Chapter 1  Starting your dissertation journey

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What are dissertations?
There are many different types of student academic assignments that are referred to as dissertations. Normally a dissertation is a major piece of independent research-based study undertaken towards the end of a healthcare programme. The nature of dissertations varies both across academic disciplines and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in terms of length, focus and timing. Healthcare professionals are often required to submit an evidence-based practice dissertation as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate programme. A dissertation is often viewed as the culmination of a programme of learning which helps consolidate the student's knowledge, skills and understanding of the research base of the discipline.

Scenario
Sue, a senior staff nurse, has an Advanced Diploma in Nursing and is aware of the move to an all graduate profession for new applicants to nursing. This has prompted her to embark on a ‘top-up degree’ programme at a nearby university to enable her to achieve graduate status. To meet the programme requirements she will need to complete a 10,000 word evidence-based practice dissertation.

Her friend Sam, who is a ward manager, graduated with a Bachelor in Nursing degree ten years earlier and now wants to study for an MSc in Nursing. For a Master’s evidence-based practice dissertation, he will have to write a thesis of 20,000 words in length.

Both are chatting together about the task ahead and their feelings about having to complete such lengthy assignments. Neither is yet completely certain what subject to focus on for their dissertation and both are anxious to begin to understand what will be expected of them. The word length required is perceived to be arduous and daunting.
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First, the learner determines the focus and direction of the work. Second, this work is carried out on an individual basis – although usually with some tutor support and direction provided. Third, there is typically a substantial research component to the project requiring analysis of existing/secondary data. Finally, learners will have a more prolonged engagement with the chosen subject than is the case with ‘standard’ coursework assignments, such as essays or reports, with the work consequently expected to be more ‘in depth’.

(Todd, Bannister and Clegg, 2004:335)

Activity

Before reading further it will be helpful for you to consider what you think an evidence-based practice dissertation is and what you are expected to do.

Talk to others who have completed a dissertation and seek out information from the university where you will study. Try to read sample dissertations. The university where you are studying will normally have a number of examples in its library for you to examine. (The website that accompanies this book hosts a sample top-up degree dissertation. Go to www.wiley.com/go/glasper/nursingdissertation)

Aim to be clear about what is expected of you for your dissertation work.

Dissertations are accepted as a highly valued part of both undergraduate and Master’s degrees. The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmark statements for healthcare programmes substantiate the importance of dissertations. In particular, one of the expectations of the QAA (2001) is that the healthcare professional can contribute to the development and dissemination of evidence-based practice within professional contexts. This is what studying for an evidence-based practice dissertation aspires to achieve for the individual student.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN, 2011) has published its strategy to help nurses improve the use of evidence in practice; it helps them to source information, interpret, synthesise and communicate it. (A full PDF copy of this valuable resource is available from the companion website at www.wiley.com/go/glasper/nursingdissertation.)

Healthcare practitioners need to be able to ask questions about practice, access healthcare research and evidence and report the key ideas and findings...
effectively and accurately to others. Preparing a dissertation encourages practitioners to become more familiar with relevant theoretical knowledge and literature, which promotes a better understanding of the practice topic being explored.

Boud and Costley (2007:119) highlight that the activities undertaken for dissertations, a major aspect of degree studies, relate to both the learning needs of the student, education values and the world of work. Undertaking a dissertation is an indication of the ability of students to manage their own learning (Stephenson, 1998), communicate and make decisions.

The dissertation demonstrates a link between research, personal learning and professional practice. It is as much about the learning gained during the process as the presentation of the final product – the bound dissertation. Production of an evidence-based dissertation is the primary means to achieving an honours degree, or a Master’s degree.

Normally, an undergraduate dissertation will be based on a critique of a small selection of evidence and be applied to one focused aspect of the student’s practice. It will provide insight and hands-on experience of the process of engaging in evidence-based practice and should inform individual or local professional clinical practice.

The requirement of a Master’s programme is that the evidence-based dissertation demonstrates how the student has ‘mastered’ a core aspect of healthcare practice and the related research knowledge and discipline-related content. There is a qualitative difference between the master’s dissertation and the undergraduate dissertation as well as the quantitative difference recognised by the word allowance. This normally relates to the depth, breadth

**Activity**

Access the companion website of this book and read Royal College of Nursing publication, *Finding, using and managing information. Nursing, midwifery, health and social care information literacy competencies* (RCN, 2011).

**Scenario**

Sue is wondering about the difference between the undergraduate dissertation she will have to complete, compared with that which Sam will complete at Master’s level.

SAM: ‘I guess it is more than just a difference in word length! But let’s think about this.’
and analysis demonstrated in the written work. A Master’s dissertation will systematically critique a greater amount of evidence from a range of different sources, demonstrating a significant appreciation of underlying issues and application and impact of the findings for the wider practice context.

Undergraduate evidence-based practice dissertations tend to focus on ‘what’ and ‘where’ questions related to practice, while Master’s level work will move on to asking more analytical questions which focus on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of practice.

QAA subject benchmark statements provide a means of describing standards for the award of qualifications at a given level. The capabilities and attributes of those who undertake dissertations for particular qualifications should demonstrate the appropriate level of study. This is always indicated in the programme dissertation assignment guidelines and the learning outcomes made available to students. More detail on this can be found in Chapter 2.

*Tip:* As well as significant differences in word length and the scope and depth of analysis required, the period available to complete and the expected hours of self-directed study between an undergraduate and postgraduate masters dissertation will differ. Make sure you have explored in detail the dissertation requirements of your programme and use them to help you organise and plan for the task ahead.

**What are the features of a degree education?**

**Scenario**

Sam and Sue are discussing what a degree education offers.

**SAM:** I think I need to be clear about why I am planning to undertake academic study again and what a master’s degree will offer me personally and professionally in terms of development. I want to become a clinical nurse specialist.

**SUE:** I agree. I am already an experienced staff nurse with confidence in my skills but I do want to become a graduate like other health care professionals we work with. I am hoping to learn more about my practice and how to make best decisions for my practice and for patient care.

**SAM:** I think we both want to develop professionally and respond to new challenges, clinically and academically, as well as enhancing our knowledge and skills to further extend our expertise in our field of practice. Is this the basis of undergraduate and postgraduate education?
The goal of graduate education as outlined by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, 2010) standards is to equip nurses with the knowledge, skills and behaviours to respond to changing needs and expectations in healthcare. A key requirement is that graduate nurse’s make person-centred, evidence-based judgements and decisions in practice. Graduate education promotes an evidence-based approach to delivering appropriate healthcare in an effective way to individuals (Pearson and Craig, 2002).

Increasingly, degree programmes are aligned with the achievement of defined ‘graduate attributes’. Many HEIs have identified their own specific graduate attributes. These usually focus on skills which are valuable for, and transferable to, work-based contexts. Graduate attributes support learners in meeting the needs of a complex, challenging and constantly changing environment of employment. They include more than just the academic or professional skills of the discipline and demonstrate skills needed to be independent, autonomous and lifelong learners, which are viewed as important characteristics of being a graduate. Graduate attributes include personal qualities, skills and knowledge gained as a result of engaging in study. They include qualities such as adopting academic approaches to thinking which demonstrate openness to new ways of responding to unfamiliar situations and challenges with intellectual curiosity.

In addition to developing skills in information retrieval and critiquing research evidence, completing a degree equips individuals with highly prized transferable skills, such as problem solving, project management and report writing, which can significantly enhance professional communication and practice. In a study to elucidate research related graduate attributes, Laidlaw, Guild and Struthers (2009) found evidence to support the case for dissertations helping achieve both clinical and research related graduate attributes for medical undergraduates. The attributes included: an inquiring mind, core knowledge, critical appraisal, understanding the evidence base for professional practice, understanding ethics and governance, and an ability to communicate. Each of these graduate attributes could be argued as being relevant for other healthcare professionals.

Completing an honours degree is often a precursor to further academic study, such as a postgraduate Masters or doctoral studies. A Master’s dissertation will build on previous knowledge gained at undergraduate level and develop new understandings and a greater breadth depth of learning. Each stage is part of a progressive development of research knowledge and skills. This may be part of developing a Clinical Academic Career pathway which integrates research and education to improve the use of research, and other evidence, in clinical practice (UKCRC, 2007).
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Features of a dissertation

A dissertation is an extended and substantial piece of work carried out independently. It is common to have a link with a group of peers who are also completing a dissertation with the same submission date and to have a link with a member of the university staff who will supervise and offer academic support. The dissertation is quite different from other assignments in terms of its depth and the length of time engaged with it. While it may be divided into sections or chapters, it needs to demonstrate a coherent and well-structured format which poses a question that is then addressed and answered in relation to a specific practice issue.

The initial choice of topic selected can increase the personal and professional depth of understanding on the subject. Very often the breadth of knowledge may be extended into unexpected areas. For example, a recent dissertation which focused on enhancing the care of people with long term conditions in one NHS Trust led the student to an exploration of concepts of clinical leadership, while another student, also focusing on long term conditions, explored the evidence for promoting approaches to self-care.

Whatever topic is chosen, it is important to remember that sustained motivation to undertake a dissertation requires considerable enthusiasm for both the subject and the process over an extended period.

Scenario

For Sue and Sam, who are both experienced practitioners, the dissertations which they undertake will enable them to select subjects or topics that relate directly to their own practice locations. This enables them to draw on their experience and knowledge of health care practice and patient care and to build on that expertise.

The key features of a dissertation include:

- Title
- Well framed question
- Clear aims and objectives
- Search strategy for best evidence
- Critical appraisal of research or other best evidence
- Discussion of results and implication for practice.
This will all have to be written-up in a readable style, communicating the relevant information and presented in an understandable format according to regulations, and submitted on time.

Undertaking a dissertation will be both challenging and rewarding. In a study examining the student dissertation experience, Harrison and Whalley (2008) found that common difficulties encountered included: deciding on a topic for study, time management, writing up a large dissertation and dealing with stress.

Presenting the result of a study into student’s thoughts of their dissertation experience, Harrison and Whalley (2008:408) provide examples which highlight some of the perceived tensions. The following are examples:

- ‘Felt that I learned as much about myself as I did about the topic.’
- ‘There is no doubting completing my dissertation was one of the most stressful times of my life but at the same time the most rewarding.’
- ‘I enjoyed having the chance to show what I am capable of. I found it very stressful at times, but achieved huge sense of satisfaction when over.’

Producing a dissertation demonstrates and communicates that you have consolidated a range of skills, including intellectual, professional, information seeking, critical analysis and synthesis of knowledge.

### Planning your dissertation – essential considerations

A brief outline on how dissertations are planned is given here; more details are given in Chapter 2.

**Planning your available time**

Some students find the use of Gantt charts helpful (Table 1.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1 Example of a Gantt chart.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Select topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search and select evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critically appraise evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write up chapters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions Discussions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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It is important to be clear about how much time to allocate to each step of the process. Several stages may be undertaken at a time and undertaking a dissertation is not always a linear process.

It is sensible to remember that things do not always run according to plan. Life events can interfere and mean that work is delayed. It makes sense to build in time for some slippage to prevent a last minute panic in meeting the deadline for submission of the dissertation. Do allow time for making final revisions and checking for spelling or other errors.

Begin writing early – produce drafts to show others and get feedback

While the list of things to do indicated above gives an outline of the structure for the written dissertation, careful thought is need about how best to present the final coherent dissertation. Reading other dissertations written by students who have completed similar programmes is always a good resource for considering how to frame your headings, sections and chapters. However, each dissertation is unique and support from a supervisor in interpreting the assignment guidelines to apply to your own evidence based dissertation is always essential.

For example, at times it can be difficult to know where to end the results section and begin the conclusions. It is important to weave all the sections together into the whole, which is the final written dissertation.

It is important to avoid writing too descriptively. Remember you need to adopt an academic approach, demonstrating your ability to think critically and analytically and to synthesise conclusions from all the information you have gathered.

Get support from others

Enlist family and friends to encourage you in keeping on task. Work with peers on the programme who are going through the same experience as you; email them or meet informally to discuss aspects of each other’s work and for mutual support. Take opportunities offered to present your ideas to the programme group or your academic supervisor in order to get supportive feedback. Some universities have special sections of their electronic learning platforms (e.g. Backboard) which feature student chat-rooms where information can be exchanged.

Adopt the help of ‘critical readers’, not necessarily those familiar with your topic, or even with healthcare, who can proofread your writing and check if the structure of your dissertation is coherent and makes sense.

Finally back up everything you save on your computer!

Tip: Buy several (minimum four megabytes) data/memory sticks/USB flash drives to store copies of your work.

Create a folder entitled my dissertation with subfolders for each individual chapter.
Completing your dissertation and gaining a good classification

Because the dissertation at undergraduate or postgraduate level makes a significant contribution in terms of credits gained and to the student’s final classification, it is often an important priority for students to gain a good result.

Make sure you meet the deadlines for submitting the final dissertation for marking and that you are not rushed towards the end. Being short of time can lead to you taking short cuts and, potentially, reduce the time available to complete your writing to the required standard. Remember, time is needed to refine drafts, ensure accurate reference lists, and check for typographical and other errors related to the general presentation before the dissertation is to be bound. Be clear about the written style (font and spacing) and final presentation format required by your university and degree programme.

To achieve a good grade you will need to look at the module assignment guidelines, learning outcomes and marking criteria (Table 1.2). Universities normally explain the basis on which student dissertations are assessed in order to guide student learning and, importantly, to ensure work is marked fairly and consistently. It is very important that as a student you are familiar with the dissertation requirements and marking guidance. Often a module handbook is produced by the university that will give details of the dissertation expectations and the explicit marking criteria by which they will be assessed. This can be discussed with your supervisor at an early stage and as you complete written sections or chapters. Part of your own learning is to

### Scenario

Sue and Sam are wondering what makes an outstanding dissertation and how they can achieve the best possible marks.

**SUE:** What do you think the markers will be looking for Sam?

**SAM:** Well, I think they will want to see more than five 2000 word essays, Sue. At the moment you seem to have five chapters written at separate times. It will need to be coherent and feature only relevant information.

**SUE:** I guess I need to make the chapters flow into each other. The difficulty is knowing what to leave out. I seem to be well over the word limit.

**SAM:** Well, we could read each other’s work and offer some feedback, then meet with our supervisors and check if we are doing as well as we hope. At the moment I seem to be writing too descriptively.

The companion website at www.wiley.com/go/glasper/nursingdissertation hosts a very good example of an undergraduate dissertation.
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Table 1.2  Example of possible evidence-based dissertation marking criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Relative importance (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentation (structure, language, referencing)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract (accuracy, relevance and clarity)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction (background to project, issues to be addressed, background reading, framing of the question)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification and selection of best evidence (retrieval of evidence, search strategy and terms, rationale for criteria to select or reject evidence, audit trail)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical appraisal of evidence (rationale for selection of critiquing framework/tool, judgement of evidence, rigour, addresses the question, research understanding)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions and implications for practice (conclusions well drawn from selected evidence, skills of analysis and evaluation, relevance to practice, application to practice)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion and plan for implementation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

develop your skills in self-assessment so that you can recognise the standard of work which you are capable of and need to aim for to ensure the desired grade.

For Sue and Sam, who are both experienced practitioners, the dissertations which they undertake will enable them to select subjects or topics that relate directly to their own practice environments. This enables them to draw on their experience and knowledge of healthcare practice and patient care and to build on that expertise.

References


Further reading


For further resources for this chapter visit the companion website at www.wiley.com/go/glasper/nursingdissertation