

Chapter 1 **Starting the journey of your final-year project**

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What is a final-year project?

The landscape of nurse training is evolving to become more flexible and accessible. Whether you have embarked on an apprenticeship leading to a degree in nursing or a foundation degree nursing associate qualification, are attending a higher education institution and undertaking a full-time direct entry degree in nursing, or perhaps you were awarded your nursing registration before the profession became all-graduate in 2013 and have now chosen to 'top-up' to a BSc or BN, you will be required to complete a final year project.

There are variations in the names awarded to these projects between education providers; dissertation, research project, evidenced-based practice project or portfolio for example. The form, structure and expected content of this project will also vary between institutions, with some requiring a 'traditional' 10 000-word evidence-based practice enquiry, while others may request a significantly shorter literature review, aimed at writing for a specific relevant journal with a view to publication. This might sound unfairly disparate, but often it is easier to work with a larger word count than it is a restricted one. Perhaps you will be required to critique the literature underpinning a specific piece of healthcare guidance, and then design an audit to test whether the recommendations are happening in practice.

Although there are many potential methodologies (research word for recipe) that you could be asked to follow, there are nevertheless commonalities between them all which remain constant, and so for the purposes of this book, we will refer to this polynymous piece of work as a 'final year project' or 'dissertation'.

This chapter is based on an earlier chapter by Sheila Reading.

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It is unlikely at undergraduate level that you would be asked to generate any new empirical evidence, meaning you will not be conducting research to generate new evidence yourself; rather you will be required to focus on a specific topic by systematically reviewing the literature in relation to that topic.

Other potential common features of a final-year project include:

- larger word count than other essays in the same programme;
- a requirement for you to show understanding of research methods and methodologies;
- a requirement for you to demonstrate your ability to be analytical and critical in your thinking and writing
- more credits than other essays (generally double the credit weighting compared with other assignments in the same programme).

A final-year project is often viewed as the culmination of a programme of learning which helps consolidate the student's knowledge, skills and understanding of the research base of the discipline.

Whether you are accessing a foundation degree to become a Nursing Associate, or are a fully registered nurse undertaking postgraduate study, it is essential to understand the task required of you.

Scenario

Alisha left school without taking A-levels; she sought employment as a health-care assistant at her local NHS Trust. Her ward managers recognised that Alisha had potential and when the new Nursing Associate Foundation Degree by the local university was launched in 2018 they sponsored her to undertake this new course. Alisha is now in her second and final year and is looking forward to registering with the Nursing and Midwifery Council as a qualified Nursing Associate. However, Alisha must successfully complete an evidence-based practice project of 4000 words before completing the course. She and her friend Charlotte, who is a third-year student nurse, often meet in the library.

Charlotte is a third-year undergraduate student nurse and has been recently assessed as having a learning difference. She has been having regular support meetings with the faculty learning support manager. She has to write a 7000-word evidence-based practice assignment.

Sue, a senior staff nurse, has an Advanced Diploma in Nursing and is aware of the move to an all-graduate profession for new applicants to nursing. This has prompted her to embark on a 'top-up degree' programme at a nearby university to enable her to achieve graduate status. To meet the programme

requirements she will need to complete a 10 000-word evidence-based practice final-year project (dissertation).

Sam, a friend of Sue, is a ward manager and graduated with a Bachelor in Nursing degree 10 years earlier and now wants to study for an MSc in Nursing. For the MSc evidence-based practice final-year project he will have to write a thesis of 20 000 words in length.

SUE: 'Why do we have to write such a long final year project?'

SAM: 'That is a good question Sue. We should first explore what an evidence-based practice final-year project is so we can understand why it is a significant aspect of our degree programmes and what we need to achieve. This article I have been reading indicates some key aspects of a final-year project.'

Activity 1.1

Before reading further it will be helpful for you to consider exactly what the module requirements are for your final-year project. What is the task that you have been set?

Talk to other people who have undertaken the task previously, or who are currently undertaking the same project, to determine how they have approached or intend to approach the task. It is likely that your course will provide a number of exemplars of previous projects.

Note that the website that accompanies this book also has exemplar projects available, take a look to see which most closely resembles the project you are undertaking.

Why do nurses need to do a research-based project?

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) is the regulatory body for registered nurses and nurses in training across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. They provide the standards of competence which underpin nursing practice and education. In *Future Nurse: Standards for Proficiency for Registered Nurses* it states:

The confidence and ability to think critically, apply knowledge and skills, and provide expert, evidence-based, direct nursing care therefore lies at the centre of all registered nursing practice.

(NMC 2018:3)

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Healthcare practitioners need to be able to ask questions about practice, access healthcare research and evidence, and report the key ideas and findings effectively and accurately to others. Preparing a final-year project will provide you with the skills that you need to be able to search for, and critically evaluate, relevant theoretical knowledge and literature, which will underpin your practice, improve your knowledge, inform your practice, and therefore improve outcomes for patients and service users.

It is therefore the process of writing a final-year project that is arguably more important than the final project document itself. Production of a final-year evidence-based project is the primary means to achieving an honours or a master's degree.

Undergraduate versus postgraduate projects

Normally an undergraduate project will be based on a critique of a small selection of evidence and be applied to one focused aspect of practice. It will provide insight and hands-on experience of the process of engaging in evidence-based practice and should inform individual or local professional clinical practice.

The requirement of a master's programme is that the evidence-based project demonstrates how the student has 'mastered' a core aspect of healthcare practice, related research knowledge and discipline-related content.

There is a *qualitative* difference between the master's final-year project and the undergraduate final-year project as well as the *quantitative* difference recognised by the word allowance. This normally relates to the depth, breadth and analysis demonstrated in the written work. A master's final-year project will systematically critique a greater amount of evidence from a range of different sources, demonstrating a significant appreciation of underlying issues, application, and impact of the findings for the wider practice context.

Undergraduate evidence-based practice projects tend to focus on 'what' and 'where' questions related to practice, while master's level work will move on to asking more analytical questions that focus on the 'how' and 'why' of practice.

The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Subject Benchmark Statement provides a means of describing standards for the award of qualifications at a given level. The capabilities and attributes of those who undertake final-year projects for particular qualifications should demonstrate the appropriate level of study. This is always indicated in the programme final-year project assignment guidelines and the learning outcomes made available to students. More detail on this can be found in Chapter 2.

What are the features of a degree education?

Increasingly, degree programmes and foundation degree nursing associate courses are aligned with the achievement of defined 'graduate attributes'. Many higher education institutions have identified their own specific graduate attributes. These usually focus on skills which are valuable for, and transferable to, work-based contexts. Graduate attributes support learners in meeting the needs of a complex, challenging and constantly changing environment of employment. They include more than just the academic or professional skills of the discipline and demonstrate skills needed to be independent, autonomous and lifelong learners, which are viewed as important characteristics of being a graduate. Graduate attributes include personal qualities, skills and knowledge gained as a result of engaging in study. They include qualities such as adopting academic approaches to thinking which demonstrate openness to new ways of responding to unfamiliar situations and challenges with intellectual curiosity.

In addition to developing skills in information retrieval and critiquing research evidence, completing a degree or foundation degree equips individuals with highly prized transferable skills such as problem solving, project management and report writing that can significantly enhance professional communication and practice. In a study to elucidate research-related graduate attributes, Laidlaw *et al.* (2009) found evidence to support the case for final-year projects helping achieve both clinical and research-related graduate attributes for medical undergraduates. The attributes included an inquiring mind, core knowledge, critical appraisal, understanding the evidence base for professional practice, understanding ethics and governance, and an ability to communicate. Each of these graduate attributes could be argued as being relevant for other healthcare professionals.

Completing a foundation degree and/or subsequently an honours degree is often a precursor to further academic study such as a postgraduate masters or doctoral studies. A master's final-year project will build on previous knowledge gained at undergraduate level and develop new understandings

Tip

As well as significant differences in word length and the scope and depth of analysis required, the period of time available to complete and the expected hours of self-directed study differ between an undergraduate and postgraduate masters final-year project. Make sure you have explored in detail the final-year project requirements of your programme and use them to help you organise and plan for the task ahead.

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and a greater breadth and depth of learning. Each stage is part of a progressive development of research knowledge and skills. This may be part of developing a clinical academic career pathway that integrates research and education to improve the use of research, and other evidence, in clinical practice (UKCRC, 2007).

Activity 1.2

Think about all the reasons why you want to become a nursing associate or registered nurse, and the reasons for choosing to study at the level you are. Prioritise the items and write a short summary statement to refer back to later.

Features of a final-year project

A final-year project is an extended and substantial piece of work carried out independently. It is common to have a link with a group of peers who are also completing a final-year project with the same submission date and to have a link with a member of the university staff who will supervise and offer academic support. The final-year project 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 that poses a question which is then addressed and answered in relation to a specific practice issue.

The initial choice of topic selected can increase the personal and professional depth of understanding on the subject. Very often the breadth of knowledge may be extended into unexpected areas. For example, a recent final-year project which focused on enhancing the care of people with long-term conditions in one NHS Trust led the student to an exploration of concepts of clinical leadership, while another student, also focusing on long-term conditions, explored the evidence for promoting approaches to self-care.

Whatever topic is chosen, it is important to remember that sustained motivation to undertake a final-year project requires considerable enthusiasm for both the subject and the process, over an extended period of time.

The key features of a final-year project may include:

- Title
- Well-framed question
- Clear aims and objectives
- Search strategy for best evidence
- Critical appraisal of research or other best evidence
- Discussion of results and implication for practice.

Discussion point

If you have been seconded or are being funded by an employer, you might find that they allocate you a topic for your project, usually because it is specific to, and enhances practice in, your particular practice area.

You may consider this to be helpful, because it limits what can feel like an overwhelming choice of inquiries . . . *but* . . . remember that it is important to choose a subject which inspires you, because you are the one who has to 'live and breathe' it for the duration. If you find yourself bored with reading around the subject after the initial literature search, this might not be the topic for you!

Have a think about what really captures your interest, and then discuss with your manager how much wiggle room there is for negotiation of topic. It might be that your personal choice is related to your practice, which will assist the negotiation, but remember that the process of learning how to search for and critically assess literature is what will enhance your practice, not the findings of the project itself necessarily.

All these aspects will be covered and discussed in the various chapters of this book.

Additionally, this will all have to be written up in a readable style, communicating the relevant information and presented in an understandable format according to regulations, and submitted on time. Penalties for breaching guidance and regulations may be applied.

Producing a final-year project demonstrates and communicates that you have consolidated a range of skills including, intellectual, professional, information-seeking, critical analysis and synthesis of knowledge.

Planning your final-year project: essential considerations

Chapter 2 gives further details on how final-year projects are planned.

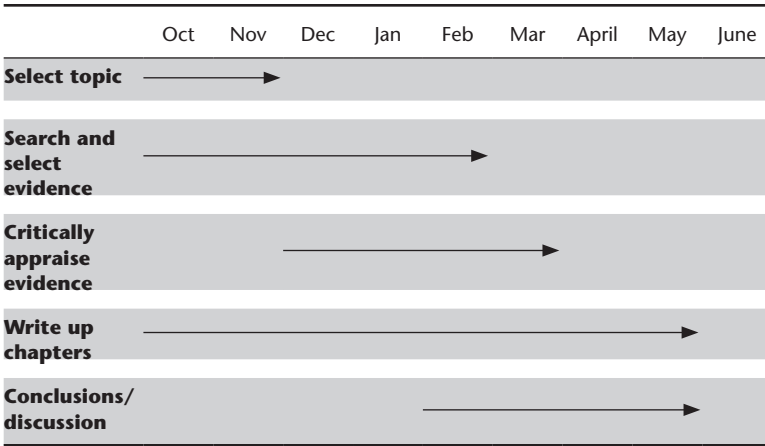
Planning your available time

Some students find the use of Gantt charts (Table 1.1) helpful. It is important to be clear about how much time to allocate to each step of the process. Several stages may be undertaken at a time and undertaking a final-year project is not always a linear process.

It is sensible to remember that things do not always run according to plan. Life events can interfere and mean that work is delayed. It makes sense to build in time for some slippage to prevent last minute panic in meeting the

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Table 1.1 Example of a Gantt chart.



deadline for submission. Do allow time for making final revisions and checking for spelling or other errors.

Begin writing early: produce drafts to show others and get feedback

While the list of things to do indicated above gives an outline of the structure for a typical written final-year project, careful thought is needed about how best to present the final coherent project.

Reading other final-year projects written by students who have completed similar programmes is always a good resource for considering how to frame your headings, sections and chapters. However, each final-year project is unique, and support from a personal tutor in interpreting the assignment guidelines to apply to your own project is always essential.

At times it can be difficult to be certain where, for example, the writing on the results section should end and when the conclusions begin. It is important to weave all the sections together into the whole which is the final written project.

It is important to avoid writing too descriptively. Remember you need to adopt an academic approach, demonstrating your ability to think critically and analytically and to synthesise conclusions from all the information you have gathered.

Get support from others

Enlist family and friends to encourage you in keeping on task, and work with peers on the programme who are going through the same experience as you. Email them, set up group discussions on messaging apps, or meet informally

to discuss aspects of each other's work and for mutual support. It is a common phenomenon to get 'too close' to your own work to see the flaws or how to resolve them. It is generally easier to be objective about someone else's work. For this reason, supporting other students with the difficulties they are encountering with their work can be of benefit to your own work.

Take opportunities offered to present your ideas to the programme group or your personal tutor in order to get supportive feedback. Some universities have special sections of their electronic learning platforms (e.g. Blackboard or Microsoft Teams) which feature student chat-rooms where information can be exchanged.

Adopt the help of 'critical readers'. It might sound counterintuitive, but sometimes the best people to proofread work are not necessarily those who are familiar with your topic, or even with healthcare. This is because someone with understanding of the subject can subconsciously fill in gaps in knowledge, whereas someone with no knowledge will require clarification if the writing is not clear enough.

Your proofreader will need to be honest with you and receiving feedback is hard, so try not to get defensive or they might not help again in the future! As well as content, they need to comment on whether the work is coherent and well structured. You might feel that comments relating to SPaG (spelling, punctuation and grammar) by your reader is being picky, but these things can impact the meaning of a sentence, which could make you look like you lack understanding – so better that they spot the errors before your marker does.

Finally, back up everything you save on your computer.

Tip

- Buy several (minimum four megabytes) data/memory sticks/USB flash drives to store copies of your work.
- Create a folder entitled 'My final year project' with sub-folders for each individual chapter.

Completing your final-year project and gaining a good classification

Because the final-year project at foundation degree/undergraduate or post-graduate level makes a significant contribution in terms of credits gained and to the student's final classification, it is often an important priority for students to gain a good result.

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Make sure you meet the deadlines for submitting the final-year project for marking and that you are not rushed towards the end. Being short of time can lead to you having to take shortcuts and potentially reduce the time available to complete your writing to the required standard. Remember time is needed to refine drafts, ensure accurate reference lists, and check for typographical and other errors related to the general presentation before the final year project is submitted. In some institutions they will expect you to have your project bound, which can take at least one week, so this will need to be factored in. Be clear about the written style (font and spacing) and final presentation format required by your university and foundation degree/honours degree/MSc programme.

To achieve a good grade you will need to look at the module assignment guidelines and learning outcomes and the marking criteria (Table 1.2). Universities normally explain the basis on which student final-year projects are assessed in order to guide student learning and, importantly, to ensure work is marked fairly and consistently. It is very important that as a student you are familiar with the final-year project requirements and marking guidance. Often a module handbook is produced by the university that will give details of the final-year project expectations and the explicit marking criteria by which they will be assessed. This can be discussed with your personal tutor at an early stage and as you complete written sections or chapters. Part of your own learning is to develop your skills in self-assessment so you can recognise the standard of work which you are capable of and need to aim for in order to ensure the desired grade.

Table 1.2 Example of possible evidence-based final-year project marking criteria.

Category	Relative importance (%)
Presentation (structure, language, referencing)	8
Abstract (accuracy, relevance and clarity)	2
Introduction (background to project, issues to be addressed, background reading, framing of the question)	20
Identification and selection of best evidence (retrieval of evidence, search strategy and terms, rationale for criteria to select or reject evidence, audit trail)	20
Critical appraisal of evidence (rationale for selection of critiquing framework/tool, judgement of evidence, rigour, addresses the question, research understanding)	25
Conclusions and implications for practice (conclusions well drawn from selected evidence, skills of analysis and evaluation, relevance to practice, application to practice)	15
Discussion and plan for implementation	10

Don't panic!

It is entirely understandable and quite usual to feel overwhelmed or anxious about such an undertaking, but with more than 650 000 qualified nurses working in the UK currently (Office of National Statistics, 2020) there is plenty of evidence that this is an entirely achievable and rewarding endeavour. You are not alone, link in with fellow students past and current, keep talking to your personal tutor and any work colleagues who have done the same or similar.

Be organised and systematic in your approach, and don't become an ostrich – if any personal or health issues are impacting on your study, or you get a study block, talk to your tutor as soon as possible, as they can provide advice and support (more on getting the most from your tutor/supervisor can be found in Chapter 12).

Activity 1.3

Find out about different learning/study styles and what works for you. Perhaps you work best first thing in the morning or last thing at night? Are you a 'little and often' person or a last-minute crammer? Perhaps you have carer responsibilities which will put restrictions on the time you have to study?

Take some time to think about all of the things that will impact on your study, whether positive or negative, and take some time to consider how you will manage them, or use them to your advantage.

There are plenty of study skills books online or in the library which offer practical advice on maintaining well-being while studying.

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