



PTAS Project Report for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS

Project Title: Evaluation of the innovative, interdisciplinary, experiential learning opportunities EPSRC Our Health offers for undergraduate, postgraduate and articulating students

Project type: Innovation Project (introduction and evaluation of an educational innovation, usually taking a practical approach)

Principal Investigator : Dr Helen Szoor-McElhinney - Helen.Szoor-McElhinney@ed.ac.uk
Schools/department : The School of Chemistry

Team members: Co-applicant, Dr Alette Willis The School of Health in Social Science

Summary

This project presents a study of the experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate students and community partners involved in collaborative health research in the context of a higher education programme: 'Our Health' (OH). OH community partners set research questions around health and wellbeing and conduct collaborative research with interdisciplinary groups of students in a community-based participatory research (CBPR) model. Our project explores the benefits and challenges that this approach raises for students as they attempt to navigate the complexities of stepping beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and relationships to develop new research insights and methodologies. Through this project we developed a deeper understanding of the relational modes of community-student collaboration in CBPR. Our findings demonstrate the key role played by interdisciplinarity in the context of a CBPR approach in enabling students to develop their confidence, research skills and health literacy, whilst strengthening connections between the academy and wider communities. *We had originally planned to involve articulating students in this project but the anticipated articulation route for college students onto the health in social science programme had not been put in place in accordance with this projects time frame.*

Project Findings

Students reported benefits from participating in OH projects in terms of improving their health literacy and interdisciplinary learning. Students reported sharing degree specific and methodological knowledge across disciplines in their groups. Postgraduate students reported that their leadership skills developed and they grew in confidence within their peer to peer relationships, finding that as well as learning they were also teaching what they had learned to junior students.

Student participation in OH enabled them to engage with communities not usually accessible to them. This provided students with an understanding of how their knowledge can be applied outside the University and improved their confidence in engaging with the wider community. All of the students valued the experience of researching with people and viewed experiential research with people as a degree relevant type of learning that was not covered by their undergraduate/postgraduate programmes. Students felt they gained employability skills and felt more confident about how they would use their degree after university.

Students found participation in OH challenging when the interdisciplinary mix was too narrow or not suitable for the project research question. Students recognised the value of interdisciplinarity in exploring a complex real-world research question and felt frustrated when a student team lacked discipline diversity. Our findings show that benefits accrue when interdisciplinarity is balanced



across teams and projects and that this balance is constantly negotiated by students. Pressures of time, particularly academic timetabling and juggling of multiple responsibilities meant that sometimes students encountered disagreements and complexity within their research partnerships which in turn impacted upon research outputs.

Extending Benefits Across The University of Edinburgh

This project suggests that undergraduates have a strong desire to build relationships with community partners and more experienced doctoral students within student groups where peer-to-peer relationships sometimes revolve around leadership and mentoring. This can be achieved through a community-based participatory research (CBPR) model. To adopt a CBPR model and harness the benefits it can provide, university colleagues should pay attention to, building flexible processes, particularly in financing the research and understanding the time commitment required to building trusting respectful relationships between student teams and community partners. This may entail a revisioning of learning from classroom/lecture-hall/lab-based work, with its emphasis on the individual learner and separate disciplines, to valuing community-based, interdisciplinary group learning.

Dissemination of Project Findings

The project team have submitted a research paper to the journal 'Research for All' it is currently under review. Once the paper is accepted we will share the publication on various University websites and have planned a series of talks across the university departments to share learning.
