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Discussion paper for 'Students as partners' strand

Sabine Bohnacker-Bruce
Learning and Teaching Fellow
University of Winchester

ABSTRACT

The Winchester Research Apprenticeship Programme (WRAP): Engaging undergraduate students in academic research

Many universities aspire to engage their students as participants in the academic community of practice; however, students' engagement in research is frequently separate from the research of academics in their discipline. Brew (2006, p.15) argues that students "need to be fully inducted into the culture and community of researchers" in order to develop essential skills of critical inquiry. While undergraduate research programmes are comparatively common in the US, they are still rare in the UK (Blackmore & Cousin, 2003).

This discussion paper presents an overview and evaluation of the Winchester Research Apprenticeship Programme (WRAP) in the Faculty of Business, Law and Sport at the University of Winchester. WRAP is designed to provide an opportunity for students to work alongside academics on a research project in order to gain first-hand experience of academic research, develop transferable skills, and encourage them to consider postgraduate education. WRAP also aims to increase staff engagement in research-informed learning and teaching and to strengthen the research culture within the faculty.

Academics are encouraged to propose a range of research projects, lasting from one to four weeks. Projects are required to provide opportunities for students to develop research and transferable skills, rather than consist of merely administrative tasks, and to make a genuine contribution to the research of the academics involved. Second year students are invited to apply for a project by submitting an application letter and CV. Applications are reviewed and candidates shortlisted for interview. Academics interview and appoint student researchers for their projects. Projects are carried out during the summer break at a mutually agreed time. After completion of the projects, academics and student participants are asked to complete written feedback forms. Student participants receive a scholarship payment.

WRAP has grown from small beginnings in 2010, when just three projects (12 project weeks) were offered and three students applied and participated. The recruitment process for the 14 projects (37 project weeks) offered as part of WRAP 2013 has just been completed and 19 student participants were selected from 30 applicants.

Feedback from academics and student participants has been overwhelmingly positive. Students particularly appreciate the opportunity to develop useful transferable skills, specifically research skills relevant for their FYPs. Academics appreciate students' support with aspects of their research projects including literature searches, media surveys, compilation of data from documents, sourcing of case studies and practical contributions such as design of a project website.

Difficulties for the programme have included the recruitment of a sufficient number of academics to act as project mentors and lack of response from students on specific programmes.

WRAP has proved successful in engaging undergraduate students in academic research and can be recommended as an innovative model. Despite the increased number of projects offered, student interest overall still outweighs the opportunities available. A focus for future development is therefore increased engagement by academic staff. Each faculty at the University of Winchester runs WRAP with variations to suit their respective programmes, indicating that it offers sufficient flexibility to be adapted to different circumstances.

References and resources

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Contact details

E-mail: sabine.bohnacker@winchester.ac.uk
Phone: 01962 827182

University of Winchester
Faculty of Business, Law and Sport
West Downs Campus
Romsey Road
Winchester SO22 5HT