

Commentator Notes (synopsis)

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1. The role of “context”

Throughout the morning the role of “context” appeared very important in shaping our conversations and understandings of undergraduate research. *Context* shaped the drivers for creating undergraduate research (UR) experiences and shaped our objectives and what was possible for us to achieve.

The *national context*, independent of which nation, was a common theme. National context defined systems of education, funding models supporting change and sustaining innovations. National context defined the metrics used within institutions which then influenced the teaching-research balance and then influenced the drive for (or against) UR activities. Where systems, funding and metrics supported UR then activities increased.

The *institutional context* was again a theme influencing discussions. UR differences were observed between universities labelled as “research intensive” compared to predominantly undergraduate teaching institutions. The types of students attracted to these different institutions and the expectations that those students brought with them – all influenced what UR looked like within the different institutions. The students themselves were also very different – not only in expectations but also in ability and in background. The diversity of academic (or faculty) roles within institutions was also highlighted – where different academics experienced different levels of encouragement (or otherwise) to work with undergraduate students and their research.

The discipline context also played a part in defining our understanding of the diversity of UR. UR can look different in different disciplines and, interestingly, it can also look similar if we drill down to the objectives we have for student learning and if we overcome some of the discipline specific language barriers which can exist.

These contextual differences were not discussed in a hierarchical sense but illustrate the diversity of undergraduate research experiences possible, the role that UR has to play across a multitude of contexts and highlight the importance of maintaining a broad awareness of UR as a teaching mode adaptable for many contexts.

2. The importance of “definitions” and a common understanding of diversity

What do we mean when we talk about undergraduate research? How broad or how narrow is undergraduate research? An early discussion from one presenter suggested that the definition for undergraduate research (UR) should be the same definition used for any research but with the work ‘undergraduate’ placed at the beginning. However if it was this simplistic then the conversations which followed would not have been so animated or prolonged! The varying characteristics used to define UR (for example, whether new knowledge is created or not, whether students devise the research question or not, whether the experience occurs within the curriculum or not, etc) should

not be seen as limitations to the experience or factors which prevent a precise definition. The diversity of characteristics are a reflection of the diversity of ways students (and institutions and academics) can engage with this powerful pedagogy. As Beckman and Hensel (2009) suggested, there is great benefit to be gained from individual and institutional discussions around what defines UR. The benefit does not come from the definition itself (if a single definition is at all possible) but from the process and the discussions themselves!