

International Perspectives on Undergraduate Research and Inquiry:
Pre-ISSOTL Seminar, Liverpool, 19 October 2010

Report from table 8

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Table 8 offered a fascinating mix of representatives from the UK, USA and Australia. Most staff were actively engaged in either running undergraduate research schemes, or implementing institution-wide initiatives, although we also had one new lecturer attending the event as part of her CPD. Inevitably much of the discussion focussed on better understanding of national differences in terms of the role of undergraduate research, but also more broadly on the organisation and indeed the very nature of Higher Education in contrasting national contexts. In particular we learnt about US Liberal Arts Colleges, where the sort of specialist knowledge developed through research, (e.g. through a dissertation) can be seen as a threat to the broad subject base that characterises their programmes.

Conceptual issues

We began by querying Tom Wenzel's definition of undergraduate research, and particularly the notion of originality, generally agreeing that it was unrealistic to expect all undergraduate research to be concerned with the creation of 'new' and 'original' knowledge. Most of us were concerned to varying extents with 'embedding' or 'mainstreaming' undergraduate research, moving beyond extra-curricular schemes to a situation where the UG curriculum is designed around principles of research and inquiry. At its heart is a move away from a model of knowledge transmission towards learning through discovery: Ray Land described the ontological shift required of staff as they reconceptualise their role and relationship with students, but what about the ontological shift required of students? How can we support them 'across the threshold' so they see themselves as researchers and producers of knowledge?

Context is key

A key theme that underpinned all of our discussions was the importance of context. National contexts vary hugely, so successful practices in the US cannot automatically transfer to the UK; institutions vary in their size, nature, culture and their attitudes towards research; disciplinary differences must be taken into account in any attempt to institutionalise undergraduate research. However, the significance of context should not become an excuse for maintaining traditional paradigms of curriculum delivery. We also considered the importance of considering students' prior experience of education and therefore their expectations of higher education, and reviewing induction activities to equip students with the research skills and understanding they would need.

Follow-up activities

Delegates discussed what we would take back to our institutions as a result of the seminar:

- clarification of concepts: what exactly do we mean by 'undergraduate research'
- make more use of students as champions of IBL
- increasing involvement in internships, study abroad and volunteering as research activity
- review of research methods teaching
- organise a series of on-campus discussions
- review induction activities
- develop a broader perspective on 'mainstreaming'
- become a member of CUR

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