

Digging Deeper: Projects

Andrew Belt: Welcome to the sixth episode of our Digging Deeper podcast series which concerns the Project dissertations our Level 6 students work on.

I am joined by UCEM's Academic Delivery Manager – Projects, Jon Hubert. Hi Jon.

Jon Hubert: Good morning.

AB: How are you?

JH: Ticking along as usual.

AB: Good stuff. I'm also joined by Hazel Lobo, UCEM Module Leader for the Undergraduate Project. Hi Hazel. How are you today?

Hazel Lobo: I'm really well, thank you. I hope you all are too.

AB: Yes, quite a group of us today. I am also delighted to be joined by two current UCEM students – firstly, Kris Hajkova who is on our BSc (Hons) Real Estate Management programme. Hi Kris. How are you?

Kristyna Hajkova: I'm very well, thank you. Thank you for having me.

AB: No worries at all. It's a pleasure to be joined by a couple of our students and for us all to be meeting each other in this way. Speaking of our second student - that is Gary Worthington, who is studying on our BSc (Hons) Construction Management programme. Hi Gary. How are you keeping?

Gary Worthington: Really well, thanks.

AB: So our internet connections are all holding well, so we shall begin. So, first off, a question for Jon and Hazel. What is the Project?

JH: So, I hope to be as brief as possible, but really the Project is intended as a culmination of everything that the students put in to their study programme on the degree for the previous three or four years, whatever the timeframe is. Those previous 16 modules lead into the Project which is a self-directed module.

It runs over two semesters and is worth 40 credits. The idea is that it's a topic of your own choosing instead of being told to study something. It's about you taking the initiative, being able to plan and manage your time to take a route that you want to follow, something that you want to do your own. Really, it's the evidence for your Honours degree.

In fact, the Honours [(Hons)] in a BSc degree actually revolves around the Project module so you can get that 360 credits.

AB: I think Jon gave us a really good introduction there. Great stuff. In terms of the timeframes, can you walk me through them?

HL: As Jon said, it's a two-semester module, which is unusual for our students. They normally take on one module per semeste.

The project starts very, very quickly. Within the first few weeks, you need to submit what we call the 'Project outline' which is just an overview, at a very basic level, of what it is you want to research. And the purpose of that outline is to allow us, as a team, to identify and pair you up with a supervisor who will then help you through the next two stages, the first of which is

the research proposal which comes in towards the end of the first semester and, effectively, is the first three chapters of your final dissertation.

Then, at the end of the second semester, you will submit your full 10,000-word dissertation and that's the completed Project. So, three important milestones.

The outline is very prompt in the first 4-6 weeks, then the proposal first three chapters around the end of the first semester, and then the final dissertation at the end of the second semester.

AB: Thanks for the explanation. And, as you mentioned there, the outline is the first step.

So, our Level 6 students will be beginning to think about their Project topics - quite a crucial time. What advice would you both have for them?

JH: So, briefly, we have a Project intro on the 'Study skills' section of the VLE [Virtual Learning Environment] which is accessible to all. You don't have to be enrolled on the module.

It's section 12 in the 'Study skills' section and it just walks through what research is about and contains a little bit on critical thinking. Crucially, it also has some hints and tips on the outline and a little form that you can download with some of the things that we're looking for, such as how you're going to conduct your research and what your title might be.

It's fundamentally about what interests you based on what your field of work is. It would normally be based around your programme, something that you're doing within real estate, construction management, quantity surveying, building surveying and so forth.

You should be asking: is it something you're passionate about, something that you really want to get into? Because it has to be something that will motivate you because no one else is going to do it for you.

AB: Definitely. And Hazel, what advice would you give?

HL: I'd reiterate one of Jon's point in that this is not a taught module as such, because this is down to you. This is your chance to choose a topic. Choose one that you're really interested in.

It might be something that's come up through your studies, there may be a subject that you wanted to go deeper into when you were studying on a module, it might be something related to your work or a problem that you're facing at work or something that's piqued your interest there but make sure it's something that really, really interests you.

It's got to be something that on a damp Tuesday evening, you're going to sit down and work on. It has to be something that's going to allow you to say to your friends, when we're allowed out again, 'I'm not coming out because I want to work on my Project'. That's what you're looking for - something with that level of passion and interest.

AB: Great points you're both making there about it being something which you really want to work on seeing as it is going to be two semesters' worth of work and 10,000 words which you'll be compiling. So, it's important that it is something which you can really get stuck into and enjoy

For extra insight, where we are joined by Kris and Gary who have both recently completed their Project dissertation, so, congratulations to you both!

Firstly, Kris, if you could introduce yourself. What is your job title and who do you work for?

KH: Thank you, Andrew. I'm a personal assistant at Griffen, which is a privately owned property, investment and development company, focusing on the UK logistics sector.

AB: Great stuff. And, you're currently on our BSc (Hons) Real Estate Management programme. So, taking you back to the beginning of the Project process, when did you start thinking about your Project topic?

KH: So I can put my mind straight back to the beginning and it was quite overwhelming but, to be honest, I was contemplating the topic area quite far in advance because I knew there was always going to be a big project that needs to be done at the end of the studies.

So, my thinking always revolved around sustainability in the built environment. The initial ideas I had were, for example, the efficiency and wastage of building materials or the uptake of Passivhaus construction.

The topic of sustainability itself is very relevant globally and my interest in sustainability was really reinforced by the theme emerging in most of UCEM's taught modules so that shaped the direction a lot, but the final topic did not get finalised until the start of the actual Project module.

AB: Okay. So, in terms of where you were on the course at the time, was it from the first semester you had it in your mind or was it a bit further down the line?

KH: I would say it was towards the end of the second year, start of third year.

It was nothing specific. Ideas around the topic of sustainability in the built environment was always something that I kept going back to.

AB: And what was the title of your project?

KH: The exact title of my project was: 'The barriers to sustainability in industrial commercial property in the UK: Analysis of the current circle of blame'.

So, it's a long title, but I think it encapsulates all that was explored.

AB: Great. And, how did you arrive at that particular topic? You mentioned that you have a passion for sustainability and it ties into the course which you're doing so, by carrying out this research, you would have been finding out a lot more than, than you would have known before. How did you go through that process?

KH: Absolutely. So, with the broad area identified, I think the final choice then came down to certain aspects from the study materials and the professional environment.

I knew that sustainable construction is possible but a question popped into my head as to whether sustainability is implemented into every construction project and, if not, why?

The second point is I was elaborating on was the fact that, regardless of the technology, at the end of the day, it's people who make the decisions.

Mentioning that to Jon and Hazel got me to consider the concept of circle of blame which demonstrates, graphically, the problematic passing of responsibility for sustainability from one professional to another. That was an important component of choosing my topic.

And third, the topic was the narrowed down to the industrial sector of the UK to make it a bit more relevant to my workplace.

AB: Thanks for taking us through the key elements which brought you to selecting your topic. So, what advice then, having been through that process, would you have for students in terms of identifying their topic?

KH: Well, every student's thought process and areas of interest will be different. Going off what Jon and Hazel have said already, I would say it's good to start with questions that you are asking already; something you haven't found the answers to, something that you genuinely want to find out more about.

And I'm not sure if this applies to all students, but I think, where the dissertation project gets a bit difficult or a little bit overwhelming no matter how prepared you are, having a topic that you enjoy or are genuinely interested in will, in my opinion, make the process easier.

Jon and Hazel mentioned in our study group - something which helped calm the nerves a bit - that the topic does not have to be anything revolutionary, not Nobel Prize material, just something that interests us and is manageable to deliver in that timeframe.

AB: I think tapping into your inquisitive nature is a really important point you raise there. Moving into actually doing your project, how did you find that? Was it satisfying? And were you pleased with your final submission?

KH: I have to say that the Project module was very, very different from all the modules I'd studied before, in the sense that, as Jon has already mentioned, it's driven by students and their chosen topic.

It took me about a week or so to adjust to the different system. I then really enjoyed the module. Jon and Hazel provide the structure for the module and the dissertation and you then work one-to-one with your allocated supervisor who is your guide throughout.

That's something that you don't have available in the other modules so it's really good to be working with somebody one-to-one and the supervisor not only helps with setting interim deadlines and providing feedback, but my supervisor was very helpful in helping me decide which ideas to pursue and which to not pursue.

That helps you to keep the distinction focused. No matter how much support you have around you, I think the dissertation is still a challenging process. It's not something that can be done in few weeks. It's a long-term commitment and process.

I would say that good time management, working with the supervisor and, probably most importantly, having supportive people around you makes the process much more manageable in terms of the final submission.

I was really happy that the submission was not rushed because I had nightmares that something would go wrong and I'd have to rush things in the last months or weeks or something.

I was happy that it was not rushed, it contained all the areas intended and when reading the final work, it was quite nice to see the topic evolve into the final document. There will always be more that you want to elaborate on or add in, but you can only work towards the wordcount you've given and try and make the most of it.

AB: I think that's really interesting that, 10,000 words, when you say it, can seem like Everest, I suppose, but then when you complete the final submission, you felt you could have gone into more detail.

It just shows that if it's a subject which you have a passion for and you enjoy that 10,000 words merely scratches the surface. Really great insight there, Kris.

And Gary, I'd also like to ask you about a key element of the project, which Kris touched upon just there, and that's the supervisor. First off, though, if you could share your occupation and employee details...

GW: Sure. I'm the head of store development for a company called Screwfix. We're part of the Kingfisher group.

I'm responsible for the design and construction that's needed to deliver those new stores across the UK and a new market in the Republic of Ireland. I also look after all the refurbishment. So, a very exciting team role.

AB: Yeah, it does sound busy. So, as Kris was just mentioning there about the supervisor, could you tell us how it worked for you in terms of working with the supervisor?

GW: Yeah, sure. Like everybody has said so far, I think that the big difference in this module is having a supervisor because it's a very different role to what a tutor plays.

Obviously, there are tutors on the module. So, first, it was about understanding the supervisor's role. I took the opportunity to read the guide about the Project and listen to the bite-sized lectures to understand the background of what that role really meant.

It was important to get some early contact with my supervisor. We chatted on the forum and introduced ourselves. I think, most importantly, we talked about how we would work together and how we would communicate, both in terms of what we communicated about and the frequency. So we decided that every two weeks would work well.

Generally speaking, when I submitted something on the forum, Hazel and Jon would come back, within a day or so, but I was conscious that that wasn't necessarily going to be the case for the supervisors. I think we agreed that I would put things in and then I would wait to get things back in a week or so, particularly with any material or any outlines I was doing for the initial proposal.

So, I think that that's worth mentioning. In terms of the role, I think it was really about me bouncing ideas and thoughts with my supervisor. My supervisor referred to himself as a critical friend which which turned out to be a perfect description.

AB: So, you're on our BSc (Hons) Construction Management programme. What was the title of your project?

GW: So, with the expansion of Screwfix into the Republic of Ireland, I was really interested in looking at the building control side of it and the legislation. So, I looked at what was the impact of the building control amendment regulations that came in in 2014.

It is a landmark piece of legislation for the industry.

AB: And what did you find?

GW: I had the opportunity to carry out some interviews with people in industry and also analyse some of the projects that happened since 2014.

As the legislation was created only six years ago, there wasn't really a huge amount of research that had been done. There'd been a few papers done that could come into play. I think that being able to find some written evidence was really valuable to get an up-to-date picture.

I think it's very much an evolving topic because it's still quite new and I think it gave me a really rich insight into what's going on right across the industry in Ireland in terms of the progress that has been made from the other part of the century, when the Celtic Tiger created a really big boom over there, and how that's impacting on the economy as well.

And I suppose that leads me onto one of the challenges which is that there was so much to look at. My supervisor was really good in terms of us talking about narrowing my focus down which was really important. When you're looking at the objectives, you can keep going back to that first question and finetuning it, and that happened even after I put the research proposal in.

AB: Your project was very much based on your employer so can I ask, how did that work with Screwfix? Were they very invested in what you would do with it?

GW: Absolutely. The business sponsored me to study on the course, so very much so.

The interesting thing was with what happened with the pandemic and the lockdown, particularly in Ireland where the construction industry is still actually locked down and has been since January, so that had quite a major impact. Initially, I planned to travel over to Ireland for interviews, because I was going back and forth to Ireland anyway so that became a bit of a challenge.

From a supportive point of view, that was good. I picked up some contacts through Screwfix that evolved into further contacts within the industry to enable me to carry out some interviews, which was really valuable.

AB: Yeah. And, just as Kris touched upon, it's really important to have that support network around you, whether it's your colleagues or your family or whoever. So, if you did have to do it again and, we're not asking you to, of course, but what would you do differently?

GW: I think it's very important that you treat it as any other project, and you plan milestones and allocate your time effectively.

Kris mentioned the time allocation side of it today. The data collection period for me fell at a time when I, all of a sudden, had a heavy workload at work and stuff going on in my personal life with my family. As Kris mentioned, the support side is really important because that's when the business said that I could take some time to work on the project.

I intended to do 10 interviews and carry out some secondary data analysis. I actually did eight interviews and then couldn't get the next two, but I pursued it anyway and actually went past the time period allocated for the data collection phase just to get those extra two, which then put a bit of pressure on me with the next part.

So, what would I do differently? I think I'd be very much stricter when you've collected the amount of the data that you need and you've got to then look at your project plan and say: have I got enough? If you've got enough, then you can then move on to the next stage and don't get too wound up in about collecting even more data because you have to trim out parts anyway. I think it's a bit like peeling an onion doing this and you need to be really careful you don't go down rabbit holes because it's such an exciting thing to be researching.

Each of the interviews pose more questions and obviously I went off to look at those, but then you have to always keep coming back to the question and the overall objective.

And that's where the supervisor came in as well. I think it's just reminding yourself that you have got a finite amount of time to complete 10,000 words, not 20,000. So, that would be

how I'd go about it differently. I think I would really make sure that I home in on each of the phases and capture those timescales and don't let them slip.

I was pleased with the submission at the end, but I think the final phase could have been smoother if I just literally stopped at the point where I'd collected enough data.

I needed to apply for an extension at the end just to complete my submission.

AB: I think that's a really great learning point - keeping your eyes on the big picture and, and not getting too taken in with the detail, which I think in any walk of life is good to take on board.

I wish you the best of luck with the results. Thanks for that perspective, Gary. And, to wrap up, I just wanted to ask Jon and Hazel one more question. We've heard the student's perspective of negotiating the Project module but from a marker's perspective, what is it they are looking for from students with the Project?

JH: Evidence of engagement. When you read through the first part of a project and then you go look at the references, bibliography - we tend to read first and last - you can see the effort that's gone into it.

Almost instantly, you can get a picture of what the student has done, how well they've engaged, how well they've taken the supervisor's advice, because the end product is also a development of the proposal. So, you can see progression and you can see how well the students worked on the project. And I just want to say thank you to Kris and Gary because clearly they did [work very hard on the Project] and that's a really cool thing to see.

I'm sure Hazel has some something to add as well.

HL: Jon's absolutely right but I'm going with something a little bit more practical. First off, markers are looking for you to answer the research question that you set.

So, it's up to you to then answer it, please make sure that you do that. And that ties into what Gary was suggesting about going back to your research objectives and your aims as you're writing.

The second thing I'd say is, although Kris is quite right, we're not looking for a Nobel Prize-winning piece of work here, but what we are looking for is something that explains what your research means in terms of your topics. So, not just the description of what he did and what you found as description, but the explanation of why that matters, what that means, and doing it that way.

And then my final one would be markers want something that's readable. Help your marker to see what you're talking about, help them understand what you're saying. Part of that of course goes back to what we said right at the very start. Let your passion show, let your passion come through. You need to write objectives and you can't afford to be blinkered in your results. Write a piece that shows all the things you wanted to investigate.

AB: Fantastic. We've come full circle, beginning with passion, ending with passion and in between so many pieces of advice providing a comprehensive look at the Project, both from the tutors', markers' and students' perspectives, which I hope will prove useful for any students who are currently deliberating over their Project topics.

So thank you everyone for your time - to Jon, to Hazel, to Gary and to Kris.

It's been really interesting. If you are not a student of ours but would like to find out more about our programmes, head to ucem.ac.uk/study-with-ucem/. Thanks for listening!