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Title "They teach it better because it's something they're really interested in" - Undergraduate experiences of research at a Northern Red Brick University
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"They teach it better because it's something they're really interested in" - Undergraduate experiences of research at a Northern Red Brick University

June 2017 saw the publication of the outcomes of the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), with its controversial use of metrics leading to much debate within the sector. The exercise aims to 'recognise and reward excellence in teaching and learning, and help inform prospective students' choices for higher education', linking the outcomes to potential future tuition-fee raises (HEFCE, 2017). The TEF seeks to match and counterbalance the Research Excellence Framework evaluating research output and impact. As the 'Metric Tide' report on the role of metrics in research assessment points out, the pressure to produce 'REFable publications' has 'contributed to a "two-tier hierarchy" between teaching and research staff' (Wilsdon et al., 2015: 93). Debates around this link, or indeed links between research and teaching has characterised the past decades internationally, as well as in the UK (Tight, 2016, Hattie & Marsh, 2004, Jenkins & Zetter, 2003, Robertson & Blacker, 2006).

This debate has been termed the research/teaching nexus, with some arguing that the relation should be perceived as multiple, rather than singular (Trowler & Wareham, 2007, Jenkins, 2004). Research on this nexus explored, variously: the association between research outputs of staff and teaching evaluations, with weak positive, or no relations reported (Hattie & Marsh, 1996 & 2002, Tight, 2016); the differences and diversity between institutional types and disciplines (Jenkins & Zetter, 2003, Healey, 2005, Robertson & Blacker, 2006); the attitudes of staff towards their different roles; and the experiences of students of the nexus (Brew & Mantai, 2017, Howitt et al., 2010, Robertson, 2007 Buckley, 2011, Jenkins et al., 2004). From the student perspective the fundamental question relates to what stake students have in the research, with a multitude of definitions describing the approaches to research and teaching. Griffith (2004: 722) outlined four models, such as teaching being research-led (emphasis on understanding research findings rather than processes); research-oriented (emphasis on understanding processes and inquiry skills); research-based (centred around inquiry-based activities); or research-informed (drawing on 'systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning process itself').

The evidence on student experiences of the research/teaching nexus tends to derive from cross-sectional analysis, comparing information from a single data collection point, collected from subsequent cohorts of students (Neumann, 1994, Lindsay et al., 2002). Both John and Creighton (2011) and Spronken-Smith and colleagues (2014: 368) recommend longitudinal design as 'alternative and potentially richer approach would be to track students as they moved through their degrees'. Following the same group of students identifies the changes in their understanding and experiences of 'research' over the course of their undergraduate studies. This paper explores the lived experience of students in a 'research-intensive learning environment' from a longitudinal viewpoint (Russell Group, 2017).

Drawing on qualitative data generated from a wider three year longitudinal study that sought to follow a group of forty home domiciled undergraduate students as they made their way into, and through a Northern Red Brick University (NRBU) starting in 2013, this paper aims

to examine how students make sense of research during their programme of study. To gain a better understanding of the experiences of non-traditional students defined as the poorest 10% of the entry population, half of the interview sample consisted of students who gained a fee-waiver from NRBU. The 40 students interviewed in the first year were selected using a two-stage sampling to achieve maximum variation at case and unit levels (Patton, 2002). First, two or three departments were chosen in each of the five faculties with higher ratio of students in receipt of financial support, then a randomly selected fee-waiver student was matched to a student not eligible for such support. The yearly interviews $n_1=40$, $n_2=40$, $n_3=38$)

explored student experiences in great detail, gathering data on the academic, social, financial, wellbeing and career aspects of transitioning through university. The interview data was transcribed and put through a thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006).

This paper details the dimensions of two ideal types of research experience: declarative and procedural. Initially, lecturers appear as the dispensers of knowledge, the purpose is to pass exams, and knowledge remains descriptive, rather than facilitating a deeper understanding. Research and the knowledge deriving from it are mysterious and external: the unknown and complex practices are carried out by researching others. As the students transition through their studies, they become competent in the research world. Research knowledge in this context becomes familiar and de-mystified as students take ownership of their pathways in becoming researchers. Evidence is presented on research experiences both integral to the curriculum, and provided to selected students as extracurricular research opportunities (Healey & Jenkins, 2009), using Griffith's (2004) models as a map to explore the diversity across NRBU. The analysis further explores how any transitions between the dimensions of these experiences can be variously constrained and/or enabled. Finally, it considers how research - as an affective practice that is actively experienced by students - can have inclusive and exclusive properties.

Whilst much policy and practice that surrounds the research/teaching nexus is both laudable and worthwhile, the findings presented here suggest that greater reflective examination of the programme level experiences of such initiatives can help to ensure that any outcomes are 'student-led' as much as they are 'research-led'. The outcomes suggest that viewing the research/teaching nexus through focusing on the student experiences can lead to enhanced understanding of the enabling and constraining factors. This paper also argues that bringing together Hodge and colleagues' (2008) developmental journey with the stages identified as 'foundations', 'intermediate learning' and 'capstone' with Gale and Parker's (2014) understanding of transitions as 'becoming' can help frame the potential transformative nature of experiencing research in an undergraduate degree.

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