Managing volume learning through hybrid action learning sets for postgraduate dissertation students

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ABSTRACT

We present a dissertation pedagogical framework developed for large numbers of postgraduate taught students (>500) using a small cadre of academic staff. Adapting practices from action learning and mentoring, we created a framework to support, guide and assess the completion of the dissertation part of their taught masters' degree in a Business School. The pedagogy delivered improvements to the cohort performance and

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aligned with positive learner feedback. We conclude with guidance for wider adoption of this pedagogy.

Keywords: postgraduate research: group work: action learning; international students: dissertation.

Introduction

A post Covid surge in international postgraduate learners joining a Business School of a UK HEI, challenged both the capacity and quality of the traditional 1-1 supervisory dissertation model, hitherto employed, to manage. Total learner volume studying a postgraduate award and the dissertation stage, increased from circa 150 in Academic Year (AY) 2020-2021, to over 800 in the AY 2023-2024 (second intake) (with >95% being international students and 80% studying MSc International Business). This volume growth outstripped available resource for the dissertation stage of their studies and thus our aim was to develop a pedagogy suitable and deliverable to support these learners. We developed a hybrid action learning and coaching pedagogy that offered a reduction in the staffing workload, improved the quality of the learner experience (Githui & Kinuthia, 2023) whilst also enhancing student success.

Developing the pedagogy

Developing a pedagogy to support dissertation projects in taught postgraduate programmes can be difficult due to both the diversity of projects and learners, the potential variance of experience of those learners and available supervisory resources. We note for example that the traditional 1-1 (master-apprentice) model of supporting theses through allocated supervisors, can bring communicational and power asymmetries through learner deference towards tutors (Doyle et al., 2016; Newsome & Cooper, 2017; Zhang & Hylad, 2021; Koo & Nyunt, 2022) and that these difficulties can be exacerbated for international learners who are culturally unfamiliar with such

pedagogical relationships with differing learner and tutor expectations (Samuel & Fhatuwani, 2023), especially when working on unstructured research tasks (Andrews, 2007; Wang & Li, 2008; Lee & Murray, 2015; Harrison & Grant, 2015). The 1-1 model has also been critiqued for inadequate preparation of learners for a fast-paced work environment (Harrison & Grant, 2015), offering a perceived safety net role by learners of their supervisors (Waghid, 2006; White & Ingram 2021) as well as straining institutional resources (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011). Learners also require support through all the stages of their research project (Vos, 2013; West et al., 2011) and the comparative experience of which can vary across a multitude of 1-1 supervisory relationships.

The traditional 1-1 supervisory model however remains a popular pedagogical choice for postgraduate taught dissertation studies in the UK. For example, in Appendix A, a 2025 survey of 142 UK HEI websites identified 116 taught postgraduate awards in International Business (or a titular variation) and 109 of these incorporated a dissertation stage. 52 (48%) of these awards explicitly cited using the 1-1 master-apprentice model pedagogy (Appendix A). Interestingly, 6 of the awards in Appendix A cited other supervisory pedagogies for the dissertation stage and 2 were using a group pedagogy.

Alternative pedagogies for dissertation support include for example, pedagogies that focus upon the emergent nature of the research task (Lee & Murray, 2015; Pownall & Acquaye, 2021), the identity change of the learners (Anderson et al., 2008), coaching support (Keane, 2016), developing wider affective and skills support (Hallett, 2010) and adopting an action learning focus (Harrison & Edwards, 2012; Edmonstone & Robson 2014; Collins & Callaghan, 2018; Johannesson, 2020). However, none have been developed for specifically supporting large volume learners, to the best of our knowledge.

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Understanding of the support needs for one-year postgraduate taught students (PGT) completing their dissertation study is less explored than it is for (doctoral) postgraduate research (PGR) learners (Uzonwanne et al., 2013; Kearns et al., 2008; Coneyworth et al., 2020). As a result, after reflecting upon the alternative pedagogies, we focused upon developing an institutionally 'supportive approach' for the learner research process as promoted by Buckley and Hooley (1988) and Bienkowska et al., (2016), that would offer collective support, alternative insights on learner work whilst also enabling learner generated actions within a supportive community. The approach also converged available institutional resources including the library (with skills support) and the University's International College.

Learners thus become active participants of their educational journey (Waghid, 2006; White & Ingram, 2021) when we placed the 'student' as holding an active and vocal position as an instrument of change rather than being a passive recipient (Cook-Sather, 2018; Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2023). Developing an action learning set (ALS) based pedagogy offered this potential with both consistent collective (group) support (Picton & Kahu, 2022). This would mitigate potential learner isolation whilst developing confidence, resilience, and a sense of self-worth (Pauley, 2004). Furthermore, an integrated peer community offers higher levels of contact time with facilitators and group members than with a supervisor in the prior the 1-1 supervisory model (Yende, 2021). In short therefore, action learning was adopted as the dominant pedagogical framework to address both pragmatic efficiency problems and to deliver a more consistent quality experience to students focused on collective support, surfacing critical insights on project work and supporting learners generating their research plans.

ALS can support learning in individuals through trusted dialogue and interaction with peers. It is the openness and trust of the sets that supports personal and inter-personal learning (Hauser et al., 2023). In organisations, it both facilitates individual and group achievement through the experience of actions on matters of pressing concern but also contributes to organisational development. ALS have been utilised and reported upon within a small number of postgraduate studies, including a part-time DBA (Wilson et al.,

2021), MA awards (Harrison & Edwards, 2012; Collins & Callaghan, 2018), a postgraduate healthcare management qualification (Edmonstone & Robson, 2014) and a small number of MBA awards (Mughal et al., 2018). Whilst conceptually this pedagogy appeals by offering collective support, learner insights and actions, it also brings challenges because the role of questioning is particularly important in action learning and learners with limited experience and for a majority, cultural unfamiliarity in working in such communities, could be reluctant to ask challenging questions to their peers (Yende, 2021; Chorrojprasert, 2020). It was this known facilitation difficulty that was particularly challenging to manage in creating an environment for our PGT learners whilst maintaining a hierarchy-free space in which facilitators do not stifle learners' independence (Revans, 1998).

To address this, facilitators initially adopted more of a *coaching* role (Casey, 1987; Marquardt, 1999; Marquardt & Waddill, 2004) steering the sets and taking responsibility for capturing the learning and improving the skill level of the group (Marquardt & Waddill, 2004; Pedlar & Abbott, 2008). As teaching staff member (A) commented "a very flexible, student-centred approach was needed" and that these learners presented specific challenges of an initial "unwillingness to speak up, …lack of autonomy…and a lack of self-directed learning". This required time to scaffold their learning by "…building up slowly with topics more familiar to them…it takes time to become effective".

A group-based action learning pedagogy was therefore adopted with facilitators operating initially in a coaching role, guiding the learning within the group whilst asking and prompting questions to support individuals and the group. The groups were thematically formed (discussed shortly) based upon individual research intentions, so that there would be relevant collective insight from the group members. Action learning pedagogies have been shown to improve key areas such as leadership, interpersonal and presentational skills (Harrison & Edwards, 2012) and particularly for international students – their cross-cultural adaptation (Collins & Callaghan, 2018). They also

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encourage independence (Edmonstone & Robson 2014) and increase social capital (Bai & Wang 2024; Edmonstone & Robson 2014).

We were mindful however of the experience reported by Marquardt & Waddill (2004) that a facilitating coach should focus on the group's learning and not the problem discussed, following Revans' (1998) warning that such roles should not create a dependency of the group on a professional for answers. Facilitators thus encouraged the group and individuals presenting and commenting, to consider and reflect upon their strengths, weaknesses, areas for development and what, in their ongoing research, were their processes, and what was difficult to achieve.

Group sessions were face to face, mitigating the risk of propagating entrenched social practices that may exist with an international group of learners by ensuring active and equal participation of all genders and status for example (Mughal et al., 2018; Collins & Callaghan, 2018). Blended learning was integrated after 4 weeks of face-to-face sessions. This hybrid structure (of face to face and online meetings) offered a clear support structure that had significantly greater contact time than had been afforded in the prior 1-1 master-apprentice model.

Materials and methods

Ten FTE new academic posts (Academic Support and Learning Facilitators (ALSFs)) were recruited to manage the groups of clustered learners with shared research foci. Whilst this was a significant investment by the Business School, financial costings indicated it represented between 30-40% overall cost savings when compared to scaling a 1-1 master-apprentice model using existing staff (and the cost of their time) and outsourcing to a significant number of hourly paid lecturers. The first delivery of the revised pedagogy was to the October 2023 intake.

Learners could undertake projects that were either; enterprise (business start-up / development), client-based (applied live projects) or traditional (academic project) which could be secondary or primary data-based (each project type was supported by a learner handbook). Perhaps unsurprisingly, a majority of learners across the cohorts opted for academic projects using secondary data. The choice was outlined in a submitted Research Intention Form (RIF- capped at 200 words) and a completed JISC Research Survey (an example of which can be provided upon request). Keynote sessions on Research Methods (RM) supported project choices and were delivered at the start of the module. The research survey was used to identity the proposed topic (the primary and secondary disciplinary focus) and research dimensions. The outcomes of the survey and RIF, allowed for filtering of project types for ALS construction.

For example, a learner's topic will have a primary disciplinary interest (e.g. International Business) and a second sub-interest (e.g. Internationalisation). This was coded by the survey (as 'AE'). A second question confirmed their research design for the project – which was constrained to three choices of – '(A)Inductive, interpretivist, qualitative / (B)Deductive, positivist, quantitative / (Z) Other'. This latter box offered a free text comment to be completed by the learner. Their response generated a third coding variable – where continuing the example above, this would be 'AEA'. The next question identified data collection instrument(s) – which was constrained to five choices of ' (A)literature / desk-based / secondary sources only, (B)questionnaires / surveys with large data sets and statistical analysis , (C) questionnaires / surveys with more qualitative comments, (D) Interviews / ethnography / focus group discursive text-based data, (E) mixed methods using human participants and (Z) Other. This latter box offered a free text comment to be completed by the learner. This answer generated a fourth coding variable -which continuing the example above, would be 'AEAC'. This coding then would represent overall- an International Business project that is internationalisation focused, exploring a qualitative problem using secondary data

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sources. A team meeting confirmed ALS allocations with facilitators based on their interests and experiences. Table 1 is an example of such a learner set (no. 9).

Table 1

An example of a relatively mixed learning set - based on International Business project themes undertaken through human data collection.

LEARNING SET	STUDENT	Research Coding	First Research Focus
9	A	ADAE	INT.BUSINESS
	B	AHAE	INT.BUSINESS
	D	AGAE	INT.BUSINESS
	C	ALBD	INT.BUSINESS
	D	ALAE	INT.BUSINESS
	E	AUAE	INT.BUSINESS
	F	AUAE	INT.BUSINESS
	G	AXBE	INT.BUSINESS
	H	AZAD	INT.BUSINESS
	I	ADAE	INT.BUSINESS

Table 2

Second sub-disciplinary codings for 'A' International Business.

Code	Description	Code	Description
A	Automation	N	Demographics
B	AI	O	Sustainability
C	Merger & Acquisition	P	Internet of things
D	Globalisation	Q	Legislation
E	Internationalisation	R	Location
F	Trading blocs	S	Not for profit
G	Business cycles	T	Sport
H	Business plan	U	Tourism

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I	Expansion	V	Leisure
J	Retraction	W	Intellectual property rights
K	Business modelling	X	Self-employment
L	Innovation	Y	Gig economy
M	Data analysis and mining	Z	Other

Table 3

Third research design codings.

Code	Research Design
A	Inductive, interpretivist, qualitative
B	Deductive, positivist, quantitative
Z	Other

Table 4

Fourth data instrument codings.

Code	Data instruments
A	Literature, desk, secondary
B	Questionnaires, surveys with large datasets and statistical analysis
C	Questionnaires, surveys with more qualitative comments
D	Interviews, ethnography, focus group, discursive
E	Mixed methods with human participants
Z	Other

Submitted RIFs were marked heuristically by being traffic lighted to guide learners; red (reject and revise), amber (proceed with major/minor caution [with bullet point concerns]) and green (proceed). RIF results provided initial materials for the opening ALS first meeting with only 8% being green lighted and 42% being reject and revise. Common errors were project scale (too large), feasibility (access to data and/or complexity) and likely to lead to report-oriented outcomes (descriptive). Prior approved

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RIFs could become ‘red’ if their ethical approval was subsequently rejected (for primary data-based projects). A subsequent failure to successfully revise and resubmit, required the learner to switch to a secondary data-based design which was then discussed as part of the difficulties of their work in their ALS.

Results

The first cohort (for AY 2023-2024 – October 23), had 46 learning sets of between 8 and 15 learner members. ALSF’s managed between 4-6 action learning sets per week, timetabled with on campus meetings for 90 minutes / week with subsequent blended optional support and with online learning journal and blogs (open to all set members to comment in). The optional on-line meetings were well attended (>75% mean attendance across all sets) and served as review sessions to support learner reflection on their actions from previous meetings and what would be brought forward to the next on campus set meeting. The second cohort (for AY 2023-2024 – February 2024) commenced with 84 learning sets with each ALSF then managing 8-10 learning sets per week with a slightly reduced on campus meeting of 60 minutes / week balanced by an increase in optional blended support. Periodic ‘Research Clinics’ open to all learners were used to support themed drop in events (for example – ‘revising an ethical application’).

We followed Edmonstone & Robson’s (2014) advice on introducing and discussing action learning first and ran an early ‘pilot’ experience to discuss exemplar problem topics. This also allowed learners to practice the methodology of listening and questioning a presenter’s query/problem and for the development of action plans for those problems. ALSF guidance materials were developed to both help support the facilitators, structure the sessions as well as ensure consistency in the learner experience. Nonetheless, the early set meetings were uneasy for participants new to this learning approach and there was a need to manage the common expectation that the facilitator does not have all the answers. Subsequent meetings became more effective as learners presented actions and explored further unresolved queries. ALSF’s

managed the process, supporting presenter rotation, debate and ensuring tracking action plans were completed.

There were two other important outcomes from implementing this revised pedagogy. Firstly, assessment becomes separated from support as the markers were not the facilitators. Dissertation marking was aligned with the wider staffing of the Business School. Arguably, this is a higher quality assessment strategy than the 1-1 master-apprentice model, where supervisors were also first markers, as prior exposure to formative learner outputs can influence the summative mark (Pownall & Kennedy, 2019). Thus, the mark awarded is only based on the final dissertation presented enhancing quality (Sadler, 2009). Secondly, converged university resources supported innovative events such as a co-delivered 'dissertation fayre' (by the library and International College), promoted both English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and dissertation writing support services to all learners.

We evaluated the outcomes of the revised pedagogy across the previous 5 cohorts as summarised in Figure 1.

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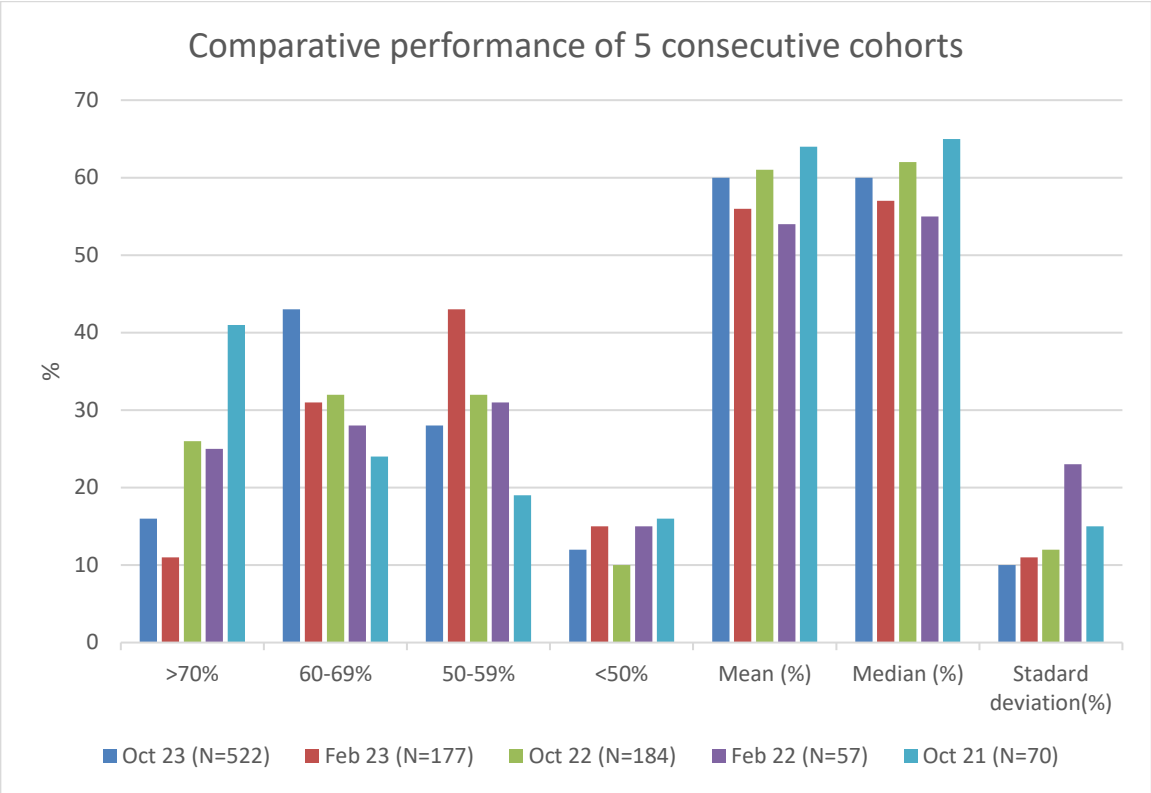

Figure 1

Cohort performance comparison data for the PGT dissertation module.

For the October 2023 cohort, there was an improvement in the number of learners achieving marks > 60% (59% or N=308) compared with 42% (N=74) in Feb 2023 cohort (the last cohort to use the 1-1 supervisory model). In addition, the October 2023 cohort sustained both a comparative low number of failures and similar mean and median marks to the smaller earlier cohorts. In other words, the pedagogy delivered an improvement in student success to no detriment of mean and median performance marks whilst managing learner volume efficiently.

We also qualitatively surveyed completing learners for the October 2023 cohort seeking to understand their experiences. This survey was undertaken post-dissertation submission but before the results were released, over a two-week time window. The response rate was 20% (N=105) - or approximately 93% statistical confidence ($\rho<0.07$)

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using the Cochran sampling formula (p=0.5). The response rate was typical for module evaluations across the PGT programmes. Holland (2019) advises to be mindful of such learner evaluations generating summative module feedback noting that longer data collection times tend to generate increasingly negative feedback, that the module type (ie. research vs content) also influences response perceptions and tutor gender may also shape responses. That said, the overall response rate and data collection period fall within the favourable scope of Holland's (2019) analysis, lending credibility to the learner feedback. Figure 2 presents the profile of the survey respondents.

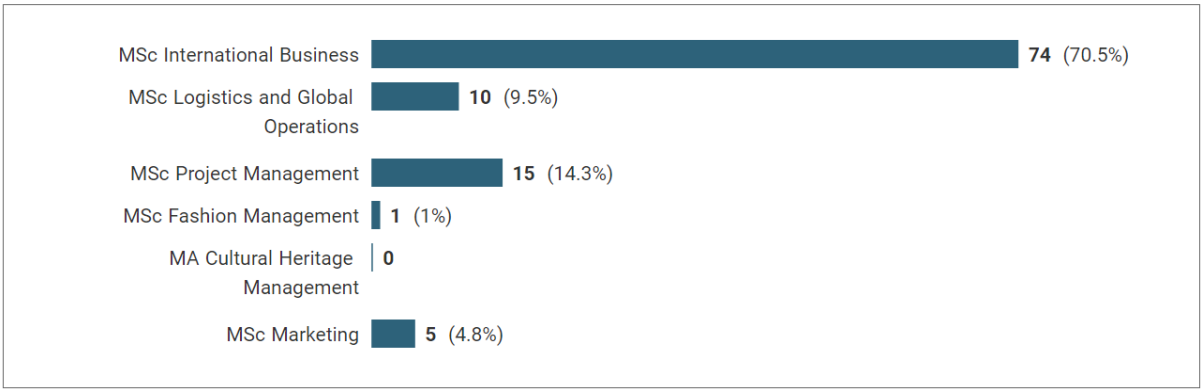

Figure 2

Profile, by study programme, of survey respondents.

We asked learners about their satisfaction across aspects of their experience of the revised pedagogy using a 5-point Likert scale from Very Satisfied to Very Dissatisfied. The Keynote sessions, which were delivered in a large lecture hall to all learners outlining important stages of their theses work and of the pedagogy of the course achieved 93.3% satisfaction. The actual ALS face-to-face meetings similarly achieved a 91.4% satisfaction (71.4% being very satisfied) whilst the use of the research clinics achieved an 85.7% satisfaction overall. The online reflection and review sessions achieved a 90.5% satisfaction.

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We also asked learners to comment on three themed areas for development of the revised pedagogy in free text questions which were grouped as follows- what to continue doing (table 6), what to do less of (table 7) and what to do more of (table 8).

Table 6

Summarised learner responses to the question "What shall we keep doing".

'What shall we keep doing'	**N**	**%**
Change nothing	18	33
Continue with Mentor/ALS guidance	10	19
Keynotes	9	17
Online and F2F meetings	8	15
1 to 1 meetings	5	9
Add group work into wider courses	1	2
Length of time for dissertation	1	2
Clinics	1	2
Engaging Activities	1	2

Table 7

Summarised learner responses to the question 'What shall we do less of'.

'What shall we do less of'	N	%
Nothing	42	76
Keynotes	4	7
ALS online	2	4
ALS F2F	1	2
ALS	2	4
Jargon/Language	2	4
Feedback methods	1	2
Assessments	1	2

Table 8

Summarised learner responses to the question 'what shall we do more of'.

'What shall we do more of'	N	%
Nothing	20	32
Physical Classes (F2F)	10	16
Dissertation Feedback	9	14
Supervisors	9	14
Online classes	4	6
Better Blackboard organisation	2	3
Provide samples	2	3
Simplify the ethical approval application process	1	2
Module Organisation	1	2
Help in Research Topic selection	1	2
Introduce SPSS	1	2
Answer queries 24/7	1	2
Provide feedback within 2 days	1	2
Provide feedback check on understanding	1	2

We were particularly pleased that the view of using supervisors was largely not the legacy challenge expected (Table 8).

Discussion

Our pedagogy addressed the need for a supportive but efficient method to manage (mainly) high volume international learners (>95% completing their dissertations) who had very little to no, prior research experience. The use of a structured research survey constrained feasible project choices and their research design whilst the RIF provided fast feedback on project intentions. Only a very small number of projects required an

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ALS reallocation as their projects subsequently evolved (this was approx. 4% for the October-2023 cohort). ALSs ensured sufficient intersubjectivity between learners through their survey output construction and which then afforded learners the experience and benefit of being part of that relevant research group.

Feedback from learners emphasised the value of active monitoring of their work through set contributions and questioning, which was supported through initial coaching and emotional support. We monitored the use of the early coaching-type relationship given it risked creating dependencies between learner and facilitator, but in practice this lessened over the duration of their studies as learners gained confidence and autonomy.

With a highly international cohort, the role that groups and language have upon learner identity and sense of belonging in 'owning' their work (Pull et al., 2016; Pownall & Kennedy, 2019) is significant. Using ALSs provided engagement with a community of similarly interested and motivated learners, which recognised that they mattered and were of worth to those around them. This contributed to a reduction in academic stress (Rayle & Chung, 2007) and to a sense of belonging and increased motivation, which facilitated personal agency and self-efficacy for the successful completion of their studies (Hanson et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Reflecting upon the experience and practice of this pedagogy, for educators seeking to consider these ideas we have a number of observations. Firstly, is to consider good learner practice for this pedagogy. To begin, it is critical to undertake a process of aligning and identifying intended projects to support an appropriate set clustering of learners. This facilitates building aligned research communities within the wider institutional support resources. Secondly, work across your institution to integrate available resources, particularly any EFL / writing provision which can be viewed as peripheral by learners to their studies. Aim to offer an integrated collection of resources

and contacts that can be called upon from within the action plans of learners and discussed in their sets. Thirdly, face to face group meetings, are an integral early and sustained part of the pedagogical practice and proved particularly important to support research inexperienced learners.

We next suggest consideration is given to addressing facilitator support and their development, particularly during the early coaching stage discussed here and the transition to the facilitation role. Given the situational context for the recruitment of the ALSFs for this pedagogy, many were early career academics, and there was an ongoing need to support their skills development in working with international postgraduate learners in particular.

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Research was deemed exempt by the University (Lincoln) ethics review board (considered institutionally as an educational quality assurance project).

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Appendix A

Table 1

Comparative UK HEI PGT Programmes in International Business awards (and variations) by dissertation pedagogy. Website survey (2025)

Award Title	Total Count	1-1 pedagogy in dissertation or equivalent	Alternative to 1-1 pedagogy in dissertation or equivalent	No cited pedagogy within a dissertation or equivalent	No equivalent dissertation module in the award
MSC International Business	43	22	3	15	1
MSC International Business Management	36	11	0	19	4
MSC International Management	12	6	1	5	0
MSC Management	5	1	0	2	2
MSC Management (International Business)	4	2	0	2	0
MA International Business	3	2	1	0	0
MA International Business Management	2	2	0	0	0

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MSC Business & Management	2	1	0	1	0
MA Business & Management	1	1	0	0	0
MLitt International Business	1	0	0	1	0
MSC International Business and Entrepreneurship	1	1	0	0	0
MSC Int. Management and Leadership	1	0	0	1	0
MSC Management and International Business	1	1	0	0	0
MSC International Human Resource Management	1	0	0	1	0
MSC International Business and Strategy	1	1	0	0	0
MSC Business, Management and Enterprise	1	1	0	0	0
MSC Global Business Management	1	0	0	1	0
No equivalent award	25	0	0	0	0

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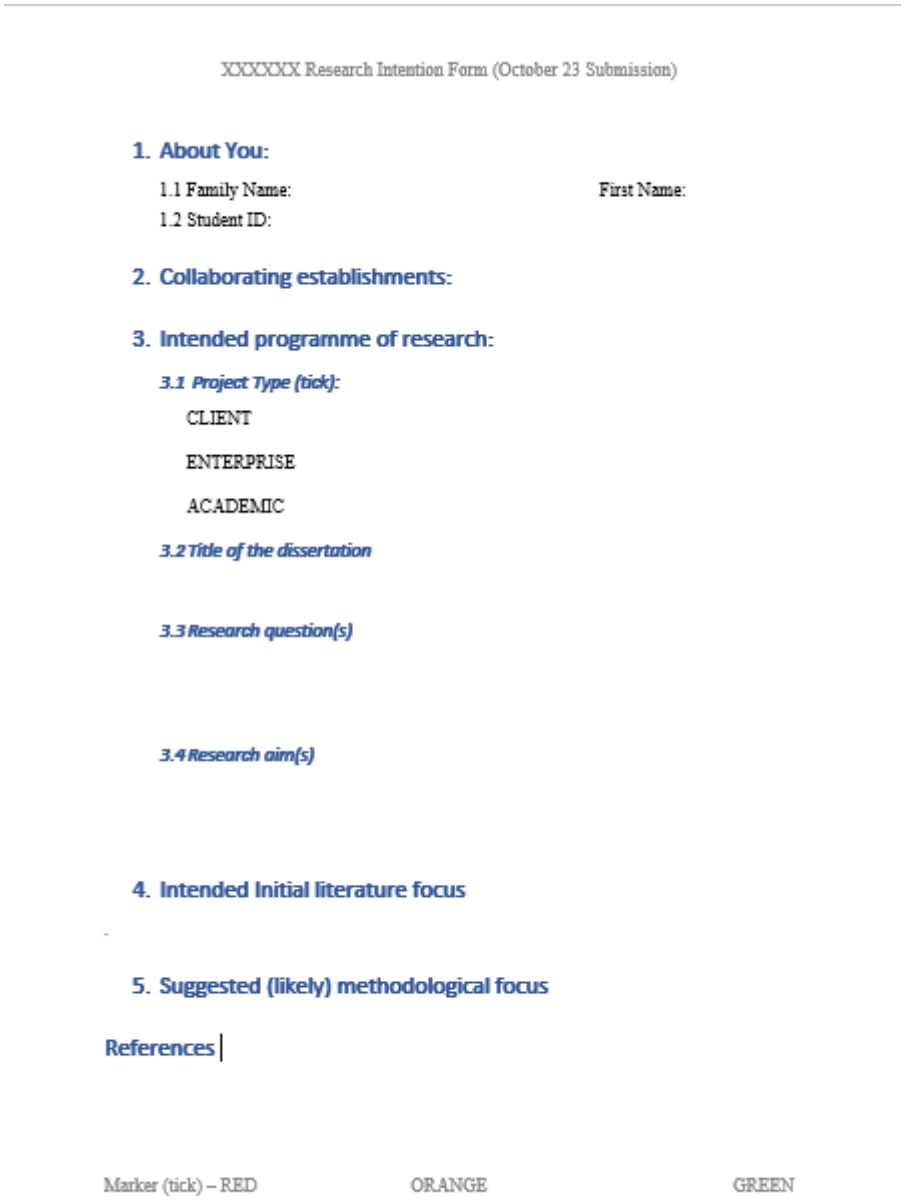
Appendix B RIF



XXXXXX Research Intention Form (October 23 Submission)

1. About You:

1.1 Family Name: First Name:

1.2 Student ID:

2. Collaborating establishments:

3. Intended programme of research:

3.1 Project Type (tick):

CLIENT

ENTERPRISE

ACADEMIC

3.2 Title of the dissertation

3.3 Research question(s)

3.4 Research aim(s)

4. Intended Initial literature focus

5. Suggested (likely) methodological focus

References

Marker (tick) – RED ORANGE GREEN

A copy of the survey instrument is available upon request

Pownall, I., Hawes, K., Hoberla, O., Cooper, S., McKnight, L., Sadler, E., … Peak, E. (2026). Managing volume learning through hybrid action learning sets for postgraduate dissertation students. *Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *4*, 81–111. https://doi.org/10.62512/etlhe.37