

# NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE THE SELF-EFFICACY OF UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION STUDENTS

Heather Skinner and Robin Croft

University of Glamorgan

HEATHER SKINNER is a Principal Lecturer in Learning, Teaching and Assessment in the University of Glamorgan's Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT). Heather has published widely in her main subject area of place marketing, and has also presented a range of papers on learning, teaching and assessment issues at education subject centre and HEA conferences.

ROBIN CROFT is a Principal Lecturer in Marketing in the Glamorgan Business School. Robin is a specialist in interpersonal communication—in particular word of mouth and its electronic variants. He has worked extensively in the whole area of social networking and has a number of current projects involving understanding how different groups mediate their communication through Web 2.0 technologies.

Correspondence to:  
Heather Skinner  
University of Glamorgan  
Pontypridd  
CF37 1DL  
[hskinner@glam.ac.u](mailto:hskinner@glam.ac.u)

Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education  
Volume 1 • Number 1 • pp29–38  
JANUARY 2009

© University of Glamorgan 2009  
ISSN: 1758-1184

Journal correspondence to:  
[jarhe@glam.ac.uk](mailto:jarhe@glam.ac.uk)

University of Glamorgan

Cardiff • Pontypridd • Caerdydd



# NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE THE SELF-EFFICACY OF UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION STUDENTS

Heather Skinner and Robin Croft

University of Glamorgan

## Abstract

**THIS PAPER** aims to address the gap in the extant literature examining the support offered to, and required by, students in light of the changing nature of the undergraduate dissertation and the changing nature of the student undertaking it. For many, it will be the first time that they will have undertaken a self-directed, major research project. The focus of this paper is to present the neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) framework for setting well-formed outcomes that was offered to students in the initial session of a pilot dissertation workshop support programme, initially targeting students completing dissertation projects on marketing topics within the Business School. Unlike modules on Research Methods the focus of this programme was not on methodology, but on soft skills such as goal setting, time management and motivation, along with practical skills such as those required to take advantage of developments in data processing technology. The paper also presents the findings of qualitative data gathered from responses of students in focus groups and in-depth interviews designed to explore students' on-going motivation throughout the dissertation process. The paper concludes with a comparison of the results of those students who took part in the workshop sessions with those that did not.

**Key words:** Goal-setting, motivation, neuro-linguistic programming, self-efficacy, undergraduate dissertations.

## Introduction

**THE NATURE** of the undergraduate dissertation has changed over the past 20 years or so. Historically the dissertation was designed to offer students a new learning experience where they would learn and utilise new skills, whereas today the dissertation has changed and is increasingly perceived as a way for students to demonstrate skills they have already learned during their undergraduate studies (Rowley and Slack, 2004). Despite the change in its purpose, the dissertation continues to be perceived by many (including students, academics and employers) as the culmination of a programme of undergraduate study (Todd *et al*, 2006), and as "arguably the most important piece of work a student produces on a degree course" (Lane *et al*, 2003). Another change in the nature of the dissertation is that, while it continues to be perceived as important and may contribute to a student's honours classification (Lane *et al* 2003, Rowley and

Slack, 2004, Todd *et al*, 2006), the dissertation is no longer the necessary component of a student's 'honours' degree it once was.

The dissertation can be challenging for all students, as it is often the first occasion they have undertaken such a major self-directed research project (Todd *et al*, 2006). For non-traditional students the challenge can be even greater. One paper that touches on these aspects of the dissertation is Lane *et al*'s (2003) investigation into "self-efficacy and dissertation performance among sport students". This article suggests that students' own perceptions of self-efficacy—a term which Lane *et al* understand in light of Bandura's (1997, p3) definition as "the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments"—are important for dissertation success.

However, there has been a change in the nature of the student body with a focus on widened participation in many HEIs (see, for example, Houston and Rimmer, 2005), leading to a growing body of literature on attendant learning and teaching issues. One issue of relevance to the undergraduate dissertation is the disproportionately low self-belief evidenced by some students from non-traditional backgrounds, as noted by Rust (2002), citing Yorke's address to the 2001 Institute for Learning and Teaching Symposium on Widening Participation. This raises concerns for the perception of non-traditional students' self-efficacy to undertake a dissertation based upon the clarification of the notion that self-efficacy is "not concerned with the skills that an individual has, but rather with the judgements they possess concerning their skills" (Lane *et al*, 2003, p60), especially when these students may already have low levels of self-belief that impact on other areas of their degree programmes. Yet despite the changes noted, it is surprising to find there is little literature on either the changed nature of the dissertation as a learning experience or on the supervision and student support process required for the changing nature of the student body. Rowley and Slack (2004), whose own work specified the need for the development of undergraduate dissertation supervisors, note that much of the literature is outdated and of limited relevance today. Todd *et al* (2006) agree, noting the lack of literature relating to the undergraduate dissertation as opposed to the masters or doctoral thesis.

We have found that the extant literature on the undergraduate dissertation, which is limited anyway, tends to be grouped under four main themes:

- the 'live' experience of the dissertation student and the dissertation supervisor, including papers offering guidance to both groups;
- subject-based issues, including choice of research topic and specific ethical issues arising in certain subjects;
- the research process, including, more recently, the use of digital technology; and
- assessment of the dissertation.

This paper therefore aims to address the gap in the literature examining the support offered to, and required by, students in light of the changing nature of the undergraduate dissertation and the changing nature of the student body who undertake such a self-directed major research project, often for the first time during their studies.

A support programme of seven workshops has been outlined here, which is designed to aid students with a range of issues that would impact on their progress throughout the disser-

tation. The focus of this paper is to examine the impact of only the initial workshop in this series, as this first session was designed specifically to improve students' self-efficacy and motivation throughout the duration of the dissertation process. However, while this first workshop in the series is the main area of focus, the conclusion of the paper will contain a wider evaluation of the series as a whole.

## Rationale for provision of the support programme

**THE DISSERTATION** was an elective on the University of Glamorgan Business School undergraduate programmes, yet despite its strategic importance and focus on self-managed study there was comparatively little support for students, the emphasis appearing to be largely on its 'student-directedness'. Student support on this module, as a consequence, was often patchy, with some supervisors providing extensive 'hand-holding', while others insisting that the students themselves take full ownership of the programme. Ensuring consistency of standards across teaching practices in higher education is a growing concern (Saunders and Davis, 1998). It was therefore felt that a programme should be put in place to establish best practice in respect of business dissertations both in learning and in teaching. To this end a pilot support package was introduced initially targeting students completing dissertation projects on marketing topics, as this was the main subject discipline of lecturers involved in the pilot programme.

The Dissertation Project Workshop Programme delivered a series of seven interactive student-centred workshops that facilitated an environment where students had the opportunity to learn and practise a wider range of skills required for successful completion of their research projects than was otherwise taught on the undergraduate programme. Unlike modules on Research Methods the focus of this programme was not on methodology but on soft skills such as goal setting, time management and motivation, along with practical skills such as those required to take advantage of recent developments in data processing technology (see Table 1).

The course was designed to draw on and impart a range of techniques, including those from neuro-linguistic programming, to enable students to assess their own current patterns of behaviour and preferences of working styles in order that they may audit their current strengths, a key component of perceptions of self-efficacy, and effect development and changes in areas they wish to improve.

The focus of this paper is to present the neuro-linguistic programming framework for setting well-formed outcomes, offered to students in Session 1 of the dissertation workshop support programme. The aims of this initial workshop ses-

Workshop	Title
1	How to get started: well-formed outcomes, and action plans to achieve them.
2	Time management.
3	Conducting effective literature reviews.
4	How to stay on track: assessing whether research is meeting objectives.
5	Reading, writing and reasoning.
6	Organising, presenting and referencing your research report.
7	Letting and setting go: when to stop, how to progress (including publishing).

*Table 1: Dissertation project workshop programme*

sion were, firstly, to familiarise students with the structure of a dissertation project, and secondly, to offer an effective method that students may use to set and achieve goals leading towards successful completion of these dissertation projects. The initial workshop of the support programme was facilitated by a senior lecturer in Marketing at the University of Glamorgan who teaches on the final year undergraduate programme, is one of the academic team supervising undergraduate dissertations, and a trained neuro-linguistic programming practitioner.

## Neuro-linguistic programming

**NEURO-LINGUISTIC** programming (NLP) was developed in the 1970s by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in an attempt to create a framework that could be used to model, and thereby recreate the effective communications techniques utilised by a number of renowned therapists including Milton Erickson, Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir. The term refers to the three areas that NLP has brought together (O'Connor and Seymour, 1994, p25):

- 'neuro': refers to our neurology, our thinking patterns.
- 'linguistic': is language, how we use it and how we are influenced by it.
- 'programming': refers to the patterns of our behaviour and the goals we set.

NLP is based upon four main principles of:

- **rapport** with ourselves and with others;
- **knowing what you want** by setting goals and outcomes;

- **sensory acuity** to check progress towards goal achievement; and
- **behavioural flexibility** to adjust and change behaviour in response to feedback (O'Connor and McDermott, 1996, pp1–2).

## Delivering the support programme

**ATTENDANCE** on the dissertation workshop support programme was voluntary. Sessions were conducted on Wednesday afternoons to avoid any clash with other teaching and learning activities.

### Session 1: How to get started: well-formed outcomes, and action plans to achieve them

The first in the series of workshops introduced students to the aforementioned NLP principle of 'knowing what you want', presenting students with a framework for setting goals using NLP techniques. The aims of the session were presented to participants by the workshop facilitator.

The first aim—to familiarise marketing students with the structure of a dissertation project—was met by a group discussion around the question 'What is a dissertation?'. This allowed each participant to contribute what they already knew about the particular course of study upon which they were each embarking and allowed the facilitator to fill in any gaps concerning their knowledge of the process. The facilitator then familiarised the group with the common structure of a dissertation, and finally ensured that each participant knew which academic was to supervise their work. The second aim—to offer an effective method that students may use

to set and achieve goals—was met by means of the NLP technique for setting ‘well-formed outcomes’. This technique does not attempt to recreate the SMART framework for objective setting (smart, measurable, agreed upon, realistic, time-based) with which business and management students may already be familiar. Rather it offers a guide to setting goals that are:

- **Stated in the positive**

Positive goals, to achieve what we *do* want, tend to be more compelling, and achievable than goals which are negative, and which are usually stated as something we *do not* want, or that we wish to avoid.

- **Appropriately contextualised**

To ascertain where, when and with whom the desired outcome is to be achieved. This stage in the process also allows participants to note any contexts within which this outcome would not be desirable.

- **Expressed in a sensory specific form**

In order that individual sensory representation preferences may be activated and ensure the desired outcome is more meaningful to the individual.

*Human beings share the same basic neurology, yet we each see, hear and feel the world very differently. Although we receive information through the five senses of sight, hearing, feeling, taste and smell, each of us has a preferred system of internally processing and coding the information we receive from our experiences of interacting with the external environment. In other words, we each have a preferred way of representing this information internally through our senses when we recreate these experiences.*

O'Connor and McDermott (1996, p62–67).

- **Capable of being initiated and maintained by self**

Allowing identification of personal strengths and resources that may be used to help achieve the desired outcome. This stage also requires identification of any personal barriers to achievement.

- **Able to preserve positive aspects of one's present state**

Achieving a new goal often leads to change. This stage in the process facilitates reflection in order that partici-

pants may identify what they may lose by achieving this goal.

- **Worthwhile and have positive consequences**

Not only for the person setting the goal, in terms of what it will take to achieve the desired outcome, but also the consequences for those around them, identifying the positive ways in which life may be different as a result of successful achievement.

Within this framework students are able to identify both motivation and means, and are then encouraged to take up the opportunity of making the first step towards successfully undertaking the dissertation project.

Each participant was presented with a handout to guide this process of setting individual goals. Prior to students undertaking the process for themselves, the facilitator talked through the process in order to set a personal goal, answering each question outlined in the handout, and explaining the relevance of each of the steps in the process. Students were encouraged to work in pairs to elicit and make a written record of their partner's answers to each question. Participants were assured that answers were not to be handed back to the facilitator, but should be used as a personal action plan and *aide memoire*.

## Method

**AS THIS** was a pilot programme the research was to be mostly exploratory in nature, in order to “gain insights and ideas” (Churchill, 1996, p118), rather than being descriptive, where the researcher is attempting to determine “the frequency with which something occurs” (Churchill, 1996, p115). With exploratory research, where “formal design is conspicuous by its absence” (Boyd *et al*, 1989, p93), it was doubted that questionnaires could fully explore issues relating to the research objectives. Therefore the primary method chosen for data collection was the use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

The evaluation of the initial workshop was designed to gather qualitative data relating to the session. Of the 16 initial session participants, a purposive sample was chosen of eight students who were personally known to the researchers to a greater or lesser extent. It was felt that having some level of personal knowledge would allow for greater participant openness. A focus group was conducted with six respondents who participated in the programme in order to “learn and understand” (Proctor, 2000, p184) their initial and ongoing motivation to undertake a dissertation, while also gaining an evaluation of the initial workshop session. In addition, depth

interviews were conducted with a further two respondents. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for depth of questioning by the interviewer and flexibility of discussion of the topics by the respondents, while providing a clear framework for the interview, which ensured all key areas were addressed. This method of data collection was also chosen in order to eliminate any possible group pressure focus group respondents may have felt, to focus attention on the respondent, and to allow the interviewer to probe more deeply concerning the feelings and motivations underlying the respondents' statements (Proctor, 2000, p193).

Confidentiality was assured to all respondents. To maintain confidentiality, both depth interview respondents have been coded as follows:

- R1** a student whose dissertation was supervised by one of the researchers.
- R2** a student who had been taught by one of the researchers and who later chose not to continue with the dissertation project but instead to opt for completing alternative modules.

Permission to audiotape each interview was granted. The tapes were transcribed, and a grounded theory approach was taken to analyse the data in order to identify emerging themes arising from the research (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 1991). Success of the overall programme was judged both quantitatively, against achievement of participation targets and against student grades, and qualitatively, by evaluating the process, outcomes, and materials used with input from participating tutors and students. This evaluation has also informed our findings and conclusion.

## Findings

**RESPONDENTS** were asked to discuss issues concerning initial and ongoing motivation; personal and external means of goal achievement; and the opportunities taken to achieve the goals each had set. Similar questions were asked of focus group and depth interview respondents in order to evaluate whether the initial workshop session had met its aims in familiarising students with the structure of a dissertation, and in offering students an effective method to set and achieve goals. There was no discernable difference between the answers given by focus group respondents and by those interviewed in more depth.

### Initial motivation

The first question asked of all respondents was concerning their original motivation to undertake a dissertation project.

This directly related back to the initial workshop session where participants were required to identify their goal, and the positive consequences of achieving it. The research evidences two overriding reasons these students gave for choosing to undertake a dissertation project. The first related to graduate career opportunities and undergraduates' perceptions of recruiters, the second to personal achievement. Another issue raised was of the benefits undertaking a dissertation can bring to the final year undergraduate experience.

#### ● Career Opportunities

When asked why each had originally chosen to undertake the dissertation, common responses included that: "It looks good on your CV." To have a dissertation standing out on a CV in the graduate recruitment market was given as the initial reason by the majority of respondents, who perceived that it "would set me apart from other students when I went for a job". This motivating factor was further defined in relation to undergraduates' perceptions of graduate recruiters:

*Employers will look for a dissertation, they'll have a look, and they'll see, and you are more likely to be employed, well, not more likely, but they'll think highly of you if you've done a dissertation.*

Another focus group respondent noted that:

*It's often expected...It's a traditional part of the degree, and when you go for interviews it's usually older people who say "What's your dissertation?" and if you say you haven't done one they're like "Why?" and maybe they don't value your degree...It will stand out on your CV, especially with the older generation. You don't see young people recruiting.*

Other reasons given on this theme included the skills that recruiters perceive have been evidenced by a student having undertaken a dissertation: "It's more like self-directed study. It shows you're motivated and you can do a piece of work on your own without having someone tell you what to do although you have got help." This focus group respondent noted the importance of a dissertation in providing evidence to recruiters that: "You can do the job without someone telling you how to do every little thing, that you can think for yourself and get the job done."

#### ● Personal Achievement

The need to achieve can be a compelling motivator (McClelland *et al*, 1953). A second, common reason moti-



vating students to undertake a dissertation was that of personal achievement. A student who initially expressed a career-related motivation, also noted that:

*I think I wanted to do it for myself as well, just to, just to, I don't know, that it would be something of mine, then, something that I'd written, something, and it's like a huge piece of work, it's not like an assignment which you would have done like thousands of, but it's like a huge piece of work that I thought that I could do well, at the time.*

- **Other issues relating to the final year undergraduate experience**

*I've got two reasons to do a dissertation...I wanted the experience of combining my two disciplines, and to take the pressure off the other modules.*

Focus group respondent

Another focus group respondent also noted that a motivating factor was that: "I'm not very good at exams."

## Ongoing motivation

Every respondent agreed that the initial reasons motivating him or her to undertake a dissertation were still compelling, including taking pressure off other modules in the final year. "Definitely, because you get to hand it in early don't you, so you get more time to revise for your summer exams." (Focus group respondent). The two depth interviews yielded richer data concerning ongoing motivation. The depth interview with respondent R1 noted the following:

**R1:** At the time my goals were, um to see if I could, um, and because I think that it was, um, sort of a thing that would set me apart from other students when I went for a job.

**Interviewer:** Are those reasons still valid?

**R1:** Um, yeah, I suppose so. I suppose I've doubted them a few times, but, yeah I suppose so in the long run.

**Interviewer:** There are two reasons there, one is to see if you could and now you're a fair way through.

**R1:** Which is proving to be a test.

**Interviewer:** You're a fair way towards meeting your dissertation objective and has it given you a feeling that you can do it?

**R1:** No, well, yes, sometimes.

**Interviewer:** When are you going to know?

**R1:** When it's finished. When it is out of my hands.

**Interviewer:** How are you going to evaluate it?

**R1:** When it's back in my hands. I don't know, um, I suppose by the outcome of my degree because that's a big component of it, I suppose...and if I feel if I was presented it by a potential candidate, then if I feel that I would be impressed by it.

In reference to the well-formed outcome setting process undertaken by students in the initial workshop, it is worth noting how this respondent has expressed the evidence of achieving the desired outcome in a sensory-specific form using mainly, although not exclusively kinaesthetic language, the language of those who process external sensory stimuli through feelings and touch (Bandler and Grinder, 1975; Bandler, 1985; Brown and Turnbull, 2000; O'Connor and McDermott, 1996; Skinner and Stephens, 2003), including phrases such as "set me apart", "out of my hands", "back in my hands" "I feel if I was presented it" etc. This may provide a more compelling motivation as this student can "feel" how it will be when the desired outcome has been achieved.

Noting external pressures, respondent R1 commented that:

*...it is difficult when the dissertation isn't your only work in progress. It's difficult when your dissertation spans four new subjects, exams, courseworks and then another four new subjects, exams and courseworks. That's what makes it difficult. I think keeping motivation on one project while some are starting and finishing and requiring a lot of work again is difficult in any sort of context, and I think whatever you do, that forms the bulk of the challenge of doing it.*

Depth interview respondent R2 is no longer undertaking a dissertation project. This student still expresses an ongoing internal motivation, and also identified external pressures. In this case, these external pressures, including "problems at home" have become barriers to achieving the goal.

**R2:** I still think I could do it well. On the topic, I could do well, and other topics I think I'd be able to do but not in the present circumstances that I am now.

**Interviewer:** So what were the main reasons for deciding not to do a dissertation?

**R2:** ...I think the level of work was one thing, and the pressure that you get to the end, and you've handed in all your other assignments and you think, oh my god, I've got a dissertation to do, 10,000 words, oh, what am I going to do?

## Means

The process offered in the initial workshop session included participants identifying both internal and external resources that could be activated to achieve goals. In discussing resources, the depth interview respondent R1, noted that the session did help identify what resources were available.

**R2:** You're aware that you've got online journals, you've got the library, you've got the tutors, you've got your colleagues, but I mean being aware of them and utilising them are two totally different things, poles apart.

## Opportunity

Respondents were also asked to remember what they had identified as the first step towards achieving their desired outcome. All responses related to formally commencing reading and researching the chosen topic of the dissertation, and all respondents agreed that each had taken that first step following the initial workshop session. When probed further on whether the step was taken in the time frame each had set, the most common answer was that the step had been taken "eventually". A focus group respondent commented that taking this first step had helped, as:

*...it kind of gave you a good idea of what to expect and how to plan things out before you actually start doing it, it's a bit of a daunting task to do before you start doing it really.*

## Quantitative evaluation of the support programme

A recruitment target of 60% of registered dissertation students was set. There were 27 final year undergraduates

initially registered to undertake dissertation projects on marketing topics, but by the commencement of the academic year three of these students had opted to take alternative modules in place of the dissertation. Recruitment targets to the workshop programme were exceeded (66%). The first workshop session was attended by 16 final year undergraduates, including the three who, by the end of the first semester, had withdrawn from the dissertation option and substituted other modules in order to achieve the relevant number of credits required to graduate. Of the 16 students who participated in the programme, three achieved first class honours degrees, eight gained upper second class honours, four students gained a lower second honours degree, and one student suspended studies for personal reasons. This compares favourably with the 11 students who chose not to participate in the programme, two of whom achieved first class honours degrees, two gained upper second class honours, five students gained a lower second class honours, and two graduated with third class honours degrees (Table 2).

Grades were also favourable for the 11 programme participants who completed dissertations, with five students achieving A grades, five students achieving B grades and two gaining grade C. These grades were, in general, more favourable than for those eight students who completed dissertations but did not participate in the programme, three of whom achieved A grades, one each grades B and C, two gaining D grades and one student failing the dissertation at F1 (Table 3).

## Participant evaluation of the initial workshop session

This support programme was monitored on an ongoing basis. Evaluation took place for each workshop session, with an overall evaluation being undertaken upon completion of the entire programme. The process of evaluating the initial workshop was designed firstly to assess whether the session met its aims, and secondly to evaluate the usefulness of the session from the perspective of the workshop participants. Respondents gave positive feedback on the workshop in particular and on the support programme in general. In meeting the aim of familiarising students with

Overall Degree Classification						
	First Class Honours	Upper Second	Lower Second	Third Class	Suspended Studies	
Programme Participants	3	8	4		1	
Non-participants	2	2	5	2		

Table 2: Student achievement levels—degree classification



	Dissertation Grade					
	A	B	C	D	Fail	
Programme Participants	5	5	2			
Non-participants	3	1	1	2	1	

**Table 3: Student achievement levels—dissertation grades**

the structure of a dissertation, respondents appeared more aware following the session of what was required than before participating in the workshop. Despite the resources provided by the University to undergraduates prior to embarking upon the dissertation, many respondents did not appear to be fully aware of the amount and level of work required. This is typified by the comments of one of the depth interview respondents.

**R1:** You just don't know anything about what is expected of you when you sort of sign yourself away to doing a dissertation, when you sign your life away, um, you just don't know anything. I really had never seen a dissertation before. I suppose I had some vague idea of it but I didn't realise how structured it was, and really what was expected of me...although obviously you have an idea from the books [named tutor] gives you, and the advice [dissertation supervisor] give me, I think the sessions...really helped clarify things.

A focus group respondent commented: "I was more motivated after the first session." Referring to the realisation, during the session, of the amount and level of work required to successfully complete a dissertation, the respondent added: "You just scared me. I thought 'I haven't done anything'."

From an overall analysis of the above data, the session also appears to have met its second aim of offering an effective method that students may use to set and achieve goals. One final comment from a depth interview respondent summarises the learning experience gained from the initial workshop session:

**R1:** We learnt how to set out objectives, whether you, you know, see them through, and whether you keep going back to your original plan and sort of reinforcing what you've set yourself as this goal is down to the individual, but I mean, initially, I think if you use the plan that you gave us I think you could really clearly set yourself a path to walk along. Whether you choose to or not is up to you.

## Conclusion

Despite the strategic importance of the dissertation option for final year undergraduates on business programmes, there is comparatively little support for students. What formal support exists is not consistent amongst dissertation supervisors even within one subject field within the University's Business School, let alone among the wider academic community. The pilot dissertation project workshop programme was designed to offer a support package to learners that aimed to establish best practice in respect of business dissertations, both in learning and in teaching. This pilot programme would appear to be developing a range of effective teaching and learning strategies, together with embryonic learning materials capable of being used and adapted by students and supervisors in all business disciplines.

The initial workshop session, designed to facilitate students' motivation to get started on their chosen projects, utilised a technique of setting and achieving well-formed outcomes from the discipline of neuro-linguistic programming. NLP offers a more detailed approach to goal setting than other frameworks with which business and management students may already be familiar. Within this framework students are able to identify both motivation and means, and are then encouraged to take up the opportunity of making the first step towards successfully undertaking the dissertation project. This would appear to be an effective way of supporting all undergraduates embarking on the dissertation, but in particular may help to better support students from non-traditional backgrounds in improving perceptions of their own abilities and their self-efficacy to undertake such a major piece of self-directed relatively autonomous work. Our own findings would appear to concur with Lane *et al's* (2003) advice offered to those designing interventions to improve self-efficacy:

*...it is important to note that the guiding principle is that performance accomplishments should raise self-efficacy... We suggest that interventions for low efficacious students should be tailored so that they develop perceptions of success. One approach is to*

*encourage students to set goals. Setting short term and challenging goals, and monitoring performance against these goals offer a clear standard with which to compare progress. Low efficacious students tend to prefer straightforward tasks in which they can clearly see how success will be attained*

Lane et al, 2003, p64

Both qualitative and quantitative data would suggest that the programme in general—and the initial workshop in particular—met its aims.

Respondents gave only positive feedback on the programme indicating that such a support package was not only welcome, but also that it had contributed to improved levels of self-efficacy. Quantitative results also indicate that students who engaged with the workshop series performed better in

the dissertation, and also in their overall degree classification, than students in their cohort who did not engage with the programme.

The pilot programme's success led to the creation of a series of workshops offered to all Business School undergraduate students undertaking the dissertation. By offering an element of common front-loaded taught support delivered one-to-many, followed by individual one-to-one supervision, it also delivered a more resource-efficient process for the faculty with less duplication of effort by supervisors

Further research to test the teaching and learning materials developed from this support programme could be undertaken across a range of academic disciplines, in particular research investigating the motivation, means and opportunities taken by various cohorts of undergraduates pursuing a dissertation.

## References

- Bandler R & Grinder J (1975) *The structure of magic*. Palo Alto, CA, Science and Behaviour Books.
- Bandler R (1985) *Using your brain for a change*. Utah, Real People Press.
- Bandura A (1997) *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*. New York, Freeman. Cited in: Lane, AM, Devonport T E, Milton KE & Williams LC (2003) Self-efficacy and dissertation performance among sport students. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, 2(2), 59-66.
- Brown N & Turnbull J (2000) Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and its relevance to effective communication. *ACCA Students Newsletter*, 4-9.
- Boyd HW Jr, Westfall R & Stasch SF (1989) *Marketing research: text and cases*. 7th ed. Boston, MA, Irwin.
- Churchill GA Jr (1996) *Basic marketing research*. 3rd ed. Forth Worth, Dryden.
- Easterby-Smith M, Thorpe R & Lowe A (1991) *Management research: an introduction*. London, Sage.
- Houston M & Rimmer R (2005) A comparison of academic outcomes for business and other students. *International Journal of Management Education* 4(3), 11-19.
- Lane AM, Devonport TE, Milton KE & Williams LC (2003) Self-efficacy and dissertation performance among sport students. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education* 2(2), 59-66.
- McClelland DC, Atkinson JW, Clark RA & Lowell EL (1953) *The achievement motive*. New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- O'Connor J & Seymour J (1994) *Training with NLP*. London, Thorsons.
- O'Connor J & McDermott I (1996) *Principles of NLP*. London, Thorsons.
- Proctor T (2000) *Essentials of Marketing Research*. 2nd ed. Harlow, Pearson Education.
- Rowley J & Slack F (2004) What is the future for undergraduate dissertations? *Education and Training* 46(4), 176-181.
- Rust C (2002) The impact of assessment on student learning. *Active Learning in Higher Education* 3(2), 145-158.
- Saunders MKN & Davis S (1998) The use of assessment criteria to ensure consistency of marking: some implications for good practice. *Quality Assurance in Education* 6(3), 162-171.
- Skinner H & Stephens P (2003) Speaking the same language: exploring the relevance of neuro-linguistic programming to marketing communications. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 9(3), 177-192.
- Todd M, Smith K & Bannister P (2006) Supervising a social science undergraduate dissertation: staff experiences and perceptions. *Teaching in Higher Education* 11(2), 161-173.