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'Research is great and everything, but it doesn't help me': Undergraduate experiences of the research / teaching nexus (0458)

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CONTEXT

'Research-led' teaching is increasingly being used by higher education institutions as a means to promote degrees to undergraduates, respond to the various demands of 'employability', and to help to justify the rising costs associated with HE level study (Brew & Mantai 2017, Elken & Wollscheid 2016). However, in the context of a 'post truth' society where both denialism and relativism find confident voice on digital platforms and elsewhere, how contemporary students are responding to the ever-increasing emphasis on research within degree programmes remains a key point of issue.

The long-standing international debate concerning the relationship between research and teaching is termed the research/teaching nexus (Tight 2016, Hattie & Marsh 2004, Jenkins & Zetter 2003, Robertson & Blacker 2006). This discussion has variously explored: the association between research outputs of staff and teaching evaluations, with weak positive, or no relations reported (Hattie & Marsh 1996, Marsh & Hattie 2002, Tight 2016); the differences between institutional types and disciplines (Jenkins & Zetter 2003, Healey 2005, Robertson & Blacker 2006); the attitudes of staff towards their different roles as researchers and/or teachers; and the experiences of students (Brew & Mantai 2017, Howitt et al. 2010, Robertson 2007, Buckley 2011, Jenkins 2004).

There are, however, two problems with this body of literature. In the first instance, it has largely assumed that the relationship between research and teaching is positive in nature (Wareham and Trowler 2007, 2008). This should not be taken for granted, particularly in the context of increases in the 'cost-sharing' mechanisms of university funding (Authors, 2018). In the second, and as Spronken-Smith et al (2014, 368) highlight, studies have relied on cross-sectional research designs. This means that the changing nature of the nexus as it is experienced by students as they move into, through, and beyond their programme has been largely unexplored.

METHODS

This paper draws on qualitative data from a wider three year longitudinal study that followed a diverse group of undergraduates within a 'research-intensive learning environment' at an English University (n=40). Examining how students make sense of the research / teaching nexus in the context of their degree programme, it aims to explore the dimensions through which students' experience 'research-led' teaching in a 'Red Brick' University.

RESULTS

A key finding is that the research and teaching nexus is a dynamic process of development that is actively experienced by students, and that it is affective in nature. Further, the nexus is

multidimensional, and students develop feelings and reactions to it. This paper provides an overview of two key aspects of the findings: first, it looks at the changing experiences of the research and teaching nexus over time, and second, it gives an insight into its exclusive and inclusive properties.

The first identified phase can be characterised by ‘research’ being a mediated experience, a practice done by others and filtered through lecturers. Knowledge was conceptualised as a broad insight into the discipline, alongside the development of basic skills. Students then were generally answering questions that tended to be set for them. Learning exists on a continuum, as previous experiences were often drawn on to understand the notion of independent learning, potentially constraining the here and now. The second phase saw students gradually personalising their own learning, thus enabling the emergence of some form of ownership over their own experiences. This let them develop their own interests and needs within the learning process: making their own choices within the degree programme practically and within the discipline conceptually. In the third phase, students started to internalise the practice of research as something they themselves could do, building on their developing disciplinary interests. A close proximity to academics and their interests and practice is coupled with students producing their own research, based on research questions they themselves developed.

However, not all students progressed through each phase to connect learning and teaching, research, and their employment futures. As an experience that was both active and affective in nature, the nexus could variously constrain as much as it enabled. These constraints were broadly concerned with diminishing interest in the nature of research; the lack of sufficient scaffolding around experiences of independent learning; the perceived distance between students and researchers; and, the wider context of participation in higher education.

This paper underlines the need to a) problematise the normative presentation of research in terms of its relationship with learning and teaching and, b) to understand how students actually experience ‘research’ within the context of their programme and over time.

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