

The Brunel MBA

Project Proposal

The Power of The Web Pitch:

“How can small firms exploit Web 2.0 technologies as marketing tools to raise their business profiles?”

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Background and Overview

This project proposal and the subsequent dissertation will attempt to investigate how Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, social networking, Really Simple Syndication (RSS) Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and other Web 2.0 technologies can have on raising the business profiles of small businesses within the UK. Specifically, how Web 2.0 tools can be used as a marketing tool to promote small businesses using the Internet. The author has specifically, created a blog entitled - “The Web Pitch” (www.thewebpitch.com) as the basis of research into this area.

While you were sleeping the Internet changed. A subtle evolution over the last three years allowed millions upon millions of individuals and businesses across the world to network, in a way that was never thought possible. The rise of social networking sites such as Orkut and MySpace brought people together from different backgrounds with shared interests to communicate and network. Web sites such as Flickr and YouTube, allowed individuals to share “experiences” using video and picture content across the world. Blogging software allowed people a “voice”, a platform to communicate their message to others across the Internet. RSS allowed interested individuals to subscribe to other people’s content across the Internet and thus be kept “informed” of new developments. Such technologies can be used by anyone. Specifically, such tools are an opportunity for small businesses that have small marketing budgets but wish to promote themselves and compete with other larger businesses in their industries

The author was inspired to research into this area after reading a paper entitled “*The Revenge of the Gifted Amateur...be afraid, be very afraid*” by Dr Lisa Harris and Dr Alan Rae. The paper specifically investigates how small businesses that use and understand Web 2.0 technologies, can effectively “punch above their own weight” and become effective early adopters of online networking and its marketing benefits. Small businesses are agile enough to exploit The Internet, more rapidly than large cumbersome corporate organisations that restrict web tools as part of their security policies.

Indeed, while you were sleeping the Internet changed and the world suddenly became a little bit smaller. Businesses around the world suddenly found new methods and tools on the Internet to promote their goods and services. Such methods and tools available, became holistic – known collectively as Web 2.0

“Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them” <http://radar.oreilly.com>

Rationale behind this study

Authors Tim O'Reilly and John Battelle summarised key principles of Web 2.0 applications as follows:

- **The Internet as a platform** — allowing its users to use applications entirely through a web browser
- **Data as its driving force** - Users owning the data on the site and exercising control over that data
- **‘Networking Effects’** - created by an architecture of active participation
- **Participation and Democracy** that encourages users to add value to the application as they use it
- **Simpler technologies** - Easy to pick up and learn by early adopters

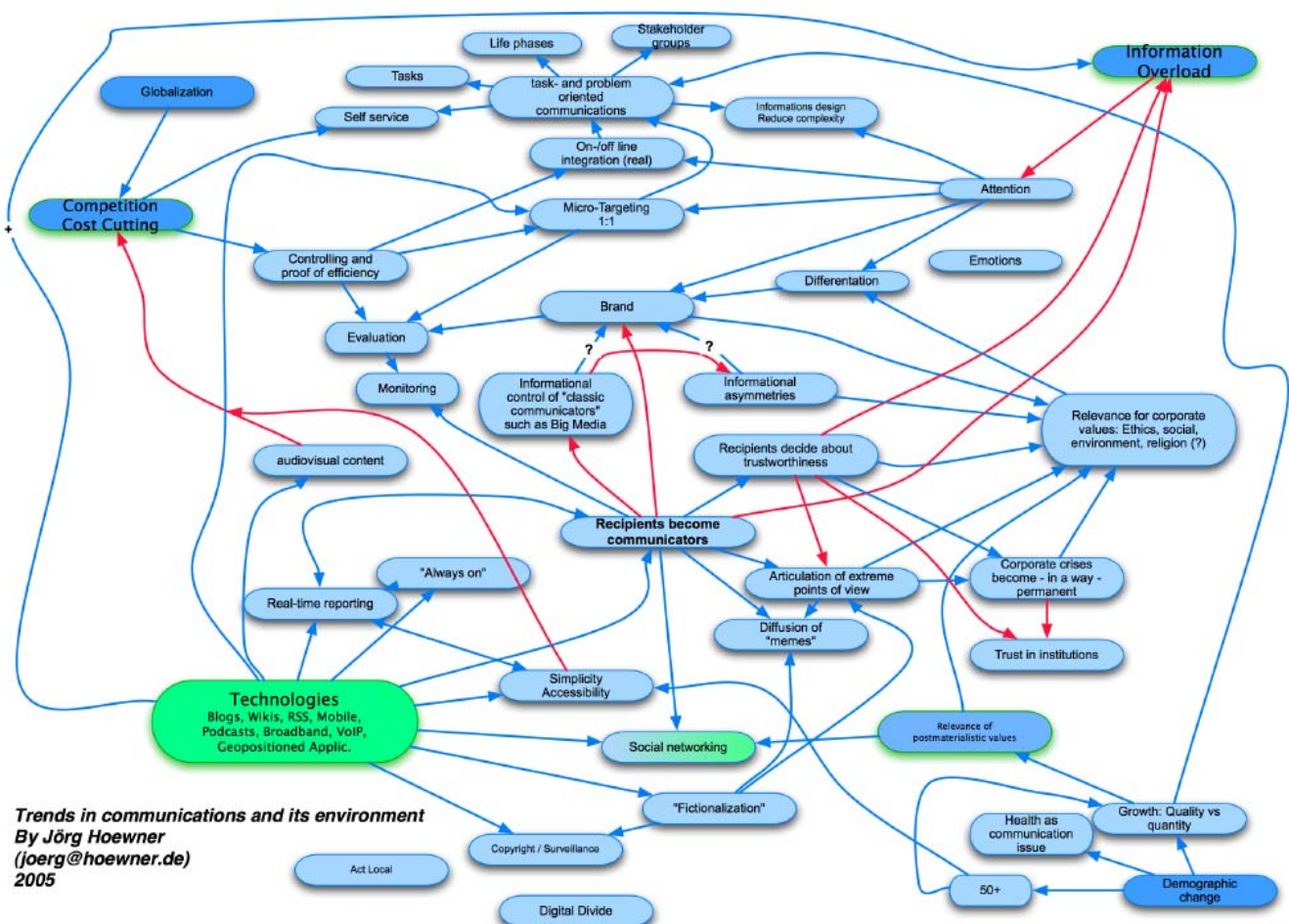
<http://radar.oreilly.com>

Web 2.0 brings a rare opportunity for small businesses who take the time to understand and use the tools available to compete with their larger competitors. This project proposal and intended dissertation, is intended to be a comprehensive study, focussing on small businesses in the London area

Research Objectives

Over recent years, much has been written in white papers and books, suggesting that Web 2.0 technologies are the next the “next big thing” in e-marketing. So far, there has been very little research conducted into how small businesses are using Web 2.0 technologies as business tools to promote themselves. The focus has predominantly been on a limited number of large technological corporations such as Microsoft and Intel. However, anecdotal evidence reported in the business and computer press suggest that some small businesses are using blogs successfully. A prime example being English Cut (www.englishcut.com)

Hoewner’s map below, shows that businesses both large and small find themselves intertwined within a complex socio-technological maze. Web 2.0 technologies can act as positive “link agents” and thus customers can become communicators and help to promote their businesses.



<http://www.moderne-unternehmenskommunikation.de/wordpress/2005/09/>

Research Aims

- To prove that using Web 2.0 technologies can have a positive impact as a marketing tool. This is measured by deploying Google analytical software and measuring clicks from Google AdSense during a four month period.
- To prove that using a mixture of Web 2.0 viral marketing techniques and keywords, Google page ranking is improved, over a four month period
- To show that social networking can help to increase sales

My overall dissertation aim is to make a positive contribution to the academic field, by investigating the experiences of early Web 2.0 adopters in small businesses as effective marketing tools. “Marketing”, is used in this context in its widest sense. According to the *Chartered Management Institute's Dictionary of Business and Management* (2003) “marketing aims to build long term relationships with customers and with other interested parties and to provide value to them”

Kotler (2003, p.13) describes “relationships and networks” as one of his core marketing concepts. The extent to which small businesses are using Web 2.0 technologies to build positive relationships with customers will be a key area to this study. Another key important area is what are perceptions regarding the effectiveness of using these new web technologies as a marketing tools? The scope of the analysis will be centred on a number of small businesses in the London area.

Literature Search

Please note that this list is not intended to be exclusive

Scoble, R. and Israel, S. (2006) 'Naked Conversations: How blogs are changing the way businesses talk with customers'. New Jersey: John Wiley

A key aspect of Web 2.0 is the voice of the blog. "A blog is a user generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news. However, most user blogs exist as personal online diaries."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

Scoble and Israel (2006) discuss their six pillars of blogging in the online world. The authors claim, that there are six differences between blogging and other communication tools, blogging is unique because it is:

1. **Publishable.** Anyone can publish a blog for free. Updates can be made frequently, and are visible instantly to a worldwide audience
2. **Findable.** Through key word searches through search engines, blogs can be found by people. The more often authors post, the findable the blog becomes.
3. **Social.** Blogs provide a forum for people with shared interests to discover each other.
4. **Viral.** Information can spread faster through blogs than other news services.
5. **Syndicable.** it can be syndicated by RSS so that readers are alerted when a blog they visit has been updated in a real time.
6. **Linkable.** Blogs can be linked to other blogs, each blogger has access to millions of other bloggers

Over the last few years, several corporate organisations have started using blogs to add "a human face" to their company. Corporate organisations such as Microsoft and The Carphonewarehouse, have used blogs successfully to promote their companies as well as their brand. As part of my research I wish to investigate how and why small businesses should use blogging in much the same way as large corporate companies. Are blogs just a fad, do they really give small businesses any competitive advantages?

Anderson, C. (2006) The Long Tail: How Endless Choice Is Creating Unlimited Demand

Anderson argues in his book and Wired magazine the case of the “Long Tail”. The theory draws in part from Shirky’s, influential essay entitled "Power Laws, Weblogs and Inequality" http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html.

Shirky noted that a relative handful of blogs have many links going into them but "the long tail" of millions of blogs may have only a handful of links going into them.

Anderson built on Shirky’s research and published an article in Wired magazine in 2004. Anderson examined the effects of the long tail on current and future internet business models. Anderson’s research later led to the publication of his book.

http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html?pg=1&topic=tail&topic_set=

Anderson argues that products that are in “low demand today or are experiencing low sales growth can collectively make up market share that rivals or exceeds the current popular bestsellers books and film blockbusters, as long as the distribution channel is large enough”. <http://longtail.typepad.com> Anderson cites earlier research by Brynjolfsson, Hu, and Smith, who used a log-linear curve on an XY graph to track the relationship between Amazon.com sales and their sales ranking.

The researchers found a large number of Amazon's book sales came from a selection of eclectic and obscure books that were typically not available in traditional “bricks-and-mortar” stores. The implications of this research for small businesses are important. The Internet has removed many of the physical barriers to market commodity goods and services. Using Anderson’s theory, small businesses can use the Internet to better manage their stock inventories and make efficient use of the physical environment. <http://longtail.typepad.com>

Godin, S. (2006) *Small Is the New Big: And 183 Other Riffs, Rants, and Remarkable Business Ideas*. Portfolio Publishing

Godin's argues that being "big" used to matter. Being bigger than your competition meant economies of scale. Big also meant control over supply and control over markets. There was a good reason for this. Value was added in ways that suited big organisations. Value was added with efficient manufacturing, widespread distribution, and very large R&D budgets.

However, almost overnight being small became more profitable than being big. Godin's continues to argue that being small means that the founder is involved in a far greater percentage of customer interactions. Small means the founder is close to the decisions that matter and can make them quickly. Small is the new big because small gives you the agility to change your business model when your competition changes theirs.

Being a small business, you have to be innovative with your approach to technology. Web 2.0 allows small businesses to use a multitude of free or fairly cheap technologies that can help to promote the business to reach more potential customers. A small business means you can tell the "truth" on your blog. Small means that you can answer e-mail from your customers. Small means that you will outsource the unimportant, low-impact tasks such as shipping, billing and packing to others while you keep all the power because you invent something that's remarkable and tell your story to people who want to hear it. A small law firm or accounting firm or advertising agency is succeeding because they are efficient, not because they are big.

<http://sethgodin.typepad.com>

Levine, R., Locke, C., Searls D., Weinberger, D. (2000) *The Cluetrain manifesto*.
Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

The Cluetrain manifesto is a set of ninety five theses organised and listed out as a manifesto, for all businesses operating within (what the author's argue) a newly-connected marketplace. The ideas examine the impact of the Internet on consumer and business markets. Additionally, as both consumers and businesses are able to connect freely to the Internet, new social networks are created that were previously unavailable and thus a new level of communication between buyers and sellers result. The manifesto continues on to argue that, changes that will be required from organisations as they respond to the new marketplace environment. The authors comment that the Internet is unlike an ordinary media used in typical mass marketing as it enables people to have "human to human" conversations, which have the potential to transform traditional business practices radically.

<http://www.cluetrain.com>

Literature Search continued...

To assist in background research, sources may be taken from the following publications and papers. *Please note that this list is not intended to be exhaustive:*

Books:

Barabasi, A-L. (2003) *Linked - How Everything is Connected to Everything Else and What it Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life*. Plume.

Battelle, J. (2005) *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing Ltd

Gladwell, M. (2000) *The Tipping Point*, New York: Little Brown

Godin, S. (2001) *Unleashing the ideavirus*. New York: Hyperion.

McKenna, R. (1991) Marketing is everything. *Harvard Business Review*. Vol. 69, No. 1, pp. 65-79.

McKenna, R. (1995) Real-Time marketing. *Harvard Business Review*. Vol. 73, No. 4, pp. 87-95.

Research Papers:

Harris, L., Rae, A (2006) "The Revenge of the Gifted Amateur... be afraid, be very afraid..."

Harris, L., Rae, A (2006) "Out on the Pull: *how small firms are making themselves sexy with new online promotion techniques*"

Leadbeater, C., Miller, P. (2004) "The Pro-Am Revolution (2004) - *How enthusiasts are changing our economy and society*

Web:

Israel, S. (2005b) Small business cases wanted. [www] *Naked conversations*, 8 April.

Available from: http://redcouch.typepad.com/weblog/2005/04/small_business.html

[Accessed 15th March 2007].

Rubel, S. (2005) Micro media is changing the PR practice. [www] *MicroPersuasion*, 18 April. Available from:

http://www.micropersuasion.com/2004/04/whats_this_blog.html

[Accessed 2nd March 2007]

Scoble, R. (2005) No RSS? No downloads? No interaction? Fake content? Your fired!

Scobleizer, [www] 19 February. Available from:

<http://radio.weblogs.com/0001011/2005/02/19.html>

[Accessed 20th February 2007].

eMarketer (2005) *The business of blogging*. 12 May. [www] Available from:

<http://www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?1003396>

[Accessed 20th February 2007].

Scoble, R. (2004) The corporate weblog manifesto. *ChangeThis*, [www] Available

<http://www.changethis.com/2.CorporateWeblog>

[Accessed 20th February 2007].

Godin, S. (2006) '*Flipping the Funnel*' [www]

www.sethgodin.typepad.com

[Accessed 21st March 2007]

Kawasaki, G. (2007) [www]

<http://blog.guykawasaki.com/blogging/index.html>

[Accessed 15th March 2007]

Research Methodology

Method of Analysis

Research will largely be descriptive and is thus likely to be qualitative research data. Interviewing will predominantly be used with a mixture of inductive and deductive lines in questioning. The purpose of this type of research will be to determine the importance that the target audience places on the Internet and the use of deploying Web 2.0 technologies to successfully promote their businesses. The aim of the research project is not to undertake a statistical analysis “using uniform questions and pre-defined categories but to obtain fuller responses in order to 'gain in the coherence, depth and density of the material each respondent provides” (Weiss, 1994, p.3). White argues that 'unstructured interviews are excellent where the aim is to understand the perspective of the interviewee and the personal meanings they attach to different situations” (White, 2002)

“If you choose qualitative interviewing it may be because your *ontological* position suggests that people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality which your research questions are designed to explore. Perhaps more importantly, you will be interested in their perceptions” (Mason, 2002, p63).

Determining the Research Questions

The aim of the research questions is to produce an insight into the use of Web 2.0 technologies and small businesses. Are they are being used at all and if so are they being used successfully to promote businesses? Mason (2002) argues that “...qualitative approaches usually entail formulating questions to be explored and developed in the research process, rather than hypotheses to be tested by or against empirical research (Mason, 2002, p19).

Proposed Research questions follow:

Sources of Primary data

- What types of small businesses are using Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, RSS, social networking, and SEO?
- What other Web 2.0 tools are small businesses using?
- If small businesses are not using Web 2.0 technologies, why not?
- Are small businesses using Web 2.0 tools as marketing tools?
- What benefits have been brought using the aforementioned tools?
- What criteria are being used by small businesses to determine the effectiveness of using Web 2.0 technologies as marketing tools?
- What were the major drawbacks in early adoption of using Web 2.0?
- How are small businesses measuring the success and effectiveness of using Web 2.0 technologies?
- Are there any common trends between early adopters of web technologies working in different sectors?
- Is it possible to define a model which can be used by other small businesses wishing to use Web 2.0 technologies to improve their marketing?

Sources of Secondary data

1. The Internet.
2. Published journals, books and websites
3. Company profiles.
4. Interviews with industry sources.
5. Industry publications such as emarketer.com

Structure of interviews

Interviews will be largely face to face although telephone interviews may also be undertaken as and when required. It is intended that interviews will largely follow the following structure:

- 1) Potential interview targets will be identified through social networking sites and across initial research on the Internet.
- 2) Before each interview, time will be spent researching the background of the interviewee and his/her small business
- 3) Once identified, potential interview targets will be contacted to seek their agreement and acceptance to take part in the interview. At this stage, potential interviewees will be informed of the purpose of the request and how any data obtained is to be used. Those agreeing to take part will be given the opportunity to be acknowledged or to remain anonymous.
- 4) Interviews will be undertaken at a mutually convenient time and or place
- 5) The interviewee will be given clear guidelines as to how long the interview will take.

Ethical Issues:

The author is keen to observe the six principles of ethical research from the Economic Social and Research Council (ESRC), which are listed below:

- ✓ Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality
- ✓ Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved. Some variation is allowed in very specific and exceptional research contexts for which detailed guidance is provided in the policy Guidelines
- ✓ The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected
- ✓ Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion
- ✓ Harm to research participants must be avoided
- ✓ The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk>

The following assumptions are being made:

- 1) That a significant percentage of the interviewee targets will allow access to information to make the research of meaningful benefit.
- 2) That the potential respondents will give a true and fair reflection and that the interviewer will not give either conscious or unconscious guidance.
- 3) That the data received as a result of the research will relate closely either way to the original data set to make an unequivocal recommendation possible.

Potential constraints:

- 1) Significant time will be available to complete the project.
- 2) Potential interviewees will allow access to material and personnel.
- 3) The author undertaking the research could become overwhelmed with information.

Industrial or Research Contacts

The author hopes to work with Dr. Lisa Harris and Dr. Alan Rae, both of whom have experience and conducted the initial research into this area. Also, two fellow MBA's have their own businesses and are willing to take part in my research to establish whether applying Web 2.0 technologies successfully promotes their businesses or not.

Contingency Planning

In the event that a significant percentage of those identified for interviews do not wish to provide information, it is the author's intention to use other data mining opportunities such as existing database information from secondary sources and analytical research from Google Analytics. Should this situation occur and given the impact that this would have on any subsequent analysis, the author will ensure that this is fully referenced within the final dissertation.

Costs and Access

The author will attempt to minimise as many of the costs as possible of undertaking this dissertation research. However, the author has allocated a budget to keep track of expenses incurred. The majority of Web 2.0 tools used as part of this research are free or minimal cost. Access to the businesses to be used in the case study, should be minimal as businesses are based within the London area.

Structure of the final report

- Title Page
- Abstract
- Acknowledgements
- Executive Summary
- Introduction – Motivation for research into this area.
- Chapter One – Brief history, background to Web 2.0 – A new form of Marketing
- Chapter Two – Arguments as to why small business should be using Web 2.0
- Chapter Three – Drawbacks of businesses using Web 2.0
- Chapter Four – Beyond 2.0 – What small businesses can look forward to
- Chapter Five – Undertaking of research.

Conclusions

- Presentation of research material.
- Analysis of said material.

Recommendations

- Recommendations based on critical analysis of results.

Reflections

- A critique of the whole process in relation to the author's experience.

Bibliography / References

- Acknowledgements where appropriate of the various data sources.

Appendices

- Relevant material identified during the research as worthy of inclusion to enlighten or enhance the potential reader's perspective.

Timetable

Please refer to Appendix

Bibliography

Books:

Chartered Management Institute (2003) *Dictionary of business and management*. London: Bloomsbury.

Kotler, P. (2003) *Marketing Management*. 11th Edition Pearson Education.

Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative researching*. London: Sage Publications.

Weiss, R.S. (1995) *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press.

White, B. (2002) *Writing your MBA dissertation*. London: Thomson

Web:

The ESRC Society [www]

[http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC Re Ethics Frame tcm6-11291.pdf](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf)

[Accessed 19th March 2007]

<http://www.moderne-unternehmenskommunikation.de/wordpress/2005/09/>

[Accessed 19th March 2007]

O'Reilly Radar - Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Trying Again [www]

http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web_20_compact.html

[Accessed 19th March 2007]

The Web Pitch Blog [www]

<http://www.thewebpitch.com>

[Accessed 21st March 2007]

Wikipedia [www]

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

[Accessed 12th February 2007]

The Cluetrain Manifesto Blog [www]

<http://www.cluetrain.com>

[Accessed 21st March 2007]

Seth Godin's Blog

<http://sethgodin.typepad.com> [www]

[Accessed 19th March 2007]

[Clay Shirky's Writings About the Internet](#)

http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html [www]

[Accessed 21st March 2007]

Chris Anderson's The Long Tail article in Wired [www]

http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html?pg=1&topic=tail&topic_set=

[Accessed 21st March 2007]

The Long Tail Blog [www]

<http://longtail.typepad.com>

[Accessed 13th March 2007]

APPENDIX

Key Project Activities	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept
<i>Planning stage</i>							
Formulate Dissertation Question							
Research academic sources and available literature to ensure project viability							
If project is viable, continue with research. If not viable, identify suitable alternatives							
Identify target market for the purposes of interviews							
Research relevant publications and Internet sources							
<i>Action Stage</i>							
Write and submit Project Proposal	22nd						
Book interviews with existing case study businesses where appropriate							
Undertake interviews							
<i>Analysis Stage</i>							
Complete interviews					31st		
Review feedback from interviews and critically evaluate in light of results							
Undertake any additional research							
Collate and reference all information obtained during course of research							
<i>Submission Stage</i>							
Prepare and write Dissertation							
Submit Dissertation							30th