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UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' AWARENESS, EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF RESEARCH IN HUMANITIES

Samuray B .Ozay
Faculty of Arts, University of Sydney
The University of Sydney
samozay@gmail.com

Abstract
This paper presents a case study of undergraduate students' awareness, experiences and perceptions of research in a major metropolitan university in Australia. The findings are based on the responses to a questionnaire in which 282 undergraduate students from humanities-based disciplines participated. Overall, students were aware of one or more of the different types of research occurring in the university. The findings indicated that students were acquiring some form of research experience in their learning, although the extent and benefits of their experiences were not examined in this particular study. Respondents perceived clear benefits to being taught by research-engaged staff members. Many of the open-ended responses showed that students perceived research-engaged staff to be more enthusiastic and effective teachers than those not engaged in research. However, some students remarked that not all research-engaged staff members possessed the skills to promote good quality teaching. More than half the participants agreed that they learn best when they are actively engaged in research processes.

Keywords: student experiences, undergraduate research, teaching-research nexus

INTRODUCTION

The Australian federal government's endorsement of the Bradley Review's (2008) broadening of participation targets prompted a re-evaluation of operational and strategic planning throughout the Australian higher education sector. The government's (DEEWR, 2009) primary objectives for higher education were, among other things, *to support high quality teaching and learning, improve resourcing for research, and invest in world class tertiary education infrastructure.* In alignment with these objectives, there continues to be ongoing commitments to inform the higher education sector and the federal government regarding future developments and funding of undergraduate research (Brew & Jewell, 2010). As part of a national initiative funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), Brew (2009) presented a communiqué to governing bodies, which highlighted the strategic importance of integrating research and teaching for all Australian universities, and of connecting undergraduate students with research.

On a global scale, tertiary institutions are increasingly adopting new ways of engaging students in research particularly at early stages of their learning experience. Integrating research and teaching at the undergraduate level is a developing trend and it is not limited to research-intensive universities (Brew, 2007; González, 2001). This trend is supported by a growing amount of evidence, emanating mainly from the US and the UK, which suggests that engaging undergraduate students in research activity is beneficial to their learning (Bauer & Bennet, 2003; Brown, Higgins, & Coggins, 2007; Harsh, Maltese, & Tai, 2011; Healey, 2000; Healey & Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Kift, 2009; Nguyen, 2007).

Many universities promote a general policy on the linkages between teaching and research at the institutional level, but the ways in which such links are being made and how often these links are established in the curricula of various disciplines is often quite vague (Elsen, Visser-Wijnveen, van der Rijst, & van Driel, 2009). A commonly cited framework for engaging undergraduates with research and inquiry was posited by Griffiths (2004), later revised by Healey (2005) and Healey and Jenkins (2009), and further developed by Ozay (2012). The framework specifies four practicable models for engaging undergraduates with research and inquiry. The framework also has one centric model representing an overarching approach to teaching, which is considered to be the

necessary foundation from which the four 'engaging' models can be employed (Ozay, 2012). The four models for engaging undergraduates with research and inquiry are:

- Research-led: *learning about current research in the discipline*
- Research-oriented: *developing research skills and techniques*
- Research-based: *undertaking research and inquiry*
- Research-tutored: *engaging in research discussions*

The central model representing an overarching approach to teaching is:

- Research-informed: *systematic inquiry into teaching and learning practices*

The case study presented in this paper set out to explore the level of engagement between students in humanities and research activity in the context of the aforementioned framework. The main purpose was to identify the degree to which students in humanities-based disciplines were exposed to research by examining three core factors: (1) their overall awareness of the types of research that occurs in the faculty and the wider university community, (2) the type of research experiences they were gaining during their studies, and (3) their perceptions of the pros and cons of being taught by research-engaged staff members. The study was built on the premise that examining the variety of ways in which students experience research in higher education is a crucial aspect of sustaining and enhancing a close relationship between research, teaching and learning (Robertson & Blackler, 2006).

The University Context

The case study institute is a research-intensive university with student enrolments of over 50,000. Founded in 1850, the University of Sydney is the oldest university in Australia and Oceania. As a member of the Australian Group of Eight (G08) universities, it thrives on its reputation for producing cutting-edge research. The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, which was the particular focus for this project, has almost 10,000 student enrolments. At the institutional level, the university, like many others, emphasizes the significance of maintaining close connections between its research and teaching practices. The notion of research-enriched[1] learning and teaching denotes a fundamental premise that underpins the quality of teaching and learning at the university. This study provided a means to evaluate this rhetoric with evidence from students.

METHODS

For the purposes of benchmarking with other institutions, the student experience of teaching, research and consultancy questionnaire developed at the University of Gloucestershire, UK by Mick Healey, Fiona Jordan and Chris Short was adopted and modified for the case study presented in this paper. Healey et al (2010) provides a list of previous studies on the student experience of research that informed the content of the questionnaire, which is comprised of open and closed questions and Likert scales.

A web link to the questionnaire was sent via email to students enrolled in undergraduate units of study in humanities-based disciplines such as Sociology, Linguistics, English, History, Media and Communications, and Philosophy. The link was made available during the semester break between June 2012 and August 2012 to allow an ample period in which students could participate. The questionnaire was sent to 3078 students of whom 282 responded, a response rate of 9.16%. From 282 participants, a total of 241 students completed the entire questionnaire, a completion rate of 85.5%. The low response rate, although quite typical for this type of questionnaire, should not be taken as representative of the entire undergraduate population at the faculty. Nevertheless, the response rate is considerably greater than previous similar studies and the resultant data provides a general indication of undergraduate students' awareness, experiences, and perceptions of research.

While all partakers completed the questionnaire anonymously, the final comment section invited willing participants to enter their email addresses to be included in future interviews and focus groups in relation to

[1] 'Research-enriched' is an expression adopted by the university as an umbrella-term to exemplify the different ways in which teaching can be complemented with research.

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this study. Some of the respondents indicated their desire to participate. This paper presents the preliminary findings based on a quantitative evaluation of the data obtained from the questionnaire. A qualitative analysis derived from student interviews and focus groups will be forthcoming to compose the second part of this study.

The present study did not extricate and analyze the particular variables related to students' level of study, gender or disciplinary field. Other studies have already shown distinct variation in students' experiences of research, teaching and learning across disciplinary fields (See for example: Robertson & Blackler, 2006; Robertson & Bond, 2005). For the purposes of showing the demographic distribution of respondents, however, the division of responses by gender, level of study and enrolment loading is shown in Table 1. The main purpose of the study was to determine the overall level of research-related awareness, experiences and perceptions of the general undergraduate population in the Humanities.

A majority of the respondents were female students enrolled full time. Approximately 44% of the participants were in their first year of studies at the university with the remaining dispersed across second through to fourth year.

Table 1.

Gender		Enrolled year of degree		Loading	
Male	59	1st yr Students	107	Full time	219
Female	182	2nd yr Students	58	Part time	22
		3rd yr Students	47		
		4th yr Students	29		
Total	241	Total	241	Total	241

Analysis

The findings are presented in terms of students' passive experiences (awareness of the different types of transpiring research activity), active experiences (engagement in research in terms of hands-on or real-life experiences), and perceptions (students' views and opinions about the pros and cons of engagement with research) (Healey, Jordan, Pell, & Short, 2010).

Passive Experiences

Students were asked if they were aware of the different types of research that was occurring throughout the university. The results showed that most undergraduate students were aware of one or more types of research that was going on around them. The three most recognized sources were academic books and articles (69%), research seminars and conferences (52%), and notice boards advertising research and postgraduate opportunities (45%). The remaining sources, which attracted less recognition, included the existence of research units (40%), posters, exhibitions and displays (39%), national/ international research reputation (35%), and research reports produced by staff members (33%). 90% of the participants believed that a certain proportion of the academic staff in their subject area was engaged in some form of research. The results from 277 responses indicating students' awareness of faculty staff member's engagement with research are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Of the academic staff in your subject area(s), what proportions are you aware are engaged in research?

Proportion of academic staff engaged in research (%)	Responses (%)
None	10
1-25	22
26-50	20
51-75	18
61-80	16
81-100	14

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The types of research activity the students believed their teaching staff were involved in ranged from undertaking a research degree (79%), writing for publication (70%), supervising research students (61%), and undertaking funded research (46%).

Active Experiences

Students were asked to tick all the types of research experiences they had obtained during their studies. A majority of the responses indicated that students were mostly hearing about their teachers' and other lecturers' research experiences. Only a small percentage of the participants indicated any actual 'hands-on' experience with research. The percentage of responses to the statements indicating the various types of experiences were as follows: listening to a member of staff discuss their research (70%), listening to a guest lecturer discuss their research (63%), reading a research paper or report written by a staff member (52%), developing research techniques (For example: interviewing, laboratory analysis, performance skills, design skills, statistical analysis, archival search skills, textual analysis) (33%), being subject in a research project run by a member of staff (28%), undertaking an independent project as part of a unit of study (26%), attending an artistic performance or exhibition linked to the subject area (20%), attending a university seminar (14%), and being involved in practical activities/fieldwork based on research projects (14%). The lowest response count was seen on the following statements: acting as a research assistant (2%), undertaking a dissertation or thesis (3%), attending a research conference (4%), and contributing to a research or conference paper, poster or other form of research output (6%). The low response count for the preceding four statements is not surprising considering that many of the participants were in the very early stages of their university studies and that opportunities for undergraduates to conduct independent research is quite limited.

Perceptions

Students were asked if research-engaged staff members who teach them had a positive impact on their learning to which 92% answered 'yes'. The division of responses to the sorts of positive impact on student learning is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. What sort of positive impact has it had on your learning?

Statement	Responses (%)
Increased my understanding of the subject.	75
Stimulated my interest and enthusiasm for the subject.	70
Motivated me to consider pursuing postgraduate research in the same area.	40
Increased my awareness of methodological issues.	39
Increased my awareness of the problems and issues faced by researchers.	37
Contributed to the development of my research-related skills.	32
Motivated me to consider pursuing a career with a particular kind of consultancy organization or body.	18

The following question was open-ended and asked them to comment further on the sort of positive impact they perceived. Many students believed that hearing about the research their teachers were involved in helped them to understand the real-life experiences associated with research as well as helping them to make sense of the subject area they were studying. Some students stated that the insights gained from hearing about their teacher's research had influenced their own way of thinking about the subject area. A selection of the responses that reflect these findings are stated verbatim as follows:

> (4th Year Female) Hearing first hand about topics of and processes involved in research. It's more meaningful hearing about real experiences than just reading about them in research papers written overseas.
>
> (1st Year Female) It's increased my awareness of the actual opportunities available to me in this field, which is very reassuring.

> (4th Year Female) One of my former tutors told us in class about her interesting experiences in conducting the qualitative interviews & the ethical issues involved. Those aspects have affected my ways of thinking and doing things in my learning journey (& in other areas of life).

Less than 10% of the participants indicated that research-engaged staff members that teach them had a negative impact on their learning. The responses to the open-ended questions revealed that a common negative effect was the unavailability of research-engaged staff to attend to teaching matters and student enquiries. Nine students in total made comments about the types of negative effects research-engaged staff had on their learning. The collective opinions are reflected in the following remarks:

> (2nd Year Female) The main example is when I have needed clarification of content, but the tutor, who is also a lecturer and an associate professor, did not reply. I chased it up, but with no success. This, however, is a rarity, and I have been very lucky with general with the staff of the university.

> (3rd Year Female) One of my tutors was engaged in her own research project and was totally disinterested in coordinating the unit - she was uncontactable via email, missed half the tutorials and did not provide timely or helpful feedback from assignments. Having said this, most of the lecturers/tutors I have had over the past three years have all been involved in research projects and they have been amazing.

> (3rd Year Female) I don't know what reasons staff have for being unavailable for consultation or having rigid consultation hours, but I don't expect them to be at my beck and call; negative impact from research-engaged staff has in part simply been that I don't enjoy a particular staff member's teaching style or personality.

It is clear that some students perceived a negative effect from being taught by research-engaged staff members. However, it appears that the type of negative effect felt by students is entirely dependent on the particular staff member and their approach to teaching. The present study was unable to obtain enough data to elucidate other areas in which students might have perceived any negative effects. The common theme of the statements made by participants in this study, as reflected in the three aforementioned comments, shows that the negative effects were more than likely attributable to individual staff members and their particular approach to teaching. Similar findings were revealed in the study conducted by Griffiths (2004).

A five-point Likert type question was presented to students to gauge their level of agreement to eight statements relating to their experience with research. The responses were scaled as 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-agree, and 5-strongly agree. A descriptive analysis of the data is provided in Table 4.

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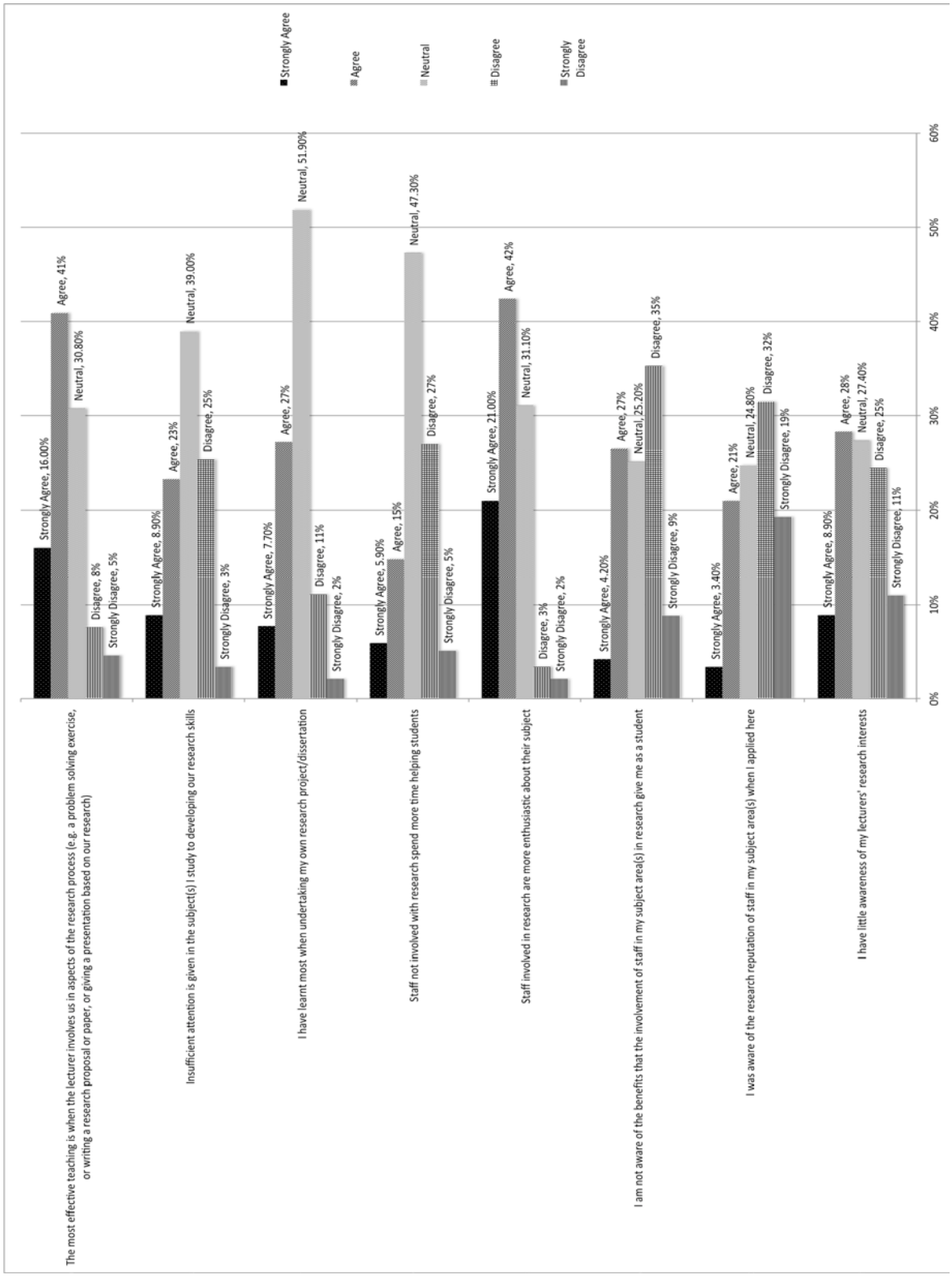
Table 4. From your experience, to what extent do you agree with the following?



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The final question asked if students had any further comments about their experiences as a student regarding the relationship between teaching and research. Students perceived research-engaged staff to be more passionate teachers than those not engaged in research. They also expressed a desire for more research opportunities to be made available for undergraduates. A selection of responses are stated verbatim below:

> (2nd Year Male) University staff who are doing ongoing research are much more passionate than those who are not. If all staff do research then the staff member who mention their research in their courses are more passionate than others.
>
> (2nd Year Female) Lecturers and tutors involved in research are engaging and tuned into the latest material in their field. There is a noticeable difference between those doing research and those in only teaching roles, and it usually reveals itself in a lack of enthusiasm.
>
> (3rd Year Female) There are too little practical hands-on research opportunities at the university and undergrads are under the assumption that to have some research skill, one would have to volunteer for a research program (which are few) or cross their fingers and hope for honours entry, which I think is very disadvantageous to those who don't gain entry into such competitive honours programs.
>
> (3rd Year Female) I would like the opportunity to have serious involvement with research. It would be an invaluable learning experience, but I haven't found this to be very accessible. The university talks about 'research' a lot, but doesn't actually educate people about the research that is going on. Research shouldn't just be the university's claim to fame; it should be used as a learning tool.
>
> (2nd Year Female) Some staff members at the arts faculty have been fantastic teachers while undertaking research of their own interests as they have been able to extend their passion of their studies to educational contexts, increasing student interest in learning from them. With this being said, just because a person is an expert in a certain area, this doesn't mean that they are necessarily aware of the best methods to promote quality teaching or to best express their ideas to a group of students who have limited knowledge of a subject. While their expertise is respected, research staff who engage with students in tutorials as purely facilitators of discussion limit student knowledge and understanding profoundly. Giving students their research background/interests, research staff of the Arts faculty play an extremely significant role in guiding Arts students to postgraduate study. (As so many Arts students struggle with which avenue to take beyond undergraduate study).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The case study presented in this paper sought to gauge students' awareness of research, their experiences with research, and whether or not they perceived any benefits from being taught by research-engaged staff members. In light of the university's rhetoric on research-enriched learning and teaching, the findings were quite encouraging.

Considering that although a majority of the participants were only in their first year of studies, they reported awareness of the different types of research going on around them as well as having obtained some form of research experience during their studies. A majority of students also indicated that research-engaged teaching staff contributed a positive influence on their learning. The aforementioned models for engaging undergraduates with research and inquiry appear to be somewhat achieved in the Humanities. 265 students in total reported that they had acquired some form of research experience during their studies.

There is, however, more effort required by Faculty to ensure that students are engaging with the transpiring research in ways that will benefit their learning. Currently, best practices in engaging students with research appear to be enacted in arbitrarily individual cases, which is mainly dependent on the individual teacher and their particular approach to teaching. Provisions to engage students in research at early stages of their learning can be advanced through the alignment of both policy and practice. Students ought be invited to *participate* in certain aspects of real-life research processes rather than being merely the *audience* for it. For example,

students can be asked to interrogate and summarise the text of an article and develop questions addressed to the article's author. James (2003) affirmed that authors generally reply positively and occasionally a general dialogue occurs whereby engaging students in real life research processes. Healey and Jenkins (2009) provide other useful examples of ways to engage undergraduates in research.

Students appear to be gaining research experience in terms of hearing about the issues involved and becoming familiar with some of the processes, yet as undergraduates, they still feel that real-life research is somewhat peripheral to their education. Some studies have already shown that students who have engaged directly with research in terms of *doing* have shown greater improvement in the skills and abilities associated with research. Bauer and Bennet (2003) examined alumni perceptions to assess undergraduate research experiences. Their study revealed that alumni who participated in undergraduate research programs, as opposed to those who did not participate, reported greater enhancement of their ability to carry out independent research. It is not surprising that students who obtain practical hands-on experience with research have a better chance of becoming more adept at conducting research. Many students in the study presented in this paper correspondingly expressed a desire to see more opportunities become available for undergraduates who wish to undertake research.

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