

Red Guides
Paper 35

Dissertation: issues in guidance, supervision
and assessment

Lesley Matthews

Red Guides address educational and staff development issues within Higher Education and are aimed at colleagues within the University and at other institutions. Some describe current good practice in Higher education, others evaluate and/or comment on curriculum development and many provide ideas for teaching. All are meant to stimulate discussion, initiate action and implement change.

The guides may be reproduced for work with, or distribution to, students of Northumbria University and can be purchased by those outside our own institution.

The author (s) of this guide:
Lesley Matthews, School of Built Environment

Northumbria University

First edition: ISBN 13 – 978 1 86135 414 3

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

© Northumbria University 2007

Introduction

This guide explores some key issues concerning the supervision and assessment of dissertations. It explores the definition of a 'dissertation' in this context, preparing students to undertake dissertation work, the supervision process itself and the preparation of supervisors. Finally, it explores some issues around the marking criteria and the assessment process. It argues primarily for clear guidance for both students and staff, particularly in relation to criteria for assessment, and for much closer attention to the interpretation of those criteria by assessors.

What is a 'dissertation'?

The term dissertation is used here to mean some form of independent, usually student-centred and student-selected, research-based project, generally undertaken towards the end of an undergraduate or masters degree. It is commonly a significant piece of work, worth 20 to 30 credits (of 120 credits) when studied in the final year of a full time undergraduate UK degree programme, and 60 credits (of 180) studied by a master's degree student.

According to Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006 p161), the key characteristics of a dissertation are:

1. the focus is selected by the student
2. it is undertaken individually (though with some staff supervision)
3. there is a substantial research element
4. it is more prolonged and in depth than other assessments.

In the case of undergraduate programmes, the research may be essentially an extended literature review, and/or may require some limited, primary research and the application of research methods. It may be called an extended essay, a project, a

dissertation, independent study, or other term. The work often extends over a (relatively) lengthy period of time, sometimes commencing at the end of the second year, or at latest at the start of the third year (of a full time programme), with work required throughout the final year.

For postgraduates, a dissertation is usually a requirement for the masters award, and, in addition to a substantial literature review, will involve the application and evaluation of research methods through primary research, presented in a much more substantial (in terms both of length and quality) piece of work. Full time students usually have a relatively short period of time to complete the work, which often is undertaken predominantly after completion of the taught modules (at the end of the first academic year), though most courses will encourage an earlier start. Students then have around 3 months to complete the dissertation, to achieve the masters award within one calendar year, though practices vary between universities. Part time postgraduate students usually have the third year of study in which to complete their dissertation.

According to Ramsden (1992), dissertations encourage a deeper approach to learning than many forms of assessment. They encourage the development of independent, self-directed learning skills and learner autonomy. Research by Todd, Banister and Clegg in 2004 found that undergraduate students felt that the learning experience of producing a dissertation was worthwhile, both in terms of the knowledge and skills they developed and also because of the 'intrinsic' value of the final product. Despite this, with the rapid expansion of student numbers over the last couple of decades, some universities have abandoned the undergraduate dissertation as being too costly to supervise in staff terms (Todd, Bannister and Clegg, 2004). Nevertheless, in many, it remains an essential element of first degree classification, and it is also an essential element in most masters' programmes.

Preparing students

In research in 2004, Todd, Bannister & Clegg identified a number of problems experienced by their undergraduate students in undertaking dissertation work, and at least some of these aspects may also be problematic for postgraduates. The key issues can be summarised as:

1. students found it difficult to formulate a 'do-able' research question, possibly due to the lack of any previous experience at setting questions
2. there were practical problems in accessing secondary research literature, as well as collecting primary research data
3. time management was invariably an issue, especially when the dissertation involved primary research (which invariably takes much longer than anticipated).
4. conceptual difficulties arose around the nature of a dissertation, since students usually have no prior experience of this type of assessment
5. they may struggle to relate academic theory and concepts to their research question
6. dissertation work may require a disproportionate amount of time, so may impact on other studies

Arguably, it is the role of the supervisor (see below) to assist students to overcome these problems. However, at least some of these problems could be addressed, or at least reduced, by adequate preparation of students well in advance of the dissertation, while others may be addressed by better guidance – both written and oral – made available shortly before commencement.

(i) advance preparation

Todd, Bannister & Clegg (2004), citing Hemmings (2001) and Hughes (2002), argue that one way of addressing the problems which undergraduate students have in defining a research question *“may be allowing learners to practice the research process in the form of a project earlier in the degree course – probably at level 2 (now, level 5) – and this could increase their understanding and self confidence”* (p346)

However, since growing pressures on academic staff time, together with increasing student numbers, have already resulted in some universities abandoning undergraduate dissertations altogether, it may be unrealistic to expect courses to initiate an expansion of mini-research project opportunities to lower levels. However, there may be some scope to amend a current assessment to permit some element of self-selected focus within clear parameters. For postgraduate courses, with generally smaller numbers of students and a greater emphasis on independent study, it may be more feasible to require earlier attempts at research-process focused assessment.

Todd, Bannister & Clegg (2004) also stress the need for explicit guidance about the nature of the dissertation well in advance of its commencement, which could include opportunities to discuss sample research questions and previous students' dissertations. For example, most courses will offer a research methods module, intended to prepare students to undertake the dissertation, and it may be that opportunities to practice some of the key skills could be incorporated into this (or another) taught module. These could include using group discussion to formulate possible questions and identify feasible methodologies; identification of likely problems and limitations of different approaches; and discussion of relevant theories and concepts and how these relate to the question being discussed. The opportunity to examine previous dissertations should help to give students a much clearer vision of the structure, approach, and scope of dissertations. Similarly, one or more

earlier modules could require students to undertake a well-focused literature review (as either formative or summative assessment), with feedback offered on strengths and weaknesses or limitations.

Such approaches may make an important difference to subsequent performance. For example, in the School of the Built Environment at Northumbria, it was recognised that student performance on one particular undergraduate dissertation module was consistently weaker than might be expected (from student performance on other modules). After careful staff discussion about the weaknesses demonstrated in the students' work, a slight change was made both to the learning focus and the assessment of the (prior) research methods module. Students were now given an opportunity to discuss their own ideas for a research project, formulate questions, and explore possible research methodologies. This resulted in students having a more focused approach from the start of their subsequent dissertation module, enabling them to 'get into' the research much more readily, and with substantially better outcomes in terms of the quality of the completed work and hence their grades.

(ii) written and oral guidance

It is essential that all requirements are carefully identified in writing, so that students can refer to this at various points as their work commences and progresses. In addition, it is worth remembering that "*having clear guidelines can protect both (staff and students) when supervision does not go well*" (Todd, Smith & Bannister, 2006, p163). This written guidance should be backed up by oral explanations and descriptions, with opportunities for questions and discussion, particularly at the early stages. The supervisor is likely to provide frequent oral guidance once the research project is underway.

Drawing heavily on guidance produced by colleagues in the School of the Built Environment at Northumbria University, as

well as Matthews (2006, a & b), it is suggested that written (with supporting oral) guidance should always include information about:

a. *the nature of the initial dissertation/project proposal*

It is usual for course teams to provide the student with a form to complete, which is likely to require (at least):

- a proposed title
- an outline of the main focus
- proposed methodology (if primary research is involved)
- an initial listing of key literature sources

It is absolutely critical at this stage that the supervision team (in whatever form – see section 4, below) ensures that the student's proposal is:

- a) feasible (likely to be achievable – for example, is it likely that the student can secure the interviews suggested in the proposal?)
- b) realistic (in terms of workload / time required)
- c) at an appropriate level (for example, requiring analysis and not purely descriptive) and
- d) relevant to the degree discipline(s)

b. *the nature of the dissertation/project*

This specifies what the students are expected to do /achieve, and should, as a minimum, identify the learning outcomes. It may, of course, further expand on this; for example that an undergraduate dissertation must

- reflect a range of literature on the topic
- contain critical analysis and evaluation

- show awareness of limitations of sources/data
- relate to academic theory
- justify and evaluate research methods (if appropriate)

In addition, for postgraduates, it might refer to:

- the depth and sophistication of the analysis
- the breadth /comprehensiveness of the literature review, reflecting the main academic perspectives and issues
- competent application and review of appropriate research methods
- innovative approaches / interpretations
- sophisticated application of theories and concepts
- original research

This should, of course, relate to the assessment criteria (see below).

c. *marking criteria*

It is good practice that students are made aware of the criteria against which their dissertations will be assessed. This will be more useful if there is also an indication of the standards required to achieve different grades. Issues around criterion-referenced assessment and standards-based assessment are examined later in this guide, under ‘assessment’, and the criteria should always be made available in the student guidance. Oral discussion, for example, about the meaning of particular terms (such as ‘critical evaluation’, or ‘well-focused’) may also prove important.

d. *the format of the assessed work*

This usually specifies elements such as the normal *structure* or layout of the dissertation, *referencing norms*, maximum *word length*, and *presentation norms* (eg double spaced, bound).

However, while the format of a dissertation is generally a lengthy written piece of work, with a fair degree of consistency in structure (eg separate chapters for literature review, context, methodology, etc), in some disciplines (such as engineering, architecture, or art and design), the format may be quite different, requiring an emphasis on experimental results, plans, drawings, models, photographs, etc. These are more often termed extended projects, but retain the same essential characteristics of a dissertation, listed above. As a result, expectations here are likely to show considerable variation between different disciplines.

e. *information about dissertation completion and submission*

This should specify if there are any stages in submission (e.g. at the project proposal stage, or on completion of the literature review, which may be summatively or formatively assessed on some programmes) as well as the final submission date / time / location for submission.

f. *the role of the supervisor*

This needs to be as precise as possible about what can, and can not, be expected from the supervisor, such as the total hours of supervision offered, frequency of meetings, etc. Issues around the supervision process are examined further below, and the main elements of the role, which have been agreed by the supervision team, should be reflected in the student guidance. It should be emphasised to students that the supervisor has, potentially, a key role to play in guiding them to a successful outcome, so they should ensure that they maximise their use of this important resource.

g. *Other roles in the process*

Any roles additional to that of the student's supervisor should be identified here. For example, does someone or group (such as a dissertation module tutor or supervision team) oversee

acceptance of the initial dissertation proposals? Or allocate supervisors? Who will mark the project? Mention should also be made here of the roles of external examiners.

h. student responsibilities

This might include reminders / warnings about:

- *research ethics* (particularly where primary research is or may be involved)

The university may have specific policies and/or a formalised process (such as forms to sign) to cover students' ethical behaviour and the rights of interviewees, etc, which should be reflected in the guidance.

- *plagiarism*

With the apparent increased incidents of student plagiarism, and the ready availability of completed projects through internet sources, it is vital that this topic is given prominence. Students should be reminded that the dissertation must be an individual piece of work, and of the rules of referencing which relate to that discipline. Deterrence is always to be preferred over detection: deliberate, calculated plagiarism may be difficult to deter, but inadvertent plagiarism can often be avoided. Regular supervision meetings are a key method by which plagiarism can be deterred and/or identified at an early stage, but students should be given explicit warnings about what plagiarism is and of the consequences of engaging in it (citing the university regulations).

- *the need for careful time management*

Encouragement can be offered here to draw up a work plan (of target dates and key stages), which can assist students to manage their research process more effectively.

i. the university's regulations (as they apply to dissertations on that specific programme)

This will identify, for example, if successful completion of the dissertation is essential for the award of honours degree; the weighting of the dissertation in the final award; the rules relating to compensation (if any), referral; and the role of exam board(s).

The supervision process

(i) the need for consistency

Consistency in the supervision role is highly desirable across the programme. Indeed, arguably, it is desirable across the university (in so far as it is possible, due to the differing nature of dissertations and projects in different disciplines), to ensure some common standards of support for similar awards (whether undergraduate degree or postgraduate). When the dissertation makes a significant contribution to the final award, it seems manifestly unfair for students in some discipline areas to receive considerable direction and support, when others receive little - yet they all receive the “same” qualification (BA (hons), BSc (hons), etc) from the same institution, classified in the same ways.

It is usual for supervisors to play a key role in ‘getting students started’, for example, with help in narrowing down the research focus, initial suggestions for reading, and some discussion about possible research methods. Thereafter, accepted norms may be more varied, so it is necessary to identify for both staff and students what supervisors can (and can not) do, in relation to the written work as it progresses. For example, it may be acceptable for supervisors to read some early drafts of parts of specific chapters, but not to provide detailed reading as the work nears completion. Unless there is consistency of approach within the supervision team, particular students may be advantaged (or disadvantaged) by different approaches to supervision (for example, the extent of ‘proof reading’).

The norms for frequency of contact are also highly variable. For example, in the social sciences at Sheffield Hallam, students are “*entitled to 20 minutes of supervision per week*” (Todd et al, 2004, p337), whereas other departments and/or institutions may specify a minimum/maximum number of meetings (or hours of contact time) over the study period. Similarly, some universities and staff adopt a very formal approach to supervision – such as pre-planned meetings, at which formal written records of what was discussed and agreed at each meeting are produced - whereas others adopt a much more informal approach, and leave it up to students to initiate contact. Again, what matters most is that this is consistent across the programme, so that some students do not feel disadvantaged by their supervisor adopting a very different approach to others. On the other hand, it is also important that supervisors are sensitive to student needs and wishes, so that supervision does not act to impede rather than facilitate progress.

It is also desirable that there is some formalised process for approving dissertation proposals, so that someone (such as the *dissertation module tutor*), or a group of staff (eg *a project / dissertations’ panel*), is responsible for ensuring that the approved proposals from the student cohort are broadly comparable in terms of the workload and scope. Without this overview, there is a risk that some students may be taking on disproportionately onerous tasks when compared to others, which could seriously disadvantage their relative performance. This person /group then has responsibility for allocating appropriate staff to supervision, having regard to the topic and staff academic interests and workloads.

(ii) the need for staff guidance

According to Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006, p163), “*the job of the undergraduate dissertation supervisor can be made all the more difficult by the lack of explicit guidance produced for them*”. Many staff would agree that there is a need for some

formal guidance about the dissertation supervisor's role, particularly for new staff, to ensure that there is a shared understanding of what they are expected to do (or not do). This could be in the form of a staff development workshop and/or by providing written guidance, though the latter also has the potential virtue of providing clear information for external examiners about the nature and extent of academic staff support to student dissertations. Ideally, then, the guidance will suggest the extent of (and limits to) the support offered, as well as the nature of that support; for example, whether it is expected that the supervisor will advise on presentation, correct grammar and spelling, and to what extent draft chapters should be closely read. Whilst it is clear that students' need for support will vary (depending, for example, on their academic ability, confidence, or whether English is a second language), it is important to ensure that there is not a huge variation in the interpretation of the supervisor's role by different staff. There should also be guidance in relation to student responsibilities; for example, if a student fails to attend an appointment, what action (if any) is expected from the supervisor?

Although Todd, Smith & Bannister (2006) found that none of their supervisor interviewees had received any formal training in the role, there nevertheless seemed to be a broad consensus about the supervision process, perhaps emphasising the critical importance of informal staff networks. These supervisors also recognised that boundaries were not always easy to maintain "*particularly where weaker students are involved*" (p169). There was some support amongst academic staff for training for new supervisors, though the role of the dissertations' module tutor (as advisor and overseer) was also seen as important. There was broad agreement that the supervisors' role changes through the process, from, in the early stages, "*a relatively directive, 'hands-on approach'*" to "*a more background position*" as the work progresses (p166). Staff guidance therefore needs

to reflect these changes in the role as the supervision process develops.

Assessment

(i) assessment criteria

There remain some distinct divisions amongst academic staff about the need for clear marking criteria for dissertations. Hand and Clewes (2000) characterise two conflicting views, the first of which argues for criterion referencing, so that everyone (staff and students) is clear about how the work will be judged. The second views the dissertation as a holistic work, and argues that *“attempts to reduce the work to specific elements, each with their own criteria, would diminish the judgements of tutors”* (p7). However, pressures towards more explicit performance criteria in higher education (eg via HEQC (1997), and the Dearing Report (1997)) have resulted increasingly in the criterion referenced approach to assessment.

Some generic examples from Northumbria University are shown in Figure 1, below. These relate to level of study but are not designed specifically for dissertations, so supervisory teams may require some amendments to make them more appropriate to the specific challenges of a dissertation module. Particular disciplines (such as design or architecture) may also require quite different criteria, depending on the nature of the required project.

However, the challenges do not end once a set of assessment criteria have been devised. Holroyd (2000) argues that *“the notion that consistency problems in assessment are solved by the production of a set of assessment criteria is woefully simplistic”* (p35), and argues that assessors need to develop shared understanding of the meaning of the criteria in practice. Research by Webster, Pepper and Jenkins in 2000 at Oxford Brookes discovered that most (but not all) students in the School of Social Sciences and Law were given marking criteria

for their dissertations, but that the relative weightings of the criteria were not explicit. They also discovered that some assessors seemed on occasions to apply their own (different) marking criteria, and that even when staff were attempting to apply criteria systematically, it was clear that the meanings of the terms used were open to differing interpretation. This led them to propose 10 recommendations for consideration by dissertation supervisors, departments and universities in the UK. These can be summarised briefly as:

- dissertation guidelines should contain explicit marking criteria with relative weightings
- guidelines should also describe the characteristics of different mark classifications (of a first, upper second, etc)
- the interpretation and meaning of all terms should be agreed between assessors

Figure 1 Examples of assessment criteria

a) from the Newcastle Business School

Undergraduate Programmes

	LEVEL SIX
First (80 - 100)	Exceptional scholarship for subject. Outstanding ability to apply, in the right measure, the skills necessary to achieve highly sophisticated and fluent challenges to received wisdom.
First (70 - 79)	Knowledge and understanding is comprehensive both as to breadth and depth. A mature ability to critically appreciate concepts and their inter-relationship is demonstrated. Clear evidence of independent thought. Presentation of work is fluent, focused and accurate.
Upper Second (60 - 69)	Knowledge base is up-to-date and relevant, but also may be broad or deep. Higher order critical appreciation skills are displayed. A significant ability to apply theory, concepts, ideas and their inter-relationship is illustrated
Lower Second (50 - 59)	Sound comprehension of topic. Reasoning and argument are generally relevant but not necessarily extensive. Awareness of concepts and critical appreciation are apparent, but the ability to conceptualise, and/or to apply theory is slightly limited.
Third (40 - 49)	Knowledge is adequate but limited and/or superficial. In the most part, description/assertion rather than argument or logical reasoning is used. Insufficient focus is evident in work presented.
(30 - 39)	Minimal awareness of subject area. Communication of knowledge frequently inarticulate and/or irrelevant.
(0 - 29)	Poor grasp of topic concepts or of awareness of what concepts are. Failure to apply relevant skills. Work is inarticulate and/or incomprehensible.

Source: Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice at Northumbria University, 2004.

b) from A. Dordoy (2007), Academic Registry, Northumbria University

	Mark Range	Postgraduate Generic Assessment Criteria
Distinction	86-100	Exemplary work providing evidence of a complete or near complete grasp of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. All learning outcomes met a high level. Exemplary in: use of primary sources of literature from a range of perspectives; development of analysis and structure of argument; critical evaluation of theories including those at 'cutting edge' of the discipline; creative original use of theory, research methods and findings; presentation of information to the intended audience.
	76-85	Outstanding work providing evidence to an extremely high level of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. All learning outcomes met, most at high level. Outstanding in: use of primary sources of literature from a range of perspectives; development of analysis and structure of argument; critical evaluation of theories including those at 'cutting edge' of the discipline; creative use of theory, research methods and findings; presentation of information to the intended audience.
	70-75	Excellent work providing evidence to a very high level of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. All learning outcomes met, many at high level. Excellent in: use of primary sources of literature from a range of perspectives; development of analysis and structure of argument; critical evaluation of theories including those at 'cutting edge' of the discipline; some creative use of theory, research methods and findings; presentation of information to the intended audience

Commendation	67-69	<p>Very good work providing evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. All learning outcomes met, some at a high level.</p> <p>Very good in: use of up-to-date material from a variety of sources; development of analysis and structure of argument; critical evaluation of theory; application of relevant theory, research methods and findings to the problem in question; presentation of information to the intended audience</p>
	63-66	<p>Good work providing evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. All learning outcomes met, many are more than satisfied.</p> <p>Good in: use of up-to-date material from a variety of sources; development of analysis and structure of argument; critical evaluation of theory; application of relevant theory, research methods and findings to the problem in question; presentation of information to the intended audience</p>
	60-62	<p>Good work providing evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. All learning outcomes met, many are more than satisfied.</p> <p>Good in most of the following aspects: use of up-to-date material from a variety of sources; development of analysis and structure of argument; critical evaluation of theory; application of relevant theory, research methods and findings to the problem in question; presentation of information to the intended audience</p>

Pass	57-59	<p>Highly satisfactory work providing evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. All learning outcomes are met, some are more than satisfied.</p> <p>Highly satisfactory in: use of relevant material from a variety of sources; development of analysis and structure of argument; evaluation of theory; application of relevant theory, research methods and findings to the problem in question; presentation of information to the intended audience.</p>
	53-56	<p>Satisfactory work providing evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. All learning outcomes are met.</p> <p>Satisfactory in: use of relevant material from a variety of sources; development of analysis and structure of argument; evaluation of theory; application of relevant theory, research methods and findings to the problem in question; presentation of information to the intended audience.</p>
	50-52	<p>Acceptable work providing evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. All learning outcomes are met.</p> <p>Adequate in: use of relevant material from a variety of sources; development of analysis and structure of argument; evaluation of theory; application of relevant theory, research methods and findings to the problem in question; presentation of information to the intended audience.</p>

Fail	45-49	<p>Work is not acceptable in providing evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. A substantial majority of the learning outcomes are met, however, and the others are nearly satisfied.</p> <p>Adequate in most but not all of the following aspects: use of relevant material from a variety of sources; development of analysis and structure of argument; evaluation of theory; application of relevant theory, research methods and findings to the problem in question; presentation of information to the intended audience.</p>
	30-44	<p>Work is not acceptable in providing evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. Most of the learning outcomes are met, however, and many of the others are nearly satisfied.</p> <p>Adequate in at least some of the following aspects: use of relevant material from a variety of sources; development of analysis and structure of argument; evaluation of theory; application of relevant theory, research methods and findings to the problem in question; presentation of information to the intended audience</p>
	1-29	<p>Work is not acceptable and shows little evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. Few of the learning outcomes are met.</p> <p>Inadequate in several, or seriously inadequate in at least one of the following aspects: use of relevant material from a variety of sources; development of analysis and structure of argument; evaluation of theory; application of relevant theory, research methods and findings to the problem in question; presentation of information to the intended audience</p>
	0	<p>Work not submitted OR</p> <p>Work giving evidence of serious academic misconduct (subject to regulations in ARNA Appendix 1) OR</p> <p>Work showing no evidence of the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to level 7. None of the learning outcomes are met</p>

They suggest that, ideally, common criteria should be applied across university departments, with perhaps a few subject-specific criteria added, and markers should be discouraged from using any additional criteria.

Similarly, Hand and Clewes' (2000) research at Nottingham Trent Business School found that *"although there were guidelines in existence, they were not used consistently and not all staff regarded them as valuable"* (p10). Like Webster et al (2000), they argue that often key terms are open to interpretation, but also that the evidence that assessors look for, in support of different criteria, can vary: *"it is markers' judgements which are at the heart of this marking process"* (p16), so that *"tutors may see quite different qualities when viewing the same dissertation"* (p18). In relation to mark classifications, they also found *"a lack a consensus over what differentiates a 2.1 from a 2.2, particularly at the margin"* (p 15), which leads them to suggest that *"we need to look much more closely at our construction of, and adherence to, marking guidelines if consistency is to be achieved and quality assured"* (p19) .

The use of descriptors of mark classifications was explored by Tan and Prosser(2004), who examined the use of 'grade descriptors' in the University of Sydney (though not explicitly for dissertations), which they define as *"the practice of describing for students characteristic work that would merit different grades"* (p269). At their most developed, grade descriptors can act as 'grade indicators', in which *"the focus is on identifying the different criteria for each grade as a common platform for staff and students"* (p273), as well as 'grade interpreters', which differentiate more comprehensively between different achievement standards. They argue that this latter conception of grade descriptors, *"by focusing on standards-referenced assessment, represent the practice and understanding of grade descriptors that comes closest to fulfilling the purpose of providing lucid and unambiguous statements of required*

standards of performance” (p279). Although this approach seems, as yet, to be relatively uncommon in the UK, it is possible to see it as the likely future direction for the development of more explicit assessment criteria and standards. One example of this type of approach, using generic criteria for level 6 assessments at Northumbria University, appears at Figure 2 – though, again, this may require some adjustment if specifically for dissertation purposes, or for different disciplines.

(ii) Marking

If the interpretation of assessment criteria can be value laden, it is clear that the marking process itself may be approached differently by different staff. Many academics have had no formal training in ‘how to mark’ in higher education institutions and Yorke, Bridges & Woolf (2000) emphasise *“the importance of inducting new staff into the concepts and methodologies of assessment”* (p22). It is worth reminding ourselves of the significance of marking to students, for, as Boud (1995, p35, quoted by Yorke et al, 2000) argues, *“students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot (by definition, if they want to graduate) escape the effects of poor assessment”*. Due to its high relative weighting, this observation is especially pertinent for the dissertation module.

Although apparently guided by explicit criteria, some staff may adopt a more ‘holistic’ approach to the assessment process and fit the marks to the individual criteria after making a judgement about the overall ‘value’ (in classification terms) of the work. Guidelines for classifications can help to guide markers more precisely in these judgements, but the key importance of developing shared understanding about the marking process is evident here. Price (2005) emphasises the need to develop what she calls ‘communities of practice’, in which there is *“a shared repertoire of communal resources, mutual engagement and a sense of joint enterprise”**“the use of social*

relationships is key.... to achieve a common understanding of standards and consistent marking practice“ (p 216)

Arguably, second marking is critical to minimising some of the problems identified above. However, as Hand and Clewes (2000 p18) point out, there may be a ‘natural’ tendency for convergence, especially when one marker is more ‘senior’ than another. If the second marking is genuinely “blind” double marking, whereby the second assessor has no access to the first’s comments or marks, this may help to overcome this potential ‘seniority’ problem. However, if the two markers’ assessments diverge, and they cannot agree on which is most accurate, this is likely to reflect differences in the interpretation of the marking criteria. Further discussion of the criteria, to try to develop closer shared understanding, may provide a resolution. If it does not, however, a third marker will then be necessary to adjudicate, because, as Hand and Clewes argue, the practice of taking the *average* of two assessors’ marks, when the two cannot agree, is an unsatisfactory and invalid approach to marking. Some Schools and Departments may also choose to use their external examiner (with his/her agreement) to assist in making this judgement.

It seems to be fairly common for dissertation supervisors also to act as markers of the dissertation they have supervised, despite perceptions that supervisors tend to mark more generously, perhaps because they “*may tend to assess the supervisory experience rather than the final piece of work*” (Hand & Clewes, 2000, p17). It is, perhaps, understandable that the more intimate knowledge that the supervisor has, of what the student has experienced, the work they have done, the efforts to which they have gone, will colour judgements. It can be argued that, for this reason, supervisors should not be involved in assessing the completed dissertation. If it is felt that the summative assessment should include an element for the process undergone by the student (and not just the final output), then

this should be separately identified (with criteria) and separately assessed.

Figure 2

Level 6 grade expectations (Psychology)

	First (70% +)	Upper Second (60-69%)	Lower Second (50-59%)	Third (40-49%)	Fail (20-39%)	Bad Fail (0-19%)
Coverage of the question	Covers all aspects of the question.	Covers most aspects of the question.	May not address some major aspects of the question.	Fails to address a number of major aspects of the question.	Addresses relatively few of the major aspects of the question. May be too short.	Addresses none of the major aspects of the question. Probably too short.
Knowledge of relevant material	Evidence of extensive independent reading including books and recent journal articles (in addition to suggested readings).	Evidence of independent reading including books and journal articles.	Answer based mainly on lecture material.	Some relevant information from lectures.	Little evidence of relevant knowledge. May cite personal anecdote.	Almost no relevant knowledge. May rely on personal anecdote.
Accuracy	All the material is accurate.	There are no major factual errors.	There may be some minor factual errors.	There may be some major factual errors.	There may be many major factual errors.	Little or no factual accuracy
Relevance	All the material is directly relevant.	Almost all the material is directly relevant.	Some of the material may not be directly relevant.	Much of the material may not be directly relevant.	Little of the material is directly relevant.	Answers a totally different question to that set.

Clarity of expression	All points expressed clearly and succinctly.	Most points expressed clearly and succinctly.	Some points may not be expressed clearly.	Not always clear what was intended.	Often difficult to discern what was intended.	Hardly ever possible to discern what was intended
Organisation	Excellent (possibly original) organisation of the material.	Very clear organisation of material.	Clear organisation of material.	Some organisation of the material	Little structure apparent.	No structure apparent
Evaluation of theory, methodology and/or empirical evidence.	Shows excellent appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of theories, methodologies and empirical evidence and their interplay. May show knowledge of the historical development of the field.	Shows good appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of theories, methodologies and empirical evidence and their interplay. Perhaps some indication of the history of the area.	Makes some attempt to evaluate theories, methodologies and empirical evidence and to justify claims.	Assertion with little concern for evidence.	Assertion without concern for evidence.	Assertion without evidence

Personal Contribution	May present own (possibly novel) view of the material, perhaps integrating evidence from or drawing parallels with other areas of the discipline. May make insightful predictions about the future development of the area.	May present own view of the material, perhaps integrating evidence from or drawing parallels with other areas of the discipline. May make sensible predictions about the future development of the area.	May make some attempt to present own view of the material showing some concern for its justification.	May make some attempt to present own view of the material but with little concern for its justification.	May present own view of the material but without any attempt to justify it.	May present a personal view that is irrelevant to the question.
------------------------------	---	--	---	--	---	---

Source: Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice at Northumbria University, 2004

Conclusion

This guide has explored some key issues about student guidance, supervision and assessment of dissertations, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It has argued that clarity of guidance, for both staff and students, is critical, to ensure that expectations and limitations are clear from the outset. There needs to be some mechanism to ensure that students' choices are appropriate for the degree discipline and are roughly comparable in terms both of workloads and the feasibility of the project proposed. Marking criteria should be explicit and, arguably, relate clearly to different grades or standards, with relative weightings clarified. However, course teams also need to ensure that the assessors themselves share common understandings of key terms and concepts used in the criteria and that they apply their judgements in similar ways, if assessment is to be consistent and valid.

References

Boud D (1995), Assessment and Learning: contradictory or complementary? in Knight P (ed), *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*, pp35-48, London, Kogan

Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice at the University of Northumbria (version September2004), Newcastle, UNN

Hemmings S (2001), The place of the dissertation in learning to research, in Humphrey R & Middleton C (eds), *Learning to research: resources for learning and teaching in sociology and social policy* (Sheffield SSP2000/ Teaching and Learning Network for Sociology and Social Policy)

Hand L & Clewes D (2000), Marking the Difference: an investigation of the criteria used for assessing undergraduate dissertations in a business school, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol 25 (1), pp 6-21

Higher Education Quality Council (1997), *Managing standards in Higher Education*, London, HEQC

Holroyd C (2000), Are assessors professional? *Active Learning in Higher Education*, Vol 1(1), pp 28-44

Hughes P (2002), *Developing Independent Learning Skills*; paper presented at the 2nd Annual Skills' Conference, University of Herefordshire

Matthews L (2006a) *The process of supervising dissertations*, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, MARCET Red Guide' Paper 7

Matthews L (2006b) *Managing Dissertation Supervision*, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, MARCET 'Red Guide' Paper 8

National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997), *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (The Dearing Report), London, HMSO

Price M (2005), Assessment standards: the role of communities of practice and the scholarship of assessment, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol 30 (3), pp 215-230

Ramsden P (1992) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, London, Routledge

Tan K H K and Prosser M (2004), Qualitatively different ways of differentiating student achievement: a phenomenographic study of academics' conceptions of grade descriptors, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol 29 (3), pp267-282

Todd M, Bannister P & Clegg S (2004) Independent Inquiry and the undergraduate dissertation: perceptions and experiences of final year social science students, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol 29 (3), pp335-355.

Todd M J, Smith K & Bannister P (2006) Supervising a social science undergraduate dissertation: staff experiences and perceptions, *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol 11 (2), pp161-173

Webster F, Pepper D & Jenkins A (2000), Assessing the undergraduate dissertation, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vo 25 (1), pp71- 80

Yorke M, Bridges P and Woolf H (2000), Mark distributions and marking practices in UK higher education, *Active Learning in Higher Education*, Vol1(1), pp 7-27