

# **When is a dissertation not a dissertation? - an investigation of undergraduate final year capstone projects in the UK'**

## **Introduction**

According to UCAS (2014) there are over 128 providers of undergraduate marketing degrees in the UK with 87 offering single honours awards, 80 with joint marketing degrees and 49 offering marketing majors. Overall, UCAS lists some 871 UK undergraduate courses incorporating marketing. The vast majority of these courses incorporate a 'capstone' module during the final year of study which is often described as a dissertation or an independent project.

The QAA benchmark for Business and Management (QAA, 2007, p.3.), require students to have an "ability to conduct research into business and management issues, either individually or as part of a team for projects/dissertations/presentations. This requires familiarity with and an evaluative approach to a range of business data, sources of information and appropriate methodologies, and for such to inform the overall learning process". In most instances, this is assessed through the mechanism of a dissertation, although other means of assessment are possible, including individual or group project work.

This paper reports and reflects on a portion of the data obtained by the 'Undergraduate Marketing in the UK' project commissioned by the Academy of Marketing and relates specifically to the process, pedagogy and procedures by which final year projects – most commonly, dissertations – are implemented, controlled and evaluated.

## **Literature Review**

Research has previously been conducted on the content of the marketing curriculum (for example, Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Kuster & Vila, 2006; Stringfellow et al., 2006). Stringfellow et al. (2006) identified four "core" modules offered by more than three quarters of their sample of 28 institutions. These were: strategic marketing, principles of marketing, marketing research and marketing communications with a further seven "standard" modules were offered by between 50-74% of courses. Harrigan & Hulbert (2011) identified 16 'typical' modules within a UK marketing programme, many of which are similar to the 11 listed by Stringfellow et al (2006) some 5 years previously. However, while both surveys illustrate how static and compartmentalised the standard marketing course is, they do not refer explicitly to the role of a capstone project or dissertation, despite the relative importance of such modules within the final year curriculum. However, others acknowledge the benefits of a more holistic approach which embraces the interconnectivity of the various areas of marketing and other subject areas (Baker et al, 2003) and focuses on problem-orientated approach to meet the needs of employers (Piercy, 1995).

Healey et al (2013) identify 10 characteristics of final-year projects and/or dissertations as being:

1. an extended piece of work
2. research or inquiry-based
3. relevant to a discipline or take an inter-disciplinary approach
4. underpinned by a range of relevant sources

5. contextualised and show recognition of the provisional nature of knowledge
6. incorporate an element of critical thinking, challenge and evaluation
7. clear what it is contributing
8. clearly defined and justified methodology
9. build up to its conclusions and where appropriate have an element of reflective commentary, including recommendations
10. communicate the research outcomes appropriately and effectively

(adapted from: Healey et al, 2013)

While dissertations and final year projects continue to be important factors in the calculation of a degree classification (Rowley & Slack, 2004), there has been some debate about the format they should take, particularly in the light of changes within higher education. In the UK, until recently, there has been a significant growth in student numbers, particularly in business and management, and, as Healey et al (2013) note, these students come from a wider range of backgrounds. At the same time, Universities are looking to reduce costs and have identified that the cost of supporting all undergraduate students to undertake a dissertation is significantly more than for other modules. Rowley and Slack (2004) also acknowledge that the role of dissertations is changing, especially given that many courses now incorporate course work into assessment, often more so than examinations for subjects such as marketing. They note that independent learning is developed throughout all levels of courses, not just in the dissertation and hence it is no longer the only opportunity to demonstrate independent learning. Thus the role of the dissertation or final year project is in flux. Nevertheless, Healey et al (2013) strongly favour the notion of a final year project or dissertation for all honours degree students but note that:

‘...traditional dissertations do not necessarily provide for *all* students and employers’ requirements. Ways should be found for students in all disciplines, and from all backgrounds, to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential through undertaking FYPD more closely aligned to their needs and aspirations’

(Healey et al, 2013, p. 6.).

This view is reinforced by Hill et al (2011) who argue that by moving away from the traditional dissertation to other forms of assessment for capstone projects student experience, attainment and employability would improve though increasing its relevance to students and employers.

### **Research Question**

Based on the literature review, it is clear that a capstone project of some kind is still perceived to be an important element of an undergraduate honours degree. However, it is unclear to what extent dissertations form this capstone within the marketing curriculum.

Hence the research question is:

To what extent is the dissertation still prevalent as the capstone module in undergraduate marketing awards in the UK?

### **Method**

An initial list of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering undergraduate courses and programmes related to marketing was built using information from HESA and UCAS. This list was shortened by removing institutions not relevant to the study – either by scope or by only offering PG programmes and classes. This reduced the list of institutions from 130 to 108.

Outline information for each of these institutions was then compiled from publicly available sources such as HESA, Unistats, HEA, UCAS and institutional websites. Categories of data collected in this manner included relevant names, addresses and other contact information, programmes and associated entry requirements [e.g. UCAS tariff points].

The main data collection was by direct contact with these institutions during 2013. Appropriately identified marketing academics were asked to provide as much of the following as they were willing and able to do so:

1. A simple list of marketing programmes and the modules in them offered by their institution.
2. Class Outlines/module specifications from those modules. From these, learning outcomes and assessments etc were extracted.
3. Numbers of students taking those classes currently – and if possible – historically.

It is common practice for capstone projects to be supported by substantial and detailed documentation. As a result of this process, documents and information were received to allow appraisal of final year projects at a spread of 30 institutions. From this set, for the purposes of this paper, comparisons can be made about:

1. Specification – how is the dissertation or project defined? Word count, structure, individual or group, time allowed.
2. What learning outcomes of the projects are expected.

## **Results**

Responses were received from institutions in England, Scotland and Wales. Due to the relatively small sample, statistical analysis has not been undertaken but the following generalisations have been identified:

### Name of Capstone Module

Within the sample, a small minority of institutions had no identifiable capstone project within the marketing syllabus with a number offering it as an elective. Of those which offered an identifiable capstone module, the following titles, or variants of, were identified:

- Dissertation
- ‘Dissertation or Individual Project’
- Research Project In Management, Business And Marketing
- Researching Management Issues
- Independent Study
- Group Marketing Project

- Professional Practice
- Work-based Enquiry Project
- Critical Business Enquiry Project
- Client Consultancy Project (groupwork)

While the term ‘dissertation’ was the most popular, it is clear that there are a number of other models which are established to assess the ability to conduct research, including groupwork.

### Module Weighting and Output

Modules surveyed ranged from 10 credits (for a group marketing project) to 40 credits in weighting (for a 15,000 word dissertation), although the most popular formats were either 20 or 30 credits. This initial survey notes a significant variation in output required from students. For example, one 20 credit dissertation from a Welsh University requires students to undertake an 8,000 word dissertation whilst another English based post-92 institution requires up to 12,000 words for the same number of credits. At yet another English post-92 university, a group consultancy project requires 10,000 words for 20 credits.

### Independent versus Supported?

The type and level of contact and support given to students varies between institution. One Welsh institution provides dissertation students (20 credits) with up to 10 hours of individual contact with their supervisor, whilst another English post-92 institution offers just 3 hours supervisor contact time for 20 credits. In some institutions the support is offered through lectures and small supervisory seminar groups rather than individual one to one support.

### Learning outcomes.

Regardless of the type of independent project undertaken, there is general commonality of learning outcomes across many of the modules. This is illustrated by the Learning Outcomes for a variety of different capstone projects in Figure 1. Most outline a process of identifying a research or business problem, evaluating existing material and undertaking a literature review and making recommendations based on secondary, and, in some instances, primary research.

Institution	Nature of Capstone	Learning Outcomes
Welsh institution (1)	Research project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess and evaluate information from a range of sources.</li> <li>• Undertake a targeted review of literature.</li> <li>• Design and conduct appropriate research.</li> <li>• Analyse and present results. Present valid discussion, conclusions and recommendations.</li> </ul>
Scottish Institution	Dissertation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• delineating an area, or areas, suitable for research;</li> <li>• setting research objectives;</li> <li>• locating, organising and critically</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• analysing the relevant secondary data;</li> <li>• devising an appropriate research methodology;</li> <li>• drawing conclusions; and</li> <li>• making relevant and practical recommendations.</li> </ul> <p>- Identify, define and analyse the relevant theoretical constructs for consideration in a specific marketing area(s)</p> <p>- Combine relevant theories and suggest strategic alternatives to solve marketing problems based on this analysis</p>
Welsh institution (2)	Group Marketing Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyse marketing environments;</li> <li>• Assess customer needs and competitor behaviour;</li> <li>• Formulate, deliver and present strategic responses for key stakeholders.</li> </ul>
English post-92 institution (1)	Work based enquiry project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discuss, critique and apply knowledge of enquiry and research methodologies, methods and analytical techniques</li> <li>• demonstrate detailed knowledge of a business topic including the literature published in the area, its underlying concepts, theories and assumptions</li> <li>• research independently, including the ability to identify and define problems and plan, timetable and execute a realistic enquiry design</li> <li>• formulate reasoned solutions and make practical recommendations</li> </ul>

## Conclusions

This initial research provides just a snapshot of current practice in UK HEIs but indicates that there is a move from the term ‘dissertation’ to define the final year capstone project to that of ‘project’. There are distinct variations between institutions, with some opting for group work and others, a minority, making such a module an elective. The relative importance, in terms of the weighting of such modules varies, from 10 credits to 40 credits and this impacts the quality of the output. A student who has contributed to a 10 credit group project may have less opportunity to demonstrate the skills of inquiry than that of a student undertaking an independent project or dissertation worth 40 credits.

It is anticipated that further analysis of the data will be able to identify examples of innovation and best practice within the context of marketing undergraduate courses in the UK.

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