

Student experiences of lecturer research in different higher education settings (0142)

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For decades research has focused on the teaching-research nexus and its place in higher education provision. Some have argued that research is vital for effective HE teaching (Neumann, 1992), whereas others have argued that the relationship between the two is more complex and is affected by personal, political and practical mediating factors (Hattie & Marsh, 1996). One aspect that has never really been established is what the active ingredient of being research-active is, or whether just being in a research-rich environment is sufficient to permeate the student experience (Neumann, 1992). Such a discussion poses problems when one considers that 10% of UK HE provision is delivered through colleges of further education (FECs) generally referred to as college-based higher education (CBHE).

Traditionally colleges do not have a research-rich culture, and are not part of the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF). This does not mean that CBHE lecturers are not necessarily research-active, many are research-active by undertaking further qualification in their own time (Harwood & Harwood, 2004) and at their own expense (Young, 2002). For those who believe that research activity is vital for effective HE teaching does this mean that CBHE students are at a disadvantage?

With respect to awareness, research has shown that as little as 40% of university students are aware of their lecturers' research activity (Healey, Jordan, Pell, & Short, 2010) mainly through their reading lists but were unaware of further detail. When considering student experiences of research activity they tend to be referring to their studies and modules linking to project work and dissertations (Healey et al., 2010) rather than involvement in their lecturers' research. Arguably this form of research involvement does not necessarily require the lecturer to be currently research-active. Research shows that students believe that lecturers that are research-active are more credible and their knowledge will be more current (Lindsay, Breen, & Jenkins, 2002).

This study aims to establish what students' awareness and experiences are, and whether this impacts on their perceptions of their lecturers, dependent upon institution type.

Methodology

Twelve discipline-specific focus groups were conducted, comprised of second year (Level 5) HE student groups from five institutions; three FECs and two universities. From the colleges 30 students were interviewed (average age of 33) and 10 students from universities (average age of 28). The disciplines were matched across institution type; including psychology, computing, bioscience, criminal justice and health related courses.

Using the questionnaire developed by Short, Healey, and Romer (2010) the questions were reinterpreted to form the basis suitable for semi-structured interviews. The focus groups questioned students about their:

- definition of the term research
- awareness of their lecturer's research activity
- experiences of lecturer research activity
- perceptions of their lecturers' research activity

Results

Defining the term research

Students from both colleges and universities defined research with reference to knowledge. Psychology students from all institutions referred to research as knowledge *production*, in its primary form, related to data collection in order to answer a research question. The majority of other students referred to research as knowledge *acquisition*, with reference their own personal endeavours, primarily related to reading.

Awareness

All groups of university students were aware of research activity occurring at their institutions with the exception of the computing students, who assumed that it occurred. Two groups of college students were unaware of research activity occurring at their institutions, those being the biology and the public service students, whereas the college-based psychology students were unaware but assumed that research was undertaken. Healthcare practitioner and computing students were made aware by effective in class communication, although this was not always welcomed.

Experiences

Unsurprisingly, as so many students were unaware of lecturer research activity, even fewer had been involved in any research. Of the college-based respondents only the computing

students had been actively involved as participants. Within the university groups, computing and health practitioners had no experiences, whereas the biologists had had the opportunity to work as research assistants. The psychology and criminology students had been participants but through enforced participation.

Perceptions of lecturer research activity

How much the students valued staff research activity was aligned to their personal experiences rather than institution type. The opportunity to be a research assistant enthused the university biology students immensely, and even the college-based participants in the computing research were curious about the project, as they felt invested in it. This was in opposition to those studying computing at university and biology at colleges who felt that lecturer research activity played no role in their education. Their focus was primarily on their assessments and grades and felt that this would be a distraction.

The university health practitioners and college criminal justice students considered their lecturers' practice to be of more importance to them than any research, which may be explained by the more vocational nature of these qualifications. Students from the colleges were not inclined to feel that their lecturers should be research active, as long as they were up to date with current theory and policy. The students who were involved through enforced participation did not feel that the process added credibility or currency to their learning experience and felt that more of the research ethos should be brought into the classroom.

Conclusion

Being taught at a research-active university does not necessarily lead to a higher level of awareness, experiences, or indeed interest in research. The most important factor was that the lectures were linked to research in a way that enhanced the topic under discussion and was not seen as an opportunity for unrelated self-promotion. Research experiences, practical or anecdotal, should only be incorporated if they add value to the session, and not because there is a requirement to do so. With the current zeitgeist being focused on employability, maybe more consideration should be given to the value of practical, professional skills to complement the research-related activity.

References

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