

Action Research: Implementing a Strategy to Improve Post-Graduate Student Dissertation Evaluation & Feedback

Naren D. Selvaratnam¹

Executive Summary

The following action research introduces deficits associated with dissertation evaluation of a masters in psychology program at a higher education institute in Colombo, Sri Lanka. It was identified that the chosen institute does not provide proper instructions and training for the academic staff to effectively assess post-graduate student dissertations. This has resulted in multiple score disputes and concerns over the dissertation moderation processes. Thus, the author has proposed a comprehensive strategy outlining an effective training program to support the academics of the institute to adopt a holistic assessment criteria against the existing rigid analytic criteria to help promote impartial and reason-based grades for students justifiable at external verification. This research may be of significance as it demonstrates the mechanisms involved in improving academic processes in a university. Further, this paper can be used as a guiding document to conduct future action research at university settings in Sri Lanka.

Key words: Dissertations, Holistic Assessment Criteria, Action Research

¹Naren Selvaratnam is the managing director of Deep Haven Counseling, Colombo, Sri Lanka and he is also a senior lecturer at Southern Institute of Education & Management, Galle, Sri Lanka. The following research was conducted during his post-master degree at the Department of Leadership Education at the Winona State University, Minnesota, USA.

Situation Analysis

The chosen higher education institute is located in the heart of Colombo, Sri Lanka. The institution offers post-graduate psychology programs affiliated with a University in England. These programs are 1-year in length that adopt a cohort approach. During the final semester, the students should conduct a mandatory research project and submit a dissertation as partial requirements for the degree of MSc in Psychology.

A group of academics with a vested interest in research conduct the assessment process for submitted student dissertations. Each dissertation is assessed twice by two academics. This is a blind marking process, where both markers assess students' work without having access to each other's feedback. The program coordinator considers the average of two assessors as the final score for a given dissertation.

As per the policy of the affiliated foreign university, the marking should be done as objectively as possible. Further, the university states that marks from two assessors for a specific dissertation should not have a difference exceeding 10%. The assessors are always requested to utilize the grading rubric for every dissertation. However, every semester more than 20% of the dissertations have major disputes in agreed scoring. There are instances where the discrepancy of scores is more than 40%.

This problem is twofold. Firstly, a student who should be given merit may be given a normal pass as the scoring of the second assessor is below 40. In such situations, a moderator from the university decides the final score for the dissertation. However, based on personal observations, the moderator's scores are often highly affected by the assessor who has given a lower score. Thus, this process of solving disputes in scoring with a third party is often unfair to the student.

Secondly, this raises questions about the assessor's ability to objectively assess a dissertation. As the coordinators of the post-graduate program reason, the majority of the staff is new to academia and has trouble being objective about student work. There were instances where moderators from the university have found assessors deliberately reducing marks for a dissertation when the student has produced an argument that contradicts the assessor's personally held beliefs. In a report produced by the affiliated university in 2017, the expertise of some of the assessors in assessing student work was questioned directly. The report further noted that the feedback given to students is unsatisfactory and contains no assistance for the student to develop the work in a re-submission. The comments also highlighted some of the assessor's inability to critically reason why a particular score is assigned for a specific dissertation.

As the coordinators of the chosen institute opine, most assessors utilize subjective intuition when awarding marks without really using the grading rubric. It was also found that some assessors themselves have not conducted adequate research and student supervision. Further, some assessors have awarded significantly higher scores to their own supervisees. Overall, these problems indicate the necessity for a staff-training program for the new academic staff to improve dissertation assessments. The necessity for this was identified in the summer of 2018. However, a comprehensive training program is yet to be established.

Literature Review

As explained in the previous section, a majority of the problems in the institute stem from novice academics. The remainder of the problems is due to the rigid analytic grading rubric (Appendix I) of the affiliated university. A combination of both these reasons hinders the capacity of the lecturers to be objective and consistent in assessing student dissertations.

As Rowntree (1987) describes, skepticism is one of the reasons that disrupts the ability of the assessors to be objective. Skepticism associated with assessing may stem from a lack of experience in academic assessments. Thus, novice assessors should carefully utilize either holistic or analytic assessment criteria. As noted earlier, poor feedback for dissertations is one of the concerns at the institute and this makes it difficult for assessors to rationalize a score given for a particular dissertation. As Pathirage et al. (2005) opine, a holistic method, as opposed to the current analytic assessment criteria of the institute, would assist the assessors in being more flexible, and rational in making the overall score for a dissertation. Moreover, analytic grading criteria are standardized ways of assessing student work. As Webster et al. (2000) reason, a dissertation is a unique experience for every student and carries far more individual input, as it is an independent work of students. Therefore, it is unfair to assess such student work through standard criteria. Thus, holistic assessment criteria are suggested as opposed to analytic assessment criteria.

Further, a general timespan for assessing a single dissertation should be determined. As Pathirage et al. (2005) reason, the time invested in assessing a dissertation is inversely related to the grade awarded. Most novice assessors demonstrate a higher propensity to spend more time on marking a single dissertation; and also, tend to re-visit already assessed dissertations. This negatively affects students' grades, also makes the assessor fatigued. Assessor's fatigue results in more variability in the quality of the assessment (Hand, Clews, 2000).

As the novice assessors are encouraged to utilize a fixed period on a dissertation, they should also be encouraged to utilize the grading rubric at all times. As Balla and Boyle (1994) explains, one of the reasons why the assessors do not use the rubric appropriately is due to lack of comprehension of the rubric. Thus, when making holistic assessment criteria for the institute, every assessor should be included in the process of designing it. This improves their understanding of the components of a dissertation and also enhances their ownership of the designed criteria (Balla, Boyle, 1994). Both these processes improve the quality of the assessment and the consistency between each assessor.

Once this is established, the quality of the provision of feedback can be improved. In the British education system, dissertations are assessed through a double-blind process (Appendix II). A senior academic will further discuss the marks of the double-blind marking process at an exam board before finalizing the grade for a selected dissertation. British exam boards are stressful and the exam board environment often intimidates novice academics. As a result of this, on the one hand, some assessors become extremely defensive in the assessment process by refraining from giving extremely high or low marks (Pathirage et al. 2005). On the other hand, some assessors provide marks closer to an average, which is known as the game theory (Pathirage et al. 2005). Both these processes have serious repercussions on the student's grade. As suggested earlier, one of the ways of boosting assessors' confidence and consistency in grading a dissertation is through the enhancement of ownership in carefully designed holistic assessment criteria.

Further, a supervisory academic panel (dissertation supervisory panel) should be implemented and should overlook the grading of novice academics until they reach the threshold of confidence. For instance, some assessors find it difficult to appreciate opposing views coming from a student. At times, some assessors reward extra marks for selected students. Both of these instances display the assessor's inability to be objective in the assessment process. As mentioned earlier, through enhancement of ownership in carefully designed holistic assessment criteria, the assessors could be further motivated to be objective and fair in the process of assigning a final grade. Further, the dissertation supervisory panel could conduct a workshop for all the lecturers on dissertation marking once the aforementioned holistic assessment criteria are established (Pathirage et al. 2005). This helps the supervisory panel to understand whether the implemented principles, policies, and regulations are working well.

Strategic Plan

In the proceeding section, the author explains a strategic plan to conduct a training program for the academic staff of the institute to effectively assess post-graduate student dissertations. To enable this, first the author has identified four measurable objectives. The method of achieving each objective is also elaborated. Further, this action research demonstrates the allocation of responsibilities and accountabilities should thereby other training programs of similar nature in the institute in the future.

Objective 1: To develop holistic assessment criteria as opposed to rigid analytic criteria, with 100% of the assessor participation in the development process.

To achieve objective #1, all the assessors of dissertations, including novices and veterans will be asked to participate to develop holistic assessment criteria to evaluate dissertations. An institution-wide announcement will be made, and the assessment criteria will be developed within a chosen date. All the assessors are required to provide the responses and feedback and mutually agreed criteria will be developed.

Objective 2: To establish an institution wide policy on an agreed time period to assess a dissertation in an attempt to reduce existing 20% of score disputes.

To achieve objective #2, responses of all the assessors will be sought to determine the average time taken to assess a dissertation. To discuss this, all the assessors are required to attend the meeting mentioned in objective #1.

Objective 3: To establish a dissertation supervisory panel to assess objectivity and rationale behind awarded scores by assessors in an attempt to reduce the existing 20% of score disputes.

To achieve objective #3, a panel consisting of the program coordinator, research methodology instructor, and the senior academic will be considered. The panel will supervise the assessment process of every assessor once objectives #1 and #2 are met. The panel will provide constructive feedback for the assessors to develop the dissertation evaluation process.

Objective 4: To implement an institution-wide policy on the provision of bi-annual training on the holistic assessment of dissertations for novice assessors by the dissertation supervisory panel in an attempt to reduce the existing 20% of score disputes.

To achieve objective #4, the panel identified in objective #3 will conduct trainings twice a year. To do this, existing problems encountered by the assessors will be obtained via e-mail. The panel will address the identified assessors' problems in the training sessions.

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, responsibilities and accountabilities can be tabulated as follows.

Table 1

Responsibilities and Accountabilities Allocation for Strategic Plan Implementation

Objective	Task	Responsibility	Timeline
To develop holistic assessment criteria as opposed to a rigid analytic criteria with 100% of the assessor participation in the development process.	Selecting a date for the development of the holistic assessment criteria.	Director of Academics & Quality Assurance	June 2022
	An institution wide announcement will be made where all the assessors will be asked to participate in the development of the holistic assessment criteria.	Director of Academics & Quality Assurance	May 2022
	Developing a mutually agreed holistic assessment criteria.	All the assessors in the faculty	July 2022
To establish an institution wide policy on an agreed time period to assess a dissertation in an attempt to reduce existing 20% of score disputes.	Based on the chosen date of objective one, feedback of all the assessors will be sought to determine the average time required to assess a single piece of dissertation (Survey 1).	Course coordinator received information and finds the average time taken	July 2022
		Director of Academics & Quality Assurance makes the final decision	July 2022

To establish a dissertation supervisory panel to assess objectivity and rationale behind awarded scores by assessors in an attempt to reduce existing 20% of score disputes.	A meeting with the course coordinator, research methods instructor, and the senior most academic of the faculty will be conducted, and the dissertation supervisor panel will be established.	Director Academics and Quality Assurance	August 2022
To implement an institution wide policy on the provision of bi-annual training on holistic assessment of dissertations for novice assessors by the dissertation supervisory panel in an attempt to reduce the existing 20% of score disputes.	The dissertation supervisory panel will conduct an institution wide survey to comprehend assessment related needs of the assessors (Survey 2).	Dissertation Supervisory Panel	August 2022
	Based on the obtained feedback, bi-annual training programs will be held.	Dissertation Supervisory Panel	September 2022
	The panel designs the training programs based on the responses obtained in the institution wide survey.	Dissertation Supervisory Panel	August 2022

To further assist reaching identified objectives by designated individuals for each responsibility, a budget needs to be planned. The budget should clearly outline resources required to keep the process transparent. Further, keeping costs as low as possible is appreciated in a country like Sri Lanka where inflation is continuously on the rise. This budgeting process is displayed in table 2.

Table 2
Resources Required and Proposed Budget

Resources	Cost Per Resource	Total
Survey 1	0 LKR	
Survey 2	0 LKR	
Work papers (A4)	2000 LKR	
Stationary equipment	2000 LKR	
Training content booklets	20000 LKR	
Printed new marking criteria	200 LKR	
Office space and presentation facilities	0 LKR 0 USD	
		20200 LKR

Upon completing the required training, the above-identified objectives can be measured to assess the effectiveness and the degree to which each is achieved.

- The achievement of objective #1 will be determined by calculating the percentage of assessors who participated in the development of the newer assessment criteria.
- The achievement of objective #2 will be determined by calculating the average time taken to assess a dissertation based on the numeric output provided by assessors for a survey. The effectiveness of objective #2 on assessors could be calculated through the prevalence of marker disputes.
- The achievement of objective #3 will be determined by demonstrating the reduction in the existing 20% assessor disputes.
- The achievement of objective #4 will be determined by conducting bi-annual training programs with 100% of the assessors and through a reduction in the existing 20% assessor disputes.

Conclusion

The above-suggested plan should be applied in the institute to observe its positive outcomes. The same process can be adopted by other institutes to improve the similar academic process in respective universities and institutes. Thus, this paper displays the effective application of action research to enhance the quality and the accuracy of dissertation marking in the identified institute for future cohorts. Further, this paper can be used as a guide to help other academics implement similar strategies in one's departments.

References

- Balla, J., Boyle, P. (1994). Assessment of student performance: a framework for improving practice. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 19(1), 17-28.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0260293940190102>
- Hands, L., Clews, D. (2000). Marking the difference: an investigation of the criteria used for assessing undergraduate dissertations in a business school. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 25, 5-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/713611416>
- Pathirage, C.P., Haigh, R., Amaratunga, R, D, G., Baldry, D., Green, C. (2005). Improving quality and consistency of dissertation assessment: A case study, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 15(3), 271-286.
- Rowntree, D. (1987). *Assessing students: how shall we know them?* London:Kogan-Page.
- Webster, F., Pepper, D., Jenkins, A. (2000). Assessing the undergraduate dissertations, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 25(1), 71-80.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930050025042>

Appendix I (Grading Rubric)

The grading rubric of the institute is analytic in nature. The grading rubric contains the following sections. The marks awarded for each section is given below.

1. Abstract (3)
2. Introduction & Literature Review (9)
3. Methodology (8)
4. Results (8)
5. Discussion (9)
6. General (3)
7. Overall comments

Assessors should provide a score for each component in comparison to the score assigned for each component in the rubric. This is a standard method, and guidelines of determining a score within a given component is not established. Thus, it is based far too on impression formation. This method is neither very standard, nor very holistic.

Appendix II (Double blind marking)

The institute uses a double-blind marking process. In this process, the assessor has no previous information on the student except for the dissertation. Also, the student has no information about the assessor as well. Further, two assessors will assess each dissertation independently. The assessors should not discuss about the dissertations, as it would interfere with the final grade. The final grade for a given dissertation will be determined by taking the average of the two assessors.

© The Author(s). 2022. The following article is published and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Under this license, anyone may access, copy, distribute, or reuse this article if the author(s) and the original source are properly cited.

Suggested reference:

Selvaratnam, N. D. (2022). Action Research: Implementing a Strategy to Improve Post-Graduate Student Dissertation Evaluation & Feedback, *Eagan Journal of Contemporary Research*, 1(1), 36 - 43.