

Rethinking Bachelor final year projects; International Perspectives

Alan Jenkins

Professor Emeritus, Oxford Brookes University (UK)

<http://www.alanjenkins.info>

“For the students who are the professionals of the future, developing the ability to investigate problems, make judgments on the basis of sound evidence, take decisions on a rational basis, and understand what they are doing and why is vital. Research and inquiry is not just for those who choose to pursue an academic career. It is central to professional life in the twenty-first century” Angela Brew Macquarie University Australia

“All undergraduate students in all higher education institutions should experience learning through, and about, research and inquiry. In undergraduate research, students learn and are assessed in ways that come as close as possible to the experience of academic staff carrying out their disciplinary research.” (Healey and Jenkins, 2009, 3)

The (United States) Boyer Commission (1998) recommended that “all undergraduate programmes should “culminate with a capstone experience. The final semester(s) should focus on a major project and utilize to the full the research and communication skills learned in the previous years.”

Spanish universities are now seeking to reshape the bachelor's degree including the Fan de Grado in response to developments in society and the Bologna university reforms . (Ferrer et al 2003). Here I offer perspectives on the final year projects from selected other national systems and suggest perspectives from these systems that may support developments in Spanish Universities.

Key global developments impacting on the final year project and in particular questioning its viability include: the ‘massification’ of higher education, thus in the UK the proportion of 18-21 years entering university is now c 50 % while in 1963 it was 3%; the growth of more professional degrees such as health care and business where students are perhaps less likely to see a focus on research as meeting their focus on future employment ; the increasing separation of teaching and research funding ...and the evident pressures on staff time for teaching and research .

The UK system and its three year undergraduate degree has long featured a final year dissertation – generally 8-10,000 words and with a strong emphasis on research methodology and results and generally based in one discipline - as a central graduating requirement. The above developments have called many institutions /departments to question whether the traditional dissertation is ‘deliverable’ partly because of the amount of one to one contact it ideally requires . Relatedly in Australia and New Zealand the UK style dissertation is largely reserved for fourth year honours students. While in the USA ‘undergraduate research’ where selected students do research mentored by faculty is largely reserved for selected ‘honors’ students with high grades and particularly in selected small private universities with high fees high staff to student ratios, and in major well funded research universities.

I as do many other academics seek to hold on to the ideal of all undergraduates carrying out a final year research based project but argue we need to rethink our arguments for such requirements and perhaps radically rethink the form of the final year project . Perhaps the focus on the ‘traditional’ dissertation was that it was seen as a selection route for postgraduate study and as a way of building the next generation of academics? Arguably in a mass higher education system such is only relevant to selected students in selected universities?

Ways forward to delivering final year research capstone for all students include Rethink the rationale . We need to investigate and then assert what makes higher education *higher* . For many of us –see the opening quote from Angela Brew – it is the sense that in

higher education the emphasis is that knowledge is uncertain , contested ..but vital to both our everyday living and to our 'success' in employment and our roles in society
Ensure all curricula are research and inquiry based for all students Research has long shown the limitations of the traditional formal lecture that has arguably long dominated university classrooms . Research is also now revealing the benefits of students learning in inquiry/ research modes .In the US such pedagogies are revealing particular benefits for first generation /minority students

Structure research and inquiry through the curriculum . Too often the final year research project is the first time the student really is required to carry out research .Course teams ...institutions need to ensure 'research and inquiry' is a central feature from term one year one.

Focus resources –in particular staff and student time – on selected high impact activities – including on (final year) research projects. That does mean reducing the resources to certain courses by increasing class size and or greater use of digital technology eg MOOCS?

Ensure national and university structures and funding in part bring together teach and research –eg require research funding /policies to include specific requirements/strategies to ensure that undergraduate students benefit from that research

Rethink the form of the final year project. While valuing the traditional 'dissertation' we need to develop new forms of research projects that better meet the needs of many students and society. Such forms include researching in and with community groups, what in the US is called 'the 'scholarship of engagement' ;research based learning that is expressly designed to support future employability ; outputs that value the forms of research that are central to the arts such as painting, musical composition; and what about supporting students working in groups on research issues –arguably that is how in future employment they will carry out research .Also such group research may help staff support such research more readily than the traditional one to one tuition? Note also how internationally many departments /institutions use digital technology to support students publishing their research in undergraduate research journals –and 'here students learn and are assessed in ways that come as close as possible to the experience of academic staff carrying out their disciplinary research.'

This last suggestion of rethinking the form of the dissertation clearly poses problems of ensuring some equivalent assessment standards for all /most such forms of research One response could be to recognize that comparing such research outputs is nigh impossible ...and or not worth pursuing ? Or more productively seek to build on international innovations to develop assessment criteria and practices that seek to resolve these issues? It is also relevant to point to international developments rethinking the form of the doctorate.If that intrigues you google 'professional doctorate' and then relate what you read there to these discussions on undergraduate final year projects.

Those of you who wish to further explore these issues and in particular to see a wide range of international case study examples from course team to institutional strategies are referred to (Healey and Jenkins 2009), (Healey et al 2014) and a wide range of Spanish innovations in (Ferrer et al 2013).

Ferrer V, Carmona M and Soria V (Editors)*El Trabajo de Fin de Grado. Guía para estudiantes, docentes y agentes colaboradores*
Mcgraw Hill 2013

Healey, M. and Jenkins, A. (2009) *Developing undergraduate and inquiry* York: Higher Education Academy. <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/employability/2009-developing-undergraduate-research-and-inquiry>

Healey M, Lannin L, Stibbe A and Derounian J (2013) *Developing and enhancing undergraduate final year projects and dissertations*. York: HE Academy.

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/ntfs/projects/NTFS_Project_Gloucestershire_2010_final.pdf