

Case Study 10**Undergraduate Research Bursaries at Northampton (URB@N): An institution-wide initiative where students work in partnership with staff on learning and teaching projects**

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URB@N (Undergraduate Research Bursaries at Northampton) is a bursary scheme offering opportunities for current undergraduate students to participate in a pedagogic research project taking place at the university.

Staff members from schools and services across the institution are encouraged to propose research questions which have the potential to benefit the department, school and/or institution, and which will ultimately impact positively on the student experience. Research projects are centred on learning and teaching and are explored through student voices. Under the guidance of the academic supervisor, students who are successfully selected for the scheme are involved in the design, data collection, analysis and dissemination of the research. On successful completion of the project, students receive a bursary payment of £500.

URB@N is based on the principle of staff and students working together in partnership to tackle educational issues, and make changes to learning and teaching practice for the benefit of the student experience. A key aspect of the URB@N scheme is students' involvement in gathering data – both as researchers and participants. The URB@N student researchers are expected to take an active role in data collection for the research projects they are working on, including designing and creating surveys, testing out educational resources, or interviewing other students and facilitating focus groups. Through active engagement with students in the research projects, staff can ensure that they are asking the right questions, and gain valuable and meaningful access to the student voice. The student researchers can act as a bridge between staff and the wider student population – addressing the power differential that can sometimes exist in staff-driven pedagogic research, thus improving the authenticity of the information obtained.

Examples of projects that have been undertaken

Participation in the scheme has grown since it began in 2009, and over 70 pedagogic projects have taken place at the university since then. The breadth in topic and scope of projects has been diverse, reflecting varied approaches to learning and teaching across the institution, and disciplinary differences. Examples of projects have included:

- Research into the experience of transition to higher education, involving focus groups and interviews with first and second year students about their experiences of starting university.
- Students' knowledge of social enterprise, explored via a survey of final year students studying health and social care disciplines.
- Capturing the expectations and experience of distance learners, through online focus groups with distance learning students at the Business School.
- Research into the experience of students who are parents, involving a large-scale survey of student parents studying at Northampton, and some individual interviews.

- Investigating the pilot of the University Ambassador scheme, involving surveys and focus groups with the students working as ambassadors in local primary schools, and interviews with the Head teachers whose schools were participating in the scheme.
- Research into the widening participation of mature students, studied through individual interviews with a sample of mature students at the university.
- Student preferences for types of VLE content, which involved a mock-up of different VLE sites containing various types of content, and a survey on students' views and preferences.
- Research into the postgraduate work experience of international students, comprising focus groups and individual interviews with postgraduate Business School students from India, Pakistan, China and Vietnam.
- Understanding the student experience of online assignment submission and feedback, involving a survey from Health and Social Science students about the perceived advantages and disadvantages of submitting and receiving assessment feedback online.

Evidence of impact and 'making change'

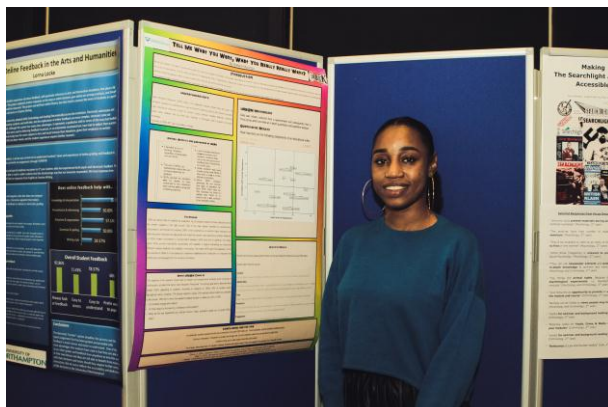
Feedback from staff and students who have been involved in URB@N has been very positive - with a range of benefits including employability and research skills, new staff-student relationships, and authentic access to the student voice. Findings from research projects have also led to demonstrated changes to learning and teaching practice - thus 'making change' for the student experience. Georgina Dimmock supervised an URB@N project in Library and Learning Services looking at the experience of student induction. She said:

'We often make claims on behalf of students without ever asking them. For years we'd run library inductions based on our assumptions of what we thought first year undergraduate students would need and want. We were always very afraid of patronising them and over the years we'd moved towards a very self-service style of induction. We decided we needed to ask the students what they needed and wanted, but we wanted the students to be open and honest. By getting student researchers to conduct the semi-structured interviews peer to peer, we felt the students provided more authentic responses. Rather than saying what they thought we wanted to hear, they said what they actually thought. We changed our library induction in the light of the findings. Our URB@N students then returned to do some follow up research and semi-structured interviews to assess the impact of the changes we'd made to the library induction. The URB@N student researchers gained something positive for their CV as well as the opportunity to meet University staff and get involved in real-world research that led to direct change.'

Natasha Bayes, a Research Assistant based in the Institute of Health and Wellbeing in the School of Health, supervised an URB@N project investigating undergraduate student opinions/preferences of a variety of assessment strategies utilised within their degree programme. She said:

'The results of the study highlight that students' preferences for assessment methods are wide ranging. Most students were satisfied with the balance of assessment methods within their course, however some students felt the balance was inappropriate and that there were certain types of assessment that they would prefer to engage in but were not incorporated within their course. The results of the project highlight the importance of finding and maintaining an appropriate balance between enabling students to experience a range of assessment styles while also allowing students to thrive from their own individual assessment strategy preferences and strengths. Understanding student opinions about these issues permits a deeper awareness of student satisfaction of the assessment strategies embedded within their course. As an early career researcher, I found the URB@N scheme particularly valuable to my professional development. The scheme enabled me to apply my research skills, to translate my own research ideas into a worthwhile project and to gain supervisory experience. It was particularly rewarding to have been given the opportunity to work with a student who had a genuine interest in research. The URB@N scheme enabled the student to gain some insight about what it is like to conduct research, to gain experience

in working collaboratively, and to develop research skills that would benefit her throughout her studies and beyond’.



URB@N STUDENT RESEARCHER PRESENTING HER WORK AT THE 2014 LEARNING AND TEACHING CONFERENCE

Rebecca Gilbert, a final year undergraduate student, worked on an URB@N project investigating the effectiveness of different delivery modes upon learning. The research aimed to compare and identify which delivery mode (such as live lectures, video lectures, audio lectures and handouts) is best for learning and also specifically what is best for the types of materials students learn (such as number knowledge, factual knowledge and conceptual information). She said:

‘URB@N has been a great opportunity to experience professional research first hand. Being part of this project has allowed me to further my skills as a researcher within a team of highly experienced lecturers. We worked together to accomplish the tasks and this meant that important tasks/roles at particular times became my sole responsibility, and this responsibility has furthered my research skills, team work and organisation skills. I think our findings could have a huge impact on the way higher education, particularly The University of Northampton, progresses. The outcomes of this project will hopefully inform how students learn best, which possibly may not be how we expect. I know the new university campus may possibly have more technology involved in the teaching, and with this research, the type of specific technology could be guided to improve students overall experience and learning’.

Eva Kotterbova worked as an URB@N researcher on a project studying student engagement with mentoring. Reflecting on her experience of the scheme, she said:

‘URB@N provided me with the opportunity to gain some new skills, such as research skills, poster design and networking with people from my area of interest. The project that I got involved in was directly connected to the student experience of university life, and will hopefully mean some important changes in order to improve their experience’.



STUDENTS REVIEWING POSTERS FROM URB@N RESEARCH PROJECTS

Thus, bursary students are active in 'making change' for the experience of fellow students. Not only do they get a lot out of the experience themselves, but the work they are doing has direct impact on the learning experience of other students. Some of the findings from URB@N projects have been disseminated beyond the university, through peer-reviewed publications and presentations at external conferences. We have also shared our institutional experience of running the URB@N scheme at national and international events, and through written publication. The reach of URB@N therefore is contributing to changemaking in the higher education sector more broadly, as well as having an impact on learning and teaching practice at The University of Northampton.