

## **4B Student experiences of formulating dissertation topics: strategies, challenges and support**

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This presentation reflects on the experiences of taught postgraduate students as they formulate topics for their Masters' dissertations. The dissertation is a key stage, both in terms of the course credits involved and as a transition to more substantial independent research. Formulating a topic is a process which requires students to carry out a range of tasks, including consultation of relevant literature and consideration of appropriate methodologies. The presentation will discuss student views and consider measures which could enhance this process.

Research into the postgraduate dissertation process is increasingly relevant. Recent years have seen significant growth in the number of students undertaking one-year Masters courses and in the number of international students (Universities UK, 2013). This study reflects on the experiences of a group of mostly international taught postgraduates and offers insights in the themes of assessment and student diversity.

The research is based on questionnaire responses collected from over 300 Masters' students. Focus groups were also employed in order to gain further insights into the process of dissertation topic formulation. Results indicated that this was an area of considerable concern, and one which students felt raised a number of new challenges in comparison to previous assessments.

The session will also explore the strategies used by students to overcome these challenges and consider how these could be used to assist others. It will be argued that it would be beneficial for teachers to employ a more 'scaffolded' approach, in which students are able to practice key tasks in topic formulation during earlier stages of the course.

### **References**

Universities UK (2013) Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education. Available at: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2013/PatternsAndTrendsInUKHigherEducation2013.pdf> (accessed: 14 November 2014).