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A Dissertation Workbook for Level H Media Students

Consultation & Revision Project

CEMP Pedagogic Innovation Fund

Final Evaluation Report

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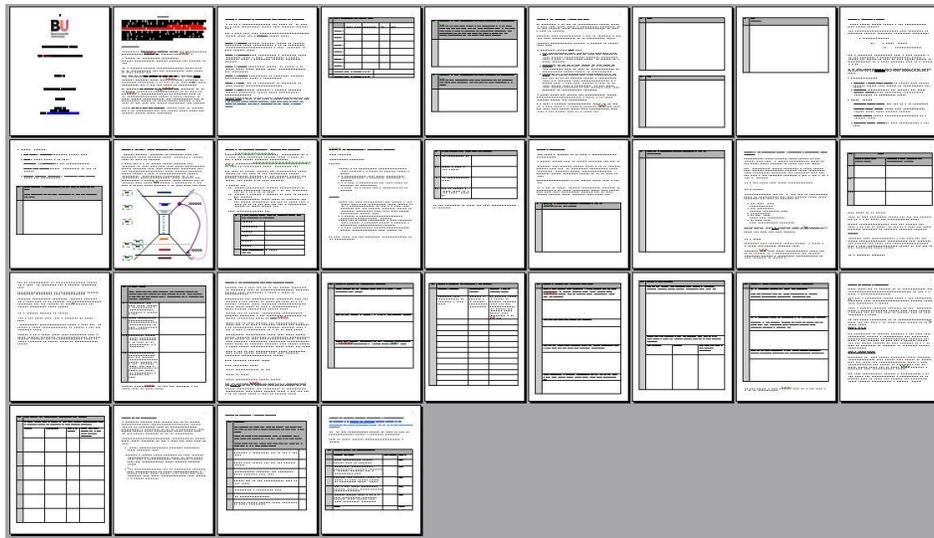
The Media School

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Acknowledgments

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1. Background and Aim of the Workbook

The Level H Dissertation Workbook was originally drafted in 2006 as part of the *Supporting Flexible Learning* unit of the PG Certificate in Academic Practice. It comprised a summary of tips, exercises and answers to frequently asked questions based on my experience as dissertation supervisor at the Media School since 2002. I found that while many students get into Level H equipped with the basic skills required in order to conduct social research, almost all of them feel daunted by the idea of having to write up a ten, twelve or twenty thousand word thesis. Many of the same, generic and structural questions come up again and again during tutorials – tips and pieces of advice that could easily be summarised and presented into a useful handbook that students could refer to in the convenience of their own study space.

Through a series of short but challenging task-boxes, and step-by-step tips and answers to frequently asked questions, the Workbook helps students develop their independent learning skills and break down the dissertation process into smaller, more manageable tasks, while at the same time gaining a more rounded picture of the whole document. Some of these task-boxes encourage students to reflect on their expectations or motivations, while others focus on specific aspects of the thesis itself, such as data collection and analysis.

Having completed the task-boxes of each section, students essentially have the backbone of each chapter, which makes their writing-up easier, while dissertation tutors can use these task-boxes to easily track the progress of their students. Other parts of the Workbook include a tutorial logbook, a checklist that students can consult before submitting their thesis, and a self-assessment sheet asking students to mark their own work against specific marking criteria – a process that is widely considered to help reflective learning.

The Workbook was piloted with a group of BMMJ Level H students and, starting in 2006/07, subsequently integrated into the curriculum as a core teaching resource for the BMMJ Level I unit *Reading the Media*, which provides students with research training and introduces them to the dissertation process. In 2007/08 the Workbook was disseminated across the Journalism & Communication Academic Group and became an additional teaching and learning resource for staff and students. In 2008 the Workbook was the subject of the inaugural Bournemouth University Award for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning.

The Dissertation Workbook serves BU's commitment to flexible learning and aims to facilitate the development of independent and reflective learning skills. Given the recent changes in the delivery of dissertation supervision, the Workbook can constitute a key learning and teaching tool that aids supervision without adversely affecting supervisors' workload. In fact, it provides staff with an efficient way of keeping track of students' progress as the completed taskboxes act as a written record and artefact of the learning process. Combined with the generic Dissertation Handbook, the Workbook is a one-stop resource for frequently asked questions, useful tips and exercises that guide students through the various stages of the dissertation. It can, therefore, enhance the student learning experience while facilitating the release of staff potential.

2. Project Objectives and Timeline

The purpose of this project was to engage in consultation with staff and students who have used the Workbook, or who might use it in the future, so as to:

- a) reflect on the current Workbook's main strengths and weaknesses
- b) survey students' needs and expectations from the dissertation supervision process
- c) discuss supervisors' experiences, needs (in terms of teaching resources) and strategic reflections on the role of dissertation support
- d) identify areas of improvement and further revision in order to make the document relevant and applicable to more programmes/frameworks across the School.

Project Timeline

Stage 1	Consultation Design	September 2008
Stage 2	Student Consultation (Questionnaire 1)	September 2008
Stage 3	Student Consultation (Questionnaire 2)	October 2008
Stage 4	Preliminary Data Analysis	November 2008
Stage 5	Staff Consultation (Interviews)	Dec 2008 - Feb 2009
Stage 6	Main Data Analysis, Interim Report	February 2009
Stage 7	Staff Consultation (L&T Seminar) Dissemination of Key Findings	March 2009
Stage 8	Final Evaluation Report	April 2009

3. Student Consultation (Questionnaire 1): Past users' feedback

For the first part of the consultation process, a questionnaire incorporating both structured and open-ended questions was sent to 14 students who had used the Workbook in the 2007/08 academic year (7 students, i.e. 50% responded - see **Appendix I**). The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify key strength and weaknesses of the document based on the narratives of past users. The main areas covered by the survey included the relevance of various sections, the role of task-boxes and areas for improvement.

Key strengths:

- Step-by-step guiding hand; helps break down a daunting process into smaller, manageable tasks.
- Key role at the beginning of the process and of each chapter: focusing, planning, working on the introduction
- Feedback process (completing and emailing taskboxes / feedback between tutorials and using that feedback to inform drafting)
- Checklist helps ensure that student has addressed various practical / generic issues

Perhaps the most challenging part of the dissertation process is the very beginning. Many students find it hard to visualise the thesis as a coherent part of distinct chapters, while they are also unsure of how to start working on it. The first few steps of the dissertation, such as the finalising of the proposal, the preparation of the Introduction and the choice of a methodological approach, are at the core of the Workbook.

Rather than telling students what to do, the Workbook poses a series of questions aiming to critically engage them with the process. Independent learning is largely about empowering students (a) to view the learning process as a series of manageable tasks and analytical problems, which they need to identify and (b) to be able to produce solutions to these problems.

The Dissertation is an ideal vehicle to getting students to think not merely as learners, but also as independent authors and creators. As the literature on educational motivation shows, developing students' intrinsic motivation and sense of efficacy is vital especially in flexible learning environments.

The Workbook allows student to see the links between the various activities and task-boxes and the final outcome, e.g. in Taskbox 8, which helps students articulate the study's rationale and contribution.

T8 In this taskbox think about your own strategy	
(a)	What is the dissertation's aim?
(b)	How will you establish the topic's importance?
(c)	How will you draw the reader's interest?
(d)	Which body of literature or theoretical framework have you chosen to develop / contribute to?

Once you've answered these four questions you're ready to write up the first draft of your Introduction.

Feedback from past students shows that the Workbook was particularly effective in these crucial first stages of the dissertation process:

“I thought it was very useful helping me get my bearings and start working on the presentation, especially in planning and working on the introduction. I thought that was the best part of it. The rest was also very informative and helpful, but since my biggest problem was starting the dissertation, I thought that was the most helpful part of the handbook.” (NW, BACOM Level H 2007/08)

“I found that the task boxes helped me focus my thoughts and gave me a good foundation to begin a new chapter. The checklist section at the end of the workbook was also really helpful... I found the workbook really helpful and used it a lot to guide my study.” (GA, BACOM Level H 2007/08)

Main areas for improvement:

- Language used could become more accessible with less academic jargon
- Add clarity by explaining concepts and tasks in a more thorough and accessible way; add examples or elaborate on existing examples
- Develop the “findings, analysis and discussion” section
- Consider adding checklists at the end of each chapter section

A couple of students from the (more practice-oriented) Journalism programme felt that the wording of the document was at times inaccessible or too academic:

“It can be a little too complicated at times, and perhaps needs a little more plain English, than just pure academic speak to make it as clear as possible, and a few extra taskboxes (not to make life easier for the student, but just help to make them really pull apart their thoughts and think about each part in a lot more depth)” (SC, BAMMJ Level H 2007/08).

This is a key point given that the aim of the Workbook is to differentiate itself from the bulk of supporting documents that are available to, but rarely used by, students.

4. Student Consultation (Questionnaire 2): Students’ needs and expectations

Following the consultation with past users of the Workbook, it was deemed appropriate to gauge future users’ needs and perceptions of their own skills and compare/contrast them with both, the material offered by the Workbook, and supervisors’ own experiences. Therefore, a short questionnaire was handed out and collected during BAMMJ’s Level H Induction in October 2008. All 54 students present at Induction completed the questionnaire. The results can be found in **Appendix II**.

An analysis of students’ perceptions of their own abilities, skills and needs produced three interesting findings, which contradicted somewhat my own perceptions and practice after having supervised more than 100 dissertations in the last 7 years:

- Students feel that study skills are the least important when it comes to the areas that they would like to cover during dissertation tutorials. Yet, my experience has been that most of the contact time has been spent demonstrating or reinforcing such skills, rather than doing any of the other three activities measured in that question.
- Respondents are most confident about their time management and writing skills and least confident about staying focused and motivated. Yet, my experience shows the opposite (i.e. that time management and writing style/skills – especially building a narrative structure – are their weakest points).

- Focusing the research question is, by far, students' biggest worry, yet it's probably the only area that, by default, the workbook cannot offer any substantial advice, given that the focusing process is highly subject-specific and based on individual students' preliminary research and interests, as well as supervisors' areas of expertise.

5. Staff Consultation (Interviews): Supervisors' needs, tips and approaches

The next stage in the consultation process included five one-to-one interviews with dissertation supervisors working in two of the Media School's Academic Groups (Journalism & Communication and Corporate & Marketing Communications). These took place between December 2008 and February 2009, lasting approximately 40 minutes each. The interview schedule and questionnaire (completed by the interviewer during the session) is attached (**Appendix III**).

All sessions started with a short presentation of the Workbook and a discussion of the main points emerging from the consultation with the students. Following that, the interview focused on the individual supervisor's practice and needs in terms of teaching resources. For example, interviewees were asked for frequently asked questions or common tips, which could be incorporated into the existing Workbook. A core aim of these sessions was to allow interviewees to reflect on their experience as supervisors and identify common patterns, e.g. generic or structural issues raised by many students over the years.

Indeed, a series of common issues affecting many students (and supervisors) did emerge through the interviews. One such example is the fact that many students are unsure about the role of the Introduction vis-à-vis other chapters or sections of the thesis, such as the literature review in a social science dissertation or the core chapters in a discursive one. Several other structural and methodological issues were also identified. A list of recommended revisions and additions to the existing Workbook based on these discussions – and on the preceding consultation with students – is presented below (Section 7).

The other major issue was the extent to which the present Workbook can accommodate the needs of supervisors across a wider spectrum of dissertation types and subjects (e.g. ethnographic, creative and discursive dissertations) and identify potential areas that could be covered by a Workbook in these fields.

There was consensus amongst participants that a separate Workbook would be needed for creative and discursive / literary dissertations due to the considerable differences in structure and format, which are directly mirrored onto the structure and format of the Workbook. However, distinct strands of social science research (e.g. ethnography) can be accommodated within the existing document.

The production of separate Workbooks for different strands of the social science dissertation would pose a problem as students would need to be aware of the various methodological options available to them, and choose the exact direction of their dissertation, *before* collecting their Workbook and commencing their preparation. That is not a problem for students opting to do discursive / creative dissertations (e.g. in BACOM), as this decision is taken early on in the process (i.e. during Level I).

6. Staff Consultation (L&T Seminar): Strategic reflections

The final stage of the consultation process was a Learning & Teaching Seminar, which took place on 11 March 2009 at the Media School. The seminar was an opportunity to disseminate and discuss the key findings of this project with colleagues from the School who had not already participated in the consultation process. The event was attended by seven members of staff from J&C, CMC and CEMP and, following the presentation of the main findings, the discussion focused on the strategic direction that dissertation supervision in the School ought to move. This debate was particularly topical in light of the ongoing review of the School's undergraduate portfolio of frameworks and programmes. A summary of the main issues discussed and points raised follows:

Challenge Does the Workbook divert from the core element of the dissertation, i.e. intellectual content? Is there a danger of it being too prescriptive and leading to formulaic dissertations?

Recommendation Communicate what the Workbook is meant to do and what it is not doing; allow space to think and talk about the “real stuff”

Recommendation Encourage students to engage in primary research as soon as possible; enhance creativity through experimentation rather than encouraging students to “play it safe”; that would help get students who are not academically-oriented more excited about the prospect of conducting academic research.

Challenge How can we encourage second year students to engage with their dissertation early on?

Recommendation Cultivate students' curiosity especially over the summer period, encouraging them to reflecting on what they're interested in.

Challenge How can we address differing practices amongst supervisors (e.g. sample sizes, methodological approaches, structural and presentational issues), which often create tensions amongst students and supervisors?

Example of best practice BAAMC, 2000-06: a designated Dissertation Tutor oversaw the process, co-ordinating staff and students, managing issues such as workload staffing and timetabling, and supervising the taught element. This aided communication amongst supervisors and between students and supervisors.

Challenge Students should place more emphasis on highlighting the coherent intellectual argument of their dissertation.

Recommendation Re-orientate our teaching culture towards students thinking in terms of research questions

Issue Introducing a taught element to the Level H Dissertation (already included in revalidated programmes in J&C)

Prospect Would cover a lot of the basic material and FAQs, such as explaining the purpose and concept of the literature review etc

Challenge Students may not pay attention to abstract concepts within a lecture environment

Recommendation Taught element should be interactive and as customised to individual students' needs as possible

Challenge Supporting and training new supervisors and junior members of staff

Recommendation In addition to the Workbook, which can itself help train new supervisors for the supervision process, a programme-wide Dissertation Tutor would act as a focal point of support and mentoring.

7. Recommended Revisions and Additions to Existing (Social Science) Workbook

- 1: Glossary (A-Z) of key terms / jargon (e.g. "Abstract", "Conceptual framework" etc)
- 2: Guidance on the role of the Introduction vis-à-vis other sections / chapters (Introduction v. Abstract, Introduction v. Literature Review)
- 3: Task-box for major journal paper abstracts (literature review)
- 4: Exercise: visual mapping of the literature cited in a journal article so as to develop the student's skills of research, analysis and synthesis
- 5: Examples of ambitious v. descriptive and feasible v. unfeasible research objectives / questions
- 6: Guidance on linking theory to research questions to data
- 7: Table showing main pros and cons of methods giving students choice and encouraging diversity and originality
- 8: Task-box probing students to reflect on their own biases and subjectivity
- 9: Links to online tutorials for SPSS and nVivo
- 10: Links and tips for the use of the Electronic Newspapers database
- 11: Box with sampling resources and links to directories with professional bodies, members – e.g. CIPR members, PR directories
- 12: Guidance on different interview techniques

- 13: Incorporate ethnographic and grounded theory approaches (methodology section)
- 14: Tips on recruiting and motivating participants to focus groups
- 15: Clarify difference between Discussion and Conclusions
- 16: Highlight remit/scope of the Workbook and need to critically engage with the intellectual core of the dissertation
- 17: Tips on thinking in terms of research questions (including how to link everyday life issues with academic research)
- 18: Task-boxes giving students the option to conduct small-scale (pilot, preliminary, experimental) primary research before the final articulation of the conceptual framework and research agenda
- 19: Review wording and language used throughout the document and consider using more accessible terms
- 20: Consider adding checklist at the end of each major section

Recommendations for a Creative Dissertation Workbook:

- focus on rationale
- justify style, medium, format, market awareness, stylistic choices
- build up reading and understanding of influential / favourite sources
- encourage reflection on own motivations

Recommendations for a Discursive Dissertation Workbook:

- focus on process
- provide student with a broad roadmap of the process
- reflect on structuring
- discuss options regarding the number of chapters
- discuss options regarding the structuring of the thesis (per theme v. per text analysed)

Appendix I: Student Questionnaire 1, n=7, September 2008

Question 1: How much did you use the workbook over the dissertation year?			
Not at all	Rarely	Somewhat = 3	Quite a lot = 4

Question 2: Overall, how useful was the Workbook in your preparation?		
Not at all	A bit = 2	Quite a lot = 5

Question 3: The Workbook was split into several different sections. How would you rate those in terms of relevance to your ongoing dissertation work?				
	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Very
Sections 1-5: Structure and preparation	1		1	5
Section 6: Introduction		1	3	3
Sections 7-8: Literature Review	1	1	1	4
Section 9: Methodology and Research Design	1	1	3	2
Sections 10-11: Findings and Conclusions		2	3	2
Sections 12-13: Checklist and Marking Criteria	1	1	2	3

Question 4: What did you think of the taskboxes?			
Level of difficulty	Too hard	About right = 6	Too easy = 1
Quantity	Too many = 2	About right = 4	Not enough = 1
Relevance of tasks	Not relevant	About right = 7	
Clarity / level of information	Not enough = 3	About right = 4	

Question 5: Which of the following areas of the Workbook are in most need of revision?					
	1 = ok as it is -			5 = needs a lot of work	
	1	2	3	4	5
Design (colours, images)	4		2	1	
Tips (text)	4	3			
Taskboxes	2	3	2		
Timing of tasks	2	3	1	1	
Role of supervisor	4	3			

Question 6: Overall, what did you like about the workbook and what can we do to make it more effective and useful to dissertation student? Any additional comments that might help us revise the Workbook?

Specific Strengths:

"I would regard the workbook as the bible for completing a successful dissertation, as a **guiding hand** which helped me in **every step of the process**. It helped to provide **clear strategies** for putting together what seemed like a daunting task." (SC, BAMMJ Level H 2007/08).

"I think the workbook was really helpful... The **taskboxes** where especially helpful, and the **system of emailing them to you** and then using them and the **feedback as the basis for writing that chapter** was very good." (SD, BACOM Level H 2007/08)

"The workbook was extremely helpful. At the **beginning** of the whole process there is too much information to handle and it is good to **help you focus**. Really helped me to **break down parts** of the dissertation into **easy-to-handle chunks**." (JH, BAMMJ Level H 2007/08)

"I thought it was very useful helping me **get my bearings and start working on the presentation**, especially in **planning and working on the introduction**. I thought that was the best part of it. The rest was also very informative and helpful, but since my biggest problem was starting the dissertation, I thought that was the most helpful part of the handbook." (NW, BACOM Level H 2007/08)

"I found that the **task boxes helped me focus my thoughts** and gave me a **good foundation to begin a new chapter**. The **checklist section** at the end of the workbook was also really helpful... I found the workbook really helpful and used it a lot to guide my study." (GA, BACOM Level H 2007/08)

"It helped me **structure** my dissertation and **keep to my deadlines**." (HP, BACOM Level H 2007/08)

Specific Weaknesses / Suggestions:

"It can be a little **too complicated** at times, and perhaps needs a little more **plain English**, than just pure **academic speak** to make it as **clear** as possible, and a **few extra taskboxes** (not to make life easier for the student, but just help to make them really **pull apart their thoughts** and think about each part in a lot more depth)" (SC, BAMMJ Level H 2007/08).

"Difficult to use because it was so **big** and **packed** with different sections [...] Try to make the workbook a little **more 'reader friendly'** by cutting out some of the **academic jargon**. [...] Make it **smaller** and **simpler**" (PM, BAMMJ Level H 2007/08)

"It may be worth doing a **checklist of series of questions at the end of each chapter section** of the workbook so that students can clarify that they have covered everything" (GA, BACOM Level H 2007/08)

"I found the **analysis section** of the dissertation the hardest part so it may be worth giving more details or advice in this section" (GA, BACOM Level H 2007/08).

"Maybe it could be useful to **expand** a little bit on the **example** used" (SD, BACOM Level H 2007/08)

"I would suggest including the slides from the **powerpoint presentations at the end of year 2** [Reading the Media] – I found these very useful. Would have preferred more **frequent tutorials** as it was too long to ask a question" (JH, BAMMJ Level H 2007/08).

"It would have been easier to have a **hardcopy** of the workbook as it's a large document to search through for the right section" (SD, BACOM Level H 2007/08)

Appendix II: Student Questionnaire 2

Population: BAMMJ Level H Students (2008-09)

Sample: n=54

Data collection date: 02/10/2008

QUESTION 4: SUPERVISOR AND TUTORIALS

“On which of the following areas would you prefer the supervisor / tutorials to focus?”

(1= LESS FOCUS < 5 = MORE FOCUS)

QUESTION 3: SKILLS

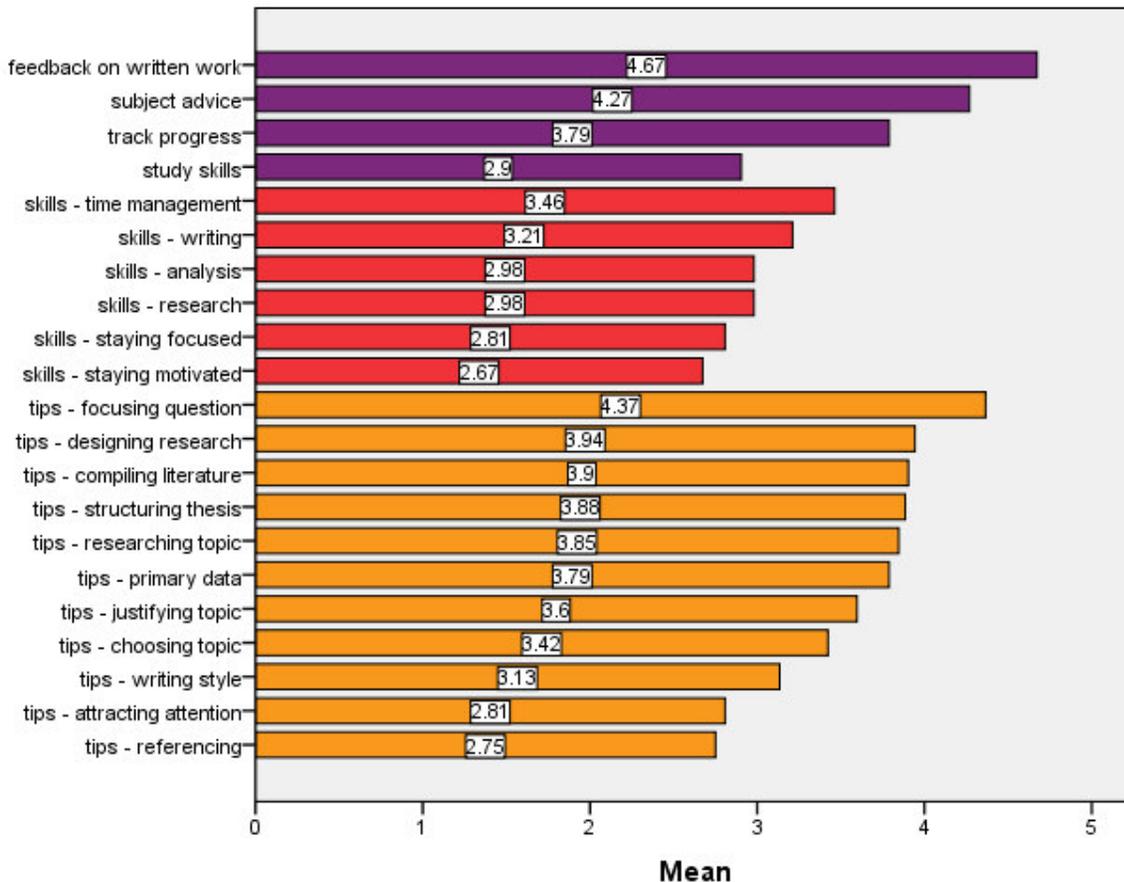
“How confident do you feel about your skills in the following areas?”

(1= LESS CONFIDENT < 5 = MORE CONFIDENT)

QUESTION 2: WORKBOOK TIPS

“The Workbook is there to provide you with accessible tips and task-boxes that will help you with the dissertation. Which of the following areas should it focus on?”

(1 = LESS FOCUS < 5 = MORE FOCUS)



Appendix III: Staff Consultation Questionnaire (Interviews)

	Step 0	SESSION DETAILS			
	Code	S3SC	Date		
	Name		Academic Group		
	Programmes				
	Types	Social science	Discursive	Creative	Humanities
		Prof practice	Ethnography	Reflective	Other?

		INTRODUCTION	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Step 1	Introduced the workbook (tips, taskboxes, feedback system) and latest additions (log, tutorial 1 checklist, assessment criteria)	
	Step 2	Explained purpose of session? (make it relevant to other programmes, incorporate other types of dissertation)	
	Step 3	Discussed SFQ1 findings? (past users - strengths and weaknesses)	
	Step 4	Discussed SFQ2 findings? (future users – perceptions of needs)	

		DEVELOPMENT (SUPERVISOR’S NEEDS)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Step 5	Identified individual supervisors’ needs – “what would you like the workbook to include?”	
	FAQ?		
	Core tips?		
	Generic advice?		
	Other?		

		DEVELOPMENT (SUBJECT- OR TYPE-SPECIFIC)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Step 6	Identified areas of subject- or type-specific dissertation advice – what would make the workbook relevant to your own subject supervision?	
	Specific literature?		
	Specific methods?		
	Common procedures?		
	Potential activities?		
	Potential taskboxes?		

		APPLICATION	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Step 7	Discussed extent to which (5) and (6) can be incorporated into existing Workbook?	
	Comments?		
	Step 8	Identified areas of the existing Workbook that are not relevant / applicable to own programmes / frameworks?	
	Comments?		

		WRAP-UP	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Step 9	Other comments / notes?	
	Step 10	Thanked the participant?	