

Student Projects in the Context of Restricted Learning Activities

Blended Learning Projects Oversight Group Recommendations

Membership of the Group:

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Introduction

Research projects are often the most exciting and challenging aspects of degree programmes for both students and supervisors alike. This Oversight Group initially identified some major issues arising from the impact of Covid 19 restrictions on student projects. Following on from this, we went on to discuss the means which help supervisors and students to address these problems and thereby provide learning experiences that retain the high standards and values of the projects we have delivered in the past. In this document, which should be used in conjunction with the [FBMH online blended learning strategy](#), we aim to provide succinct guidance points that will help those concerned at either undergraduate or postgraduate level to meet this goal.

1. Designing your Project

The Importance of having a Backup Project

- Restrictions on the type of activities (experimental, laboratory, data gathering) central to many projects may be imposed at any time during the next academic year and are likely to be in force during the first semester. It is therefore essential that all Supervisors have a backup project, or components of a project, already planned right at the outset, i.e. when project titles are offered and made available to students.
- Programme Directors and Leads: Ensure that provision of backup projects is included in the guidance provided to all Project Supervisors as part of their responsibilities.
- Project Supervisors: It is important to design a backup project that poses intellectual and research challenges, equivalent to those central to a high standard project delivered in previous years. Supervisors should ensure that backup projects still deliver the required ILOs which are consistent with those for the programme or unit, or, in situations where individual projects also have their own ILO's, they are at the appropriate level. (See Below).

Using alternative sources of data

- If it is not possible for the student to collect data directly from human subjects or to perform laboratory methods directly, then using readily available datasets is a suitable alternative.
- You may have already collected such data for another purpose, or examined the possibility of sharing data collected by a colleague. Acquiring data from online sources is another acceptable alternative, e.g.
 - <https://www.proteinatlas.org/>
 - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/>
 - <http://proteomecentral.proteomexchange.org/cgi/GetDataset>
 - <http://circadb.hogeneschlab.org/>

- If you have datasets which can be used by others for project analysis, please contact teresa.m.smith@manchester.ac.uk, as you will be able to contribute to an FBMH resource, to help support Projects across the Faculty in these difficult circumstances.
- It is important to note that pilot Effective Practice Hubs are being set up within the Faculty including one on Research Methods Hub. This community of practice is gathering case studies from members on a variety of teaching topics on research methods. The group keeps in touch via this [Yammer Group](#) (just request to join) or check out the teaching case studies shared so far on the main website here - <https://effectivepractice.manchester.ac.uk/> .
- If you are offering a project which would normally have involved behavioural research laboratory methods requiring large numbers of subjects, this need can be met with appropriate software, for example Gorilla (www.gorilla.sc). There is considerable expertise in the use of such software throughout the Faculty e.g. Division of Neuroscience and Experimental Psychology (contact: George.farmer@manchester.ac.uk)

Ensuring the Quality of your Research Project

- It is essential that your Backup Project emphasises the analytical aspects of research including literature review, analysis of methodologies, interpretation of data and discussion of results within the context of current and previous knowledge. The objectives must reflect this. These transferable skills are of the utmost importance for a student's development even though they may not have collected the data themselves.
- Supervisors should ensure that backup projects still deliver the ILOs required for projects and are accompanied by a thorough explanation of the aims of the Backup Project, so that the student understands that they will be participating in work at the same level of a Project delivered in previous years.
- A well designed Backup Project may provide the basis for a presentation at a Meeting or a short publication, and this benefit should be made clear to the student.

2. The Student's Perspective

- Central to the success of Projects delivered under these conditions, is to provide your student with a clear explanation of the situation, the restrictions under which you may be working and that it may not be possible to provide the laboratory experience, or interaction with participants that would normally be the case.
- It is also crucial to go through the ILO's carefully with them, so that they are clear about the learning outcomes and understand the importance of the skills that they will be learning and the intellectual challenge that they will be facing e.g. high level analysis of the literature, thorough analysis and exploration of the data, discussions of these outcomes in the context of current and previous knowledge.
- It is vital to emphasise the value of these transferable skills, which are as, if not more important than collecting data and results.

3. Communications between Students and Supervisors

- Agree expectations and ground rules regarding regularity and timing of meetings at the start of the project. This requirement is often included in the guidance for Project Supervisors and Students available through the respective programmes, and it is particularly important not to neglect this under the current circumstances, when normal activities can easily become disrupted.

- It may not be possible to meet face-to-face, even though Supervisors may be physically present for some laboratory work or teaching. It is therefore essential to establish a routine of online meetings, usually through Zoom (recommended by the University).
- Ensure that you are familiar with using Zoom for this purpose - [Zoom](#) (screen sharing, whiteboard etc) and that your student has facilities for these meetings. Otherwise, find an alternative platform e.g. WhatsApp, or conduct meetings by phone. The medium is not so important, but the contact with the student is key.
- Manage your student's expectations, for example it may not be possible to provide a detailed response immediately to their email message, but it is helpful to reply with a brief holding email, explaining that you are busy, but will be able to respond in, for example, 3 days. Students will accept such a response, which is much more helpful than no response at all.
- Although you may be meeting online, it is vitally important to provide helpful and high standard feedback, observing the feedback structure "[rules](#)", indicating what the student has done well, what needs attention and a clear brief summary action plan at the end.
- Providing comprehensive feedback on a project report in a timely manner is often time consuming; one possibility is to set up a Zoom session just for yourself, screen share the student's document and add your comments as you go along verbally, while recording the Zoom session. All you need to do is to send the student the recording. This has already been tried in other Universities with much success <https://library.iated.org/view/ROSS2019INC>.
- **Supporting struggling students.** This is an important issue which must be addressed. There are a variety of reasons why students may be in difficulties during their research project. Although it is not the Supervisor's role to investigate them, it is essential that such students are referred to the appropriate Teams and agencies within the programme that can provide support and expert guidance. Key to this is to recognise "**Red Flags**" e.g. **attendance i.e. missing two scheduled supervisory meetings, non-engagement, not responding to your advice, late completion of documents.** If you experience one or more of these, especially missing two scheduled supervisory meetings, refer the student immediately either to the student support office or to the project unit coordinator.

FUTURE OUTCOMES FROM THE BLENDED LEARNING PROJECTS OVERSIGHT GROUP

The Group as a whole wished to ensure that student experience was maintained when they undertook Projects, even though significant amendments may have been made to them. They were keen to follow up the experiences of both Supervisors and Students under these circumstances and were interested in participating in further Group meetings during the next academic year to discuss progress and develop any further appropriate guidance if required.