

ISSOTL 2010 CUR Workshop – Report for Table 4

Chair: Roger Brown (UK); Reporter: Kirsten Zimbardi (Aust); Table members: Cecilia Lucero (USA), Jonas Lilienthal (Germany), Mandy Dillon (UK), Sue Moron Garcia (UK), La Vonne Cornell Swan (USA).

Our Table opened the proceedings with pleasant introductions and a lively debate on the definitions and characteristics of undergraduate research experiences (UREs). Generally, our group agreed to a broad definition of UREs, inclusive of activities through which students might discover or develop knowledge that was new to the discipline, or simply new to the student. Interestingly, the differences between disciplines in whether knowledge is created *de novo*, or elaborated from past knowledge, also became part of this discussion as we attempted to define “research” itself. However, as we attempted to draw together an agreement on a single working definition of UREs for the Table to conclude our discussion, our most junior member said, quite rightly “it doesn’t really matter how I define undergraduate research, what matters is how my institution defines undergraduate research.” Such a blunt statement caught all of our attention, and to a certain degree our dismay, but we had to agree that the boundaries set by the given institution within which we each work will ultimately shade how we use the term “undergraduate research” in daily practice. Our group included participants from, not only a broad range of countries, but also the full breadth of institutional roles – from a past Vice Chancellor, to members with only 1-5 years of experience in the academic profession. It was clear that each of our positions within our institutions plays a major role in the degree to which we may be able to effect changes in attitudes and discourses around UREs within our institution. Importantly however, being able to participate in the debate around defining UREs with leading international experts in this field was something that empowered us all and could strengthen the insights we each brought back to our institutions.

In the subsequent discussion of national contexts, we shared the specific characteristics and details of the various schemes available to support UREs in each of our countries, and were all impressed by the range of programs and opportunities available in USA. Our group included one member with a wealth of experience in the CUR and NCUR programs, as well as one of the founding members of the BCUR initiative, which we discussed at length. Two major points were clear from our discussion of national contexts: 1) availability of funding was a - or perhaps **the** - major determinant in the number, breadth and specific natures of URE programs provided to our students, and 2) professional development opportunities for academics to improve the effectiveness with which they oversee UREs was severely lacking across the international landscape.

In the closing discussion on institutional context, we were drawn back to discussions of institutional definitions of UREs, as well as the explicit and implicit support provided to academics who engage in URE programs. We debated the relative merits of institutions which supported UREs primarily for the benefit of the academics, or the students, and acknowledged that policies which attempt to enhance the experience and careers of both parties were the ideal. Our discussion then came to the insight that all of our group members could point to the various mission statements, goals and ideals of our respective institutions and charge our institutions with the responsibility of providing and supporting URE programs for the benefit of both its staff and its student body. What institution could claim that UREs are not aligned with their fundamental reason for existing as an academic institution?

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