



Critical events in bachelor's and taught master's dissertation writing: a case study and model

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ABSTRACT

Dissertation writing at bachelor's and master's levels is a process presenting challenges that must be overcome for the successful completion of the degree programmes. Factors such as unclear expectations and the assumption of competence can generate situations jeopardising successful dissertation outcomes. This study applies an instrumental case study approach to chart the lived experience of one student's dissertation writing journeys at undergraduate and taught master's levels. It uses interviews, journey plots and email correspondence to provide insights identifying factors that feed into critical event scenarios during the writing process. Following thematic analysis, the themes Supervision, Feedback and University Regulations were identified and discussed in relation to the emotions in the journey plots of the two dissertations. A categorisation of critical event factors is provided and used for a tentative model of a critical event scenario in an attempt to contribute useful insights into dissertation writing pedagogy and related institutional policies.


Waqt il-proċess tal-kitba ta' dissertazzjonijiet fuq livell ta' Baċcellerat jew Masters, l-istudenti jaffaċċjaw sfidi li jridu jissuperaw biex jispicċaw il-kors. Jista' jkollhom problemi serji biex ilestu l-kitba tad-dissertazzjoni u jgħaddu mill-kors jekk l-aspettazzjonijiet tagħna ma jkunux ċari jew jekk nassumu li l-istudenti diġà għandhom il-kapaċitajiet meħtieġa biex jagħmlu xogħolhom. Dan l-istudju juża l-ġrajijiet ta' studenta li kitbet dissertazzjoni tal-Baċcellerat u wara dissertazzjoni għall-kors ta' taught masters biex jitfa' dawl fuq il-proċess tal-kitba f'dawn il-livelli. Nużaw intervisti, plotts tal-proċess tal-kitba u korrispondenza bl-email biex nagħtu indikazzjonijiet ta' ġrajijiet kritiċi waqt il-proċess tal-kitba. Analizi tematika wriet li t-temi prinċipali li ħarġu mill-istudju kienu dawk tas-Supervizzjoni, Feedback u r-Regolamenti tal-Università. Dawn iddiskutejniehom flimkien mal-emozzjonijiet li deheru fil-plotts tal-proċess tal-kitba. Għarna f'kategoriji l-fatturi li jagħtu xi ħjiel li jista' jkun ta' siwi għall-pedagoġija tal-kitba tad-dissertazzjonijiet u l-policies istituzzjonali relatati u hloqna mudell tentattiv ta' ġrajja kritika.

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1. Introduction

The ‘diverse cohort’ (Coneyworth et al. 2020, 264) of graduates in master’s-level programmes a steady increase globally over recent years. Statistics published by the Council of Graduate Schools has shown as many as three-fourths of graduates from the US and international member universities taking up postgraduate studies (Okahana, Augustine, and Zhou 2018). Similarly, HESA (the Higher Education Statistics Agency) in the UK has reported an increase of 171,810 (82%) taught master’s students over a five-year span from 2019/2020 to 2023/2024 (HESA 2025).

As research in this area also increases, there are indications that postgraduate studies at both master’s and doctoral levels represent a major educational challenge, involving adjustments beyond the educational sphere that prove highly demanding, as students progress into adulthood and their lives become more complex (Tobbell, O’Donnell, and Zammit 2010). Within the educational environment itself, Bamber et al. (2019) found master’s students and academics struggling to fulfil unclear expectations, with students reporting lack of confidence in the seven skills identified as constituent aspects of ‘Mastersness’. Despite this, research indicates there is a perception of ‘assumed competence’ (Tobbell and O’Donnell 2013) in postgraduate programmes at all levels. Academic structures and staff tend to operate on the presumption that, by virtue of their graduate status, postgraduate students come readily equipped with the skills needed to pursue their studies (Tobbell, O’Donnell, and Zammit 2010), thereby underplaying the qualitative leap in academic skills underlying higher academic expectations, as confirmed by Pearce (2023) in her study on master’s students. Bunney’s (2017) case studies at master’s level in Australia indicate this perception of assumed competence as wide-ranging.

A consequence of the assumption of competence is the expectation of independence. Studies considering insights from students and staff highlight conflicting perceptions about the notion of academic independence at postgraduate level. Student perceptions indicate that the practicalities of achieving a ‘balance between direction and independence’ (Drennan and Clarke 2009, 485) in taught master’s programmes are not being satisfactorily met. The reflection that independence means ‘being left alone to struggle’ (Tobbell and O’Donnell 2013, 1058) is a reality that postgraduate students stand a good chance of experiencing, despite the increased need for support for students moving into different disciplines, or furthering studies after a substantial time lag (Tobbell and O’Donnell 2013). This scenario is reflected in Neupane Bastola and Hu’s (2021a) work on supervision at master’s level in Nepal, which paints a vivid picture of students struggling through postgraduate studies constantly chasing supervisors for advice and support.

Some attempts have been made to formalise support for students undergoing postgraduate study, particularly in taught programmes. The benefits of the *Transition In* framework, a tripartite programme initiated in the UK aiming to support postgraduate students’ academic skills, collaborative teamwork and professional identity, have been analysed by White (2024). Results showed most students appreciated content revision sessions. However, library workshops preparing students for research and academic writing at postgraduate level were not as well met, with 44% neutral responses and 17% disagreeing the sessions were beneficial (709). This result suggests these skills require particular attention, possibly by dedicated academic writing specialists as far as the academic writing component is concerned.

Evidence suggests that skills related to academic writing are highly valued in academia. Graduate programme directors and graduate deans have rated written communication skills as an important factor determining the potential for success, closely following analytical and critical thinking, particularly in the softer disciplines (Okahana, Augustine, and Zhou 2018, 12). There is therefore considerable risk in assuming students come readily equipped with the higher-order academic writing skills necessary for fulfilling postgraduate course programme requirements. Furthermore, the overall picture of research in this area suggests creating a balance between providing necessary support whilst guiding students towards academic independence is one of the more demanding tasks academic staff and institutional policy-makers face, with support for academic writing taking on an important role in this scenario.

Two issues seem to be key to the provision of adequate writing support at postgraduate level: institutional policies and the role of the supervisor, with clear instances of overlap between the two. Harwood and Petrić's (2017) case studies of supervision at master's level include a case where departmental policy dictated 'supervisors weren't allowed to read anything other than the results chapter' (184). Another case documented a restriction limiting the number of meetings students could have with their supervisors. Overall, the studies also indicated a broad spectrum of supervisor support, varying from very supportive to behaviour indicative of neglect, which suggests no benchmark standards are in place.

A prominent feature of supervisor support is feedback, particularly at the writing up stage. As Chugh, Macht and Harreveld's (2022) study on supervision at both master's and doctoral level indicates, feedback is 'at the mercy of research supervision' (683), therefore if it happens to be inadequate, there is normally no fallback option to set things right. Research on postgraduate supervisory feedback does not paint a reassuring picture. Chugh, Macht and Harreveld's review identified five related umbrella problems: feedback content, the way feedback is given, the students, the supervisors and divergent expectations. In summary, students' expectations are not met when feedback is not detailed enough, or indicative enough of problematic issues, and when it does not point at possible solutions. Lack of timeliness and lack of balance between positive and negative feedback are also problematic issues. The effect of problematic feedback on student wellbeing is reflected in Neupane Bastola and Hu's (2021b) study on supervisory comments on master's thesis drafts. The study found that students often receive negative feedback they do not perceive as constructive, generating emotional lows and undermining self-esteem.

It may be that some issues related to feedback are the result of the problem of assumed competence discussed earlier. Comments in Neupane Bastola and Hu's (2021b) study reveal supervisor frustration at perceived 'basic' incompetence. One student commented, 'They easily criticize our work and say, 'Can't you even do this!'' (417); and another supervisor was reported as exclaiming 'You do not understand even minor things' (417). It is difficult to gauge whether the evaluative judgement reflected in such comments is warranted, but such insights highlight the issue of how feedback should develop into a higher-order postgraduate level gradually empowering students to assume greater confidence, freedom and independence in writing up research.

Gaining insights into students' lived experiences as postgraduate writers is vital to furthering understanding of critical elements feeding into the dissertation writing

process. We introduce here a critical events approach to the analysis of the dissertation writing process in undergraduate and taught master's programmes. The study aims to chart the critical events shaping one student's undergraduate and taught postgraduate dissertation writing process, leading to a categorisation of critical event factors and a tentative model of a critical event scenario. Our understanding of critical events is based on two studies: Woods' (1993) early paper on critical events in education, which provides a basic definition characterising critical events as those bringing about 'radical change' (355); and García-Montoya and Mahoney's (2023) recent study on critical event analysis in case study research, which focuses on their causality in relation to a specific outcome, in our case the completion of the dissertation. We will consider writing in its broader context to include underlying issues affecting the production and outcome of the dissertation. We believe the study will contribute useful insights into dissertation writing pedagogy and related institutional policies at the relevant levels.

2. Methodology

2.1. The participant

The participant, referred to by the pseudonym Amy, is a university student who read for an honours bachelor's degree in Human Language Technology in her home country, followed the same year by a master's degree in Language Technology at another European university. She is bilingual in her native language and English, the medium of instruction at both universities. She was first contacted by the researchers to participate in the EU funded network project COST Action IS1401, and gave her first interview as a participant for that Action. The two subsequent interviews were conducted as follow-up interviews for the current study, which included all three interviews.

2.2. Research design and theoretical underpinnings

An instrumental case study was chosen as a methodological approach since it enables general understanding of an issue through investigation of a particular case (Stake 1995, 3). The study focuses on lived experience to highlight Amy's perception of the factors influencing her writing at critical periods during her bachelor's and master's dissertation writing journeys. Amy was chosen as a case study in her role as a student reading for a taught master's degree. Her case comprises two bounded units (Creswell and Poth 2018), her bachelor's and master's dissertation writing journeys, which allows for the comparison of critical events within the study.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The primary data consisted of three online interviews averaging 90 min each between the interviewee and the first author conducted over the period documented by the study: the first on 20 September 2017, shortly after completion of the undergraduate degree; the second in April 2020, an interim interview designed to bring insights into the prolonged writing period of the master's dissertation; and the third on 3 October 2021, upon its completion. These interviews provided the data for the study, together with three

journey plots drawn during the interviews as a graphic account of the emotional highs and lows discussed, and a superimposed learning curve documenting academic progress over the periods in question. These data were supplemented by relevant details from email correspondence between the interviewee and the first author. All interviews and correspondence took place in English as the interviewee's preferred choice.

Interviews were transcribed, segmented for topic changes and coded thematically in NVivo. A list of fourteen themes drawn from word frequencies in the combined interview data was used as the coding scheme. This was refined when the authors jointly coded the first interview. The second and third interviews were coded separately and an average of 86% inter-rater reliability was reached as computed from code comparison percentages in NVivo. This was considered satisfactory. Three major themes were subsequently identified: Supervision, Feedback and University Regulations, based on their close relationship to the aim of the study and their importance at critical periods during the dissertation writing process. The analysis aligns a thematic approach to a critical events approach, the latter as outlined by Webster and Mertova (2007).

2.4. Ethics approval

Informed consent was given for the initial interview within the COST project and the two follow-up interviews. It was explained that the current study would be a follow-up to the former COST study and that the interview data for the first study would also constitute data for the current study. The University of _____ Research Ethics Committee granted ethics approval for both studies. All potentially identity-revealing details were anonymised.

3. Results

This section presents a chronological factual account of Amy's bachelor's and master's dissertation writing processes. Although the two experiences are clearly connected through a common writer, they have clear start and end points and separate end products and can therefore be considered two successive writing journeys for the purposes of comparison and analysis. The details of the journeys were collated from the interview data (including the journey plots Amy drew during the interviews) and correspondence with Amy through email. Contextual details will be given in line with Connelly and Clandinin's (1990, 8) understanding of the central role contextual elements play in narrative accounts of lived experiences.

3.1. Amy's bachelor's dissertation journey

Amy wrote her bachelor's dissertation between December 2016 and May 2017 as part of her honours degree in Human Language Technology at a university in her home country in Europe. She was limited in her choice of topic following communication problems with her department when she was on an Erasmus exchange at the time the choice of topics took place. She met her supervisor fortnightly face-to-face or over Skype and felt she had her full support even when the latter was in hospital. Amy's supervisor gave her advice about the methodology during the preparation and later stages of the

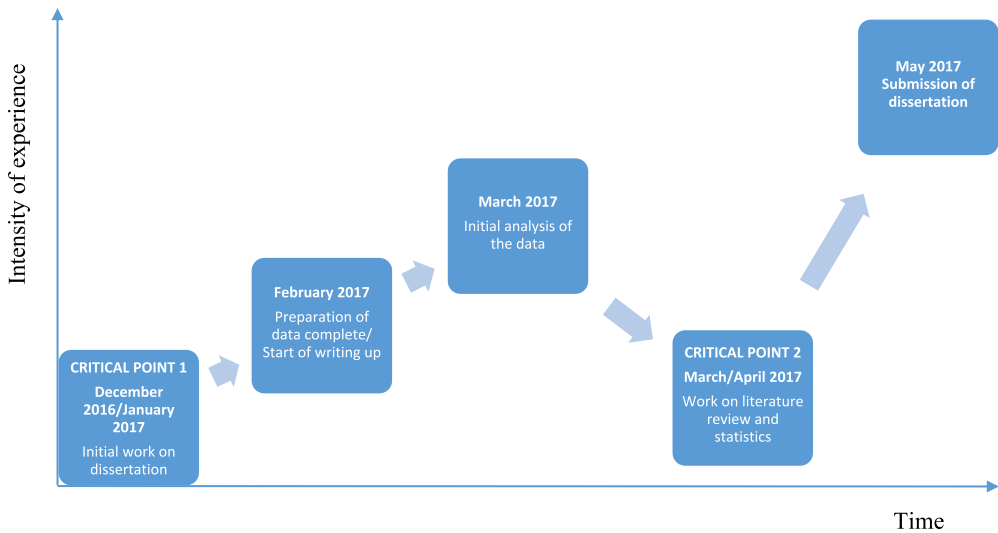


Figure 1. Amy's bachelor's dissertation writing journey.

study, and advice and feedback during the writing-up stage including at the level of editing and proofreading. Supervisor support was crucial when Amy experienced an initial low during December 2016 and January 2017 because she could not understand the rationale behind her work, and as a result 'felt very lost' and felt she 'was doing everything mechanically'. Another source of frustration was the lack of a clear submission deadline. By February, her initial problem was resolved and her data collection complete. At the time, Amy also felt she had the support of fellow students and friends. This positive trend continued through March and the initial analysis of her data. Work on the literature review and statistics, however, proved problematic, also because Amy felt pressed for time at this point. Support from her supervisor was again available, and once these obstacles were overcome, Amy experienced constant progress and was successful in submitting her dissertation on 15 May 2017. [Figure 1](#) sketches a timeframe for the main events in Amy's bachelor's dissertation writing journey.

3.2. Amy's master's dissertation journey

Amy enrolled for a taught master's in a European university away from her home country in September 2017, when she was twenty-one. The structure of her master's programme allowed for taught courses to be taken over one or two years; Amy opted for one year. The rest of the programme would be dedicated to the dissertation, and the degree would be awarded once this was successfully completed. However, university regulations did not specify a deadline for submission. Amy started work on her dissertation on a high in April 2018, following completion of her taught courses. An initial hitch regarding her choice of topic and assignment of a supervisor was quickly overcome. She met her supervisor regularly during the initial stages and had finished the programming for her dissertation within a month. She then returned to her home country and started working full time, at which point work on her dissertation slowed down and meetings with her

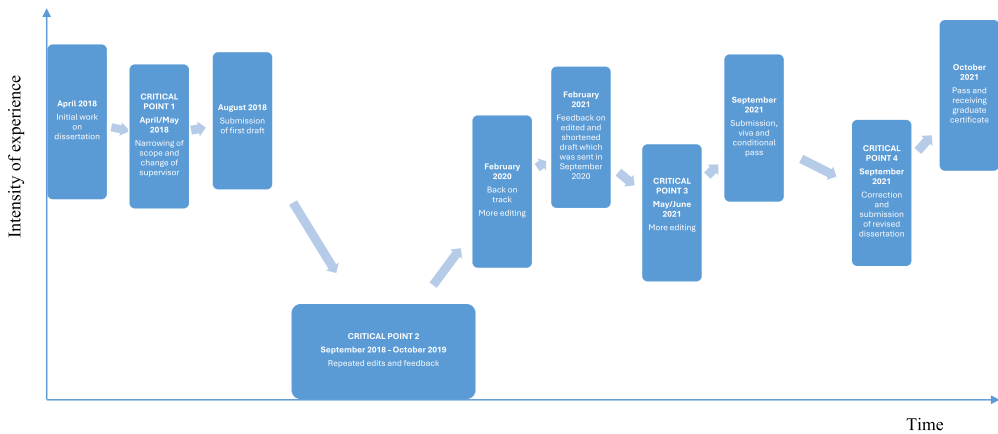


Figure 2. Amy's master's dissertation writing journey.

supervisor became sparser. Their communication took place generally over email and occasionally over Skype when clarification of detailed feedback warranted it. Amy reported no dissertation guidelines were provided and word-limit details changed from a hundred to fifty pages and finally to between 30–40 pages.

In August 2018, Amy sent a 72-page draft of her dissertation hoping to present it in September. However, revisions took longer than expected when feedback from her supervisor reached her in September and included changing the coding behind her model. Amy also needed help with statistical analysis. These events initiated a prolonged low period of repeated edits until a year later in October 2019, following a feedback phone call with her supervisor after her sixth edit, she felt she no longer had the energy to deal with the demands of her dissertation and stopped working on it altogether. In retrospect, she commented that 'not having a deadline doesn't help at all'. The following February (2020), with the emerging pandemic helping to bring her dissertation back into focus, she regained control of work on her dissertation and contacted her supervisor, who at this point was struggling to give her work priority. She sent a revised version of her dissertation in September 2020 and received encouraging feedback the following February (2021), which provided some relief from her misgivings of 'the last two years that it is all bad and not worth a passing grade' (pers. comm., August 26, 2020). In September 2021, she submitted, had her viva and following approval of her corrections was informed shortly afterwards she had passed. [Figure 2](#) shows a timeline of significant points of Amy's master's journey through to completion.

4. Analysis and discussion

This section provides an interpretation of the results based on a critical events approach coupled with thematic analysis. Critical points throughout the two dissertation writing journeys are identified from the journey plots drawn by Amy (represented in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#)) illustrating the emotional highs and lows in relation to plotted events. These are discussed with a focus on the three themes identified in the results (Supervision, Feedback and University Regulations). A comparative element is introduced highlighting

the difference between Amy's experience of bachelor's and master's dissertation writing. These insights will be used for a categorisation of critical event factors informing a tentative model of a critical event scenario highlighting the salient factors affecting dissertation writing success and related policies governing postgraduate degree programmes.

The first journey plot (Figure 1) indicates two critical points in Amy's undergraduate dissertation writing experience: Undergraduate (UG) Critical Point 1 at the outset; UG Critical Point 2 in March/April 2017. The former was the lowest in her undergraduate dissertation writing experience; both were followed by a quick resolution indicated by clear subsequent upward trends. The second and third journey plots (colated and represented in Figure 2) indicate four critical points in Amy's master's dissertation writing experience: Master's (PG) Critical Point 1 in the initial stages when she narrowed down the scope of her project and changed her supervisor; PG Critical Point 2 after she received feedback in September following submission of her first draft in August 2018; PG Critical Point 3 between February and May 2021 when she attempted to get back on track after a considerable lag during which she had stopped working on her dissertation; PG Critical Point 4 after official submission in September 2021 when she was informed she had achieved a conditional pass. The data indicate that PG Critical Point 2 was the most difficult; it was a lengthy, deep low characterised by frustration and lack of faith in her work that significantly hindered her progress and jeopardised completion of the programme. A detailed account of each critical point follows.

4.1. Undergraduate critical point 1

Two themes come into play at UG Critical Point 1: University Regulations and Supervision. The underlying problem at this initial stage was the result of administrative hiccups related to Amy's topic. She was on an Erasmus exchange and out of the loop when her coursemates were writing their proposals, only realising she needed to do so when everyone received an email reminding them of the deadline the previous day. She was given an extension, but by then the list of topics had been considerably depleted. Consequently, she chose a topic which

was very specific ... they gave us an area and they gave us sort of details about how they wanted it to be ... I personally felt it was ... the research that the supervisor was doing in her own field but instead of doing it herself she just gave that work to a student

Amy felt disoriented because initially she could not understand what her supervisor 'wanted from my research' and then had to work this out whilst preparing for exams. The fact that a submission deadline was not established until later exacerbated the problem putting her in a difficult position when organising the time left to resolve the issue and write her dissertation. Amy's situation substantiates Skeith et al.'s (2018) study on providing support at master's level, which reports students indicating effective time management is conducive to success but, as one student explained, 'lack of external [dissertation] deadlines is a huge problem' (115). This issue was resolved largely due to Amy's supervisor's support:

then after January, so after the exams passed, I remember meeting up with my supervisor and telling her, please like, try to explain to me what exactly my dissertation is about

because I'm getting very confused and I feel very lost and I remember we went through how the experiment is going to be set up and what is the scope of the experiment and how it should be ... and that's when I sort of started getting an idea, and that's when I started creating a prototype.

It is evident that Amy's supervisor fulfils the aim of 'filling knowledge/skills gaps' (Teklesellassie 2019, as cited in Grohnert et al. 2024, 10), a role perceived in the study as an important element in supervision at this level by students and staff alike.

The importance of supervisor availability at critical times and of establishing deadlines are themes that will recur at other points in Amy's dissertation journeys offering a fruitful point of comparison.

4.2. Undergraduate critical point 2

Over the period of March/April 2017 Amy experienced her second and last low in writing her undergraduate dissertation. This concerned handling statistics and the literature review, both problems feeding into and hindering the writing process. The most prominent themes related to this period were Supervisor and Feedback, which shall be dealt with together since they are at this point closely related.

Amy's supervisor decided to take a direct role in handling the statistics, realising that Amy had to manage this problem together with her work on the literature review when time was at a premium and 'was struggling'. She insisted, however, that Amy should 'know that this is why we did those statistics and this is why you need them'. Her understanding of what was important for Amy to be directly responsible for as an undergraduate was crucial. She shifted Amy's focus on the literature review, in which Amy took a more proactive role, supplementing articles she and her supervisor had jointly decided to include with another she had found herself. She also provided timely feedback on Amy's reading, encouraging her to go back for a clearer understanding when needed:

I felt that I needed ... I really really needed to know what I was writing about, and sometimes even though I read it so many times there were still times when my supervisor told me, 'but this is not how it was written, I think you need to read it again'

What is evident here is that Amy and her supervisor are both perceiving the need for in-depth understanding of the topic through her reading, and Amy's response to the feedback is therefore forthcoming despite the renewed effort needed.

Detailed feedback from Amy's supervisor was also forthcoming throughout the writing process:

I used to give her a draft and she would ... track the different changes that she wants even when it came to English-wise ... she used to literally ... cross out a word and write a different one ... she was really really helpful and she did that until the very end

This happened even when her supervisor was hospitalised:

she was always there even during her time when she was sick and needed to be in hospital she actually contacted me the night before she went to hospital just to make sure that everything's ok.

Amy's account makes it clear that when she was writing her undergraduate dissertation, she was working within what Grohnert et al. (2024) in their review of master's thesis supervision refer to as a 'safe environment' (10). This is characterised by effective communication and handling of challenges. An important element is the kind of feedback given, which is timely, detailed, and points at possible solutions. Timely feedback has been highlighted as a factor conducive to programme completion in Skeith et al.'s (2018) analysis of master's students experiences in a Master of Health programme. Singh (2016) also documents master's and doctoral students' appreciation of constructive, detailed feedback.

In summary, Amy's undergraduate dissertation writing experience indicates that although she was sometimes hindered by aspects of the administrative setup at her department, her supervisor's support and feedback were instrumental in ensuring successful submission of her dissertation. Amy obtained her Bachelor's (Honours) degree in Human Language Technology in November 2017.

4.3. Postgraduate critical point 1

Amy's postgraduate dissertation writing journey started in April 2018 after finishing her taught courses. She experienced an initial problem which was quickly overcome, but which is documented here to provide a comprehensive account of her journey. Amy had initially chosen the option of doing her dissertation with a company in the region working on speech recognition. However, the project fell through because the company was unable to provide the personnel needed. A change of supervisor was recommended with whom Amy discussed and pursued a narrowed down version of her project. She was satisfied with this resolution and 'comfortable with both [supervisors]'. Work subsequently proceeded 'on a good vibe'.

4.4. Postgraduate critical point 2

Amy suffered a significant setback in her master's dissertation writing after receiving feedback on her first draft submitted on 2 August 2018, having successfully completed her taught courses, returned to her home country and spent a month completing her first draft. The most important themes here are Supervisor and Feedback. This critical period lasted for over a year, during most of which Amy was working full time.

Amy's mindset when she submitted her first draft reflects her confidence that she had met what she understood as expected levels of competence for her degree. However, in contrast with her reaction to her supervisor's feedback on her undergraduate dissertation, the negative feedback she received in September 2018 was unexpected:

I was very positive ... in my head, I had thought that I had done a really good job, and that I had done some relevant work ... I didn't feel that there was anything missing ... but from his feedback ... he saw a lot of things that didn't make sense, and a lot of things that he felt were missing, for it to be a good enough master thesis, and I felt lost at that point because I had an impression of how to do something but in actual fact, it was something completely different

Two details need to be noted: firstly, the university guidelines were unclear as to word count; and secondly, Amy had asked unsuccessfully to be given a dissertation in her

area she could use as a gauge regarding expectations. Consequently, her initial perception was based on what had been expected of her during her bachelor's degree and during the taught part of the master's programme, neither of which helped:

in the taught part, I didn't feel there was much of a difference, from my bachelor's to my master's, the difference was when it came to the amount of work and to the level of, of what is expected out of you, which is something that I feel I wasn't prepared for

She had also tried looking at PhD theses and one master's dissertation that carried significantly more credit weighting than her own, but for obvious reasons neither was effective as a clear gauge. Consequently, in April 2020 on resuming work on her dissertation, she was still reflecting that 'I still think sometimes that maybe it is still not at the level that it's supposed to be', explaining that 'I think it's because I don't know enough of how it's, it needs to look like'.

Amy's reflections indicating lack of guidance on this point is a significant issue supportive of Bamber et al.'s (2019) and Millin, Spronken-Smith, and Millin's (2022) perception that clearer expectations are needed in master's level programmes. We would add that this need is likely to be stronger in the dissertation component, since taught units tend to be more explicitly structured with clearer learning outcomes. The possibility that students may experience more difficulty writing the dissertation than carrying out the research also needs to be considered:

the work that I did programme-wise no, it was the writing I did that was wrong at the time,¹ later on when we continued doing the edits there were some things that needed to be changed or added ... to be able to give a better evaluation to my work, but at that point in time it was mostly the writing, how I was delivering my writing.

A succession of edits (six from September 2018 to October 2019) culminating in Amy's stopping work on her dissertation characterises this period:

I had gotten six, you know, I do something and I get feedback, I do something, and I get feedback ... and I understand that editing is so important because my level of it being a master's is not there, but it was very disheartening ... so as soon as I received my feedback [after the sixth edit] and had a call with him [her supervisor] about what I needed to do, I got very unmotivated and basically just stopped.

It is important to consider Amy's reactions to her supervisor's feedback to understand why it had this effect. Amy reports that during this period, between her first to her sixth edit, she received feedback every few weeks, and she even had occasional Skype meetings with her supervisor when needed. However, the feedback tended to be negative:

at that point positive feedback from my supervisor was very hard to get ... because he was very difficult in the way he gave his corrections or recommendations ... I remember for example I think it was September 2019 ... he had sent me an email and he had wrote to me ... that I was at the bottom of his to-do list, and that's where I got very demotivated.

The repeated edits and Amy's comments also suggest the feedback did not point at clear solutions and was not comprehensive enough, so that each edit needed further editing:

I had edited and fixed my programme, and still something comes back, and then suddenly he tells me, oh but you didn't add this, and this could be good for your [sighs heavily] ... it

seemed like it was never going to end ... and at that point in time I was, mentally I couldn't take it anymore.

This supports findings from Singh (2016) highlighting postgraduate students' appreciation of feedback providing 'clear instructions' (82). Amy's reflections about the feedback she received and its emotional impact support McPherson, Punch and Graham's (2017) conclusion that transition to master's level is characterised by 'anxiety, self-doubt and disorientation' (42) and lack of clarity about what postgraduate study entails rather than higher-order learning tends to characterise the more important challenges experienced by students following a taught master's programme.

Amy stopped working on her dissertation in October 2019 and did no further work till February 2020 when the effects of the emerging pandemic brought her dissertation back into focus.

4.5. Postgraduate critical point 3

In February 2020 Amy decided to resume work on her dissertation. Her comments indicate she felt that with the pandemic restrictions in place ruling out social activities and previously planned trips abroad, she might as well resume her efforts on completing her dissertation. Supervisor and Feedback themes are foregrounded, but the data indicate different dynamics at this stage, mainly related to regulations regarding deadlines, an important underlying problem.

By September 2020, Amy had sent a revised, shortened version of her dissertation to her supervisor, subsequently forwarded in October and again in November, in answer to which she finally received an email in December. During this period, Amy commented her supervisor had 'ghosted me for a while' and she had emailed him from her personal address thinking her university email might no longer be functional. Although Amy was still on a high at this point and does not document this time as distressing, it did lengthen the period towards submission. Regarding an email Amy received from her supervisor in December, she explains

he felt he couldn't continue correcting my thesis any more and he was going to speak to the university ... to see if there will be someone who would look at my thesis and provide me with ... a new fresh pair of eyes on my thesis

Indications that he was now out of touch with her work were also present in his feedback of the following February, which included suggestions contradicting those previously sent by him. Amy experienced another low at this point.

This situation supports findings by Aitken et al. (2022) regarding the importance of timely communication, highlighted here by the fact that Amy and her supervisor are at this point geographically distanced. Amy's supervisor's feedback changed over this period: it now lacked timeliness, an important characteristic as indicated by various studies (e.g. Heide et al. 2019; Millin, Spronken-Smith, and Millin 2022; Schulze 2012; Skeith et al. 2018). It was also no longer consistent and reflected a distance from her work due to the lengthened period of inactivity following her sixth edit. It is however to the supervisor's credit that he admits this and suggests a productive way forward. It should also be noted that as Grohnert et al. (2024) report in their review on master's thesis supervision, various studies show that academic staff's ability to provide

effective supervision is affected by their teaching load. In this case, Amy notes that since she herself was not timely in sending her corrections, she could not reasonably expect her supervisor to be speedy in sending her his feedback.

An important underlying problem seems to be the lack of any external motivation for timeliness of interaction:

from the aspect of not having a deadline it was great because I wouldn't have managed to spend three years on it, working on the thesis, ... but then on the other side of course it gave the leeway of ... let me put the fault on myself, not on the supervisor, because there was a period where I was completely unmotivated and I didn't want to work on it, so the fact that they didn't have a deadline didn't even motivate me to work on it at all. And then from the aspect of the supervisor he didn't have a deadline to reach for him to answer me, so ... if it took six months to answer me nothing was going to happen.

Amy also comments later that fees were not affected by the time taken to submit the dissertation and complete the degree. No external motivators were therefore in place encouraging timely submission.

This low period encompassed the time Amy received feedback from her supervisor following her repeated requests, to the time she submitted her revised version for the 'fresh pair of eyes'. It was followed by an upward trend following news that her dissertation had been approved for submission and she could prepare for her viva. Amy submitted her dissertation in September 2021.

4.6. Postgraduate critical point 4

Amy faced a final hurdle in completing her degree when she received a conditional pass after her submission and defence. Her supervisor's role was a minor one at this point and Feedback and University Regulations feature more prominently. University regulations stipulated a thirty-minute public presentation, a critique from another candidate and questions from the examiner and the floor, a procedure taking approximately an hour.

Amy faced her viva with mixed feelings: relief that she had managed to submit and could be hopeful of a pass, and disappointment in her perception that she could not do better. Her comments in April 2020 are indicative:

I feel that I might be getting a bit more understanding in what I need to do, and accepting that I cannot be the perfectionist that I have in my mind and just ... aim to have it at a good level ... that I can at least pass ... because at this point I just want to pass and have ... my certificate in hand, I'm not aiming to get an A

The fact that Amy is still struggling to understand what she needs to do at this late stage shows how lasting the effect of unclear expectations was in her case, generating a constant sense of unease and uncertainty up to submission stage. Amy had to face her viva with these doubts, since, as is customary, no feedback was forthcoming once she had submitted.

Amy was informed only a few hours after her viva that she had achieved a conditional pass and would be awarded her degree if a revised version of her dissertation in line with the examiner's suggested corrections were submitted within a fortnight. Amy submitted her corrections and was duly informed she had achieved a pass.

5. The model

This section focuses on the comparative elements in the two sets of critical events and sets up an explanatory model of a critical event scenario taking into account potential problematic issues that can act as triggers in undergraduate and postgraduate dissertation writing. The rationale is to highlight salient factors under the control of higher education institutions, thereby creating an awareness for the more effective implementation of policies and practices governing dissertation writing pedagogy. Based on the results, we devise a model bringing to light issues related to Supervision, Feedback and University Regulations. We note outside factors also come into play that may significantly affect the outcome of a dissertation (e.g. the epidemic). These necessitate an understanding of the model as an explanatory rather than a predictive one. The categories given in Table 1 below act as a first step towards the model presented in Figure 3.

As Table 1 indicates, issues related to University Regulations are common to both undergraduate and postgraduate dissertation writing and underlie the entire process. It is also interesting to note that in this case, critical event factors feature early on in the bachelor's dissertation writing process, whereas a later build-up characterises that of the taught master's, where a significant risk leading to potential non-completion of the degree occurred. Significant factors in the taught master's centre around feedback issues and are exacerbated by the lack of dissertations in the area that could act as models. Figure 3 shows a tentative model of a likely critical event scenario based on the above factors.

The model suggests a likely time-period for a critical event (i.e. towards the end of a prolonged writing-up period), identifies underlying issues under the control of higher education institutions and possible triggers that can act as catalysts. The presence of outside factors that can affect the resolution of a critical event indicate it is difficult to predict how a critical event will resolve itself until further research is carried out that can identify how these may play out in this complex scenario.

Table 1. Factors leading to critical events in bachelor's and taught master's dissertation writing

	FACTOR 1: UNIVERSITY REGULATIONS		FACTOR 2: SUPERVISION		FACTOR 3: FEEDBACK	
	Bachelor's	Taught master's	Bachelor's	Taught master's	Bachelor's	Taught master's
Prewriting stage	Clear deadline given late	Unclear expectations Word count changed substantially No deadline	Rationale for dissertation unclear Sourcing and understanding the literature Handling statistics	/	/	/
Writing-up stage			/	No model dissertation available	/	Lack of timely feedback Feedback unclear leading to too many repeated edits Inconsistent feedback
Submission stage			/	/	/	Negative feedback

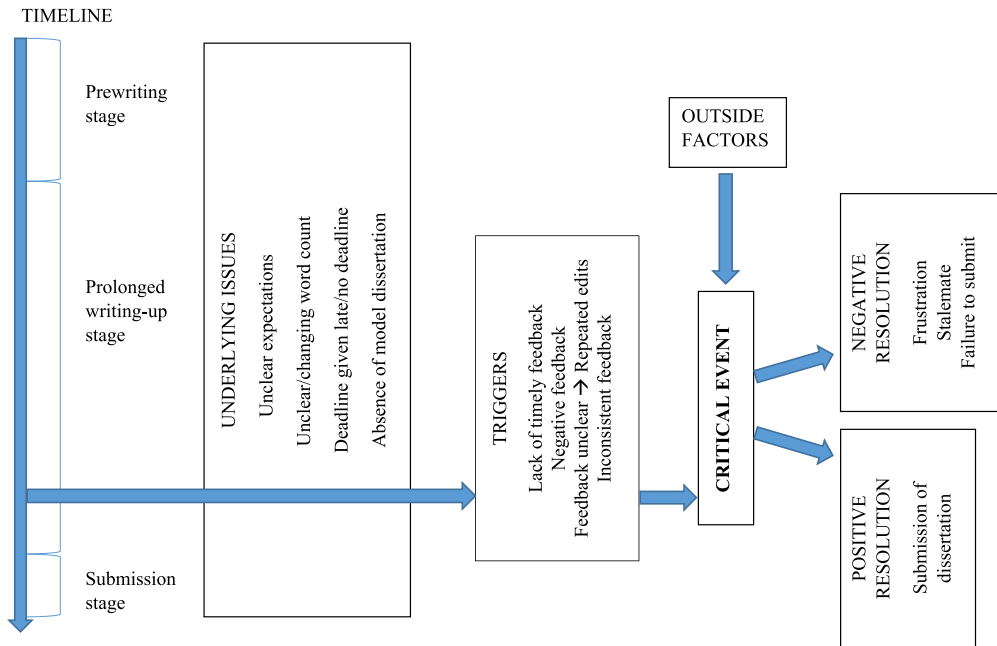


Figure 3. Model of a likely scenario for a critical event in dissertation writing.

6. Conclusions

It is not possible to generalise conclusions from one case study; however, we present here some tentative conclusions based on insights from the study that may serve as pointers for higher education institutions and suggestions for future research. It is significant that these support previous research on dissertation writing, but add detail to specific situations related to a prolonged writing-up period. Our results suggest that university regulations that do not stipulate a deadline for the submission of a dissertation provide a likely scenario for a prolonged writing-up period. We note that similar situations can be found at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels when significant extensions are given to submission deadlines and in cases of suspensions of study. Unclear expectations regarding research content, as well as specifics such as word count, can also serve as exacerbating triggers for critical events. Additionally, critical factors made more likely by a prolonged writing-up period are lack of timely feedback and feedback that becomes inconsistent over time. Given these insights, we suggest that critical events are more likely to happen later rather than earlier in the dissertation writing process, therefore adding weight to the importance of avoiding critical event situations, since significant time and effort on both the student's part as well as at the institutional level would have been spent that can result in a likely scenario for an unsuccessful outcome.

The focus of this study was to shed light on those critical factors that fall under the control of higher education institutions. We therefore list here some relevant recommendations for institutions offering programmes that include the submission of a dissertation, particularly in undergraduate and taught master's programmes.

Higher-order recommendations:

1. Provision of dedicated writing support available to distance and on-site students.
2. Stipulation of deadlines for submission of dissertations available early enough for students to be able to plan and organise their work.
3. Training provision for supervisors focusing on the importance of timely, constructive feedback and the transition from informative to try-again feedback.

Lower-order recommendations:

1. Provision of guidelines outlining clear expectations including word count and other details affecting the writing process.
2. Provision of exemplars of dissertations in the specific field carrying a similar weighting to those required for submission.
3. Initial discussions with students regarding what is expected from a master's dissertation.
4. Regular meetings and communication with supervisors, especially with distance students.

We hope this study has provided useful insights into debunking the myth of the assumption of competence and consequent expectation of independence in postgraduate dissertation writing. We highlight the importance of establishing institutional policies and practices that take into account potential critical factors in dissertation writing at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. We also hope this study serves as an avenue for future research concentrating on the construction of a more detailed picture of critical event scenarios in the dissertation writing process in research-based as well as taught programmes at the various levels.

Note

1. The time Amy refers to here is September 2018, after she received feedback on her first draft.

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