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An Introduction to Research and your Dissertation

Introduction

Almost everywhere in the English speaking world, and in many other parts as well, it is now the case that students of tourism and related subjects at Master's level are required to produce a dissertation. Very often this is a daunting task for students. It is unlike any assignment that they have had to produce before. It is much longer, requires a good deal of originality, and will almost certainly involve them in the gathering of primary data and hence the use of research methods, which they may know little about and believe that they have never used before.

Students will be required to read more extensively than for other written assignments. The reading will not be confined to one particular narrow theme or topic, as may be the case in relation to an individual assignment, but will be concerned with the wider literature that is relevant to the chosen topic. There will also be the need to read literature on the methodology and techniques to be used to conduct the individual student's research, as well as literature on how to analyse the results of this research.

To reflect the importance of the dissertation, it frequently has double weighting in terms of overall assessment marks and is often represented as a double module and may be worth as much as one third of the total credit points in a Master's course. Therefore, if the taught part of the Master's course is made of eight 15 credit modules (with four modules per semester), the dissertation is often equivalent to four 'normal' taught

modules and is to be completed in the third semester of the overall course programme. The dissertation is the only part of the course concerned solely with research. Additionally, the student is left, to a very great extent, to his or her own devices and works largely alone over several months with only occasional input from a supervisor.

To many students, the structure of the dissertation will seem as if there are several assignments together, not just one, as each chapter will appear to require at least as much time and effort as an individual assignment. As a student, you will be used to a fairly short time frame of just a few weeks to prepare for, write and submit a standard assignment. However, the dissertation will take months to prepare, write and present.

In relation to the dissertation there is almost always a pre-requisite – this is the ‘Research Methods’ module. In many Master’s courses, which are usually made up of related modules, it is unusual to have prerequisite modules. It is often the case that one or more of your taught modules has given you the initial idea for your chosen dissertation topic. One of the reasons that the dissertation is likely to be the last aspect of your dissertation, is that you need time to reflect on your taught modules and your reading, to come up with your topic. However, you may find that you are working on your dissertation, while still being taught other modules on your course.

Also in relation to the dissertation, students are given a supervisor and usually have one-to-one tutorials. For many students this is not just a new experience but a frightening one! A student will usually be required to prepare some written work in relation to their assignment, send this to their supervisor in advance and then be prepared to answer questions about what they have written, without knowing in advance, what those questions will be.

The way in which the dissertation is assessed is different from other assignments in terms of the way it is marked and who is involved. The student may be asked to prepare individual sections or chapters of the dissertation, and then these drafts are ‘marked’ or commented on by the supervisor, before being discussed individually with the student. Assignments linked to taught modules are usually marked by the person who lectures on the module. Under normal circumstances,

the dissertation will be marked by the supervisor, and also at least one other person, based at the same institution, who has not been involved in assisting the student in writing the dissertation. It is also quite likely that an external examiner will be involved. This person is external to the university or college where the student is studying and is involved, not just to mark the dissertation, but to ensure consistency of standards across all universities in that region or country.

Increasingly chapters, or part chapters, of the dissertation are being used in assignments prior to the start, or even within the framework, of the dissertation itself. So a student may be required to produce a draft 'Introduction' chapter as an assignment before they actually start the dissertation. Also students may be required to submit a draft literature review, or in some cases even the detailed plan for the methodology of the dissertation, as assignments, in advance of actually conducting the primary research.

Because of its size and the requirements of energy and time to complete, the dissertation carries far more weight than any other part of the Master's course and frequently amounts to one third of the marks for a Master's course. Failing the dissertation is not an option therefore if a student hopes to gain a Master's qualification.

Why do research?

As Long (2007) indicates, research is what the enquiring mind does. Most people are involved in some form of research almost every day. Finding your way to a new educational establishment by asking directions is research. Asking how much food costs in a restaurant is research. Asking your partner what they want to eat for an evening meal is research. Asking your mother, father, brother or sister what they want as a birthday present is research. However, these activities may not sound like the research that you will conduct in your dissertation. The similarities are that you are posing questions, with a specific purpose in mind and you are asking individuals (respondents) your questions. Responses to your questions will give you information and this may allow you to make decisions and then act on the basis of what you have learned from your questions. In fact, much of your life is taken up with making decisions such as: what to wear before going to study, how to