Guidance document for supporting dissertations and projects while working online and remotely

Guidance document for supporting dissertations and projects while working online

Overview

The purpose of this guide is to provide an overview of the Independent Research Project (IRP) Short courses with accompanying advice on providing project supervision while working online. The guide has three sections:

- Summary of the IRP Short Courses: introduces the five short courses to help assist in decision-making as to how they can be used in your discipline.
- Guidance on supporting projects while working on online: practical advice on how to deliver supervision support online.
- Details on getting access to the IRP Short Courses.

Summary of Independent Research Project Short Courses

The purpose of the IRP short courses is to prepare and guide students through their final research project. The courses work on the principle of a student-centred practical approach to project management through five short courses. Each course will require approximately three hours of study. The courses could be used holistically at the start of a project module or used selectively at strategic points through the project.

The topics range from devising a topic through to writing up the research with examples and activities to focus on points. There are numerous tasks for students to complete which familiarises them with the strategies for sharing with supervisors and completing a project. The courses are not subject specific and require students to refer to their course brief and apply it within the framework of the IRP courses. The courses consider different types of evidence collection such as empirical and reflective evidence though the focus is on numerical and categorical data collection. Course relevance to projects with an emphasis on abstract discussion, non-empirical research or subjective reasoning is limited.

The courses will be delivered on the FutureLearn platform, which can be linked directly from Moodle using single-sign on. The FutureLearn platform will provide a shared space for all students using the short courses providing scope for peer discussion within and across disciplines.

Below is an overview of course content of the five courses:

Short course one – Research Question – Provides a guide to using the courses and to the independent research project process. It focuses on developing the research question through brainstorming ideas and narrowing topics. It offers examples of Locate searches and requires students to carry out initial searches on their topic to familiarise themselves with search terms. Week one concludes with the process of generating a research question and setting the aims and objectives.

Shot course two – Research Design – Focuses on the purpose of research design and types of design methods. It looks at the use of qualitative and quantitative methods along with the means of generating results such as case studies and surveys. Tasks for this week require students to show clear connections between research questions and research design whilst also encouraging students to make independent design choices.

Short course three – Literature Review – The literature review is explored with guidance for selecting sources and following criteria such as timeliness, relevance and quality. It also offers direction on reading, writing and storing sources appropriately. Students are drawn to the process of critical evaluation and the synthesis of past research while making connections to the research proposed in their projects. Tasks include developing search terms and using citation.

Short course four – Methodology and Methods – Targets research methodology emphasising rigour, reliability, validity and bias. The course advises students on identifying ethical issues and provides guidance for gaining ethical approval. Students are guided on gathering and analysing evidence and alerted to the pros and cons of using methods such as internet surveys and sampling. Students are then encouraged to justify their choice of methodology and tasked with collecting data.

Short course five – Writing up – The concluding week of short courses takes students through the writing process. It examines the development of a writing plan and the presentation of results. It provides practical advice on using figures and tables and includes tasks that familiarises students with project stakeholders and encourages peer review. The course concludes with general and practical advice to students regarding motivation, the role of the supervisor and techniques for dealing with feeling overwhelmed.

Guidance for supporting dissertations and projects while working online

Introduction

The act of supervising dissertations or projects includes providing support on content and research knowledge, advising and supporting on task planning and providing social support to the student. Providing this support for students working remotely requires a structured approach. Los Santos et al (2019)[1] found that when working online project supervision support is best provided using a combination of asynchronous and synchronous communication. Los Santos et al (2019) found that asynchronous communication is best for knowledge and content focused support. While synchronous communication is best for connectivity and social support.

This guidance note will outline suggestions for providing dissertation/project in combination with the IRP Short Courses. It will include guidance on the use of asynchronous and synchronous communication to achieve a clear structured support plan for your students.

Asynchronous Discussion support

You may wish to provide a discussion forum in your Moodle site to complement the short course activities. The use of the discussion forums in Moodle, in conjunction with the online short courses will provide an asynchronous space for content focused support. The open nature of these discussions can be used encourage sharing and peer support and for responding to frequently asked questions (FAQs). Points to consider when using Discussion forums:

- Set clear expectations as to your engagement with the forums.
- Provide answers to any student queries, which are not specific to the individual, via the forum so exploiting the one-to-many communication benefits. Setting up an FAQ space for example.
- For a guide on using Moodle Discussions (requires Moodle logon) [link]

Synchronous support: A structured supervision plan

A clear and structured plan is a requirement for effective supervision. Complementing asynchronous discussion spaces with synchronous one-to-one meetings will provide the support space to focus on task planning and monitoring plus social support for the individual student. Each of the short courses will ask students to capture and record their planning as they work through them; details of what to expect are listed in the 'Using the Online Resources' section below.

It will be beneficial to make use of tools to record notes and actions from these meetings to help with project management and progress checking between meetings.

• Guidance on managing one-to-one supervision meetings.
  – Set a clear schedule of meetings
  – Record attendance, this can be through recording notes of the meeting (which should be agreed by you and the student)

• Guidance on managing one-to-one supervision meetings.
  – Remind students to come prepared – populating a shared document or a student journal in advance for example (see below)
  – Set clear timelines on the meetings.
  – If arranging multiple meetings plan breaks in between as time to take a break and/or take notes and prepare for the following meeting
  – Communicating online
  – Audio quality is of more importance than video; minimise background noise, speak clearly and with a balanced pace.
  – These details are drawn from the Guide to managing one-to-one online tutorials

• Synchronous meeting tools; remote one-to-one meetings can be conducted using a range of online tools including MS Teams (Guide to using MS Teams), which does allow screen sharing. Other tools that could be used, with agreement of the students include, WhatsApp, Skype.

• Tools for recording notes and actions
  – There are a number of tools which can be easily used to create shared documents for meeting notes, these include Office 365, Google Docs. If using MS Teams the meetings can be recorded. Both you and the student must agree to the meetings being recorded and how the recordings are to be used and stored should be agreed.
  – As alternatives or to complement these shared document tools students can be encouraged to produce an online journal or blog as a record of their thinking and progress. Tools available include the Moodle Journal plugin, the Mahara portfolio

Using the Online resources

As the students work through the online courses they will be asked to undertake a series of tasks to capture their planning for the project. What the students are asked to produce is listed below as a guide as to what can be expected. These resources will provide a focus for what support is likely through the discussions forum and what you can expect them to be bringing to the one-to-one meetings.

- **Short Course 1 – Research Question**
  - Students will have:
    - been asked to discuss their ideas with their supervisor
    - drafted a short (100-150-word) statement of the research question which your potential topic addresses, including the research aim and three objectives

- **Short Course 2 – Research Design**
  - Students will have:
    - written a short paragraph (100-200 words) justifying your research design.

- **Short Course 3 – Literature Review**
  - Students will have:
    - made an initial plan of your literature
    - practised quoting, paraphrasing and summarising research, and citing it correctly

- **Short Course 4 – Methodology and Methods**
  - Students will have:
    - Set up Ethics Account
    - Made a list of the data and evidence they need

- **Short Course 5 – Writing up**
  - Students will have:
    - considered the different audiences for their work and how they might judge its quality and usefulness
    - reviewed their writing plan
    - identified the sections or chapters for their project

Getting access to the IRP Short Courses

The IRP Short Courses are available on FutureLearn. If you wish to make use of these resources then please contact OnlineOperations@coventry.ac.uk who will provide a URL to embed in your Moodle site. Single-sign on will ensure students can access the resources on FutureLearn.