

**An investigation into the feasibility of a science journal for a college's partnership by consideration of student and staff views on research activity and publication. (0109)****Introduction**

Further Education Colleges (FECs) have been delivering Higher Education (HE) for over a decade now, yet the cultures of these places of delivery differ greatly with respect to the role of research activity. Research by Thompson (2003) found that FECs focus on the scholarship of teaching compared to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who have more focus the scholarship of discovery (Boyer, 1990) due to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, 2008). Much of the research that focuses on the student perception of research-active staff conducted in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has found that in general student feel they benefit from this division of labour (Lindsay, Breen, & Jenkins, 2002) especially when involved actively in the process (Healey, 2008) although some felt that they needed to be exposed to the whole process (Zamorski, 2002).

Although most science degrees include research methods modules and dissertation or project assessments it may be argued that this is only part of the process of being a researcher; the process of dissemination being omitted. One form of dissemination is through conference presentations, an issue embraced by the National Conferences on Undergraduate Research held in America offering students the opportunity to network and have the experience to present to their peers (Jungck, Harris, Mercuri & Tusin, 2004). Other dissemination opportunities are those presented by student journals, such as PennScience Journal of Undergraduate Research (Morris, Zheng, Kulp, Krimo Bokreta and Santiago-Aviles, 2006) where students who have been part of this process indicate its strengths in helping them develop skills as a researcher and enhancing their career prospects. Other commentators question the need for student-specific journals suggesting it is ageist and that students should publish their work in already established journals (Siegel, 2004). Needless to say there are those who believe that students are not equipped with the skills nor the time to engage in these higher level activities (Gilbert, 2004).

The aims of this research were to establish what HE in FE students' perceptions were of research-active lecturers and whether students and staff would be interested in contributing to a university college's partnership science journal.

## **Methodology**

There were two stages to the data collection in order to address each of the aims. A questionnaire was developed in order to establish what student views were of research activity. This was completed by 45 students across three HE in FE colleges within a partnership. To establish the views on the production of a college's partnership peer-reviewed science journal open to contributions from both staff and students, focus groups were conducted. Two homogenous focus groups per respondent type (staff: N=7, students: M=11) were conducted across another three colleges within the partnership, using stimulus induced responses, through the discussion of journals brought for their perusal.

## **Results**

### *Students' perceptions of research activity*

The responses to the questionnaire indicated that the most important perception of lecturers who have been published is that of enhanced credibility as indicated by nearly half of the respondents. The impact that these students felt it had on their studies was primarily the ability to relate the research to teaching and the increased currency of the lecturer's knowledge, albeit 18% felt that lecturer's publishing research would have no impact on their studies.

On the whole students agreed that they would value the work by peers and lecturers if published in a peer reviewed journal, with several respondents qualifying this with comments suggesting that it was important that it was peer reviewed. Only two participants felt that such work would not be valued. All respondents showed some interest in publishing in an in-house journal, and there was no difference in their degree of interest as to whether the journal was the university's journal or the college's partnership journal.

### *Staff and students' views on a college's partnership science journal*

From the focus groups it was established unanimously that the production of such a journal would be of benefit to both staff and students. Staff felt it would be a wonderful opportunity for students to complete the research process and share their findings with others. They also felt that this would be an opportunity for staff that have done research, for higher level qualifications or reasons of personal interest, to publish their work. This would allow other lecturers to see what research interests their colleague's have, as well as increasing their confidence to publish in other journals thereafter. All students felt it would be a wonderful opportunity to contribute to the process in some way; through article submission or part of the editorial process. They expressed how proud they would feel to have contributed to the greater body of knowledge and some students felt it would encourage them to work harder on their dissertations and projects in order to compete for publication. With respect to their lecturers' contributions the student commented on how they would like to read their contributions and relate this to their learning.

### **Implications**

From this research it has been established that the consensus is that both staff and students would relish the opportunity to engage in the dissemination aspect of the research process more fully. Such a journal would encourage HE in FE lecturers to contribute to the body of knowledge by presentation of research that they had already conducted, and potentially encourage further research to be undertaken in the future, thus increasing the research activity in the FECs. The students were excited about the opportunity for their projects to be more widely read than by themselves and the module assessor.

The next step is to assess the feasibility of journal production in the current economic climate. With many FECs having to tighten their belts it may be difficult to convince each institution to support the project with staff time or resources, especially when the benefits of a successful launch will not be fiscal, but enhancing the reputation of HE in FE colleges by increasing their research profile should be seen as step in the right direction.

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