‘I guess it must be up to me’ – student autonomy and reflections on ‘writing’ the undergraduate dissertation

Edge Hill University
About the dissertation

- **BIG** writing
- Research based
- Analysis and critical thinking
- Autonomous learning
Methodology

- Action research – using an informed perspective to develop practice
- The students
- Loosely structured interviews to promote discussion and obtain rich narratives
Writing Histories

- A range of experiences
- The academic essay – a shared experience
- Being ‘fed’
Factors influencing student autonomy

Pre-existing ‘competency values’ → University Department Subject area Modules

Confidence
Aspiration levels
Choice of topic

- Students were conscious of the need to satisfy the expectations of tutors
- Trade-off
Starting the dissertation

- Tutor expectations v. Student behaviour
- Distracted

- Deliberate strategy
  - ‘I work better under pressure. I know if I’ve got a deadline close up I will get it done. I’ve never once had an extension since I’ve been here’.
Supervisory relationships

• Students generally utilised their dissertation tutor

• Some students were, however, willing to ignore their advice
  - ‘I always do my introductions first, it helps me to do it first’.
  - It’s what I’m used to, it’s what I’ve always done through all my education. Like I said it works for me’.

• Aware of the contested nature of research
Conclusions and Questions

Dissertation tutors should aim to provide an environment that encourages autonomy by encouraging:

- Dialogue
- Critical reflection

How does your experience of supervising undergraduate dissertations compare to the findings of this research?

How do you think our suggestions will work in practice?