**Introducing research-led learning and teaching**

***A briefing note***

1. **Introduction**

‘The University considers research-led teaching to be a defining characteristic of its approach to education’ (QAA Institutional Audit, University of Liverpool, March 2009)

It makes sense for a research-intensive university with a large student body to ensure that its teaching and learning is led by research. And the university’s strategic plan envisages an intellectual environment in which teaching and learning is driven by research excellence. But the notion ‘research-led teaching’ remains one that is open to a range of interpretations. Indeed, the report from our recent QAA Institutional Audit points out that ‘many courses focused on staff employing what could be characterised as a somewhat passive 'research-led' approach through curriculum content conveyed by experts’ (para 28), noting that only in certain areas of the university were students engaged and developed as active researchers.

This briefing note is designed to provide an overview of the main interpretations of research-led teaching and learning, focusing in greater detail on approaches that engage students. But it recognises also that a significant shifts are entailed in involving students as active participants in research.

1. **Notions of research-led learning and teaching**

There are a number of models of the teaching-research nexus. Griffiths (2004) argues in one widely-used categorisation for four different models:

1. ***The curriculum is delivered by research-active staff and linked to their research***
2. ***The curriculum includes courses on research methods***
3. ***Students engage in research***
4. ***Teaching is informed by pedagogic research***

We have established strengths in relation to this first model, with many programmes in which the curriculum is designed and delivered by research active staff, and linked to their research interests. But research suggests, also, that students are aware their access to staff is more limited where tutors are busy with research. It will thus be important with growing student numbers to consider how to continue to offer such curricula without increasing the demands on research-active staff.

The second of these models focuses on the processes involved in the production of knowledge. Courses on research methods are also standard fare, although considerable space is often required to incorporate them into the curriculum.

While we will concentrate most directly in what follows on the third model, it is helpful also to remember that teaching can be informed by systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning process. Certainly, if we are to integrate teaching and research by involving students as active researchers, then we need an evidence base on which to proceed. And while these models are presented here as distinct, it is important to remember also that successful developments are often characterised by all of these models, as active researchers take an informed approach to working with students as they actively produce their own knowledge.

1. **Engaging students in research**

The model of the research-teaching nexus that offers most promise for student learning is one in which the curriculum is based on students engaging in research or aspects of the research process, especially where students direct the activity. Such activity clearly goes beyond the final year project or dissertation. The table below outlines a range of ways in which students can become involved in research across their entire programme.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Learning based on a process of research or inquiry* | Problem-based learning, project work, group inquiries, small-scale investigations, case studies. |
| *Learning based on an aspect of the research process* | Discussion of research papers, participation in ethics committees, field work, laboratory work, data collection and analysis, peer editing, peer review, engagement with research seminars, presentations, student conferences, student journals. |

*Table: Learning based around students engaging in research or aspects of the research process*

**Coping with the additional demands**

Clearly, this approach poses significant demands for both colleagues and students. Jenkins and Healy (2009) summarises research, for instance, that suggests that weaker students may shy away from more demanding patterns of learning or that students choose modules or tasks that result in higher grades for the same effort. And it is clear that staff must devote both time and imagination to devise appropriate learning experiences. A separate briefing note addresses ways forward in response to such issues.

**Reasons to engage**

But given this context it is clearly important that we identify reasons that are felt to be compelling at departmental level for any greater use of such learning. Departments may wish to consider their patterns of student recruitment, as programmes that involve extensive use of research-led learning are often seen as more attractive by potential students, improving the levels of recruitment of high calibre or international students. Students who have become interested in research are also more likely to progress to postgraduate study. Or a professional body may be pushing for students to master a range of skills and capacities that are best developed through experience of research. Reasons such as these will be needed in addition to the institutional case or to factors such as improved student employability, enhanced student engagement, or a better match with intended learning outcomes.

**References/Further reading**

The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (2001) *A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities*, Stoneybrook, New York. <http://notes.cc.sunysb.edu/Pres/boyer.nsf/webform/contents>.

Jenkins, A and Healey M (2009) Developing the student as a researcher through the curriculum, in Rust, C (ed,) *Improving Student Learning through the Curriculum*, Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2009) *Institutional Audit, University of Liverpool, March 2009*, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Gloucester.

**Further resources**

Video on Research-led Teaching - (17/06/09). Dr Peter Kahn (Educational Developer), Educational Development Division, University of Liverpool

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/eddev/CPD/Past_CPD_Events.htm>

Some relevant resources are also available from the last two learning and teaching conferences:

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/eddev/l_t_conference/past_conferences/l_t_conference_09/resources.htm>

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/eddev/l_t_conference/past_conferences/l_t_conference_08/L%26T_Resources_2008.htm>

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Note: this briefing note is based on a discussion document prepared for the APSC November 2008 meeting.