regular essays.

In year one the assignment deadline was at the end of May, which unhelpfully overlapped with the start of students' work on the dissertation and was far too late for feedback on the assignment (returned at the end of June) to have much impact on the dissertation itself, at least for full-time students. In year two we moved the course a month earlier to resolve some of these issues, but students have still had to wait until

the end of May for their assignment feedback, when they are well into the dissertation process.

b) Posters

Since the beginning the course has featured a research poster activity in its final session as a key piece of formative assessment. The poster is an opportunity for students to share the essence of their research plan before they have to write it up their full proposal. In years one and two this was held in Paterson's Land G1, where students from the whole course put up posters for comment. Last year we conducted this in regular tutorial groups instead. Either way, many students have treated this activity as an optional extra and failed to take advantage of its significant feed-forward potential. Only about half of all students seem to have taken part in either the large sessions or the tutorial sessions. As those who have taken part have found the feedback received on the day very helpful in finalising their plan, this is a significant missed opportunity for those who do not.

c) The proposed change: Making the poster the assignment

We propose to address many of the issues above by making the poster activity the basis of the course assignment. Students will be asked to communicate their research plan in the form of an A2-sized poster rather than as a regular written document. These physical size limits will serve to constrain the number of words students can use. The same sorts of information about topic, background, indicative literature, chosen methods and their justification, and ethical issues and other practical constraints will need to be addressed, in concise form.

Students will be asked to present this poster, effectively as a draft, at the poster activity in the last session of the course, and will receive feedback from tutors and peers in that session. Students will then have a week to refine the poster, based on the feedback they have received, before submitting the final version, which will bring the date that they receive their final assignment feedback and marks forward by up to three weeks.

This change should encourage more students to take advantage of the poster session formative assessment opportunity, as it will more directly relate to their final submission. It should reduce some of the more routine aspects of the current assignment, and should save markers some time in reviewing and assessing the final submitted assignments. It also adds variety to the range of assignment types across the three research courses, of benefit to the different learning styles among our students.

We hope to make these changes in time for the semester two delivery of the course in 2013-14.

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13 September 2013