

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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How is COVID-19 changing research in the disciplines? The views of undergraduate researchers

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: This study examines how undergraduate researchers responded to the challenge of writing about the impacts of COVID-19 on, or in, a field of their interest. The study explores their motivations for taking up this challenge via an online survey and follow-up interviews. It also examines the changes in research in different disciplines brought about by COVID-19 that they suggested through a content analysis of their written submissions. The research contributes to understanding of students' conceptions of research, and reveals how research in different disciplines is changing in the context of COVID-19.

Paper: Introduction

Universities have experienced big disruptions owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts on teaching and learning caused by the rapid transition to online delivery are well reported. However, it is less understood how research has changed and is changing due to COVID-19. This research contributes to our understanding of how early career student researchers conceptualise research and the changes experienced in their disciplines or areas of research. It provides fresh perspectives on the changes in research in different disciplines brought about by COVID-19, and may suggest new future directions for research in various disciplines.

Aims and objectives

The study aims to identify the ways in which neophyte researchers conceptualise research, their perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on their research areas, and their motivations to participate in a project inviting them to write about the impacts of COVID-19 on, or in, a field of their interest.

Objectives

1. To discover undergraduate researchers' perceptions of how COVID-19 has impacted research in different disciplines;
2. To elucidate how they experienced engaging in writing about the effects of COVID-19 on research in their discipline;

3. To understand students' motivations for engaging in a voluntary writing task, what they gained from doing so, and their actions following the experience.

Relevant Literature

The study sits within the tradition of work designed to understand the nature of research. Studies to understand the conceptions and experiences of researchers at different levels (Bills 2011; Brew, 2001; Brew, Boud Namgung et al, 2016;), including, how students conceptualise research (Meyer, Shanahan & Lausch, 2005; Pitcher, 2011; Shan, Ayers & Kiley, 2020) are particularly relevant. Research exploring undergraduates' experiences of research have pointed to students being unaware of research being done in universities (Turner, Wuetherick & Healey, 2008; Spronken-Smith, Miroso, & Darrou, 2014). With the increasing interest and engagement of universities in recognising the importance of undergraduate research, there is now a need to understand how students engaged in research conceptualise research in different disciplines.

A second growing area of research that provides a context for our study is work to understand the effects of COVID-19 on research policy and practice (Morgan & Sargent, 2020; Subramanya and colleagues, 2020). Inquiry-based pedagogy, a form of undergraduate research, has likely been affected by the rapid transition to online teaching. The effects of COVID-19 on research have been recognised to vary in different disciplines (Morgan & Sargent, 2020). However, except for the study by Verma and Gustafsson (2020), we have been unable to find work examining how research in different disciplines has been changing through COVID-19.

Research methodology

In 2020, undergraduate students were invited by the Australasian Council for Undergraduate Research to submit 500 words, or an A3 poster, on the impacts of COVID-19 on, or in, a field of their interest. Fifty-seven undergraduates from a wide range of disciplines and universities entered this competition. Each submission was double-blind reviewed by volunteer experts. This provides the context for our study.

The theoretical underpinning of the study is the idea of evaluation as illumination, as described by Parlett and Hamilton (1977). This refers to evaluation conducted from different angles and taking account of the needs and interests of the various stakeholders.

In order to explore how neophyte researchers understand the nature of research in different disciplines and how disciplines are changing in the context of COVID -19, the experiences and motivations of these 57 students are initially being investigated via an online survey. Following the initial analysis of data, online interviews will be carried out with a selection of participants who gave consent in the survey.

A content analysis of the students' written statements and posters is being used to identify how these undergraduate students have conceptualised research and to show their perceptions of how disciplines have changed due to COVID-19. The research has received ethical approval.

Conclusion

How researchers conceptualise and experience research is an important area of research into higher education. It has long been recognised that undergraduates can see aspects of higher education

practice that experts perhaps see less clearly (Shore, Pinkler & Bates, 1992; Brew, 2006). This study is important because it will provide fresh perspectives which may suggest new directions for research in various disciplines and new research-based learning strategies.

An understanding of the motivations of undergraduate researchers to voluntarily engage in reflecting on and writing about research, has the potential to heighten understanding of students' motivations to do research. This study may therefore influence initiatives designed to encourage students to take up research opportunities and pursue postgraduate research degrees.

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