

Table 6 members:

Derek France (UK)
Neil Haigh (NZ)
Stuart Hampton-Reeves (UK)
Harry Hubball (Canada)
Christine Stokes (UK)
Alison Thomas (Canada)
Laura Zink (Canada)

Table 6 had the benefit of including a student member – Christine – who has been involved in doing research as an undergraduate at the University of Central Lancashire and whose perspective was therefore particularly valuable in our discussions throughout the course of the day.

Conceptual issues – defining what we mean by ‘undergraduate research’

In starting with the question of how we would each define ‘undergraduate research’ we found ourselves anticipating many of the issues that came up in subsequent discussion sessions, such as the influence of various different national educational structures and initiatives and differences between our own institutions within such national structures.

We began by exchanging information on how we each (and our respective institutions) view undergraduate research and noted that a logically prior question is what we/our institutions regard as ‘research’ of any kind in the first place. In some quarters the emphasis is on research as being something that yields a publishable *product* of some kind, but elsewhere it may be valued more in terms of its capacity to involve people in a *process* of discovery that stimulates their engagement with the topic in question, irrespective of whether or not the end product is a traditional publication. The former view is clearly that of the more traditional research-intensive universities, whereas institutions with more of a focus on undergraduate teaching are more likely to acknowledge the latter approach as a relevant model to employ in promoting student interest and involvement in research. (We later noted that this difference in institutional emphasis will also influence the likelihood of faculty members putting time and effort into supporting undergraduate research – rather than their own or that of their graduate students – and to affect the kind of research experience they might consider appropriate to offer undergraduate students.)

Our discussion then led to recognition of the implications of this for how we might envisage undergraduate research. Is it something that can only be undertaken by an upper-level student who has already acquired the necessary training in their discipline to produce a high quality ‘product’? Or is it something that can/should be introduced into the undergraduate curriculum as early as the first year as a way of engaging them in a subject and stimulating their curiosity, whether or not they have any prior research ‘training’? In discussing this we also recognised a)

that there are important differences between different disciplines in terms of their ability to involve students in research at this level; b) that even when students are doing some kind of research activity it may not actually be labelled as 'research'. (Thinking about both of these points led us to consider the merits of setting up working groups within our institutions with membership from across different faculties, in order to establish how research opportunities of different kinds could be built into the undergraduate experience in each area.)

National initiatives, institutional culture and sustainability

We were interested to hear from Neil that in New Zealand it is a requirement that undergraduate students acquire some research experience in the course of their degree, as a way of developing their intellectual independence. Our questions as to how this policy was implemented led us into discussion of the importance of funding to ensure that initiatives to promote student research can be made sustainable. (The example of the UK Centres of Excellence having their 5 year funding ended was raised in this context.) Equally problematic for some of us have been shifts in institutional leadership and resulting changes in funding priorities and overall interest shown in supporting student research.

Conclusions and parting thoughts:

There was consensus that many of the issues raised in the workshop were ones which we would like to discuss further with colleagues (and students) in our own institutions – and we all expressed the resolve to do so!

Alison Thomas

(Table 6 Reporter)