

How to...

Engage students in research

Institution-wide research is not just for higher education institutes (HEIs), college higher education (College HE) should be undertaking research too. Data from enhancement mechanisms will suggest areas for improvement; for example, results from certain questions in the National Student Survey (NSS) or feedback from module reviews where responses to a particular question might indicate a negative viewpoint from a few programmes. If for example, timetabling is an issue with one programme, it can be dealt with in that department but if the issue is across several programmes a college-wide action research project (ARP) will help identify the problem and offer solutions.

Student engagement in research activities is to be encouraged in college HE but no one size fits all as each institute has its variables from the types of programmes they run to student demographics. For some institutions, students studying at sub-degree level and being involved in college-wide research in this safe environment prior to the move to Level 6 will be provided with valuable tools for the future. For those with Foundation Degree Awarding Powers and Taught Degree Awarding Powers, involving students encourages them to embed what they are currently learning or build on what they know.

An invitation to be involved should be college-wide as just using the student representatives could be adding more responsibilities than they want. Consideration has to go to the student's weekly activities and responsibility. Many students in college HE are working adults so a full-time working parent who studies in the evening might not have the capacity to contribute as much time to the ARP as a younger student who is studying, in work placement or in part-time employment. However, there is a role for everybody and it is advisable that this whole process is facilitated by a member of staff who will work on the ARP from start to finish. As well as ensuring the ARP process is rigorous, the facilitator needs to drive the project forward and ensure that every student who wants to, has a voice and understands that they are involved in knowledge creation.

Visiting student groups initially will provide information that will be very wide-ranging. Many students are comfortable discussing the problem in a group but always offer the opportunity to have responses collected confidentially either face to face or through email. A follow-up survey will help differentiate the needs from the wants.

The facilitator needs to ensure students understand the benefits of their involvement (individual and collective voices heard; community of practice; involvement in ARP in a 'safe' context; embedding what they know) and expectations of how the process will evolve. This should include discussion of how their research will not only benefit themselves but also future cohorts, particularly if findings recommended changes that might take time and will need to go through various committees or wait for funding.

PROCESS

Start

1. Meet each student group to define problem.
2. Facilitator and students discuss values that will apply until APR ends.
3. Identify volunteers (focus groups, reading, IT support, survey development etc).
4. Identify and read relevant literature.

Middle

1. Focus group to decide what goes into a survey.
2. Develop and send out survey.
3. Collect and collate data from survey.
4. Focus group to discuss findings and link with relevant literature.

End

1. Write report.
2. Disseminate report to student group for final comment.
3. Disseminate report to appropriate platforms such as college higher education board.
4. Add involvement to CV.