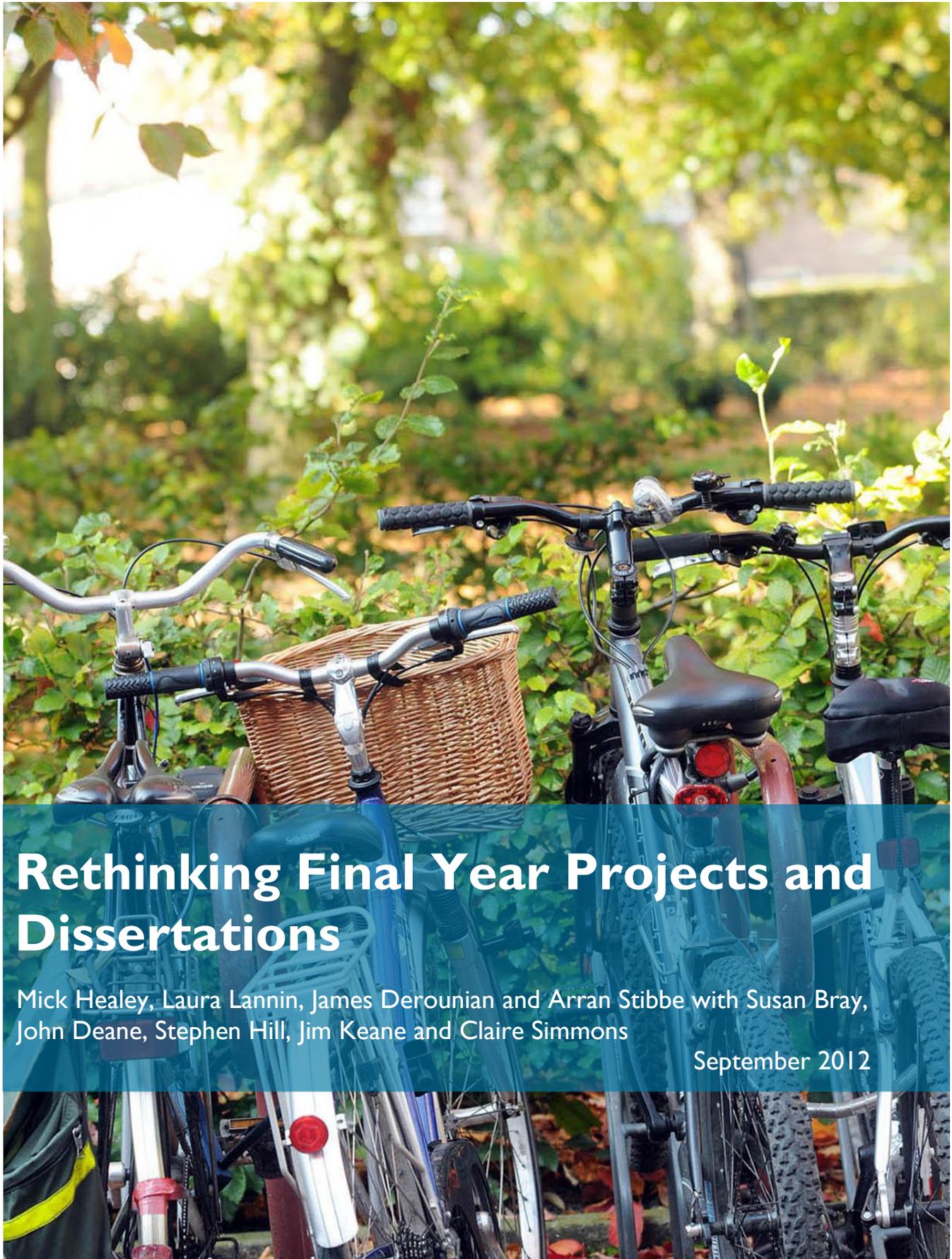UNIVERSITY OF
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Rethinking Final Year Projects and Dissertations

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Contents

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Dissertations; Final year projects; Capstone projects; Research and inquiry; Curriculum

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

The honours dissertation is the traditional undergraduate capstone and is often seen as the gold-standard of British higher education. It provides an excellent apprenticeship for students wishing to undertake research degrees, but with increasing student diversity and growth of professional disciplines, it does not necessarily provide for *all* students and employers' needs.

This project aims to transform institutional practices and assessment strategies through identifying innovative solutions for developing accessible final year projects and dissertations (FYPD) to meet the needs of students from different backgrounds, different subjects and different kinds of institution. This we attempted to achieve through a critical evaluation of the lessons from the literature; the compilation of 70 case studies of innovative practices in a wide range of disciplines in both research- and teaching-intensive institutions from the UK, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Netherlands, Switzerland and the United States; an analysis of stakeholder needs; and the stimulation of discussion through presenting our thinking at over 30 workshops and conferences and holding two national conferences and a debate at the University of Gloucestershire.

Rather than trying to come up with a single definition of a FYPD we chose instead to celebrate the variety by mapping some of the key dimensions. Nevertheless, while celebrating the variety of forms that FYPD may take, we also recognise that there are some essential features that characterise a dissertation. The project raises key issues about what are the defining characteristics of higher education and how should the final year curriculum exemplify such. Our argument is that all undergraduate students should undertake a FYPD, but that they should be wider than the traditional honours dissertation in their conception, function, form, location, and nature and dissemination of outputs. These are illustrated in this report with examples based on the case studies collected for the project.

We conclude that giving both staff and students a choice in the form FYPD can take and the nature of the outputs to be assessed is in our view the best way to meet the varied needs of the increasingly diverse student body studying in higher education. This is likely to motivate a wider range of students than the one-size-fits-all approach, which characterises most FYPD, and hence increases the probability that more students will experience transformational learning. Quality assurance procedures need to be flexible to allow the choices recommended by staff to be implemented.

Background

The Changing Role and Experience of the Dissertation

The honours dissertation, undertaken by the majority of students in the UK (Jackson 2010) has, deservedly, "a privileged place within many degree programmes" (Hemmings 2001, 41). This distinguishes the UK from higher education systems in North America and Australasia, where commonly only 10-20% of students have this experience. The traditional dissertation provides an excellent apprenticeship for students wishing to undertake research degrees, but with increasing student diversity and growth of professional disciplines, there is need also to consider innovative approaches to designing a wider range of final year projects and dissertations. As the proportion of students continuing in higher education and taking research degrees has fallen other forms of dissertation may be more appropriate to meet their graduate aspirations. Giving students a choice of alternative forms of dissertation, some of which may be employment or community-based, is required to ensure that the needs of *all* final year students are met regardless of background, discipline or life goals (see also discussion of stakeholder analysis in the methodology section).

The traditional honours dissertation is under pressure because of the resources required to support it, the lack of preparedness of some students to undertake it, its perceived inappropriateness to vocational disciplines, and its lack of relevance to some courses or future careers (Booth and Harrington 2003; Price and Feehily 2004). It appears to be based on the traditional three/four-year full-time model of higher education rather than the increasingly diverse provision, including part-time and work-based learning. Yet for many it remains the 'acid test' for students, towards the end of their degree, to demonstrate independent work on a major project, showing that they can think and work like a member of their discipline or profession (Todd *et al.* 2004). Whilst recognising the strengths of the traditional dissertation, what are also needed are alternative types of projects that provide students with a forward-looking experience and equip them to thrive in an uncertain world (Barnett 2004). Our argument is that a more flexible approach is needed in the form, function and assessment of final year projects and dissertations to meet the needs of students from diverse subject areas and courses.

The dissertation is seen as a key way of linking research and teaching (Jenkins *et al.* 2007; Rowe and Okell 2009) and many students testify to the transformational effect of their dissertation experience (Derounian 2011). Unfortunately this is not the experience for all students (Shadforth and Harvey 2004). Ways need to be found for students in all disciplines, from all backgrounds, to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential through undertaking dissertations more closely aligned to their needs and aspirations. The initial impetus behind the Research-Informed Teaching Initiative was to preserve the 'gold-standard' of honours dissertations and preserve the international competitiveness of UK universities, though when enacted it went well beyond

the dissertation (Childs *et al.* 2010; Healey and Jenkins 2009). Now is the time to diversify the nature of the undergraduate dissertation to include both traditional research and a wider range of inquiry-based activities, with a strong emphasis on ensuring consistency of standards across different forms of assessment (Hand and Clewes 2000; Pathirage *et al.* 2004; Tariq *et al.* 1998; Webster *et al.* 2000).

Moreover, making explicit the benefits of various forms of projects and recording the skills the students gain are important ways of linking the final year project to employability (Gresty 2009). The project aligns with the Government's intention that higher education should play an important role in supporting economic development (Bolden *et al.* 2009). "Employers and universities are dependent on one another to prepare tomorrow's graduates" (CBI 2009, 4). QAA Scotland has examined how enhancing research-teaching linkages can improve the development of employability attributes (Gunn 2010). Alternative forms of final year projects are one key way of addressing this issue. Preparing students to move into the world beyond university is an underlying rationale for creating transformational experiences for final year projects and capstone courses in many parts of the world (e.g. Sill *et al.* 2009). In the US this is increasingly conceptualised as an opportunity for independent learning in one's discipline or professional field, and as an occasion for integrative learning (Huber 2010; Huber *et al.* 2007).

Diversifying the Dissertation

Our focus is on students undertaking research and inquiry projects in their final or senior year, but the FYPD that we are interested in are wider than the traditional honours dissertation in their conception, function, form, location, and nature and dissemination of outputs. This raises issues about the nature of research in different disciplinary and professional settings and whether, particularly in the professional disciplines, such as business, journalism and education, the traditional extended research essay is the most appropriate model. This in part reflects discussions of what counts as research in different disciplines in the various UK research assessment exercises and the current Research Excellence Framework. Performing arts, design and fashion FYPD have over time favoured the production of artefacts displayed at end of degree shows. Consultancy and science communication projects are used in some bioscience courses (Luck 2008); community-based projects feature in the social sciences (Mashiter 2009); while tasks in other subjects may be employer-linked (Greenwood 2007; Milwood *et al.* 2007). Connected to this is a debate about how the findings of FYPD can be more effectively disseminated, for example, through public exhibitions or undergraduate research conferences and journals (Healey and Jenkins 2009; Hart, 2012). Some of these issues parallel discussions about redefining the doctorate (Park 2007), taught postgraduate projects and advanced diplomas.

This project set out to assist course teams to find innovative solutions for different disciplines and professions in designing and assessing FYPD. It builds on previous NTFS projects concerned with undergraduate research

in new universities (Childs et al. 2010) and the experience of students in their final year (Webb 2011), and Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning focused on inquiry-based learning (LTEA nd). These projects only mention FYPD in passing and none investigated the nature of innovative FYPD. Most of the innovative forms of dissertation found in the NTFS Assimilate project at Masters level (Brown *et al.,* 2012) are matched by those we have found at undergraduate level. Arguably the range and variety of innovative practices are even greater at the undergraduate level. Since we began the project an application of many of the ideas explored in this report to one discipline, geography, has been published (Hill *et al.* 2011).

We are especially interested in projects that result in what Kegan (2000) calls 'transformational learning'. He argues that this results in new ways of knowing, or what Mezirow (1991) refers to as 'new frames of reference'. Freire (1998) extends this and suggests that the prime purpose of university education is transformation of the individual and society. FYPD encourage students to move into the self-authorship stage of intellectual development (Baxter Magolda 2009).

The Gloucestershire Context

This project also contributes to the University of Gloucestershire's (UoG) strategic priorities: 'Achieving Inspirational Learning' and 'Transforming Students' Lives' (UoG 2009). UoG has a tradition of innovative teaching and learning, particularly active learning through undergraduate research and inquiry, and has extensive experience of working with employers, community groups and professional bodies to enhance student learning. For example, the Business School has a post-placement module in which students reflect on the value of their placement period and on their personal and career development. While in Media Communications, Culture and Film Studies the Dissertation has been made optional and, building on the work of Garde-Hansen and Calvert (2007), has been replaced with two single modules: Professionalism and Creativity and Investigative Study.

The University produced a report entitled *Co-generative Toolkit for Curriculum Development with Business and Community Partners* (Co-genT) (Jenkins *et al.* 2009), funded by JISC's Business and Community Engagement Programme. UoG has also pioneered *the Gloucestershire Framework for Personal and Professional Development,* to accredit learning taking place in the workplace and community, and for completed modules to be aggregated into an academic award (University of Gloucestershire nd). The project concentrates on employer-focused higher education opportunities in the region. As part of the Gloucestershire Framework, professionals engage in reflective practice and critically evaluate their skills and expertise within the workplace. These examples constitute a robust institutional platform, which links this project to existing innovative projects and helps ensure the embedding of project outcomes. Providing authentic learning opportunities, including student

placements and focused project-learning in the workplace and community, is key to UoG's interpretation of active learning.

In summary our concern is with projects that students undertake towards the end of their undergraduate degree, usually in their final or senior year, in which they engage in a significant amount of independent research or inquiry, but which are wider in form than the traditional honours dissertation. Although the rationale and focus of this project is on the UK we feel we may have much to learn about, and hopefully contribute to, practices elsewhere, especially the capstone projects common in North America and Australasia. Capstone projects usually refer to integrative final year projects which, at least in professional disciplines, are often focussed on the transition into employment. However the term is used loosely and applied inconsistently (Fyffe *et al.* 2011). Our interest is in those capstone courses in which students undertake research and inquiry projects, rather than those which are designed as taught courses.

Aims and Objectives

The stated aim in the proposal was:

> "to transform institutional practices and assessment strategies through designing creative and accessible honours projects as alternatives or additions to the traditional dissertation. Such creative honours projects will extend the independent learning and critical thinking that enhance students' employability and their capability as lifelong-learners and responsible citizens in an uncertain world. These foci will contribute to current debates about honours-level projects, as well as the kind of learning that can take place in HE and its relevance to employability."

This broadly remained the case during the project, though we changed the language to avoid confusion among stakeholders. In particular the term 'creative honours projects' was misunderstood by some as only applying to the creative arts. There was also some who thought that we were proposing abandoning the traditional dissertation. To try to avoid these confusions we changed the initial title from 'Creative Honours Projects' to 'Final Year Projects and Dissertations (FYPD)' and made explicit that we value the traditional honours dissertation highly, but feel that it does not meet the needs of all of our students. Hence our argument that a variety of different forms of FYPD is needed to meet the aspirations of a wider group of students.

In summary, some of the detailed foci of the project evolved over the two years:

- To shift emphasis from developing creative honours projects to broadening the form of FYPD.
- To place greater emphasis on identifying a wide range of case studies from different disciplines and countries
- To change the language we use to describe the project to staff and students to avoid being perceived as attacking the dissertation
- To open up the project to all disciplines rather than the initial focus on five UK Subject Centres
- To identify learning outcomes which are common to most or all dissertation types
- To produce a book on the topic of FYPD, which the HE Academy has agreed to publish (Healey *et al.* in preparation).

Our overarching research question was "How can final year projects and dissertations be designed and assessed to help students prepare for an uncertain world?"

Methodology and Implementation

To address our research question: "How can final year projects and dissertations be designed and assessed to help students prepare for an uncertain world?" we developed a multi-layered, action-oriented methodology. A series of research and development activities of different weightings, building on each other, were undertaken over the two years to provide evidence-based evaluation. The project was guided by BERA's (2004) and UoG's (2008) research ethics. There were four main elements to the methodology:

- We undertook a critical evaluation of the lessons from the literature on the nature and role of final year projects and dissertations in the UK and internationally, which we updated during the project and led to a published bibliography (Healey, 2012a).

- Much of our efforts were put into developing a resource-bank of case studies of innovative practices in a wide range of disciplines in both research- and teaching-intensive institutions in different countries. By the end of the project we had compiled 70 examples from the UK, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Switzerland and the United States (http://insight.glos.ac.uk/tli/activities/ntf/creativehops/examples/Pages/default.aspx). Of these 44 main case studies were completed using our template (mostly 2-5 pages in length) and an additional 26 were mini case studies (usually about half a page long). We also produced 5 extended case studies which involved interviews with staff and students. The case studies are all available for the public via the project website and are listed in Appendix 1. To enhance dissemination and their use in workshops we have also summarised the main case studies as mini case studies on the website.

- Team members contacted stakeholders (including students, staff and academic institutions, employers, and community groups) relevant to their disciplines to discuss the purpose and requirements of final year projects and dissertations. This resulted in a document which highlights what the stakeholders want from a dissertation (Appendix 2). The wide range of perceptions reinforces the desirability of providing a range of different types of dissertation.

- To stimulate discussion across the higher education sector we presented our thinking at over 30 workshops and conferences and we held two national conferences based at the UoG. We used these events to collect viewpoints from participants. Within the UoG we held a debate on the motion that 'This house believes that the traditional dissertation needs rethinking', which we videoed and subsequently interviewed the two staff and two student proposers and opposers of the motion (http://insight.glos.ac.uk/tli/activities/ntf/creativehops/events/debate/Pages/default.aspx).

Outputs and Findings

The main outputs and findings may be divided into conceptual and empirical insights into final year projects and dissertations (FYPD). Further details are presented, particularly on the latter, in our forthcoming HE Academy publication on *Developing and enhancing undergraduate final year projects and dissertations* (Healey *et al.* in preparation).

Conceptual Findings

The literature review, case studies and the stakeholder analysis, together with the discussions held at the various events we presented at and organised, helped us to develop our thinking. Two key conceptual outputs were the 'dimensions of FYPD' and the ten 'key characteristics of a dissertation'.

Rather than trying to come up with a single definition of a FYPD we chose instead to celebrate the variety by mapping some of the key dimensions (Table 1).

Table 1: Dimensions of final year projects and dissertations

Campus based	Employer / community based
Undertaken at the university	Distance learning
Research preparation	Professional / employment preparation
Student learning centred	Outcome product centred
Discipline based	Multi- or interdisciplinary
Student initiated	Teacher / supervisor initiated
Individual work	Group work
Original to the student	Original to the discipline
University audience	Professional / public audience
Emphasising in-depth analysis	Emphasising synthesis of knowledge / skills
Assessed by academics	Assessed by peers / professionals
Individual supervision	Group / peer supervisions

While celebrating the variety of forms that FYPD may take, we also recognise that there are some essential features that characterise a dissertation. However, as with all characterisations, not every dissertation can be expected to exhibit all of the characteristics. Some are generally applicable, but others are more relevant to particular disciplines, and some are aspirational rather than being a strict requirement. Whatever form a

project or piece of work takes, and whether undertaken on campus, in the workplace or community, characteristics such as the following make it a dissertation. It needs to:

1. be an extended piece of work largely shaped and directed by the student;
2. be research or inquiry based;
3. be relevant to a discipline or take an interdisciplinary approach;
4. be underpinned by a range of relevant sources;
5. be contextualised and show recognition of the provisional nature of knowledge;
6. have an element of critical thinking and evaluation;
7. be clear what it is contributing;
8. have a clearly defined and justified methodology;
9. build up to its conclusions and where appropriate have an element of reflective commentary, including recommendations; and
10. communicate the research outcomes appropriately and effectively.

An extended version of these characteristics can be downloaded from the project website
http://insight.glos.ac.uk/tli/activities/ntf/creativehops/Pages/KeyCharacteristicsofaDissertation.aspx.

Empirical Findings

As previously noted our focus is on students undertaking research and inquiry projects in their final or senior year, but the FYPD that we are interested in are wider than the traditional honours dissertation in their conception, function, form, location, and nature and dissemination of outputs. These are illustrated below with examples which are based on the case studies collected for the project which are listed in Appendix 1. Further information on the case studies are available on the project website
http://insight.glos.ac.uk/tli/activities/ntf/creativehops.

Conception – Traditional projects and dissertations are usually independently undertaken academic research projects with a degree of choice being exercised by the student as to the topic, though, particularly in the science,technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines, these may be chosen from an approved list which staff are willing to supervise. An alternative conception is to engage students in consultancy projects. For example, in Interactive Media Studies at Miami University Ohio, students work in groups of up to 20 on client consultancy projects, such as redesigning their website (Case Study 3.5). Commercial companies are charged $20,000 per project paid on delivery; non-profit organisations and charities are typically charged c£5,000. They found the client did not take it as seriously when no charge was made. From the client's perspective, they get 'out of the box' thinking that they would never obtain from a consultant firm. The clients typically

end up with something that far exceeds their expectations. The students find it surprising and challenging to manage the changes which commonly occur during the development stage of the project.

In other institutions projects may be closely linked to staff's research interests. For example, in Criminal Justice at ANU, students participate in a research project based on current research being conducted by members of the Faculty of Law, the Australian Institute of Criminology and Research School of Social Science (Case Study 2.3).

Empowering students went a stage further at Newcastle University, UK, where they were involved in designing the Independent Study dissertation module for Combined Honours (Case Study 3.11). Assessment in the module follows a path from formative to more summative assessment; with a balance between assessing the output and the process, determining the latter through a culminating reflective interview. An element of peer assessment is also used and peer collaboration is encouraged.

Function – Most FYPD emphasise analysis of a problem or issue in depth. In contrast many capstone projects emphasise synthesising ideas and material covered earlier in the syllabus. For example, the Exploring Contemporary Literature module at Oxford Brookes University is compulsory for students studying English (Case Study 1.13). The module encourages students in their final year of study to reflect upon their accumulated reading experiences and to explore and implement their critical vocabularies by examining a number of contemporary writings. One of the principal aims is to get students to relate the material that is discussed in class back to other texts and cultural forms that they have encountered on their degree.

Other capstone projects, particularly in the professional disciplines, aim to prepare students for the transition into professional life. For example, the Department of Engineering and Technology at Western Carolina University has implemented a five course engineering project based learning (PBL) core culminating in a senior capstone course sequence, focused on the development of new products and processes (Case Study 5.14). The department has partnered with The Centre for Rapid Product Realisation in delivering and administering the PBL and capstone courses. Both equipment and staff are shared in a collaborative effort to meet the needs of both industry and students. The capstone projects vary across several areas including medical devices and testing equipment, manufacturing products and processes, military and tactical devices, solar collectors and control devices, and sports equipment redesign. The joint collaborative partnership has produced well over 100 industry related products/processes with several resulting in application for patents.

Form – In most traditional dissertations students work independently. However, in many projects group work is used, partly in response to increasing student numbers, but also to give students experience of working in teams which is common in many jobs. For example, final year student primary trainee teachers at

the University of Chichester are given the chance to develop skills and confidence in creative problem-solving in their professional world (Case Study 4.4). Students work in small self-selected teams of around 3-5 students. They address real world problems over realistic timescales and, by the end of their projects, provide genuine end products for external clients, typically schools or non governmental organisations (NGOs) such as museums or environmental education centres.

Where groups are working effectively better quality work is usually obtained than where students work individually. At the University of Gloucestershire the average mark for the Issues in Environmental Geography module based on group projects was consistently 3-5 percentage points higher than the average for other final year modules in geography (Case Study 4.12). The group mark was redistributed among the team members on the basis of self and peer assessment of the quality and effectiveness of their contribution to five project processes.

Location – Most FYPD are campus based. To make the experience more authentic a growing number of programmes are exploring ways of engaging their students in work based and community based projects. Work based projects are relatively common in the professional disciplines, but we came across innovative examples elsewhere. At Sheffield Hallam University, for example, they have adopted this mode in a module in the humanities which runs across two semesters (Case Study 1.9). Examples of the range of recent types of project include: writing a handbook for volunteers working with dementia sufferers in residential homes; Aim Higher Mentoring Associate work in secondary schools; and writing for an in house film magazine and managing external relationships with the Showroom Arts Cinema.

Community based projects are growing in importance in the UK, but they have not yet reached the popularity they have in North America where they form part of the service learning initiatives found in most universities. At Portland State they have gone a stage further, where during the final year each undergraduate student is required to participate in a Senior Capstone community-based learning experience (Case Study 3.1). Each student works with a team of students and faculty. Each Senior Capstone must result in some form of summation, closing project, or final product that puts closure to the students' experience.

Nature and dissemination of outputs – The traditional output of the dissertation in the UK in many disciplines is an 8-10,000 word thesis. Although other forms of output are common in FYPD in the art, media and design subjects they are rarer in most other disciplines. At Sheffield Hallam they allow students on the MSc Database Professional dissertation to submit either a traditional report, or a portfolio of artefacts (Case Study 5.15). In order to maintain visible fairness between the two approaches they share four equally weighted marking criteria - knowledge of the domain; justification of the approach; description of the research

and discussion of the outcomes; and quality of the report and presentation of the argument. Typically the portfolio is delivered as a website, allowing the inclusion of hyperlinks to media of different types.

Undergraduate research conferences and journals are growing in popularity as means of disseminating the outputs of students' projects (Healey and Jenkins 2009; Hart 2012). For example, final-year tourism students at the Universities of Lincoln and Wolverhampton participate together in a live virtual conference, as part of their final-level assessment (Case Study 2.2). During the specified time frame of one week, students across the two campuses can come together at times of their choosing to participate in a joint effort to disseminate research findings and engage in dialogue about their research. Students submit a full conference paper, but it is only a summary discussion paper that appears on the conference website. Each student is also required to post a comment on another conference paper, in true conference dialogue tradition.

The establishment of a national undergraduate research journal for geography, GEOverse, has had interesting impacts on the four institutions involved (Case Study 4.7). Students at Oxford Brookes, the lead institution, undertake a compulsory second year module called *Geography in the Field* where they go on a field trip and work in groups and collect data. An optional third year honours module was created in which students could write up their research as a paper for GEOverse with supervisory support from a tutor. In contrast colleagues at the University of Reading have replaced an examination with writing a journal article for GEOVerse. The University of Gloucestershire has developed a collaborative writing assignment in which students write a collaborative journal article, while at Queen Mary University of London they have an expedition to Iceland. Students are given the opportunity to produce a research paper on their return.

Involving students in public engagement is another way in which FYPD outputs may be disseminated. For example, Bath University has on option module for third and fourth year mathematics students, in which they undertake a project designed to enhance and broaden the public understanding of mathematics, with a particular emphasis on working with local schools (Case Study 5.7). The project provides mathematics students, who are traditionally poor communicators, with the opportunity to demonstrate competency with these skills and to evaluate their ability, whilst increasing student interest in teaching careers.

Designing Choice into Final Year Projects and Dissertations

For us, perhaps the most interesting case studies collected are those which provide students with a choice as to the form, function, location and/or output that the FYPD takes. Surprisingly we found relatively few – about 12 per cent – which gave students a choice. Despite all the innovative ideas we came across, most programmes continue to operate a one size fits all policy to those taking their FYPD. By giving students a choice and verifying that the assessment criteria of the different forms are largely the same, it is possible to ensure that the FYPD appeal to a wider group of students, while assuring that the standards of the different forms are identical.

The Bioscience community appears to be leading the way in this area (Luck, 2008). No fewer than three of the examples we found, where choice was embedded into the dissertation at Durham (Case Study 5.8), Leeds (Case Study 5.11) and Plymouth (Case Study 5.4), came from this area. For example, at Leeds final year students within the Biomedical Sciences have the opportunity to undertake one of seven types of research project (individual laboratory project; group laboratory project; computer simulation project; critical review project; survey project; science and society project; and educational development project). Students are provided with a list of projects, with project descriptors, in March of the year preceding their final year and invited to choose, in rank order, 10 projects they would like to be considered for. The assessments for all project types are similar. Students are required to write a 25-30 page dissertation and deliver an oral presentation.

Outcomes

In terms of the aims and objectives discussed above and the revisions in emphasis during the lifetime of the project, the main project outcomes resulting from the implementation of the project's methodology and the outputs and findings outlined in the last two sections are:

Knowledge and Understanding Outcomes

- Enhanced knowledge and understanding about the nature, potential benefits and staff and student experiences of innovative final year projects and dissertations (FYPD) among academic staff and students within UoG and other universities in UK and internationally.

Learning and Teaching Outcomes

- Identified desirable learning outcomes for a range of dissertation types
- Enhanced the quality of learning for students through:
    a. Development of revised FYPD within UoG;
    b. Identifying positive responses within the higher education sector to developing and embracing a wider scope for FYPD, to include innovative approaches, such as work based learning models.

Evidence Base Outcomes

- Developed and enhanced the evidence base (via Showcase, Grand Findings, project report, conference papers, examples, and case studies) for impact on student learning of FYPD.

Action Planning Outcomes

- Established plans for the continued dissemination of project outcomes.

Impact Evaluation Outcomes

- Reviewed the project's 'theory of change'
- Assessed the short-term impact of the project.

External Evaluation Report

Evaluation was an integral part of the project from the beginning. We agreed with our external evaluator, Martin Jenkins, to use a Theory of Change (ToC) approach to evaluation (Hart *et al.* 2009). The framework was used to explain how and why the project realised the results it achieved. It attempts to develop an understanding of the relationships between outcomes and the activities and contextual factors which may influence the outcomes. One of the attractions of the ToC approach is that it may be used to extend the team's understanding of a project, rather than audit it. Hence the key question in our case was: "What have we learned about how final year projects and dissertations can be designed and assessed to help students prepare for an uncertain world?". It is essentially a narrative approach, which tells the story of the project. Martin facilitated a workshop with the team at the beginning of the approach developing the ToC. The team revisited it a year later and identified areas which had changed and some unexpected outcomes.

The external evaluator's report is included as Appendix 2. Among the point he makes are that:

- "The project has been extremely successful in identifying and promoting creative and innovative approaches to final year projects and dissertations.
- The desired-outcomes set-out for this project were ambitious for a two-year project. … However, the project team has successfully disseminated its findings through the two one-day symposiums and presentations at numerous conferences and workshops in the UK and internationally.
- The project has been delivered against a back-drop of institutional change and some concern over the scope of the project.
- A well-designed web-site has been produced as part of this project.
- Other longer-term impacts reflect impacts on students, empowering learners and developing higher level graduate attributes. The project team have acknowledged that achievement of these outcomes requires cultural change resulting in pedagogic change in the sector. The project has produced resources that will help to inform this process of change.
- They have been very successful in raising awareness and understanding, drawing together a range of examples and initiating debate. The collection of case studies and identified 10 Key Characteristics provide a good outcome in helping to broaden the scope and understanding of the 21st Century dissertation."

Some comments on the impact of the project from two of the team members are included in Appendix 3.

Conclusions and Implications

Summary

Key conclusions that can be drawn from the project are the following:

- A wide variety of different kinds of final year projects and dissertations (FYPD) was found; these are summarised in the dimensions of FYPD (Table 1) and are apparent in the 70 case studies collected during the course of the project (see discussion above under Outputs and Findings).

- Despite the wide range of different approaches in terms of the design of the projects, the way they are undertaken and assessed and the form of the outputs, it is surprising, with some noticeable exceptions, how little choice students appear to be given. However innovative the projects and varied the topics covered, most students are asked to produce similar things and go through similar processes.

- Although the project has emphasised identifying innovative FYPD it is important to note that they share a common set of learning outcomes. The key characteristics of FYPD are given on p.12.

- The traditional dissertation is rightly highly valued in terms of the range of beneficial impacts it has for student learning; they can result in transformative learning experiences for many students. However it is not an appropriate or beneficial experience for all students. This project has found that by diversifying the range of forms of FYPD meets the needs of a wider range of students, particularly those taking professional degrees and those who wish to seek employment outside academia.

- Students in some disciplines have benefited from FYPD which are employment or community-based; these real-world learning experiences are an excellent way for students to gain graduate attributes which prepare them for life beyond the university.

- Much attention in this project has been given to collecting case studies of FYPD from a wide range of disciplines, different kinds of institution and a range of countries. The experience of the events, workshops and conferences at which we have presented has shown how effective these are to challenging academics to think beyond the current ways that they undertake FYPD.

Implications for Students

Students stand to benefit from this project through experiencing a wider range of FYPD and the associated enhancement in skills and understanding from staff redesigning their FYPD. The high level of motivation reported in many of the case studies bodes well for bringing about transformational learning where the FYPD are appropriately designed.

Implications for University Sector

The continuation of workshops and conference presentations together with the wide range of resources, including the case studies and project reports publicly available on the website, should ensure that there is a long term legacy for the project. The decision to publish a book on the topic and the plans to continue to run workshops and make conference presentations to academics and other stakeholders in both the UK and internationally about rethinking final year projects and dissertations will help keep the topic on the agenda and will support colleagues wishing to redesign their FYPD. We are conscious – even since the formal ending of the project that courses have introduced new dissertation alternatives e.g. Bournemouth University's MSc Green Economy now offers both a 'traditional dissertation' and a work-based reflective report.

Implications for the University of Gloucestershire

This project contributes to a long standing agenda within the University to develop research informed teaching and active learning. This is the third NTFS project the University has been awarded in this area - the other two were *Leading, promoting and supporting undergraduate research in New Universities* (2007-10) and *Learning Empowerment through Public-Student engagement (LEAPSE)* (2009-11). Despite extensive restructuring within the University most of the team remain in post and are willing to continue to encourage and support colleagues redesign their FYPD to benefit student learning. The continuing support of the Dean of Teaching Learning and Innovation and Head of Learning Enhancement and Technology Support will ensure that the project outcomes are embedded in future learning and teaching initiatives within the University. As a direct result of the project we now have a working example in the humanities with documentation of an innovative dissertation process that has received positive feedback from students, and that example is likely to be modified and used for other courses in the university in the future. Team members remaining at the university will continue to promote rethinking FYPD within the institution and will support colleagues wishing to redesign their FYPD.

Implications for the Employability Agenda

The range of skills acquired through the many forms of FYPD that we encountered is quite remarkable and suggests significant benefits that such skills-acquisition can make to student employability. The skills support the students' development by encouraging them to become empowered, confident and capable students. FYPD contribute to employability by helping deliver many of the graduate attributes emphasised by employers. Land (2013) suggests the attributes associated with engaging undergraduate students in research and inquiry projects "include:

- critical understanding
- awareness of the provisional nature of knowledge
- how knowledge is created, advanced and renewed
- the effective communication and dissemination of findings

- an ability to analyse problems and issues and to formulate, evaluate and apply evidence based solutions and arguments

- an ability to apply a systematic and critical assessment of complex problems and issues

- an ability to deploy appropriate techniques of analysis and enquiry

- familiarity with advanced techniques and skills

- inventiveness and creativity in formulating, evaluating and applying evidence-based solutions and arguments

- effective project management of time, resources, operations and information

- an understanding of the need for a high level of ethical, social, cultural, environmental and wider professional conduct."

What Next?

This project has focussed particularly on developing a conceptual understanding of the nature of FYPD and analysing and celebrating, through the collection of a large number of case studies, the wide variety of forms they may take. This has led to practical guidance on how to design FYPDs and to develop supportive policies to ensure the innovative ideas are put into practice. There are important research and development agendas, which can build on this enhanced understanding and interest stimulated by the project. On the research side there are wide gaps in our knowledge and understanding of the experience of staff who redesign their FYPD and their students experience in undertaking them. While on the development side the growing interest in the sector in students as change agents provides opportunities for staff and students to co-design FYPD and co-research into their impacts (Healey 2012b).

Recommendations

The following recommendations arise from this report:

- At our events and workshops we repeatedly found that discussing adapting practices to local conditions was more important than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. Institutional context is vital for the successful propagation of new final year project and dissertation initiatives. The major inference from this is that prescription is not the way forward, but that the continued encouragement and support of academic staff and institutions to create distinctive FYPD opportunities is much more likely to be successful. Progress towards greater opportunity for active learning and self-direction within FYPD will only be hindered by a lack of knowledge and guidance, which this project has sought to address, and by any diminution of investment in the future of the higher education student experience.

- Giving students a choice in the form FYPD can take and the nature of the outputs to be assessed is in our view the best way to meet the varied needs of the increasingly diverse student body studying in higher education. This is likely to motivate a wider range of students than the one-size-fits-all approach, which characterises most FYPD, and hence increases the probability that more students will experience transformational learning.

- Quality assurance procedures need to be flexible to allow the choices recommended to be implemented. The easiest way to do this is to have several different versions of FYPD under the same module code. The examples we have uncovered during the course of the project all meet the same learning outcomes and are assessed similarly, though the weightings given to different components may vary for different forms of FYPD. By having the choice *within* a module also means that it is easier to modify the details of existing modules than having to validate a new module.

- Our suggestion for FYPD guides is that they include both a list of essential features that need to be part of any project or dissertation, as well as an open-ended list of possible shapes and forms they can take so long as the essential features are present. This should encourage students to be more creative and to experiment with forms with which they may be more comfortable than the 'standard' 8-10,000 word written thesis.

- For future research there is a fruitful area to explore in terms of the experience of staff in rethinking their FYPD and introducing them into the curriculum and the experience of their students taking them. This project has identified many positive comments from the case studies. Now what is needed are more systematic studies. It is highly desirable that students are involved both as co-designers of FYPD and co-researchers into their impacts.

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Appendix 1 - List of Disciplinary Case Studies

Details of these 70 case studies may be found on the project website at:

http://insight.glos.ac.uk/tli/activities/ntf/creativehops/pages/default.aspx.

Arts, Design, Media and Humanities Examples

1.1 Giving students alternative assessment options for undertaking a Product Design project at **Nottingham Trent University, UK**

1.2 History students contribute research findings to a web site at **Victoria University, Canada**

1.3 Design dissertation: From practice to theory and back again at the **University of Greenwich, UK**

1.4 Advanced Newsweek: work-based learning and employability skills for student journalists at the **University of Gloucestershire, UK**

1.5 Community sector work placements as capstone projects at **Swinburne University of Technology, Australia**

1.6 Developing authentic undergraduate research in Art & Design at **Nottingham Trent University, UK**

1.7 An extended essay as an alternative to a dissertation in a Radio Production degree course at the **University of Gloucestershire, UK**

1.8 Producing artefacts through collaboration in Media Production at the **University of Gloucestershire, UK**

1.9 Final year work based projects in the Humanities at **Sheffield Hallam University, UK**

1.10 Learning from industry professionals and a student-led conference on Contemporary Issues in Arts Management at the **Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts, UK**

1.11 Entertainment Technology dissertation at **Staffordshire University, UK**

1.12 Letting the apple fall further from the tree: the creation of a guide to inform students of the diversity of possible forms an English Language dissertation can take in the **University of Gloucestershire, UK**

1.13 Exploring Contemporary Literature at **Oxford Brookes University, UK**

1.14 Music and the dissertation at **Oxford Brookes University,** UK

1.15 Creative Exchange: Multidisciplinary Media Arts practice in an industry context at **James Cook University, Australia**

1.16 BA (Hons) Popular Music students – an alternative approach to assessment design of a research project module at the **Colchester Institute, UK**

Business, Hospitality, Law, Sport and Tourism Examples

2.1 Engaging students in applied research through a Community Sports development consultancy project at **University of Central Lancashire, UK**

2.2 Modelling the research experience: Tourism students' virtual conference at **Universities of Lincoln and Wolverhampton, UK**

2.3 Students participate in a research project on Criminal Justice linked to staff interests at **Australian National University, Australia**

2.4 International on-course market research experience for final semester Bachelor of Agribusiness students at the **University of Queensland, Australia**

2.5 Events Management live consultancy project, at the **University of Gloucestershire, UK**

2.6 Coaching and Community Development at **Southampton Solent University, UK**

2.7 Implementing a Research active curriculum at the **University of Sunderland, UK**

2.8 Researching Contemporary Management Issues: An alternative to the final year project at the **University of Winchester, UK**

2.9 Virtual Law Placement: Experiencing work integrated learning in diverse law graduate employment workplaces virtually at **Queensland University of Technology, Australia**

2.10 Broadening final year projects through use of major and minor thesis requirements at the **Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, Japan**

2.11 Students solving real-life projects in Computer Science and Software Engineering at **University of Sheffield, UK**

2.12 Charity fund raising final year project in Business and Management Studies for enhancing employability at the **University of Bradford, UK**

2.13 Management Practice in real world projects at Hong Kong Polytechnic University

2.14 Final year work placement, an alternative to the dissertation in Events Management, at the **University of Winchester, UK**

Interdisciplinary Examples

3.1 Compulsory community-based learning capstone project at **Portland State University, USA**

3.2 Unravelling complexity at **Australian National University, Australia**

3.3 Inter-disciplinary inquiry-based learning (IDIBL) focused on action research in the workplace at **University of Bolton, UK**

3.4 Academic credit for employability skills at the **University of Gloucestershire, UK**

3.5 Changing institutional and undergraduate perspectives and approaches to education; demonstrated by the State of Sexual Assault undergraduate project at **Ball State University, USA**

3.6 Involving students in Interdisciplinary Interactive Media Consultancy projects at **Miami University, Ohio, USA**

3.7 Working interdisciplinary with communities in the UK, Kenya and Zambia to design, produce and sell a children's book at the **University of Central Lancashire, UK**

3.8 A work-based alternative to the dissertation at Masters Level: Staff engaged in action research at the **University Centre Yeovil, UK**

3.9 Independent Study programme at the **College of Wooster, USA**

3.10 Dissertation Question Time: supporting the dissertation project through panel discussion at **Brunel University, UK**

3.11 Engaging students through empowering them to co-create the curriculum at **University of Newcastle, UK**

3.12 Engaging students in researching research support and developing web resources at **University of Newcastle, UK**

Education, Social, Environmental, and Health Sciences Examples

4.1 Service-learning program in Faculty of Education at **Queensland University of Technology, Australia**

4.2 Giving students first-hand experience of research-based consultancy in environmental management at the **University of Queensland, Australia**

4.3 Preparing and defending a consultancy report in environmental geology at **Kingston University, UK**

4.4 Trainee teachers making change happen in their professional world at the **University of Chichester, UK**

4.5 Students act as research consultants in joint degree in Education, Sport and Leisure at **Nottingham Trent University, UK**

4.6 Empowering communities through Asset Mapping and GIS, a series of senior capstone courses at **Portland State University, USA**

4.7 Geoverse: A national journal for undergraduate research in Geography at **Oxford Brookes and three other universities, UK**

4.8 Research and inquiry based practice dissertation for undergraduate qualified nurses at the **University of Southampton, UK**

4.9 Encouraging students' critical engagement with Community-based Publics and Issues at **Birmingham City University, UK**

4.10 Geography Workplace project at **Staffordshire University, UK**

4.11 Bachelor Thesis in International Cooperation and Development for pre-primary and primary school teachers at **Scuola Universitaria Professionale della Svizzera Italiana, Switzerland**

4.12 Final year students undertake team research projects on local environmental issues at the **University of Gloucestershire, UK**

Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Examples

5.1 Collaborative and student-driven learning approaches to capstone units in ICT at **Macquarie University, Australia**

5.2 Nurturing biochemical research skills in group laboratory-based capstone unit at the **Queensland University of Technology, Australia**

5.3 Chemistry 'Concentrated Study' Project at the **University of St Andrews, Scotland, UK**

5.4 Research into Practice: An alternative format for final year Bioscience honours project at the **University of Plymouth, UK**

5.5 The Mechanical Engineering final year project at **University of Adelaide, Australia**

5.6 Linking students with industry through Co-operative Education for Enterprise Development (CEED) in **four Australian Universities**

5.7 Communicating Maths at the **University of Bath, UK**

5.8 Bioscience end of degree project at **Durham University, UK**

5.9 GIS Management in industry at **Curtin University, Australia**

5.10 Bridging the gap between textbooks and scientific research: Cell Biology at **University of Utrecht, Netherlands**

5.11 Integrating professional and technical competencies in a final year capstone design course at the **University of New South Wales, Australia**

5.12 Alternative final year projects in the Biosciences at the **University of Leeds, UK**

5.13 Students undertake paid internships as agents of change or educational researchers in biosciences at the **University of Leeds, UK**

5.14 Facilitating student professional readiness through industry sponsored senior capstone projects at **Western Carolina University, USA**

5.15 Dissertation in Database Professional MSc by portfolio at **Sheffield Hallam University, UK**

5.16 Developing and professionally managing video-games at Utah Game Forge, at the **University of Utah, USA**

Appendix 2

Stakeholder Perceptions: What stakeholders want from 'Rethinking Final Year Projects and Dissertations: Creative Honours and Capstone Projects'

This document was produced in answer to the question 'How do we know that this is what these stakeholders want?'. Consequently, following wide consultation, the following viewpoints were expressed.

Students Want:

- Confidence that Creative Honours projects represent a worthwhile challenge appropriate to their discipline and development
- A Creative Honours output that is useful in job hunting
- An opportunity to understand and integrate theory and practice, to secure academic study and practical benefits
- A wide range of possibilities for final year projects
- An opportunity to develop skills that go beyond narrow disciplinary research and writing that is of clear use in life and career
- An opportunity to pursue activities which are meaningful or life enhancing (such as volunteering) and have them count towards their degree
- Creative Honours projects that allow students a chance to reflect on their values and motivations behind their activities
- An opportunity to challenge conventional wisdom and be creative
- Assurance that they will be well supervised and supported by the university and any partner organisation
- Clear assessment procedures including entitlement to formative feedback and assessment criteria that are unambiguous
- To gain from a process that enables them to synthesise knowledge and information
- Projects that represent good value for money
- Projects that can be shared, published or recognised as good practice

Staff and Academic Institutions Want:

- Confidence in Creative Honours projects that represent a challenge appropriate to the undergraduate level and discipline
- A Creative Honours output that is useful to students/graduates in gaining employment

- Projects that provide an opportunity to integrate theory and practice, to inform and secure academic study and practical benefits
- Creative Honours projects that provide an opportunity to explore new approaches relevant to their discipline, and which constitute a manageable work load.
- An opportunity to integrate or synthesise knowledge and experience within and beyond the classroom
- A clearly designed assessment process
- Projects that foster collaboration with students to produce academic reports, published research or new products/initiatives

Employers Want:
- Confidence that Creative Honours projects represent a challenging and practical application of relevance to the discipline and their business
- A Creative Honours output that demonstrates to potential employers the skills and capability of students and graduates
- A Creative Honours output which expands and consolidates the skills and knowledge of students
- Outputs which engage with sustainability and ethical concerns
- Students equipped with the knowledge and experience to succeed in the work place, create materials of value to businesses, and undertake work-based research
- A Creative Honours output that offers solutions to problems, is evidence-based, realistic, timely and pragmatic
- Clarity and structure to the project, i.e. on how it may affect the individual's work capacity and any further requirements on business resources

Society Wants:
- Students to gain skills that help them link and act on economic, cultural, social and environmental aspects of problems
- Reflective practitioners, creative thinkers, and researchers
- Projects that engage with real issues and that make a difference

Community Groups Want:
- An output that makes a practical difference that directly benefits the community
- A project that community groups can contribute to as partners, gain insights from, and apply to improve their circumstances
- Confidence that Creative Honours projects undertaken by students are properly supervised, providing community groups with clear links to university staff whilst encouraging students and community

groups to jointly explore ideas, share skills, knowledge and experience that are situated in the community

Appendix 3 – External Evaluation Report

Martin Jenkins, Manager, Centre for Educational Development, Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, New Zealand

Introduction

This report provides a review of the *Rethinking Final Year Projects and Dissertations: Creative Honours and Capstone Projects* research at the University of Gloucestershire. The project has used a Theory of Change (ToC) approach for its evaluation (Hart *et al.*, 2009). This approach is based on that used by the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS), at the University of Sheffield (CILASS, 2010). The reason for choosing the ToC approach was that the evaluation is encouraged to focus on the enabling and process factors and not just the outcomes and impacts. The approach emphasises telling the story of the project by mapping the changes made to the ToC during the life of the project.

At the start of the project team members participated in a workshop activity facilitated by the external evaluator to produce their ToC representation for the project. This process identified the: current situation, enabling factors/resources, processes/activities, desired outcomes and desired longer-term impacts. In establishing these it was possible to identify potential sources of evidence which the project could draw on in order to achieve the desired outcomes. These included interviews with project team members and students, project documentation, literature review, project outputs and the evolution of the ToC evaluation representation.

It was the intention that the external evaluator would facilitate discussions with project team members as part of this evaluation. However, as a consequence of the external evaluator relocating to New Zealand during the period of the project this has not been possible. The project team did though review the original ToC in October 2011. In seeking to achieve some dialogue as part of the evaluation a draft report was sent to the project team, which provided them with an opportunity to respond and so add to the final evaluation report; responses from the project team do therefore form part of this report. The focus of this external evaluation report is based on an analysis of project documentation, outputs and the responses of the project team; providing an external perspective on the achievements of the project.

Project Theory of Change

> '*The Honours Dissertation is the traditional undergraduate capstone and is often seen as the gold-standard of British HE. It provides an excellent apprenticeship for students wishing to undertake research degrees, but with*

> *increasing student diversity and growth of professional disciplines, it does not necessarily provide for all students and employers' needs'.*

This quote from the Executive Summary of the project proposal represents the core issue for this project. The review of the original ToC representation in October 2011 was indicative of the reflective and responsive approach taken by the team throughout this project. The team added an additional column to the ToC representation, *Unexpected Changes and Outcomes*, reflecting some of the factors that were impacting on the project and making clear what changes that were being made.

The changes demonstrate a broadening of terminology and scope for the project as well as reflecting a response to both the local and national environment in which they were working. The original proposal was aligned with UK higher education policy in recognising the importance of alternative projects that might be employer or community based, reflecting the employability agenda. These were reinforced in the updated ToC, as likely long-term impacts of the project.

The project team did change the title of the project during this first year. The original title 'Creative Honours Projects' was found to be confusing, being seen by some to be limited to creative disciplines. In addition within the University of Gloucestershire itself there was a concern among some staff that the project was being used as a means of closing down the dissertation rather than broadening its scope.

> **Team comment:**
> People were confused by the term creative and assumed that the term referred to the creative disciplines (i.e. Arts-based subjects). It also suggested that the 'traditional' dissertation couldn't be creative- which did cause some academics some discomfort at the 2011 UoG debate.

The project made a distinction in its original outcomes between a dissertation and a creative honours project. Through discussions over the life of the project this was changed as it was recognised that rather than add a new categorisation, what was required was to broaden the definition and scope of the dissertation.

> **Team comment:**
> We have extended and hence broadened, the definition of the traditional dissertation.

Outcomes and Impact

The project has been extremely successful in identifying and promoting creative and innovative approaches to final year projects and dissertations. It has gathered over 65 international case studies and has made these available through an accessible web-site. The promotion of alternative approaches has also been achieved through a National Symposium held in June 2011, a Grand Finale conference staged in the Spring of 2012, a debate within the University of Gloucestershire and numerous conference and workshop presentations by

members of the team in the UK and internationally. By assembling this resource bank the project is raising awareness of how the scope and definition of the final year project is being interpreted internationally.

Identifying desirable learning outcomes for a range of dissertations was another desired outcome. Rather than desired learning outcomes the team has identified

> **Team comment:**
>
> Through the UoG debate and two National Conferences the project team realised that re-defining the dissertation was detrimental to higher education. Staff, students and employers understand the terminology of the dissertation and there is a desire to work within this language boundary. However, students and staff recognise, which is demonstrated by the large number and breadth of case studies collected, that there is creative scope within the 'dissertation'. These perspectives changed the teams understanding of creative honours projects and instead of offering an alternative the focus changed to broadening the potential scope offered within the undergraduate dissertation.

what it has termed key characteristics of a dissertation. These have been produced as a set of key characteristics, intended to provide a framework to open-up possibilities. This is an open and positive outcome, which has been promoted at the Grand Finale Symposium, the HEA conference, NTFS PASS project conference and several workshops. It is hoped this will be part of an on-going dissemination plan, as identified as part of the desired-outcomes, including the planned book.

The project aimed to have an impact within the University of Gloucestershire, developing new approaches to final year projects. One discipline area (i.e. English Language) has successfully transformed its undergraduate dissertation by giving students guidelines which describe the essential features of a dissertation and allowing them to pursue a wider range of options within these guidelines. The dissertation guidelines introduce a 10 stage structure and dissertation conference to engage students. This is a positive move, recognising that bringing about curriculum change is often a long-term project and having an exemplar will be potentially valuable in the future. The project has been delivered against a back-drop of institutional change and some concern over the scope of the project. It is hoped that the University of Gloucestershire will follow-up this development to evaluate its impact.

The desired-outcomes set-out for this project were ambitious for a two-year project. This was recognised in the July 2011 report with a reassessment towards raising awareness, stimulating debate and providing examples. The project has been able to meet these

> **Team comment:**
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> Given the UoG debate, the two national conferences and the numerous conferences and workshops we have undertaken we believe that we have stimulated a lot of debate.

achievements particularly providing examples and raising awareness. It is one of the limitations of a two-year project that the opportunities for more sustained debate within the higher education community around the scope and definition for the 21st Century dissertation are limited. However, the project team has successfully disseminated its findings through the two one-day symposiums and presentations at numerous conferences and workshops in the UK and internationally. I would urge the project team to continue using future

dissemination opportunities, such as the forthcoming book, to promote a broader understanding of the scope of final year projects and dissertations.

Processes and Activities

The project has been very productive in establishing contacts across the UK and internationally which have resulted in the collection of a wide range of case studies. It is also notable that opportunities have been taken to promote the project widely, with Professor Healey in particular promoting the project at conferences and institutional visits.

A well-designed web-site has been produced as part of this project. This provides access to the case studies and other outputs from the project as well as providing access to project reports. This provides a good resource for the higher education community.

A successful National Symposium was held in June 2011, attended by over 100 participants, feedback from the event was positive. In February 2012 a second National Symposium, the Grand Finale for the project, was held; this was also attended by 100 participants, including undergraduate students from across the UK.

The project has produced a set of Ten Key Characteristics for Final Year Undergraduate Dissertations and Projects and a set of Stakeholder Perceptions. These have been made available on the web-site, it is hoped that good use of these will

> **Team comment:**
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> The 10 characteristics were developed with extensive consultation especially the international advisory panel and participants at 2012 conference and several workshops.

be made within the University of Gloucestershire and that they will be promoted more widely.

Enabling Factors and Resources

As part of the ToC process a number of enabling factors were identified at the start of the project. While the scope of this project was for the higher education community as a whole it was working within a specific institutional context. This did have an impact on the delivery of this project. The

> **Team comment:**
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> Through time attitudes have changed, as demonstrated by the English Language department who now use a model which allows students to undertake creative dissertations within the existing framework.

broader institutional context for the period of this project was of change. The University of Gloucestershire has seen the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and a significant programme of revalidations following a review. This has not helped create an environment that was conducive to change. It initially contributed to concerns expressed over the extent to which the project reflected a threat to the dissertation. This view also reflects the strong commitment to this traditional model in

academia. However, ultimately the curriculum review did also provide an opportunity and ideas developed through the project were able to be fed into the process.

Longer-term Impacts

The longer-term changes that this project initially identified were greater awareness and commitment to the potential of creative honours and capstone projects, with the aim of enhancing the learning 'engagement' of undergraduates. At the mid-point of the project they were extended to include: embed a range of ways of achieving learning outcomes of final year projects and dissertations within the University of Gloucestershire; develop higher level graduate attributes through the application of creative and innovative approaches to final year projects and dissertations; empower learners through choice and diversity; broaden the definition and scope of the dissertation to ensure its relevance to the 21st Century.

Any comment on the achievement of these desired long term impacts is beyond the scope of this evaluation report. However, it is possible to comment on whether pathways have been established which would create the possibility. Within the University of Gloucestershire one department has already transformed its dissertation; providing that important first step. This is a positive result that needs to be acknowledged and will hopefully be used to inform future practice in other disciplines. Other longer-term impacts reflect impacts on students, empowering learners and developing higher level graduate attributes. The project team have acknowledged that achievement of these outcomes requires cultural change resulting in pedagogic change in the sector. The project has produced resources that will help to inform this process of change.

Concluding Remarks

The rationale for this project recognised the tension that was developing between the traditional dissertation and its appropriateness for higher education in the 21st Century. It was therefore a timely project that had broad-value to the higher education community, being informed by the Research-informed-Teaching agenda, the employability agenda and recognising different disciplinary approaches. This scope was reflective in its original broad scope, which in looking back can now be seen to have been perhaps too ambitious. It set out desired outcomes that were both broad – to raise awareness and understanding – and also deep – identifying desirable learning outcomes. The project team have responded well to the environment in which the project was enacted, recognising the needs of the community and so helping to ensure that useful outputs have emerged from the project. They have been very successful in raising awareness and understanding, drawing together a range of examples and initiating debate. The collection of case studies and identified 10 Key Characteristics provide a good outcome in helping to broaden the scope and understanding of the 21st Century dissertation.

Appendix 4 – Two Team Members' Perspectives on the Project

Here are comments from two members of the team about the impact of the project:

'In joining this project I found an extremely focused team of researchers who were genuinely interested in the issues raised by the changing role of undergraduate dissertations. What this project did, particularly through the two national conferences and the website, was bring together a wide ranging community of academics who share an interest in questioning the role of what we might call the 'traditional' undergraduate dissertation. I was most impressed by the flexibility shown by the team in this regard, particularly in adapting the project in light of the evidence it accumulated about just how varied the definition of 'dissertation' is in different subject areas. I feel fortunate to have been able to participate in this project, one of the best and well managed I have come across in over 15 years as a university academic." Dr Jim Keane, Senior Lecturer in Economics

"The Project has taken me on a fascinating learning journey, where I started out with certain attitudes and ideas about the dissertation and teaching and learning in general, conducted detailed evidenced-based inquiry, and discovered a wide range of new ideas and possibilities. The questioning started at a deep level, of 'what is education for in the 21st century' to specific level of ways of organising dissertations to achieve educational goals in changing times. The result for me is a dissertation process that challenges students, allows them to show their creativity and develop a wide range of skills, and I hope that my contribution to the project will be as useful for others who design dissertations. This project has been extremely valuable in extending my research skills in the area of pedagogic research – something few academics outside of education disciplines are trained to do as a postgraduate student. It has strengthened my own teaching and placed me in a better position to contribute to educational development, both within my university and nationally." Dr Arran Stibbe, NTF Reader in Humanities