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Context and process challenges associated with supervising postgraduate dissertations: An example from marketing

Lynn Vos[a,*], Kate Armstrong[b]

[a] University of Hertfordshire, UK
[b] Regent's University, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings of a study into the challenges that U.K. marketing academics face in supervising postgraduate dissertations. Findings from semi-structured interviews with supervisors from 10 UK Universities are categorised using elements of Biggs' (1989) 3P and Astin's (1970) I-E-O conceptual frameworks of teaching and learning. In particular, the study looks at the challenges that supervisors perceive with the dissertation process and whether they are *context* dependent (related to student characteristics or situational/institutional factors) or *process* dependent – related to dissertation procedural factors and supervisor-student transactional and relational factors. The main objective is to assess which challenges are more amenable to solutions or mitigation, at least in the short term. In addition, the findings are compared with the literature to identify if there are commonalities or unique differences between those who supervise marketing dissertations and those from other disciplines and to suggest solutions. While institutional factors such as the drive to recruit more high-fee paying international students and the policy of keeping the master's degree to one year may be difficult to change in the short run, there are many other opportunities to improve the dissertation experience for both supervisors and students.

1. Introduction

The market-oriented model of UK higher education (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009) has led to both an increase in the numbers of students taking undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and the search for higher fee-paying candidates. For UK Masters' programmes in business and marketing, for example, HESA (2000–2010) data shows that student numbers increased by just over 300% during the period from 2000 to 2010. Two other trends are notable: first, in the past 15 years, the time to complete most master's degrees has decreased from 18 months to one year and second, most students on marketing related master's degrees typically come with English as a second language. Currently, Chinese students make up the majority of non- UK students on these programmes and along with other foreign students, pay 30–80% more than domestic students for their degrees (UKCISA.org.uk). The growing student numbers, the rise in non-native English-speaking candidates, and the shorter time frame to complete today's postgraduate degrees are just some of the challenges faced by academics teaching on these programmes. For both academics and students, many of these challenges coalesce around and become magnified in one of the major teaching and learning experiences on a UK master's programme, the dissertation.[1]

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: l.vos@herts.ac.uk (L. Vos).

[1] In the United States and Canada, the master's degree is called a 'thesis'. The term 'dissertation is used for the work of doctoral students.

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For most taught UK master's degrees in marketing the traditional dissertation remains the culminating capstone project. Students generally finish their core taught modules within 8 months and then use the remaining 4 months to complete and submit the dissertation. How students are prepared for the task of researching a topic varies by institution but for the most part students are assigned a supervisor early in the academic year, take a course or set of lectures in research methods, and write a research proposal prior to working on their dissertation. In marketing, most students will undertake some form of empirical research and produce a 12–18,000 word document including a literature review, methodology, data analysis/findings, conclusions, recommendations and limitations. While some institutions are replacing the dissertation with other capstone experiences such as consultancy projects and action research reports, many UK-based master's in marketing programmes still include a dissertation.

The literature on dissertations at all levels – undergraduate, master's and doctorate is robust and covers a wide range of issues and challenges related to the supervision process, to student achievement, and to contextual and institutional factors. However, there has only been meagre research into issues associated with the master's level dissertations in marketing. This paper presents a small exploratory study of master's level marketing supervisors at ten UK institutions to identify their perceptions of the key challenges associated with dissertation supervision in the context of a changing higher education environment. The main objectives are to:

- differentiate the supervisor perceptions regarding the challenges that are contextual such as situational and student related factors and those that occur within the process of dissertation study; and
- determine whether there is evidence for issues unique to master's level marketing dissertations or whether they face common challenges and experiences to other disciplines.

The research will help to identify those issues and challenges that are more amenable to change or improvement in the short term, and those that may be more difficult to change without greater investment of time and other resources. Recommendations are also provided on how other disciplines have managed problems and issues associated with the dissertation process.

The paper uses elements of Biggs' (1989) and Astin's (1970) conceptual frameworks on learning and teaching that consider how different factors affect students' learning outcomes and their overall learning experience. These factors include those that are contextual and may pre-exist when the learning experience begins as well as those that vary and interact during their learning. The study does not seek to operationalise or measure the impact of all these factors but to use them as an aid to understand and categorise the challenges that dissertation supervisors perceive as being of concern and in need of solutions. To provide some validation of the findings, comparisons are made with the general literature on dissertations from a range of disciplines and academic levels to determine if the challenges identified in this study are unique or are representative of broader concerns across supervisors of dissertations in higher education.

2. Background: Master's degrees in marketing in the UK

The website master'sportal.eu was used as a proxy to identify master's in marketing programmes in the UK given that no higher education body provides such a listing (master'sportal.eu, 2017). The website lists 221 Master's in marketing programmes at both private and public UK higher education institutions, 68% of which award a Master of Science (MSc) degree, and 27% a Master of Arts (MA). A sample of 30 MSc and 20 MA programmes was chosen from this website to see how MSc and MA marketing programmes differ.

The review revealed little difference in their offerings, although some MSc programmes include more statistics training. Six of the 221 programmes are MBAs with a marketing focus, 5 are M. Phil or M. Res, and except for one European master's, two part-time

Table 1
Master's of marketing degree types in the UK (2017).

Number	and degree types
85	Marketing, Marketing Management, Strategic Marketing, Marketing Online
30	Marketing Communications, Promotion, Advertising and/or Public Relations International, Global, Cross-Cultural Communications and International
10	Digital Marketing and/or Social Media
9	Management/Business with Marketing
9	International Fashion, Fashion Marketing
8	Brand related
6	MBA – Marketing focus
6	Tourism and Events with Marketing
6	Combination (e.g. Marketing with English; Marketing and Finance)
5	M. Phil or M. Res
4	Sports Marketing
3	Marketing/Business Analytics
3	CIM Top Up (Chartered Institute of Marketing postgraduate diploma + Dissertation)
2	Marketing and Innovation
2	Retailing
2	Marketing, Consumption and Society
1	Charity Marketing and Fundraising
1	Marketing and Financial Services
Total	221

degrees and four online master's, all are one year in length. Table 1 provides a classification of the courses based on their titles. Thirty-eight (38%) percent are general marketing degrees with marketing communications and international-related programmes making up a further 27%. Six programmes cross two subjects (e.g. Marketing and English; Marketing and Finance), 10 digital and/or social media programmes, and 9 combine management or business with marketing. These and the variety of other marketing specialty programmes comprise the remaining 35%.

The programmes were reviewed to determine whether students were required to complete a traditional dissertation or another type of capstone project. Eighty-one (81%) percent of the programmes sampled require students to do a dissertation, 8% give students a choice of a dissertation, an internship project or a major project, and 10% or 22 institutions offer only a major project. The dissertation is clearly still the most common way in which a UK based master's level in marketing is assessed as a measure of 'postgraduateness', although other learning experiences such as 'consultancy projects', 'work-based projects', 'action research reports', or 'integrated communications plans' are currently offered on 18% of programmes.

The dissertation is typically an extended piece of writing based on an in-depth reading and analysis of scholarly work on a topic chosen, discussed with and approved by an academic supervisor. Although literature reviews or dissertations based on secondary research are accepted at most institutions, anecdotal evidence from discussion with colleagues across the sector indicates that most students are encouraged to do primary data collection framed around a conceptual framework and a justified method. A review of the guidelines for UK master's programmes in marketing provided online from 50 Universities show the following similarities in their structure and requirements:

- the dissertation carries at least double the credit value of individual modules[2]
- the word count generally ranges from 12,000 to 18,000 words although the length varies from 8000 to 20,000 words);
- it is described as a major or significant piece of work;
- students concentrated work on the dissertation begins after two semesters of taught modules, thus allowing about four months for its completion;
- preparation for the dissertation tends to consist of a dedicated research methods module taught during the year or a series of lectures in research methods; and
- students are often required to submit and pass a research proposal before undertaking their work.

The dissertation is a multifaceted project that requires students to integrate an array of skills, processes and capabilities and to demonstrate considerable depth of knowledge on a focussed topic. Hart (2004) notes that the purpose of the master's dissertation "is to give [students'] the opportunity to demonstrate … that [they] have acquired the 'ability to do capable and competent research [and to show] … 'mastery' of the skills of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, argumentation and data collection and handling …" (pp. 5–6). He also suggests that students need to bring a range of capabilities and attitudes to the dissertation process including self-management, determination, objectivity, adaptability and reflection.

Researching UK master's supervisors in an education department, Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin (2006) found that supervisors see their most important tasks as helping students to arrive at a well-defined focus for their dissertation, assisting them in developing a realistic and manageable research design, helping them to fine tune their research instrument, and acting as a 'critical reader' and commentator on student drafts. They describe supervisors' sense of responsibility to ensure that the final product meets established academic standards; however, for many, there is a challenge in find the right balance in terms of how much input, feedback and/or editing to provide before the work becomes less that of the student's and more of their own. Supervisors also take different approaches to developing student agency with the dissertation, some preferring that students take responsibility from the beginning for managing their time and contacting the supervisor while others provide more structured, rule-driven and timetabled support (Anderson et al., 2006).

3. Factors affecting the dissertation learning experience: a theoretical framework

Learning experiences and their outcomes are context dependent and affected by many factors (Biggs, 1993). Both Biggs (1993) and Astin (1970) have conceived models of learning that describe the influences and process that affect student experiences and outcomes. Biggs' (1993) 3P model (presage, process, and product) establishes a range of factors that are contextual to the learning situation and exist prior to it. *Presage* factors are of two main types –*student characteristics* such as prior education and knowledge, beliefs about learning, and attitudes towards learning; and *situational factors* such as regulations, policies, the learning environment, and teaching methods. Both presage and process factors will affect students' cognitive, behavioural and affective outcomes (the *products*).

Astin's (1970) Inputs-Environment-Outputs (I-E-O) model was first proposed to improve educational research into why some students do better than others on assessment. He argued that unless educational researchers control for what he terms *input* differences (student characteristics), they cannot draw accurate or unbiased estimates of how other factors affect student outcomes. Unlike Biggs, Astin (2012) does not identify all student characteristics as pre-existing but views input differences as both fixed, such

[2] The term 'module' is used in the UK to refer to a course or subject taken within the degree. For a taught master's degree in the UK, students need to successfully complete 180 credits, 60 of which make up the dissertation/major project and 120 from taught modules. Modules may be worth 15, 20 or 30 credits each, depending on the institution.

as demographic and educational background characteristics, and those that can vary over time such as “cognitive functioning, aspirations, [motivation] and expectations, self-ratings, values [and] behavioural patterns” (p. 76). Many teaching and learning researchers have found support for Astin's view that how students approach learning will be affected by prior teaching and learning experiences as well as by their self-confidence, motivations, and attitudes (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 1992).

Environment in Astin’s (2012) I-E-O model is contextual and “[refers] to the student's actual experiences during the educational program” (p. 18). The environment or context for learning includes university regulations and policies, such as recruitment policies; the programme students follow, including content and teaching and learning methods, processes and assessments; the learning environment; organisation and management; and teacher approaches and styles. *Outputs* are student outcome variables; these can be cognitive (e.g. grades), behavioural, and affective (e.g. programme satisfaction). Biggs and Astin's frameworks have considerable similarities. However, while Biggs (1989) was initially concerned with the approach students would take to their learning (deep, surface, and/or strategic), Astin (1970) was seeking to improve the way assessments and their outcomes are compared. Nonetheless, both models provide insights into a range of factors that help to clarify and categorise the challenges associated with various educational experiences and how they might be improved.

Both Biggs (1993) and Astin (2012) added dimensionality and interactions to their models over time and a reading of their research reveals that within both Biggs and Astin's models, procedural, transactional and relational factors are embedded. *Procedural* factors refer to the established university or programme guidelines and requirements, how students interpret, work with and understand these requirements and manage their time (Armitage, 2006). Although Biggs does not use the term procedural, he argues that there is an interaction between factors such as university guidelines/requirements and how students approach learning tasks. This interaction can be positive or fraught with challenges. In terms of the dissertation, procedural factors include requirements for students to establish a clearly focussed topic, set aims and objectives, undertake a deep review and analysis of the literature, and justify their methodology. These stages generally take place after or near the completion of research methods training where students are often required to pass the research proposal stage before moving onto the dissertation.

In Biggs' (1993) learning process, students and teachers are also interacting in *transactional and relational* ways (Armitage, 2006). Transactional factors refer to how supervisors and students negotiate and work out their expectations of each other and involve supervisors providing information, guidelines and setting work while students are taking in information, developing their understanding, asking questions, seeking feedback and undertaking the work (or not). *Relational factors* are about building trust, managing communication issues and/or breakdowns, and dealing with affective issues. As Armitage (2006) notes in his research on dissertation supervision in a UK business school, supervisors will take different approaches to their role, some following a more structured approach requiring students to meet deadlines, follow set protocols and attend scheduled meetings while others will be more ad hoc, preferring to let students develop agency from an early stage. This might involve allowing students to contact them when required and set the agenda for meetings. Some supervisors change their practices over the course of the dissertation. Acker, Hill, and Black (1994) found that while many supervisors will start with a more structured approach – what they term a *technical rationality model* –over time they move towards a more *negotiated order model,* thus tending to be open to adjusting the supervisory process to the needs of different students and to changing their approach over the period of supervision.

In a learning experience where academics and students work together one on one, such as in the master's dissertation, *relational factors* often come to the forefront (Anderson et al., 2006; Armitage, 2006; Vilkinas, 2008). Over the many stages of and student challenges with the dissertation, supervisors will be called on to provide both intellectual advice and emotional support (Vilkinas, 2008). At the same time, they are seeking to develop the student's self-confidence, independence and agency (Anderson et al., 2006). As Grant (2003) notes “supervision differs from other forms of teaching and learning in higher education in its peculiarly intense and negotiated character, as well as in its requirements for a blend of pedagogical and personal relationship skills” (p.175).

4. Methodology

Using the interview transcripts of the 10 current UK master's in marketing dissertation supervisors, this study applied Biggs' (1993) and Astin's (1970) concepts to identify and categorise the factors and challenges that, from supervisors' perspectives, most influence and affect the dissertation learning experience. We consider both *context factors* – student related and situational (including Astin's (1970) environmental factors and Biggs' (1993) institutional factors), and process factors. That is, those that can vary with or within the student-supervisor relationship: procedural, transactional and relational (*process factors*). We also consider the interaction between context factors and process factors (See Fig. 1).

The findings are discussed in alignment with the broader literature and the discussion categorises issues and challenges as more amenable to change or improvement in the short term and provides recommendations for how to do so while also considering why some others may be more difficult to change.

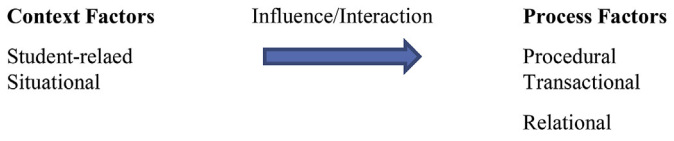

Fig. 1. Factors affecting the dissertation supervision and learning experience.

Table 2
Interview codes.

Gender	Male or Female	6 Male; 4 Female	Programme
Academic Level	Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Principal Lecturer, Reader, Professor	Most U.K. Universities use these titles to show the teaching and/or research level of staff. Career progression generally begins at the Lecturer Level, however a lecturer at an old University would potentially have more research experience that one from a Post 1992 University.	2 MSC Marketing
		N = 10: 2 Lecturers; 4 Senior Lecturers, 1 Principal Lecturer, 1 Reader, 2 Professors	2 MA Marketing
		N-10: 2 Old Universities, 8 Post-1992	MA Strategic Marketing MBA Marketing MA Advertising and Communications MA Marketing Communications MA Strategic Marketing Communications MA Digital Media

4.1. Design

A phenomenological, qualitative approach was considered most suitable to interrogate the research aim, which centred on the experiences of academics who supervise PG marketing dissertation students. Phenomenological researchers begin their study with the assumption that a phenomenon can only be understood through the words of the individuals who experience it (Myers, 1997). That is, the reality of the dissertation supervisors can be explained through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. This interpretive approach aims to comprehend phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them and does not predefine dependent and independent variables (Creswell, 2012; Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994), instead focussing on the complexity of individuals' behaviour as the situation emerges. This method facilitated the investigation and allowed for the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of the respondents to be identified through in-depth interviews, whilst still accounting for the social, individual and situational nuances and constraints of their experiences (Armstrong, 2017). Furthermore, given that the research into marketing dissertations is very limited, an exploratory approach was deemed most appropriate to lay foundations for future research.

Recruitment followed the identification of potential respondents via email; the authors found 10 academics (from ten different Universities across the UK), willing to participate who represented different academic levels including: professors, senior lecturers and lecturers, all of whom are active in research and are widely published in peer reviewed, marketing-related empirical journals. The selection of degree programmes that the supervisors work on attempted to reflect those found on Master's portal.eu (see Table One above). The final sample of respondents were from Universities that have a higher percentage of students studying on general marketing (n = 5); marketing communications (n = 3); MBA Marketing (n = 1) and Digital Marketing (n = 1). As the respondents wished for their University to remain anonymous, no further details are offered on the ten institutions that took part in the study, other than that they are mix from 'old' (pre-1992) and 'new' (post 1992) Universities. The sample detail of the respondents is illustrated in Table 2.

The term 'Old University' is a liberal one used to describe those HEIs that form the Russell Group of Universities and the original universities and are distinct and more established than their 'post-1992' counterparts. There are many definitions used to explain 'new' Universities, however, from a review of the literature, 'Post-1992' appears to be the least ambiguous in terms of reflecting the status of the university and represents the most commonly used term amongst the academic community. Older universities are often perceived as being much more research intensive than newer universities, although, the sector is diverse and changing rapidly so these terms do not necessarily reflect this perception.

The research instrument was developed following the review of current literature into existing issues, themes and opportunities across the dissertation literature in general and as identified by Vos (2013). No indication was given to respondents of the significance of these themes in the literature as we were seeking to identify challenges that resonated with marketing dissertation supervisors and to encourage them to draw conclusions of their own. Additional questions were asked to ensure that respondents had an opportunity to discuss what they felt to be the main challenges of supervision. Some background questions provided insights into each academic's tenure as a dissertation supervisor, their core research and teaching interests and their role at the institution. Information was also sought on the general characteristics of their postgraduate marketing dissertation project, whether students were offered alternatives to the traditional dissertation, how many students, on average, they supervise annually, and the typical backgrounds of their students. Pilot interviews were carried out with two current supervisors exclusively as a check for validity, thereafter, ten other supervisors were each interviewed for approximately 90 min at their respective institution. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

In line with the qualitative tradition and the interpretive approach, the narratives informed the codes, which then formed the themes that have been used as a structure for the results and analysis. All of the interviews were transcribed and analysed using Nvivo 8, which simplifies the interaction between the transcripts and the analysis procedure, thus facilitating a more holistic approach to code generation. The coding process was "*blind*"; the researchers sent samples of transcripts to each other for "*check coding*" a process endorsed by Miles and Huberman (1994) to uphold validity. The coding was compared and discussed for consistency but there were

no significant differences.

The themes are evidenced by direct quotes from the respondents' narratives (the terms ‘respondents’ and ‘supervisors’ are used interchangeably throughout the report). For clarity, each respondent has been given a code, so that they are identifiable, and the data remains rich and meaningful. The codes are designed to protect the identity of the respondents in line with the research code of conduct and the respondent's wishes. (See Table 2 for an explanation of the coding). Finally, to provide some interpretive validity of the results (Maxwell, 1992) each researcher again checked the findings of their counterpart before agreeing upon a final set of themes. Consensus between authors on the final themes was unanimous and reflective of the thorough, iterative analysis of the respondents' transcribed narratives, in line with the phenomenological analysis approach.

5. Findings

This section presents the key findings of the research, which are derived from an in-depth analysis of the transcribed supervisor interviews. The results revealed six themes that represent significant challenges faced by those supervising MA marketing dissertations in the UK: 1) Mismatched supervisors and the supervisory relationship; 2) Student motivation, comprehension and knowledge; 3) Research methods training and failing the research proposal; 4) Choosing a viable topic and conceptual framework; 5) Language and cultural barriers; and 6) Plagiarism and academic dishonesty.

As background, all supervisors noted that 80% or more of their students are from overseas and have generally entered from an undergraduate programme of study, from employment, and/or from another international institution. An average programme has 30–60 students (although one older University has 160 students on just one of its MA marketing programmes, and this has led to many supervisors feeling overburdened with supervision as well as the need to higher part time academics to support the large numbers). The length of dissertation supervision experience ranged from 4 years to over 20 years. Respondents supervise anywhere from six to 15 students per academic year. The respondent with 15 students complained that this is too many to manage effectively, especially where students have skills deficits or language issues. All respondents except one stated that their students undertake a ‘traditional’ dissertation, meaning that they are required to write approximately 12,000 to 18,000 words on a topic of their choice relating to the marketing discipline, the majority involving primary research and data gathering. At all ten Universities, the credit value of the dissertation is 60 credits or approximately 1/3 of the total credits on the programme. Students at one University undertake a consultancy project but the respondent noted that it includes many of the components of a traditional dissertation.

To contextualise the dissertation process in the wider remit of master's level programmes, it is useful to note that in cases, students complete their master's in one year, with programme courses running over two semesters and approximately four months dedicated to the dissertation. Most students are assigned a supervisor early in the academic year and they agree terms for meetings, deadlines and expectations. Supervision is largely constituted in face to face meetings, but email is also very important as are voice-over-internet protocol services such as Skype, particularly when students choose to complete the dissertation in their home countries. Most students take a research methods module and commonality exists between the respondents' description of the research methods curriculum, which, for the majority includes lectures, seminars and workshops on both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies with varying degrees of depth regarding these paradigms. In one case, however, the students had no seminars, only lectures and were taught with a mixed cohort across the business school. The duration of the courses lasts from 5 to 12 weeks and takes place in either the first or second semester. and all but one Old University assess their students using a research methods proposal. The anomaly University has only 5 weeks for the research methods class and students are assessed using a presentation of their ideas.

5.1. Challenge 1: mis-matched supervisors and the supervisory relationship

A key challenge identified by respondents is the mismatching of supervisors to students. With more post graduate marketing students and more students on other general business-related master's’ programmes (e.g. MBA) who are choosing to do dissertations on marketing topics, respondents remarked that there is just not enough teaching staff in their subject area to supervise all the dissertations, nor sufficient expertise in other departments. Many commented on the fact that they supervise master's dissertations on subjects of which they have no in-depth knowledge of or are unrelated to their own areas of research. In terms of the supervisory relationship, all respondents identified problems with students failing to contact them, failing to turn up to scheduled meetings and not appearing to understand their recommendations or feedback.

In terms of how they structure and proceed with the supervisory relationship, each respondent tended to have their own approach for calling and conducting meetings. They generally see their students 6 to a maximum of 10 times during the dissertation journey and meetings last from 15 to 30 min. The approach to organising supervisor meetings seems to fall into two camps: structured and ad hoc, as Armitage (2006) found in his research. Those supervisors who favour the structured style tend to have an initial group meeting with all students and then follow this with individual one to one meetings. Common to those with a ‘structured’ style is developing a set of rules that the supervisors explain to students and to which they are expected to adhere:

> I have a strict set of rules that I have developed over my years as a supervisor in order primarily to get the most out of my students and encourage them to progress and secondly, to manage my time effectively so that I'm not constantly being sent work or questions via email (Female, Senior Lecturer, post-1992).

Likewise, another male respondent has developed a list of rules to establish expectations early that he sends out to all students. It is one of the more extreme examples of a structured approach being used to manage time and progression with the dissertation

process and to manage expectations. The list largely includes behavioural expectations related to time management (coming to meetings on time; submitting various components on time; having a work plan and sticking to it) and codes of conduct (coming to meetings with paper and pen; informing the supervisor if the student cannot make a scheduled meeting; demonstrating evidence of wider reading and asking informative questions rather than asking the supervisor 'what should I do'; seeking the supervisor's help when difficulties arise; treating the process as a professional relationship; not expecting the supervisor to do editing). He noted, however, that many students ignore his guidelines. (Male, Senior Lecturer, Post 1992). Another respondent also explained that despite setting out clear guidelines, many students ignore them thus resulting in a rush near the end when serious problems cannot be rectified (Male, Reader, Post 1992). He noted that "I'm not sure what else we can do as supervisors to address student apathy and disorganisation".

Other advocates of the structured approach maintain that planning and focus by both the student and supervisor are critical. Only a few, however, tended to favour a more ad-hoc approach to meetings and in one case the respondent saw the weaknesses inherent in his own approach:

> I don't really have any protocols, which is unwise, as you can then be pestered by students all over the summer. I have colleagues who say I will see you at this time only and I will read a full draft at the end of the summer. I find that hard, … if a student gets in touch with me, I have to get back to them (Male, Professor, Old University).

In general, a common complaint was that many students do not turn up to scheduled meetings and that many of their international students return to their home countries to carry out their primary research and write their dissertations. In all cases, supervisors saw these behaviours as having a detrimental effect on the quality of the dissertation. Some also saw it as making it more difficult to ascertain whether the final piece of work was the student's own. With students not coming to the University for meetings and going overseas to do their dissertations, some supervisors have come up with other ways to interact with them. Innovative examples from amongst the respondents include: providing support in the form of online discussion groups, blogs, Skype meetings and through e-learning platforms.

5.2. Challenge 2: student motivation, comprehension and knowledge

Students' lack of motivation and advanced linguistic and conceptual skills to grasp research methods or literature review are also cited as key challenges for supervisors, and one that is deemed particularly hard to address:

> The problem is, you can give them as many research methods classes as you like with innovative teaching methods, creative approaches, course conferences and so on but if a student is lacking in motivation and doesn't really want to be here then you have a problem that is difficult to overcome (Male, Professor, post-1992).

These seemingly rather bleak sentiments are echoed by the other supervisors and suggest that more time needs to be spent motivating students in the earlier preparation for the dissertation and in finding alternative ways to develop their cognitive skills, but many felt that there were too many barriers currently in the system to allow for this to happen. Other common concerns were about the challenges students face with really getting to grips with the academic literature and being able to synthesise, analyse and critique the work of others. Further discussion of skills and knowledge weaknesses follows in a later section.

5.3. Challenge 3: research methods preparation and failing the research proposal

As noted above, in most cases, students are prepared for the dissertation through a research methods module or a set of lectures. Most respondents also appear to agree with the findings of Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, and Nunan (1998) that the way research methods is taught and assessed is not an ideal way to prepare students for the dissertation, nor does it help them to write a good initial research proposal.

Most expect their students to complete a research proposal that includes a focused topic, aim, objectives and/or set of research questions, a brief literature review showing evidence of a conceptual framework, justification for the chosen research design, clarity on how primary research participants will be sampled and accessed, ethical considerations and a timeline for completion. One lecturer noted that the research method module has four assessment points, including a bibliography, short literature review, outline and justification for the methodology and then a textual analysis. Each student does an oral presentation to which supervisors give feedback, however he argues that it is a rather disjointed process that does not seem to help students when it comes to the dissertation (Male, Lecturer, 1992).

All remarked that each year some students start their dissertations even when they have failed the research proposal, and that this is due to institutional pressure to ensure that regardless of whether a student fails this stage, they will still complete on time. Underlying the problem of failures in the proposal is the difficulty students' face in research methods training. Fail rates on the module average 25% and most respondents feel that it remains an especially challenging course for students. Common problems include: lack of resources to create additional classes; lack of student attendance; student apathy and, most significantly, students not grasping or understanding research approaches, philosophies and concepts. To help more students through the module, one department removed the more challenging concepts, but this did not, in the end, solve the problem of failure or weaknesses in dissertations:

> The problems with our research methods classes are that they are too general and lacking in depth and nuances of research that

our students need.there are no philosophical discussions at all.but because this had proven difficult for students in the past, we took them out. (Male, Lecturer, Post 1992).

Similarly, another respondent indicated that their research methods curriculum is too limited and too generic because the marketing students take their methods classes along with students on all of the other business disciplines and that there are no seminars to explore concepts in depth, only lectures. (Male, Professor, Old University).

Some academics are trying out ways to overcome the problems students face with the research proposal and research methods:

When I first meet with my students, I tell them all to resubmit their research proposal to me, so I get an idea of what they want to do. I then ask them to re-write their proposal based on the feedback they were given and to incorporate any further advice I may have given them since we have met. This means that any of the students who have failed are brought up to standard more quickly than if they just got started on the dissertation proper. (Female, Senior Lecturer, Old University).

Another academic has turned the poor student engagement with research methods she has faced into a positive learning experience by using a mini research conference.

In general, however, the conversations revealed that the supervisors wish they had more time to engage their students during the preparation for the dissertation through the research methods classes, had more time to try different approaches and ways to share good practices amongst the teaching and supervisory team.

There is a significant gap between the supervisors' knowledge and what is really going on in the research methods classes … most of us aren't really clear on what preparations the students go through before they come to us to be supervised. I think there is a real issue with this and perhaps the process would be better if we had more of a collaboration between everyone and we share knowledge and expectations (Female, Senior Lecturer, Old University).

Many noted that a key reason why students find research methods difficult, fail their proposals and have limited knowledge of good research practice when it comes to writing their dissertation is that a one-year master's programme with all the other content students are expected to learn is just too short for them to develop and practice the required knowledge and skills.

5.4. Challenge 4: choosing a viable topic and conceptual framework

In line with failing the research proposal, students generally seem to have a problem finding a viable topic area to research that will lead to a worthy conceptual framework. Most respondents agreed that they experience this difficulty each year and noted that students tend to come to their first supervisory meeting with a topic area that is far too broad – a point also discussed in the literature.

Some students come to me saying that they want to research ‘branding and trainers’ or ‘consumer behaviour and decisions making’ or ‘why people buy … whatever’ – it's incredibly frustrating as we try to prepare them through our intensive and advanced research methods module, yet we still have these problems once the student comes to the supervisor relationship, they just don't grasp the methodological issues sufficiently enough to proceed. (Female, Senior Lecturer).

Some respondents to this study view it as a problem of skills - in particular, weaknesses in students' abilities to be analytical and critical - while others see it as a challenging task that takes considerable time to do well, even for seasoned researchers.

5.5. Challenge 5: language and cultural barriers

All ten respondents maintained that language competence is a significant issue facing UK postgraduate marketing dissertation students given that 80% or more of their students do not have English as a first language. The narratives point to the frustration that supervisors feel at the drive by their institutions to recruit more and more overseas students whose level of English is low to very poor. These students necessarily find writing a 12–18,000 word dissertation very difficult.

There is also a concern by some respondents that the English language qualification used to recruit students, the IELTS,[3] is a flawed measure of language competency. Two respondents noted that there are big differences in being able to speak coherently, understand written materials and write clearly in another language and most international students are weak in both comprehension and writing.

I think our IELTS is 7 but there are lots of issues, for one thing, the IELTS is quite flawed and cheating does happen. It offers a very weak understanding of conversational English, which is associated with the test. I think Universities don't want to face this as of course then numbers would reduce and therefore funding (Male, Professor, Old University).

Respondents also discussed cultural differences in how international students are taught prior to coming to the U.K. and how this might impact upon their ability to undertake a dissertation. In addition, the issue of culture differences in how international students are taught prior to coming to the UK was discussed. One respondent perceives that language and culture are inextricably linked with how a student is potentially able to cope:

[3] IELTS stands for International English Language testing system that is used across the world to test standards of English. All U.K. Universities use the IELTS as a measure of English language competence when choosing to admit non-native English speakers. Most Universities take students with a 6.5 IELTS score and many feel this is just too low for Masters level comprehension and writing.

North American, Europe, British and Russian students are more independent learners, they go off and read more and come back and say OK I have read this and this is what I think, but my Asian students, they are more dependent due to the cultural differences and how they have been taught in the past, so linguistically and conceptually, they struggle with the process of the dissertation" (Female, Senior Lecturer, Old University)

These findings lend support to the idea that language competency is only one of the challenges associated with large cohorts of non-native English speakers who only have 12 months to complete their degree. Many respondents also noted that students on their programmes do not have marketing as a first degree and thus also need time to learn the core concepts. Prior educational experiences may not include writing or even reading long essays or research papers, or critiquing others work and thus they come to the UK master's dissertation with an incomplete set of skills for a marketing dissertation.

5.6. Challenge 6: plagiarism: disillusionment and a desire to raise the academic standard

There seemed to be a real sense of disillusionment amongst the supervisors regarding plagiarism and the limited use of vivas at their institutions. Orally examining students work is tended not to be an option for most respondents in this study unless the student has been accused of plagiarism and yet all respondents felt it should be a natural part of the process. However, for situational reasons, such as high student numbers and the short time frame for the dissertation, supervisors realise this is not likely to happen, even though they believe it would raise the overall academic standard.

I think it's a mistake that we don't have vivas, it's a useful idea as it would give us an understanding of whether it's the student's work or not. However, from what I have seen at this University, it doesn't seem like we can do much even if we do know that the work isn't the student's own (Male, Reader, post-1992).

Respondents are also concerned about that idea that more and more students may be buying their dissertations. Online businesses which make this an option for students are flourishing. At least one respondent to this study had experienced this issue:

There is a real issue with students buying dissertations. I had two cases in particular – a student, she kept failing her dissertation, twice in fact. It's written in American English and she is from Iran and the stats were beyond her capability, …we knew that but it's so hard to prove, so she slipped through the system and she got her degree. Another one was a Thai National who also got her degree in the end … …These are the issues that no one wants to face and there is no real system to deal with it here in the UK, it's awful, it's so difficult to prove (Female, Lecturer, Old University).

Similarly, one supervisor pointed to the need for the institution to do more:

The future seems bleak with the amount of students that seem to be buying dissertations – with new technology it is harder and harder to track whether a student is guilty of plagiarism …. The problem … is that we need to be supported by our universities and have stringent, appropriate and effective plagiarism protocols in place so that these students do not go on to receive their degrees (Male, Professor, Old University).

6. Discussion

What is clear from the findings is that marketing dissertation supervisors face considerable challenges. One of the main objectives of the paper is to differentiate the supervisor perceptions of those challenges that are *contextual* or those that occur within the *process* of dissertation study. Based on the interview findings, it is possible to categorise *contextual* (student and situational) and *process* related (procedural, transactional and relational) factors and these are presented in Table 3. What follows is a discussion of these factors with reference to the wider literature demonstrating where marketing related challenges are also found in other disciplines, the study's second objective.

Context factors (situational and student related) represent a considerable set of challenges for supervisors. In terms of situational factors, respondents referred often to their institutions' recruitment policies and the priority to attract as many high fee-paying candidates as possible, especially non-UK and non-EU students who pay up to 80% more than domestic students. For some, this means a growing number of students to supervise with no additional resources. It also leads to mismatches between student interests and supervisor expertise and more students with linguistic problems who do not have enough time in a one-year master's to improve sufficiently to write competently. Many respondents to this study also feel that their institution sets the English language proficiency requirement (IELTS minimum score of 6.0–6.5) too low and furthermore that the test does not adequately measure a student's ability to work with scholarly texts and or their level of linguistic ability. Even according to IELTS, students falling within the band between 6.0 and 6.5 are merely competent users of English (Paton, 2012). This is supported by a large study undertaken by the University of Western Ontario where researchers found that current tests of English are generally poor predictors of academic performance and students writing ability (Simner & Mitchell, 2007). In addition to the linguistic challenges that overseas students face, many have come from a different educational background that may not prepare them for writing a long research document like the dissertation, an issue that will be discussed further under student-related factors.

Another *situational factor* that is not so much institutional as representing what could be called a tradition in UK marketing departments is the requirement that students take a research methods module as preparation for the dissertation. Many respondents suggested that students' struggle with research methods training and that the content and assessment does not prepare them well for the dissertation, leading some to take it upon themselves to provide additional training to help improve students' knowledge and

Table 3
Marketing dissertation supervisor perceptions of contextual and process challenges with the dissertation.

Context Factors	• Situational	1. University policies on recruitment – greater number of higher fee- paying candidates; up to 80% are international students. 2. IELTS a flawed measure of English language competency. 3. Length of master's has decreased to 12 months. 4. Increasing number of dissertation students per supervisor. 5. Increasing numbers of marketing dissertations – supervisors not always working in their area of specialism. 6. Lack of resources to provide additional support for supervisors, students, and for vivas. 7. Research methods module/lectures not seen to be the best way to prepare students for the dissertation. 8. Lack of collaboration and sharing of good practice amongst dissertation supervisors.
	• Student –related	1. Many international students have weak linguistic skills. 2. Large percentage of students who have not previously studied marketing. 3. Prior educational backgrounds of many international students do not prepare them for writing long research essays or for critical analysis. 4. Weak conceptual skills. 5. Weak research skills (literature review, methodology, analysis). 6. Poor motivation and attendance in research methods and at supervisory meetings.
Process Factors	• Procedural Factors	1. Student challenges with choosing a viable topic for the dissertation. 2. Student challenges narrowing down and focussing their topic for research. 3. Problems with all aspects of the literature review. 4. Weak primary research gathering and analysis skills.
	• Transactional and relational factors	1. Supervisor approach (more ad hoc or more structured) does not always meet its objectives – many students tend not to follow rules/guidelines. 2. Supervisor approach many not be appropriate for type of student. 3. Student behaviour – not coming to meetings lack of preparation, leaving the country to complete dissertation, etc.

understanding of academic research. This is not an effective solution however as only a few students benefit.

The broader literature on dissertation study also supports the idea that research methods courses are challenging for students and do not adequately prepare them for the dissertation (Edwards & Thatcher, 2006; Meyer, Shanahan, & Laugksch, 2005; Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2005). For example, Allison, Kewkowicz and Nunan (1998) argue that the typical way that research methods is taught and assessed is not appropriate for dissertations because the classes tend to be more applied and are not appropriate preparation for an academic research project.

At most, a fifteen week first or second semester course in research methods is provided as the foundation for the dissertation in marketing at UK universities. This implies that topics such as how to undertake a literature review and how to select an appropriate research method are covered in just one or two weeks, arguably not enough time for the complexity of these topics. Considerable research has also pointed out difficulties that students have with transferring knowledge acquired in one domain to that of another (see for example, Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; McKeough, Lupart, & Marini, 1995). For successful transfer to take place students need to have mastered the earlier material (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000) and be given multiple opportunities to apply knowledge learned to the new context (Maranville, 2015). These opportunities are difficult to achieve in the short time available for the dissertation. A longer time frame may be needed, but unfortunately, there is little research on the impact on learning or the differences in outcomes from a one year degree to that of an eighteen month or two-year master's degree.

A significant category of context-related challenges in the postgraduate dissertation relate to *student characteristics.* Astin (2012) describes these as either fixed (demographic and educational background characteristics) or those that can vary over time such as cognitive functioning, motivation, aspirations, expectations, learning beliefs, values and behaviour. Three key student-related factors that were found in this study to present challenges for marketing supervisors and students are language issues, prior education, and skill deficits. Language, or more appropriately, linguistic issues and competency have been considered briefly in the section above, but, supervisors also report that international students evince other types of skill weaknesses. In their view, Chinese students, who make up the largest cohort in most MA Marketing programmes, tend to come onto the programme with less preparation in critique and analysis. Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006), Abasi and Graves (2008) and Huang (2008) have examined the linguistic challenges that Chinese dissertation students face in understanding scholarly work written in English and in writing a literature review section that requires criticality and attributing sources. In their study on Chinese students' critical thinking performance, Ku and Ho (2010) note that while the Confucian-collectivist culture of the Chinese places a high value on academic pursuit it does not actively encourage the kind of critical thinking that is advocated in the West. They note that “in [their] cultural context where higher values are placed on respect for authority, tradition and social harmony, diversity in opinion may not be well appreciated” (p.57). This point should not be overstated, however, as Chinese educators are acknowledging the importance of critical thinking and students now coming to study in Western Universities may be arriving with greater experience of this type of thinking than we give them credit for (Ku & Ho, 2010). Their challenges may lie just as much with linguistic difficulties as with thinking skills and prior learning.

Student skill deficits or weaknesses in analysis, evaluation, clear and coherent writing, methodology and statistical analysis are also cited by marketing dissertation supervisors. These problems are heightened by the fact that a dissertation requires students to integrate such a wide range of knowledge and skills, some of which may be partially learned in research methods and others which, it

is often assumed, students have learned elsewhere. As Andrews (2007) has noted in his work on the kinds of skills required for completing a dissertation, courses at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels tend to focus more on content delivery than skill development, despite the employability agenda, and thus curriculum designers and supervisors are wrong to assume that key dissertation skills have been taught elsewhere, in depth, or have been sufficiently mastered.

In addition to the *context* factors discussed above are *process* related challenges that can be broken down into *procedural factors* and *transactional and relational factors. Procedural factors* include University and programme dissertation guideline documents and what is expected of both supervisors and students. They also include how students interpret, work with and understand the requirements of the dissertation and manage their time. As noted in the conceptual framework *procedural challenges* are influenced by situational factors and are associated with prior learning and skill deficits. Situational factors include the type of preparation marketing faculty choose to give students for the dissertation (e.g. research methods module) and the short time frame to inculcate the knowledge and skills needed for each part of the dissertation in a one-year programme. These issues may help explain why students are often confounded or at least initially perplexed by how to undertake various stages of the dissertation. Respondents to this study focused particularly on the difficulty students have with problem definition and narrowing down a topic for research, problems that have also been identified in the literature (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997; Jenkins, Jordan, & Weiland, 1993; Thompson, 1999; Todd, Bannister & Smith, 2006).

Procedural and *student-related challenges* are often compounded by the fact that students and supervisors have different expectations about what their counterpart will provide or be able to do and what exactly is meant by 'plagiarism' or attribution and justification of knowledge, a point we will return to later. In addition, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) have argued that supervisors may have become habituated to the concepts and aspects of the process over such a long period that they have become tacit and taken for granted, thus never fully communicated to students. In addition, as Polanyi (1958) clarified, tacit knowledge is the kind of knowledge that is very hard to convey to others through traditional means such as 'telling' and writing it down. On this theme, Rust, Price, and O'Donovan (2003) argue that simply explaining key assessment criteria and standards such as those associated with the dissertation "is not sufficient to develop a shared understanding of 'useful knowledge' between staff and students. Socialisation processes are necessary for tacit knowledge transfer to occur" and this takes both time and peer engagement with the criteria" (p. 162).

Transactional factors are those related to how supervisors and students work out the expectations and requirements of their relationship during the dissertation process and *relational factors* refer to how each deals with building trust, managing communication issues and breakdowns, and working towards each other's expectations (Armitage, 2006). Writing on postgraduate dissertations, Drennan and Clarke (2009) and McCormack (2004) demonstrated that t*ransactional and relational challenges* emerge when supervisors have expectations and understandings of their students' prior knowledge and capabilities that do not match the students' abilities or learning. McCormack (2004) conducted interviews with a small group of students and supervisors over the duration of their dissertation study and found that there was a considerable gap in students' understanding about research and what was expected of them against what supervisors believed students were able to do. In some student/supervisor relationships this gap was so wide that students' either did not finish or did not finish on time. If supervisors are not fully aware of student knowledge and skill weaknesses, they will be less likely to intervene with the right kind of support and feedback.

On *transactional* factors, Armitage (2006) notes that supervisors can take different approaches to dissertation study and, indeed, our study has demonstrated that some supervisors follow a very structured, rule-based approach while others are more ad-hoc. Differences in approach may lead to mismatches between supervisors and students, particularly when a more ad-hoc supervisory approach is used with a student who is quite dependent and needs more structure and 'hand-holding'. In our study, however, it appears that regardless of whether the supervisor used a highly structured, rule-based approach or a more ad hoc one, supervisors complained that many students still failed to turn up to scheduled meetings, make use of feedback or meet deadlines.

Embedded within the transactional aspects of the supervisory process are *relational factors* –whether or not trust is built between the student and supervisor, how communication issues and breakdowns are managed, and how each party deals with emotional and affective issues. In terms of international students studying for a master's degree, the literature is rich in terms of how the relationship may fail to develop effectively between the two (e.g. Abasi & Graves, 2008; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Allison et al., 1998; Dong, 1998; Cadman, 1997). Cadman (1997) speaks of how the epistemological differences between international students and their supervisors can leave the students with a sense of "'loss' and 'being lost' …. not only in the people and cultures they have lost in leaving their countries behind, but also the skills and competencies they feel they have lost in [the Western] environment" (p 8). These students can feel almost unfit for the dissertation and are less likely to want to see their supervisors or have difficulty engaging effectively with them. In addition, the sense of being an outsider can make international students feel very alone and thus their affective state may hinder their ability to meet the supervisors' goals and requirements. Thus, when the marketing supervisors interviewed here comment on the low levels of motivation they find in their dissertation students or their failure to attend scheduled meetings, what may be happening is that the student has lost confidence in their abilities and feel that they do not have the skills to complete the task (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004; Huang, 2008).

A final set of challenges are those that are in part *contextual* and in part *procedural* - plagiarism, attribution of sources and academic dishonesty. Plagiarism, the potential to purchase a dissertation, and misunderstandings about what and how to reference are major concerns for our supervisors. Most feel that at one time or another they may have, or their institution has allowed a student to pass based on work that was either all or in large part not their own and this is a great worry to them. Some feel that the short time frame for the dissertation, cultural factors and the prior education of international students, the increasing number of online sources offering to sell a completed dissertation, and general student skill weaknesses contribute to the problems of academic dishonesty. The literature points to a much more complex problem than what on the surface appears to be simple dishonesty and cheating (e.g. Abasi

& Graves, 2008; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Duff, Rogers, & Harris, 2006; Leask, 2006; McGowan, 2005) and more will be discussed on this issue in the recommendations section below.

7. Recommendations

A major objective of this study was to identify key challenges faced by marketing dissertation supervisors. Although a small sample was used, we can argue that the literature supports most of these challenges as common to many dissertation supervisors from a range of disciplines. Another objective was to categorise these challenges as a first step to identifying potential solutions. We argue that supervisors, programme leaders, and University managers would benefit from a discussion of the factors that affect and influence the dissertation learning experience and student outcomes. Through a structured evaluation of these factors those involved can identify which are within their control to change or influence in the short term and which as Freeth and Reeves (2004) note, "must be accommodated' because of 'genuine constraints" (p.43).

In drawing some tentative conclusions about which of these sets of challenges are most amenable to change, some recommendations can be made to help with current practice:

Situational Factors: Given the change in UK higher education to a more market-oriented model where it is incumbent upon Universities to increase their income to make up for the decreases in government funding, it is not likely that changes will be made soon to student recruitment onto UK master's in marketing programmes. As of early 2018, numbers of overseas students were up again[4], thus long as these students are willing to come to the UK for their postgraduate education and pay the higher fees, Universities are likely to continue recruiting. As more is reported in the media about the poor language skills of international students (e.g. Paton, 2012), perhaps some pressure may come to bear on some institutions to seek ways to enhance student linguistic skills either within the programme (e.g. Kingston University's Master's of Marketing with English programme) or to link with overseas institutions as feeder schools where more concentrated and discipline specific linguistic training is provided before students come to the UK.

In terms of research methods training as ineffective preparation for the dissertation, there is much support in the literature for how to improve the training or to provide training in different ways (Wagner, Garner & Kawulich, 2011; Edwards & Thatcher, 2006; Meyer et al., 2005; Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2003, 2005). For example, Andrews (2007) provides a framework for teaching students how to frame an argument and to think critically in preparation for their dissertations. Wagner, Garner, and Kawulick (2011) provide recommendations on how to restructure research methods courses and use different forms of assessment to better prepare students. Edwards and Thatcher (2006) suggest that supervisors should get refresher training in how to teach research methods particularly for the dissertation and be provided with more appropriate materials than the traditional methods textbook. They suggest that students should have a longer period of training in how to do academic research during their master's and be given ongoing assessments, not just one as a means to measure their learning of how to undertake research. Their study found that this approach led to significant improvements in students understanding of key research concepts and how to apply them. A final point is that supervisors both within and across institutions should be encouraged (and given the means to) share ideas and good practice to identify ways to improve research methods training. In this study at least two supervisors have found interesting solutions or additional support for their students that others could benefit from, but it doesn't appear that they are sharing these ideas more broadly.

Student characteristics: The literature on the challenges that non-native English speakers' face and how to support them is considerable. In fact, a great deal of the research into dissertation supervision and processes can be found within English as a second language journals (e.g. Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Braine, 2002; Cadman, 1997; Dong, 1998; Jenkins et al., 1993; Melles, 2009). Among the most important findings are that supervisors often fail to realise how isolated their international students feel during the dissertation process (Akylina, 2006) and that since many of these students face similar linguistic and skill related issues, collaborative cohort groups are useful in providing peer group support and sharing of ideas and practice. As noted above, Ahern and Manathunga (2004) also note that the issues of low motivation and attendance may have more to do with other problems that a student is facing and supervisors need to take this into consideration when students do not come to scheduled meetings or meet deadlines. For a richer understanding of low motivation, supervisors can consider using Johnson, Green and Kluever (2000) procrastination inventory tool to identify reasons why students may be showing a lack of motivation and failing to move on with their dissertation. The tool differentiates between categories of factors: cognitive (lack of knowledge or skills) emotional/affective (anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, personality clash with supervisor) and/or social (social isolation, pressure of external social relationships). The authors provide techniques to help with student motivation depending on the reason or reasons identified and these could be very useful for marketing supervisors.

Procedural Factors: Much research has been undertaken into how to help students through various stages of the dissertation process. (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004; Cassuto, 2010; Johnson, Green, & Kleuver, 2000; Maxwell & Symth, 2010; Ryan, 1999; Swales & Lindemann, 2002). For example, Zuber-Skerritt and Knight (2010) suggest a series of early workshops with group discussion, group support and reflection to help students with problem identification and focus. Having group versus individual discussions allows students to see that they are not alone in the challenges they face and that there are several ways to narrow down a topic, for example. This also helps save time for the supervisor. Andrews (2007) provides detailed advice on how to help students build critical thinking and argumentation skills for the dissertation. As noted above, greater sharing of ideas across departments and disciplines would very likely help to share good practices that others could benefit from.

Transactional and relational factors: Two key messages emerge from the review of transactional and relational factors: students and supervisors often have different expectations and different understandings of challenges each are facing, and, as noted above, lack of attendance and failure to adhere to supervisor guidelines may have more to do with cognitive and emotional factors than motivation. While the present study only looked at supervisor's perspectives, the literature demonstrates that students often view the problems in

the relationship quite differently (De Kleijn, Mainhard, Meijer, Pilot, & Brekelmans, 2012; Drennan & Clarke, 2009; Dong, 1998; McCormack, 2004). Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary and Ryan (1999) reviewed a series of studies on student versus supervisor perspectives of supervision and found that while supervisors often complained of students not attending meetings and not making use of their feedback, students complained that supervisors took too long to provide feedback and did not provide them with enough guidance at the beginning. An unpublished study by Fan (2013) for the Higher Education Academy (UK) (now Advantage UK) also found variation in the perspectives of supervisors versus those of non-native-English-speaking dissertation students. Students commented that it was often hard to make an appointment with their supervisor, that the supervisor never replied to emails, and that they took a long time to provide feedback. Fan's supervisors complained that many international students are not active in contacting them and generally lack motivation. Clearly, this study pointed to considerable differences in expectations and understanding which very likely have a negative effect on both student experiences and outcomes. At minimum, students and supervisors should agree upon a schedule and a set of terms of reference for the dissertation meetings and expectations.

Furthermore, there is a clear need for supervisors to identify or at least attempt to clarify student expectations, skill weaknesses, and – after the fact - their experiences with the supervisory process and take student perspectives more into account when designing their future approaches to supervision (Armitage, 2006). They also need to be more reflective of what has worked, what has not and why, and to share ideas with colleagues. As noted above, supervisors could also identify the reasons why students are showing low motivation, as these may have to do with a lack of confidence, with skills deficits or emotional factors rather than disinterest. Many studies provide evidence-based recommendations for how to improve motivation and student agency with dissertations (e.g. Akylina, 2006; Grant, 2003; Hetrick & Trafford, 1995; Maxwell & Symth, 2010; Phillips, 1994; Powles, 1988; Taylor & Dawson, 1998; Woolhouse, 2002).

Plagiarism: The literature is rich on the issues of plagiarism and academic dishonesty (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Duff et al., 2006; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Joyce, 2007; Leask, 2006; McGowan, 2005). Abasi and Graves (2008) argue that students need to go through different stages of learning to be able to come to terms with the skills that are required (evaluation, critical thinking) as well as the meaning behind various practices. They note that more and more studies are pointing to the complexity surrounding academic dishonesty and their review of the research into plagiarism and international students showed “that inappropriate source attributions might have to do with students' culturally shaped life trajectories and their outsider status relative to their prospective discourse communities” (Abasi & Graves, 2008, p. 222). They argue that somewhere in their master's programme students need to be shown that attribution is a vitally necessary convention, is about crediting an author's way of approaching a subject, but not accepting that it is the ‘absolute truth’ and that the student's point of view is also important and valued. They also state that most institutional plagiarism policies should be rewritten. Currently, most focus only on the negative, “punishable” aspects of failing to attribute sources, and thus students are afraid of doing the wrong thing to a much greater extent than they are encouraged to develop the kinds of scholarly attitudes and practices that supervisors expect.

8. Future research

This study is limited by the small sample of respondents who agreed to be interviewed. However, it is evident that many of the problems faced by marketing dissertation supervisors are very similar to those across a wide range of other disciplines. The study used elements of the conceptual frameworks on the learning experience proposed by Biggs (1989) and Astin (1970), but it was not fully operationalised to identify how these factors affect student outcomes and this would be a useful research project to better understand the impact of the contextual and process factors. In addition, the study only investigated challenges as experienced by supervisors and it is clear from the literature that students often describe their experiences very differently. They can face challenges that supervisors do not fully understand or appreciate (e.g. Drennan & Clarke, 2009) and these can include not only skill deficits but emotional issues and cultural factors. Future research should therefore include those students who are actively supervised and in particular, given the growing numbers of international students on marketing master's’ programmes, research should investigate their specific challenges and identify potential solutions.

Furthermore, more research should be undertaken in how to manage the other challenges associated with marketing dissertations. Given the problems that students have with research methods training and the research proposal, additional investigations should be made into alternative pedagogic approaches to learning the skills and knowledge needed to complete a dissertation. We also need to have a better understanding of whether sufficient time is allotted to research training – for both supervisors and students - and to the entire dissertation process. Some of the issues raised bring into question the academic standards of master's programmes that are much shorter today that in times past when students were given an additional six months to a year to concentrate on and complete the dissertation. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the traditional dissertation in favour of other forms of study that fit better with today's shorter time frame and the applied nature of many MA marketing programmes; research that compares the challenges and the learning achievements from applied projects versus marketing dissertations would be of value. Researchers should re-examine what aims that educators are trying to achieve with the master's level dissertation in marketing, whether we are indeed achieving them, and if not, what other ways there may be to allow students to develop the skills and achieve the learning outcomes that we *assume* are being achieved with the traditional dissertation.

From a practical point of view, Armitage (2006) found that supervisors tend to manifest the ‘functional silo’ syndrome (Ensor, 1988) when supervising their students and not share ideas or collaborate. This study has identified areas of good practice that could benefit others given that supervisors share many similar concerns. Managers, programme leaders and supervisors should set aside time to fully investigate and discuss these challenges and to work collaboratively to solve them and to share good practices.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2018.11.005.

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