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A study of the experience of Education Masters dissertation students; could different models of working offer further support other than the usual student tutor dyad?

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Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme: Final Report

The final report should consist of a two-page summary of the project and its findings (using the fields below as a guide).

Along with this form, please also send (where relevant):

- Ethical approval forms
- Conference papers and/or articles for publication
- (If your initial TFAS application was 'approved with conditions) Evidence that these conditions have been met (in 'Other')

Send all forms to: adam.fisher@plymouth.ac.uk

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Names of other staff involved: None - but working informally with IMP (Masters of arts in Education) graduate, Ms Liz Hughes

Title of project: A study of the experience of Education Masters dissertation students; could different models of working offer further support other than the usual student – tutor dyad?

Type of project - Mixed methods (online questionnaire survey and interviews leading to case study data)

Keywords (that describe/reflect the project): postgraduate dissertations, masters level working, student- tutor dyad, group and peer working.

Aims of project: My research question and aim of the work was to explore whether ways of working on dissertations other than the usual face to face supervisor–student dyad may be beneficial for our students? Other ways of working are used in some other disciplines (Egan et al. 2009) and countries other than the UK, and so the question and aim was whether other ways could also be useful for us.

Background/context to project:

In most European countries the final assessment in a master's degree programme is the master's thesis (Meeus, van Looy, and Libotton 2004) or dissertation.

> Research supervision has conventionally been conceptualized as an individual activity in the humanities and social sciences, and the literature has to a great extent focused on the supervisor–student dyad (Dysthe, 2006 p 299).

Other studies support this assertion (Anderson, 2007; Kirton, 2011; Pilcher, 2011). This is not just in the UK either for in other countries "…master's students traditionally have one supervisor who guides them through the process of their research in a more or less one-on-one relationship" (Renske A.M. de Kleijn, 2012, p926)

Most of our Education mature students returning to study part time at master's level - are still working full time as school, college and academy teachers. This therefore also creates its own pressures and in particular isolation could be an issue reported by some (*IMP student feedback data*). I therefore wanted to see if we could offer other ways of working over and above the usual student tutor dyad that could support those that wanted it further.

Methods used: The methods used were online questionnaire leading to the writing of case studies. All our students who recently completed or who are presently engaged with the dissertation stage of our master's programme were invited to contribute to the research, firstly via the questionnaire.

From those that participated, 38 in all, most offered to be interviewed although in practice, when contacted again, not all then were able to offer dates and times to talk further. However, around twenty were talked to in some depth by phone, Skype or face to face. This part of the work is still being completed, one or two interviews outstanding partly because interviews times were rearranged due to time constraints etc.

All data were anonymised in line with established UK ethical guidelines and those of my university. (Please see ethical approval form attached).

The interviews were 'relatively unstructured, informal conversation-type' (Gillham 2000, p25) focused around three dissertation process based questions. This was important because in some cases the participants had, as in a previous study (Anderson and Gristy, 2013) "worked together for some time and had already built up a relationship, which meant that to revert to a very formal structure would have seemed inappropriate" (Anderson and Gristy, 2013, p113).

I established an understanding with the participants that 'the defining characteristic [of case study] … is its focus on just one instance of the thing that is to be investigated' (Denscombe 1998, p15) in this instance, the issue of dissertation working - and we largely kept discussion to that. By working together in this way, we operated within a participatory research approach, generating grounded theory, 'theory that is grounded in the evidence that it turns up' (Gillham 2000, p 25).

Some observation data contributed to that gained from both questionnaire data and individual and group interviews thus enabling triangulation to be used to offer some reliability and validity.

A social constructionist, I worked "assuming both discourse and education to be inherently collaborative meaning-making activities". Thus we create a genuine community (Rymer, 1993) and the students are co learners, what Freire called "teacher–student with student-teachers". With students, in this case, teachers in schools etc., I "collaborate ...engaging

them in conversation and acknowledging that our talk shapes our reality as a social group and in turn our pedagogy" (Rymer, 1993).

I also started to trial a new way of working. One cohort of students was therefore, by agreement, grouped to see if indeed approaches other than the one to one tutor/ student engagement were helpful. This group still has some outstanding interviews to be completed.

Results:

After evaluation and analysis – working jointly at this stage with an ex student, graduate of the IMP whose own dissertation had focused on similar aspects of masters working, I plan to propose measures - initially for the teaching practices on our own Education master's programme but then potentially for a wider audience.

However, initial results suggest that group and peer working does indeed have some advantages but is by no means the most popular finding from the data. The final paper will be able to offer a detailed exploration of how these other practices may be beneficial or otherwise.

Since the study has focused on the discipline of master's dissertation work with the subject area being of secondary concern, the findings should have application across all practice/ professionally focused part time masters. Literature (please see below) that underpins the research project to date has been taken from nursing, social work, computing and maths as well as education (in both the UK and other countries) and therefore this study should readily contribute to this larger body of knowledge too.

Associated publications: I plan to offer the final paper for publication to an education journal, possibly JET, in late 2014.

Other: The work has been shared as a paper at the ECER conference September 2014 and the Q and A time discussion offered some ideas around 'time' and its use as a reason or excuse that will usefully feed into the final paper. The work has been accepted for sharing at the SRHE conference in Dec 2014 too. It was also accepted for BERA but later withdrawn as the conference dates clashed with the Institute of Education PU graduation this month.

Some literature used:

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