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Undergraduate Research Projects and Dissertations: issues of topic selection, access and data collection amongst tourism management students

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Abstract

The honours project or dissertation is a significant form of assessment in the undergraduate curriculum. This paper reviews the pedagogical literature on the undergraduate research project and, drawing on qualitative research with undergraduate tourism management students, the student perspective of undertaking a research project is explored. Motivations for topic choice include personal interest, career aspirations, and perceived ease of access to primary data or the literature. The paper discusses barriers in the research process commonly experienced by students, for example, data collection and access problems. The research highlights implications for the design, implementation and supervision of projects within degree programmes.
Keywords: undergraduate, project, dissertation, student, research, access

Introduction

The undergraduate project is often the first major piece of independent research that a student will undertake. This paper explores undergraduate students' experiences of research, focusing on issues of topic selection, access, and students' responses to data collection problems. It utilises data collected through interviews and surveys with final year BA (Hons) Tourism Management students at The University of Greenwich, UK. The paper originated from the authors' experiences of writing and

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Rachel I'Anson graduated in 2002 with a First Class BA (Hons) Tourism Management with Spanish degree from The University of Greenwich. Her degree programme included working for the London Tourist Board and study in Barcelona. Following graduation, Rachel travelled extensively in South America, South-East Asia and Australasia. She is now a Project Coordinator for Springboard UK, which promotes careers in hospitality, leisure, tourism and travel.

Currently Senior Lecturer in Tourism Management at Victoria University of Wellington, at the time of this research project Dr Karen Smith was programme leader of the BA (Hons) Tourism Management degree at The University of Greenwich. Her responsibilities included teaching research methods and supervision at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Karen's research interests include human resource management in the cultural sector, particularly the management of volunteers, special interest and heritage tourism, and qualitative methodologies.

supervising an undergraduate research project (I'Anson, 2002), and Rachel's own story aptly demonstrates the challenges facing the novice student researcher.

Rachel's story

"Transferring universities for the final year of my BA (Hons) Tourism Management with Spanish degree I was enthusiastic and motivated about my research project and discussed possible topics with my supervisor, Karen. I worked through a number of different ideas, but problems always arose when I tried to plan the primary data collection. The September 11th terrorist attacks, and the resulting impact on the tourism industry, further complicated the situation. By the autumn, my working title was 'cultural awareness and experiences: a comparison of specialist and mass market tourists travelling to Spain'. Having got nowhere through my established contacts, I tried cold calling travel companies, with some degree of success. 'Specialist Travel', a niche tour operator, was interested in the project and willing to help. They also offered to arrange contact with their sister company, the mainstream operator, 'Popular Holidays'. Emails were exchanged with the Product Executive, Mel, and followed up with a face-to-face meeting at a trade show. A relationship was developing and Mel agreed to allow me to administer a questionnaire to their customers and to a similar sample within 'Popular Holidays'. All seemed to be going well. I was working on the literature review, collecting secondary data, and designing the questionnaire. A draft of the survey was sent to Mel who would be contacting her colleague at 'Popular Holidays' and liasing with the legal and marketing departments about sending out the questionnaire and finding a suitable sample. We were in weekly contact by email and telephone. Then everything went quiet and emails from Mel stopped arriving.

It was now mid-December and I was starting to worry about my lack of progress. A telephone call to Mel revealed that the draft questionnaire had not been reviewed, the 'Popular Holidays' colleague had not been contacted, and no checks had been made with the other departments. Amendments were suggested to the survey, which I made and emailed straight back.

After Christmas, during a face-to-face meeting with Mel, things really fell apart. 'Specialist Travel' was now not able to co-operate with the survey distribution. Redundancies at 'Popular Holidays' meant that this avenue was also closed. I desperately considered other options for the research, both with and without 'Specialist Travel', but they radically altered the whole nature of the project. I think my frustration and disappointment was heightened because I had naïvely thought that a relationship had developed with this key gatekeeper. Of course, situations change and for the organisation my research was low on their list of priorities. Talking to my supervisor and other students I found I was not alone in my experiences, although most students hit access and data collection barriers long before I did. These challenges of conducting undergraduate research had been discussed in our research methods course and by my supervisor, but once I started investigating further, there seemed to be a gap in the literature concerning students' experiences of conducting research. Serendipitously, I had my new research topic."

Rachel's story illustrates some of the challenges facing the novice undergraduate researcher. This paper will begin by reviewing the role of the project or dissertation in the undergraduate curriculum and evaluating the literature on undertaking and supervising student research. The paper presents qualitative data on students' experiences of research, and concludes by highlighting the implications for the design, implementation and supervision of projects within undergraduate degree programmes.

The role of the undergraduate project or dissertation

Labelled the dissertation, honours project or management report, this assessment constitutes a piece of academic research (primary and/or secondary), varying in length from 5,000-12,000 words. The terms 'dissertation' and 'project' are used interchangeably within many institutions; however, this paper adopts the classification offered by Clewes (1996), with 'project' referring to first degree research, 'dissertation' to masters degrees, and 'thesis' being reserved for higher research-only degrees. The undergraduate project is accepted by many academics, as well as students and potential employers, as a, or even *the*, defining element of an undergraduate degree. Not only is it the distinguisher between

an honours and an ordinary degree, it is frequently used as the discriminator for students on the borderline between degree classifications (Webster et al., 2000).

Hussey and Hussey (1997) identify four objectives of the undergraduate research project:

- analytical problem solving skills;
- active learning through identification of a problem to be explored and completed;
- skills development for independent research;
- application of academic knowledge.

The aims of the undergraduate project thus encompass both intellectual and skills development. Distinguishing projects from higher level degrees, Clewes (1996:27) notes that first degree research requires 'independent enquiry and exercise of judgement … although analytical rigour is not always demanded'. The undergraduate project holds special value for both the teacher and the student (Webster et al., 2000). For many students, it provides the first opportunity to plan and carry out academic research, and it is often the most substantial and independent assessment that they will undertake during their degree.

Projects are a feature of the tourism curricula; in her evaluation of undergraduate tourism programmes at 30 UK institutions, Stuart-Hoyle (2003) identified that 22 included a dissertation or individual project as a core course in the final year of study. Although not detailed in her paper, it is probable that the other eight programmes included an independent research project as an optional element. Taught research methods courses are often incorporated into the curriculum to prepare students for their final year project, however, just less than half the programmes surveyed by Stuart-Hoyle included research methods as a core course; of these, 13 were taught during year two, with one in year three.

Researching the undergraduate project

As a significant component of the curriculum, student research as an assessment tool has been studied and evaluated by reflective Higher Education (HE) practitioners. However, whilst there are a plethora of texts on both research methods and guides to the design, development and writing of the research project (for example, Fitzpatrick et al., 1999; Madsen, 1992; Mauch and Birch, 1998; Phillips and Pugh, 2000), the majority of these are primarily aimed at higher degree students. Paltridge's (2002) analysis of a sample of these 'how to' texts found that while many important aspects of the research process were discussed, much less attention was given to the actual writing and structure of the dissertation. This focus on postgraduate dissertations and theses is also evident in educational research into the role and process of student research, for example Kangis (2001) discusses the purpose and role of MBA dissertations, and Abel (2002) and Paltridge (1997) both explore the challenges faced by postgraduate international and English as a Second Language (ESL) students. An issue of *New Directions for Higher Education* focused on the American doctoral degree, and addressed 'the condition of the dissertation and the personal and institutional factors that affect its completion' (Goodchild et al., 1997:2). The volume includes analysis of the roles of key players in the dissertation process: society, the university, faculty, and the student (Katz, 1997); student characteristics and reactions to the dissertation process (e.g. Green, 1997; Kluever, 1997); and institutional support structures to help students complete their dissertations (e.g. Nerad and Miller, 1997). Student accounts of the dissertation research and writing process, and the 'lessons learned' are also generally written from the postgraduate perspective (e.g. Riebschleger, 2001).

In the UK, students commonly undertake an independent research project at the undergraduate honours degree level and reflective HE practitioners have explored the project from the university or academics' perspective, focusing on the supervision process and the development and application of assessment criteria. Practitioner case studies evaluating aspects of the project within the undergraduate curricula include a number from the Nottingham Business School at The Nottingham Trent University. Clewes' (1996) research with multiple stakeholder groups (heads of department, undergraduate course leaders, project supervisors, employers, and final year Business Studies students, both domestic and international) indicated overwhelming support for the educational value

of the project as an assessment method. Concerns identified by respondents included differing expectations of what is required, the variable quality of supervision and marking, and workload problems for both staff and students, exacerbated by students' poor time management skills. Qualitative research with markers (Hand and Clewes, 2000) revealed three common criteria for assessing undergraduate projects: content (namely the relation of theory to practice), research process (understanding of methodological issues and evidence of data collection), and presentation (including referencing and keeping a narrative thread). Sanderson et al. (1998:34) reflected on their use of action learning sets, 'groups of peers who are committed to formulating and solving individual problems within a mutual supportive framework', as a way of supervising and supporting students' project work.

Evaluation of the marking of undergraduate business projects at the University of Gloucestershire (Saunders and Davis, 1998) highlighted a number of issues related to marking consistency and the interpretation and application of assessment criteria. Concern with reliability and consistency of standards is particularly significant in an HE climate of increased pressures on staff due to high student numbers and tight marking deadlines. These concerns are further intensified when combined with a large assessment team and when the assessed work forms a large proportion of the student's overall degree classification, both characteristics of the undergraduate project. Webster et al.'s study (2000) with staff in the School of Social Science and Law at Oxford Brookes University, similarly examined the creation, communication and application of assessment criteria for the undergraduate project, raising important issues concerning the extent, and desirability, of criteria standardisation. On balance, the authors supported the need for equity, consistency and transparency that agreed assessment criteria can supply, whilst recognising the need to be flexible and reward innovation in approach and execution; factors that are surely to be encouraged given the individuality and independence of each student's research project. The LTSN for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism website (http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk) also includes a number of case studies illustrating innovation and good practice in the teaching and management of research methods and dissertations at both undergraduate and postgraduate level; see Box 1 for details of these case studies and the contributing authors and institutions.

Key word: Dissertation

No.	Title
4	Managing Undergraduate Dissertations (Burgess - Oxford Brookes University)
12	Postgraduate Dissertation Preparation (Nield - Sheffield Hallam University)
13	Research Skills For HND/Degree Transition Students (Taylor - City College Norwich)
36	Tourism and Hospitality Research Methods Workbook (Brunt - University of Plymouth)
37	Group Work in Tourism and Hospitality Research Methods Teaching (Brunt – University of Plymouth)
38	Using SPSS for Undergraduates (Brunt – University of Plymouth)
39	Qualitative Data Analysis Without Any Software (Brunt – University of Plymouth)
44	Managing the Postgraduate Dissertation Process (Dutton, Ritchie & Jarvis - University of Brighton)

Box 1: LTSN for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Case Studies

In the humanities and social sciences, the undergraduate dissertation is an independently conceived and executed research project; this contrasts with the sciences where students work independently on projects that are generally derived from staff members' research interests (Stefani et al., 1997); undergraduates are often collaborating with staff and graduate students as part of wider research projects or themes. Whilst this presents different challenges for both students and academics (see for example, Zydney et al., 2002), there are commonalities in terms of the significance of the project to undergraduate curricula, and issues of supervision and assessment. Questionnaires to academic staff and final year students who had recently completed their projects in the School of Biology and Biochemistry, and the School of Biomedical Sciences at Queen's University of Belfast (Stefani et al., 1997), revealed both commonalities and divergences in the perceived purposes of the honours project,

and aspects of the supervisory relationship. Tariq et al. (1998) detail the subsequent development and introduction of a criterion-reference approach to project assessment, and Heylings and Tariq (2001) led further curriculum developments in the University's Departments of Anatomy and Physiology which emphasised the collaborative input of both staff and students. A three year pilot study resulted in a voluntary scheme allowing students to submit three research progress reports, thus gaining formal feedback from lecturers and encouraging student reflection on their learning styles and research methodology.

Although the Queen's University of Belfast studies and Clewes (1996) are notable in exploring the perspectives of a range of stakeholders, including students, the overall emphasis of the research on undergraduate projects is from the teacher's or supervisor's perspective. Where students have been involved, it has been on curriculum projects initiated by staff, with the emphasis on evaluating current practice and developing assessment strategies and curricula. This paper offers an alternative perspective by drawing on a student's research of her peers' experiences and explores the practical challenges facing undergraduate students when researching and completing their projects.

Undertaking research as an undergraduate student

In order to understand these challenges, it is necessary to revisit some of the basic processes and tenets of research that the experienced researcher may take for granted, but which the novice student researcher may be exploring for the first time. This includes the standard convention of representing the research process as a series of steps or stages that fit together in a linear arrangement. As an example, Ryan (1995:16) separates the process into eight steps:

1. Identification of the problem
2. Assessment of value of the research process
3. Development of the research proposal
4. Development of the research design
5. Determination of data collection methods and procedures
6. Determination of analytical procedures
7. Evaluation of results
8. Final report including results, evaluation and recommendations

Although presented as a sequential system, Ryan, and others such as Hussey and Hussey (1997), emphasise that in practice, this ordered sequence is unlikely to happen, and that repetition and overlapping of stages is more probable. As expressed by Clark et al. (1998:1):

> The research process and particularly the intellectual or 'thinking' part of it is inherently 'messy'. This is because however well planned a research process is, there will always be an element of creative uncertainty.

The recognition of movement, both advancing and retreating, within the research process model is important as it suggests that the researcher will be presented with situations where decisions have to be made regarding the direction of the research. This may involve re-directing the research from the original research plan. Triggers for this redirection may be positive, if for example unforeseen opportunities arise, but may also be negative, e.g. barriers to access. It is these issues that are the focus of this paper, rather than decisions over the appropriateness of individual methodologies.

The need for re-directional strategies presents the researcher, particularly a novice student, with challenging decisions concerning the development and completion of their research project. As the first major piece of independent research undertaken by students, the undergraduate project confers 'responsibility for taking a research project all the way from conception to completion' (Lindsay, 1997:14). Students often feel they are 'working in the dark', with common concerns over getting started, getting stuck on data collection and problems with the writing-up (Hampson, 1994a, cited in Clewes, 1996). Thus, even the first stage of the process, getting underway and particularly choosing a topic, presents the student researcher with a major challenge and one that has significant implications for the project as a whole.

Choice of research topic

Choosing a research topic is the first and one of the most important stages of the research process, as it will have a bearing on all the other stages of the research project. The independent nature of the research and the responsibilities and expectations this puts on students is a major pressure. 'All research projects emerge from an interest in a particular topic' (Lindsay, 1997:14), however, even with research methods teaching and support through a supervisor, it can be overwhelming for a student when the onus is on them to develop and execute research independently. Up until this point, the focus of their assessment has largely been predetermined and directed by teaching staff (Saunders et al., 2000). Easterby-Smith et al. (1991:18) point out that: 'It is very rare for students to have a clear focus from the outset of their research, and yet many find the lack of a clear focus is a major impediment to getting started.' Given these conditions, what are the determining factors or motivations for a student's choice of research topic?

Evaluating academic research conducted within organisations, Rynes et al. (1999) suggest that significant research is successfully produced when the researcher has intrinsic motivation for initiating it; for example, where there are psychological rewards such as the opportunity to demonstrate one's ability or there is a sense of challenge and achievement. Motivation can take the form of personal interest: a desire to learn more about a subject that enthuses the researcher into a more in-depth examination of a particular area. This interest may be generated by personal circumstances and interests, as well as previous courses and assessments. Clark et al. (1998:23) advise students that:

> A dissertation topic should sustain interest over the necessary period of time. People can come to hate the whole dissertation process and as a consequence lose motivation, but, if a topic is chosen that retains the interest of the writer, there is a good chance of successful completion.

Undergraduates are sometimes motivated to choose a research topic which links to future aspirations (Saunders et al., 2000). Cooper et al. (1996:26) suggest that 'research should have a beneficial influence, not only on the body of knowledge of tourism and hospitality, but also on the personal development and career paths of those undertaking research'.

Issues of access

Saunders et al. (2000) identify that many first time researchers want to proceed as soon as a topic has been selected, but advise that if insufficient attention is given to access issues, problems may occur and the research may become flawed. Within a research project, access may be required to documents, people and/or institutions (Blaxter et al., 1996); Saunders et al. (2000) refer to both physical and cognitive access. Access challenges for the student may include the status of the researcher, ethical implications, and gaining access to respondents or an organisation. The constraints and pressures of time and resources often compound access issues. Undergraduate research is commonly carried out over one or two semesters alongside other taught courses which must be fitted in with the external demands on a student's time, including the financial pressures of undertaking higher education. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many students underestimate the amount of time and effort that negotiating access can take. Students may also experience problems arising from their perceived status, particularly given the rise in student numbers and the corresponding increase in students undertaking research in the tourism sector. Access may be particularly challenging when the research subject is of a sensitive nature.

Problems of access usually start at the data collection stage. Clark et al. (1998) rationalise that any reasons for choosing a particular research method will, to some extent, depend on how easy the method is to implement, how easy it is gain access to the desired quality and quantity of respondents, and once identified, how easy it is to gain co-operation. Management studies often focus on research within organisations, and research challenges can include gaining initial access and dealing with confidential company data. Buchanan et al. (1988) advocate an opportunistic approach; access has

become harder with the wide use of research-based assessments in further and higher education and because of the competitive economic climate. They offer aspirant researchers the following advice:

- allow sufficient time to gain access;
- use friends and relatives where possible;
- use non-threatening language to explain the aims of research;
- deal with respondents in a positive manner;
- offer a copy of your findings.

Gatekeepers are often crucial players in gaining access and permission to carry out research, however students are often unclear about how to identify and interact with these key figures. Kitchin and Tate (2000:39) warn that 'if you cannot get individuals or institutions to cooperate with your study, then effectively there is no study, regardless of your intentions'. However, they do go on to suggest a number of possible response strategies if access is refused: approaching other, similar participants; trying another organisation; trying to find another route into the original organisation; or waiting and re-approaching the same gatekeeper at a later date. Once these avenues have been explored, if access is still blocked, the student may need to consider changing their research strategy completely.

Responding to access and data collection challenges

Kitchin and Tate (2000:291) offer sage advice to new researchers: '…sometimes, despite all the planning in the world, things do start to go wrong…There are few experienced researchers who have not suffered a major setback whilst undertaking a project.' So what is a student faced with such a problem supposed to do? Kitchin and Tate (2000:291) warn against becoming demoralised or disheartened:

> The important thing is to try and salvage what work you have done and to fully explain what went wrong and why. If you have time, change direction and complete the project using a different strategy.

Although preparatory research methods courses are common for project and dissertation students, many, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, find the transfer from learning *about* research to actually *doing* their own research difficult (Edwards, 2002). The linear research process model suggests that when faced with a problem or barrier, the researcher returns to the previous stage in the research process, revisiting ways of developing and designing the project. However, many students find difficulties in first recognising a problem, and then responding constructively.

Whilst this literature clearly contains pertinent advice and guidance for the novice researcher, it does not give an understanding of how the novice student researcher experiences and responds to these challenges. The remainder of this paper attempts to address this gap by reporting the findings of a study of undergraduate tourism students.

Context and method

At The University of Greenwich the project represents a significant part of the undergraduate curriculum, including the BA (Hons) Tourism Management programme, taught within the Business School. At the time of this research, Business School students were all required to complete a research-based course in their final year; either a 6,000 word management project (15 credits) submitted at the end of semester one (January), or a 10,000 word dissertation (30 credits) submitted in April. All students are now required to undertake a dissertation. Students were provided with the following rationale (taken from the 2001/02 Course Specification) for the 10,000 word research project course (termed the dissertation); the aims are similar to those of other institutions' undergraduate research project courses (see for example, Hand and Clewes, 2000):

- To help the students' ability to define and analyse a complex business problem.
- To help students integrate academic knowledge and practical applications.
- To give practice in the specification, collection, analysis and reporting of information.
- To give the opportunity to structure and write up large amounts of material.

- To give experience of planning a project over an extended time period and meeting a deadline.

The research population for this study consisted of all final year students on the BA (Hons) Tourism Management programme (fifty students, excluding the researcher). Data was collected during February and early March with students who had recently submitted their project but had not yet received their mark or assessment feedback, and dissertation students in the last months of their research. The findings reported here are an amalgamation of these two groups and the overarching term 'project' is used. Methodological-triangulation - the use of more than one data collection method - was used for collecting primary data from tourism students. This approach provides greater confidence in results through a more rigorous research process and cross validation of data (see for example, Denzin, 1989). Data was collected through an exploratory survey (n=49), in-depth interviews with nine students, and a follow-up questionnaire (n=42).

A brief exploratory survey was undertaken to establish the research topics chosen, methods of data collection utilised and students' experiences of gaining access. Email was used to initiate contact with respondents, however, despite studies which suggest that email surveys have high response rates, particularly in comparison to postal or mail self-completion surveys (see for example, Ilieva et al., 2002), there was a poor response to the initial email. This may be a reflection of the disadvantages of email surveys, not least that they are very easy to ignore and discard (Dommeyer and Moriarty, 2000), and the proliferation of email and web surveys (Couper et al., 2001) may mean that respondents are less inclined to reply. This precipitated a change in method and the survey was re-designed and administered face-to-face, with a response rate of forty-nine out of a possible fifty students. Throughout the research, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to all students; they were aware that the same group of staff who were assessing their own work would see the written up research findings.

Each respondent was asked to rate their perception of access during the research process on a Likert scale whereby a score of 1 meant that access was deemed 'very easy' and 5 meant that they found access 'very difficult'. Students also identified the most significant issue that influenced their data collection, and this was cross-tabulated with their ranking of access; Table 1 illustrates the number of respondents in each category. The key issues affecting research that were identified in the exploratory survey were:

- Location - issues arising because of where the research was conducted, including within organisations, public places, or particular geographical locations;
- Respondents - how willingly, or not, the respondents were to participate or impart information;
- Contacts - people or organisations known to the researcher who were used in order to gain access to certain information;
- Cultural Issues - where cultural differences or language affected data collection;
- Sensitive Research Topic - including dealing with sensitive commercial or personal information;
- No Significant Issue - where researchers experienced no particular issues aiding or hindering data collection.

		Perception of Access					
		1 Very easy	2 Easy	3 Neither easy nor difficult	4 Difficult	5 Very difficult	**Total responses**
Key issue influencing data	Location	1	1	1	3	2	**8**
	Respondents	3	2	4	3	0	**12**
	Contacts	2	1	0	0	0	**3**
	Cultural issues	0	0	1	2	1	**4**

Sensitive research topic	0	1	2	3	0	**6**
No significant issue	0	10	6	0	0	**16**
Total responses	**6**	**15**	**14**	**11**	**3**	**49**

Table 1: Perceptions of access and factors influencing data collection

The next stage of research focused on those who identified strong positive or negative issues in terms of their access. Qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the nine students who placed themselves at the polarities in terms of ease of access, finding access either very easy or very difficult. By purposefully selecting these respondents, the aim was to produce 'information-rich' data (Patton, 1990). The use of interviews can be advantageous when the interviewer and informant have similar backgrounds (Valentine, 1997); as students on the same degree course, and both undertaking research, these shared experiences helped to facilitate a rapport and produce rich and detailed conversations. Data gathered from these interviews contributed to a follow-up self-completion questionnaire, with open-ended questions, to all students on the programme, which prompted forty-two responses.

Research findings

Choice of research topic

Students in the study undertook research in a range of tourism areas, including impacts on destinations, tourist behaviour, marketing strategies, quality management, human resource development, and crisis management. Students' motivations for choosing a research topic, as reported through the interviews and follow-up survey, varied considerably and three main drivers were identified: personal interest in the subject area, a link to career aspirations, and perceived ease of access to primary or secondary data or the literature. Personal interest in the subject area was motivated by a desire to learn more about a subject. This was the most common motivation for choosing a research topic, identified by 31 out of 42 students surveyed, and echoed in the interviews, as illustrated by two students:

> "Personal interest, I spent a lot of time in the Eastern Mediterranean and I knew that I'd be going out there in the summer."

> "Throughout the degree we've done a lot of research on tourism, but not often about tourism in less developed countries. So that is why I wanted to choose Kenya, also because it's my country of origin."

Less significant, although linked with personal interest, was choosing a topic related to career aspirations, including planning to use the dissertation as evidence of understanding of a topic or issue; for example:

> "Doing a project on low cost airlines is a subject that interests me and I also would like to work in the airline industry so knowledge gained may help me later."

This concurs with Clewes' research (1996) which identified that skills development and the practical value of the project in terms of improving job prospects were important. Greenwich students also identified perceived ease of access to sources of data, primary and secondary, or the literature, as a factor in decision-making and topic choice. The following quotes, from different respondents, demonstrate students' choice of topic relating to ease of access to primary data through established contacts with individuals or organisations, either through past or current employment, or through previous courses and academic activities, including paid and voluntary placements:

> "Personal interest and easy access to data through work."

> "I was having trouble deciding what to do for my dissertation. So once I'd been there [on placement] I thought right, I've got the information, I've had the access, I'll do my dissertation on that."

> "I had this lady's name from [Tourist Attraction] who said we could contact her if we needed to."

Perceived ease of access to secondary data sources or the literature did not appear to be a major consideration amongst the majority of the students in the sample with regards to topic choice; only two respondents identified this as motivation for choosing a particular topic:

> "The main motivation I had was I needed a topic that I could find a lot of secondary data on. Basically with all the disasters recently, there is a lot written about this."

> "Followed on from year 2 course, knowledge of the subject and easy access to information."

Experiences of data collection

Students utilised a range of primary data collection methods; whilst it is no surprise that interviews and questionnaires were the most common techniques, content analysis, observations and focus groups were also employed to generate data. Secondary data analysis was uncommon. Positive experiences of data collection tended to be reported when research was relatively unproblematic, often due to access through prior contacts, co-operative and willing respondents, or a particularly relevant and interesting research topic, for example:

> "My experience in collecting data was good as everyone was helpful."

> "…everyone was so willing to talk to me. I think because they put so much time and effort into the job that they really want to talk about it."

> "I spoke to my supervisor at work who gave me the name and number of the finance department for the group. I did some interviews. They were really willing to help me and were talking about things like financial strategies which is like the things you read about in the textbooks, it was really interesting to see that it actually works like this in the work place."

Negative experiences included difficulties in data collection due to cultural differences, researching a sensitive or controversial research topic, or uncooperative respondents. Respondents identified difficulties arising from their status as a student and the perceptions of potential respondents. Some students felt that they had access problems because student research was not highly rated by either organisations or individuals, for example: "Some people refused to see me if they were in an official position"; other perception issues were also noted, such as:

> "…the local community seemed to underestimate themselves. They think that they don't know enough about anything, they think that they need to have gone to university to give you any of the simple answers."

Some students had tried to pre-empt negative reactions about student research in the way that they approached and presented themselves to potential respondents. However, this did not always produce the expected outcome; a student researching the impact of foot and mouth disease on a tourism destination hit by the outbreak noted that:

> "I thought I should look presentable for the interviews so I dressed up smartly, but some of them [the respondents] thought I was from the BBC or something official, you could tell they were being a bit hesitant or suspicious of me."

Responding to access and data collection challenges

The nature of the redirection strategies employed by students to overcome challenges of access and/or data collection was dependent on the research problem. However, whilst many students took action in response to problems, usually continuing their research with different respondents or a different sample group or case study organisation, some students simply accepted their situation, displaying weaknesses in the evaluative skills of research; for example:

> "I didn't know if all the information I got was correct because it was commercial and they probably didn't want to give any bad information away…you just have to assume that what they are telling you is right."

A number of students admitted, in confidence, that they knew their response, or lack of response, to the research problem was not necessarily the 'correct' or most appropriate one. Problems of poor access meant that more than one student undertook less research than they had planned, or undertook research that they felt was inappropriate. Another student, faced with more data than anticipated due to the success of their access and primary data collection, admitted that:

> "By the end of the interviews I really got the hang of doing them. I know you're not supposed to but I didn't really encourage the answers, I just said right thank you and went onto the next question. Otherwise they ended up waffling and they take so long to type up."

Conclusions and implications

Although a small-scale project of limited scope, this research offers the undergraduate student viewpoint as a counterpart to the dominance of the academic's perspective and the focus on postgraduate level research. This paper highlights the challenges presented by undergraduate research projects for both staff and students. Students found the initial stage of determining a research topic difficult. The rationale for choosing a particular topic varied from student to student; the main themes identified in this research were personal interest (where a student pursues an area which animates them), career aspirations (research in relation to potential career fields), ease of primary data collection (established contacts providing access to data or organisations), and to a much lesser extent, ease of access to secondary data and/or the literature (availability of published material on the subject or prior knowledge). This paper has focused on the research problems encountered at the project formation and data collection stages; the main difficulties encountered by students were concerned with access, collecting sensitive data or being faced with unwilling respondents. Further research into the factors influencing topic choice and investigation into the access and data collection challenges faced by students, and how they attempt to overcome them, would be beneficial to both future project students and to their teachers and supervisors. Student accounts of the research process offer an important but neglected perspective.

The findings from this research also have implications for research training. Many students find the choice of research topic not only intellectually challenging but also an isolating experience. Guidance on topic selection, through both preparatory research methods courses and early allocation of a supervisor, is therefore crucial. The importance of emphasising access and data collection challenges at this early topic selection stage will help highlight the important implications of this decision. It was clear from this research, and other studies mentioned, that students also require guidance on transferable study skills to improve their experience of undergraduate research. Project planning and particularly time management skills, are vital to the successful completion of the research project, especially given the multiple demands on their time that today's students face, not only from other courses but also from the fact that many are compelled to work part-time, often for a significant number of hours per week and in the vacations. There are also implications for staff development and the management of research project courses; despite the critical role that the student-supervisor relationship plays, few institutions offer formal training for staff in supervisory skills or project marking, and staff tend to learn by doing (e.g. Hand and Clewes, 2000).

The difficulties in undertaking and supervising undergraduate research also have to be put in the context of wider trends in higher education. Common challenges currently being faced in HE include those associated with widening access, coping with larger groups of students, the increasing occurrence of plagiarism and other forms of cheating, and the need to keep up-to-date with technological advances (Ottewill and MacFarlane, 2002). With increasing numbers of tourism programmes in the UK, and a corresponding increase in the numbers of tourism students (see Stuart-Hoyle, 2003 for discussion), there will be increased competition for research opportunities, especially in terms of access for organisation-based research on popular research topics, such as low cost airlines. Increasing student numbers impact on staff time and responsibilities; given the individual nature of the project, many universities are already hard pressed to accommodate the growing demands of project supervision and assessment.

Accounts of reflective practitioner projects have highlighted a number of possible responses to these challenges. Sanderson et al. (1998) found that using action learning sets offered project students the opportunity to learn on three levels: about the technical content of the project, the process of doing research, and learning about themselves. However, whilst the mutual support available in a learning set may reduce anxiety levels by enabling students to see others experience similar problems, learning sets are not necessarily less time-consuming for tutors than traditional one-to-one tutorials. Nevertheless, Sanderson et al. (1998:41) conclude that, as tutors, they found the 'experience of operating learning sets with undergraduates to be challenging, enlightening, demanding, occasionally frustrating, but ultimately rewarding'. Further research is required to determine the student's perspective of action learning sets as an approach to project supervision.

The other major pedagogical trend that has the potential to support undergraduate project research is information technology (IT) and computer mediated communication (CMC). The viability of using IT and CMC to support and enhance the student-supervisor relationship has already been explored, particularly at the postgraduate level. For example, Carberry et al.'s (2002) assessment of the application of new technologies to enhance the quality of Masters dissertation supervision with marketing students at the University of Portsmouth Business School found that, overall, students saw the use of online conferencing and web cams in supervision as better than email but they preferred the traditional face-to-face contact where possible. There is also the option of combining these strategies, for example, Edwards (2002) details the introduction of an online dimension to the action learning sets for business and management postgraduate dissertation students at Wolverhampton Business School.

Reflecting back on Rachel's story, the subsequent research confirmed that she was not alone in facing frustrating and disheartening setbacks and barriers in designing and undertaking her research. However, not all students displayed an ability to react positively to the demands of decision-making and re-direction in the research process. Whilst the independent project can be an exhilarating and rewarding part of the undergraduate programme, for both student and supervisor, it is also a daunting and potentially isolating experience. The project or dissertation is an accepted and well-regarded assessment tool, however, given the pressures on students, staff and universities from the external HE context, attention must be focused on how best to support and develop this crucial introduction to the research experience and major component of the final degree classification.

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