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# Final-year projects as a vehicle for delivering research-based education

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## 1. Introduction

The final project for the MSc Facility and Environment Management (FEM) programme is designed to give students the opportunity to conduct independent research relevant to facility management practice, and, in the case of part-time students, the needs of their employer and sponsor. The quality of the work across the board is generally high and the research design robust, which is independently confirmed year on year by external examiners' comments. If the student takes a further step and writes up their dissertation in the format of a research paper, it gives him or her the chance to further reflect on the importance of well-defined research design, work towards a deadline with the co-authors in a team environment and, ultimately, communicate their new learning to audiences in both the UK and overseas. The importance of all these extra dimensions are clearly identified within the UCL Connected Curriculum framework.

## 2. The case for student-student supervision

Over the course of my 25-year-long lecturing career, I have co-authored about 18 papers, initially with my undergraduates and now with my MSc students. As I began to engage with the surrounding educational literature, I recognised that my relationship with my students had always been collegial. It is therefore not surprising that I am still in contact with most of these students with whom I co-authored papers, or that the majority of them have remained active researchers either in academia or in

their various professional settings. This is possibly best described in some feedback sent to the then course director from one of the students I supervised in 2015, published at an international conference in 2016: 'I am especially happy with the grade awarded to my dissertation, and for that please extend a special thank you to Dr. Ljiljana who was really a very knowledgeable and encouraging supervisor. Her unique style of supervision helped me to focus on my research in a way that enhanced my innovation and passion to explore.'

However, the effort of involving students at research level, including helping them produce refereed publications, is time-consuming for academic staff, who are already under pressure trying to meet the high-level expectations for their own work. To address this, in 2015 I involved one of the PhD students from my institute in supervising one of my MSc students. At the time, Yekatherina had just started the third year of her PhD, so I had confidence in her as a researcher. While supervision is something I do routinely, for Yekatherina it was the first time she had ever supervised anyone, and so she was extremely enthusiastic and excited about it. That enthusiasm almost certainly transferred to Claire, the MSc student, as well. Yekatherina generally also had fewer work commitments than me, and so was able to allocate more time and resources to Claire's supervision, creating the potential for Claire to grow from a B-grade student to someone who eventually achieved a commendation for her dissertation.

Having one student, albeit more experienced, supervise another contributes to a collegial atmosphere in which an MSc student can feel more relaxed – for instance, not ashamed to tell her peer that she didn't understand something. An MSc student might feel uncomfortable admitting this to her lecturer, as she might have a perception that she was expected to know that 'something' already. In other words, the MSc student might feel more comfortable asking her peer for repeated feedback rather than a busy superior.

As for Yekatherina, this is what she has to say about the experience:

It was an amazing opportunity for me to structure my thoughts on how to do research. At the time of the dissertation I was already in the beginning of the third year of my PhD, so I already knew how to do research. However, the best way to learn about the topic is to explain it to somebody else. It was the first time for me that I [had] ever explained [to] somebody else how to do research. It was also an amazing opportunity to get some teaching experience. I got to experience a difference between doing research myself and guiding somebody else to do it. When reflecting now on the process, I come to [the] conclusion that I probably imposed too much of

my thoughts on her, and next time I should make sure that I rather create an atmosphere for thoughts to grow, rather than impose my own. However, it was a valuable experience and a valuable lesson to learn and next time I will do it differently – and probably learn something new as well. I was supervising on a topic different to . . . my PhD. I had knowledge in some aspects of the topic and an interest in others. However, I did not have time to explore those topics within my PhD. Through Claire's work it was possible for me to explore a new and interesting topic, which I would not have been able to do within the scope of my PhD.

The rapport and mutual respect Yekatherina and Claire had for each other are best described in the following email exchange:

*Claire hi,*

*I just want to say thank you! You are my first master dissertation student and it was a pleasure supervising you, talking to you and reading your work!*

*I am glad you pushed it so far. We would still need to work on it, but it is a really good dissertation.*

*Best,*

*Katya*

*Hi Katya,*

*I should be thanking you!! You gave me so much help and direction that I would never have achieved on my own.*

*Your future students will be very lucky.*

*Kind Regards,*

*Claire*

### 3. Conclusion

To summarise, by involving a student (PhD) from a neighbouring field in the supervision side of a teaching process (MSc dissertation supervision), we created an amazing learning experience for the taught student (MSc student). The result, an MSc dissertation that adopted innovative research design, was singled out in the external examiner's report as something 'he learned from' and was the basis for the joint journal paper currently under review.