

## ENHANCING THE UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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The inter-relationship between teaching and research is one of the defining features of Higher Education and the demand for the integration of teaching and research has increased further in recent years. Engagement with undergraduate research benefits both the student and institution. In particular, undergraduate research has been associated with critical thinking (Ellis 2006), research skill acquisition (Hodge, Haynes, LePore, Pasquesi and Hirsh 2008), degree completion and higher degree aspirations (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Consequently, educational reviews and commentaries such as the Boyer Commission Report (1998) have consistently raised the profile of undergraduate research.

According to Healey (2005), there are four primary ways (research led, research oriented, research based and research tutored) in which undergraduates may engage with research and inquiry. Levy (2009) has developed the Healey (2005) model to distinguish between research projects that are staff or student led and research that explores and/or acquires existing knowledge or research that builds knowledge. The resulting forms of undergraduate research are identified as pursuing, authoring, identifying and producing. This variation together with other influential factors (such as supervisor experience and availability) may have a substantial impact on the student experience.

Relatively few studies have investigated the student experience of undergraduate research. Studies conducted in this area typically involve empirical science faculties at American institutions and contrast the experience of paid research interns with students conducting the capstone project. Differences between American and British universities and between subject disciplines (Boyer 1998) make extrapolation from these studies problematic. The current project explores current practice within Psychology departments at British institutions. Contributions from both students and supervisors will be obtained as previous research identifies important differences between the student experience and faculty perceptions of this (Wuetherick and Berry 2008).

Project funding was secured from the Higher Education Academy (Psychology Network) in February 2011. The project will employ both quantitative online surveys and telephone interviews with subsequent thematic analysis. All Psychology students that have recently completed their undergraduate dissertations at a British university will be eligible to contribute. Supervisor perceptions of the supervision process will also be investigated and in order to maximize supervisor contributions; supervisor participation will not be dependent on their students' involvement with the project. The research will investigate a number of issues including the process of study design and development, the student-supervisor relationship, the utility and purpose of the research project, integration within the wider research community, the level of skill development and satisfaction with the experience. The attention to undergraduate research is consistent with various pedagogic activities at UCLan such as the 2011 British Council for Undergraduate Research Conference.

Findings will be disseminated within both the host institution and the wider pedagogic research area. The research will provide supervisors with a detailed account of the student experience. In particular, the findings will provide an insight into those aspects of undergraduate research and skill development that are most valued and those in which additional support is required. In this manner, staff will be able to make informed choices about the research project process. The research will inform the development of a guide, supporting undergraduate students' project experience. In particular, materials will emphasise the value of the project in terms of skill development and employability. Students will be encouraged to reflect on their progression in order to increase their awareness of transferable skills etc.

### References

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