1) Two competing narratives of UGR

Whilst considering the posters and listening to the contributions made by the various presenters I had the sense that there were two competing narratives of undergraduate research (UGR) emerging from our discussions. The first of these might be characterised as a Junior Model of the Practitioner in which the emphasis is placed on research outcomes, the acquisition of competence in research methods and publication. This is research with a capital ‘R’. Approaches which focus on research internships, undergraduate research publications and undergraduates assisting faculty in their (faculty-led) research would perhaps fall into this category. The emphasis here is on excellence and selectivity – the best students – with students probably being self-selective. It is an elite (and elitist) model in a positive sense of those terms. Activities in this narrative are often organised by the Office of Research. The alternative narrative might be termed Mainstreaming. This is one which emphasises the development of graduate attributes within the undergraduate curriculum and tends to be inclusive – for all students. This is research with a small ‘r’, and might be characterised as fostering ‘research-mindedness’ or skills of enquiry. It is informed by notions of employability and concerned primarily with educational outcomes. Activities in this narrative are often organised by the Office of Teaching and Learning.

2) Need for Faculty Development

A particular implication of the Mainstreaming approach is the need for appropriate faculty development. Such an approach for all students in undergraduate curricula requires a degree of scaffolding for students and awareness of curriculum design if it is to be done well, and requires an ontological shift, a learning threshold, which places emphasis on student activity and student learning as opposed to faculty research expertise. This can be interpreted as a challenge to faculty researcher identity and experienced as a sense of loss or undervaluing of personal expertise. Defensive stances can take the form of ‘But we’re doing it (UGR) already’ e.g. as a capstone course or lab activity, or the argument that UGR is not meaningful if it does not culminate in publication.

3) Assessment of Student Learning in UGR

A specific dimension of undergraduate research (and also faculty development) that was conspicuous by its absence in our discussions and posters was that of assessment. Though UGR places considerable emphasis on student-centred learning, development of autonomy and self-regulation, we, as faculty experts, often re-assert control and authority when it comes to assessment. In research communities, however, assessment of research output is usually undertaken through peer review and trust in peer judgement. This trust might be lacking in UGR and is something that perhaps would benefit from further consideration in future CUR gatherings.

4) Globalisation and Production of Knowledge Workers?

Presentations during the workshop drew attention to the development of UGR as a growing globalised trend. It was apparent from the poster presentations that similar activities and discussions were taking place in many countries all over the world and that this has been quite a
recent (‘young’) development. An interesting speculation is whether such developments are a symptomatic effect or even a manifestation of globalisation as an increasingly established ideology, with an emphasis on knowledge production and exchange in a ‘knowledge economy’ by ‘knowledge workers’. This is, of course, controversial terrain and it will be interesting to see whether political and sociological critiques of undergraduate activity designed to promote graduate attributes of enquiry and enterprise are forthcoming.