

## **The Important Value Dissertations Have in Forming Future Algerian Teachers and Researchers**

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### **Introduction:**

In the learning process, students go through various phases of learning and receive a great deal of knowledge in different subject matters in order to form them for future jobs and to get them ready for the benefit and success in their societies. Writing dissertations at the end of the under-graduation or graduation phase is one of the most important things students are required to write in the form of a research paper about a given topic related to their field of study. The overall aim of writing dissertations is to help students to learn how to do research. Its great benefit lies in the fact that such kind of research practices help students a great deal to rely on themselves in searching for and in acquiring new knowledge and information about a particular topic with the guidance of their teachers and supervisors. Accordingly, and given the importance doing research and writing dissertations have in forming good future researchers and teachers, the aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of writing dissertations in the production of good and ready to take responsibility researchers and teachers, by providing them with knowledge and experience in their field of study.

There are many benefits in conducting undergraduate research which are significant. Doing research has a high status in contemporary higher education. According to Lopatto (2006 : 22), undergraduate research is an experience that “include doing original research while being mentored by an experienced researcher.” Involving students in many undergraduate research activities and tasks is very necessary at undergraduate level and undergraduate research is seen as a promising activity in forming good future teachers and researchers. Using Lopatto’s (*ibid.* : 22) words, “ the undergraduate research experience may be the epitome of engaged learning.” Research has a great deal of value because it offers students as young researchers the opportunity to attain a wide range of educational goals. Undergraduate research can also facilitate empowered learning (communication, problem-solving, team work), informed learning (allowing the student to study the natural and cultural world), and responsible learning (permitting the study of social problems and the self).

## 1- Definition of Dissertation:

Conducting undergraduate and/or graduate research project or dissertation is considered as the capstone project of students' graduate education. This project is not like anything else that students have been engaged in before.

*The dissertation is a unique, hybrid project-both a professional-level research project and a crucial piece of evidence of your qualification for a credential. It is a point of exit from student status and a point of entry to professional and scholarly life. (Lovitts & Wert, 2009: vii)*

An undergraduate dissertation is a process and a product at the same time. It is a process in the sense that it develops expert knowledge through understanding, developing skills, thinking and so on. The dissertation is also considered as a product in the sense that it represents an external representation of what a researcher has achieved and the degree of expertise he has reached in a given field. Conducting research is a real demonstration that the young researcher knows how to approach the topic, how to master complex ideas and information, has acquired professional skills and competencies, and is also able to conduct future independent research.

Reading (2013) provides the following definition of what is meant by dissertation by stating that,

*[...] a dissertation is a major piece of independent research-based study undertaken towards the end of [educational] programme. A dissertation is often viewed as the culmination of a programme of learning which helps consolidates the students' knowledge, skills and understanding of research base of the discipline. (2013:3)*

She (*ibid.*) further states that,

*A dissertation is an extended and substantial piece of work carried out independently. [...] The dissertation is quite different from other assignments in terms of its depth and the length of time engaged with it. While it may be divided into sections or chapters, it needs to demonstrate a coherent and well-structured format which poses a question that is then addressed and answered in relation to a specific practice issue. (Reading, 2013:8)*

The choice of the research topic on the part of students is a central matter in doing research, be it undergraduate or graduate. A good topic for research will increase the personal and the professional depth of understanding the subject. Not only this, but very often the breadth of knowledge can be extended into other areas of research. To use Reading's (2013: 9) words again, "Producing a dissertation demonstrates and communicates that you have consolidated a range of skills, including intellectual, professional, information seeking, critical analysis and synthesis of knowledge."

East Tennessee State University provides the following definition of undergraduate research. It is "any creative effort undertaken by an undergraduate that advances the knowledge of the

student in an academic discipline and that leads to new scholarly insights or the creation of new works that adds to the wealth of the discipline.” In the same line of thought, the university of California defines undergraduate research as:

*mentored, self-directed work that enables individual students or small groups of students to explore an issue of interest to them, and communicate the results to others. The project involve inquiry, design, investigation, research, scholarship, discovery, application, writing and/or performance to a greater or lesser degree depending on the topic.*

## **2- The Importance of Undergraduate Research Projects:**

As undergraduate students, anyone will most probably embark on a dissertation or a final-year project. Winstanley (2010: 1) advances the following definition of what is a dissertation and its importance for learners,

*A dissertation is just an important sounding name for a long essay based on your own research. Writing a dissertation is an exciting, challenging, rewarding and often wonderful experience. At the same time it can be exhausting, time-consuming, frustrating and exasperating.*

In the final year of their undergraduate studies, students reach an important stage in their career. They start preparing their dissertation or research project but many students find this stage flounder (*ibid.*:4). Understanding what research means is a central step for undergraduate students to conduct good research in the future. Research can be defined as a process of gathering information about a specific topic. The more information we have about the topic, the better our stand and understanding will be in making the right decisions. It is also a process based on advancing knowledge generated from past research, theories and studies done by other researchers, teachers and so on. People from different walks of life can contribute in the gathering of information be it in medicine, biology, science, literature, linguistics and so on.

Another major aspect in doing research is the fact that this latter is designed to answer a given question or solve a given problem. It is very vital in our everyday life since it arms us with information and knowledge and makes us better researchers and thinkers that think critically and do not accept anything put before hands without questioning. The overall aim of research is to help students question, research, make hypotheses, answer them on the basis of knowledge and information gained during researching and reading about the topic.

Giving students the opportunity to participate in undergraduate stage and to do research is a very important experience in their lives. Doing research and writing dissertations is an intellectual activity that aims at answering curiosity, satisfying the students' thirst for discovery and giving them an outlet for creativity also. A great deal of

learning is said to occur when undergraduate students undertake research. Generally speaking, learning does not always happen inside class only. Knowledge gained in classroom is usually reinforced and assimilated when learners are given some opportunities to apply what they have learnt.

The importance of doing research lies also in the fact that it leads to a better understanding of a given subject and a deeper appreciation of the discipline under investigation. In addition to that, doing research helps students later on to better clarify their goals in their career. None can have a deep knowledge of a given topic in a specific field of study unless s/he has the chance to do some of the thinking, the researching and writing about that topic.

Another important role of research for undergraduate students is that it is considered as a significant *confidence booster*. The more students enrich and widen their knowledge by researching, asking questions and analyzing, the greatest their understanding and mastery of the subject will be. This can be better improved especially if the student is surrounded by teachers and members of the faculty who provide useful guidance and encourage her/him.

In some cases, the benefit or the importance of doing research may not seem clear despite the fact that it is taken for granted that doing any kind of research will lead at least to a better understanding of a given matter in any subject field. One thing is sure, though, about doing research; if we do already know a lot about something, doing research about it would be considered as being useless in some cases. Research is an activity done to investigate, to explore, to gain more knowledge. It may involve doing experiments, writing questionnaires, doing interviews, and so forth, and it involves reading too much about the subject in a critical manner, analyzing and interpreting the results *inter alia*.

Put differently, research is considered as the source and the foundation of knowledge. It allows one to enlarge her/his understanding and apply new methods and theories of research. Undergraduate research done by students adds to their global knowledge. It is seen as the best source for new ideas, methods and techniques in the different areas of studies. Another important factor in doing a good research project or dissertation by undergraduate students is the presence of a good mentor or supervisor. Finding a good mentor is also an advantage for undergraduate students and their participation in research. Students need that because they will benefit a great deal from the mentor's knowledge, experience, and wisdom.

### **3- Purpose of Writing a Research Paper :**

All types of writing are done for some specific purposes like writing essays, reports, articles and so forth. Writing dissertations is also

done for some specific purposes. Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) make the purpose behind writing dissertations clear in the following statement:

*The dissertation is a report of research intended primarily for a scholarly audience. It is not a longer version of a term paper. It is not an anecdotal account of your professional success. And it is not a personal statement of your philosophy or a collection of your opinions. It is an objective, documented, and detailed report of your research.* (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005: 6)

According to Winstanley (2010), there are three main important purposes for writing an undergraduate research paper or dissertation. These are namely the **institutional purpose**, the **personal purpose** and the **communicative purpose**. The institutional purpose in conducting research is said to ensure that the one holding the degree had made a contribution in a given field. The dissertation is perceived by members of the faculty as a clear demonstration that the candidate is liable to conduct other research and even to publish it, hence, become a member in their community. In the institutional purpose of writing dissertations and conducting research, the faculty gives a great importance to dissertations and doing research because in this case the researchers will take the task of generating and disseminating knowledge in a serious manner. The research dissertation is considered as the best form of knowledge dissemination. (*ibid.*)

Undergraduate students may have different personal purposes in undertaking. The most important purpose is of course to get the undergraduate degree. To use Glatthorn and Joyner's (2005:4) words, writing a dissertation is very central because,

*Writing is a way of knowing and thinking: The process of systematizing knowledge and finding a form to express that knowledge becomes a means of discovering meaning. [...] Such learning will foster your personal and professional growth.*

The third important purpose in undertaking undergraduate research is the communicative purpose. This purpose is quite clear and simple: the researcher conducts research in order to report the results of the research. The overall aim behind doing that is not to persuade or entertain the audience, but rather, the most important aim is to inform a particular type of audience about a given research.

All in all, the three aforementioned purposes are some of the main reasons for researchers to conduct research and write a dissertation be it in undergraduate or graduate stage. What is important though is the fact that the three purposes-institutional, personal and communicative-interact together to shape the dissertation in a particular way (Winstanley: 2010).

According to Germano (2008), a dissertation can become many things. It can become a scholarly article (s), a book and so on. According to him (2008:5), "The dissertation is usually the longest work the young scholar has ever written, an exhausting trek across the scholarly tundra."

Teachers and faculty members in a scholarly community at university, always perceive good dissertation research as being a genuine and serious contribution to the field. If it is not an addition, then it is not considered as something important at all. Great dissertations usually show the researcher's mastery and command of the material, both broadly and deeply. They must show that she has something new to say, show and prove at the same time.

Briefly stated, the undergraduate or graduate researcher should break new ground and bring new things to the particular audience. Many dissertations can be found to be a repetition of previous research using the same process, methods, and getting may be the same results that will add nothing to the specific field. The researcher, in this case, will be considered as breaking old ground only. To use Germano's (2008: 6) words again, "the good dissertation is a work of intellectual substance that makes a contribution to the author's field."

In the same line of thought, Bryant (2004) maintains that writing a research paper/dissertation is regarded as being a study that makes a contribution to learning. The educational degree the researcher will get signals the discovery of new knowledge and learning experience: "[Research dissertation] does afford intellectual growth and knowledge of the research in one's field. [...] it is widely held expectation that the dissertation will add to the knowledge base of its field and train the student as a researcher." (Bryant, 2004:5)

#### **4- The Role of Academic Research on Students' Learning :**

White (2002: 5) states that a dissertation reflects the following things:

- A dissertation illustrates the context of existing knowledge. It is important that a literature review is included that collates previously published work in the same field. Your dissertation is not an isolated investigation. You need to show how it relates to what other people have done. Again, other people's work must not simply be described. It is the relationship between your work and theirs which demonstrates criticism and analysis.
- A dissertation demonstrates original work and research. By original work and research, we mean that you should put forward your own ideas and back them up with appropriate evidence.

The young undergraduate researcher is claimed to absorb knowledge required to become an independent researcher and then engages fully in the process of knowledge generation, dissemination, transfer, and utilization cycle (Lyons & Doueck, 2010).

*The dissertation is your opportunity [...] to produce a guided [...] piece of research that hones and demonstrates your research skills. [...] The purpose of dissertation research is to learn more, not in a vague nonspecific way, but in a disciplined, rigorous, and purposeful way. Completing dissertation research therefore requires discipline, rigor, and purpose. (Lyons & Doueck, 2010:9)*

The research paper or dissertation is an important piece of work. In a final year project, the dissertation forms may be the quarter, less or more, of the students' mark in their final year. The importance of the end of year dissertation on students lies in the fact that it can be used as an evidence about students' knowledge and research abilities. Getting a good mark in one's dissertation should, for the previous reason, be a key goal of all undergraduate students.

Besides that, doing a final year project or dissertation is the first and only step to get one's degree. According to Roche (2007: 9), "La validation de la plupart des diplômes nécessite pour l'étudiant d'avoir rédigé, et parfois soutenu, un mémoire de fin d'études."

The holder of a given degree is often regarded as someone who has demonstrated a great ability to conduct research independently or collectively in the case of undergraduate students. Doing research is a central stage for undergraduate students because it is considered as a type of learning whereby undergraduate students accumulate knowledge through research, investigation and reflection. This involves also PhD researchers who are in the course of conducting research or writing their research proposals. To use Bryant (2004: 5) words, "the knowledge gained in carrying out a dissertation is, in most cases, the result of discovery."

When conducting research, either personal or collective, the students move away from what is termed 'aided discovery' whereby the teacher is considered as the main source of knowledge and information deliver. The students' role in this case is that of knowledge receivers. Research, however, turns the role of the student as an active learner. S/he is seen as an active participant in the process of research and knowledge seeking (Bryant, 2004).

While doing research, student train themselves to acquire knowledge through discovery. Being not trained in how to conduct or do research can have lot of negative effects on students later on in their academic career and education because this may create large obstacles for them in conducting their undergraduate research. Given the problems that may surface if students are not given some training to do research in their undergraduate courses, some courses are devoted in the early years of studying at university to introduce students to research methodology and how to do research especially in the field of English. Students are given theoretical knowledge and information and they are also involved in some practical tasks as a check up of their learning. Some of the main aspects in research methodology where focus is placed on in undergraduate courses of

English students at the university of Constantine 01, for instance, is citing, summarizing, paraphrasing, gathering information, reading and analyzing it to answer a given question, and so forth. The most important thing that undergraduate students should recognize well, however, is that in their final studies' research paper or dissertation, they are at that stage operating in a very different learning level and environment.

*It is extremely important to make this psychological shift from thinking of yourself as a passive learner to thinking of yourself as an independent and active learner. The [...] [researcher or] student writing the dissertation is almost always the initiator of action. There are no obligations to do an assignment or show up for class. There is no formal feedback along the way; the judgment comes all at once. Dissertation learning is truly a different kind of learning. (Bryant, 2004:6)*

## **5- The Value of the Dissertation :**

### **1.1 The Academic Value :**

For many students the undergraduate dissertation is the first independent piece of work they completed. The value of the dissertations lies in the fact that it allows students or new researchers to show that they can work alone. In other words, the research paper or dissertation is an opportunity for the student to show her/his true worth.

Writing dissertations and carrying out research in the undergraduate stage is a central part of the final phase in the students' studies to get their degrees. In certain courses, the value of the dissertation may reach up to 40% of the students' assessment. There is a general consent among teachers that conducting research and writing dissertations reflects the students' true intellectual ability (White, 2002).

### **1-2 Personal and Career Value**

In addition to their academic importance, dissertations have also a personal and career importance in the students' lives. At the end of educational programmes, the dissertation comes as an assessment of the whole range of skills and competencies students have gained and developed. Conducting research can help students even in getting a job in the future; through writing dissertations students develop some important skills that many employers require. They are called 'personal transferable skills' and they involve such matters as the ability to plan, to organize, to criticize, to gather information, to solve problems, to think logically, time management, data interpretation, communication skills and so forth. To use White's (2002: 6) words, "In summary, [ a dissertation] is a piece of tangible evidence of the sort of work of which you are capable."

Since The undergraduate students' experience can be greatly enriched by being engaged in research experiences, students involved



in research have many benefits. To use Madan and Bradan (2013 ) words,

*Research experience allows undergraduate students to better understand published works, learn to balance collaborative and individual work, determine an area of interest, and jump start careers as researchers. Through exposure to research as undergraduates, many students discover their passion for research and continue on to graduate studies and faculty positions.*

One direct benefit of research is that when investigating a phenomenon is class, and by being engaged in research, undergraduate students will find it easier for them to understand the rationale underlying research. Another important benefit in conducting undergraduate research is that students will learn how to work independently and in collaboration with others. Undergraduate research is usually conducted in groups that is why it is very important for undergraduate students to learn how to balance collaborative efforts with what they can do independently: "The nature of research today is that interdisciplinary teams are becoming the norm, and gaining firsthand experience in teamwork should be promoted in the undergraduate education." (Madan and Bradan, 2013)

Exposure to research for undergraduate students is of key importance also and helps students explore career fields. Some students might consider research as a path for their careers that is why it is of valuable importance to them. Exposure to undergraduate research can be the door that opens for students opportunities toward research after graduation. The more the students get involved in research, the more experience they will gain, which will have positive effects and enhance their future career choices. Exposure to research is also important since it is said to increase the likelihood of undergraduate students to become successful researchers. Upon degree completion, undergraduate students might find themselves in a position of being unsure of how to proceed to graduate stage.

The following are the benefits from participating in undergraduate research as identifies by the university of Missouri (2013) :

1. Help clarify your academic and créer interest and goals ;
2. Acquire knowledge in your academic field that transcends classroom study ;
3. Enhance critical skills in communication, independent thinking, creativity and problem-solving;
4. Enhance professional and academic credentials to support applications for scholarship, awards, career employment, and entry to graduate and professional schools;
5. Engage in the creation of new knowledge on the cutting edge of an academic discipline and apply that knowledge to real-world problems ;

6. Participate directly in the university's central mission of scientific discovery, scholarly activity and artistic creation.

In the same line of thought, the following are also the reasons in getting involved in undergraduate research as stated by the department of sociology at Utah States University (2013):

1. Get involved in research, scholarship, and creative activity that is innovative.
2. Engage in one-to-one with faculty in the work of your discipline.
3. Clarify and prepare of your créer by developing an understanding of research methodology in your field of study.
4. Develop critical thinking creativity, problem-solving, and intellectual independence as well as team skills and communication skills.
5. Reinforce what you are learning in your classes with a steady supply of hands-on research opportunities.
6. Investigate a problem or question, carry out a project, and then share those discoveries with their peers.
7. Become one of the undergraduate researchers who have been shown to persist in finishing their undergraduate degrees at a higher rate and also persue graduate education at a higher rate.

Moreover, research is claimed to help students by enhancing the following:

1. Analytical Skills
2. Teamwork
3. Time Management
4. Leadership
5. Writing Skills
6. Troubleshooting
7. Understanding Ethics
8. Communication
9. Self-Confidence

### **Conclusion:**

A significant number of undergraduate students at the end of their academic studies are usually overwhelmed by the academic process they go through, subjects they have to pass exams in, and tasks they are obliged to do. Many of them do not know how to do research because they have not been engaged in such kinds of tasks before. It is the role of teachers and advisors in the undergraduate phase then to help students by giving them more opportunities to do research and get more experience. The clue is that there should be more chances provided for undergraduate students to do research, and the role of the teachers is to ignite a passion in them to do it with great devotion. The purpose behind that is to avoid the students' delimita of getting involved in research late in their undergraduate careers, and finding serious difficulties in conducting research.

Academic institutions can play a great role also by enhancing the undergraduate curriculum and promoting research to students. The more they are involved in research tasks, the more understanding they will get about how to do research individually or collectively. Last but not least, as it has been discussed in the present paper, doing research has many advantages on students' learning and improving their academic levels, boosting their knowledge of their field and gaining experience. All these benefits will help form good researchers and teachers who possess a good deal of knowledge with regard to their fields of studies and will open for them new doors for research and improving their teaching knowledge and practice as well.

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