Being Inclusive in Supervising Projects and Dissertations

1. Practical support

1.1 Offer variety
Diversify the type of Final Year Projects (FYP) and dissertations available by giving students options aligned to their aspirations following completion of the course. A diverse student body will include students with different motivations and they are likely to be far more engaged with the project if they can link the skills and knowledge to potential future use.¹

1.2 Give practical information
If permitted within your School, provide guidance on the structure and possible layout including examples to look at and information to refer back to as needed. Giving guidance from the outset about how the word count can be broken down and the purpose of each section will make it seem more manageable. This is particularly important for students with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) who may find academic writing challenging and have poor organisational and time management skills.² It is important to remember that many students may have limited experience of what a dissertation or long project involves and may have a lot of anxiety about it.

1.3 Support skill development
Refer students to further sources of support such as skills@library for help with aspects such as referencing and keeping track of sources. Many students will not have acquired these skills through their course.

Provide support for students to make realistic project plans. Many students with SpLDs and autism spectrum conditions find it difficult to break down larger tasks into smaller chunks and to estimate how long each activity is likely to take.

Provide examples and explicit guidance on how to be reflective, where required. This skill does not come naturally to some students, such as those on the autism spectrum.

Encourage students to use text to speech software for proofreading their work. Students with SpLDs and non-native speakers may benefit from hearing their work read back to them in order to check it for sense and minor errors as the University’s proof reading policy does

not allow 3rd party proof-reading. In some exceptional circumstances, however, disabled students can be recommended a proof reader. Your Faculty Disability Coordinator will be able to advise further on individual cases.

1.4 Prepare students for fieldwork and lab work (See also guide to Being Inclusive in Fieldtrips)

Assist students assess any risks involved in off-site activities at an early stage, and identify measures that the student can put in place to prevent difficulties arising. Ensuring the student has planned and prepared well will mitigate against problems which disrupt the progress of the project. This is particularly important for disabled students who will need to think through additional challenges associated with their disability as early as possible.

2. Managing the student-supervisor relationship

2.1 Agree expectations

Encourage students to challenge your ideas and engage in debate with you. Some students may be from cultural backgrounds where authority figures must not be challenged, so they may be naturally inclined to agree with the supervisor on everything, rather than understanding debate as a learning opportunity.

Hold a clarification session with the student to ensure that you both have a clear understanding of the purpose of the project. Due to prior educational experience or cultural background, there may be a mismatch in understanding the meaning and purpose of research based learning.

2.2 Regularly revisit the focus of the work and monitor progress

Ensure you maintain the same vision of the purpose and direction of the project throughout the student’s learning journey. Use project plan milestones to identify whether students are falling behind and identify problems early. Through the process of reading, researching and thinking, students can change direction with their ideas and may not think it is relevant to inform you. If this change is potentially problematic, you need to know as early as possible in order to salvage the project. It may be more difficult for disabled students or those with additional responsibilities outside of university life to find the time they need to rescue a project that has gone awry or to catch up when they have fallen behind.

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2.3 Encourage systematic record keeping
Allow students to use a digital voice recorder to record supervisions as this will reduce the need for note-taking. Some students, such as those with dyslexia, have difficulty listening, engaging fully in discussion and taking notes concurrently. This also applies to people with concentration and memory difficulties, such as those with mental health problems.

Consider providing a template for students to record key points from supervision meetings and actions to complete. Recap this at the end of the meeting so that both parties are clear. Some students may have poor organisational skills and may need support to ensure they come away from supervision meetings with useful information. Providing a template ensures both student and supervisor are clear about what should happen next and provides an opportunity for the student to consolidate the main points of the discussion. Keeping co-authored notes will also give you a record of any advice given, particularly where this has involved external pastoral support recommendations.

2.4 Support students to prioritise their time
Be aware of students’ other commitments outside of university and enable them to be realistic about the time commitment involved in a dissertation or long project. Consider using Skype if this is more convenient and saves travel time. Students with caring responsibilities or those who need to work part-time to support themselves may find it difficult to devote sufficient time to a longer project without guidance on time management, particularly if they haven’t done a longer project before.

Find the full set of Being Inclusive in... guides at http://www.sduonline.leeds.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/

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