

Case Study Title:

Your Name: Dr Dickon Copsey

Institution: University of Glasgow

Subject area: College of Social Sciences

Programme/Course: Cross-college initiative with multiple programmes – UG and PGT

Module/Unit: Challenge-based dissertation

SCQF Level: 10 or 11

Assessment Name: Challenge-based dissertation

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1. How would you summarise your practice case study?

The University of Glasgow's Challenge-Based Dissertation (CBD) was developed as an optional alternative to the traditional dissertation, designed to help students apply academic research to real-world organisational, social, or policy challenges. It was designed to provide a more practical and vocational alternative suitable for the majority of our undergraduate and postgraduate taught students who progress directly on into the workplace after their studies – rather than further study. It aims to better support employability and professional skills development, and to support career pathways beyond academia.

What is it?

Rather than producing a traditional research dissertation, students complete three assessed components: an academic project report (7,000–8,000 words, 50%), a policy brief written for a non-academic audience (2,500–3,000 words, 40%), and a presentation (10%). This new approach still requires students to conduct rigorous academic research, but to then communicate their findings and their practical recommendations to non-academic, external stakeholders.

Students may work on challenges identified by academic staff, external organisations, or develop their own project with support from the College of Social Sciences Student Experience Team. Students can opt to conduct their dissertations in collaboration with external organisations - providing valuable professional

experience and industry connections - or to identify hypothetical external stakeholders to communicate their results to.

The CBD is currently embedded across 6 postgraduate programmes within the School of Education and will be rolled out to all of the School's postgraduate taught programmes in 2026/27. It will also be delivered as a 'Practice-based dissertation' at undergraduate level within our MA Social Sciences Economics programme.

By connecting theory with practice, the CBD enables students to address real-world problems while developing research, communication, creativity, and employability skills that are highly valued by employers.

2. Why did you develop or enhance your assessment and what was your rationale?

The Challenge-Based Dissertation (CBD) was developed as an alternative dissertation model that better reflected the needs, aspirations, and likely career destinations of many of our students. It was clear from our Graduate Outcomes data that the majority of our students progressed directly on into employment rather than further study. They needed a dissertation format that better developed their ability to apply academic knowledge and skills to real-world organisational and social issues. The CBD format connected academic learning more directly with professional practice and workplace contexts and allowed our students to target their research towards topics of future career relevance.

In addition, the CBD model was designed to fit with, support and expand the reach of our existing collaborative dissertation option. Each year, we have a relatively small number of students who work with external organisations to produce research that informs their organisational practice and challenges. Feedback from the organisations working with our students was that the dissertation itself was of limited value to them due to its academic format and focus. They, ideally, required something that could present the research findings in more practical and accessible terms, with practical recommendations and improvements they could make within their organisations. The new policy brief assessment - which forms an integral part of the CBD model - was perfect for this purpose communicating the key issues and research in terms of practical value to non-academic organisations.

Finally, the CBD model allows students to choose whether they work collaboratively with an external organisation or simply identify a potential and hypothetical recipient for their research and policy brief. This allows us to scale the CBD to a much larger student audience than would be possible if every student was required to work with a collaborative partner organisation.

3. What enhancements or changes did you implement in assessment in making this more innovative, diverse or inclusive of diverse learner cohorts?

Firstly, we provided a series of face-to-face interactive workshops to introduce students to the CBD model. These workshops encouraged our students to consider dissertation topics of personal and professional interest to them and their future aspirations, introduced them to the policy brief assessment which was new to many of the students, and provided guidance and practice opportunities for the final presentation.

These workshops were supported by 3 asynchronous professional skills modules which form part of our College Employability Programme, as laid out below:

- *Making your dissertation work for you* provides guidance on the framing of the project to help students formulate a challenge topic aligned with personal and professional aspirations and introduces students to the potential for conducting their research collaboratively with an external organisation (either sourced themselves or by academics).
- *Practical Presentation Skills* is designed to equip students with the tools they need to present with confidence and in a clear and impactful way. It provides the students with an opportunity to practice and receive feedback before their final assessed presentation.
- *Writing a Policy Brief* supports students to write, structure and design a concise easy-to-digest policy brief, highlighting key findings and recommendations. The module also provides a downloadable policy brief template that students can use to get started. Students can also make a 1:1 appointment with a member of the team to receive formative feedback before submitted the assessed brief.

Students were enrolled on these modules and could complete them at a time that suited their timetables, receiving online feedback and support from our trained Student Experience Team tutors as they worked through.

Finally, for the policy brief assessment, in particular, we found the combination of a downloadable template, worked through student example policy briefs, formative feedback from our tutors on early drafts and a clear marking rubric all made the assessment more accessible and inclusive.

4. What informed your approach to the changes you made, e.g. student feedback, observations of student difficulty, insights from literature or research findings, assessment pass rates etc.?

Our approach was initially informed by a cross-university working group led by our Dean of Teaching. This working group commissioned a landscape and literature review of the many alternatives to the traditional dissertation currently being trialled across the institution and the broader HE sector. It also examined the changing needs and career aspirations of our postgraduate taught students. It was also informed by a detailed analysis of the career destinations of our postgraduate taught student cohorts through our Graduate Outcomes data, which showed that the majority of our students transition directly into the workplace. Finally, it explored the motivations of our prospective postgraduate students in choosing their Masters institution. These motivations were increasingly focused on the employability benefits and applied value of their postgraduate programmes.

5. What key changes have you seen as a result of this change to your assessment practice?

We have seen a significant increase in the alignment of dissertation topics with students' personal interests and professional aspirations. We have also seen an increase in the number of postgraduate programmes which have incorporated the CBD model. For example, the CBD model will be rolled out to all of the School's postgraduate taught programmes in 2026/27. It will also be delivered as a 'Practice-based dissertation' at undergraduate level within our MA Social Sciences Economics programme.

All of our partner programmes have incorporated the promotion of the CBD into their marketing materials for prospective students.

Finally, the CBD model has allowed us to engage with a much larger array of external organisations who can work with our students and receive the practical benefit of a policy brief tailored to their organisational needs and challenges.

6. How are you evaluating the effectiveness of these enhancements or changes implemented?

We have been gathering feedback from our students on the value of the CBD experience from the outset of our project. In addition, we collect feedback from partner organisations.

We also collect feedback from each of the 3 professional skills modules that support the CBD model exploring the impact these asynchronous resources on our students' development of professional skills.

Finally, we are in the early stages of a comparative study exploring the relative benefits of the CBD pathway versus the traditional dissertation route.

7. Tips for practitioners:

Do you have any tips for practitioners wanting to make similar enhancements or changes in their assessments that you could add in?

We would say keep things simple and make sure you provide ample support to students, particularly around new and unfamiliar assessment formats. Students can be quite risk averse particularly when it comes to elements of their courses that directly impact their grades. If in doubt, they will choose the traditional “safer” route, however appealing alternative types of assessment may appear.

So, when introducing a new assessment, make sure you have templates, worked examples, clear rubrics and formative feedback and support on hand throughout. Whilst we recognise current financial pressures on HEIs mean that support for students is finite, there are innovative ways that this support can be scalable and efficient.

And finally, please reach out directly if you have any questions, want to access our templates or resources, or just want to learn more about what we are doing at the University of Glasgow. We are very happy to share!