Dissertation study at the postgraduate level: A review of the literature

Lynn Vos
Discipline Lead for Marketing, Accounting and Finance

Contents

1. Introduction

Post graduate students on UK Master's programmes in business-related subjects increased by just over 300% in the period from 2000 to 2012 (HESA, 2000-2012). In recent years, up to 80% of these students have come from overseas, the major markets being China and India. Also occurring within this decade has been a move by most UK institutions to reduce the length of the Master's programme from 18 to 12 months, and this shift alone is probably one of the major reasons for the increase in student numbers. In addition, many UK Universities have set up partnerships, joint ventures or their own campuses in overseas locations to deliver both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Whatever the contractual arrangement, the UK partner is generally responsible for assuring the quality of the programme. This can mean sending academics abroad to teach and sit on exam boards, and calling upon UK academics to first or second mark some if not all of the work from students on overseas campuses. At present, however, the growing number of students is not generally followed by additional resources for teaching.

In the vast majority of UK home and overseas universities, Master's students in business still complete a traditional dissertation. The increases in student numbers, the rise in students who are non-native English speakers, the reduction in time to complete the degree, and the strain on resources have placed growing pressures on academics who are involved with preparing students for and supervising them through the dissertation. And yet, despite the rising pressures and concerns, research into dissertation challenges and potential solutions for those who supervise Master's level business students is scarce at best.

In spite of the limited research into business-related dissertations, the literature on dissertations in general is credible, robust, illuminating and interesting. It covers the management and processes associated with Undergraduate, Masters and PhD dissertations in a range of disciplines and across a broad range of themes, the main ones being:

- The student-supervisor relationship;
- Teaching and learning research methods;
- Helping students through various stages of the process, and ways to improve student motivation;
- The challenges of student diversity, cultural background and prior preparation for undertaking a dissertation; and
- Issues related to plagiarism and academic dishonesty.

Following, is a review of the literature on these themes drawn from journals and other publications related to issues in higher education in general, and where available, those related specifically to business disciplines. The report concludes with a summary of key themes, sub-themes and recommedations from the literature as well as some recommendations for future research.

1.1 The student-supervisor relationship

A number of studies have focussed on the student-supervisor relationship (Lamm, Clerehan & Pinder, 2007; Armitage, 2006; Dysthe, 2002; Woolhouse, 2002; Holbrook & Johnston, 1999; Cargill, 1998; Taylor & Dawson, 1998; Hetrick & Trafford, 1995). The key themes within this body of work are the differences in student-supervisor expectations; approaches to managing the relationship; different approaches to supervision in general; issues related to communication and understanding; and differences in student-supervisor perceptions of the overall experience.

McCormack (2004) conducted a longitudinal study of a small cohort of postgraduate research students and found that there was a considerable gap between students' understanding about research and what was expected of them against what supervisors believed students were able to do. In some cases this gap was "so wide and persistent that on-time completion" was affected (p. 319). Armitage (2006) conducted research into supervisors' roles and expectations of the dissertation supervision process with the aim of informing policy, practitioner-based knowledge and practice. The study focuses mainly on the relationships of students and supervisors and the management of the dissertation. His work highlights some interesting insights regarding transactional and relational aspects pertinent to these relationships and the need to manage expectations and build trust. He argues that students take different approaches to their dissertation and generally form one of three 'types': 1) The Hare; 2) The Tortoise; and 3) The Ostrich. He provides typical characteristics of each segment and how to manage the differences (See Appendix One for a description of each).

Armitage (2006) goes on to quote Sharp and Howard (1996, p.159), who emphasise the importance of planning when embarking on the supervision journey:

> *'Research supervision of postgraduate taught Masters Programmes should resist the temptation to proceed with its execution until an acceptable plan has been formulated', and that 'in large part, avoidable problems should be highlighted by the systematic planning process'.*

The need to develop a plan when undertaking the dissertation process is a common theme in the literature. Woolhouse (2002), Phillips and Pugh (2000) and Exley and O'Malley (1999) also emphasise the need for supervisors to have a very clear understanding of students' expectations of the supervisory process from the outset and to provide explicit guidelines as to

what the supervisor will and will not be able to provide. Students should also be encouraged to discuss and record their expectations and for these documents to be reviewed periodically during the study period.

Anderson, Day and McLaughlin (2006) considered how supervisors view their role and found a duality of interests, one that focuses on the wider academic community and the need to ensure that students adhere to accepted academic standards, and their concomitant desire to develop student's self-confidence, independence and agency through the dissertation process. They note that in order to "support students' capacity to act with initiative, supervisors needed to align students' activities appropriately with the established values and practices of the research community"(p.165) and that there is a balance to be struck between the potentially constraining effects of imposing standards and developing student agency and autonomy. Grant (1999, 2003) has written extensively on the power relationship between supervisor and student and the means to best manage this relationship in order for students to develop autonomy and skill. She notes that "supervision differs from other forms of teaching and learning in higher education in its peculiarly intense and negotiated character, as well as in its requirements for a blend of pedagogical and personal relationship skills (2003, p175).

Aaker, Hill and Black (1994) suggest that supervision can be viewed under a technical rationality model or a negotiated order model. Dissertation guideline documents tend to present the supervisor as one who will follow a *technical rationality model* focusing on issues of technique, procedure and following the rules of academic practice. Their research, however, showed that most supervisors actually follow more of a *negotiated order model,* tending to be open to adjusting the supervisory process to the needs of different students and to changing their approach over the period of supervision, as required. Vilkinas (2008) interviewed 25 academics to identify the roles they take on during supervision and found that they were similar to what her previous work into management roles had revealed. Most supervisors undertook the task-focussed roles that she labels deliverer and monitor - the *deliverer* role involves helping students to organise their work, work to a time schedule and manage competing interests while the *monitor* role involves providing feedback and analysing student performance during the process. Half of the participants also undertook an emotional and intellectual *developer* role with their students, but only two commented on their having taken the time to reflect on their own capabilities and their approaches to supervision, what Vilkinas (2008) called an *integrator* role.

A number of researchers have also pointed out that the challenges students face in dissertations are often made more difficult by the fact that supervisors have tacit knowledge of the features and approaches to dissertations that they do not communicate to students (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Burnett (1999) and Akylina (2007) discussed the benefits of using small groups or collaborative cohort supervision in helping "the students' enculturation into the particular discipline" (Alkylina, 2007, p. 115), their understanding of dissertation process and terminology, and in building support networks. Supervisors often forget how solitary students can feel during their dissertation study and, as noted below, international students, in particular, can face a strong sense of social isolation. Action sets and small group meetings can be beneficial in allowing students to share both problems and solutions and in building their confidence.

If the supervisory process is prone to problems of communication and understanding that result when not all the terms of reference are made explicit and from students not being familiar with the language and cultural assumptions inherent in what may be to them a new discipline, then it is also likely that student and supervisor will have different perceptions of the success and/or failures of the process. Dong (1998) found that students and supervisors often differ in terms of their perceptions of how much support was provided during the dissertation. In her study of science dissertation students, she found that their perceptions of the assistance provided by supervisors was less than what supervisors felt they had provided. This again points to a need to identify student expectations from the outset and to provide clear guidance on the role and input to be provided by the supervisor. In their review of the literature into what students expect from the supervisory relationship, Drennan and Clarke (2009) identified:

> *prompt feedback, providing balance between direction and independence, regular meetings, appropriate expertise of the supervisor, and ability to suggest alternative designs if problems arose (p.485).*

They noted that there is evidence that the quality of supervision does vary for students and one of the main issues is the lack of contact between supervisor and student. Lumadi (2008) also reported on differences in expectations between students and supervisors. Students expected their supervisors to provide more support with research techniques, to be more explicit about the criteria upon which their work would be judged, and to provide feedback on their work more promptly. They complained of not being able to contact supervisors and waiting long periods of time for feedback. Supervisors complained that students were poorly prepared for the dissertation, failed to take their comments and feedback into account when revising, and that poor language skills on the part of many students meant that the supervisor had to spend a great deal of time on editing and correcting the students' work. All authors (Dong, 1998; Lumadi, 2008; and Drennan & Clarke, 2009) support the need for supervisors to identify student expectations from the outset and to provide clear guidance on their role and the input they will provide.

Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary and Ryan (1999) reviewed a series of studies on problems in the student –supervisor relationship, noting Powles (1988) study on student dissatisfaction with the supervision they received at the early stages and Parry and Hayden's (1994) study on student concerns with their supervisors knowledge of procedural and practical aspects of the process. The authors also noted students' concerns about delays in receiving feedback and feelings of isolation. In addition they reviewed an earlier study by Moses (1984) that still has resonance with students and supervisors today – supervisors having too many students; the mismatch between student research interests and supervisor interests; personality mismatches; and student perceptions of inadequate support. Aspland et al. (1999) provide a useful set of guidance documents to help both

students and supervisors track and manage issues that come up during the process. Ryan (1984) also provides a useful checklist for supervisors and students.

Armstrong (2012) interviewed 10 dissertation supervisors in Marketing and found that respondents identified problems with students failing to get in touch with them, failing to turn up to scheduled meetings and not appearing to understand the supervisor's recommendations. In contrast, Fan (2013) who conducted focus groups with international dissertation students, recorded the following comments:

> *'My supervisor was good but she's so busy, always too late to make appointment'; 'It took me more than three weeks to make a meeting. I waited 45 minutes and the meeting ended in less than 10 minutes'; My supervisor never replied to my emails ' [and] 'We were told not to contact the supervisor directly. To make appointment via School reception, but often the reception did not know his availability. I have been trying for weeks to see him'.*
> *(Comments from focus group participants in Fan, 2013, p. 9).*

Fan (2013) also surveyed dissertation supervisors of international students in the UK and reported that some students tried every excuse to avoid face-to-face meetings with them. In addition, he provided the following comments from supervisors:

> *'International students do not engage in contact as often as other students'; 'They should be more active, make more frequent contact with [the] supervisor, asking for help!'; 'General lack of motivation, the feeling that they plagiarise and get away with it, getting others to do their work, copying dissertations done in their own country that are not on any anti-plagiarism site, trying to give their supervisor gifts'; [and] 'Within research methods they should cover how to think critically and implement within the dissertation, this is always lacking in international student work'. (Comments from survey participants – Fan, 2013 p. 8)*

Both Armstong (2012) and Fan (2013) found that the majority of supervisors were committed to improving the process but were concerned with the growing numbers of students they are required to supervise and the lack of time allocated to provide a really good experience for students.

The problems inherent in the student-supervisor relationship are unlikely to disappear as long as there remain considerable differences in the quantity and quality of supervision and differences in expectations and perceptions. Semeijn, Semeijn, & Gelderman (2009) note that despite the growing number of master's students in higher education, supervisors themselves are often not given training or support in how to establish effective student-supervisor relationships or on what their role requires. Thomas (1995) also commented on the lack of supervisory training and supervisor guidelines available in Universities. Drennan and Clarke (2009) argued that the development of supervisory skills should also be a priority at Universities as their research demonstrated a strong relationship between good research supervision and the ability of students to develop solid research skills such as the "ability to work independently and critically, the ability to develop arguments, and awareness and use of advanced methodological designs that pertained to the student's discipline of study"(p.485). There research on 220 master's level nursing students demonstrated that factors such as the quality of supervision and good infrastructural support were better predictors of student outcomes in relation to research skill development than were characteristics such as "age, years qualified, gender and undergraduate educational qualifications" (p.496).

The Higher Education Academy has developed and recently updated a survey tool, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (HEA, 2013) to investigate a range of factors related to research degrees and provision in the UK, including the quality of supervision experienced by students, their views on the quality of supporting infrastructure and the degree to which their programme enhanced their research skills. The 2007 report on results from the PRES from 58 institutions across the UK found that respondents considered "supervision to be the most important aspect in successfully completing their research degree" (HEA, p.2) and that most respondents were generally satisfied with the overall programme (81%). It is interesting to note, however, that other studies reported on above that have used qualititive research (interviews, focus groups) tend to show lower levels of satisfaction with supervision.

1.2 Teaching and Learning Research Methods

Most Universities in the UK provide some form of research training for students who will be undertaking a post-graduate dissertation. Armstrong's (2013) study on UK dissertation supervision, found considerable variation in how research methods are taught. Some departments offer research methods training as a stand-alone course that students are required to take; others include the training within another module such as market research; and still others provide it as additional, non-credit workshops that students can attend if they choose. In most cases, however, students are required to submit and pass a research proposal assessment before they undertake the dissertation. Four of Armstrong's (2012) 10 respondents remarked that students often come to start their dissertations having failed their research proposals. Underlying the problem of failures in the proposal are the difficulties students' face in research methods training. Where the subject is assessed, fail rates tend to be in the region of 25% as all respondents in her study agreed it remains a challenging course for students. She identified common problems amongst the supervisors interviewed: lack of resources to put on additional classes; lack of student attendance; student apathy and students not grasping methodological concepts. This is compounded, respondents noted, by the shortage of time in a one year Master's programme to provide students with the knowledge necessary to write a competent research proposal and then complete a successful dissertation.

The challenges associated with teaching and learning research methods is a key theme in the literature. (Edwards & Thatcher, 2006; Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2005; Meyer, Shanahan & Laugksch, 2005; Montcalm, 1999; Allison, Kewkowicz & Nunan, 1998; and, Zuber-Skerritt, 1987). In their comprehensive review of the literature on teaching research methods in the social sciences, Wagner, Garner and Kawulich (2011) found that a wide range of approaches are advocated, including exercises, problem-based approaches, collaborative and group work methods, simulations, and experiential learning. However, they also found that except for studies identifying student anxiety with statistical analysis, there is limited research into the challenges of teaching and learning specific aspects of research methods as well as the role and desirable characteristics of a research methods teacher. They note that

> *"[u]nless methodology is accepted as central to education in a discipline, teachers will too often be allocated to classes for reasons other than an aptitude for teaching methodology, and students are unlikely to learn how to do research well. There is a pressing need for widespread debate, informed by pedagogical research, around what makes successful research methods teachers."*(p. 83).

Allison, Kewkowicz, and Nunan (1998) also comment on the expectations that supervisors may have about the benefits of research methods courses to the dissertation process. In many cases, the research methods course allows students to apply their learning to short research projects, assignments or in exams, but that these assessments do not guarantee that students will be able to apply the knowledge and skills in their dissertation.

Edwards & Thatcher (2006) suggest that supervisory staff can benefit from refresher training and more specific teaching resources in addition to the traditional research methods textbooks to help overcome the challenges associated with teaching the subject to their students. They make use of a student study pack written by colleagues that incorporates both ongoing assessment in the form of weekly seminar sheets and summative assessment comprising a research proposal and a statistical assignment. They note that the *ongoing-assessment* approach has led to significant improvements in students understanding of key research concepts and how to apply them.

Research methods training, as noted above, is undertaken differently across institutions, but in general, where the course is structured towards the dissertation, most students will be exposed to how to undertake a literature review; citation guidelines; different research methodologies and how to choose and apply them; and, techniques for analysing data and writing up findings. Andrews (2007) noted that despite the tacit or explicit requirement that a dissertation demonstrate a student's ability to develop an argument, evaluate and take a critical approach to knowledge, most research courses do not provide this kind of training. He makes an important point about the mis-match between training and supervisor expectations of student's capabilities when he comments that:

> *A dissertation/thesis will not be truly argumentative until it has (a) worked out its theoretical position, (b) reviewed the literature, (c) designed an appropriate empirical study (if it is that kind of study), (d) gathered the evidence, (e) arrayed the evidence into categories and (f) found its own position in relation to those categories, arranging them in a sequence that carries the argument of the piece as a whole. Many students only deal with the middle elements: they undertake a review, sort the evidence (sources, quotations, facts, hypotheses) into categories and then they write. What they write is exposition. It is not argument, and it is not critical, and it does not involve much thought: that is why it may or may not pass, according to the criteria for a pass in any particular course of study (p. 13).*

If we have expectations for "scholarship, independent critical thought...[and]… argumentative coherence from our students work (Andrews, 2007, p. 13)", then we need to provide training in how to do these things, in addition to finding ways to improve the way we teach research methods.

1.3 Particular challenges and helping students through various stages of the process

Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006) identified other key challenges in the undergraduate supervision process including the intellectual challenges students face in choosing and then narrowing down a topic for research; problems with time management; and the difficulties students have in being analytical and critical in their work. Writing on post graduate dissertations, Cooley and Lewkowicz (1995), Thompson (1999), and Jenkins, Jordan and Weiland (1993) explore the difficulties that students face in structuring an argument over such a large piece of work and doing so with consistency and balance. Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) looked at difficulities in writing up the discussion section, including challenges with the language, and difficulties in expressing and linking ideas, but noted that these problems sometimes go beyond what can be overcome in the short period given for the dissertation. Zuber-Skerritt and Knight (1986) identify *problem definition* as one of the main challenges that students face. They recommend a series of early workshops with group discussion, group support and reflection to help students through the early stages of problem identification and focus. Baker (2000) undertook a survey of approaches to identifying a topic for research and outlines key tips for writing an effective research proposal.

In line with failing the research proposal, Armstrong (2013) found that 7 of her 10 respondents suggest that students seem to have a problem finding a viable topic area to research that will lead to a worthy conceptual framework. In most cases, students come to their first supervisory meeting with a topic area that is so broad, it is inappropriate for a dissertation. The literature supports the contention that students have a very difficult time choosing and narrowing down a topic for research (Todd et al., 2006; Thompson, 1999; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995; Jenkins et al., 1993; Zuber-Skerritt & Knight,1986). Some

view it as a problem of skills - in particular, weaknesses in students' abilities to be analytical and critical - while others see it as a challenging task that takes considerable time and practice to do well, even for seasoned researchers.

Sachs (2002) argues that writing a dissertation or thesis involves not only self-regulation by the student, but "goal setting, skill acquisition (such as in data analysis), motives, attitudes and one's conception of learning" (p. 100). As a result of the large number of skills that are required as well as the need to keep motivated and self-regulate, students often face anxiety in researching and writing their dissertations. Supervisors need to understand the correlates of this anxiety if they are to help students through the process.

There is quite extensive research into how to help students through various stages of the dissertation, specific interventions for specific problems faced, and how to improve student motivation. In his discussion article, Cassuto (2010) recommends creating collaborative groups to help those who are feeling isolated; be sure that from the beginning the student is working on a topic that they are truly excited about and interested in; encouraging students to start writing on any section of the dissertation, just to get them writing; and make it clear to students that the dissertation does not have to be 'perfect' – it needs to meet a particular threshold, but that no piece of writing is ever perfect.

Writing the dissertation itself is a key challenge for most students, and skills in writing at this level are not generally included in the curriculum of most Masters programmes. Many universities have learner development units where students can go for additional help, and some put on specific classes for dissertation writing. Murray (2007) recommends holding writing clinics for dissertation students within the department where they can practice writing in small increments or "snacks" as his students came to refer to them. This process had a range of benefits for students, including getting them used to writing regularly, building confidence in their ability to write, and in making the writing process more manageable. Such clinics may be particularly helpful for international students who have limited experience with writing such a long piece of work or in writing in English.

Students' lack of motivation with the dissertation is cited as a key challenge by supervisors interviewed for Armstrong's (2012) report and is one that is hard to address. This seemingly bleak sentiment suggests that more time needs to be spent motivating students in the earlier preparation for dissertation but that lack of motivation and comprehension of concepts may continue to be a barrier. Ahern and Manathunga (2004) suggest that motivation may be linked to other issues that a student is facing. They use cognitive theory to identify typical stages where problems and challenges are likely to occur and provide strategies for assisting students who have become stalled in the process. They refer in particular to those students who have been avoiding contact with the supervisor, may continually be changing their topic and have failed to show the supervisor any of their work. They make reference to work by Johnson, Green and Kluever (2000) who developed a procrastination inventory based on a previous tool by Muszynski and Akamatsu (1991). The inventory helps to identify students who are having trouble moving forward with their dissertation and also differentiates the reasons for their slow progress as either cognitive (lack of knowledge or skills), emotional/affective (anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, personality clash with supervisor) and/or social (social isolation, pressure of external social relationships). The authors then provide techniques to help with student motivation depending on the reason or reasons identified. Maxwell and Smyth (2010) created a research management matrix that focusses on different stages of the research process to identify potential hurdles for students and ways to help students overcome them.

Albertyn, Kapp and Frick (2007) provide one example of a detailed evaluative framework for the dissertation that was created for markers but that could be introduced to students early in the process and referred to as students complete different stages. One way to reduce the challenges associated with each stage of the dissertation is to be explicit upfront on how each section will be evaluated and what the marker will be looking for. By creating such evaluative frameworks that are consistent across a department, supervisors can also benefit. As a group, they can come to some agreement on what they view as a threshold level of achievement for each section as well as what sections are most problematic for students and how the teaching of the concepts and expectations from each section could be better addressed. This approach may also help reduce large differences in grades arrived at by first and second markers. Furthermore, students will benefit from a more transparent and consistent marking process.

Wagner, Garner, and Kawulich (2011) note that "a well-informed approach to teaching, in whatever field, relies on a sound understanding of the processes of, and obstacles to, learning" and that we need to first have a better understanding of these processes and obstacles in dissertation study if we are to develop "a more carefully targeted pedagogy" (p. 84). However, Armitage (2006) noted that most supervisors tend to work within both subject and methodological silos when supervising students' and that they should exchange ideas and best practice more often at a departmental level regarding the issues they face and their approaches to supervision.Taking a department-wide approach to this understanding and potential solutions to problems is likely to be the best way to ensure that all issues are considered and that there is consistency in how students are supervised and graded.

1.4 The challenges of student diversity, cultural background and prior preparation

The problems experienced by non-native English speakers is also a key theme in the literature (Fan, 2013; Braine, 1989, 1995; Jenkins, Jordan & Weiland,1993; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Horowitz, 1986; Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; West & Byrd, 1982). Problems with the language are not the only issues non-native students face. Belcher (1994) discussed the challenges associated with being relatively new to a "discourse community" and, like Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006), the difficulties of coming to terms with the often tacit knowledge that supervisors take for granted.

Deem and Brehony (2000) and Dong (1998) have all noted that non-native speakers tend to be more socially isolated during the dissertation process and agreed with Belcher(1994) that their lack of "rhetorical and genre knowledge of the discipline" (p. 181) adds to the writing challenges of these students. Writing challenges include "the conventions of formality, objectivity, conciseness, technical details and precision" that native speakers may take for granted or have had prior experience with (p. 382).

A number of studies have examined the difficulties that Chinese students in particular face in the critical evaluation of existing literature and with attributing sources (Fan, 2013; Abasi & Graves, 2008; Huang, 2008; O'Connell & Jin, 2001; Frost, 1999; Knight, 1999; Smith, 1999; and Cadman, 1997). These challenges tend to be related to their prior education where respect for academics is inculcated at an early stage and students are not encouraged to question the ideas and opinions of their superiors. The authors provide recommendations on how to help Chinese students develop the ability and willingness to question and evaluate. These recommendations are also of value to students from a range of different cultures.

Huang (2008) undertook a study on the experiences that Chinese and Indian students on post graduate tourism and hospitality programmes had with the notion of 'critical thinking'. She points out that what academics mean by "critical thinking" can vary. The concept is broad and non-specific and given that there are a lack of clear guidelines on how to teach critical thinking, it is not unreasonable to conclude that both domestic and international students will have challenges in both understanding what it means to and in learning how to think critically. She refers to work by Egege and Kutieleh(2004) who argue that

> *"our understanding of what critical thinking entails is heavily influenced by the history and traditions of our academic 'institutions'. What Western academics recognise as evidence of reasoning, the tools used to reason with, the language and structure of the argument, actually represent a cultural, rather than a universal method"(p.3).*

In interviews with Chinese and Indian postgraduates, Huang found they were unclear about what critical thinking is and how to undertake it and that their lack of English vocabularly made it difficult to apply critical thinking in their coursework and exams.

Both Armstong (2012) and Fan (2013) identified issues related to language and culture. All ten of the respondents interviewed by Armstrong (2012) maintained that language competence is a significant issue facing UK postgraduate marketing dissertation students, in particular given that up to 80% of their students do not have English as a first language. The narratives point to the frustration that supervisors feel at the drive by their institutions to recruit more and more overseas students whose level of English is low to very poor. These students necessarily find writing a 15,000+ word dissertation very difficult. There was also a concern by some respondents that the IELTS is a flawed measure of language competency. Two respondents noted that there are big differences in being able to speak coherently, understand written materials and write clearly in another language and most international students are weak in both comprehension and writing. Given how critical these skills are for writing a dissertation, respondents argued that students need more time to develop these skills and a one year Master's programme is just too short to allow for this development. Respondents also discussed cultural differences in how international students are taught prior to coming to the UK and how this impacts upon their ability to undertake a dissertation.

Fan (2013) undertook his study on international students and their supervisors to identify specific issues they have faced with dissertations and to gain insights into the experiences of both groups. His research was prompted by concerns that international students tend to score at least one grade point below home students on their dissertations. Supervisors who responded to his survey had big concerns about students' proficiency with English and the barriers this caused them in completing a dissertation. Most supervisors showed enthusiasm to improve the experience of their international students but felt students were also hampered by the time restrictions:

> *'They do not have enough time…'; 'It is very hard for them. 1) Competing deadlines; in a nutshell there is too much to do in one year of study; 2) International students have a lot to come to terms with: language, culture, the weather, etc., which can inhibit their engagement with the course including the dissertation; 3) They also have to come to terms with a new subject area which has a lead in time of about 3 months'.(Comments from supervisor surveys, in Fan, 2013, p.7.)*

1.5 Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

Much has also been written on plagiarism and academic dishonesty. More recent research into these themes points to the complexity of the phenomenon –it is not always a simple choice by the students to use the work of someone else without attributing that work, but may come from their "unfamiliarly with the ways of thinking, speaking, and writing associated with the specific subject areas" (p 226) and the "cultural, educational, and professional dispositions that oriented them differently to text, knowledge, and authorship" (Abasi & Graves ,2008, pp. 226 -227). Researchers suggest that in addition to informing students about the penalties for plagiarism, they also be instructed in the nature of and core assumptions that underpin academic practice and writing, particularly if they have not been trained in English speaking Universities (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; McGowan, 2005; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Pecorari, 2001; Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997).

The work of Abasi and Graves (2008) is particularly informative in helping supervisors to gain a better understanding of underlying issues that drive plagiarism for international students in particular. The authors draw upon the work of other scholars (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Brodkey, 1987 and Gee, 1996) to create a view of academic writing as social practice.

This conception

> *allows us to conceive of academic writing as a complex of literacy practices patterned by discipline-specific ways of reading and writing as well as the particular attitudes and beliefs that members of a given disciplinary community hold toward literate practice (p.)*

Similar to Belcher (1994), Dong (1998) and Bitchener & Basturkmen (2006) (see above), they argue that these practices and discipline-specific ways of viewing dissertation processes are not immediately evident to foreign students in particular and are often tacitly held by supervisors. Similar to Andrews (2007) (see above), they argue that one particular practice that dissertation supervisors expect of students is to develop an "argued claim to knowledge" (p.225) and that this argument should take on a critical perspective. Unlike the other researchers however, Abasi and Graves (2008) link these challenges to how students approach attribution as well as to incidences of plagiarism. In order to see how the authors make this link, it is worth quoting from their article at some length:

> *In this study we were interested in how institutional plagiarism policies interacted with ESL students' academic writing and how those policies framed the professor-student relationships. In our view the institutional plagiarism policies that the students experienced in their course assignments and the broader institutional context reduced the complex phenomenon of plagiarism that is "centrally concerned with questions of language, identity, education, and knowledge" (Chandrasoma et al., 2004, p. 174) to the mechanics of documentation, … While trivializing "the complex meanings of [academic] authorship attribution" (Fisk, 2006, p. 52), the institutional documents withheld important information from the international students in this study, who were in the early stages of their relationship with North American academic writing. The institutional documents were misleading to the students in that they prompted the students to think that academic attribution was more about avoiding plagiarism than responding creatively to the ideas of others (p. 229).*
>
> *The professors expected the students to write from an authorial stance while demonstrating familiarity with the research literature, and at the same time displaying an "evaluative orientation" (Maguire, 1998) that allowed them to assess the arguments put forth in published texts. ….The professors viewed students' textual appropriation and source attribution as one of those "community" practices that resides in a web of complex relations and develops over time (p. 226).*
>
> *[The dissertation documents]… conveyed virtually no information about the core assumptions that underpin professional literacy practices, namely, that knowledge is contingent, and that all published sources, regardless of their authors, are to be approached as provisional claims to truth that are always subject to rational scrutiny (Dillon, 1991; Toulmin, 1958). That professional academic writers bring a complex set of assumptions to the act of writing can be highlighted by the fact that writers use citations to achieve multiple pragmatic functions, of which crediting other authors is but one (Harwood, 2008). These omissions about academic writing were therefore not only misleading to the students, but they also diminished the professors' efforts to socialize the students into privileged literacy practices (p. 229).*

Clearly students need to go through different stages of learning in order to be able to come to terms with the skills that are required (evaluation, critical thinking) as well as the meaning behind various practices (attribution is about crediting an author's way of approaching a subject, but not accepting that it is the "absolute truth; attribution is a necessary convention, but should be part of an argument that is woven together with both the authors' points of view as well as my own). Abasi and Graves (2008) note that most institutional plagiarism policies are written in such a way as to focus only on the negative, "punishable" aspects of failing to attribute sources, thus forcing many students into a writing style that is more likely to provide a list of attributed author words and comments, rather than an evaluation of author's works. Students are afraid of doing the wrong thing to a much greater extent than they are driven to develop the kinds of practices that we as supervisors often tacitly expect.

> *Further conversations revealed that the students appeared to have adopted a stance that seemed to dominate their writing, a stance devoted to showing that they would not steal other people's property (p. 227).*

Fan's (2013) research into the particular challenges faced by international students undertaking post-graduate marketing dissertations in the UK provides candid comments from focus group participants that points to a particularly worrying trend – student's giving up on the dissertation process altogether and purchasing a dissertation from an essay writing service. None of the student's in his focus groups revealed having done this themselves but two students agreed that more than 50% of students were taking this route. While we cannot accept this figure as anything more than conjecture on the part of students, it is clearly indicative of a growing problem and one that needs to be tackled. Megehee and Spake's (2008) study on cheating behaviour amongst marketing students found that the percentages of those who self-report cheating are very high and those who report that "the average marketing student cheats" are even higher – so there is support in the literature for Fan's (2013) student comments. Armstrong (2013) found that at all institutions where she conducted interviews, academics are aware of the problem and have seen it increase but in no case are vivas used for all or even many students as a way to detect cheating or plagiarism.

In there literature review of teaching research methods in the social sciences, Wagner, Garner and Kawulich (2007) found very little research into teaching and learning research ethics. Although generally concerned with the 'subjects' of research, research ethics training can be extended to cover ethical issues in general. In his review of the pedagogical literature in marketing, Brennan (2012) identified "[a] wealth of research-informed advice and teaching resources on the subject of teaching ethics … in the Marketing education literature" (p. 14) and much related to cheating and plagiarism. However, until

we have a better understanding of the factors that lead to this behaviour and at what point in their degree programme the triggers for cheating increase, it will be difficult to find effective, enduring solutions.

2. Summary and recommendations for further research

This review of the dissertation literature has highlighted a number of significant challenges associated with the process and most current supervisors would probably agree that many of these are representative of their own experiences. For business school academics, these problems are likely to increase given growing numbers of students and the lack of a proportionate rise in resources to manage them.

The research reviewed in this report comes from a wide range of disciplines and covers supervision at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral levels. An attempt has been made to identify as many studies as possible that consider Master's level dissertations, but good research and insights of relevance can be found on dissertations at other levels. Much of the literature on dissertations is published in higher education journals and also those focused on the English language. Sadly, there is relatively little research into the particular challenges and issues faced by students and supervisors on post-graduate business programmes. The two reports for the Higher Education Academy by Armstrong (2013) and Fan (2013) are beginning to fill the gap but more is needed.

The literature makes it clear that many of the challenges associated with dissertations are related to misunderstandings on the part of both students and supervisors about the difficulties faced by both groups and to underlying issues of communication and differences in expectations. If knowledge and expectations are tacitly held by supervisors (Bitchener and Basturkman, 2006), and if becoming proficient in research and writing requires time for students to become acquainted with the "rhetorical and genre knowledge" of a "discourse community" (Belcher, 1994, p.181), then work needs to be done to first uncover the information, expectations and conventions that students are not initially party too and then on ways to make these more explicit.

Many authors make recommendations on how to develop a community of students where issues can be discussed openly; where the issues of isolation, cognitive and emotional problems on the part of students can be understood and dealt with; and, where expectations from both parties can be made more explicit and clear. Action learning sets, group discussion, clear upfront discussion of marking criteria, planning documents, weekly assignments, and working groups are all recommended as ways to improve learning and skill development and to reduce misunderstandings.

One issue that is not well covered in the literature, but is often brought up by both supervisors and students as an area of concern and misunderstanding is marking criteria and how final marks are arrived at. Some departments use a more holistic approach to arriving at a final grade. Indicative criteria are provided to assess what final classification the dissertation falls within, but specific marks are not given to individual sections. At other institutions and departments, marks are given to different sections of the disseratation (eg: literature review, methodology and methods, discussion of findings) and each section is given some indicative criteria for what would be considered a fail, pass, merit or distinction on that section and the final grade is arrived at by adding the marks together.

An investigation into the rich literature on good practice in assessment would be useful to help departments create more effective marking approaches that are more consistent and that reduce misunderstandings. Seymour (2005) recommends creating a set of "first order criteria" that assess a student's overall ability to "analyse, evaluate, and to present a coherent extended argument" (Seymour, 2005, p.1) that is internally consistent – key learning outcomes of most dissertation modules. Students are given an indicative distinction, merit, pass or fail mark on the first order criteria and no matter how well they do on the different sections (what she calls second order criteria), they can never get a grade higher than what they got on the first order section. In a short paper on revising Master's level dissertation marking criteria, Seymour (2005) argued for this more holistic first order criteria section to be added because:

> *"the list of criteria[in different sections are]difficult to intepret in any consisent way…..different assessors [value]the different criteria as more or less important [thus undermining consistency] …different sections of criteria [are] not mutually exclusive, [meaning] that some aspects of the dissertation [are] assessed under more than one heading…further, various studies have demonstrated that there are differences between experienced and non-experienced supervisors assessment grades and between those awarded by [various] subject specialists within multi-disciplinary departments"(p.1).*

Students, supervisors and external examiners want grading criteria that are consistent, transparent and can be similarly interpreted. Clear criteria can go a long way towards helping to reduce misunderstandings and miscommunication. Good criteria, provided to the students upfront can also be used as a diagnostic tool by the supervisors to show where an individual student needs to do some additional work; to see where many students are failing or getting low marks, so additional training can be organised; and, as a diagnostic tool that collaborative cohort groups can use to help each other improve. More research into effective marking criteria is therefore also recommended.

Table One provides a summary of the key themes and related sub-themes identified in this review of the dissertation literature along with the main authors who have researched them. The table also provides a summary of the recommendations from the literature on how to address these challenges. In cases where authors have not made specific recommenations, their names are also included in order to point readers to valuable additional background information and

research on the themes. The practicality of implementing the recommendations suggested is not addressed here, but it is clear that given the current resource restraints faced by academics, departments and insitutions in the UK, some will be far more difficult to implement than others.

Given the depth of some of these challenges, however, it may be time for institutions to seek innovative ways of dealing with the dissertation module. It may be time for more departments to consider alternatives to the traditional dissertation where the same learning outcomes can be achieved but through a different framework. Many academics would agree that the dissertation is a critical component of a Master's level programme and remains a test of the Master's degree standard. Its importance is highlighted by the fact that it generally carries a credit value of 60, equivalent to one third of the total credits on a programme. (Appendix Two provides an example of learning outcomes for a dissertation in a postgraduate business subject in the UK).

In general, dissertations require students to demonstrate a range of higher level cognitive and communication skills (evaluation, synthesis, critical analysis, judgement, intellectual coherence) as well as personal skills (time management, prioritising tasks, contribute to building an effective relationship with a supervisor). The dissertation also allows students to develop a higher level knowledge and understanding of concepts, theories, positions, arguments and key developments in their subject area. Additional research is needed to determine whether the knowledge and skills can be developed and demonstrated using an alternative type of assessment that may also reduce the challenges and problems inherent in the current approach.

Another set of questions that should be investigated further are: the degree to which the dissertation actually contributes to the developments of this set of knowledge and skills; the underlying and more explicit challenges that students face in achieving and/or demonstrating each knowledge and skill outcome; whether we are providing the most effective means to prepare students to demonstrate these outcomes under current institutional conditions; and, if there are more effective teaching and learning approaches that could be implemented.

Clearly, the literature and comments from both academics and students points to a need to address these issues in a timely manner. Universities in the UK are not likely to change their priorities related to recruitment, nor to be in a position in the near future to provide more resources for dissertation management and supervision. Consequently, programme managers, teaching and learning specialists and academics need to address the issues presented above and find solutions that help to improve the learning experiences of dissertation students and to reduce the pressure on academics who manage and supervise them.

Examples of alternative approaches to the dissertation or changes in focus can be found in the literature, and anecodotaly some UK Universities are beginning to offer student's a more practical alternative – one that focusses on addressing the needs or solving the issues of a particular organisation. This may be either an action project or an internal organisational project and they require the candidate to investigate a particular organisation (perhaps one that they are working for) and to either identify specific solutions that will help to improve current practice or evaluate the implementation of a new system or approach. Archibald (2010) provides insights into how his department implemented a problem-based, decision-oriented thesis that focuses on theory and practice rather than more traditionally on theory/research. He notes that:

> *Our vision has been to connect the thesis to actual organizational improvement through the candidate's role in leadership, problem solving, and decision making (p.100).*

Further research on the skill development potential and longer term learning and career development potential of these and other types of dissertations is needed to see if they offer a way forward and a means to overcome some of the challenges addressed in this report.

Table One: Summary of Key Themes and Recommendations from the literature on dissertations

-from Vos, L. (2013) *Dissertation study at the postgraduate level: A review of the literature.* York: Higher Education Academy, pp.12-15. (not yet published)

Key Theme	Sub-Themes	Authors	Commentary and Recommendations from the Literature
The student/ supervisor relationship	1. Student/supervisor expectations and perceptions: differences in student views of the process.	Armstrong (2013); Fan (2013); Drennan & Clarke (2009); Lumadi (2008); HEA (2007); McCormack (2004); Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary and Ryan (1999); Parry and Hayden (1994) in Aspland et al. (1999); Powles (1988) in Aspland et al. (1999); Moses (1984) in Aspland et al. (1999)	• Investigate and understand students' conceptions of research and the research process prior to undertaking the dissertation to identify differences and confusions (McCormack, 2004); • Be aware of the different types of students who present themselves to the dissertation process in terms of their individual learning styles and pastoral need (Armitage, 2006); • Supervisors within a department should exchange ideas, best practice and discuss their own approaches to supervision (Armitage, 2006); • Ask students what current challenges they are facing and then design weekly tutorials accordingly (Woolhouse, 2002); • Working with the student, develop a guideline document to first clarify and then record expectations, from both the supervisor and student's point of view (Ryan, 1984; Exley and O'Malley, 1999; Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary and Ryan, 1999; Phillips and Pugh, 2000 and Woolhouse, 2002; Lumadi, 2008;); • Willingness of supervisor to provide more guidance on different methodologies (Hetrick and Trafford, 1995); • Supervisor to self-reflect on his/her approaches to supervision and to adapt as needed (Anderson, Day and McLaughlin, 2006; Armitage, 2006); • While supervisors carry out a number of roles and functions, including keeping a student on track, providing timetables and guidelines, they also need to ensure that they are helping to develop student's independence and agency in the research process (Acker, Hill and Black, 1993; Grant, 1999, 2003; Vilkinas, 2008); • Better matching of students interests with supervisors research interests and experience (Moses, 1984); • More feedback, more regularly and provided in a more timely manner (Aspland, Edwards, O'Learly and Ryan, 1999; Powles (1988) as cited in Aspland et al, 1999; Parry and Hayden (1994) as cited in Aspland et al., 1999); • Provide training for supervisors and those teaching research methods (Drennan and Clarke, 2009; Semeijn, Semeijn and Gelderman, 2009);
	2. Supervisors' roles and approaches to supervision.	Vilkinas (2008); Armitage (2006); Anderson, Day and McLaughlin (2006); Grant (1999; 2003); Aaker, Hill and Black (1994)	
	3. Differences in student characteristics and in their approaches to the dissertation process.	Armitage (2006)	
	4. The value of planning, guidance documents and checklists.	Albertyn, Kapp and Frick (2007); Sharp and Howard (1996) as discussed in Armitage (2006); Woolhouse (2002); Phillips and Pugh (2000); Aspland et al. (1999); Exley and O'Malley (1999); Ryan (1984)	
	5. Issues in communication: tacit vs. explicit; cultural issues.	Akylina (2007); Albertan, Kapp and Frick (2007); Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006); Burnett (1999); Dong (1998)	
	6. Supervisor training and support (lack of).	Drennan and Clarke (2009); Semeijn, Semeijn and Gelderman (2009); Thomas (1995)	
	7. Tools to gain insights into student experiences.	Higher Education Academy (2013) PRES	

			• Conduct research (focus groups, interviews, surveys) with dissertation students to investigate their experiences with dissertation study, both during and after the process and then make improvements as required (HEA, 2007; HEA, 2013); • Use small group or collaborative cohort supervision to provide support to students, to share ideas, and to disseminate information/ideas from the supervisor (Akylina, 2007; Burnett, 1999); and • Clarity at all levels of the organisation on the problems inherent in the current approach to dissertations (number of students per supervisor; time frame for dissertation completion; current resources and training) and innovative thinking on how to address.
Teaching and Learning Research Methods	1. Variations in how research methods are taught.	Armstrong (2013)	• Review the approach to research methods training; identify specific challenges faced by students and revise curriculum, assessment, and teaching as required (Armstrong; 2013; Wagner, Garner and Kawulich, 2011; Edwards & Thatcher, 2006;; Meyer, Shanahan & Laugksch, 2005; Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2005; Montcalm, 1999; Allison, Kewkowicz & Nunan, 1998; and, Zuber-Skerritt, 1987); • Recognise the particular challenges associated with teaching and learning research methodologies and revise curriculum, assessment and teaching as required. (Wagner, Garner and Kawulich, 2011); • Recognise the need to provide teaching in learning in critical thinking and effective argumentation in addition to research methods and revise curriculum, assessment and teaching as required (Huang, 2008; Andrews, 2007); and • Provide training and support for those who teach research methods (Wagner, Garner and Kawulich, 2011; Andrews, 2007).
	2. Problems of failing the research proposal.	Armstrong (2013)	
	3. Challenges associated with teaching and learning research methods.	Wagner, Garner and Kawulich (2011); Edwards & Thatcher (2006); Murtonen and Lehtinen (2005); Meyer, Shanahan and Laugksch (2005); Montcalm (1999); Allison, Kewkowicz and Nunan (1998); Zuber-Skerritt (1987)	
	4. The need for specific research methods training for supervisors and teachers.	Wagner, Garner and Kawulich (2011); Edwards and Thatcher (2006)	
	5. Research methods training as insufficient to prepare students for all the skills needed to complete a dissertation.	Andrews (2007)	
Challenges at various stages of the process and in student motivation	1. Overview of key challenges at different stages of the dissertation process and how to assist students.	Cassuto (2010);Maxwell and Symth (2010); Albertyn, Kapp and Frick (2007); Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006)	• Provide specific training in writing for dissertations; hold writing clinics where students write in small increments regularly (Murray, 2007; Todd, Smith and Bannister, 2006; Thompson, 1999; Cooley and Lewkowicz; 1995; Jenkins, Jordan and Weiland, 1993); • Use workshops with group discussion, group support, reflection and other approaches to improve topic selection and problem definition by students (Armstrong, 2013; Cassuto, 2010; Todd, Smith and Bannister, 2006; Baker, 2000; Thompson, 1999; Cooley and Lewkowicz; 1995; Jenkins, Jordan and Weiland, 1993; Zuber-Skerritt and Knight, 1986);
	2. Writing and argumentation challenges.	Murray (2007); Thompson (1999); Cooley and Lewkowicz (1995); Jenkins, Jordan and Weiland (1993)	
	3. Challenges at the topic selection and problem definition stages.	Armstrong (2013); Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006); Baker (2000); Thompson (1999); Cooley and Lewkowicz (1995); Jenkins, Jordan and	

		Weiland (1993); Zuber-Skerritt and Knight (1986)	• Recognise the anxiety that students face and the correlates of this anxiety in learning such a broad range of required skills for the dissertation (Sachs, 2002); • Identify the specific challenges that students face with progress and/or motivation as either cognitive, emotional/affective and/or social and address accordingly (Ahern and Manathunga, 2004; Johnson, Green and Kluever (2000) as cited in Ahern and Manathunga, 2004; Muszynski and Akamatsu (1991) as cited in Ahern and Manathunga, 2004); • Identify the specific challenges that students face at each stage of the dissertation process and address with specially designed interventions/ approaches (Maxwell and Symth, 2010); • Clarify with students at the very early stages the criteria for marking each section of the dissertation; refer to the criteria regularly during the supervision process so students can self-reflect on whether they are achieving the criteria; use the criteria as a discussion point in group/collaborative cohort meetings (Albertyn, Kapp and Frick, 2007); • Supervisors meet regularly as a group to exchange ideas, discuss and reflect on their approaches to supervision and best practice so as to develop more targeted pedagogy and greater consistency (Wagner, Garner and Kawulich, 2011; Armitage, 2006); and • Provide students with many examples of good practice.
	4. The variety and range of skills to undertake a dissertation.	Sachs (2002)	
	5. Lack of student motivation and how to address.	Armitage (2006); Ahern and Manathunga (2004); Green and Kluever (2000) as cited in Ahern and Manathunga (2004); Muszynski and Akamatsu (1991) as cited in Ahern and Manathunga (2004)	
Challenges of student diversity, cultural background and prior preparation	1. Challenges faced by non-native English speakers in dissertation study including language competence.	Armstrong (2013); Fan (2013); Braine(1989, 1995); Jenkins, Jordan and Weiland(1993); Casanave and Hubbard (1992); Canseco and Byrd (1989); Horowitz (1986); Bridgeman and Carlson (1984); West & Byrd (1982)	• Provide specific training in writing for dissertations; hold writing clinics where students write in small increments regularly; provide training in argumentation and critical thinking/writing/reflection (Murray, 2007; Todd, Smith and Bannister, 2006; Thompson, 1999; Cooley and Lewkowicz; 1995; Jenkins, Jordan and Weiland, 1993); • Recognise that international students often feel more socially isolated during the dissertation process; develop collaborative cohort groups to support these and other students (Deem and Brehony, 2000; Dong,1998); • Recognise that being new to a discipline and a "discourse community" and the cultural underpinnings of a discipline creates specific challenges for international students; hold extra workshops early in the process (Huang, 2008; Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006; Blecher, 1994); • Reconsider the IELTS requirements for the programme (Armstrong, 2013); and • Consider a pre-training period for international students prior to their undertaking the Master's to help with enculturation and the development of language skills (Fan, 2013).
	2. Being new to a discipline and discourse community.	Deem and Brehony (2000); Dong (1998); Belcher (1994)	
	3. Issues of social isolation.	Deem and Brehony (2000); Dong (1998)	
	4. Specific challenges faced by Chinese and Indian students.	Fan (2013); Abasi and Graves (2008); Huang (2008); O'Connell and Jin (2001); Frost (1999); Knight (1999); Smith (1999); Dong (1998); Cadman (1997)	

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty	1. Plagiarism and academic dishonesty as part of a wider problem: cultural, educational and professional predispositions; unfamiliarity with the culture of the discipline.	Abasi and Graves (2008); Cooper and Bikowski (2007); McGowan (2005); Sutherland-Smith (2005); Pecorari (2001); Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne (1997)	• Recognise the underlying factors that can lead some students to plagiarise and to be dishonest (time pressures; lack of skills; lack of confidence; social and family pressures to succeed; confusion over expectations; institutional failings) (Armstrong, 2013; Fan, 2013; Abasi and Graves, 2008; Cooper and Bikowski; 2007; McGowan, 2005; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Pecorari , 2001; Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne,1997); • Be aware of and willing to address the scope of the problem, particularly of academic writing services and the number of students who use them for their dissertation (Fan, 2013); • Work as a community of academics to address the rise of academic writing services and their constant promotion to students (Fan, 2013); • Re-introduce viva's for all students (Armstrong, 2013); • Create an alternative to the traditional dissertation, such as an action project for a specific organisation to help reduce the potential for cheating; and • Provide additional training in ethics (Wagner, Garner and Kawlich, 2007)
	2. Scope of the problem and use of academic writing services.	Fan (2013); Megehee and Spake (2008)	
	3. Institutional failures in and challenges to detecting plagiarism and cheating.	Armstrong (2013)	
	4. Lack of ethics training and suggestions for incorporating more ethics training.	Brennan (2012); Wagner, Garner and Kawulich (2007)	

References

Acker, S., Hill, T., & Black, E. (1994). Thesis supervision in the social sciences: Managed or negotiated. *Higher Education, 28(4):* 483-498.

Ahern, K., & Manathunga, C. (2004). Clutch-starting stalled research students. *Innovative Higher Education, 28(4):* 237-254.

Akylina, S. (2006). Group Supervision in graduate education: a process of supervision skill development and text improvement, *Higher Education Research and Development, 25(2):* 115 – 129.

Albertyn, R.M., Kapp, C.A., & Frick, B.L. (2007). Taking the sting out of evaluation: Rating scales for thesis evaluation. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 21(8):* 119-123.

Allison, D., Cooley, L., Lewkowicz, J., & Nunan, D. (1998). Dissertation writing in action: The development of a dissertation writing support program for ESL graduate research students. *English for Specific Purposes, 17*: 199–217.

Anderson, C., Day, K., & McLaughlin, P. (2006). Mastering the dissertation: lecturers' representations of the purposes and processes of Master's level dissertation supervision. *Studies in Higher Education, 31(2):* 149-168.

Andrews, R. (2007). Argumentation, critical thinking and the postgraduate dissertation, *Educational Review, 59 (1):* 1-18.

Archibald, D. (2010). "Breaking the mold" in the dissertation: Implementing a problem-based, decision-oriented thesis. *The Journal of Continuing Education, 58*: 99 -107

Armitage, A., (2006). The roles, expectations and experiences of master's degree dissertation supervisors. In: C. Rust, (Ed.), *Improving student learning through assessment*. Proceedings of the 13th improving student learning symposium, Imperial College, London, 5-7 September 2005. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

Armstrong, K. (2013). *Best practice in managing, supervising and assessing post-graduate marketing dissertations*, York: Higher Education Academy (not yet published).

Ashworth, P., Bannister, P., & Thorne, P. (1997). Guilty in whose eyes? University students' perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment. *Studies in Higher Education, 22(2):* 187- 203.

Aspland, T., Edwards, H., O'Leary, J., & Ryan, Y. (1999) Tracking New Directions in the Evaluation of Postgraduate Supervision. *Innovative Higher Education, 24(2):* 127-147.

Baker, M. (2000). Writing a research proposal. The Marketing Review, 1(1): 61-78.

Belcher, D. (1994). The apprenticeship approach to advanced academic literacy: Graduate students and their mentors. *English for Specific Purposes*, 13: 23–34.

Bitchener, J., & Basturkmen, H. (2006). Perceptions of the difficulties of postgraduate L2 thesis students writing the discussion section. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 5(1):* : 4–18.

Brennan, R. (2012). *Teaching marketing at university level: A review of recent research*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Burnett, P.C. (1999). The supervision of doctoral dissertations using a collaborative cohort model. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 39(1):* 46-52.

Casanave, C. (2002). *Writing games: Multicultural case studies of academic literacy practices in higher education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Casanave, C., & Hubbard, P. (1992). The writing assignments and writing problems of doctoral students: Faculty perceptions, pedagogical issues, and needed research. *English for Specific Purposes, 11:* 33–49.

Cadman, K. (1997). Thesis writing for international students: A question of identity? *English for Specific Purposes, 16:* 3–14.

Cargill, M. (1998). Cross-cultural postgraduate supervision meetings as intercultural communication,

in: M. Kiley & G. Mullins (Eds.), *Quality in postgraduate research: managing the new agenda,* (175-187) Adelaide, University of Adelaide.

Cassuto, L. (2010). Advising the struggling dissertation student. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 57(11):* 51-53.

Cooley, L., & Lewkowicz, J., (1995). The writing needs of graduate students at the University of Hong Kong: A project report. *Hong Kong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching*, *18*: 121–123.

Cooley, L., & Lewkowicz, J. (1997). Developing awareness of the rhetorical and linguistic conventions of writing a thesis in English: Addressing the needs of ESL/EFL postgraduate students. In A. Duszak (Ed.), *Culture and styles of academic discourse,* (113–1400) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Cooper, A., & Bikowski, D. (2007). Writing at the graduate level: what tasks do professors actually require? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 6:* 206-221.

Deckert, G. (1993). Perspectives on plagiarism from ESL students in Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 2(2):* 131-148.

Deem, R., & Brehony, K.J. (2000). Doctoral students' access to research cultures: are some more unequal than others? *Studies in Higher Education, 25(2):* 149 -55.

Delamont, S., Parry, O., & Atkinson, P. (1998). Creating a delicate balance: the doctoral supervisor's dilemmas, *Teaching in Higher Education, 3(2*): 157–172.

Drennan, J., & Clarke, M. (2009). Coursework master's programmes: the student's experience ofresearch and research supervision. *Studies in Higher Education, 34(5)*: 483-500.

Dong, Y. (1998). Non-native graduate students' thesis/dissertation writing in science: Self-reports by students and their advisors from two US institutions. *English for Specific Purposes*, *17*: 369–390.

Dysthe, O. (2002). Professors as mediators of academic text cultures: an interview study with supervisors and master degree students in three disciplines in a Norwegian university. *Written Communication, 19(4):* 485–536.

Edwards, D.F, & Thatcher, J. (2006). A student-centred tutor-led approach to teaching research methods. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 25(2)*: 195-206.

Egege, S., & Kutieleh, S. (2004) Critical thinking: Teaching foreign notions to foreign students. *International Education Journal, 4(4):* 75-85.

Exley, K., & O'Malley, C. (1999). *Supervising PhDs inScience and Engineering*. In Wisker, G and Sutcliffe, N(eds) *Good Practice in Postgraduate Supervision*, SEDA Paper 106.

Fox, H. (1994). Listening to the world: Cultural issues in academic writing. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Gale, X. (1994). Conversing across cultural boundaries: Rewriting 'self'. *Journal of Advanced Composition, 14*: 455–462.

Frost, A. (1999). Supervision of NESB postgraduate students in science-based disciplines. In Y. Ryan, & O. Zuber- Skerritt (Eds.), *Supervising postgraduates from non-speaking backgrounds* (pp. 101–109). Birmingham, UK: Open University Press.

Grant, B. (1999). Walking on a rackety bridge: mapping supervision, *Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Annual International Conference,* Melbourne, July.

Grant, B. (2003).Mapping the pleasures and risks of supervision, *Discourse,* 24(2), 175–190.

Grant, B. & Graham, A. (1999). Naming the game: reconstructing graduate supervision, *Teaching in Higher Education,* 4(1): 77–89.

Hesa (2013, 2000) Students by level, mode and domicle (UK) http://www.hesa.ac.uk/ [Accessed January 12, 2013]

Hetrick, S. & Trafford, V. (1995) The mutuality of expectations: mapping the perceptions of dissertation supervisors and candidates in a postgraduate department of a new university, *Journal of Graduate Education, 2(2):* 35–43.

Holbrook, A., & Johnston, S. (1999). The many facets of research supervision in education,. In A. Holbrook & S. Johnston, (Eds.), *Supervision of postgraduate research in education,* Review of Australian Research in Education No. 5, Sydney: Coldstream.

Huang, R. (2008) *Decoding critical thinking for Chinese and Indian international students studying in tourism and hospitality subjects.* York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/projects/round_9/r9_huang_report.pdf [accessed February 7, 2013]

Johnson, E. M.,Green, K. E., & Kleuver, R.C. (2000). Psychometric characteristics of the revised procrastination inventory. *Research in Higher Education*, *41:* 269–27.

Kam, B. H. (1997). Style and quality in research supervision: the supervisor dependency factor. *Higher Education, 34(1):* 81–103.

Lamm, R., Clerehan, R., & Pinder, J. (2007). Guides and Climbers: Development of an online resource for thesis writers and supervisors. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 21: 1166-1183.*

Leder, G. (1995). Higher degree research supervision: a question of balance. *Australian Universities' Review,* 38(2), 5–8.

Lillis, T. (2001). *Student writing: Access, regulation, desire*. London: Routledge.

Lumadi, M. W. (2008). The pedagogy of postgraduate research supervision and its complexities. *College Teaching Methods and Styles Journal, 4(11*): 25–32.

Maxwell, T.W., & Symth, R. (2010). Research supervision: the research management matrix. *Higher Education, 59(4):* 407-422.

McCormack, C. (2004). Tensions between student and institutional conceptions of postgraduate research. *Studies in Higher Education, 29(3):* 319-334.

McGowan, U. (2005). Does educational integrity mean teaching students NOT to 'use their own words'? *International Journal of Educational Integrity, 1(1).* http://www.ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/IJEI/article/viewFile/16/6 [Accessed November, 2012].

Megehee, C.M. and Spake, D.F. (2008) The Impact of Perceived Peer Behavior, Probable Detection and Punishment Severity on Student Cheating Behavior. *Marketing Education Review.* 18 (2), 5-19.

Meyer, J.H.F., Shanahan, M.P., & Laugksch, R.C. (2005). Students' conceptions of research : A qualitative and quantitative analysis. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research,* 49(3): 225–44.

Montcalm, D.M. (1999). Applying Bandura's theory of self-efficacy to the teaching of research. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 19(1*): 93–107.

Moses, I. (1984). Supervision of higher degree students: Problem areas and possible solutions. *Higher Education Research and Development, 3:* 153-165.

Murray, R. (2007). Incremental writing: A model for thesis writers and supervisors. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 21(8)*: 1067-1077.

Murtonen, M., & Lehtinen, E. (2003). Difficulties experienced by education and sociology students in quantitative methods courses. *Studies in Higher Education, 28(2),* 171–185.

Murtonen, M., & Lehtinen, E. (2005). Conceptions of research and methodology learning. ***Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research***. *49(3):* 217-224.

Muszynski, S., & Akamatsu, T. (1991). Delay in completion of doctoral dissertations in clinical psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *22:* 119–123.

O'Connell, F., & Jin L. (2001). *A structural model of literature review: An analysis of Chinese postgraduate students' writing*. Paper presented at BALEAP conference, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK.

Park, C., Hanbury, A., and Kuleg, M. (2007) *Postgraduate research experience survey: Final Report*. York: Higher Education Academy, http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/postgraduate/PRES.pdf [Accessed February 7, 2012].

Parry, S. (1998). Disciplinary discourse in doctoral education. *Higher Education, 36*: 273–299.

Parry, S., & Hayden, M. (1994). *Supervising higher degrees research students.* Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service.

Paxton, M. (2006). How do we play the genre game in preparing students at the advanced undergraduate level for research writing? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 5:* 4-18.

Phillips, E. (1994). Avoiding communication breakdowns. In O. Zuber-Skerritt & Y. Ryan (Eds.), *Quality in postgraduate education,* London: Kogan Page.

Phillips, E. M., & Pugh, D. S. (2000). *How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors*, *3rd Ed*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Pecorari, D. (2001). Plagiarism and international students: how the English speaking university responds. In D. D. Belcher, & A. R. Hirvela (Eds.), *Linking literacies: Perspectives on L2 reading-writing connections,* (229-245). Michigan, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Powles, M. (1988). *Know your Ph.D. students and how to help them.* Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Prior, P. (1994). Response, revision, disciplinarity. A microhistory of a dissertation prospectus in sociology. *Written Communication, 11*: 483–533.

Ryan, Y. (1994). Contracts and checklists: Practical propositions for postgraduate supervision. In O. Zuber-Skerritt & Y. Ryan (Eds.), *Quality in postgraduate education* (pp. 156-164). London: Kogan Page.

Sachs, J. (2002). A Path Model for Students' Attitude to Writing a Thesis. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 46(1): 98-108.*

Seymour, D. (2005). Learning outcomes and assessment: developing assessment criteria for Masters level dissertations. *Brookes eJournal of Learning and Teaching, 1(2): 1-9.*

Semeijn, J.H., Semeijn, J., & Gelderman, K.J. (2009). Master thesis supervision. *Advances in Business Education and Training*, 2(2): 211-222

Silva, T., Reichelt, M., & Lax-Farr, J. (1994). Writing instruction for ESL graduate students: Examining issues and raising questions. *ELT Journal, 48*: 197–204.

Smart, D., & Conant, J.S. (1990) Marketing dissertations: Profiling the successful thesis candidate. *Journal of Marketing Education, 12(3)*: 2-8.

Smith, D. (1999). Supervising NESB students from Confucian educational cultures. In Y. Ryan, & O. Zuber-Skerritt (Eds.), *Supervising postgraduates from non-English speaking backgrounds* (pp. 146–156). Suffolk: Open University Press.

Sutherland-Smith, W. (2005). Pandora's box: academic perceptions of student plagiarism in writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 4(1)*: 83-95.

Taylor, P. & Dawson, V. (1998) Critical reflections on a problematic student–supervisor relationship, in J. Malone, W. Atweh & J. Northfield (Eds), *Research and supervision in mathematics and science education* (105-127). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Todd, M.J., Smith, K., & Bannister, P. (2006) Supervising a social science undergraduate dissertation: staff experiences and perceptions. *Teaching in Higher Education, 11(2):* 161-173.

Wagner, C., Garner, M., & Kawulick, B. (2011). The state of the art of teaching research methods in the social sciences: towards a pedagogical culture. *Studies in Higher Education, 36(1):* 75-88.

Watkins, D. A., & Biggs, J. B. (Eds.) (1996) *The Chinese learner: cultural, psychological and contextual influences*. Hong Kong, Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong.

Woolhouse, M. (2002). Supervising dissertation projects: expectations of supervisors and students, *Innovations in Education and Training International,* 39(2): 137–144.

Ying, Fan (2013). The experiences of international students with dissertation study: Business Education. York: Higher Education Academy (*not yet published).*

Youngman, M. (1994) Supervisors' and students' experiences of supervision, in R. Burgess (Ed.), *Postgraduate education and training in the social sciences, (75-104).* London, Jessica Kingsley,

Zuber-Skerritt, O., & Knight, N. (2010). Problem Definition and thesis writing, *Higher Education, 15(1-2):* 89-103.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1987). Helping postgraduate research students learn. *Higher Education*, 16: 75–94.

Appendix One: Armitage (2006) on dissertation student "Types"

- From Armitage, A., (2006). The roles, expectations and experiences of master's degree dissertation supervisors. In: C. Rust, (Ed.), *Improving student learning through assessment*. Proceedings of the 13th improving student learning symposium, Imperial College, London, 5-7 September 2005. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

Type One: The "Hare"
These are self-reliant students whose supervisors have to deal with a varied number of practical and methodological issues during the course of the dissertation process. Students who fall into this category have the following characteristics and approaches towards the supervision and research process:

- Pre-conceived ideas of the dissertation outputs prior to conducting the research itself. This could be termed "backwards deduction".
- Highly focused and task-oriented characteristics.
- An emphasis of results output rather than a process centred research process. As such, academic rigour was seen as less important than actual and usable dissertation results and outputs.
- A narrow and limited view of what the research process and what research actually encompassed.
- A propensity to rush conclusions without submitting these to the wider concepts and theories that they were working within. This could be termed "conceptual blindness".
- A reluctance to engage literature outside their organisational context and making conceptual leaps to other related research, articles and learned works.
- A reluctance to engage the methodology literature, and pay only lip service to the academic framework in which the dissertation is couched.
- Research questions that were not fully developed.
- The absence of linking research objectives to methodology.

7.3.2 The "Tortoise"
These are the supervisor-directed and support-seeking students. Those who fall into this category appear to display diametrically opposed attributes to those of the self-reliant student. As such, they display characteristics of being theorists and reflectors (Honey and Mumford, 1985). Supervisors of this type of student have to lend both academic and moral support to their students to a greater extent than those supervising the self-reliant student, and this is more noticeable towards the latter stages of the dissertation process as the students near completion of their dissertation. Students who fall into this category had the following characteristics and approaches to the supervision research process:

- Research questions that are not fully formed.
- A reluctance to take responsibility at the early stages of the research process for their own learning.
- A propensity to be side-tracked into related issues and topics, as such they were not answering their original research questions.
- Easily distracted by outside interests, which included work issues such as promotion, and family commitments.
- Questioning each step of the dissertation process to a point where the supervisor adopted a 'hand holding' rather than facilitative role.
- A difficulty in coming to terms with the methodological issues and working in and with different types of paradigms, methodologies, and data collection approaches.
- A propensity to request more frequent dissertation meetings with supervisors, especially towards the end of the dissertation process as the hand-in date loomed.

7.3.3 The "Ostrich"
These students lose contact with their supervisor. Paradoxically, they tend to display the same characteristics of the self-reliant student possessing pragmatic and activist characteristics (Honey and Mumford, 1985). Supervisors have to re-establish the dissertation process and re-engage with their students after lengthy periods of time away from their studies due to personal and professional reasons. Students who fall into this category have the following characteristics to add to those of the self-reliant student in the way they approach the research process:

- A failure to have any focus at the initial stages of the dissertation process.
- A propensity to drop out or intercalate due to work and/or family life pressures.
- Not contacting their supervisor until well into the data analysis stage. This could be termed 'fear avoidance' as they are unwilling to admit their difficulties with the research process.
- A propensity to request more frequent supervision meetings at the initial stages of the dissertation process as their lack of confidence and understanding of the issues was scant.
- A tendency not to contact their supervisor for relatively long periods.
- A tendency to cancel supervisory meetings more frequently than the self reliant, directed and support seeking student.
- To submit the research process to their supervisor to sort out any difficulties they had got into.

Appendix Two: Example of aims and learning outcomes for a postgraduate Business-related dissertation in the UK

Dissertation Module Narrative (Example)

Aim

The aim of the Dissertation is to contribute substantially to the research training aim that is appropriate to a taught Master's programme. To achieve this aim the student is required to demonstrate an understanding of the philosophy and principles of research (empirical or non-empirical) and show competence in the design, execution and reporting of a research project. In this way the student's ability is developed to carry out subsequent research independently and to commission, manage and evaluate the research activities of others. The dissertation may be empirical or non-empirical in nature.

Learning Outcomes

Knowledge: On completion of this module, the successful student will be able to:

- Demonstrate an advanced understanding of relevant concepts and theories and critically evaluate their relevance through analysis and application, and an ability to utilise these concepts and theories in developing a substantial, logically structured and reasoned dissertation on a related topic;
- Demonstrate the ability to carry out a significant research project, based on a thorough review of the available academic literature and making use of appropriate models, theories and concepts applied to a specific issue;
- Demonstrate the ability to identify, critically evaluate and make appropriate use of a range of information from a variety of sources to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific issue;
- Make a reasoned and critical selection of information sources, analytical tools and techniques appropriate to the specific issue being investigated;
- Demonstrate the appropriateness and intellectual coherence of the research design/plan of argument for linking questions to methods and conclusions.
- Develop an advanced appreciation of, and the ability to critical reflect on, the influence of interpersonal, intercultural and ethical issues in the design;
- Recommend and evaluate appropriate courses of action; and,
- Present and justify the analysis and interpretation in a suitable and professional manner.

Skills: This module will call for the successful student to be able to:

- Demonstrate the ability to prioritise tasks and take responsibility for their own time management and autonomous learning ;
- Demonstrate the ability to work effectively with a supervisor;
- Demonstrate advanced critical thinking skills in a range on unforeseen circumstances and appreciate the role of complexity in advanced research and strategy formulation;
- Demonstrate the ability to analyse a specific issue and to evaluate, analyse and utilise secondary data, including academic literature, in identifying the salient dimensions of a current situation;
- Formulate specific research aims and objectives for primary data required, select and justify appropriate research methods (including addressing issues of adequacy of sample size, validity and reliability);
- Design and administer appropriate research instruments to collect primary data, where undertaken, analyse data obtained using appropriate analytical software and statistical tests where appropriate;
- Synthesise primary and secondary data and other relevant information and present a range of problem-solving solutions demonstrating logical consistency and adequacy of conclusions supported by data;
- Select an appropriate content, medium and style of presentation for a range of academic, professional and consumer audiences, including the development of advanced communication and inter-personal skills.

Contact us

The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York
YO10 5BR

+44 (0)1904 717500
enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk

ISBN: 000-0-0000000-00-0

© The Higher Education Academy, 2013

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is a national body for learning and teaching in higher education. We work with universities and other higher education providers to bring about change in learning and teaching. We do this to improve the experience that students have while they are studying, and to support and develop those who teach them. Our activities focus on rewarding and recognising excellence in teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice, and by helping to influence, shape and implement policy - locally, nationally, and internationally. The HEA supports staff in higher education throughout their careers, from those who are new to teaching through to senior management. We offer services at a generic learning and teaching level as well as in 28 different disciplines. Through our partnership managers we work directly with HE providers to understand individual circumstances and priorities, and bring together resources to meet them. The HEA has knowledge, experience and expertise in higher education. Our service and product range is broader than any other competitor.

www.heacademy.ac.uk | www.twitter.com/heacademy

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Editor. Such permission will normally be granted for educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the communications office at the Higher Education Academy: 01904 717500 or pressoffice@heacademy.ac.uk