

The ‘master’s dissertation fair’: reflections on impact and future development

Georgia Koromila
University of Reading, UK

Sonia Hood
University of Reading, UK

Presentation abstract

Every year in early spring, postgraduate taught (PGT) students start preparing for their dissertation project. At the University of Reading, this time coincides with the end of teaching, including the Library seminars supporting skills development. Acknowledging that our sessions were ill-timed to effectively support our PGT students at a challenging stage in their degree trajectory, the Study Advice and Academic Liaison teams at the University of Reading Library trialled a week of webinars in June 2020 tailored to PGT level and focusing on elements of the dissertation. The Master’s Dissertation Fair was born! The popularity and positive reception of the initiative took us by surprise and motivated us to continue running the Master’s Dissertation Fair as an annual tradition ever since.

In this session, we shared our reflections on the successes and lessons learnt from the first three iterations of this programme, focusing on its Study Advice component. We reviewed the student feedback collected post session and explored what the impact was on our one-to-one service in supporting PGT students with dissertation projects over the summer. We also discussed how this initiative impacted our team, as it provided a rare opportunity for us opportunity to plan and develop collaboratively a coherent and complementary set of sessions. Finally, we explored how this reflection on impact can inform our planning for a more holistic approach to PGT support. For example, are there opportunities to use new formats beyond the webinar? What else could we do to improve our reach and inclusivity?

Keywords: postgraduate taught students; dissertation support; webinars.

Community response

The community response to the presentation was strong, with a number of comments identifying the potential impact of this work for Masters students, who can sometimes fall between the taught provision support and the Phd student supervisory structure. One respondent commented:

Thanks for sharing your experiences with developing a 'fair' for your students. This brings together varied areas of student development in a compact way and makes us as practitioners more visible! It was interesting to learn about the logistics and your take-aways. Definitely something to consider for our faculty (I am faculty based). Enjoyed your presentation!

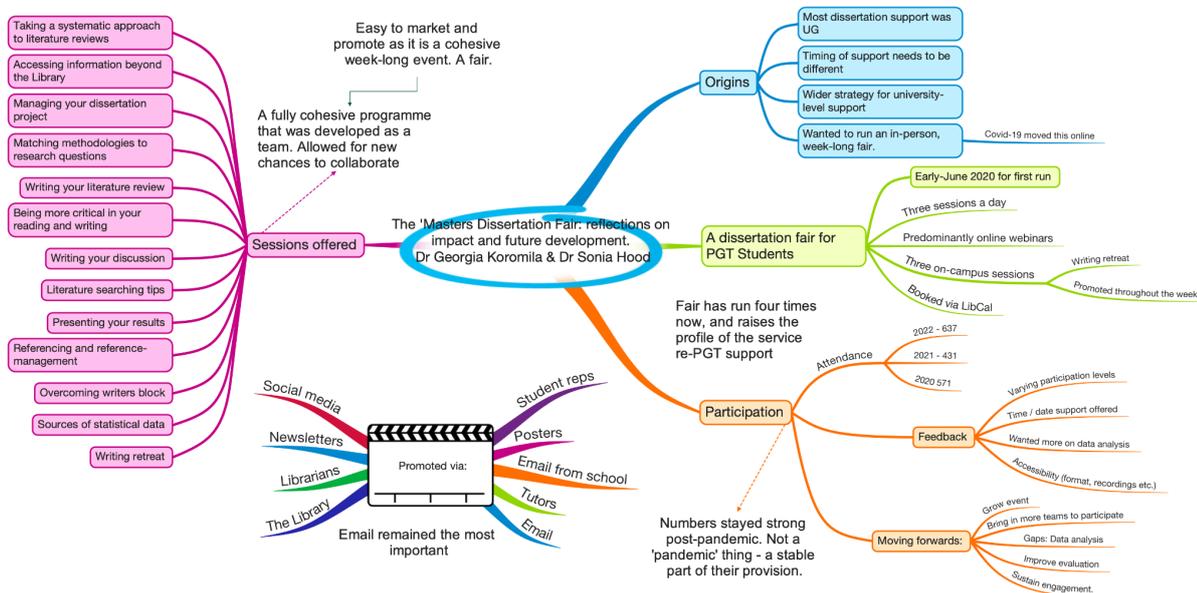
The comment speaks to the question of ownership – who takes the lead on support for PGT students over the summer, especially where financial demands may take them away from the campus, or see them undertake additional work, caring or other responsibilities during a period many of us do not fully consider in the same way as term-time. One respondent was inspired by your session to think about their own support:

This session has given me a great deal of food for thought about how we provide for our Masters students at my own institution. The presenters' comments about Masters students being left out during the summer months resonated with me. The timing of the fair was astute – recognising that although undergraduate programmes are finished, here we are with a week-long programme exclusively for Masters! I also agree that having academics on board, who actively promote your events, can do wonders for attendance numbers. The concept of a week-long programme with a mix of online and face-to-face sessions dealing with key aspects of the dissertation process was interesting and one that I will be taking away to explore at my own institution. Thank you all for your insights – fascinating!

One final respondent noted that the ideas shared in this session could be deployed more widely:

For our MA programmes, we have hundreds of students to support and supervise. I'd like to extend this idea of a dissertation fair into the discipline and look at how it could work within the context of Education. I think the majority of sessions outlined by Koromila and Hood would transfer very well to the disciplinary context.

Figure 1. Mindmap capture of the presentation, created by Lee Fallin, University of Hull.



Editorial comment

This is an interesting and collaborative approach to PGT support, making use of learnings from the Covid-19 pandemic to support students both on and off campus. It would certainly improve the impact to explore hybrid models of delivery, as you mention in the conclusion, or sharing of recordings. The approach has clearly inspired the community to consider this demographic of students more closely in their own institutions, and as mentioned, the students themselves feel better recognised for all the work they do outside of teaching/term time.

Next steps and additional questions

Currently one of the best attended sessions is about managing your dissertation, so could this come earlier in terms of project managing the timeline of your work? One of the student comments mentioned the desire for a session about how to present data, such as

graphs, tables etc. Will this kind of session need to move more into discipline-specific sessions, and how might this impact on the structure of the fair? At what point would PGR students feel that the sessions are also useful to them, but the event messaging feels exclusive to PGT? Could advice from students or alumni enhance the peer learning potential of the Fair? Overall, this is a really great initiative, and the community response has been fantastic. You can tell from the comments and questions that everyone is really supportive of this work, and look forward to seeing it continue to develop.

Authors' reflection

Delivering the session gave us an opportunity to reflect on our Masters Dissertation Fair and consider its successes and ideas for improvement. There are many elements that work well: collaboration with other support services; scheduling a series of sessions in one week to create an 'event' atmosphere; and offering a mix of online and face-to-face sessions. Through this initiative, we intended to offer time-specific support for PGT students, as they undergo an internal transition from being 'taught' to assuming the role of independent researcher (Crisfield, 2020), a transition which is arguably not easy to manage within the challenges and pressured timeframe of a single-year programme (Coneyworth et al., 2019). The event is, indeed, very much appreciated by our PGT students, who often feel neglected over the summer. We are very happy to see in the comments that colleagues are likely to trial similar initiatives in their institutions.

There are, however, some elements of our approach that we need to rethink, and reviewing the feedback we got from students and colleagues at the conference was useful in clarifying these. The timing of some of the sessions is not right: the session on 'planning your project' could do with coming earlier, along with discussions around methodology. While we do offer webinars early in the spring term on these topics, they are not 'badged' as Master's sessions, so perhaps we could consider offering two distinct events for our PGT students. In addition, we are currently exploring how we can develop more themed weeks, collaborating with other support services (such as Careers) to help students navigate the support that is on offer. We have set up a Community of Practice to support this idea. Finally, the idea of using current PhD students to offer peer support to our PGTs is inspired. We will certainly be looking into this and taking on board all the suggestions offered by those who attended.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to: A-K Reck (University of Portsmouth), Jen McLay (University of Surrey) and Lee Fallin (University of Hull).

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Author details

Georgia Koromila is a Study Adviser at the University of Reading. She holds a PhD in Archaeology from the University of Reading, awarded in 2016. Before joining the Study Advice team, she worked in supporting international postgraduate students coming to the UK for the first time, and has interests in inclusivity and promoting interdisciplinary thinking.

Sonia Hood is the Study Advice Manager at the University of Reading. She has worked as a Learning Developer since 2006, after a successful career in Marketing. She completed

an EdD in 2019, researching self-efficacy beliefs and academic writing. She has an interest in university transitions and levelling the playing field.

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