Policy on Support for Dissertations and Projects in Taught Programmes

Scope
1. This applies to dissertations and other significant pieces of independent work undertaken by undergraduate and postgraduate taught students. The policy also applies to such work undertaken by groups of students rather than individual students.

Principles
2. Dissertations and other independent projects are designed to help students develop skills in independent learning and project management. There are therefore good educational reasons for setting limits to the amount of support available, otherwise there would be doubts as to whether the work was really the student’s and whether the student had been able to produce a major piece of independent work.

3. Because the disciplines taught in the University vary widely, it is likely that there will be differences in the way projects and dissertations are managed and good reasons for these differences. This policy does not therefore seek to establish a common set of expectations, but rather, to stress the need for expectations to be clearly communicated, remembering that for some students this may be their first large scale piece of work of this type. The level of support made available may legitimately vary according to the stage the students are at. That is matter for academic units to determine and then communicate to students.

4. The two key principles are therefore that academic units should:
   a. Set out clearly the level of support students can expect; this should be done in writing, but also be reinforced orally. It may be presented in the form of a “dissertation charter” which sets out the duties of both supervisor and student, clarifying the responsibilities on both sides.
   b. Ensure that staff deliver the promised level of support. This applies both to ensuring that sufficient support is provided, but also on grounds of equity, that some staff do not provide too much support.

Checklist of issues to consider
5. This provides a checklist of the issues schools should consider in determining their policy on dissertation and project support. By definition, it cannot be exhaustive and, in the case of non-verbal outputs, will need to be conceived differently:
Feedback

a. At what stage? – Plan, sample chapter(s), full draft, partial draft
b. Turnaround time for feedback.
c. Response times for quick e-mail questions, which should lie outside those issues covered by general written guidance in the module handbook
d. Last date for requests for feedback.
e. Form(s) of feedback – broad comments, annotation, oral

Staff time

f. How much staff time is allocated to meetings with students, reading drafts etc.
g. Whether meetings will be individual or in groups
h. How soon before a meeting written materials should be submitted so as to allow time for them to be read
i. Whether students can consult staff other than their supervisor

Recording meetings

j. Who is responsible?
k. How will this be done? E.g. ePortfolio

Staff Absences

l. How supervisees will be informed of staff absences and holidays, so they can plan accordingly
m. Who else they can approach if their supervisor is not available e.g. because of illness
n. If there are two supervisors, what the roles are and how they differ

Financial support

o. Whether there is any support for costs incurred by students and how they access this
p. Any additional resources provided – e.g. additional printer credit

Effective practice

6. Where it is feasible, it would be effective practice to:

a. Provide student access to some past projects, whilst ensuring they cannot benefit unfairly from this. This could be hard copy or electronic.
b. Include contributions from previous year’s students in module handbooks (or on Blackboard), recording their experiences of undertaking a project or dissertation and highlighting how to work effectively.
c. Use ePortfolio to support meetings with the supervisor and to record that they have taken place.
d. Provide access to information about past student project conferences and any relevant documents from the conference.
e. Mention the generic writing support available from the Writing Development Centre and from the Library.
f. Consider what additional support might be made available to students with specific learning difficulties (e.g. a readiness to proof read more or to correct grammar). This includes signposting students to support provided by Student Health and Wellbeing.
g. Recognise that some students, including some non-native speakers of English, may need further English language support and more support from their supervisors.
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