

Doing research is a key element of learning: undergraduate research can transform the sector

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Published: 23 February 2007

Times Higher Education Supplement

Talk of education for a knowledge economy is hollow if students take no part in scholarly inquiry, argues Alan Jenkins.

In the frenzied discussions about whether the research assessment exercise should be replaced or complemented by metrics after 2008, one thing remains constant: the importance of students and academics learning in a research environment has been totally ignored.

Internationally, there is mounting evidence of the potential benefits of such an approach. If the concept of a "knowledge economy" has any validity, then the growing number of undergraduates are the very people who need to learn to work and live amid university research. To an extent, the Government has adopted these perspectives and moved away from the 2003 White Paper with all its talk of "teaching-only" institutions.

Speaking at a conference on undergraduate research at Warwick University in October last year, Bill Rammell, the Minister for Higher Education, stated:

"We want all students to access the benefits exposure to teaching informed by research can bring... We believe an understanding of the research process - asking the right questions in the right way, conducting experiments and collating and evaluating information - must be a key part of any undergraduate curriculum."

Yet it is also clear that whatever benefits the RAE might have brought to the organisation of research, studies by Ian McNay and others have shown that the exercise has also led institutions to devalue teaching.

Structurally, there has been a growing separation between university research and student learning. Student leaders in a number of institutions are angered by the limited contact many undergraduates have with academics, who instead are preoccupied with RAE-focused work. And if some vice-chancellors and, perhaps, ministers have their way, students, their parents and wider society will soon have to pay even higher fees for this degraded experience.

But recent events in the US suggest ways forward for the UK, with or without metrics. In 2000, the National Science Foundation stated that one of its three core funding strategies would focus on the effective integration of teaching and research. Thus, major grants have as one of their key criteria the effectiveness of research dissemination.

Some US funding streams are now targeted specifically to support undergraduate students (and staff) as researchers in institutions outside the research elite. Some recent funding has been directed to this sort of activity in the community colleges where some 50 per cent of undergraduates are now educated. Metrics such as the National Survey of Student Engagement rate institutions on the extent to which undergraduates are involved in research, including work that benefits local communities.

These principles could be adapted to post-2008 research and teaching policies. The RAE could be modified to require departments to demonstrate how students and wider society

benefit from department research. Metrics could reward institutions and departments for producing refereed publications focused on teaching. The Higher Education Funding Council for England's £25 million research-informed teaching fund could be expanded significantly after 2008 to support mainstream staff and students learning in research environments across the country, perhaps through supporting US-style institutional undergraduate research schemes.

National survey data could be developed to measure and reward institutions and departments that bring students into the worlds of research. Work that supports local communities could be particularly rewarded. Institutions and departments could be required to provide evidence, in part through metrics, that they support staff who effectively link their teaching and research.

So let's start thinking about what happens after 2008 by stating a set of core educational principles and values. That should mean valuing student and staff learning through research and directing high-level research, at least in part, to its dissemination to wider society, which should include undergraduates and local communities. Having established such principles, and only then, will it be time to discuss procedures such as metrics or modifying RAE methodologies. At present the system is in danger of heedlessly rushing to solutions without thinking where it needs to go.

Alan Jenkins is a fellow of the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research at Oxford Brookes and Warwick universities, and author, with Mick Healey, of *Institutional Strategies to Link Teaching and Research*, published by the Higher Education Academy.