

MSc Dissertation Planning 2013-14

The time is approaching when the Graduate School needs to consider the organisation of dissertations within and across programmes. Two changes have been made for 2012 and 2013 with some success. First, the starting point for the dissertation process was brought forward so that students were matched with supervisors between February and March. This was to enable students to identify their topic at an earlier stage, to consider design, apply for PVG if needed, and to get a head start on approaching schools and other organisations for permission to recruit participants so that they are prepared to collect data in May-June. In addition, the earlier start lets students work out, with guidance from the supervisor, what research methods they are likely to use. This lets them make optimal use of the Planning Research course linked to the dissertation: by selecting the appropriate workshops.

The potential risk of starting early is that weaker students are distracted from giving enough time to course work which they must pass in order to progress to MSc. Staff have therefore been asked not to require students to do a lot of work on the dissertation, e.g., write their literature review. The idea is to have a **gradual** lead in to help organisation.

There has also been an effort to emphasise that students should fit their research topics to staff research expertise, rather than expect staff to adapt to student-led topics. As part of that, a database of staff interests has been provided to let students see the range of topics in the School. In addition, staff have been invited to post adverts for research projects to which students are invited to respond. Some staff really responded to this offer, with adverts for interesting research projects in their field. It is important that all concerned are aware of this option, and PDs are asked to make sure students know about the ads. It is potentially a great research experience for them. However, it is also important that we have clear agreed guidance to supervisors, e.g., re student contribution. We will circulate information on advertising projects to staff by the end of November/start of December..

There was an attempt to have a School-wide database with a system for students to list choices. However, some programmes are very subject specific and optimally organised within-programme so there is no move to have a single source for supervisors. There was also a move to involve more staff in supervision and this has resulted in a greater number of colleagues, some of whom typically teach only UG, in contributing. This has been immensely useful, especially in MSc Education where numbers were unexpectedly high. We will again be updating the database of supervisors prior to putting it on Learn for students to see.

Ethics. There were a few problems with students proposing research with real ethical implications. Few students have the experience to conduct research with significant ethical implications. It would be really helpful if PDs could warn supervisors and students at the outset about the challenges. Students and supervisors also need to know that the ethics committee only meets every two weeks.

The aim this year is to capitalise on the aspects of organisation that we know work well, while keeping some scope for flexibility and choice where it is feasible. So we would like to suggest to colleagues that

- (i) EM and PA work to update the database of supervisors.
- (ii) PDs plan for a very prompt start in matching students to supervisors (Jan-Feb).
- (iii) the system of staff adverts is retained with agreed guidance for staff and students (Action: EM and PA to circulate info on this to staff)
- (iv) the database is also retained, again, with clear agreement by each programme, before it is made available about how it will be employed (Action: EM and PA and Grad School)
- (v) PDs let the Grad School know how they will inform students about the database and adverts
- (vi) It is made clear to students that, although they begin the dissertation process before the end of the diploma stage, if they fail to progress, they cannot complete the dissertation (Action: PDs).
- (vii) Supervisors are provided with full dissertation guidance, including all information available to the students, to avoid confusion. This is particularly important with regard to the RM proposal (Action: Rory Ewins, CO for RM3; PDs, EM and PA).
- (viii) Students are each given a dissertation guide which includes a section in which to keep a record of meetings and actions. This should include a note at the outset of any planned student or supervisor holidays. If staff could support this it will be helpful if students request concessions late on in the summer or have issues about their supervision. (Action: EM and PA, students and supervisors)

We would like to offer students a general talk before the holiday about the dissertation and what is involved. We will send PDs an outline of what we say to students beforehand to avoid any risk of their receiving contradictory information from PDs and EM and PA.

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