The Independent Study: A Review of Content and Purpose (Worcester Business School Learning & Teaching Project)

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Aim

To understand current ideas as to 'Best Practice' in the design and process of the undergraduate Independent Study (IS) in order that they can be discussed collectively with Staff at the Away Day in November and incorporated into the IS preparation (including related modules; notably on Research Methods) and supervision processes at University of Worcester Business School.

Background

The Independent Study and related Research Methods modules are notable in their ability to discriminate i.e. to produce a greater 'spread' of scores amongst undergraduate (UG) students. The IS process is frequently observed to be the most challenging part of their degree course in feedback from students – this is perhaps because of the centrality of an appropriate *research method* in this piece of work, relative to other submissions. This is often the first time that many students are required to 'put science into practice' in such a holistic and sustained manner. Partly for this reason, the IS has the potential to exert a powerful leverage for employability, particularly for Business students who are looking to work in a commensurate area as it demonstrates the application of 'functional competencies' which graduate employers are looking for. However, at a recent exam board it was observed that the UG IS was often an 'underwhelming experience', which given the significant amount of marks attached to it, is a loss. The purpose of this evaluation and consultancy document is to increase the effectiveness of this weighty piece of study, both in terms of ideas to improve the student experience as well as ultimately to improve student achievement (marks) in the IS.

Literature Review

The QAA (200) subject benchmark statements detail a number of Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSAs) related to the expectations made of Business and Management degrees. The most notable for the UG IS include: "the…effective self-management in terms of time, planning and behaviour, motivation, self-starting, individual initiative and enterprise…..the ability to conduct research into business and management issues…individually …for dissertations…this requires familiarity with and an evaluative approach to a range of business data, sources of information and appropriate methodologies…" (p 4).

And "3.8 Business and management degrees are strongly related to practice and therefore there should be a strong link between the development of skills and employability of graduates."(p 3).

These allude to issues relating to the **pedagogy behind applied research**; to **considering employability** and to **increasing self-awareness and self-initiating behaviours**. Subsequent literature was therefore reviewed for the insights that could be gathered specifically on these three emphases.

A piece of Teaching and Development research supported by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) subject centre for Business, Management, Accounting and finance (BMAF) in 2008 explored an Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) approach to the final year modules as a way to connect the student and staff final year experience of business and management degrees, in reaction to a view of this exchange as being more like a 'courier' approach where knowledge is simply 'delivered'. This was intended to encourage student and staff engagement in a 'pioneering' and questioning learning journey, which would seem an appropriate metaphor for the UG IS process. The latter certainly sounds more pedagogically attractive for both students and staff to participate in and Grisoni, (2008) found improvement on marks with each subsequent year on some modules, though not specifically on the IS and with the acknowledgment that some subjects were admittedly more easily re-engineered for this approach than others.

EBL approaches are perhaps making slow advancement into BMAF contexts for a number of reasons. A student survey by Kolb & Kolb, (2005, reported in Grisoni, 2008) found that a traditional, didactic 'text-driven' approach was comfortable for 46% of management students surveyed, with only 21% preferring experiential or more student-centered approaches. This acknowledges that the plausibility of teaching methods are evaluated by students as HE 'customers' and such feedback can be powerful in creating expectations for delivery which challenge the 'newer' pedagogical frameworks, even though these maybe designed to "encourage students to develop their self-awareness, to explore wider aspects of their own experience and to link theory and practice." (Grisoni, 2008 p 2). The student experience is now formally measured longitudinally in the National Student Survey (NSS) and maintaining 'popularity' ratings may well influence teaching methods which could be seen as more 'challenging' or less expedient than traditional methods which are more easily accepted as effective and as an artifact of history. Grissoni also acknowledged the additional resource implications and amount of staff energy (in defining clarity of purpose, justifying the *greater* work-load of EBL in comparison with other modules and balancing collaborative working with clear boundaries) required to re-cast modules wholesale, particularly during busy periods in the academic year.

Another experiential learning approach to delivering research skills training in undergraduate research modules was conducted by Finn & Crook, (2003). This developed an electronic platform called STARS or the Scientific Training by Assignment for Research Students. These authors drew attention to the salience of the final year undergraduate research project by comparing it to the 'masterpiece' once produced by the apprentice as evidence of the culmination of their training and justification for their qualification. They too noted the relatively high amount of marks attached to research skills in the IS on most degree courses in addition to their status as transferable skills which are highly valued by employers in any of the 'science-based disciplines'. They note: "it is of concern that undergraduate training so regularly reveals deficiencies in these basic research skills…it seems pertinent to ask 'is the importance of the final year research project reflected in the preparation that students receive for it? More generally, is the importance and expected standard of research skills in higher education reflected in the curriculum of undergraduate degrees? And …how can we improve the learning of research skills?" (Finn & Crook, 2003 p2). This transferable employability potential in the UG IS was also endorsed in student feedback in a recent L&T innovation and development grant project conducted at UW (Francis-Smythe & Bicknell, 2008).

Beginning with a kind of 'research skills competency skills framework' which included elements often seen in generic graduate competency frameworks (for more on these see Francis-Smythe & Bicknell, 2008) such as: project management; effective communication, report writing

analyzing and synthesizing information as well as research-specific skills, Finn & Crook, (2003) designed the e-resource to offer formative assessment and feedback. It is important to qualify this as they designed their e-learning *to compliment and reinforce other relevant modules or training, rather than as a stand alone learning research training resource*. Certain assumptions were made about the potential users of STARS which may not include some students such as Direct Entrants to the final year for example, or some groups of International Students who are struggling more with their written English skills. One of the 'case studies' for example in the e-resource, assumes that students will compare the 'official critique' with their submitted piece after completing the assignment and receiving feedback with their errors automatically highlighted alongside the 'expert answer'. Whilst this allows more opportunities for students to benefit by exposure to other learning paradigms e.g. drawing on imitation and 'role modeling' in terms of learning about how 'approved' answers should look, given that there are problems in students at UW BS collecting their assignments and thus feedback, assuming that they will independently make these comparisons and reflect on them once the assignment has been graded may not be accurate. These authors also noted that whilst an experiential learning or problem-based learning approach could produce deep understanding and insight in students they referred to this as "the educational equivalent of the 'no pain, no gain' principle!" (Finn & Crook, 2003 p 5). In essence they present some useful ideas but do not claim that they are a panacea, or that they could be used in isolation, or that students will be less reluctant to use these than they would be to pick up a research methods textbook. Indeed organizational or curriculum integration was found to be a key factor in uptake of e-learning such that any measurable impacts could be assessed, across a range of topic areas (Bicknell, 2002; 2006).

Perhaps the most surprising conclusion of this literature review of 'best current practice' in IS preparation and given the relative weighting of these documents on degree courses, was the relative silence written about it at UG level. Excepting the QAA subject benchmarks, none of the HEA subject centre BMAF, the Association of Business Schools or the LTSN have much to say in regard to operational definitions or descriptions of best practice in the Independent Study, despite a number of personal requests for such information which were made after researching their websites - this produced some literature and facilitated the creation of some useful contacts in this area with these bodies and with academics in other universities. At dissertation or 'M level' there is rather more material which contains much finer grained evaluations of content and purpose in the MBA dissertation including marks awarded, methodological type, amount of analysis, level of data etc. (Kangis, 2001). These are objective indicators and therefore present something which can be 'benchmarked as the first stage in determining improvement. The UG level the literature (as determined during this literature review) remains much more generic and pedagogical in tone, with little 'hard evidence' as regards outcome measures applied to IS reviews. This does not help with a desire to "improve the learning of research skills" as stated by Finn & Crook (2003) and who themselves used the QAA statements of key skills as their starting point. Together with the QAA then, the only other operational definition to consider is provided by the URF notes on the IS which define it thus:

- 'A substantial piece of work following detailed investigation and research into a subject by a student at Level 6. Such work is carried out independently with minimum supervision'.
- 30 credits from an IS are needed for an honours degree
- 'All students must take and pass an Independent study in order to be eligible for a degree with honours. A student may take only one Independent Study.'

Method

Following the literature review, two cross-sectional data collection strategies were adopted under an organisational evaluation framework (Bryman & Bell, 2007) to allow the collection of data from two key groups of stakeholders who would be able to contribute context-based, feasibility information in addition to experience-based reflections (Patton, 2002). A short email survey was constructed for BS Staff (see appendix 1). This incorporated issues from the literature and feedback from external examiners at the most recent exam boards. The decision was taken *not* to use a formal tool such as 'survey monkey' for this and the questions were presented in a manner (one email no links) most likely to facilitate the greatest completion. Responses were received from 14 members of a targeted sample of BS staff making for approx. 35% response rate – which is typical of surveys (Oppenheim, 1992). It is worth noting that the sample contained responses from key individuals with responsibility for Quality, Research, Research Methods and the IS tutor role. All respondents had previously supervised IS students. The qualitative data was coded by question and thematically analysed in WORD. The findings and recommendations in this consultancy report will be shared with all BS Staff prior to a Learning and Teaching 'Away Day' event scheduled for November 2009 in order to facilitate further reflection on these issues.

The e-survey for Students provided triangulation of data type and was constructed in the 'survey monkey' tool to gather feedback on the IS from this years' cohort on six areas:

1. The experience of completing an Independent Study (IS) in Business Management

2. Research Methods courses as preparation for the IS

3. Use of IS guides

4. Advice to other students following their IS experience

5. Positive and negative IS feedback from students

6. Additional comments re BS degree at UW

This e-survey strategy responds to the difficulty in obtaining feedback from final year students on their IS as they have effectively 'left' by the time they hand it in and so data collection opportunities are a problem. Face validity was assessed by a 'critical friend' prior to its administration and content validity was supported by incorporating questions from Registry and the previous IS study tutor. Responses were gathered from 32 individuals of a possible 98, following 3 reminders being issued at fortnightly intervals making for a similar response rate to Staff of 33%. The quantitative data was dealt with descriptively acknowledging sample numbers and the qualitative data analysed thematically as described above. This e-survey will be passed onto the new IS co-ordinator and is thus available for re-use and more importantly to facilitate easy annual comparison, with future cohorts, containing both quantitative and qualitative data. A higher response rate would be preferred to increase reliability but that the nature of some of the qualitative data was rather candid, attests to its authenticity and ecological validity. Again, this e-survey can be re-issued with future cohorts and its reliability can thus be assessed longitudinally and by inferential statistical interrogation with larger sample numbers against annual benchmarks which can now be easily gathered.

Findings:

To facilitate further departmental consultation at the Business School Away Day, a substantial amount of verbatim feedback as well as data is included here.

Part 1 - Staff
1. Should we encourage students to engage in Primary rather than Secondary research as much as possible?
2. What would be the benefits of doing this?
3. Where would such an approach not be appropriate?

Responses from Staff indicated a cautiously positive approach to encouraging more primary research - with some caveats: that subjects such as accountancy, finance and economics may necessitate the use of secondary research and that in order to complete primary research more forward planning on the part of students needs to occur in commencing their IS projects earlier: *"…certainly if they are going to do primary research as this takes time."* However, one person noted that this was *"a moot point that academics seem to care about but the wider world would prefer not to be bothered with"*.

The benefits of engaging in primary research were observed to be around:
- avoiding some of the common 'pitfalls' contributing to poorly executed IS such as *"our students seem to confuse secondary research and literature review"* *"they would have more method to write about"* (thereby improving the quality of their IS).
- Increased transferability of academic skills for improving employability *"unless we are going to abandon applied research which would be a shame as there are plenty of opportunities"*.

4. Should we move the Research Methods module into the final year?

The response to this, overall was negative or unfeasible. Whilst Staff acknowledged that for some students:
- *"To think about research for the IS and having to take the Research Methods module concurrently is probably useful."*
- *"One 'problem' here is that requirement by Registry that IS proposals are completed half way through the second semester of year 2. There may be an administrative logic in this but not necessarily an academic one – should we give them a summer to develop their ideas (based on feedback from the research methods second assignment?)."*
- *"I was persuaded by the recommendation to do so from some externals. I think it suits today's students short time frames better (potentially). Also a benefit for placement students."*

Staff acknowledged that for most students, they will benefit from a longer period to become familiar with new and rather abstract Research Methods terminology:
- *"No – they need to be thinking about this as they make their choice of study"*
- *"I would be strongly against moving the RM module into year 3, because I would expect students to spend time over the summer thinking about their IS. We need to make sure that they are encouraged to set up a meeting with their supervisor early in Semester 1."*
- *"Some students would prefer to do their IS over two semesters."*

- *"No, but 'how to do an IS' sessions / summer School would be helpful."*
- *"I feel that this should all come before they begin their projects, so the Research Methods module should be completed (and passed?) in the previous semester."*

5. Do we need to make more and better use of Work Based Learning models (e.g. SPHERE or other collaborations) to facilitate this?

The response to the above question was neutral in tone; there was acknowledgment that:

- *"Maybe we simply need to reduce the fear of primary research, contacting 'strangers' .... This seems to be some problem – but more… is that primary research is less comfortable as being not so easy to do from home."*
- *"Inevitably to be competitive with 'entrepreneurial and employability-oriented universities' and the courses they offer."*

Some however indicated a more positive response:

- *"I think that this would be excellent!"*
- *"In 08/09 all the second year students have had the chance to practice designing an online questionnaire; Hopefully, this will be shown in next year's IS."*

6. What are the implications of this in terms of resources and capacity in the Business School?

The following resource and supervision issues were highlighted:

- *"there should be two IS module* leaders across the whole business school – one for research-based IS, the other for applied research."
- "*In practice, students generally need more support for primary research based IS in my experience. Will perhaps be especially critical to allocate 'appropriate' supervisors in terms of industry/sector experience."*
- *"Resources to manage/liaise and supervise 'real time' applied IS projects."*

7. Would integrating more Problem-Based Learning (PBL) or Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL) activities into the curriculum facilitate students in approaching their IS – if so in what year of study?
8. How might this be achieved?

All of the responses provided here were positive, however this represented under half of the respondents:

- *"Yes, asap after they arrive, embedded in appropriate mandatory module(s)."*
- *[In] "Year 1 and 2."*
- *"This is a good idea and should be done before IS topics have to be chosen."*
- *"Will inevitably benefit students. Would like to see this beginning in Year 1 and building in Year 2."*
- *"In principle yes, but would involve re-casting a lot of work and access to additional resources."*

Suggestions for how this could be achieved included:

- *"As a learning objective in chosen modules."*
- *"More real-world activities and also getting the students started on parts of an independent study in some modules."*
- *"Case study, lecture of a researcher in practice…".*

- *"The obvious route is via mandatory modules, whether they are appropriate is another question."*

9. Would some 'IS Supervision training' be helpful for Staff in clarifying salient issues that recur in poor IS?

A strongly positive response was given to this by most respondents:

- *"Yes, very much so. My memory is that supervising my first IS was the most daunting part of the job as a new SL (but I did not come from an academic background).*
- *"Absolutely YES! But how this would be received is another question."*

10. Should the current BS IS handbooks be developed to include additional sections on related issues?

To this the following suggestions were given from a small number of respondents:

- *"Perhaps we could also add to the student guidelines some supervisor / marker commentary on poorly executed work, so that they might begin to learn what to avoid? No shortage of material there I'm sure."*
- *"…suggest a section similar to FAQs called "Avoiding Frequently Made Mistakes"*
- *I would like to 'offer' more IS 'seed questions' as students may be able to get started sooner and so benefit more from the whole process! There is a significant amount of academic push-back to using 'proposed topics' as the IS question should be the students' own – however it would be broad and how the student interpreted and addressed it would be up to them. It would just halve the time students spend stressing themselves into avoidance or paralysis BEFORE they have a research question to get going with!*

The final question asked Staff: Is there anything else you would like to suggest or make comment on about improving the IS or students' preparedness for it?

This and question one generated the most feedback. Comments included:

- *I don't think students should be asked to do IS at all. Why not give them the option to put together portfolios or write critical reports on various projects or internships they do during summer holidays or during their sandwich year?"*

- *"I think the problem is that we don't prepare them enough for doing a piece of independent work…Now, many of our students now do lack the ability to express themselves in a structured and analytical way, and we do little to specifically address this."*

- *"Year 1 is where we lose them… we should be doing what doesn't happen at the moment in the final year at school. It should be a tough year, not a time to go out on the*

town every other night. We need to really push them right from the start across the whole business school."

- *"The computing and business folks working more closely in independent studies. There are projects students could do that encompass parts of both, it should not have to be one-or-the-other."*

- *"Put the 'A' independent studies in PDF format with access in the online library. I've heard that some hard-copies go to the library, but they tend to disappear. If all the ones that were marked 'A' were accessible easily, students could see what is expected of them."*

- *"Let the students start part of their independent studies in some modules."*

- *"We can have more influence on the process of chosen topics, either by not accepting certain topics and on the hand, suggest topics ourselves. The latter, e.g., publishing a list of topics, we want to be researched. More constraints, yes, but giving direction."*

- *[Agree with above comment] We could incorporate this into Research Methods (BUSM3102, BUSM2102) first session.*

- *My general view is that the IS is a really good assessment for a final years honours student. While there were some criticisms of it in the Exam Board I would caution against over-reaction based on one year's cohort. That is not to say that no developments should be considered. I do feel that tutors (me included) might be more rigorous in the Interim Review process. Secondly we might be more demanding as a staff of the quality of IS proposals that we 'sign off'. I recognise that research does 'emerge' as projects progress but we might encourage the students to give greater thought to exactly what they are planning to do and what they want to achieve at the proposal stage."*

Part 2 - Students

1. The experience of completing an Independent Study in Business:

The results below represent the responses from 32 IS students from 2008/09 – just under one third of the cohort who completed their IS and across a broad range of Business and Management topic areas. 53% (17) completed their IS across two semesters.

Most students reported that they met with their supervisor between 2-5 occasions (57 (17), with 7% (2) reporting they met with them only once. 37% (11) met on more than five occasions. In reference to these meetings; 77% (23) found them to be very useful or useful; 20% (6) reported them to be Ok. Only 1 person reported them to be not useful with the following comment:

> *"It spent me about two months to get to know who is my supervisor. And even when I know, I found he is always very busy, and the answer he give to my question is too simple that could give me no help in doing my IS."*

When asked how IS tutorials could be improved, 18 students provided comments which included:

Positive feedback:
Mine were good.
I felt my tutor was helpful enough
My experience with my Supervisor was great. Did not have any problems whatsoever. So i believe my Independent Study Supervisor should keep up his good work.
Personally, I think my tutor followed the rules in the book. Whenever I had questions, he gave me exact and useful answers. And I considered I had full liberty to organize my work, the professor did not stress me with meeting and reports to fill. I really appreciate it.

Pressure:
Give helpful suggestions what to do, not to put pressure on students to get certain sections of your independent study done by certain dates throughout the period.
Appointed the supervisor as quickly as you can and try to prevent too many students have just one supervisor.
Have tutors that know you, therefore knowing how to get the best out of you. I know they can't give stuff away but whenever i asked if i was on the right lines i was just told 'it's your IS it's up to you', which can be a bit confusing when you're having a bit of a panic.

Structure & Guidance:
More structure to the number of meetings e.g. every 5weeks
They could be longer and give more guidance over each area in the independent study
By giving more indications in what way the study and reading could be improved.
Over all my tutorials were helpful but I had so much to cover in the tutorials as the whole concept of the independent study process was not explained well previously .
Provide timely help.
By setting deadlines for each meeting, this way the student can stay on target with their independent study if they struggle for time.
Tutorials could be more structured, supervisors should discuss what format the report should be written in and how to go about researching the certain topic.
More accessible - not just on certain days or certain times. Sometimes difficult as I live a distance away and had to book time off work to get to uni for a 30min appointment. Also able to provide suggestions and advice on ideas they have that may enhance study. Not just answer questions.
Make them compulsory.

Tutor-Student Relationship:
I also felt very distant from the tutor and quite overwhelmed with the whole project. I felt i could only ask to be guided on certain things and once the one chapter (as regulated by the uni) had been read i felt i was totally on my own with the rest.

> *I should have been more proactive in contacting him.*
> *To have the same tutor all the time.*

Some of these question the 'independent' nature of the independent study and may indicate that some students do not feel ready or appropriately prepared for it. That students are requesting more structure and even compulsory tutorials also endorses this interpretation.

Interestingly 63%(19) respondents considered the experience of completing their IS as a very useful task for a third year student; 33% (10) reported that it was OK and only 1 person reported that it was not a useful task.

2. Research Methods courses as preparation for the IS:

50% (14) of respondents reported Research Methods as very useful; 40% (11) as OK and 11%(3) as not at all useful in preparing them for their IS. 17 people gave the following comments with regard to increasing preparation:

> ***Positive feedback:***
> *During the research methods course I learned terms really useful for the independent study.*
>
> *I was happy with the information provided in the Research Methods module: exercises in seminars, readings and tutors' openness and ability to answer questions.*
>
> ***Structure & Content:***
> *More detail in the introduction of the framework of the assignment, and more resource(like someone's assignment).*
>
> *Could have gone into more detail about what is needed in each section, done little bits on each section.*
>
> *Set out more specific ways of how to build the independent study and what should be included in each chapter.*
>
> *More concrete advices regarding the IS instead of studying some theories. Needs to show how each topic and skill learnt was relevant to the independent study. Put importance on the module itself and its relation to the independent study. The module could have included much more about the layout, writing and general contents of the study as this is relevent to everyone and there was much confusion about what should and should not be included etc. Much of the topics covered were not used by myself and many of my fellow students.*
>
> *Could of used spss more detail and more on analysis.*

More information regarding how to structure the study in chapters etc - most people I spoke to on the course were unclear about this. More about how to do a study from secondary sources.

teach the way to collect the information

have more handouts

Timing:
The research methods course must be in a semester in which the student can remember what he/she was taught.
been nearer the time when we actually did our studies - so it would have been fresh in our minds.

Should probably be a first semester year 3 module. Couldn't remember that much from second year.

I think that if students picked their study prior to studying research methods they would get a lot more out of the unit by being able to understand how it is relevant to the independent study. I found that I attended research methods, got annoyed by how simple the module is, submitted the assignments which I failed to see the relevance of and then when under taking the independent study it finally occurred to me the purpose of the module. Had I known the topic of my study and its plan prior to the module I could have learned and utilised the module at the same time.

3. Use of IS guides:

25% (7) reported a lot of use of the IS in Business Management guides that were given out in week one of the Research Methods courses. 64% (18) reported some use and 10% (3) reported not much or no use of these. 11 people made the following comments as to how they could be made more helpful or any other information they would have liked.

Positive feedback:
Information provided was ok.
research methods module have helped me with my independent study.
The fact is that some independent studies may require a specific outline, which only the independent supervisor can give you. This was my case, and the tutor from Research Methods clearly advised me to speak with the IS tutor to ask for guidelines.

Structure & Content:
Spent a lot of time on the format- maybe more guidelines for how it should look.

More detail of what is required.
a generic guideline to follow.
Useful contacts.
The guide was useful but quite long, a summary sheet with absolute key points at the end might be helpful.

Reference & other material:
It would be good to have more up to date independent studies as reference in the library
Suggestions from last years students who under took independent study. Things they wish they had known, advice etc. Explanation of journals, where to find them, what is there - topics etc.

4. Advice to other students following their IS experience:

24 students provided the following 'advice that they would offer to a student in their subject who was about to start their IS':

Topic choice:
Do not choose a topic that you have not been thoroughly taught in, the basics need to be profound in order to build a deeper understanding about the subject.
Pick a topic you really like - for example chose a football club, clothes brand or drinks brand and see if it could be made relevant such as branding or study their accounts.
Pick a topic you can easily get resources for. Choose a topic you are interested in. Base your research on a mixture of primary and secondary research, as you are likely to get more valid results with that method.
Pick a topic that you like, but that you also know a tutor who specializes in it. Make sure you are interested. Make sure the information required is accessible.
I would advise them to choose something they are really interested in or passionate about. Otherwise, they might find that they are losing interested and motivation on the way. Researching and writing the IS is not "Mission: Impossible", but it requires commitment, dedication and, most important, time.

Planning & Organising:
Start your independent study in plenty of time as it does take up a lot of time.
Prepare early, read as much as you can, keep in touch with tutor.
Start over the summer holiday before the third year and read lots of books.
Start it early and get the results in as soon as possible and then you can concentrate on what needs to be written in the main body.
Read a lot about your subject and start reading early.
Start early.
Start early, even if it is research here and there and gradually you will build up lots of information ready for the start of your study.
Start it as soon as possible!! Get as much research as you can before you start writing it.
Do loads of reading and preparation.
Prepare early do it in the second semester.

> *Start your research during the summer before you begin your 3rd year. If possible do your dissertation over two semesters as i found that very convenient doing.*
> *They should start writing their independent study as soon as possible.*
> *Start Early.*
> *START IT EARLIER THAN I DID.*
> *Start as earlier as possible and have regular meeting with the tutors.*
> *Plan, plan and plan. Have a contingency plan if they are going to conduct primary research and it suddenly becomes not suitable due to company requirements etc.*
>
> ***Structure & Content:***
> *Think of it as lots of smaller essays instead of one enormous one*
> *Proof read your work over and over again.*
> *Remember what you have learnt in research methods as this will help a bit.*
> *Take out lots of research and be clear from the start what you are aiming to find out.*
> *Talk to your tutor as soon as possible even if you haven't really started work on your study, because their advice will probably help your research to be more focused when you do start.*
>
> ***Employability feedback:***
> *Pick a topic that maybe relevant to a job you would like. Looks good on your CV.*
>
> **Other:**
> *Change your subject.*

5. Positive and negative IS feedback from students:

22 students provided the following positive comments concerning their experience of their IS:
their IS:

> ***Personal significance:***
> *It was more enjoyable than some of my other essays. It was good to write and have opinions about things I'm interested in. The satisfaction of completing it is great, I was so pleased with myself!*
> *Enjoyed researching an interesting topic, help for further research in the future in a topic.*
> *To research my own topic was good as it allowed me to read about something i was interested in.*
> *Good to learn independently Interesting as you choose the topic yourself*
> *Great sense of achievement at the end!*
> *It will help me to do my IS in master level.*
> *Helped me understand more about the subject of the independent study.*
> *I have enjoyed every bit of it, in fact it has been my best module taken so far all through my years at the University. I choose my topic which was something i never got the opportunity to do for other assignments.*
> *I learnt a lot about the topic which I have been able to educate others on.*

In depth knowledge about a particular subject.
It was my own project and I really enjoyed seeing how things developed and were heading to a final result.
It was satisfying to see it bound and finished knowing it was all your own work. I felt that the results of my study could be useful to many employees.

Transferable skills:
I realised how strong i am and didnt give up. I learnt new skills and enjoyed learning them, such as interviewing participants and working along side a charity.
It has given me better knowledge about a subject that I would like to work with.
Helped me manage my time more effectively
Helped me learn to cope with difficult issues that arose whilst writing my independent study.
Time management
Organizational skills
A good challenge, made me prepare, made me work hard.
I enjoyed the challenges of interviewing and requesting participants to fill in my questionnaires.
1. Shows how to format a formal report. 2. Shows how to research a topic.
I learned how to respect deadlines with a big amount of work.
Teaches you to prioritise workloads, to plan workloads and to work solely on your own without any input from friends etc.
1.gain more knowledge 2. integrate the knowledge which have been learned during last three years 3.improve the self-management skill
It has enabled me to learn which industry I wish to go into.
The liberty to organize the work in my own way and at my own pace.

Support & Content:
Good to have contact with a tutor, good amount of time to get the work done, good to have feedback.
Help with writing (e.g. refining and improving)
Good Support from tutors.
Meetings with tutor.
A lot of support Checking of one chapter.
There are some useful primary data to help evaluate the subject (guidance for).
To do the major part of the study in the library was good as all library staff was very helpful.

22 students provided the following negative comments concerning their experience of their IS: their IS:

Pressure:
It was the most stressful period of my time all through my 3 yrs at the University. Having said that after handing in my Dissertation, i felt so fulfilled and i loved the relief. I cant really say any negative aspect of my Dissertation as i have really, really, really enjoyed the experience.

Pressure to do certain sections of the independent study; rush through a meeting with you not knowing who you are or what your doing after meeting the tutor a few times.

At a certain point I was confused because ai had to change some things, and I didn't know what to choose and how to change it. Eventually, I asked my IS tutor for advice. He did not tell me what to do, he just gave me his opinion and the final decision was mine. I like the fact that I could take decisions, but the confusion period was rather stressful.

University messed up my modules so I couldn't spend the time needed on my independent study, a lot of pressure and stress.

To have a supervisor that I had never met before this subject was not good as the communication process was harder to start and maintain.

To do the independent study in one semester was not good and my friend at brooks university did the dissertation over 1.5 semesters and handed it in February which i think would have been better as it would not have been so stressfull last month of study.

- Time consuming -Stressful.

It is difficult to discuss and develop your study when you are the only one doing it. When studying modules it is nice to bounce ideas, discuss and learn as a group. With an IS you do feel alone and find yourself sometimes questioning if you have got the right end of the stick.

Time and project planning:
Very difficult to choose a topic to do it on. Staying awake for 43 hours straight before deadline date to get it done!

Fixed time----I saw a student was just 1 minute late because of the problem of print machine, his IS was considered 24 hours late.

8 000-10 000 words is too short as the depth is hard to build and at the same time as giving a new insights and thoughts about the subject.

There is not enough time for preparation.

1) Using SPSS 2) Repeating my self in work over and over   3) more feedback may be required.

Takes a long time and can interfere Have to rely on others if conducting surveys etc Expensive if buying resources that are not immediately available e.g. books that are not in the library.

Time consuming. Liaising with tutor can be tricky, some are more helpful than others.

Many tutors were allowing more tutorial time than was stated in the hand book and reading every chapter more than once rather than the one chapter as stated by the uni. Which ever way, it should be fair across the board! More time could be spent leading up to independent studies to make the whole experience less daunting rather than taking modules that were not as necessary.   I live 25 miles from the university, travelling for modules, writing module essays, completing an independent study and responsibilities at home is very very difficult. Tried working in the library and there were never enough facilities or space.

Didn't know what went where, had to ask people, needed more words.

1. Luck has to be in when being assigned a supervisor 2. Supervisor are not useful until some of the study has been written.

It was really difficult to read many books and put the information together in the independent study.

Finding it hard to discover the deadline date.

i left mine late and had to cram. Needs to be more independent studies in the library. very outdated.

1. i have change three tutors which have negative impacts on my IS, i would like to say, it is very important for the Uni to provide stable tutors to the student, instead of changing it all the time.   2. restrict on collecting information   3.poor time management at the beginning of the IS.

Other:
No negative comments, because your success in IS is up to you.

6. Additional comments re BS degree at UW:

10 students added additional comments as follows**:**

Positive feedback:

The business management degree has been good. But I think that we should have the opportunity to read business law as it would definitely have been a course that I and I think many others would have chosen.

I came directly in the 3rd year and I can honestly say I feel I learnt things that would definitely be useful in my career. I am really happy with the decision of coming to the Uni of Worcester with a top-up programme. Thank you!

Brilliant experience. Majority of the modules experienced were very good and interesting. Some modules were missed out on as they were not mandatory yet were more relevant and useful to marketing than some that were mandatory.

I have really enjoyed the Business management course over the past three years! I do think though that the course could have more business trips as currently the course does not really do this.

I thoroughly enjoyed studying at Worcester. I went to Aston Uni first, and its completely different there. its like 300 people in a lecture theatre. I love the fact you get to know the lecturers personally. Its easier to communicate and get feedback from them in this way. Don't change that.

Business management degree is integrate subject which covers most of the subject within the business management, its a good subject, however, i would like to choose more specific subject for my post graduate study, it could be more help for the future career.

Constructive critical feedback:

Try to give the International students more help in doing assignment, especially for those students comes from the nations which did not speak English.

More skills could be integrated rather then just theory.

As the unit is a double module, for myself and my colleagues who are direct entry students, our degree classification is made up of only our final year grades. We found our first semester a learning curve of the way work is marked, Worcester standards compared to college and ways work is to be submitted, and therefore obtained grades we expected in our second semester (after being disappointed and deflated in the first semester). However, due to us all doing our independent study in our second semester we are all nervous and cannot predict our overall degree grades to be

expected. The independent study for us is the difference between degree classification. Therefore, it is a difficult study to undertake and has created a lot of stress. I feel it is not fair that due to being direct entry students we cannot use any of our 2nd year grades to make up our degree classification. This was not explained to us when undertaking our degree, just a bombshell dropped upon us when joining Worcester uni. I would therefore not recommend the direct entry route. If I was to undertake my degree again I would have completed it all at University. The final year has created a lot of unnecessary stress.

I have completed my degree but not sure i remember much of what i have done?

Conclusions:

Having reviewed the issues raised from the QAA subject benchmark statements in relation to best practice in the IS on:

- pedagogy behind applied research;
- considering employability
- increasing self-awareness and self-initiating behaviours

it would appear that there is a balance to be found between a potentially much more pioneering but resource and time intensive approach to teaching in relation to the IS or some form of 'hybrid EBL' approach (Grisoni, 2008) perhaps incorporating the development of 'IS summer schools' for particular support. Such modules could allow for the exploration of reflections on enquiry based questions as suggested by Grisoni, (2008 p16). Such as:

What do I want to learn about in this inquiry and how will I go about it?
Where do my questions and interests come from? What experiences have prompted them?
What questions about …………… am I posing and how do I intend to inquire into these?

In any event, there are calls for more IS support that is flexible and allows students a more learner-centered approach to preparing for and carrying out their IS, which by default includes more preparation on Research Methods.   This support should be integrated with current provision but not time-limited and flexible in design for re-learning at a juncture where students are actively engaged with their IS. This would suggest an e-learning resource for these skill areas would be of value in addition to the material currently provided on Blackboard.

In terms of benchmarking IS achievement for improvement, conducting an 'audit' of submitted IS would allow the quality and quantity of methodological sophistication to be evaluated. Whilst this occurs to some extent through the external examination process, the purpose of this audit would be to quantify the type and level of submitted studies at a much finer level of detail than in overall mark, similar to evaluations of M level dissertations (e.g. Kangis, 2001). This would create a benchmark which could then be longitudinally reviewed to determine whether overall 'improvement' had in fact occurred.

Students retrospectively report the benefits of hindsight in inducting their own research question to enable them to start their IS sooner and also in wanting more 'real world' application of

theory. Both of these issues could be combined with increased use of 'supplied IS topic areas' from Staff and/or collaborative work-based learning projects where organizations propose a list of topic titles and students construct a research question and study based on these in the semester prior to commencing their Research Methods course. For a majority of students it is possible that simply *starting their IS earlier* would significantly improve their marks on it. This could deliver benefits both in engaging students with their IS *earlier* than most currently do and so giving them longer to develop ideas and collect and make optimal use of the supervision process, appropriate primary or secondary data and construction of the final IS document.

Some of the feedback from students raises issues demonstrating confusion about the 'independent' nature of the independent study and may indicate that some students do not feel ready or appropriately prepared for it. That students are requesting more structure and even compulsory tutorials also endorses this interpretation. It is worth noting here that in an evaluation of attendance and marks on Research Methods BUSM 2102 this year, there was a positive correlation between attendance and marks such that a significantly lower mark was achieved by students recorded as attending less than 50% of the RM course seminars.

Despite these challenges, it is interesting and positive to observe that 63%(19) Student respondents to this e-survey considered the experience of completing their IS as a very useful task for a third year student.

Recommendations for review by the team:

From Staff feedback:

- Encourage students to engage in primary research unless they can demonstrate a defensible rationale for why secondary research is more appropriate for their chosen topic

- Retain Research Methods in the semester ahead of the IS

- Encourage more students to complete their IS over two semesters

- Increase the emphasis on a more formal interim review process to ensure students are benefiting from a longer period of supervision

- Develop an IS 'summer school' following submission of the proposal (this could focus on EBL/PBL approach to their question to 'seed' discussion with their supervisor in the new term; language support sessions as necessary; IS document structure and content sessions for which there is no room in Research Methods course)

- Issue IS supervisor allocations earlier (before the end of term in which their IS proposal is completed – where a proposal has been submitted on time and expecting faster turnaround/acceptance of proposals by Staff)

- Increase emphasis on work-based learning opportunities such as placements and collaborations to service UG IS projects

- Include a problem-based/enquiry-based learning approach in a mandatory module in the first year of BMAF degrees

- Develop Staff training support for supervising the UG IS

- Develop integrated Student e-resource for Research Methods and the IS

- Develop the IS BS Handbook

- Consider alternative forms of IS

From Student feedback:

- Formalise and structure the IS supervision process more (e.g. audit meetings, make interim review more formal 'progress review' meeting, make sessions compulsory; issue an IS module 'contract' to include: discussion on expectation setting and Supervisor-Student relationship management)

- Provide examples of previous 'A' graded independent studies (via ILS support)

- Provide more support and guidance with structuring of IS document and layout

- Feed in 'student advice' gathered in the annual IS e-survey, to subsequent cohorts at the beginning of Research Methods courses

- Provide more help and much earlier on topic selection and question development

- Students should *start* their Research Methods courses with their IS proposal completed rather than complete it at the conclusion of RM courses

- Consider moving the Research Methods module to the final year to allow material to be 'more current'

- Make Staff aware of the significant amount of positive feedback from Students on the IS and on their experience of completing a Business Management Degree at UW.

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