Go the Distance
Academic insights for distance learners EXTRA
Episode 9: Projects - with Tim Coughlin

I'm Tim Coughlin. I'm a lecturer in education technology and a tutor in computing a distance learning education.

Students will do a number of smaller projects during a qualification like a degree but towards the end, very often we'll do a large individual project and this will involve them independently doing a piece of work with the support of a supervisor or tutor to help them along the way.

Assignments will happen throughout different courses, so as you go along you might take a number of smaller assignments: that might be an essay or a small report. So these kind of dissertation projects are much larger. They may well constitute a whole module or two modules worth of study, and really the difference is that you're not guided as much on the topic, so it is very often something where you get to choose what you're going to do.

A dissertation is often used to refer to the report that you produce, so we would sometimes talk about dissertation project purely because you know the dissertation itself might be the output: the report that you hand in at the end.

When we talk about – this is undergraduate dissertation, so I suppose we could say that at undergraduate level the length of the project is normally, you know, six to nine months and three hundred to six hundred hours of work. You might then look at longer dissertations and masters and a PhD is effectively a very large dissertation over three or four years.

The project provides quite a few different benefits to students. One is that it allows them to pursue something they're really interested in, so they should be building on the advanced topics of study that they've learned as they've gone through their qualification, and they should take something that they want to pursue and follow that. Another way that is really important is that it teaches people sort of project management and time management skills, and a lot of those would be important in professional jobs: in the kind of careers people want when they graduate. I think finally it allows you to produce something that you could potentially show to a potential employer if you were going for an interview or applying for a job: you might have a

piece of research, a product or something you've designed that you can actually show those people, and it would be a substantial piece of work.

The project often starts with a phase of coming up with a proposal. So this is the point at which the student can figure out something that they're interested in, perhaps a few alternative things that they might think could make suitable projects. And it's really important at that stage that they get some feedback from their tutor; a supervisor, so they might decide that some of those ideas aren't suitable or they might just need to shape them into something that that becomes a suitable project: it's ambitious enough but it's possible. And it actually meets the criteria of the course and what we're trying to teach. Having got past that point the student will probably spend quite a lot of time doing research and understanding relevant literature: in the case of computing, they might look at systems; in other types of projects they might have to look at, you know, whatever's happening in that subject. So it's really gathering evidence and research that can inform the decisions you make in the project. There's also a big element of planning at that stage, so you should be coming up with a suitable plan, and that might be adapted over the course of the project, but at least it should be there near the start, and then whatever the project is, there'll be a phase of really getting on with it. That might be building something; doing some research; it might be just analysing data and all this time you'd be getting some feedback and talking to a tutor at regular intervals to keep yourself on track, and towards the end of the project, obviously you start writing, but you should also be evaluating what's been achieved.

When you're writing up a project it might be the longest piece of work you've ever had to produce. It very often is the case that you have been used to writing short essays and reports of some form, and then the project: it can be quite difficult, because it may be tens of thousands of words in length. This really requires you to learn – obviously – good writing skills, but also how you structure a piece of work and that length and how you make sure it's clearly reporting what you want to say. As an assessor, if the report is readable, that's a really good start.

I think there's several challenges for distance students in completing their project. I think really obvious one is that they've got to maintain contact with their tutor in different ways. So you might have to email them or talk to them on the phone and get used to doing that regularly. That's obviously important to keeping you on track. Another aspect of doing it at a distance

is when you're doing your research you might not have access to a physical library. So you might be doing more of this online and actually still making use of the library services at your institution, but using those online and making sure you know how to do that.

Projects can be challenging for non-native speakers particularly if they need to do a lot of research which is written work and so they need to improve their ability to read a lot of documents. So those are skills they should be developing as they go through their qualification. So if we see the dissertation project as something towards the end then building up to it is really important in that regard. There might be other challenges around finding a suitable topic. Often it's easier for students if they have a place of work or something that's obvious that stands out to them as an interest, so that can be easy for some people and challenging for other people.

I've supervised a variety of projects where it's really been something exciting for the student. One example that springs to mind was a student who built a desk that was technologically advanced: it had screens built into it and allowed people to work better, so their project was based around physically building and evaluating a technologically advanced desk. I can think of other projects where people have studied emotions and how we can use technology to detect emotions. Another thing that people often do is the project can be based around their work: if they are distance learning students, very often working as they study, so they can find something interesting that perhaps isn't exactly in their job role or what they normally do but then get the support of the employer to do this project, and that can be really good because it's realistic and it can make an impact on their work.

There's a lot of search engines that are designed specifically to help people do research. And those can be a really valuable tool: the library can help you to find those may have its own engines for identifying the relevant search. Another area where there's some really good tools is planning software. So time management; planning your project. Those are areas where there's online tools and services that can make it clear and keep you organized.

Another type of tool that can be very useful are communication tools so you obviously have to talk to your tutor and your project may involve you talking to a variety of other people. So you would be making use of different tools to communicate with them.

A good project should be suitably ambitious but not too complicated. Students have a limited amount of time, but we want them to do something innovative and interesting. So that's a good start. Beyond that it's got to be well planned out. There should be a good amount of time set aside to the early stages of research and the late stages of writing up and reflecting on what's been done. I think it's also important to understand that you don't have to achieve everything that you set out to, but you have to be able to reflect on what happened and what goals that you did achieve, and what goals didn't happen and why. So there's very commonly aspects of a project that are failures, but as long as the student has understood why that part of it has failed that's not really a problem – we're often looking for students to do something ambitious and sometimes things go wrong.

There's a whole variety of things that can go wrong. Some students really struggle with the writing up so they'll produce something that's hard for an assessor to read. It might be too long even though we're actually talking about quite a long thing but they have a lot to say, and they might actually struggle to actually say the important things in a readable way. Quite often aspects of the project will go wrong purely because they were exploring something has not been done before and therefore what they actually find is it's not easy or possible to do the thing they're exploring in their project. So what we really like to see is that students can adapt to that. So if something goes wrong that they have a plan B or that they can reflect and understand on what they're learning through that process.

When we mark projects there will normally be quite clear criteria. And those should be given to students as well as the staff so people should be able to see what it is that they're being marked on, and that – that's really important for them and for us so that we try to be consistent about how we mark projects. The criteria might cover a range of things: it might cover the planning and management of the project and how well that's been done. It will cover the complexity of the project: how it's drawn on things that the student has previously studied. So if you've learnt a lot about a particular topic and then applied it well that's – that's a really good thing to see in a project. And we always look for students to be reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses and what they've achieved through the project. It's possible for a project to go badly wrong but still get a good grade. The ambition could be to test something and that thing not be possible. So we do get examples where the student has learned a lot through the project process, but their results might not be what they hoped for.

We give feedback to students at several stages in the project, so it's not just at the end, but actually something we try to do continuously. That's in order so that people can stay on track and improve their project as they go along. We generally provide some sort of summary of the feedback but then actually also comment directly on to the report that the student's given us. So that would normally be two parts of that process: there would be a detailed comments on particular sections of a student's report that they've handed in and then a summary of what we feel – how we feel their project's going.

Presentations should be able to provide people with a short and clear understanding of someone's project. So it's a good way to mark and understand what someone's done. And it's also just another mode of presenting, aside from a written report, so it actually allows people to see that someone understands what they've done and perhaps even to answer questions on it.

I think the length of the presentation will be variable and you'd be given advice as to that beforehand. It is quite often the case that you won't be able to talk about everything that you've done, so you do have to be selective and perhaps fit it into 10 or 15 minutes to describe the really important aspect of the project.

A good project presentation should show that the student really understands what they're doing, so it shouldn't just seem like they're reading from a script or that they've prepared an answer and that's all they can say. Ideally it should show that they really understand this subject and give you a clear and brief understanding of what they've done. The role of visuals in a project presentation can be quite variable and this might again be something that you're instructed on as you are told what to do. The project presentation might involve PowerPoint or another way of presenting visual images and these might be diagrams and images related to your project. It's often a problem that students will create presentations that are purely a lot of text and those aren't particularly helpful or informative.

Project presentations can be challenging for non-native speakers, particularly in terms of being confident to speak in English and also understand if they're questioned on their project. So you've got to think on your feet, and that obviously can be a challenge. I think practising and, you know, getting

other people to see your presentation until you're confident with the topic, and confident about what you want to say, can really help there.

Gaining skills and practice in presentation can be really important as you move beyond your qualification and trying to get jobs and move on in your career. These are key aspects in a lot of jobs, whether you're just communicating to a small group of people or a large group. And if you can develop those as part of your degree and show that you're actually building up that, then it will help you a lot in the future.