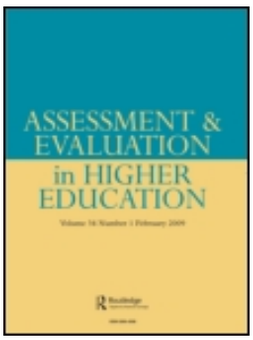

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Independent inquiry and the undergraduate dissertation: perceptions and experiences of final-year social science students

Malcolm Todd*, Phil Bannister & Sue Clegg
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

This article reports on findings from a research project that investigated the experiences and perceptions of final-year social science undergraduates enrolled on a dissertation module in a post-1992 UK university. The dissertation was designed to provide students with the opportunity to function autonomously and determine the content and focus of a major part of their study and assessment. Using data from interviews and questionnaires, the article explores the students' lived experience of the dissertation as a form of independent learning and assessment, the challenges they encountered, and their perceptions of peer and tutor support. While students valued the autonomy, authenticity, and ownership they felt in relation to their dissertation, they also experienced considerable challenges, particularly in relation to 'time'.

The undergraduate dissertation—a vehicle for promoting independence in learning?

For many undergraduate degree students, a significant element of final-year study is an independent learning project. While these projects may vary greatly in scope and nature (e.g. a large-scale written assignment such as a dissertation or extended essay; the design and production of some type of artefact) most share a number of key characteristics. First, the learner determines the focus and direction of the work. Second, this work is carried out on an individual basis—although usually with some tutor support and direction provided. Third, there is typically a substantial research component to the project, requiring the collection of primary data and/or the analysis of existing/secondary data. Finally, learners will have a more prolonged engagement with the chosen subject than is the case with 'standard' coursework assignments such as essays or reports, with the work consequently expected to be more 'in depth'.

The central place afforded to the dissertation in undergraduate degree courses reflects the value it is seen to possess as a vehicle for student learning and as an assessment tool. Indeed, the dissertation has been described as retaining

*Corresponding author: Sheffield Hallam University, School of Social Science and Law, Collegiate Crescent Campus, Sheffield S10 2BP, UK. Email: m.j.todd@shu.ac.uk

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> a privileged place within many degree programmes. Viewed as the culmination of the degree, the dissertation is seen as the mechanism through which students construct a synthesis of theory, published studies, methodological understanding, the selection and application of appropriate research methods, analysis and discussion. (Hemmings, 2001, p. 241)

The undergraduate dissertation, with its ability to offer students the opportunity to exercise responsible choice in the method and content of their study, can encourage a deep approach to learning (Ramsden, 1992). Moreover, the need to produce work-ready graduates who are, amongst others things, more effective, independent and confident self-directed learners, has been underlined by many commentators (Stefani *et al.*, 2000). The ability to work independently is an important outcome of undergraduate study and the dissertation is designed to allow learners to be more involved in making decisions about the choice of subject matter, learning methods, control over which aspects may be focused upon, pace, sequence and content of their study—which are some of the key characteristics of independent learning (Boud, 1988; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 1992).

Despite the perceived pedagogical value of the dissertation, however, there is evidence that in some higher educational institutions there is pressure to abandon it as being too 'expensive' in the context of mass undergraduate provision. This pressure reflects recognition that independence and autonomy can only be realized in a context of considerable preparation of learners and teachers before any degree of autonomous learning can be successfully implemented (Hurd, 1999). Independence does not involve a hands-off approach. The challenge in the undergraduate dissertation is to provide sufficient support to cultivate autonomy while recognizing that many students may not feel fully prepared for this form of study. If it is to be successful, independent study needs to be developed over time, and embedded within clear institutional and departmental polices that underpin and support a philosophy of developing independence in learning (Souto & Turner, 2000; Hughes, 2002).

Moreover, there is a growing realization in the literature that even well-supported autonomy involves a dialectical moment between what Silén (2003) calls 'chaos' and 'cosmos'—that movement on the students' part between the emotionally unsettling experience of intellectual confusion and moments of insight and order. While students should not be left to struggle alone, when students encounter new intellectual challenges they are thrown into a state of liminality—of being stuck and hovering on the edge of a boundary without knowing how to cross it. Meyer and Land (2003b) identify these states of liminality as occurring when students encounter 'threshold concepts' that challenge their understanding. These threshold concepts appear particularly troublesome but once grasped appear to shift the students' personal knowledge irreversibly; threshold concepts mark qualitative shifts in understanding (Meyer & Land, 2003a, b). It would be surprising if the dissertation, with its particular demands on students to formulate a problem and identify appropriate conceptual frameworks and data sources from within which to think about their problem, did not involve 'troublesome' concepts and associated states of liminality. Equally, however, they are likely to experience the pleasures of 'cosmos' and the irreversible insight that

comes with the mastery of new ways of seeing as they shift the boundaries of their personal knowledge.

However, in spite of the dissertation's status within degree courses, and its perceived pedagogic value and challenges, the students' 'lived experience' of this type of assessment appears to be relatively under-explored within published research literature in the UK. Considerably more attention has been paid to learner experience and tutor practices in relation to the master's dissertation and the doctoral thesis (examples of recent studies being Wright & Cochrane, 2000; Jackson & Tinkler, 2001; and Woolhouse, 2002). What does exist on the undergraduate dissertation appears to focus primarily on staff marking practices (e.g. Webster *et al.*, 2000) rather than on the student experience of this learning activity, although an aspect of this (student perceptions of the role of the supervisor) is considered by Stefani *et al.* (1997).

The central problematic of this paper, therefore, is with the lived experiences of students faced with an undergraduate social science dissertation. The study also focuses on the support they receive and how they felt they were able to use it. The paper is divided into six sections. Section one looks at the design of the study, and the next four sections report the findings under the headings 'Authenticity and personal ownership', 'Uncertainty and challenge', 'Time' and 'Support', which were the key themes that emerged from the data analysis. The final section concludes with some reflections on the implications for practice.

Study design

The study of an Applied Social Studies (ASS) dissertation module took place in a post-1992 UK university. The BA (Hons) ASS dissertation is a 20-credit compulsory final-year module, studied over two semesters. The theme of the dissertation is chosen by the student (towards the end of Level 2 study) but has to fall within the disciplinary framework/s of sociology, criminology or social policy. The dissertation permits students to design an extended piece of written work based on library study, work or voluntary experience, or limited primary data collection and analysis. It should be focused around a research question, determined in part with a supervisor, which provides the grounding for the study.

The underpinning philosophy of this module is that it provides students with an opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning and develop their social science skills, including the use of appropriate methodologies. Students are expected to devote approximately 200 hours of 'self-managed time' to dissertation study, and each student has a supervisor appointed to them at the start of Level 3 study. The student is entitled to 20 minutes of supervision per week in the form of individual tutorials (although how this time is distributed is a matter of discussion and negotiation between the student and the appointed supervisor).

The assessment of the dissertation module is in two stages—a short (1200 words) 'interim report' (on progress to date, methodology to be employed, ethical concerns for the study, literature sources, etc.) weighted at 10% and submitted during the first semester; and the final dissertation (5000–8000 words), weighted at 90% and handed

in at the end of the academic year. During 2001–2002, around 100 students took this module with 20 tutors providing supervisory support.

The research study undertaken was small-scale and exploratory. It attempted to capture some of the lived experiences and perceptions of those students and staff who were engaged with the dissertation module for the academic year 2001–2002. The study involved three main points of data collection:

1. Self-completion postal questionnaire to students

A postal self-completion questionnaire was designed (see Appendix A) and administered to all of the students taking the dissertation module, which included a small number of part-time students, with responses received from 44 of the 93 students (47.3% of the complete sample). The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions covering a range of topics related to the dissertation. The questionnaire was first of all pilot-tested on four dissertation students who did not form part of the final sample in the study.

2. Semi-structured interviews with students

All of the students that had returned the questionnaires were then invited to participate in a tape-recorded semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted (in person or by telephone) with 14 of the students (10 females and 4 males—which was representative of the student body within the ASS division at the time of the research) who had completed their dissertation. The interview schedule covered a wide range of themes relating to the dissertation process. These themes had been highlighted by the data emerging from the student questionnaire (see Appendix B).

3. Staff interviews

A semi-structured tape recorded interview was conducted with eight members of staff who were dissertation supervisors within the ASS division within the School. The interview guide had been designed following an initial analysis of the data collected from students. It was intended for the sample to be, as far as possible, representative of the larger staff group in terms of level of seniority, length of services, gender and discipline. Of the eight interviewees, four were from the sociology division and four were from the social policy division; five were male and three were female. The length of time teaching in higher education ranged from 5 to 27 years, with experience of supervising undergraduate dissertations ranging from 1 to 20 years.

The data from the interviews and questionnaire were initially analysed by the authors and this was then discussed and verified with other research colleagues in the university where the research took place. The analysis involved looking for themes within the student experience and comparing them with the expectations of staff. The main data presented in this paper are from the in-depth interviews and some of the open questions on the questionnaire. The staff interview data and the data from the student questionnaire have been reported elsewhere (Bannister & Todd, 2002),

but we have drawn on this where necessary to inform our interpretation and our discussion.

The interviews were analysed individually, informed by a phenomenological approach to qualitative data (Ashworth, 1999, 2003). From the reading of the data a complex picture emerged about the students' experiences of the dissertation—involving authenticity and personal ownership, uncertainty and challenge, time, and support.

Authenticity and personal ownership

For the students, the significance of the dissertation derived from their sense of the work being independent and self-directed. Along with staff, they felt that the dissertation both develops and demonstrates their personal ability to manage a relatively unstructured task:

> It's not like an essay—it involves study on your own. You don't get the support you'd normally get—it's down to you from start to end. (Student Interviewee 3)

The dissertation assessment appeared to have created an environment within which students had to take on much more responsibility for their own learning. Such autonomy in learning was contrasted by a number of students with that in more conventional modules on their course:

> The point of the dissertation is that it's independent work that's less guided. Even in your third year, most modules are guided. (Student Interviewee 8)

That the dissertation is individual and learner-directed was important for several interviewees: respondents commented on the possibility which exists to pursue personal interests and do original work, and on the fact that the learning from the dissertation can have personal meaning:

> At the start, I didn't see the dissertation as useful, but this changed. It's the only piece of work that's more or less what I wanted to do. (Student Interviewee 9)

Some students went further, recognizing that the prolonged engagement with a defined topic can result in deeper learning opportunities:

> When I started doing it I realised it's much more in-depth—you get a better understanding of the topic. (Student Interviewee 13)

It was also noticeable that several interviewees implied, or openly stated, their belief that the dissertation more genuinely represents one's ability than standard coursework assignments do:

> The dissertation looks good, it's my own work and it's individual. You're not just answering an essay question. (Student Interviewee 2)

This belief in the dissertation as an *authentic* form of assessment seemed to originate largely from its being experienced as personal in a way that other work is not. The dissertation required the learner to determine the focus of the dissertation and the student is primarily responsible for all stages of its production. Consequently, it appeared from the interview data that there is a much stronger sense of ownership and

a motivation to succeed compared to other forms of assessment. Students reflected on how the dissertation compared with other types of assignment:

> In other courses, it's set out what they want you to find out. This is about your individual thought and direction—you can go off in your chosen direction, branch out and make different things relate to each other. There's more freedom involved. (Student Interviewee 13)

This perceived authenticity and freedom also appeared to relate to the widely held conviction that the dissertation demands a higher personal investment than coursework. One student claimed that while one can put minimal but concentrated effort into an essay (e.g. commencing it shortly before the deadline) and still pass, this approach cannot be adopted with the dissertation because it is more involving; it often relies upon other people providing them with information; and requires a much greater input and critical refection:

> It's been a valuable experience for me because it's so different from other stuff. With other essays you can rush them if you have to … but this is so much work, you can't rush it. It demands more. (Student Interviewee 6)

Uncertainty and challenge

Within both the survey and interviews, students were asked to comment on their experience of key phases within the overall dissertation process. According to the dissertation supervisors interviewed, the production of a specific research question that the dissertation will address constitutes one of the most challenging aspects of dissertation study for undergraduates. The difficulty of this task was indeed a prominent theme within the student interviews; many respondents had struggled to determine a precise focus for their work, and to produce a question that could be answered within the confines of the module:

> In the first meeting with the supervisor, she didn't think that my topic was feasible in the time available. She said it was too broad, and that I needed to select an issue where I could evaluate something. (Student Interviewee 7)

For some, the difficulty experienced here related to how they initially conceptualized the dissertation. A number of the students spoke of approaching it as a 'topic exploration' (to use the words of one supervisor), subsequently producing initial questions of a descriptive and imprecise nature:

> I knew what I wanted to write about but I couldn't get a question to match. My original question was too vague and unanswerable. In terms of tightening it up, I knew I wanted to link disability to employment. I tried to get a question from that but it was a descriptive question that I ended up scrapping on advice from the supervisor, he told me it wasn't any good as a question. (Student Interviewee 3)

This uncertainty extended to the scope of the dissertation and over-ambition in wanting to investigate too many facets of the chosen subject. Some students did not appear to know where to stop in designing and structuring the research project. The students most frequently attributed the difficulties encountered at this stage to their lack of

experience of determining their own assignment titles within the degree course, these usually being prescribed.

Gathering data (primary and secondary) had also posed difficulties for a large number of students. Nearly three-quarters of the questionnaire respondents reported problems, most frequently in locating information, relevant literature and learning resources, and recruiting cooperative research participants for interviews or focus groups (survey respondents, interviewees). Although students had studied research methods in their second year, some said they had struggled when faced with the open context of the dissertation:

> I didn't understand it so I couldn't apply it to the dissertation; it didn't influence the research I did (Student Interviewee 14)

Other students reported that they found the research methods module helpful, but recognized that the challenge was to be able to think through the meaning of what they had learned in a new, more open context.

Time

Over three-quarters of the students who were surveyed stated they had put more effort into the dissertation than other modules of equivalent credit value, with most claiming that the requirements of the dissertation had reduced the time available for other final-year work. Furthermore, amongst the interviewees it was widely held that the demands of the dissertation had had a detrimental effect on other studies. One student observed:

> It [the dissertation] took up more of my time … Once you get into it, you have to put in the effort. It's 8000 words, plus there's so much more to do. When you're doing it, it seems so much more important than the rest of your work. It does take over. (Student Interviewee 6)

Those interviewed gave various reasons as to why the dissertation had received more effort. Some attributed it to personal enthusiasm:

> You put more time into the dissertation because it's something that you enjoy. You want to explore and get to the bottom of it. I had a genuine interest in my topic and did loads of reading … It can quite easily take over if you're interested in the topic. (Student Interviewee 4)

This sense of engagement relates closely to the theme of autonomy identified above. Ownership and interest positively motivated the student to spend more time. However, other students identified the technical demands of the dissertation as imposing a greater load:

> I did the dissertation and left other work. It's got to be done in a set way, you can't rush it … There is a learning curve for the dissertation. Researching it took ages, doing a large literature review then conducting and transcribing interviews … (Student Interviewee 7)

Some students felt that there was too much emphasis on the dissertation, causing them to give it disproportionate attention:

> There's too much importance put on the dissertation. Because of this, I did 5 or 6 times as much work on it. (Student Interviewee 8)

The perception on the part of the majority of students was that they spent much more time on the dissertation than on other modules of equivalent credit value. The survey results indicated that most students spent more time on the dissertation in semester 2 (an average of $6^3/_4$ hours per week) than in semester 1 (an average of $4^1/_4$ hours per week). Time, however, is notoriously difficult to estimate, and given that the survey and interviews took place near the end of semester 2, it is possible that some students responded to questions relating to the time spent on the dissertation with reference to their most recent experience only. If averaged out over the year, the overall level of input into the dissertation may not have been greatly in excess of that for taught modules of equivalent credit value.

If it is the case that certain students *did* spend more time on the dissertation than on other 20-credit modules, one possible explanation, suggested in several staff interviews, is that the students were not used to this genuinely independent, self-directed style of study and so needed to make an additional effort to adapt to its demands, but that they were motivated to do so by a sense of ownership. However, several survey respondents and student interviewees also suggested that in its current form the dissertation simply requires too much from them and that the task could not be completed within the recommended 200 learning hours. This perception is not confined to our study. Research on staff and student conceptions of undergraduate research project work by Stefani *et al.* (1997) reported on a number of claims from students that their supervisor was 'unrealistic in his/her expectations of what an honours student can achieve within what is a relatively short period of time' (p. 280).

Support

The survey investigated student perceptions of the support that can be reasonably expected from the dissertation supervisor. A strong consensus existed amongst respondents that the role of the supervisor is to give academic guidance on managing the dissertation, to motivate and encourage and to possess (and communicate) academic expertise in the area of the dissertation. The largest proportion of survey respondents *disagreed* that it was the responsibility of the supervisor to help write the dissertation itself.

Interviewees were asked what they had found most helpful in terms of support provided by the supervisor. Students reported that the constructive feedback given on draft work was highly appreciated:

> The most useful thing the supervisor provided me was positive criticism. I then kind of knew where I was going wrong and what to work on. (Student Interviewee 14)

Supervisors were also valued for their subject expertise—advising on sources of relevant information and encouraging creative thinking about the subject being explored:

> He [the supervisor] helped me to broaden my thinking, making linkages [to other areas of theory] that I wouldn't have made before. (Student Interviewee 12)

At certain key points in the dissertation process, the input of the supervisor appeared to have been vital for many students. Nearly every interviewee spoke of the critical role of the supervisor in helping them establish the parameters of their proposed research inquiry—providing direct feedback on its feasibility, and constructive advice on how to articulate the research question:

> My supervisor was very important in defining the topic. I'm not sure that I could have come up with the question on my own. I didn't know what I could answer; I didn't know what it would benefit me to do. (Student Interviewee 1)
>
> Her [the supervisor's] suggestions weren't necessarily what I wanted to do, but they indicated the type of question to answer. (Student Interviewee 2)

Several interviewees had valued the assistance of the supervisor in selecting an appropriate research methodology:

> I wouldn't have known what research method to use on my own—I needed the tutor for this. You need to see your tutor before you're able to start work on it. (Student Interviewee 10)

Whilst guidelines on the potential format of a dissertation are offered to all students at the start of the module, ultimately they have to decide how to create the final document and what to include (and exclude). The practical advice on structuring and editing the final work had also been appreciated:

> The supervisor helped me with working out the presentation, so that it wasn't an extended essay and the chapters flowed. (Student Interviewee 3)

Considering the role of the supervisor more generally, many interviewees welcomed the actions of the supervisor in helping them shape the dissertation experience:

> I had the resources and the enthusiasm but was lacking direction. The supervisor had clarity of thinking—they broke it down into chunks and took me through a process that I would have struggled without. It provided me with a framework. They took my ideas and put a framework on it. (Student Interviewee 12)

Through the staff interviews, it was established that approaches adopted by tutors towards supervision varied greatly in terms of formality. Certain supervisors had a relatively relaxed approach, initiating preliminary meetings but then leaving it to the student to request support when needed, with others being more formal and directive (e.g. establishing a supervision timetable for the year; producing a written record of each meeting; drawing up a formal contract of rights and responsibilities). Over three-quarters of the students surveyed had experienced *some* type of formal element within their supervision (most commonly the setting of a date for the next meeting at the end of each supervisory session). The vast majority of these students saw this to have been useful, with the interviewees providing further details. The setting of tasks (e.g. to complete before the following meeting) and deadlines by the supervisor had served to motivate the learners:

> I think that the supervisor is there to provide you with motivation. I like pressure—my supervisor's was not a relaxed style of supervision! Whereas other students said their supervisors said 'Do it by whenever' and things went off track. (Student Interviewee 1)

The onus was placed on the students to initiate supervision and there were no formal timetabled slots allocated in advance. Sometimes this was felt to be a problem for students who would have liked more overt instruction with their support. However, it was interesting to note that some whose level of formal contact with their supervisor had been low nonetheless regarded this positively:

> I think I saw my supervisor twice … but this was OK. I also wrote to her. This level of contact was enough for me. (Student Interviewee 8)

> I only saw the supervisor twice—I like working on my own. I wrote big chunks, gave it to her to give me feedback. (Student Interviewee 14)

The supervisors of the students quoted above were not necessarily 'non-interventionist' with all their tutees. A number of tutors interviewed claimed not to have a fixed approach to supervision, but rather tailored this to suit the individual needs of each learner. One student interviewee was appreciative of the opportunity to negotiate the style of supervision provided:

> I said to my tutor that it was no use setting me deadlines, which I know other supervisors did, because it would create too much pressure for me … The style of supervision I had worked for me. I had a choice in this—my supervisor asked me at the start how I'd like to be supervised … For another student, I know that he had a totally different style of supervision. (Student Interviewee 4)

While many survey and interview respondents were content with the supervision they received, a quarter of those surveyed would have liked a greater level of formality, most frequently citing a timetable for the submission of draft chapters as desirable. The research data suggest that students appreciate structure within the dissertation process as it helped them to manage their workload and remain motivated. This is further supported by the strong consensus amongst the survey respondents and interviewees that the record of progress submitted at the end of semester 1 (the 'Interim Framework Report') provided a useful milestone in what is a long-term learning activity, and helped to focus their efforts.

Given the lack of formal teaching within the dissertation module, the researchers were interested in how far students had formed their own peer support networks and the perceived usefulness of such contact. The vast majority of survey respondents had interacted with other students about the dissertation, with the largest proportion regarding this as useful to some extent. Certain interviewees also mentioned this:

> I talked to some of the other students who were doing health topics. We'd read through each other's work to see if it made sense. (Student Interviewee 10)

However, what emerged quite powerfully in the interviews was that peer support was necessarily limited in its helpfulness because of the individual nature of dissertation study. Several interviewees stated that discussion with other students had been relatively superficial; peers cannot provide detailed help since they are not knowledgeable about the topic:

> You can't ask your friends about the dissertation because what do they know about the subject? They'll think it's brilliant. (Student Interviewee 4)

Nonetheless, many found it useful to have had at least some contact with others:

> It is an isolating experience, so you do need people other than your supervisor to talk to. (Student Interviewee 4)

Interestingly, we found that a number of interviewees had consciously *limited* their contact with other students about the dissertation because to do otherwise would have been counterproductive:

> It is interesting to find out what problems the other students have had and where they were at in the process, but talking to other students can have a bad effect—you panic because they're ahead of you. It's better to believe your supervisor, not what others are doing. (Student Interviewee 4)

Discussion and concluding remarks

From the results of the study, it appeared that the learners on this module perceived the dissertation largely as worthwhile, in terms of:

- the subject knowledge acquired and skills developed (particularly in relation to working independently);
- its 'authenticity' as a vehicle for student learning and as a method of assessment; other types of assignment were lacking in comparison;
- its high *intrinsic* value, which extended beyond the degree course. A tangible, sizeable and self-contained end-product of an extended learning process, the dissertation constitutes an achievement in its own right;
- the strong sense of ownership (and thus motivation) that it brought about. The process of its production, though not easy, was generally found gratifying.

However, the research highlighted a number of challenges for students. With regard to problems encountered by learners in collecting primary research data, and accessing relevant secondary material, practical difficulties of this nature are perhaps inherent to social science research at *any* level. However, these problems are not necessarily simply technical, the uncertainty described by students may be indicative of a degree of liminalty (Meyer & Land, 2003) as they struggle to relate data and concepts to their research problem. The struggle which students experience in generating a research topic or question—another problematic area of dissertation study highlighted in our research—helps enhance their understanding of the nature of social science research inquiry, but may be experienced as a 'chaotic' moment in the dialectical process of coming to terms with new ideas (Silén, 2003). Certainly this is the period where the support of supervisors appears to have been most important in helping students move on. However, a problem exists if subsequent phases of dissertation study are delayed as a result, since time is at a premium in this module in spite of its running over both semesters of the academic year. We found that students often find it challenging to produce a 'researchable' research question. This is probably largely attributable to their lack of experience of this task, there being limited opportunity elsewhere on the course for students to construct their own assignment questions.

One way of addressing this problem may be allowing learners to practise the research process in the form of a project earlier in the degree course—probably at Level 2—and this could increase their understanding and self-confidence and so ease

matters in the final year (Hemmings, 2001; Hughes, 2002). It is also possible that an incomplete understanding of the nature of dissertation causes students to struggle at this stage (e.g. seeing it as a general 'topic exploration'). The provision of a clearer account of what the dissertation is, earlier on in the process, might make the students more capable of handling this task, as could the availability of sample research questions and completed dissertations. However, while additional support may help students deal with the emotional difficulties of defining a researchable topic, intellectual struggle is an inherent part of the experience of autonomy. Even well-supported autonomy will always present students with real challenges.

The difficulties experienced by many undergraduate dissertation students in managing their time effectively strongly suggest that relatively unstructured study constitutes a major challenge for learners at this level. This is further supported by the overwhelmingly positive view within the research sample of both the assistance given by the supervisor (who appeared to have played a critical role for many students at certain key moments in the dissertation process) and the provision of formal supervisory arrangements (which were seen to have helped provide structure).

An issue raised by the research was that of time. Time is of course multidimensional. Adam (1995) analyses the co-existence and intermingling of different dimensions of time as co-present: time as linear divisible clock time, temporality as our being in time, timing as in 'when' time, and tempo, the intensity of time. It seems unlikely that the students in our study were simply reporting on simple clock time when reflecting on the difficulties of time in relation to their dissertation. Rather that, as the quotations from the students suggest, time represents the importance of the dissertation for them and some of the struggles they face in completing it.

A logical technical response to this 'problematic' situation would be to impose more structure on the learning process—for example, through setting a larger number of formal interim objectives to be achieved—and/or to give the supervisor more of a directorial role. Yet it was apparent from the student and staff interviews that much of the perceived value of the dissertation originates from its giving students a wholly different learning experience, through which they learn how to be autonomous and to take responsibility for achieving self-designated objectives—these also both being highly valuable skills for employment. Moreover, as we have suggested, the problems they face are not simply technical, rather they are inherent in the challenge of dissertation work itself.

The key issue for practice is developing a balance between freedom and structure, enabling student autonomy while also providing contact, support and training (Hughes, 2002). Yet we would argue that it would be equally counterproductive to over-determine the teaching and learning strategies employed by supervisors, since the advocacy of a limited range of 'correct' approaches to be adopted would move away from a conception of independent study as student-centred and concerned with the development of intellectual independence, and might also curb originality.

It is important to recognize, however, that pressures towards more formality in learning, teaching and assessment strategies may come from outside the immediate context. There are broader factors impacting on tutor practice in this area. For

example, currently, in UK higher education, there is an emphasis on greater transparency in relation to teaching, learning and assessment processes. In many universities, including our case study site, internal and external course validation procedures require the production of detailed accounts of module content, the learning, teaching and assessment strategy employed, anticipated learning outcomes, assessment criteria and so on. Within this 'quality culture' environment, tutors may feel under pressure to prescribe more closely the learning experience that students undergo. There may be a conflict between the mantra of encouraging independent learning in higher education and the demand that all learners conform to predefined measures and assessment formats. Hussey and Smith (2003), for example, have argued that prescribing learning outcomes limits creativity and autonomy on the part of both students and staff (Clegg & Ashworth, 2003).

The under-resourcing of teaching in higher education institutions in the UK in recent decades has also forced many universities to adopt what Ramsden (1992) called 'mass production standards'. Universities, Ramsden argued, 'handle each individual student the same way, even though we know for certain that they operate in different ways' (p. 101). The undergraduate dissertation, in this respect, with its need to provide adequate preparation and supervision support, is clearly a costly form of teaching and assessment to provide within higher education. These are complex issues which reflect the changing nature of higher education in the UK and elsewhere, and which go beyond the scope of this paper, but are important in judging the scope for promoting supported independent learning.

Our study suggested that there is a strong case for retaining the learner-centeredness that the dissertation (or equivalent) brings to undergraduate courses. We would argue that the experiential nature of the learning and the face-to-face academic support offered by tutors that occurs within learner-directed research-based study of this kind needs to be recognized; it is a form of learning and assessment that can gainfully put to the test a student's grasp of the intellectual content of their chosen discipline. We would suggest that the challenge of such unstructured learning is better dealt with by preparing students for independent learning at an earlier stage in their undergraduate careers, in first-level and second-level courses, rather than by making that learning more tutor-led.

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Notes on contributors

Malcolm Todd is Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Science and Law and also holds a Teaching Fellowship seconded part-time to the Learning and Teaching Institute at Sheffield Hallam University. Recently published work

in the area of teaching and learning includes internationalizing of the curriculum in higher education and autonomy and work experience for social science students.

Phil Bannister is a researcher in the Learning and Teaching Institute at Sheffield Hallam University.

Sue Clegg is Professor of Educational Research and Head of Research in the Learning and Teaching Institute. She supports educational research projects across the institution. Recently published work includes an analysis of the mediations of LTA strategies into practice, racializing discourses in higher education, and learning outcomes and disciplinary understandings.

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Appendix A

Your experience of the Applied Social Studies Programme Dissertation

Personal details

Name ..... **Course** .....

Gender female ☐ male ☐ **Age** 18-24 ☐ 25-30 ☐ 31-40 ☐ 41-50 ☐ 51-60 ☐ 61+ ☐

Route into university: A-levels/Highers ☐ Access Course ☐ Other route: .....

Title of your dissertation: .....

.....

The Applied Social Studies Programme 3rd year dissertation

1. The final year dissertation is a unique form of assessment within undergraduate courses, and differs in a number of ways from the standard course essay. Please state what you think are the main things which tutors are looking for when marking the dissertation.

- .....
- .....
- .....

Preparation for the dissertation during the 2nd year

2. At the end of the 2nd year, how clearly did you understand what the process of writing the final year dissertation was going to involve? Please indicate your view on the scale below.

I had a very clear understanding of what was going to be involved	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	*I did not understand at all what was going to be involved*

3. Before the end of the 2nd year, you were required to complete and hand in a form indicating the topic that you intended to research in your dissertation next year. At this stage, how much thought did you give to the process of choosing a topic? Please use the scale provided to indicate your view.

I gave a lot of thought to my initial choice of topic	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	*I gave very little thought to my initial choice of topic*

4. Did you undertake any work on the dissertation during the summer vacation, before the start of the final year?

Yes ☐ **No** ☐

If you answered **yes**, please briefly describe the work you undertook and how useful you found it to do this. If you answered **no**, please say why you did not undertake any work, and state whether or not you feel that this has disadvantaged you in any way.

The dissertation during the 3rd year

5. Is the topic of your dissertation the original one that you chose at the end of the 2nd year, or have you changed it since then?

It is the same topic ☐ **It is a different topic** ☐

6. Please estimate the amount of time that you spent per week working on the dissertation:

- during Semester 1: _____ **hours per week (approximately)**
- during Semester 2: _____ **hours per week (approximately)**

7. Do you feel that you put more or less effort into the dissertation than your other final year units?

A lot more effort	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	*A lot less effort*

8. In your view, how far has the process of researching and writing the dissertation affected your studying of other units during the final year - either positively (e.g. the quality of your writing has improved; you are better at finding resources) or negatively (e.g. you have less time available for studying those other units)?

*Writing the dissertation has had a very **positive** effect on my other studies*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	*Writing the dissertation has had a very **negative** effect on my other studies*

Please briefly explain your answer:

Conducting the research

9. Please describe any difficulties/problems that you have encountered in carrying out your research.

10. As part of your dissertation research, are you undertaking any empirical fieldwork (e.g. distributing and analysing questionnaires; conducting interviews; engaging in participant observation, etc.)?

Yes ☐ **No** ☐

11. Have you taken a research methods unit (or units) in the School?

Yes ☐ **No** ☐

If you answered **yes**, please indicate how useful you have found the unit(s) when writing the dissertation:

Very useful	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	*Not at all useful*

Your dissertation supervisor

12. When you were choosing your dissertation topic, did you have a definite idea of who you wanted to be your dissertation supervisor?

Yes ☐ **No** ☐

13. Please indicate how far you agree or disagree with the following statements about the role of the dissertation tutor:

The role of the dissertation tutor is:	**Strongly agree**				**Strongly disagree**
to provide motivation and encouragement	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
to be an academic expert in the area of the dissertation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
to give academic guidance on managing the dissertation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
to help write the dissertation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

14. At what point during semester 1 of the 3rd year did you have your first meeting with your dissertation supervisor?

Week _____

15. Has your supervisor established formal arrangements with you for your dissertation supervision? Please indicate which (if any) of the following apply to you:

at the end of face-to-face meetings with your supervisor, you set a time for the next meeting	☐
after meetings with your supervisor, a written record is produced detailing what was discussed and actions which you have agreed to undertake	☐
you have a "contract" indicating the support that the supervisor will provide and what you will produce in return	☐

you and your supervisor have produced a timetable for the whole year, showing when you will submit draft chapters	☐
other (please describe):	☐

If you answered **yes** to any of the above, please state how far you found this to be useful.
If you answered **no**, do you think that having some kind of formal arrangement for supervision would be helpful? Please explain your answer.

16. In total, how many face-to-face meetings have you had with your dissertation supervisor?

0-3 ☐	4-6 ☐	7-10 ☐	more than 10 ☐

17. How many times have you contacted your supervisor:

- by **email**? _____ times
- by **post**? _____ times

18. Please state the three most helpful things that your dissertation supervisor has provided you. Examples might be ideas about research methodology; practical help in setting up interviews; lists of secondary reading; feedback on draft work; formal timetable of meetings, etc.

i) .....

ii) .....

iii) .....

19. How accessible do you feel that your dissertation supervisor has been?

Very accessible	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	*Not at all accessible*

20. Have you had any contact with any tutor(s) in the School other than your supervisor about your dissertation?

Yes ☐ **No** ☐

If you answered **yes**, please describe the support/guidance that you received from this tutor(s).

21. Overall, how would you rate the quality of the support that your supervisor has provided you? Please indicate this on a scale of 1-10, 10 being "excellent" and 1 being "extremely poor".

Rating of support from supervisor: _____

22. In what ways do you think that the support provided by your dissertation supervisor could have been improved?

23. How useful have you found it to talk to other students about your dissertation?

Talking to other students has been very useful	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	*Talking to other students has not been useful at all*

I have not talked to any other students about my dissertation ☐

Official procedures for the Applied Social Studies dissertation

24. You have had to complete a number of forms during the dissertation - the Diss1 form at the end of the 2nd year (indicating your chosen topic); the Diss2 form near the start of the 3rd year (outlining the research you plan to undertake); and the Interim Report shortly before Xmas in the 3rd year (describing your progress to date).

Please indicate how far the process of completing each of these forms has helped you to clarify the focus and scope of your research, and to plan work that you will undertake subsequently.

	The process of completing this form	**The process of completing this form was not useful at**

	was very useful				all
Diss1	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Diss2	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Interim Framework Report	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

25. The tutors who supervise the Applied Social Studies dissertation are currently looking at ways in which the student experience of writing the dissertation could be improved. Please indicate how useful you think you would have found each of the following when researching and writing your dissertation:

	Very useful				Not useful at all
The dissertation regulations being available via a website	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Guidance on aspects of the dissertation (e.g. doing a literature review; questionnaire design) being available via a website	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A facility that enables you to discuss your experience of writing the dissertation with other students online	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Having a "virtual meeting" with your supervisor (i.e. some supervision being delivered online, via the Internet rather than face-to-face)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

26. If you have any other comments on the final year dissertation, please write them on the other side of this sheet.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire

Appendix B

Applied Social Studies Dissertation research

Questions for students

Introduction

- What *is* the undergraduate dissertation, in your view?
  How does it differ from a standard undergraduate essay, both in terms of the work involved and the form of end product?

Your experience before the start of Y3

- What (if any) activity did you undertake for the dissertation before the start of the third year?
  - before the end of semester 2, year 2
  - over the summer, between the 2nd and 3rd years of your course
- How did you go about choosing a topic for your dissertation? What were the reasons for your choice? (e.g. interest sparked off by something you had studied in another unit; area of personal interest/commitment outside of the course; etc.)
- When you were choosing your topic, did you have any idea of the areas of expertise of the tutors in the department?
  If you *were* aware of the areas of expertise of the tutors, did this influence your choice of topic?
  If you *were not* aware of the areas of expertise of the tutors, would you have found this information useful?
- Did you have a firm idea of who you wanted to be your dissertation supervisor? If so, did you get the dissertation supervisor that you wanted? If no, how did you feel about this?
- How did you find the process of completing the Diss1 form? Would you have appreciated more guidance on how to complete it?
  In retrospect, how useful do you think that it was for you to have to complete the Diss1 form at the end of the 2nd year?
- Before the start of the 3rd year, how well did you understand what the final year dissertation was and what it would involve? Were you given any preliminary advice/guidance on the dissertation at the end of the 2nd year? If so, how helpful was this? What kind of advice/guidance would have been useful to you at this stage?

The dissertation at the start of the 3rd year

- How prepared did you feel to undertake the dissertation at the start of the 3rd year?
  What were your feelings about having to do the work? (e.g. nervous; keen to get started, etc.)
- Did you do anything over the summer before the 3rd year?
  If yes, what did you do? How useful was it to do this?
  If you did not do anything, why not? Do you think that this disadvantaged you in any way?
- Did you stick to the dissertation topic that you chose at the end of the 2nd year, or did you change it? If the latter, what were your reasons for doing this? Do you think that this disadvantaged you/set you back in any way? (e.g. less time to prepare).
- Does your dissertation involve primary data collection (e.g. interviews, questionnaires etc.) or is it purely library research-based? What were your reasons for choosing this type of project?

The dissertation supervisor

- When did you have your first meeting with your dissertation supervisor?
- What happened during this meeting?
- How did your first meeting(s) with the supervisor change the focus of your research?
- What do you see the responsibility of the supervisor as being? What do you expect them to provide you with?
- Has the tutor told what they see *your* responsibility as being within the student-supervisor relationship? (e.g. producing drafts of work to deadlines that they set)
- How often have you seen your supervisor? How easy has it been to arrange meetings with them?
- What do you think about the quality of the support that your supervisor has provided? How valuable have you found it?
- Have you had any contact with other members of academic staff about the dissertation? If yes, for what?
- Have you talked to any other students doing the Applied Social Studies dissertation about your and their work? If so, did you find this useful?

Conducting the research

- How prepared did you feel to carry out the research for your dissertation? Before you got underway with the work, did you have a firm idea of the research methods (and techniques of analysis) that you would be using?
  How helpful was your supervisor on this matter?
- At what point in the semester did you start your research?
- Please describe any difficulties/problems that you encountered in carrying out your research.
- Have you taken/are you taking a research methods unit within the School? If yes, how useful has it been to you within the dissertation unit?
- What additional support would you have found useful for this aspect of the dissertation?

Writing the dissertation

- At what point in semester 1 did you actually start writing your dissertation?
- Have you had any feedback from your supervisor on draft chapters/sections of your dissertation? If yes, what did you think about this feedback? Was it helpful?

The Interim Framework Report

- How clearly did you understand what you were required to include in the Interim Framework Report at the end of semester 1?
- How easy/difficult did you find it to complete this form? Did you find the guidance that was provided useful?
- Did you find it useful to write up (in the Interim Framework Report) what you had done on the dissertation during semester 1?