

Principal's Teaching Award Scheme Project – Dissertations at a Distance. Final report, February 2016

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Summary

The Dissertations at a Distance project was designed to better understand online distance learners' and teachers' experiences of undertaking Masters dissertations. As more Masters programmes are offered online, more students will have the experience of conducting a significant piece of independent research while at a distance from the University of Edinburgh. Student, programme and institutional success are at stake when students embark on the dissertation, and this project aimed to heighten our institutional ability to support online distance learning (ODL) students through dissertation to completion of their Masters programme, by developing our understanding of the factors involved in successful completion of dissertations at a distance. Framed around the concept of 'success', the project aimed to explore what supervisor, student and programme practices could be seen to align with successful dissertation outcomes for online distance learners.

Through a series of interviews with graduates from four online distance programmes at the University of Edinburgh, workshops and discussions with supervisors, and a review of programme practices, the project examined the online distance learning experience of independent research. Project activities included:

- Eighteen interviews with graduates from the four programmes involved in the research.
- Two workshops and a focus group discussion with dissertation supervisors.
- In-depth discussions with programme directors and co-ordinators, and a review of programme practices and documentation.
- Dissemination web site and events with University of Edinburgh colleagues.
- Conference presentations and academic publications.
- Development of the 'dissertation situations' game.

A number of findings emerged from the project:

- Online distance graduates across all four programmes reported positive experiences with independent research, supervision, support and their own development as researchers. Students particularly valued the welcome and encouragement they received from supervisors and other academic and support staff. The theme of 'hospitality at a distance' emerged in response to this finding.
- Where experiences with the dissertation were challenging or negative, these tended to be assumed by interviewees to relate to the online nature of the experience, rather than to common issues and concerns that many students, both on and off-campus, face. The theme of 'campus imaginaries' emerged in response to this finding.
- Interviews and workshops revealed that dissertation supervisors need and value opportunities to think about and understand the distinctive issues and concerns that arise for online distance students. To this end, we developed a discussion-based game for online supervisors: 'Dissertation Situations'.
- No two programmes in the research approached the dissertation process and supervisory arrangements in exactly the same way, indicating that there are many potential models for organising the dissertation period and supporting students. We recommend a fuller mapping exercise to learn about the full range of practices across all ODL programmes, including the strengths and weaknesses of each, to give new programme teams scaffolding to support their own approaches.
- Although it was planned to analyse dissertation-related data from the four programmes involved in the research, this proved unachievable. Access to data was more difficult than anticipated due to a change in the University's reporting software and processes, and the data itself was not easy to work with and appeared to contain errors. Student systems may need to be made aware of these difficulties so they can put mechanisms in place for programmes to be able to analyse patterns in student achievement and activity.

The project findings can help us better support ODL students both in successful completion of the dissertation, and in achieving a high quality experience of the dissertation process. In particular, we recommend that:

- A fuller mapping exercise should be undertaken to understand the full range of practices across all ODL programmes, including the strengths and weaknesses of each, to give new programme teams scaffolding to support their own approaches.

- More programmes could consider running programme-specific events like the workshops we held with supervisors. These were productive in terms of generating shared understandings of supervision challenges and practices, considering student experiences on the dissertation, and identifying areas where programme directors may want to clarify or refine processes.
- Online distance programmes should look for more ways to engage with students about their expectations of conducting independent research.
- Help and guidance should be provided for programme teams to understand what student systems data might be able to offer, and how to access this.

Project activities

Interviews

This strand of the project comprised 18 interviews with graduates from the four programmes involved in the research. Because programme organisers/directors were aware of issues that meant certain people shouldn't be approached (where there were appeals ongoing, for example), the agreement was that each would select graduates who would be appropriate to interview – including those who started but did not complete the dissertation, and others with unusual experiences – aiming to get a spread of locations and dissertation outcomes and experiences. As the MSc in Clinical Management of Pain had not yet had students who had undertaken the dissertation (as this was an optional programme element), the programme director was asked to nominate students who had undertaken the programme's 20-credit independent project, instead. Law and Digital Education graduates who were medics were excluded, to attempt to keep some separation between the HSS and MVM student groups in terms of professional backgrounds.

The semi-structured interviews took place via Skype or email (and in one case face-to-face), between November 2014-February 2015. All were conducted by the RA, from a set of questions which she used as a starting point (see Appendix A).

Subject area	Number of interviews	Dissertation weighting
Clinical Education	6	60 credits, compulsory for the degree
Law	4	60 credits, compulsory for the degree
Digital Education	6	60 credits, compulsory for the degree
Clinical Management of Pain	2	60 credits, optional dissertation or project

Interviews were transcribed by an external company (Outsec), and each transcript was reviewed and anonymised by the PI before uploading the data into Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative data analysis software tool. The RA and PI collaborated on thematic coding of the interviews. Themes that emerged included:

- personal and professional contexts of interviewees, including their experiences of work-based research projects, combining work and study, and their reasons for choosing to study online;
- a variety of experiences of the dissertation, including enjoyment, personal development, uncertainty about expectations, isolation, responsibility and different understandings of success;

- issues around place and time, mobility, disruption, and geography;
- supervisory relationships, practices and experiences of support;
- programme context, communication, support and how the dissertation was organised and managed;
- community and interaction during the taught and dissertation elements of the programme;
- the dissertation itself: topic, scope, methods, structure, genres, deadlines, assessment and experiences of thinking and practicing like a researcher;
- strategies adopted and lessons learned from the dissertation experience.

Programme reviews

The review strand involved in-depth discussions with programme directors and co-ordinators, and a review of programme practices and documentation (see Appendix B for the full set of snapshots). One of the most interesting aspects of this part of the project was developing an understanding of how differently different programmes approached the dissertation and getting a sense of the strengths of each approach, as well as the areas identified by programme directors and organisers for further work and development.

Each programme director/organiser was asked to identify some key messages for other programmes:

Ambition and feasibility:

- Students need a lot of help and advice to guide them in shaping a feasible project. It is sometimes helpful to frame this as a 'pilot' study, and to emphasise that it can only be a small piece of work, undertaken during a year in which the balance of work and study can be hard to achieve. Start early, do 'little and often', keep on top of the timetable, and stay in touch with your supervisor!
- A key challenge for the independent study projects is to make them manageable; they are usually far too ambitious. The academic supervisor's job is therefore to look at the project as a whole and help unpick what is feasible given the time and resources available.
- Recommend to students that they plan a dissertation over an 8-month period, to allow for some slippage and still to stay within the year.

Matching students, supervisors and topics:

- Know your students - who they are, why they are there. This will give a good head start on guessing about potential topics and supervision needs.
- It is good for the programme to give choices of dissertation topics where this is feasible in terms of supervision. Offering staff profiles listing research interests is also a good approach, to guide students towards topics for which there is supervisory capacity and expertise.
- The onus is on the programme director to get the right fit for supervision – compatibility in relation to the topic is key, but style matters too: for example, if someone is struggling, match them with someone very hands on.
- Positive relationships with supervisors are really important, and can work especially well where students and supervisors know one another well already. When the supervisory relationship goes wrong – for example if

agreed activities or preparation don't take place prior to set meetings – it can be problematic for students and for the dissertation.

Motivation:

- Students have to be motivated to successfully complete their academic studies and understand the value attached to their hard work. Students often ask 'what am I going to get out of this?'. Students on some programmes are not studying purely out of 'interest' or for abstract reasons, but strategically with clear career goals in mind.

Planning and flexibility:

- Give students enough time before the dissertation starts to think it through and understand what they're going to do. Timing is crucial: don't bombard them when they're not receptive. A dissertation guide setting out expectations and deadlines, along with as much of a timetable as possible, is really important.
- Consider how flexible it's possible to be with starting points, to give students the best chance of aligning the dissertation with their other commitments. However, once they do start, encouraging and supporting them to keep within the year limit seems to be important – once things start to slip beyond that, this often becomes an unsatisfactory experience for students and supervisors.

Supporting students:

- Students need explicit and repeated guidance to be given in multiple formats.
- Someone (probably the programme director) needs to keep an overview of the dissertation process and to be available and approachable in case any issues arise for students or supervisors.
- Clarity of expectations on both sides is key. Students need to know what they need to do.
- Look for ways to support peer contact for those students who want it, without assuming that everyone does – some prefer to work independently.
- Students value seeing examples of other work and feedback that's been given, from across the range (not just excellent examples).

Supporting supervisors:

- Help supervisors develop systems for checking in with students.
- Meet up periodically to give supervisors a chance to discuss dissertation approaches and issues. It's also really helpful to have group dissertation moderation sessions to review a batch of feedback and marks.

Last but not least: The dissertation should be an enjoyable experience!

Workshops and focus group discussions

As part of our combined data generation and dissemination plans, we held two workshops and a focus group discussion with dissertation supervisors between March and April 2015. The workshops, with MSc Clinical Education and MSc Digital

Education supervisors, used anonymised extracts from the Phase 1 interviews as discussion prompts for participants. Pairs of supervisors each selected several quotes, and discussed these together, before bringing observations back to the larger group. The workshop then moved on to a wide-ranging discussion about supervision practice, structured around the following questions:

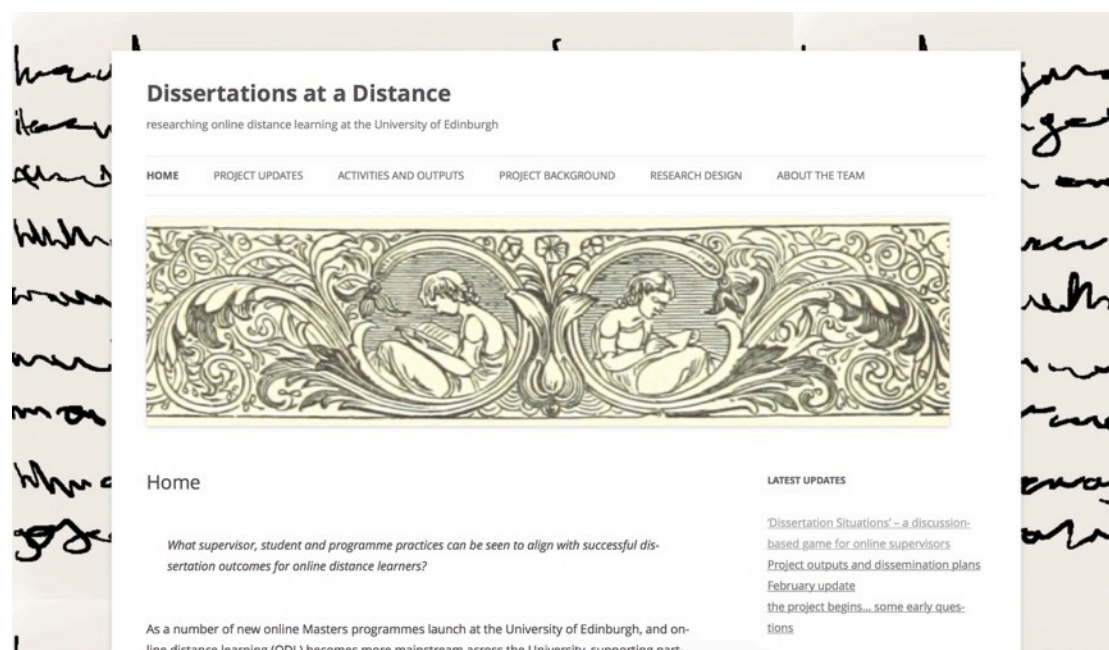
- What (if anything) is distinctive about supervising at a distance?
- What are some things you do as a supervisor that you think work well for online distance students?
- What are some challenges or worries for you in relation to supervising online students?
- In your experience, what do students find most difficult about doing dissertations at a distance?
- In your experience, what matters most to online distance learners at dissertation stage?

There were not enough supervisors available from the eLLM programmes to run a full workshop, so instead we conducted an interview/focus group discussion with two colleagues, focused around the questions above.

Some selected observations from these events are in Appendix C.

Project web site

The project web site served as a location for project information, updates and details of the team, and was made available to prospective interviewees and others we engaged with as part of the project. The intention is to keep updating it with information about events and project outputs. <http://www.distancedissertations.uk>



Events

We have presented or are due to present our work on the project at the following events:

Dissertations online. Online Learning @ Edinburgh. 5 May 2015, University of Edinburgh. <https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/OL/ODL+Past+Events>

Campus imaginaries and dissertations at a distance. Society for Research into Higher Education Conference, Wales, 9-11 December 2015. Jen Ross and Phil Sheail. <http://www.srhe.ac.uk/conference2015/abstracts/0166.pdf>

Supervising at a distance: understanding the ODL dissertation experience. Workshop, Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh. 10 February 2016. <https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/OL/ODL+Past+Events>

'Hospitality at a distance': supervisory practices and student experiences of supervision in online Masters dissertations. Networked Learning 2016. 9-11 May 2016. Phil Sheail and Jen Ross. <http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk>

'Dissertation Situations' game



colleagues playing 'dissertation situations', February 2016

At our third team meeting (August 2015), we discussed our original plan to create a resource for online distance students, and recognised that our findings were likely to be of more use to supervisors than to students. This led to a rethink of our dissemination plans, and to the idea of developing a scenario-based game to replicate the success of our supervisors' workshop formats, where we asked supervisors to discuss student quotes from the interviews.

We developed a prototype game, and tried it out with a small group of supervisors on the MSc in Digital Education programme.



supervisors trying the 'dissertation situations' prototype, September 2015

The experience was encouraging, and helped us refine our thinking. We moved to full development of the game, with the support of a graphic designer (Sigrid Schmeisser, who had worked with the PI on another project). The final game was completed and delivered in late January 2016, in time to be played at our workshop on 10 February.



printed version of 'dissertation situations', January 2016

The game is based around 'situation' cards, which players draw as they move around the game board from 'enrolment' to 'graduation'. The situations echo accounts given to us by interviewees and participants in the research, and are designed to provide opportunities for discussing the potential issues and challenges a student may face in the dissertation process, and for exploring a range of responses to these.

About 25 workshop attendees in total played the game in groups of three or four.

The feedback on the experience was extremely positive. Since then we have been in discussion with colleagues about adapting the game for play a) online; b) with students and c) with on-campus supervisors.

Ten copies of the game have been printed and are available for programme teams to borrow.





Project challenge – dissertation-related data

One strand of activity in the project was to be an analysis of dissertation-related data from each of the four programmes. We aimed to look at available data on numbers of students undertaking the dissertation, numbers completing it, supervisory arrangements, time between enrolment and graduation, and grades. We planned to use this in conjunction with the interview data, to help draw conclusions about how experiences of success map onto duration of study, supervisory arrangements, and completion rates. However, getting this data proved to be difficult – the new system, BI Suite (replacing BOXI) did not allow academic staff to design and run reports, so our request for data had to be sent to a colleague in Student Systems. This colleague was extremely helpful (our thanks to him – Paul Gorman), and he helped us work through what was available in relation to the questions we wanted to explore. He was able to run reports to generate the following data for each student:

Examination Number		Supervisor initials	
UUN		MR	
Route Code	PTMSCCLINE1P		
Start Date	01/09/2009	Dissertation Mark	
Agreed Award Name	MSc	Enrolled on dissertation	
Award Conferred Date	29/11/2013		

Module Code	Period Slot Code	Course Marks	Credits	Academic Year Code
MEED11017	SB23	71	20	2009/0
MEED11018	SEM1	72	20	2009/0
MEED11020	SEM2	57	20	2009/0
MEED11014	SEM2	62	20	2010/1
MEED11022	SB23	62	20	2010/1
MEED11021	YR	55	60	2011/2

sample data from the BI Suite report

However, the raw data we could get in spreadsheet format was not easy to work with. For example, the spreadsheet was set up so that each course enrolment had its own row (so each student would have multiple rows), and it wasn't possible to have one row per student. We sought help from our colleague Hamish Macleod, who was able to run some analyses on the spreadsheets.

Report

Time from start to award in months

Agreed Award Name	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
LLM	31.3617	14	10.97399
MSc	52.0423	26	19.19534
PgDip	34.1027	1	.
Total	44.5431	41	19.22290

example of report from initial (inaccurate) raw data. Thanks to Dr H Macleod.

This enabled us to identify major issues with the spreadsheet (not all students were appearing), and to return to Student Systems to discuss these, and run new reports. At this point it emerged that a number of student entries were being duplicated, and we were not confident that the data we had was complete or error-free. Before returning to ask for more help, several of us met with Hamish Macleod to discuss how we wanted to use this data. We decided that the questions we could potentially answer (relationship between dissertation mark and how long between enrolment for the dissertation and graduating, for example), weren't necessarily going to give us useful information (because there are a number of reasons why graduation might be delayed). Simple mark data alone would be of limited use for us, and on reflection, we decided that continuing to try to 'hack' the data was unlikely to be worthwhile given the difficulties with working with the raw data, and the problems that kept emerging in the data. We gave up on this strand at that point, and focused on the themes emerging from the interview data and how these related to supervisor and programme director experiences and observations.

Emerging themes

Key themes that emerged from the project data were:

Hospitality at a distance. A recurrent theme of 'connection and disconnection' emerged from our analysis of interviews. This theme is considered in relation to student accounts of positive experiences of support and continuity in supervisory relationships, juxtaposed with reports of disconnection and isolation during the dissertation process; experiences which were often accepted by graduates as an inevitable part of working on an independent research project. Building on Ruitenberg's (2011¹) work on 'an ethic of hospitality', we understand these experiences within the theoretical framework of 'hospitality at a distance'. 'Hospitality at a distance' is a useful framework in the context of distance education supervision, where home and host, the 'at-home', might be contested, and where we might need to rethink what it is to, 'leave space for those students and those ideas that may arrive' (Ruitenberg 2011 p.33) from beyond the campus. Achieving 'success' in dissertations at a distance may involve accepting the instability of relations between student and supervisor, that are marked not only by power dynamics, expectations, and performances of student and teacher identities (as all supervisory relationships are), but also by the varied and shifting conceptions of home, welcome, and 'belonging' that accompany the distanced encounter.

Campus imaginaries. Our interviews exposed a number of 'counterfactuals' or 'if only' statements that identified difficulties or challenges in the dissertation process and attributed these to being an online distance student, while simultaneously constructing 'campus imaginaries' in which these difficulties would either not have arisen or would have been resolved by being physically located on campus. Taylor (2004²) describes the social imaginary 'not [as] a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society' (p.2). The campus imaginary can be counterproductive to students as they grapple with what are actually relatively common experiences and challenges encountered during periods of independent research: unexpected obstacles; issues with motivation; supervisory relationships; time and space to focus; isolation and doubt. If students assume these issues are related to their mode of study, they may be less likely to seek help or advice or to try to address these, thereby missing opportunities for development and support.

These themes are being further explored in conference presentations and journal articles.

Project futures

Two journal articles are in progress based on the concepts of 'campus imaginaries' (lead author, Ross) and 'hospitality at a distance' (lead author, Sheail).

¹ Ruitenberg, C.W., 2011. The Empty Chair: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality. *Philosophy of Education Archive*, pp.28–36.

² Taylor, C., 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Duke University Press.

In terms of future development of the project resources, we propose further work on the 'dissertation situations' game, including thinking about how this could be adapted for different groups (including students).

With the agreement of members of the project team, we would like to share the snapshots on our web site, as well as the key observations from the workshops.

Appendix A: Interview Schedule



Dissertations at a Distance: Interview Schedule

My name is Phil and I'm a researcher on the 'dissertations at a distance' project at the University. One strand of the project is looking at the dissertation experience with former students of the University who have studied on online programmes.

This is to help us think about what kind of advice and support could be given in the future to students and staff studying and supporting online programmes, as the University increases the number of programmes which are available to study at a distance.

So, first of all, thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed, we really appreciate it. I hope not to take up much more than an hour of your time, if that all sounds ok to you?

Consent form check.

1. So, to get started, what I'd be really interested in first is hearing a bit about your reasons for studying this particular programme, and for studying it online at UoE?
2. Moving on to the dissertation element, can you tell me what you were hoping to get out of the dissertation experience? What did you think it would be like?
3. How was it different from studying on the rest of the programme?
4. Can you remember how long the dissertation took from choosing a topic to submitting it?
5. How did you choose your topic?
6. Where were you based during the dissertation phase?
7. How did you communicate with your supervisor? Did you ever meet your supervisor in person at all during that time, or visit the campus during the dissertation period?
8. How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor?
9. What kind of feedback did you get on your work during the process? Was there any particular guidance they gave which was important to you?
10. Did you keep in touch with the other students on the course while you were working on your dissertation? How, when, why?
11. What were the main challenges you encountered while working on your dissertation?
12. Was there anything you found particularly exciting or motivating during the period of working on the dissertation?
13. Overall, what do you now feel about your dissertation experience? How do you think the dissertation went? Did it go well for you?

Alternative questions for people who graduated with the Postgraduate Diploma

1. So, to get started, what I'd be really interested in first is hearing a bit about your reasons for studying this particular programme, and for studying it online at UoE?
2. Moving on to the dissertation element, can you tell me what you were hoping to get out of the dissertation experience? What did you think it would be like?
3. What were the factors involved in not continuing with the dissertation?
4. Was there anything that could have happened that would have meant you would have continued?
5. How long were you officially 'on dissertation'?
 - a. Did you get as far as choosing a topic? How did you do this?
 - b. How did you communicate with your supervisor? Did you ever meet your supervisor in person at all during that time, or visit the campus during the dissertation period?
 - c. What kind of feedback did you get on your work during the process? Was there any particular guidance they gave which was important to you?
6. How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor?
7. Did you keep in touch with the other students on the course while you were working on your dissertation? How, when, why?
8. Overall, what do you now feel about your dissertation experience?

Appendix B: Programme Snapshots

Dissertations at a Distance Snapshot: MSc Clinical Education

How do dissertations work on this programme?

Students on the MSc Clinical Education follow a set pathway of courses over a three year period, culminating in the dissertation in year three. Normally students begin the dissertation in September, and have one year to complete it. A Research Methods course, taken in year 2, introduces students to a number of approaches, with an emphasis on qualitative research.

Students submit a research proposal by the end of September, which is reviewed by the programme team and a supervisor allocated. At this point students are also given some initial feedback, often including advice about the feasibility of the project. Students tend to be overly ambitious in their initial proposals.

During the dissertation year, as well as working one-to-one with supervisors, students are invited to fortnightly seminars which cover topics such as conducting literature reviews and developing research questions. Students value this, but also miss the more intensive collaborative work and discussion from the taught elements of the programme.

Before the final submission deadline of end of August, students submit their dissertations for review, and each is read by one of the programme team, who gives feedback and advises whether the dissertation is ready for submission. As numbers on the programme grow, issues can more easily slip through the cracks, and from 2014/15 supervisors will also submit a report outlining the student's progress through the dissertation.

About 18 students undertook the dissertation last year, but this number varies and may be as high as 35 next year. There is a team of five core supervisors, with other staff taking on supervision of Clinical Education students on an ad hoc basis. Successful supervisors, in this programme team's experience, know how to work collaboratively with students, to be open and willing to discuss issues, to negotiate expectations, to be clear about who is doing what and when, and have sufficient subject (including clinical) and research expertise and (crucially) knowledge about dissertation writing.

The programme is aimed at busy professionals, so the student group is diverse, and they are often very focused on the value of the qualification in their professional context. These students have not taken 'time out' of their normal life for study, and life events can lead to disruptions in study. The programme has a fairly big demand for interruptions and extensions as a result (roughly ¼ of students in each year group end up 'out of sync' with the group for this reason).

Also because of the professional context of programme participants, dissertation research tends to be done in real-life contexts, and in settings where supervisors and the programme team cannot directly guide or monitor students' activity. Supervisors can offer guidance, but ultimately have to negotiate the challenge of

‘letting go’ and accepting a lack of control.

Until this year, the assignments for Research Methods were two article critiques. In 2014/15, one of these assignments was a research proposal. The team is looking for ways to boost the quantitative elements of the Research Methods training, to support the data analysis approaches that some students wish to take. The team is also beginning to steer students towards particular topics in the areas of expertise of supervisors. They are also thinking about the provision of a full-time (1 year) masters, which might be particularly suitable for students who wish to go on to PhD; and alternative formats for the dissertation (such as an article for publication plus a reflective commentary).

What works really well?

Students have a lot of choice in terms of the topics they choose and the approaches they use, which they appreciate (though this creates some issues in relation to supervision, too). They can choose topics that align with their professional priorities, and can get credit and make the time to do things that they are interested in and that there is a genuine need for.

The development of research thinking during the dissertation can be transformative for students. In particular, many students, including very senior professionals, may encounter qualitative approaches for the first time on this programme, and it opens up ways of thinking about experience that they find amazing.

Additional support mechanisms beyond 1-1 supervision work very well, such as drop-in summer sessions before the dissertation year, and the fortnightly seminars which boost confidence and help students see that others are also in the same boat.

The programme holds a reception each year at graduation, and this is a special and revealing time. The culture and nature of online relationships can lead to openness and a sense of equality amongst peers, rather than more hierarchical student-teacher relationships. When students and staff meet at graduation, there is often a warmth and a strong sense of knowing one another well. There is now a growing community of graduates from the programme, and scope for a thriving alumni group, which might allow people to stay in touch as potential collaborators, and also as potential teachers on the programme.

What challenges are still to be addressed?

Supervision arrangements are not currently sustainable. The programme team feels the need for a more controlled and managed process of allocating and working with supervisors. There are a number of graduates from the programme who would be interested in and qualified to act as supervisors, but the programme needs a process by which supervisors are trained, and remunerated or given honorary titles to reflect their status. However, supervisors have a lot of autonomy, which can make it difficult to step in and sort out issues.

Not many students publish from their dissertations, and this is something that the team would like to see more of. However, the programme team invites graduates to attend an annual conference in Milan, and encourages people to come and present, and this has been very successful.

What are some key messages for other programmes supporting online distance dissertations?

1. Know your students - who they are, why they are there. This will give a good head start on guessing about potential topics and supervision needs.
2. It is good for the programme to give choices of dissertation topics where this is feasible in terms of supervision. Offering staff profiles listing research interests is also a good approach, to guide students towards topics for which there is supervisory capacity and expertise.
3. The onus is on the programme director to get the right fit for supervision – compatibility in relation to the topic is key, but style matters too: for example, if someone is struggling, match them with someone very hands on.
4. Students need a lot of help and advice to guide them in shaping a feasible project. It is sometimes helpful to frame this as a 'pilot' study, and to emphasise that it can only be a small piece of work, undertaken during a year in which the balance of work and study can be hard to achieve. Start early, do little and often, keep on top of the timetable, and stay in touch with your supervisor!
5. Students need explicit and repeated guidance to be given in multiple formats.
6. Someone (probably the programme director) needs to keep an overview of the dissertation process and to be available and approachable in case any issues arise for students or supervisors.

Dissertations at a Distance Snapshot: MSc Clinical Management of Pain

How do dissertations work on this programme?

This programme has been running, and evolving, since 2005, when it began as a collaboration with the University of Sydney. Initially its structures were constrained by the contractual requirements of that collaboration, and the programme was the only MSc in the University of Edinburgh without a dissertation component.

The capacity for independent, self-directed study is extremely important in this field, and therefore there has always been an 'independent study' (or 'maxi-project') option course on the programme, which shares some of the functions of a dissertation, but is smaller in scale and is explicitly practice orientated. Approximately half the projects produce practical materials (for example disseminating information to patients or peers through targeted materials), and half produce academic outputs (such as a literature review or an article for publication). There is flexibility of approach, provided the project has the right level of critical analysis, literature review, engagement with recognised methodology, and analysis of data. Because of the complexity of ethical approval procedures within the NHS and the time constraints for projects within the programme, students do not undertake projects requiring ethical approval. There are also significant formalities to navigate in order to get material published for patients, so careful planning is needed in these cases. Students have a University supervisor for their independent study, but also work closely with a clinical supervisor, who is often based in the student's place of work, or drawn from the networks of the student or the

programme team, including graduates from the programme. Some students request a clinical supervisor who is based geographically near to them, as they also want the option of meeting face-to-face.

In about 2012, graduate feedback suggested that students wanted the option of a formal dissertation or project, so that they could be more competitive in the job market against candidates whose masters programmes did include dissertations. In addition, clinical audit skills are increasingly in demand in the subject area and within the NHS, particularly in more advanced roles, so although academic research experience isn't normally needed, the transferable skills it provides are seen as desirable. When the partnership with Sydney came to an end, it became possible to realign credits, develop new courses, and a 60-credit independent research component was introduced, which would be undertaken over one year, and could be in the form of a dissertation or a project.

For the students who took up the 60-credit component, all chose to do it in project mode, rather than as a traditional dissertation. The 60-credit project is an extension of the maxi-project, and involves the development of a learning contract, a formal proposal, the creation of a poster, and a final project which can include public engagement and knowledge exchange elements. Despite initial graduate feedback that the dissertation would be desirable, subsequent feedback suggests that it does not appear to be a priority for most students on the programme. The MSc is sought by those who are looking to open up new professional opportunities, and with that comes particular approaches and needs.

For academic year 2014/2015 onwards, the 60-credit dissertation or project has now been made optional, and students can now complete the MSc as a fully taught programme, or with the dissertation or project. The programme director would like to see the development of research skills and personal ownership of learning take place within the independent study project option. The benefits of higher degrees and advanced study in the field are closely related to the skills and experience they provide for career progression so the projects and courses students invest their time in need to have clear professional application, making more practice-focused independent study a better fit than a dissertation.

What works really well, and what challenges are still to be addressed?

The flexibility and clear practice value of the independent study projects is prized by students. The opportunity to work with clinical supervisors means students can draw on expertise directly related to their own work.

It is very hard for students to shut down from clinical life. Many welcome their study time as a chance to carve out some time, and have some control over the space that is the computer, and to 'be a student' for periods of time. They also appreciate being able to talk to others in the same position, even though in practice this doesn't happen all that much. For these students, a sense of shared understanding and commonality of experience means something (even across the world, and even when it is more tacit than explicit).

It is really important that students do some kind of research-based, self-directed project. This is not compulsory at present (both the 20- and 60-credit independent

study modules are optional), but the programme director is exploring options for making something required.

Students can be very focused on the clinical aspects of the project, and can value practical outcomes over synthesis or creation of new knowledge. They could benefit from more practice in producing academic work – for this reason they are encouraged to submit papers for conferences.

When moving from taught elements into less-regular interaction and contact with fellow students and with the university, students have felt they missed out on contact points and social elements. The feeling that someone else is there and looking out for them is highly valued, and students don't see the one-to-one attention from their supervisors as equivalent to peer contact and support, and the shared experience of being with others on the programme.

Research methods training is needed, otherwise the dissertation will only ever be suitable for those with research experience. However, research methods training is currently difficult within the College and University – there are arguments for shared provision across programmes, particularly for specific areas such as statistical methods, but such shared provision takes students away from their cohort and from programme-specific learning opportunities.

Students who pay on a course-by-course basis can struggle with payment issues when they need to pay for 60 credits at once. The finance department urgently needs to explore this for online distance students invoiced at course level.

The programme struggles with staffing, in common with other programmes in the College – a lack of core staff brings challenges in relation to locating academic supervisors, ensuring consistency and quality, monitoring the work of clinical supervisors. External clinical supervisors are a key strength of the programme and are highly valued by students, but many struggle to balance their clinical commitments, their prioritization of work and their academic commitments. This is a challenge in relation to dissertations, along with issues of payment, training and guidance, and the prioritising of the student experience. As student numbers grow, this is likely to be an increasing issue.

What are some key messages for other programmes supporting online distance dissertations?

1. Students have to be motivated to successfully complete their academic studies and understand the value attached to their hard work. Students often ask 'what am I going to get out of this?' and 'how will it improve my clinical career?'. Students on this programme tend not to be doing this degree purely out of 'interest' or for abstract reasons, but strategically with clear career goals in mind. Regarding the dissertation, students have to understand why they would choose to move out of a collaborative and highly structured learning space – what are the tangible benefits of doing so? Dissertations are seen as extremely challenging – taught elements may be seen as less so (whether this is true or not).
2. A key challenge for the independent study projects is to make them manageable; they are usually far too ambitious. The academic supervisor's job is therefore to look at the project as a whole and help unpick what is feasible given the time and resources available.

Dissertations at a Distance Snapshot: eLLM degrees³

Programme titles:

- LLM in International Commercial Law and Practice
- LLM in Medical Law and Ethics
- LLM in Law
- LLM in Intellectual Property Law
- LLM in Information Technology Law
- LLM in Innovation, Technology and the Law

How do dissertations work on these programmes?

eLLM students are required to write a 10,000-word, 60-credit dissertation, after successfully completing six teaching modules. A highly structured process for dissertations has been in operation for the eLLM programmes for several years. Part-time online students begin their dissertation immediately after the end of Semester 2 in their third year of the programme, and have four months to complete the work. This aligns exactly with the timetable for on-campus students, so online distance students on these programmes complete their dissertations as if they were full-time during this period. There is a single process for all dissertation students, both online and on-campus, with a shared deadline and marking process, and set dates and activities for supervision meetings. Dissertations for the eLLM programmes are almost exclusively based on desk-based research.

Prior to 2011, there was more flexibility regarding timing and schedules, and students and supervisors could negotiate meeting patterns and dissertation processes. However, feedback from students indicated that there was dissatisfaction with a lack of consistency, with some of those who received less feedback and supervisory input feeling disadvantaged. A series of School meetings were held to develop the current process.

Students are encouraged to begin thinking about their dissertation before Christmas, when the handbook becomes available, and to be clear about their topic areas by the time of the fair in February. There is no specific research methods training provided, as students will be experienced from their taught courses at conducting the kinds of legal and desk-based research required in the dissertation. eLLM students tend to be adult learners, who are returning to education after a number of years, having been following a professional career. Although many of the students have a background in law, a range of other disciplinary backgrounds are represented, including medicine, information technology and education.

Students each propose two topics, which are discussed and refined during a dissertation 'fair' in February each year (for online students this takes place asynchronously over a two-week period; for on-campus students it is a single day). Topics are submitted to the learning administration team, who pass them to the postgraduate director, and from there they are sent to programme directors. Programme directors determine the best fit between topic and supervisor and

³ Some of the information presented in this snapshot is drawn from Jackson, E. (2009), 'An online 'dissertation space' for the eLLM. PGCap assignment, University of Edinburgh.

allocate students accordingly – attempting to find a match for the first choice of topic where possible. Programme directors are aware of which students are online distance learners, but this is not necessarily an important factor when allocating supervisors.

Most online students are matched with supervisors they have met before on taught courses. Supervisors who have not taught online are normally still willing to take online distance students, as the supervision processes are so streamlined that in practice it doesn't make much difference – the mode of meeting (by phone or videoconferencing vs face-to-face) is the only significant difference. There are three meetings during the dissertation period – one to expand on the topic and agree a title; one to give feedback on an outline plan; and the final meeting to give feedback on a 5000 word research report. In between meetings students can contact supervisors if there are any issues. It is rare for students to approach the learning administration team unless they require extensions or there are pastoral issues.

During the dissertation stage students are also only very infrequently in touch with one another, and sometimes report feeling somewhat isolated. Informal peer support that may have existed during the taught elements of the programme tends to disappear. There is a dissertation discussion space available, including a list of supervisors and students, but this is not heavily used. Students are very careful not to be seen to collude. It seems that students in this discipline see the dissertation as an individual scholarly pursuit that demonstrates their own progress and achievement.

What works really well?

Students aren't limited to their own subject area, and supervisors can be allocated beyond the programme confines. This gives students more flexibility to explore topics of particular interest. Ideally all students get their first choice of topic, subject to supervisor availability.

Online distance students often have a very strong connection with their workplace. When the dissertation topic fits in with their work, the dissertation is very motivating and helps sustain momentum. Those who do particularly well see the dissertation as a 'capstone', and worthy of further work afterwards, such as writing for publication. Some students also go on to PhD research.

Principles of managing time, being organised, and knowing how to use resources are scaffolded extensively on taught courses, and this provides good support for many students.

Online meetings can be very focused and targeted, which is positive and productive. Students are accustomed to working asynchronously with tutors and peers, so the relatively small number of synchronous meetings with supervisors is in keeping with what they have experienced earlier on the programme.

Survey research conducted in 2009 found that eLLM dissertation students: were motivated by intrinsic interests. They employed a range of strategies to make and manage time in order to work on the dissertation, often acknowledging the support of family, friends and colleagues in enabling this. They were very positive about the overall dissertation experience, particularly the opportunity to develop ideas through independent research. Support and

guidance from supervisors was generally much appreciated. Students were reasonably satisfied with their final dissertation, and mentioned a range of other benefits from having completed the dissertation: intellectual gains as well as gains in their capacity as professionals. (Jackson, 2009)

What challenges are still to be addressed?

Students tend to find the transition from research to writing difficult. Supervisors do not read sections or drafts of the dissertation, and supervision focuses on getting the research done, even though writing may be the more challenging part, especially for students with English as an additional language. The kind of writing that's needed in a law dissertation is quite specific, and more guidance is needed. The model of how students are supported to engage in discussion may be fruitful here, including showing examples and providing support.

The programme team would like to see a work-based project option as an alternative to a dissertation. This could be difficult to engineer for on-campus students, but would be significantly easier for online students who are already in professional settings. Some staff are hesitant about changing processes and possible workload implications, so these discussions are still in progress.

It would be good to use the dissertation discussion space for more sharing of progress – perhaps designing points where students do an activity together to generate more conversations. Many different kinds of interactions and approaches are fine - there is no 'one way' to do well on the dissertation – so such scaffolding will need to be done with a light touch.

Longer timeframes with later submission for part-time online students would give them more quality time to explore their topics.

What are some key messages for other programmes supporting online distance dissertations?

1. Give students enough time before the dissertation starts to think it through and understand what they're going to do. Timing is crucial: don't bombard them when they're not receptive. A dissertation guide setting out expectations and deadlines, along with as much of a timetable as possible, is really important.
2. Students value seeing examples of other work and feedback that's been given, from across the range (not just excellent examples).
3. Clarity of expectations on both sides is key. Students need to know what they need to do.
4. Positive relationships with supervisors are really important, and can work especially well where students and supervisors know one another well already. When the supervisory relationship goes wrong – for example if agreed activities or preparation don't take place prior to set meetings – it can be problematic for students and for the dissertation.
5. The dissertation should be an enjoyable experience.

Dissertations at a Distance Snapshot: MSc Digital Education

How do dissertations work on this programme?

The MSc Digital Education launched in 2005, and the first students graduated with MScs in 2008. Most programme participation is on a part-time basis, with students taking up to six years (but mostly 3-4) to complete the MSc. There are three exit points: MSc, PGDip, and PGCert.

Students must successfully complete 120 credits of taught courses, including the 20-credit Research Methods course, to progress to dissertation. Once 120 credits have been completed, part-time students can start on the dissertation at any point during the year. Once they begin, they have one year to complete the dissertation. Students can choose any topic related to Digital Education. They write a research proposal as part of the Research Methods course, and this is worth 50% of the mark for that course. Students get support and advice while on Research Methods about topic selection, and have an opportunity to try out project ideas and get feedback on these.

Supervisors are generally allocated to students from within the core Digital Education programme team, on the basis of good fit with topic or methodology. Occasionally students ask to work with particular supervisors, and this is accommodated where possible. Sometimes the topic requires specialist expertise which is available within the School of Education or beyond. When that is the case, and if they have not worked with online distance students before, colleagues have sometimes been invited to co-supervise with one of the Digital Education team. Students and supervisors negotiate together how to handle meeting mode and frequency. Synchronous meetings are common, as is email correspondence, and some students keep a blog to which their supervisor has access.

What works really well?

The flexibility to start the dissertation at the most suitable point for the student allows for many timing issues and problems to be sidestepped (though it also causes other issues – see below).

The programme holds an annual dissertation festival which brings people together to present their research activity and findings to supportive peers and academic staff, as well as take part in sessions covering aspects of the dissertation process.

As of 2014, students on the dissertation and those taking Research Methods have access to a shared discussion space in Moodle, which they use to communicate amongst themselves, organise meetings, and give encouragement and support.

Student-supervisor relationships are usually extremely positive, and students report having been well-supported through their time on the dissertation.

Virtual graduation and graduation in Edinburgh take place each November, and students report this as one of the highlights of the programme for them. The quality of dissertations on the programme is excellent.

What works less well?

Because people begin at different times and there are few formal group activities during the dissertation, the sense of cohort and community can be diminished for students at this stage.

Supervisors can lose track of students if they fall out of contact. The one-year timescale combined with no fixed start date makes keeping on top of student progress difficult if students are not proactive about this.

What are some key messages for other programmes supporting online distance dissertations?

- Consider how flexible it's possible to be with starting points, to give students the best chance of aligning the dissertation with their other commitments. However, once they do start, encouraging and supporting them to keep within the year limit seems to be important – once things start to slip beyond that, this often becomes an unsatisfactory experience for students and supervisors.
- Recommend to students that they plan a dissertation within an 8-month period, to allow for some slippage and still to stay within the year.
- Help supervisors develop systems for checking in with students.
- Look for ways to support peer contact for those students who want it, without assuming that everyone does – some prefer to work independently.
- Meet up periodically to give supervisors a chance to discuss dissertation approaches and issues. It's also really helpful to have group dissertation moderation sessions to review a batch of feedback and marks.

Appendix C: Key observations from the supervisor workshops/focus group

Power dynamics

There may be power imbalance issues between supervisors and students who are also working professionals, for example around whose time is more valuable.

Support & engagement:

Few of the interview quotes seemed to express a sense of knowledge or curiosity about what is happening with other students or other supervisors. Some of the quotes talk about feeling isolated, but support and communication can be difficult at dissertation stage, when everyone is at different stages, and structured events might not be welcome. Students sometimes seem to be nervous about talking together: they may not know each other well enough to give support, and managing this online might particularly difficult, especially in clunky environments that hinder spontaneous interaction.

The light touch social dimensions of academic life in a face-to-face community (bumping into people at the kettle) are less available to online students. There might be ways of using social media like this (for example leaving Skype open), but people now tend to have particular ways of using key social media spaces and aren't so amenable to changing these

Losing touch, keeping momentum:

Supervisors expressed anxieties about losing touch with students, and strategies for monitoring progress were discussed. It's quite normal for students to be 'guns blazing' to start with, but then to lose momentum, and if they're far away and not easy to contact or chase, it's easier for them to 'hide'. And if supervisors have a lot of students, it's especially easy to lose track of them. Students who happen to be local were thought to be easier to keep track of, taking advantage of opportunistic encounters, bumping into someone and talking for a minute: 'you can tell 1000 things from a moment face-to-face'.

The contrast between the taught period and dissertation period can be extreme and difficult for some. Where students talk about loneliness and isolation, this might also tie to an imagined ideal of what face-to-face study might be like.

Supervising at a distance can mean a blurring of public/private spaces and times. Students may appear out of the blue, but probably not when you want them to, and those may not be the ones you need to worry about. Silences and gaps are difficult to interpret (though this may happen with on-campus students, too). Supervisors worry about losing track of people, and feel impotent when they reach out and get no response – it can be hard to judge how far into 'stalker mode' it's appropriate to go to try to make contact.

Expectations:

Online students can have high expectations about how quickly they should get responses – perhaps indicating a lack of understanding of supervisor workload. Contact can sometimes be intrusive – if supervisors are logged on in Skype, students will try to connect. What other experiences are students comparing things to?

How do supervisors convey information about their other commitments without making students feel undervalued? This can come up even after the dissertation ends, if students are seeking advice about publishing and next steps – does the supervisory relationship end? Students (and supervisors) might be building stories of one another to fill in the gaps in their knowledge. Being at a distance may allow for more misunderstandings as students construct meanings of supervisor actions/words without the wider context of (for example) seeing someone regularly in their workplace and having a sense of their working patterns. For both students and supervisors there may be problems of attribution – how much they read into what they're seeing and act on it.

Interactions:

Working online might make some interactions more informal – it wouldn't be unusual to meet an online student in the evening, or while both parties are at home, with family 'wandering around in the background'. There can be a difficult balance between getting to know someone and being disrupted. And for supervisors who haven't been involved in teaching, video conferencing can be intimidating – they want to tidy up and get dressed, and hide the red wine in a mug: 'You wouldn't invite these people into your house but will let them see your kitchen'.

Difference and distance:

Supervising at a distance means working with students who are in a different country and organisational culture. Supervisors don't know what political or technical hurdles might come up, or what the expectations are. In addition, if a project is based in Africa, but drawing on UK studies, students need to make the translation of context. This is something supervisors might want to talk more with students about at project proposal stage.

Time vs distance:

Part-time/full-time seemed to be more of an issue in many of the quotes than online/on-campus – many if not most of the issues raised would seem to be issues for part-time on-campus students, too. Supervisors working with full-time students often find they have a different set of issues, for example with looking after themselves and taking time off.

Part-time students possibly have access to a more authentic research experience, as opposed to full-time/campus students who go away and cram data collection into eg a week overseas. Part-time students have more time to assimilate complex ideas and think big thoughts, whereas the full-time experience is much more compressed. However, part-time students are also likely to run into issues that full-time students don't face, such as changing jobs. Some key issues for part-time/distance students are self management, self confidence, and keeping study prioritized.

Digital environments:

Different environments for communication can feel quite different and lead to different outcomes and relationships. Supervisors can hide their faces and expressions in some formats – allowing them to be supportive even if feeling frustrated. On the flip side, being at a remove from students make it harder to judge their overall wellbeing. Commenting in blogs feels different from commenting in Word (which someone identified as feeling like 'correcting'), which is different again from preparing notes for a synchronous meeting which will be more like a conversation. The amount of detail varies in different mediums, and interventions

like 'live reader responses' can sometimes be possible – but these experiences and preferences vary widely between supervisors.