The Higher Education Academy

Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)

Students as researchers

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What are the links between teaching and research?

The initiative develops student appreciation of research/consultancy in the discipline and brings findings from staff research into teaching and learning into the curriculum

Context:

An increasing number of students are being given the opportunity to become involved in research whilst undergraduates. This case study details the involvement of students as researchers in an FDTL 5 project ALAC (Active Learning Active Citizenship) at Sheffield Hallam University.

Background:

The idea of using students as researchers came from a previous collaborative project between Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and Lincoln University. In that instance students from SHU produced annotated lists of websites for a variety of topics being studied (including democracy, extremism and citizenship). These lists were edited by tutors in SHU and used as seminar materials by a tutor in Lincoln.

ALAC project:

A selected group of second and third year students were invited to contribute materials (literature reviews and in some cases case studies) for an e-media website being created as part of the ALAC project.

ALAC is a collaborative project which aims to enhance the teaching and learning of citizenship and political literacy in Education Studies, Social Policy, Politics and Teacher Training by developing resources and approaches that integrate the use of ICT and multimedia involving the use of virtual learning environments and open up flexible approaches to learning.

Having identified case studies for the website (e.g. the meaning of democracy in active citizenship, the environment, pressure groups, and religious fundamentalism) project leaders identified the accompanying literature reviews and text resources they wanted to accompany the case studies.

Tutor role:

The main role for the tutor in this initiative was to select the second and third year students to complete the literature reviews. Having selected the students the tutor then briefed them about the task agreed a deadline for submission and arranged payment via the FDTL project funding structure. Students then went away to research and produce a 2-3,000 word literature review. Once the piece had been submitted it was then edited and proofed before being loaded onto the ALAC website.

Further developments:

Following the ALAC student researcher initiative, tutors at SHU have decided to embed the role into a core module in 2007/08. One stream of a core module 'Social Policy Work Experience' will offer 20 second year students the opportunity to become research assistants to academics across the division (including academics in social policy, psychology, criminology). Tutors will be asked to identify topics and persuade other academics to take part as well as brief the students through regular meetings.

Hot tips:

'Select your students carefully if you have set deadlines. Mature students who had already completed two years of research methodologies proved reliable and produced work of a high quality'.

'Consider employing students who have recently completed high qualitydissertations. It provides positive alumni impact'.

'Reserve editing rights to materials produced'.

'Provide clear conventions for referencing'.

'Ensure beforehand best ways of making payments to students. It may be easier to achieve this via a project than other university departments'.

'Provide payment on completion and submission'

Feedback:

Several students have asked to be involved again. Involvement provides an income and a positive alumni impact. All literature reviews were completed on time and will be added to the website. One student is providing a case study based on his own experiences of Higher Education and working in the voluntary sector.

Problems/issues:

It is not always easy to arrange payment to students for commissioned work. The FDTL 5 project provided a good opportunity and route to do so.

Additional information:

Details of the ALAC project can be found at: http://alac.escalate.ac.uk/