Writing a degree project at Lund University – student perspectives

Summary
This report summarises the results of a survey that focused on the students’ experiences of writing a degree project at Lund University. The study was planned and executed by the Quality and Evaluation office and it was designed as a questionnaire survey which was conducted during the autumn semester of 2014. The main purpose of the study was to highlight how well the students had been prepared for writing their degree projects, how the project can be organised, and how different designs may affect the students’ experiences and academic success. Some of the respondents of the survey executed their degree projects within the framework of study programmes that had been judged to be of inadequate or very high quality in the quality audits of the Swedish Higher Education Authority, and the study also explores whether these two different groups of students made different experiences of their degree projects.

The survey was sent to a total of 1 672 students who had completed a degree project at Lund University, of whom 714 chose to respond. This corresponds to a response rate of 43%. Students from all faculties participated in the study, except students from the Faculty of Fine and Performing Arts as their degree projects are often very differently designed from those of other faculties. This means that students from the School of Economics and Management (EHL), Faculties of the Humanities and Theology (HT), Faculty of Law, Faculty of Engineering (LTH), Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, and the University’s specialised centres (USV) were included in the survey. The most important findings of the study will be presented in this summary.

Most students feel they are well prepared to carry out a degree project – but far from everyone, and women perceive themselves to be less prepared than men

Among the students who had never before written a degree project at the Bachelor’s level or higher, the majority felt that they were very or fairly well prepared in terms of many key aspects of the work. For example, most of them responded that they considered themselves to be able to master literature searches (86%), and scholarly referencing (79%). At the same time, it is not unusual that students feel unprepared and insecure. As for the University at large, nearly one in four responded that they did not feel particularly prepared to write research texts (24%). An even slightly higher number of students felt that they were not prepared for applying research methodology (33%) and theoretical perspectives (30%) to their work. The latter to a greater extent applies to students from the Faculty of Law, less than half of whom felt that their previous studies had prepared them for using research methods and theories in their work.
As for the group as a whole, women experienced that they were less prepared with regard to writing research texts and applying research methodology and theoretical perspectives to their work. The difference is most evident with regard to theory. Of the students who had never before written a degree project, the proportion of those who responded that they felt unprepared to apply theoretical perspectives was twice as high for women (41%) than for men (20%), and this difference can be found to some extent within all faculties.

**Few students read other students’ work as part of their degree project course – but many want to**

It appears to be uncommon that students read and discuss degree projects written by other students as a part of their education. Only 15% of the students who had never before written a degree project responded that they had read some previous student’s degree project as part of their education. However, the students appear to have a great interest in doing so. More than six out of ten (61%) of those who were about to carry out a degree project for the first time had, on their own initiative, studied some previous student’s degree project or extensive paper. In this respect, there is thus a large discrepancy between the focus of the education, and the interest expressed by the students themselves. The fact that the programmes provide little opportunity for students to read other students’ degree projects, while the students’ interest in doing so seems to be considerable at all faculties, raises several interesting questions. Does the students’ self-initiated reading serve as a real alternative, or would the students benefit more in a few crucial ways if the reading was organised and conducted within the framework of the programme? How could a programme component that includes reading and discussing other students’ degree projects be organised so that the students would be better prepared to execute their own work?

**Most students carry out their degree projects individually – and collaborations can involve several challenges**

At Lund University at large, most students executed their degree projects individually (76%). About a quarter of the students conducted their work in groups of two (20%) or more (4%). Whether they worked alone or together with others varied greatly between the faculties. At EHL and LTH a majority of the students worked in groups, whereas at other faculties, working in groups or pairs was much less common. At the Faculty of Law, none of the students had worked in groups, and at HT only very few.

Several students who had done their degree projects in collaboration with others brought up the challenges involved in the collaborations. Some stressed that it can be difficult to coordinate different interests within the group. Others observed that different group members may have different levels of ambition and spend different amounts of time on the degree project, which in turn leads to an uneven workload that can be perceived as both frustrating and unfair.
**Students who submit a written outline feel more secure in terms of knowing what to do**

When the students reflected on the work process, several of them emphasised the importance of getting started with the degree project as soon as the course begins. On that basis, a number of them observed that the programmes’ communication of important starting points for the degree project does not need to be put off until the start of the degree project course. The students seem to favour that the programmes would, in different ways, introduce them as much as possible to the degree project well in advance of the start of the degree project course.

Programmes often urge students to submit a written outline of their plans for their degree project, and organising the submission of such an outline as a compulsory course component results in an increased sense of security among the students. Of those who submitted an outline, about two thirds (65%) knew what they wanted to write about at the start of the course, while the same applied to only half (52%) of those who did not submit an outline.

Far from everyone who submitted an outline as a course component reported that they received feedback on it from the teaching staff. As an example, almost half (44%) of the students from the Faculty of Medicine who had submitted an outline responded that they received no feedback at all.

**Students who see a connection between the degree project and their future studies or profession are more motivated than others**

Among the students who participated in this survey, most of them (72%) stated they felt very or fairly motivated to carry out their degree projects. Meanwhile, one in five (20%) responded that were not motivated at all. The proportion of motivated students was slightly higher at LTH, the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Science than at other faculties.

The students with the most motivation were those who could see a clear connection between the degree project and their future studies or profession. Most students who were interested in applying for research studies also felt very motivated to carry out their degree projects (83%). This number was far smaller among those who did not express an interest in pursuing research studies (61%). Others thought that the degree project would be of great importance when applying for jobs, and of these the vast majority felt very motivated to carry out the work (83%). The same motivation was only found in a much smaller percentage of the students who could not see a connection between the degree project and their future employment prospects (63%).

**Important to understand the extent of the supervision**
For all the faculties combined, six out of ten students (61%) felt that they received sufficient supervision when working on their degree projects, and relatively few (13%) felt strongly that the supervision was insufficient. In this context, the Faculty of Law (44%) and the Faculty of Social Sciences (49%) stand out in that fewer of their students felt that they had received sufficient supervision, compared to students at other faculties.

Of the students who stated that they, in connection with the start of the course, received very clear information with regard to how much supervision they were entitled to, more than seven out of ten (73%) responded that they had received sufficient supervision. Conversely, that number was only one in three (33%) among the students who felt that they had received very unclear information. This shows the importance of clarifying the extent of the supervision and thereby communicating what expectations the students can have on their supervisors in this regard.

**Well-informed and well-prepared students think more highly of the supervision – and face-to-face meetings are important for the experience of the supervision**

The students who thought they had been well informed about the conditions for the execution of the degree project were to a greater extent satisfied with their supervision than those who thought that the conditions were unclear. This applies to almost all faculties, and regardless of whether it concerns information about the scope of the supervision, which formal rules apply, the submission date, or grading criteria. Another aspect that has a significant impact on how the students experience the supervision is how well their previous university studies prepared them for carrying out a degree project. The more prepared the students’ previous studies had made them, the better they think of the supervision. This also applies to practically all faculties and irrespective of whether the preparation is about writing research texts, searching for literature, scholarly referencing, or applying research methods or theoretical perspectives to their work.

That well-informed and well-prepared students to a much greater extent think that the supervision worked well than uninformed and unprepared students suggests that the conditions for supervision are considerably more favourable in educational environments that prioritise preparation and information before the students are to carry out their degree projects. In these environments, the supervisor does not need to compensate for inadequate preparation or vague information, and can fully focus on the progress of the degree project. This in turn creates good conditions for supervision that is favourable from the perspective of both the student and the supervisor.

Another aspect of the supervision, which from the students’ perspective appears to be central, is face-to-face meetings with their supervisors. Of those who stated that they to a great extent communicated with their supervisor through face-to-face meetings, nearly nine out of ten (86%) thought that the supervision had worked well.
Supervision is crucial to how students feel about the degree project in general

Judging by the students’ responses, the importance of the supervision can hardly be overrated with regard to how the students feel about their degree project. The vast majority (80%) of the students who thought that the supervision had generally worked well also conveyed positive experiences of the course as a whole. The opposite often applied for those students who for various reasons felt that their supervision had not worked well. Only slightly more than one in four students (28%) who thought that their supervision had worked badly were satisfied with the course in general.

Half of students are given opportunities for support other than supervision within the framework of the course – the other half receive no such support

It is fairly uncommon for students to have the opportunity to take part in some form of teaching or training in addition to their supervision within the degree project course. The course structure for just over half of the students (53%) provided them with opportunities for additional learning support other than their supervision. For the other half (47%) there was no such support available.

Among the additional support that was offered, different types of seminars were by far the most common complement to the supervision. Looking at all the faculties combined, four out of ten students responded that they, within the framework of the course, took part in one or more seminars while conducting their degree projects. In addition, approximately one in five students responded that their course included some form of organised peer review.

In the group of students who did not take part in any teaching or training in addition to their supervision, there was some criticism of what was perceived as deficient planning of the course. The criticism suggested that parallel seminars or lectures could be a support in the work process, or that students were in general sceptical of a too individualised course structure.

Most students feel that their work was discussed in a constructive manner during the examination – but many think that the justification of the grade was unclear

The majority – almost eight out of ten – felt that their degree projects were discussed in a constructive manner during the examination. LTH, in particular, stands out compared to other faculties as a higher proportion of its students (89%) expressed that the examination involved a constructive discussion of their work. Generally, the examination of a degree project includes a critical review/defence seminar. A little more than seven out of ten (72%) were positive about the critical review, while slightly more than one in ten thought that it worked badly.
Most students (68%) expressed that the examination session worked well with regard to the feedback they received from their examiner. Meanwhile, students at different faculties reported different experiences. While almost nine out of ten students at the Faculty of Medicine (88%) thought that they received good feedback from their examiner, the same applies to less than half of the students at EHL (49%) and the Faculty of Law (49%). Moreover, many students felt that the justification of their grades was unclear. Approximately every third student at the University thought that the justification of their grade was fairly (21%) or very unclear (17%). The students that were most uncertain were those at the Faculty of Law, where four out of ten students thought that the justification of their grades had been very unclear.

**Conflicting signals from the supervisor and examiner**

According to the guidelines stated in the *List of Rights for Students at Lund University*, the supervisor and the examiner should, if possible, not be the same person. However, the opposite is not unusual. Out of all the students, 7% responded that their supervisor and examiner had been the same person, and this occurred at all faculties. However, it was more common at particularly HT but also LTH where one in five (20%) and one in ten students (10%) responded that their supervisor was also the examiner of their degree project.

While the supervisors and examiners are expected to be different people, their separate functions may have the result that the student feels that their supervisor says one thing and their examiner says another. These rather complex starting points usually require dialogue and cooperation between the supervisor and the examiner. However, this seems to not always be an easy matter. Frustrations over conflicting signals from the supervisor and examiner were one of the most central issues when the students in the present study expressed critical perspectives with regard to the examination of their degree projects.

**Degree projects greatly contribute to the students’ knowledge and learning – and most are proud of their work**

Many students expressed that the execution of their degree projects considerably developed their knowledge and skills in several different areas. About three out of four at Lund University stated that the degree project had to a great extent strengthened their ability to solve problems independently, and in large measure developed their critical thinking and theoretical knowledge. Nearly seven out of ten (68%) also found that the degree project to a great extent enabled them to develop their knowledge of research methodology. Writing a degree project usually gives students the opportunity to immerse themselves in an area that they find particularly interesting. This opportunity seems above all to lead to the development of specialised knowledge. The vast majority (91%) believed that the execution of their degree projects greatly contributed to providing them with specialised knowledge in the field of study of the programme. In this context it can also be noted that almost three out of four students
(73%) were to a high degree proud of their work and that less than one out of ten (9%) expressed clear disappointment or dissatisfaction in this regard. The vast majority of students at all faculties were proud of their work.

**Motivated students who invest time benefit more from the degree project**

The degree to which students feel that they learn depends both on their individual investment and motivation, and on how the studies are designed and executed. In the light of how much time the students invested in their degree projects, it is clear that those who reported a more extensive investment also stated that they to a greater extent felt that they gained new knowledge compared to those who spent less time doing the work. The students’ motivation is also an important aspect of the learning process. The students who felt strongly motivated when they first started their degree projects also felt that they learned more than those who expressed that they felt only slightly motivated.

While the highly motivated students to a greater extent thought that the degree project had been rewarding, the majority of those who felt only slightly motivated nevertheless thought that the degree project had greatly developed their abilities, including their problem-solving skills and critical thinking. Even in cases where the student may have been initially sceptical, the degree project provided great potential for contributing to the individual’s learning and knowledge development.

While the students’ investment and motivation in several important respects go beyond the immediate effect of the education, there are other factors that are relevant to the students’ knowledge development, and that in a clearer way are directly linked to the execution and planning of the project. Worth mentioning in this context is how well the students thought their supervision had worked. For example, three out of four who thought that the supervision had worked well responded that the degree project to a great extent had developed their knowledge of methodology (75%). The same was perceived by far fewer (50%) of those who thought that the supervision had worked badly. Another example is that more than eight out of ten (83%) of those who thought the supervision had worked well also believed that they, to a great extent, had improved their writing skills, which applies to fewer than six out of ten (57%) of those who thought the supervision had worked badly.

**Perspectives on learning and usefulness**

A majority of the students in the present study expressed that the degree project had to a great extent developed their critical thinking (72%) and their ability to independently solve problems (75%), and this clearly shows the potential degree projects have to promote learning. Given that learning can be regarded more as a process than a measurable property, it can be noted that those who enjoyed the actual process also thought that they learned the most. For example, the vast majority (84%) who enjoyed writing their degree projects also
stated that it, to a great extent, developed their ability to solve problems independently. The same applies to less than half (45%) of those who did not enjoy the process.

The students were also asked to form an opinion about the potential future usefulness of their degree project, and its role when applying for jobs. Most students (70%) believed that they would benefit from the work in the future and, in this regard, the students at the different faculties were in relative agreement. Fewer of them (32%) believed that the degree project would be of significance when applying for jobs, and in this regard the students’ opinions differed greatly between the faculties. While slightly more than one in ten students at the Faculty of Law (12%) believed that their degree projects would be significant in this regard, the same applied to four out of ten students at LTH (40%).

The students’ experiences of the degree project within programmes of very high or inadequate quality

A majority of the students who participated in the survey were registered as having passed their degree projects during the spring semester of 2014. An additional selection was made that included students who carried out their degree projects on programmes judged to be of very high or inadequate quality in the national quality audit of the Swedish Higher Education Authority. Since the quality review was largely based on the quality of the degree projects, they provide a possible starting point for studying the quality of the work in light of the content and structure of the programmes. What experiences do students have with regard to writing a degree project at Lund University as part of a programme that has been judged to be of very high or inadequate quality?

Based on the results of this study, it is difficult to find simple and unambiguous answers to this question. However, it can be interesting to reflect upon some of the results with regard to the relationship between the students’ experiences and the assessment of the quality of programmes. These results primarily involve selected parts of the supervision, how the students feel they had been prepared for the degree project, the written outline that some of the students submitted before starting the project, and whether the students had read another student’s degree project before starting their own work.

One example is that more students from the stronger educational environments thought that the supervision worked well with regard to the supervisor’s ability to provide constructive feedback, how well the supervisor was prepared for the supervision sessions, the discussion of the timetable and intermediate goals, and discussions before each new stage of the project process. Another example is that students from programmes which were judged to be of very high quality generally considered themselves to be better prepared for the degree project than students who conducted their studies in environments that had been judged inadequate. Furthermore, the survey shows that students who have submitted a written outline find it important to receive feedback on it. Among the students from educational environments judged to be of very high quality, twice as many (54%) responded that they received feedback on their outline, compared with those who pursued their studies in educational environments.
judged inadequate (27%). Another example is that a significantly higher proportion of students from programmes that were considered to be functioning well had read another student’s degree project before executing their own. While more than seven out of ten students (71%) from programmes that were judged to be of very high quality had read another student’s degree project, that number was less than half (44%) for those who pursued their studies in environments that were judged inadequate.