Teaching Research Methods and the Supervision of Undergraduate Projects: Seeking Practical Improvements to a Complex Process

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Abstract: This paper develops a review of teaching research methods and student supervisor relationships, first presented to ECRM20. Last year we tested an extensive literature review with a survey of undergraduate business students, this has now been supplemented with further survey data, interviews and a focus group. This supplementary data has deepened our understanding of the issues and has largely reinforced the findings from the previous paper. At a time when some schools are moving content on-line and seeking new forms of assessment, there is a need to ensure that research continues to fulfil a contribution towards intellectual and practical understanding. Detailed analysis has explored the extent to which the teaching of research methods within a taught degree course and the completion of an individual project has proved effective. Value perceived by the students and supervisors of a major project has been confirmed to influence both success for a candidate at an interview as well as providing a skill set suitable for longer term employment. Learning 'skills for life' was suggested by the students.. The extent to which students and supervisors engage was explored and opportunities for improvement are reported. The importance of adding an element of fun to the process was also raised. Little evidence of supervisors receiving training was found, Feather et al (2010, 2013) and a challenge continues to be the extent to which supervisors are fully briefed on the required dissertation process. In practice, supervisors rely on their own prior experience and this can contribute to an uneven quality of experience for students. Conclusions on the undergraduate data are developed for two specific research questions and next steps for improvement at the school are outlined for the Business School to consider.

Keywords: undergraduate research, teaching research methods, project supervision

1. Introduction

This paper continues recent research Mitchell and Rich, (2019, 2020), with a review of literature on the teaching of research methods and the quality and effectiveness of the student supervisor relationship in managing research projects conducted by students. Data has been collected at a London based Business School through surveys, focus groups and interviews from undergraduate students as well as faculty and staff. This is used to explore where research methods fit within a contemporary Business School curriculum and how they can be included in a way that remains relevant in a rapidly changing environment. The inclusion and supervision of an individual project is closely connected to the teaching of research methods because it provides an opportunity for students to put their learning about methods into practice. Moreover there is a disconnect between project supervision and other aspects of teaching especially in the undergraduate context, as supervision includes a measure of largely unmediated one-to-one contact.

1.1 Research questions

The following questions are explored:
- **RQ1.** What content on research methods is delivered, how useful and relevant to the course as a whole is it?
- **RQ2.** How significant is the supervisor-student relationship where students conduct independent research within their studies, how is it organised and what lessons are learnt?

Section 1 Introduction covers the purpose, background and research questions. Section 2 the literature review, 3 methodology, 4 results, 5 conclusion and finally 6 next steps.

1.2 Background

Both authors have been involved at various schools for some years, with the teaching of research methods, supervising and managing the process for students' dissertations, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Business schools have experienced a number of changes in response to competition, pressures to revise curriculums, recruitment and a major shift to eLearning and self-managed learning, Mitchell and Rich (2020);

pedagogy and evaluation, Brown and Rich (2020). In the year 2020 these pressures have been exacerbated by the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic. Schools that had been doing well have struggled with resources for teaching and learning. Even before the pandemic, changes in teaching approach have changed requirements for the utilisation of space. Others may be trying to cut costs as well as rediscover their competitive edge. Individual projects and dissertations can be expensive to resource and come under scrutiny when costs need to be cut. Evidence is mixed although there has been suggestions that individual student dissertations are now less popular both with faculty and students, and that alternatives be considered, Derounian (2011), Duke and Beck (1999), Healey et al (2012). Research at University of Huddersfield by Feather et al (2010: 2013) suggested that the dissertation made no statistically significant difference to overall marks. That depends on weighting in the marking scheme, and universities will vary in this regard. This raises a question on value, especially if in some way a project and dissertation is 'costlier' to undertake. Arguably for honours level undergraduates a dissertation helps to differentiate the more capable students who develop a variety of valuable skills, assisted with a one-to-one supervisor. Projects also provide the opportunity to assess a number of important facets of students' abilities, that are not at present readily assessed using other conventional methods, such as written examinations, Stefani (1997). Further, the dissertation is often used at exam boards for borderline candidates in relation to the UK honours classification, Booth et al (2003), Webster et al. (2000). There are valid concerns that if the dissertation is compulsory at undergraduate level, it may disadvantage students not of the required calibre, raising the issue of whether such students are suited to university-level study. The question remains as to differences in depth and rigour across dissertations at a bachelor, master and doctoral level and therefore the ease with which comparisons can be made and lessons drawn.

2. Literature review

Given the overall aim of the research (section 1) and the Research questions 1 and 2 above in 1.1 relevant themes are suggested below. The interconnectedness of these themes is apparent both within and across the two questions.

2.1 Curriculum for research methods teaching and its delivery.

The traditional role of a student project, supervision and the associated teaching of research methods has been, and continues to be questioned at some universities Feather et al (2010; 2013). The demand on resources and pressure to offer more online support, as opposed to face to face teaching are relevant factors. This has been given added impetus for business schools and students to provide protection from Coronavirus. It has been suggested that only limited lessons can be translated from research on postgraduate supervision to that of the undergraduate processes Rowley et al (2004).

Many business schools and universities include an introductory module to research methods. Typically, a mixture of classroom and self-study material, designed to give an awareness of the types of project available, which research methodologies are appropriate, along with examples of data analytics, ethics, working with a supervisor, referencing and use of plagiarism software. Practice in crafting aims / objectives and research questions, writing literature reviews and designing data collection surveys is also desirable, particularly at undergraduate level. The choice of material depends upon the curriculum and the level of student research expertise. One popular text, Hair et al (2007) includes chapters on: ethics, defining the problem and reviewing literature, research design, sampling and data collection, primary and secondary data, questionnaire design, analysis and interpretation of data, qualitative and quantitative, hypothesis, regression and communicating the results. A further valuable text in wide use at business schools, which combines an introduction to the concepts of research with practical guidance on data collection and on qualitative and quanititative techniques for analysis, is '*Research methods for Business'* Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, (2012).

Anecdotal evidence led Stehlik et al (2020) to believe that specialist college curricula requirements were driving trainee research behaviour and was therefore an important target for systematic study. It is reported that this may be contributing to wastage in medical research. This opened the possibility for future work to quantify outcomes of curricula changes put into practice, including quality of trainee research outputs and their subjective experiences. It follows that the extent to which experienced supervisors are also involved in the design and delivery of curricula for teaching research methods may also be an issue for business and management students. Nind et al (2020) argue that teachers and supervisors should attend more carefully to the social, emotional, active and the reflective nature of learning research methods. The interconnections between doing research and teaching research methods are considered central. Hsiung (2016) further reminds

us of the 'inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing' nature of the relationship arguing that insufficient attention has been paid to how teaching can contribute towards research rather than the other way around. Similarly, the authors argue that with research methods education insufficient attention has been paid to how learning can contribute to teaching, and in turn to doing research. Massard de Fonseca (2017) suggests that because qualitative methods are regarded as easier to learn, word-based and traditionally applied less in dissertations, students may not require training under faculty guidance. Much of the discussion regarding research methods teaching occurs in Anglo-Saxon regions ignoring the cultural and political context within which qualitative researchers do their teaching, Hsiung (2016).

In China, some social scientists see qualitative research (QR) as similar to the indigenous '*investigative research'* proposed by a leader of the country's communist reform. Teaching QR in China is challenging due to a short and scattered history with western thinking and complicated domestic socio-political context, Chen (2016).   Two approaches are developed to address these challenges: '*knowing and doing'* and *'practical reasoning'*. These strategies resonate with the Chinese cultural beliefs of learning by doing in real contexts and learning with appropriate adaptation and flexibility. Given the recent growth in the number of Chinese students that have chosen to study at western universities this seems significant. The ability to use multimethod data is an increasingly desirable skill set for business practitioners. Projects that allow undergraduate business students to practice mixed methods research create a valuable opportunity to improve work-readiness skills. Some schools have offered options for either an individual research dissertation, group based, or entrepreneurial work-based project; although the dissertation still typically follows a traditional academic format. However, research over several years across some 70 international schools at the University of Gloucester have included running a '*Newsweek'* production using television, radio and online news. At Sheffield Hallam writing a handbook for volunteers in a dementia residential home Derounian (2011); Healey (2012) was a further option.

2.2   Value of research methods knowledge

Frias and Popovich (2020) applied an experiential learning model to create and assess the use of multiple methods for undergraduate projects. They tested the benefits of a mixed methods approach to client-based projects, as a collaborative effort between two marketing classes. The results demonstrated that students reported several professional development benefits, including enhanced communication and teamwork, and data analysis and triangulation skills. This study also provided insights for instructors on the implementation of collaborative projects that include mixed methods research. Recent focus on data analytics as opposed to data collection and choice of method has increased the need to use appropriate software e.g. SPSS and Nvivo and online tutorials are popular in this regard (Saunders et al , 2012). Student satisfaction plays an important role in the quality of university education. Identifying students' satisfaction with their education and acquired skills, or knowing their opinions is crucial when facing challenging demands in the job market e.g. Spain. Martínez-Roget et al (2020) report that a survey conducted among 130 undergraduate economics students helped with an assessment of a dissertation's influence related to intellectual curiosity and the perception of acquired skills. The results also confirm the significant role played by the supervisor.

2.3   Student-supervisor relationship

An example of a thesis being central to the third year of a business degree is in Bucharest, Tănase, and Harba (2020). Support in supervision implies helping with topic selection, dividing the thesis into stages, holding meetings and keeping minutes, helping with deadlines, providing guidelines and feedback on drafts, explaining tasks and performance standards is regarded as part of the ever-changing role for both students and lecturer's in the thesis supervision process. Building a better relationship with the coordinated students, as well as achieving better results in terms of quality, time management, final grade and student satisfaction is something that all teachers desire. Martínez-Roget et al (2020) confirm that the tutor or supervisor's presence throughout the process of completing the undergraduate dissertation at business school is key. Faced with equal skills perception, students who had more personal contact with their supervisors expressed greater satisfaction. The results coincide with those from previous research, in which the supervisor's role is emphasized in performing a dual, pedagogical and psychological role in terms of getting students' attention and interest, encouraging them and providing a sense of security.

2.4   Organisation / delivery

Tănase, and Harba (2020) pose a number of critical questions for both students and supervisors; the answers to which vary between institutions. How close is the relationship between a supervisor and a student? What are

students' expectations when selecting a topic, as well as deciding upon a teacher to support with their work? Are those expectations the same in the beginning and at the end of the collaboration? Do students have similar expectations or do they differ, influenced by various factors? The same questions apply to supervisors. How much do students' expectations vary depending on different factors, such as age, experience and number of students? During collaboration, the supervisor can wear multiple hats, including that of a trainer, leader, coach, boss, manager, evaluator and friend. But these roles very much depend on time and situation, as well as on the student's and teacher's personalities. Even though group supervision has its advantages, it is not a common practice. A method where several students are present during the meeting, but the supervisor may still address each one of them individually, is somehow placed at the borderline between group and individual tutorials. It has some advantages, one of them being that students can interact with each other and ask questions and receive answers that could be of interest to all of them. They also receive individual answers for a specific problem. Some students are shy and do not feel comfortable in groups. For teachers, group supervision is less time consuming and can be a way to highlight individual progress of a specific student in order to motivate and stimulate the rest of the group. On the other hand, individual meetings between teacher and student play an important role in reducing isolation, enhancing understanding of different research methods, contributing to knowledge development and offering encouragement Lessing and Lessing (2004). Nind et al (2020) argue that teachers of research methods and supervisors would do well to attend carefully to the social, emotional, active and reflective nature of learning research methods. Teaching people to be health professionals, teachers or social workers almost inevitably means engagement in pedagogic cultures that recognise and build from a valuing of active and experiential learning. A study at Aberdeen university confirmed that at Masters level a research project is used to enhance skills and employability, hence developing research skills that will equip students with competences necessary in their career Cornelius (2016). A problem that remains however, is that given the high number of masters and undergraduate students, faculty supervision is an expected part of the workload, Cornelius (2016) that lacks the priority and motivation awarded to PhD supervision. The hours allocated by the institution may not reflect the work undertaken (or required) relying on goodwill and professionalism.

2.5 Lessons and value

It is crucial for students to have a close connection with their supervisor and attend meetings on a regular basis, Tănase, and Harba (2020). Most of the undergraduate students have four or five meetings with their supervisor, which is considered enough to complete the thesis. The student needs to be interested and play an active role in these meetings, take notes and consider suggestions. Rather than waiting for students to ask questions, tutors can also play an active role by probing every step of the thesis development. Supervisors are then able to address and correct any potential errors or misunderstandings from an early stage, bearing in mind that undergraduate students who do not always have the experience of producing a major project present different challenges to postgraduate or Ph.D. research students. The supervision process, if properly managed can transform a mandatory activity in an enjoyable one. Through the guidance provided, communication and feedback, supervisors can influence the student perception about this process and contribute to their personal development and boost their self-esteem.

2.6 Synthesis

The key messages that emerge from this review and will impact upon design of the methodology and data collection are:

RQ1. What content on research methods is delivered, how useful and relevant to the course as a whole is it?
- The level, detail, and comprehensiveness vary considerably between schools from undergraduate to doctoral candidates. At the very least, practice in developing research questions, undertaking a literature review and developing the scope of the project are key. Undergraduate business students may be exposed to the use of primary as well as secondary data collection, quantitative as well as qualitative analysis. (2.1 & 2.2)
- Projects that allow business students to practice mixed methods research create a valuable opportunity to improve work-readiness skills (2.1)
- Students report gaining several professional development benefits as a result of participating in a project, including enhanced communication and teamwork, and data analysis and triangulation skills. (2.2)

- Students valued the opportunities to learn about qualitative and quantitative methods, and about how to identify a research question and to review the literature, but there remained serious gaps in their understanding and also their knowledge of practical skills such as the use of software tools.   (2.2)
- Teachers of research methods and supervisors would do well to attend carefully to the social, emotional, active and reflective nature of methods learning. (2.3)

RQ2. How significant is the supervisor-student relationship where students conduct independent research within their studies, how is it organised and what lessons are learnt?
- The extent to which experienced supervisors are also involved in the design and delivery of curricula for teaching of research methods. (2.3, 2.4, 2.5)
- Support in supervision implies helping with topic selection, dividing the thesis into stages, holding meetings and keeping minutes, helping with deadlines, providing guidelines and feedback on drafts, explaining tasks and performance standards is regarded as part of the ever-changing role for both students and lecturers in the dissertation supervision process. (2.3, 2.4)
- The supervisor can wear multiple hats, including that of a trainer, leader, coach, boss, manager, evaluator and friend. But these roles very much depend on time and situation, as well as on the student's and teacher's personalities. The supervisor can provide guidance about the process of carrying out a project, or expertise in the subject matter, or both, for instance when helping students to formulate a research question. (2.4)
- The supervision process, if properly managed can transform a mandatory activity into an enjoyable one. (2.5)
- Faculty contribution to supervision needs to be recognised as part of a balanced workload. It should not be perceived as a chore or a token activity which faculty are expected to take on against their will. (2.4)

3.   Methodology

The plan was to use a variety of mixed methods with survey questions of various cohorts in Likert scale, binary format and open-ended free format; interviews and focus groups with students, support staff, faculty and alumni / recent graduates. This would enable some comparison with undergraduate data collected a year ago, where the sample size and response rate was inhibited by Covid-19.

3.1 Data collection

As might be expected the various courses follow different curricula and hence study research methods and work on their dissertations at different times. For this paper we focused on undergraduate students and collected the following data:
- Survey cohort: Final Year Undergraduates BSc (Business Management).
- Interview the Senior Course officer with responsibility for administering undergraduate projects
- Carry out a focus group with newly appointed teaching fellows with responsibility for teaching research methods with the undergraduate cohort starting their final year in 2021.

The cohort of undergraduates carrying out their final year projects in 2020/2021 was the first where a majority of students followed a new structure, introduced with the 2018 intake. The new structure was accompanied by a significant increase in the total number of students taking Business Management courses, from an intake of about 250 to 350, translating into a larger number of projects to be supervised than in previous years. As part of the revised structure the final year included a taught module devoted to research methods and data analytics. This was the culmination of a curriculum throughout which students were encouraged to carry out independent inquiry based on concepts and understanding that they had developed during the course. Some material which had, in the previous structure, been offered through informal workshops to prepare students for their final projects, was subsumed into the new module. As part of the new module the members of this cohort also had much more detailed instruction in how, and why, to use case studies and how to write literature reviews than was offered to their predecessors. UG students experience focus groups as part of their year 1 curriculum when they are learning about market research so this could also be a useful data source.

After the ECRM2021 conference we interviewed the senior course officer for undergraduate projects (see Appendix 1 for questions and responses). We also held a focus group with new teaching / research fellows to disccuss their approaches to teaching research methods (see Appendix 2). The data collection included the following key messages from the literature review (section 2 and 2.6).

- Link between research methods techniques, valued skills and professional development
- Ensure the techniques encouraged can be used and applied correctly for a range of abilities
- Supervisors' familiarity and involvement with research methods teaching and project curriculum
- Clarity on timescales and key milestones
- Appropriate reward for faculty workload and involvement

3.2 Limitations

Our focus has been on undergraduate business students. Given a number of recent changes within the school e.g. amalgamation with the University of London, two name changes, the covid outbreak and a need to work offsite; students were exhausted with completing surveys –hence the poor response rate received. With many students still undertaking distance learning, interviews and focus groups also proved a challenge.

4.   Findings and results

4.1 Survey undergraduate students (29 respondents)

Table 1: Value of a research methods module – response (%)

Question	Not well	Slightly well	Moderately well	Very well	Extremely well
Develop academic writing skills	10	10	24	45	3
Scoping a project	3	21	21	38	10
Develop research questions	3	21	31	28	14
Writing literature review	21	10	28	31	7
Develop methodology	10	14	14	41	17
Primary data collection	7	17	14	41	17
Secondary data collection	14	0	31	31	21
Quantitative skills	14	14	28	31	7
Qualitative skills	14	21	24	38	0
Use of mixed methods	14	14	34	28	7
Discussion of findings	21	17	17	38	4
Develop evidence-based conclusions	21	14	10	45	7

- There is a tendency for a respondent to consistently score low or high on most questions
- Overall answers are skewed towards positive responses.
- 94 responses were < moderately well, 159 responses > moderately well
- This may reflect weaker or less motivated students

Table 2: Value of understanding research methods to the project / dissertation – response (%)

Question	Definitely No	Probably No	Might or might not	Probably yes	Definitely Yes
Understanding RM is a key learning objective	3	3	24	48	18
Understanding RM is useful to my future career	3	11	21	31	31

- Negative responses correspond with respondent answering not well or slightly well above in Table 1

Table 3: The role of the supervisor – response (%)

Question	Yes	Maybe	No
1:1 working with a supervisor	62	21	14
Able to choose a supervisor	69	7	21
Able to consult with specialist faculty	14	34	48
Choice of project type	38	31	28
Choice of emphasis on qualitative or quantitative	72	14	10

4.2 Discursive replies

Value of feedback

- The majority, 79% said that verbal and written feedback were of equal importance; among the balance all but one valued written feedback.

Past experience
- As expected little experience of undergraduates writing a dissertation as opposed to essays

Guidance from supervisor
- Provided papers to read
- Clear plan and structure
- Expert guidance
- Choice of research question, plan, ethics and approach

How could supervision be improved?
- More 1:1 meetings and feedback
- More advice on writing
- More accessible
- More consistency and some way of avoiding a minority of students having a poor experience with disengaged supervisors

Autonomy
- Most appreciated a choice on approach. However, some thought there was too much autonomy

Effective preparation for the project
- A full range of responses covering both extremes

How could the process of writing the dissertation be improved?
- More briefing at start of the year
- More practical learning on RM's
- Clearer deadlines, examples and experience from the previous year.

5.   Discussion

Research methods   Some felt it was key to specific parts of the final year project process, notably creating a methodology section. A corollary of this was that it might not be seen as immediately relevant to other parts of the final year or to students' future careers. One comment was that research methods could be more usefully covered in the second year given that the project was going to be a major component of the final year. Another suggested that an individual assignment, as distinct from a group assignment, on research methods would be useful. There was interest in a more practical emphasis with one respondent mentioning specific training in using SPSS and NVivo. (see Tables 1 & 2).

Supervision   'What guidance has your supervisor been able to provide about how to carry out your project or dissertation?' Elicited three strongly negative comments (others were fairly generic and generally referred to supervisors' subject matter knowledge, familiarity with the process, and expertise). One of the negative comments suggested that the process would have been good if only they had '*somebody helpful*'. A second suggested that the process could be improved by ensuring that the supervisors '*did the work*'. A third observed that their supervisor who they perceived as an academic oriented towards postgraduate students with no interest in undergraduates, had not followed up beyond providing initial reading suggestions. Conversely, there were several very positive observations: these included one who had a great relationship, one who highlighted personalised guidance, one who pointed out the supervisor's relevant subject matter expertise. Several highlighted the supervisor's role in helping to focus on the research question and on aspects such as getting ethics approval. Another respondent observed that email was not necessarily the best platform for supervision discussions.

Several observed that briefing instructions would have been more valuable earlier in the academic year. Most students wanted both written and verbal feedback, several thought that written was most important: only one thought that verbal was most important. (see Table 3).
While there are no surprises this supports an overall view that a good proportion of students have a very good experience indeed with the project but some find it disappointing. It also supports the view that, while we rely on individual supervision, students are at the '*mercy*' of various academics' interests and motivation. There are

indications that the process would benefit from clearer definition of expectations and more consistency between the approaches offered by different supervisors.

In order to understand more fully the above findings we carried out an interview and a focus group. These helped us to understand the process by which supervisore were allocated and the approach planned for the coming year with new faculty teaching research methods.

5.1 Interview with senior course officer (see Appendix 1)

It became apparent from discussions with both students and academic staff that project supervision takes place as part of a complex system, where other pressures on supervisors' time and setting up communication channels between students and supervisors have an impact on the effectiveness of the process. To understand some of this complexity and to gain another perspective on the process we interviewed one of the professional staff responsible for coordinating supervision of undergraduate projects.

Changes to final year projects tend be incremental. Common issues are that although the documentation is considered straightforward, it is not widely read by faculty and students alike. Briefings are therefore held by course directors who clarify choices and elective options for students in advance. Students who attempt a full dissertation of 10,000 words are expected to have achieved average grades of 60% plus. Other students can attempt an applied research project, which is a shorter 5000 word dissertation, plus an additional elective module.

Most issues between students and supervisors are resolved over a conversation, there are also personal tutors and a student experience officer who can assist. Faculty workload varies and this may influence the number of students each supervise. A number of faculty will have a preference to supervise postgraduate students with work related to their own research and interests. The business school operates mainly across two sites. Undergraduate teaching is mostly at one site and the majority of faculty and postgraduates function at a second; this typically restricts communication.

5.2 Focus Group with new teaching / research fellows (see Appendix 2)

In the light of increasing student numbers and as part of a programme to strengthen teaching skills within the Business School, a number of early career academics were recruited as teaching fellows. As these fellows had recent experience of PhD study, they were tasked with developing and delivering teaching of research methods. Three fellows, two with expertise in qualitative research and the third with expertise in quantitative research and analytics, participated in a focus group.

There was real enthusiasm for teaching research methods and applying their experience from postgraduate work to an undergraduate audience. A range of useful concepts were discussed - qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods; and the importance of data collection and project management were stressed as key components. One commented "if you want to master something, teach it". Group work and offering the students a choice for assessments were considered important. Reflecting on research methods as providing "skills for life"' not just for a project and dissertation, was emphasized, as was the provision of exercises to practice and learn application. It was agreed that both parties have a responsibility to work at the student-supervisor relationship, and that the process should be an enjoyable one.

6. Conclusion

The overall aim for this paper was to explore where research methods fit within a contemporary Business School curriculum, at undergraduate level for business students, and how to ensure relevance in a rapidly changing environment. In conclusion; the student data evidenced that the majority of students who responded had a positive response to the value added through understanding research methods. Skills for life (4.3), and specific help with interviews and careers (4.1 Table 2) were stated. Most problems with student-supervisor relationships were resolved quickly (4.2). Those students that preferred a shorter project could also do a further elective. Other changes were online learning packages, and team related exercises. New members of faculty with recent research experience plan to add energy, enthusiasm and fun to the taught research methods modules (4.3) during the next term.

Two research questions guided the study:

RQ1. What content on research methods is delivered, how useful and relevant to the course as a whole is it?
The content for final year undergraduates, changed little before a revised structure with a complete module on research methods was introduced. There is more emphasis today on group exercises and choice of approaches and also on the tools that are available for accessing and cleaning data. Evidence from the survey (Tables 1 & 2) showed a majority of respondents found that the research methods module was either very or extremely useful.

New teaching and research fellows who will be teaching undergraduate research methods this term offered a wide range of topics for inclusion, also reinforcing the significance of relevance, practical examples, group work and learning of skills 'for life , not just for a dissertation'.

RQ2. How significant is the supervisor-student relationship where students conduct independent research within their studies, how is it organised and what lessons are learnt?
Evidence from the survey (Table 3) identified areas for improvement especially with timing, communication and the briefing of students and supervisors. The observation about being assigned an '*academic master's member of faculty* ' with no interest in undergraduates remains a challenge and reflects concerns about the perception among faculty both of undergraduate teaching and of project supervision. The manner in which faculty's workload is set and they are incentivised or motivated to supervise student projects is an issue. An interesting observation by '*new*' faculty was to try to make the student – supervisor relationship an enjoyable one with an element of fun in addition to the serious aspects of managing the overall process.

7. Next Steps

Exploring these two research questions has implications for the teaching of research and supervision processes within the Business School. The following should be discussed within the school and actioned where possible:

1. Many of the negative comments from staff and students alike reflected a lack of consistency, most evident in survey responses from students concerned that they were not getting the sound educational experience which they knew some of their peers to have. This could be linked to the complexity of the whole process within the Business School and to some of the difficulties encountered in administering project supervision effectively. Whatever expectations should exist around project supervision, there are clearly difficulties in communicating these effectively and also in ensuring that a common understanding exists. There is also a difficult balance to be achieved between promoting autonomy among students and being prescriptive about the approach to supervision

2. A practical next step arising from these issues is to ensure the briefing for both students and supervisors is clear on what is expected from the process. So far, briefing for students on final year projects has been centred on expectations of what is to be produced, and in fact the guidance on the process and on communication between them and supervisors has been framed as an instruction that they should negotiate the most appropriate channel for communication themselves. This is subject to very few requirements such as to produce a draft on a certain date before the submission was due. Student responses to the survey revealed differing views on matters of process, for example whether group supervision might be appropriate or whether they could consult other members of academic staff. In the future briefing to both staff and students will focus on clarity about these process issues and on a clear and detailed set of expectations for supervision.

3. As alluded to in the interview with the course officer, in the future students will have the option of doing an applied project which will be based around group supervision. For this a much more highly structured approach to supervision will be adopted and because it takes place predominantly in groups students will have a clear view of how their progress compares with their peers.

4. The evidence of some supervisors being perceived as uninterested in undergraduates is cause for concern. This arose in responses to the student survey and also in discussions with the course officer concerned with administration of the project. It is particularly worrying given that this coincided with an expansion in the Business School's undergraduate programme. While it is difficult to change perceptions among faculty members as a whole, a more structured approach and clearer expectations should provide an opportunity to promote undergraduate supervision as a worthwhile activity and not as an academic chore that needs to be done. This also needs to be positioned within an understanding of the other pressures and constraints affecting academics, as a plea to put more work into undergraduate supervision is likely to be very ineffective if it does not take account of the context.

5. In the focus group the teaching fellows demonstrated considerable enthusiasm for research, willingness to share their ideas and understanding with undergraduates, and creativity in how they intended to present the material. They were clearly committed to a refreshed approach to teaching research methods which will combine the very practical skills in which some students expressed with an emphasis on the value of understanding research as an ability which would benefit them in future employment and in life in general. If the students can build on this enthusiasm they will have acquired an understanding and appreciation of research that will enhance their degree and help them considerably in their future careers.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Wednesday 8th September 10:30   Notes from Zoom meeting

Senior Administrator responsible for undergraduate projects on all degree progs (except Actuarial)

1. Please describe what your job entails in connection with student project work.
    Work with faculty. A change this year is to create a questionnaire for students to select their project preferences earlier than before. Faculty allocate students to supervisors and returns a list to contact the students. Issues include the student changing their mind on the project type or the student – supervisor relationship not working.

    This year Business / management undergraduate can choose an ARP (Applied Research Project) option worth 15 credits as opposed to a normal student FYP dissertation of 10,000 words and 30 credits. Students may need to have earnt 60 / 65%+ average grades to qualify for the FYP. Although the ARP is not an easy option for weaker students.

2. Do you have a view on how documentation regarding the nature, workflow, timing and delivery of projects and dissertations might be improved? How might we ensure that this is then read and used as intended?
    Now avoiding the additional cost of visiting lecturers supervising projects. There is a student handbook that is updated annually. Students and faculty do not always read this as requested. Students usually email questions. Academic matters ought to be addressed to faculty / supervisor. The handbook is suitably 'general' rather than very specific. Minor changes are made year on year. The course director also briefs students at the end of year 2 on the final year project requirements. The students also have a Student Experience officer.

3. What issues do you have to deal with in terms of allocating students and supervisors and dealing with any concerns raised by either party?
    Often a misapprehension over whether a full dissertation is more likely to impress potential employers. 600-700 students per year. A max of 10 students might change supervisors. Most issues are resolved over a conversation. Gaining engagement (of both parties) is crucial. If a student needs to resubmit then aim to keep the same supervisor. All projects are second marked and a sample go to external examiners a majority of issues can be dealt with and do not need to be referred to the Course Director.

4. We have a concern that some supervisors may not be committed to undergraduate teaching and learning (one survey respondent talked about supervisors being more comfortable with master level students). Have you experienced this issue, and any thoughts on what could be done?
    The same faculty each year tend to supervise projects. The workload varies according to other teaching / research duties. There is a variation in commitment and effort expended by both parties. From previous experience working in the MBA office it was easier to persuade many faculty members to put effort into MBA projects than it is for undergraduate projects.

5. When we interviewed one supervisor he mentioned that he had on some occasions taken on a very considerable volume of supervision and been happy to do so, subject to being able to keep track of the various different students he was responsible for. Do you have any thoughts on workload issues such as this?
    Faculty may supervise up to 20 students (range 2-20). With the Covid-19 pandemic, zoom sessions were widely used.

6. In your experience are there any lessons from how postgraduate projects and supervision are organised from an administrative viewpoint?
    It is generally considered harder to engage undergraduates than postgraduate students. Let's see how well the changes made this year work.

7. We wish to explore how supervision is organised, and your perception of what are the problems, what works well, and what could be improved. Your overall thoughts would be appreciated.
   Try to simplify / streamline wherever possible. Some students will always feel disenchanted. One faculty administrator coordinates projects across programmes. Discourage change of supervisor where possible.
   There has been little change over the years in the standard of undergraduate projects. Most of the undergraduate teaching is at Northampton Square. For Postgraduates, Most of the faculty are based at Bunhill Row where postgraduate teaching takes place – this makes communication easier for postgraduates and also the development of relationships.

Appendix 2

Thursday 16th September 10:30   Notes from Zoom meeting

Focus Group with new research / teaching fellows.

Based on your recent Postgraduate experience and with a view to teaching undergraduate and also perhaps Masters students research methods, we would like your thoughts on the following:

1. Students are preparing for perhaps their first major project and dissertation. What do you consider to be the most useful concepts, theories and tools that students need?
- Detailed real world examples.
- Importance of collecting data , students learning about their online community, use of specialized programming languages, SPSS.
- NVivo – basic coding and use of nodes.
- Finding a balance not all students keen on analytics.
- Epistemology and ontology – familiarization with important concepts for critical writing and thinking.
- Paradigms: '*I'm very biased towards teaching the paradigmatic issues at stake in whichever approach is taken'*.
- Objectivism vs interpretivism or constructivist approaches.
- Inductive vs deductive
- What theory is! This is often misunderstood and an UG can graduate without fully appreciating the distinction between theoretical insights and empirical observations.
- Need a detailed plan and milestones

2. How best can these ideas be put across in the classroom? e.g. lecture, on-line, exercise based, group work etc…?
- Joint teaching sessions.Lecture/discussion (Socratic method)
- Exercise in tutorials on the basics of NVivo

3. What are your thoughts on making research methods relevant to final year undergraduates?
- 'My goal would be that they should appreciate (1) what method is right for the questions they've been tasked with answering in the workplace: predictive power vs meanings and culture (2) If they intend to pursue an MA it can help establish which route they might pursue. (3) if they walk away with the basics – we've done our job'

4. Are you planning an assessment as part of the teaching – if so what do think would be suitable?
- Group work, give students options.
- I assume the existing assessments will be used and we may add to them after next weeks meeting

5. Based on your experience of postgraduate studies, what lessons would you offer in managing the project process?
- Clear about how to organize the project breaking it down into sections
- Clear about what assessments they'll be judged against so they address the criteria clearly

6. Again from your own experience, what suggestions do you have for enhancing the student-supervisor relationship?

- Be available, open and approachable. I've seen lectures shut people down too readily.
- Building relationships – forgive the American in me but this is an issue of providing inspiration and understanding the UG experience.
- Regular meetings, availability, deliver on targets – try to make the process fun.

7. What differences would you propose for the teaching of MBA, or MSc students compared with BSc in Business and /or Management?
- At batchelor level students have little research experience and are used to being told. Masters level – clear idea of what they are interested in but do not assume they understand the jargon

8. Any other thoughts?
- Excited at the prospect of teaching research methods to undergraduates, also realistic about personal bias.
- The final project is important as a differentiator for bright students. Also increasingly important for those graduates that will need to collect data, undertake analysis and and write reports in their new jobs.
- About a third of of students will continue with postgraduate studies.
- I love the saying – " *if you want to master something, teach it*". That's why I'm excited to engage with this material. I'll learn a lot from the process and hopefully reach some of my students.