

CETL-MSOR Conference 2015

Aoife Hunt, Noel-Ann Bradshaw and Mayur Patel: Rethinking the final year project report: cutting out the waffle

All final year students taking programmes in the Department of Mathematical Sciences undertake either a weekly placement or the research methods and project module. The assessment for the project is made up of a group project, followed by an individual project. The former task is designed to enhance employability skills as students reflect on their initial planning and research work as part of a group, and also communicate their results in group presentations before embarking on their longer and more in-depth individual research. Two years ago the University's academic calendar and term structure was changed following recommendations during the UG-Flex project, which advocated the flexibility of a trimester calendar (1). This resulted in the research methods and project students having a significantly shorter time to write up their research. As a result, the individual project assessment was redesigned to incorporate a seven-page, "research paper" style report, cognate to journal articles that students necessarily encounter as part of their research. External examiners have commented very favourably on this format and think other HEIs might benefit from adopting a similar approach to project reports.

We specified a template for the report with rigid formatting requirements, akin to the specifications of academic journal and conference publications. Students learned how to structure their research according to this concise format, and communicate their findings in a succinct manner. We found that this effectively focussed the students' writing in the main body of the report and that they could still demonstrate their work comprehensively, for example by providing raw data and full computer code in appendices attached to the report.

When marking these submissions our supervisors, moderation panel and external examiners commented that the succinct report style enabled discrimination between the varying quality of work: students have "nowhere to hide" when there is little room for superfluous information in their reporting. Furthermore, it was found that those students conducting their individual research in response to an employer brief produced reports in this format that were fit-for-purpose in conveying their findings to an end-user or client.

This talk will present the new report specifications and template used, and explore the findings, challenges and lessons learned from the past two years of its delivery in the final year project course. Implications for teaching, assessment and learning outcomes will also be discussed, alongside staff and external perspectives on the impact of the change. Further developments will also be considered, particularly in terms of the assessment criteria and in marking reports of this type. Views from the conference audience will be greatly welcomed as we discuss further possibilities in this area.

(1) JISC, 2012. Proposal to amend the University of Greenwich Academic Framework [online] UG-FLEX proposal to amend academic calendar May 2012. Available at: <<http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/file/56172993/UG->

FLEX%20proposal%20to%20amend%20academic%20calendar%20May%202012.p
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