

2184 Going it Alone: Improving Dissertation Support

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Union Notes:

1. Completion of a dissertation, or final research project, is a requirement of many degree programmes at UEA.
2. With the weighting of dissertations ranging from 20 to 100 credits, they can hold huge bearing on the degree classification that an individual achieves.
3. The University currently has no policy to regulate dissertations at undergraduate or postgraduate level. This has led to extreme variation across the university in: the way dissertations are submitted and marked, the time frame provided to complete a dissertation, what is expected of the supervisor role, and the provision of research methods training.
4. A significant number of postgraduate taught students undergo their dissertation over the summer period, when many academics are on research leave. This can result in supervision and support being harder to access.
5. From the period of 24th July to 9th October 2017 uea(su) conducted a piece of research into the experiences of students on postgraduate taught (PGT) courses during the completion of their dissertations.
6. Our research found the following:
 - a. Dissertation submission dates varied by up to four months between Masters courses.
 - b. Over 50% of respondents had at least 3 weeks variation between the advertised course end date, and their dissertation submission date.
 - c. 55% of respondents were not made aware of when their dissertation was due until 3 months into their course.
 - d. 1 in 4 respondents said they would have liked more research methods training.
7. Many undergraduate courses do not provide optional research training for dissertation students. There is also no correlation between schools providing research methods training on undergraduate courses, which have corresponding courses at masters or PhD level.
8. There is no consistency at undergraduate level regarding the credit weighting of dissertations compared to word count.

Union Believes:

1. There are major concerns for students who have variation between their dissertation submission date and advertised course end date. This can impact on their accommodation, but more seriously, a significant gap can place tier 4 visa students at risk.
2. The variation between submission dates in both the January and September submission periods, should be reduced to no more than 2 weeks.
3. The university should coordinate accommodation contracts to fall more closely in line with final submission periods, with no more than 2 weeks variation.
4. Currently the dissertation experience is based on a lottery system, where limit on supervision hours, specialist training, timeframe given to complete, and information provided by the school, can all become factors that advantage some individuals over others.
5. While it is acceptable for there to be school-specific practice, there are minimum standards of support and guidance that all students should expect.
6. Every postgraduate student should receive a handbook at the start of their course that provides clarity on the dissertation process, what they can expect from their supervisor, and the sources of support available.
7. UEA should develop a policy to regulate the dissertation process, including specific expectations of supervisors.

Union Resolves:

1. To mandate the Postgraduate Education Officer to continue to work with the University to fulfil the recommendations of the PGT Students' Dissertations Support Report.¹
2. To develop a policy in partnership with the University's Dissertations Working Group with the aim of creating a more consistent and uniform dissertation experience.
3. Further to the recommendations of the PGT Dissertations Support Report, the Education Officers will also lobby for optional research methods training across undergraduate programmes that include a dissertation or large research project.

¹ <https://www.uea.su/pageassets/postgraduate/thehonestyproject/PGT-Masters-Support-Report.pdf>

4. The Education Officers will also request that the Dissertations Working Group review credit weighting of undergraduate dissertations in relation to word count across all schools.