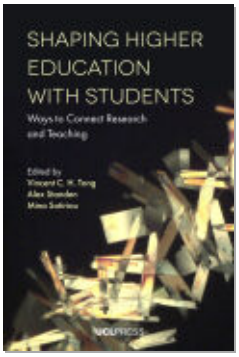
1.7. Connecting students with the workplace



1.7
Connecting students with the workplace

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1. Challenges and issues

As research-based education is a comparatively new area, establishing it requires the involvement of different groups of people, both within and outside the university. But, currently, not all members of the university are aware of research-based education or are ready to adopt it. The process of implementing it will also differ from department to department. One issue to emerge from the focus group discussion was that although there are some scattered examples of student involvement in research, it is not very organised, planned or widely practised in all departments. One participant said: 'Most of the graduate or students on Masters of Science (MSc) courses don't know what the scope of research is in their department'. This is true for many departments.

Another barrier to engaging students in workplace research is scarcity of resources. 'There are not even adequate places to sit in the office', said one of the academics in the focus group discussion, 'so how can we invite at least some of the students to get involved in our research work?' For students, there is a vast field of work outside academia. Professor Fleming said that after completing their studies, only 15 per cent of students remain in academia, with the rest working in non-academic jobs. Therefore, enabling students to increase their employability for jobs in industry is a very important issue. There are several basic skills – creativity, logical and critical-thinking, research communication, teamwork, leadership, being able to work under pressure and so on – that students could acquire from research-based higher education. But many

students are not aware of these transferable skills that are so useful when they enter the job market.

There are opportunities for work or industrial placements in some departments, but these are still very limited. Creating opportunities on a wider scale is a real challenge, as it involves multidisciplinary groups working together, both within and outside the university.

2. Recommendations

The practical implementation of research-based education across the university is a complex process. The first step should be to spread awareness of this teaching approach to every academic and research staff member, particularly senior colleagues. There should be a central recommendation from the university to every department to put this new approach into practice, backed up with a strategic implementation plan, as well as financial resources and other material support from the central authority.

Each department should be willing to engage students in its various research projects. Some changes or redesigning of the old curriculum may be necessary to fit with this research-based education system. Tutors may also need some new training. To involve students in research, tutors have a very important role. Tutors could integrate research into their teaching by involving students in their own research projects, for example by giving them some specific duty, responsibility or fieldwork experience. Tutors could also design assignments that are focused on real-life research activities, such as the practice of writing a grant application, giving a presentation or peer reviewing.

To prepare students for connection to the workplace, tutors should help make students aware of the transferrable 'soft' skills that they are acquiring through research. These skills should be flagged to students to give them more confidence about approaching the world of work, for example being able to refer to them in a job interview or apply them in their real working life.

Incorporating more multidisciplinary research into higher education could help to widen students' horizons of future work opportunities. The university should collaborate with industry and local government to allow students to connect with the workplace through work placements, internships, volunteering opportunities or collaborative projects. This would really help students to make the smooth transition from theoretical

knowledge to practical work, and also benefit industries by increasing the supply of innovative workers.

Professionals from industry or business could be invited to the university to give short lectures or career consultations on practical ways to apply the knowledge gained at university into working life. They could also speak to students about work patterns and the workplace environment, which would help students make more informed choices about their future jobs.

Academics usually have a wide network of both academics and non-academics. They should use their existing networks to help their students. Two academics at the focus group suggested that professors are sometimes reluctant to let students use their network, as they are worried about the impact it might have on their own reputation. They said there should be a central industrial placement system within the university.

The implementation of research-based education by connecting students with the workplace is most certainly a noble concept. If universities want to make it happen, staff and students will need to work in partnership. Academics should also get official recognition for being involved in research-based education. It should be seen as rewarding for their careers, otherwise they are unlikely to really engage with it and do the extra work required.