

MSC MARKETING MANAGEMENT DISSERTATIONS: AN UPDATE AND REFLECTION ON THE SUPERVISOR ALLOCATION AND STUDENT SUPERVISION PROCESS

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Update to:

Rudd, J.M. (2009) "Restructuring the process of dissertation supervision allocation", in Aston Business School Good Practice Guide in Learning and Teaching, Vol. 6, pp 2-9.

<http://www1.aston.ac.uk/clipp/learning-innovation/ltr-good-practice-guides/>

Introduction

It has been an interesting experience to re-read the 2009 paper, and to reflect on the changes made since then. The overall process (in terms of paperwork and deadlines) has changed little in this time. Some subtle changes and improvements have, however, occurred, and it is these (and the reasons for them) on which I will concentrate here.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the changes made to the supervisor allocation and dissertation supervision process, specifically the context and drivers of these changes will be discussed.

Supervisor allocation and supervision process - update

The general approach adopted by Course Directors and the Group to these issues is unchanged since 2009, and is as follows:

1. Make an early start: Create the student / faculty partnership early in the academic year.

Students and faculty are working together on developing ideas, and creating of an interesting and academically rigorous piece of work early in Term One. The very latest that a student will have agreed a dissertation project, and have an allocated supervisor, is week six of Term One. In this way, students are comforted by knowing they have qualified and experienced help in this area of their degree and, have started work on this important (and lengthy) project.

2. Structured supervision: Clear deadlines to dissertation completion are set and agreed between supervisor and student early in Term One.

It is important that in their initial (recorded) meetings, both student and supervisor set and agree clear and achievable goals. Of even more importance is that these are met, however, flexibility within the team is also often required.

By meeting regularly, and at agreed intervals, problems are easily identified and dealt with. Often, a lack of progress on the dissertation project is symptomatic of issues elsewhere, either academic and / or personal. As such the dissertation supervisor can help the Course Director in providing pastoral, as well as academic, support.

There were, however, two underlying principles expressed in the 2009 paper that were rethought. These were 1) “*Students require knowledgeable and structured supervision, based in theory*” and 2) “*It is helpful, but not essential, if students enjoy/like their dissertation topic.*”

1. “*Students require knowledgeable and structured supervision, based in theory*”

This remains largely true. There is much more of a focus, however, on the practical implications of research and engagement with practitioners. Many more of our students may now chose projects offered by organisations with which we have established links/dialogue. In this way, we can offer different forms of research help to our partner organisations, as well as creating more practically minded/focussed MSc Marketing graduates. It is our hope (and we have some anecdotal evidence to support this) that we enhance the employability of our graduates by creating stronger links with practitioners through MSc research projects. Additionally, there are examples where organisations who have initially wanted MSc-type research have, on completion, asked to conduct further work with members of faculty that may lead to publications in peer reviewed journals.

Since the 2009 paper we have also recruited three Teaching Fellows (for the first time) into the Marketing Group. This has been incredibly successful overall, but in relation to dissertation supervision their help, support and practical marketing knowledge, has been a source of motivation and inspiration to both students and faculty alike.

2. “*It is helpful, but not essential, if students enjoy/like their dissertation topic.*”

More flexibility and choice is now offered to MSc Marketing Management students. It is important that they “like” their dissertation topic, and their supervisor for that matter. History tells us that if students like their topic, they will engage with the process, and will work harder to achieve a better overall result (which everyone wants!). This choice has been facilitated, in part, by the employment of Teaching Fellows, who are able to supervise a much wider range of topics. Additionally, there has been a culture change in the Group that has meant faculty are much more open to alternative ideas on topics and flexible in their approach to topics they are willing to supervise. When the original paper was published it was not uncommon for students to be (in effect) given a topic and be told to get on with it. This would not happen now. Given the increasing importance of “word of mouth” (or social media based discussion forums), and the propensity of students to use them, it is important that in a very competitive marketplace we are mindful of the student experience, and adapt systems and processes accordingly

Overview and reflections

The processes regarding the allocation of dissertation supervisors and the dissertation supervision process is now reviewed annually in the Marketing Group. In this review, we examine feedback from the perspective of the course director, programme administrators, Marketing Group faculty and students. In this way we try to ensure an effective, efficient and relevant process for all major stakeholders, with a focus on student satisfaction.

These processes have remained largely unchanged, since the original Good Practice in Teaching and Learning paper in 2009. The original restructure provided a strong and clear framework that continues to support students and faculty, to deliver interesting and relevant marketing research projects in the timescales allowed.

Since 2009 we have been successful in recruiting a number of excellent faculty, and this in turn has increased the scope of the projects offered to students; allowing more choice. Unfortunately, since 2009 student numbers on the MSc Marketing Management have reduced. A positive outcome of this however, has been that faculty have allocated more time to fewer students. As a result, the overall quality of dissertation projects produced has increased, and the number of student complaints relating to dissertation issues, are close to zero. Based on anecdotal evidence in this case, but nevertheless supported by marketing theory, the strategic implications regarding staff to student ratios and their relationship with student satisfaction are clear. It is of importance that in the push for greater incomes

and student numbers, business schools and universities consider the amount of faculty resource available against the level of "service" required or desired (Berry, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, 1994; Singh 2000; Salanova, Agut, Peiro 2005). Faculty costs may increase as a result, however this will be more than off-set in the medium to long-term, by rising student numbers driven by excellent output measures (such as NSS scores, employability etc). This is not to say that more resource is always desirable, but appropriate and competitor-relevant levels are important.

Practitioner engagement is now a central theme in the MSc Marketing programme, and in the dissertation process. We have been successful in connecting with a wide variety of industry partners to enhance the range of projects offered. This is something that we will concentrate on in future, as the incentives for this are great both for students and for faculty.

References

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Salanova, M, Agut, S, Peiro, J.M. (2005). "Linking Organizational Resources and Work Engagement to Employee Performance and Customer Loyalty: The Mediation of Service Climate", *Journal of Applied Psychology*; 90, 6; pp 1217 - 1227.

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Example used with Postgraduate Students on MSc Marketing Management