

How CESR informs student research:

The *Engaging in Critical Business Enquiry* module at UWE

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In 2011, a study by the CBI indicated that almost three quarters of UK employers were dissatisfied with the skill levels of graduates (CBI 2011). As the effects of recession continue to be significant issues in 2013, there is reason to suspect that graduate employment will continue to be cause for concern. A growing literature emphasises the importance of ensuring a focus on employability in degree programmes and reveals that UK universities are aware of the vital role they play in preparing graduates for an increasingly uncertain labour market (Fallows and Steven 2000).

At UWE initiatives are in place, for example in the form of *MyFuture*, to give students support in following the career path of their choice. A key focus is employability and one element of this is the ability to understand, critique and conduct research. It is estimated that, regardless of career choice, graduates will find themselves engaged in some sort of research activity in the future (Kavanagh and Drennan 2008). Current literature highlights the need to embed employability skills within the curriculum (Yorke and Knight 2006). An embedded curriculum design enables a student to gain broad subject-related knowledge whilst developing skills which can be transferred to a range of different contexts in the future. Hence, amongst the new first year UWE undergraduate modules introduced in 2012/13, the module *Engaging in Critical Business Enquiry* is designed to provide students with a grounding in the transferable skills inherent in the study of research methods. Upon completion students will have gained experience of active research and begun to develop skills integral to future employability

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The majority of tutors on the programme are CESR members and CESR research has been embedded into *Engaging in Critical Business Enquiry* from the outset. For academics involved in the teaching of the module, the opportunity to embrace research-led teaching and introduce a new generation of potential researchers to the world of employment research has an obvious appeal. During lectures and workshops on research methods staff were able to draw on CESR research, both past and present, and to demonstrate through concrete examples that research is integral to business practice. We even incorporated CESR articles into the teaching of how to

construct a literature review.

Engaging in Critical Business Enquiry culminated in a poster conference, which provided students with an exciting opportunity to present and discuss their research with academic staff, senior management, peers and guests from outside the university. The event was an enormous success, attracting over four hundred first year students. The diverse themes of the conference coordinated with the three student clusters (Business and International Management;

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Accounting, Economics and Finance; Marketing, Enterprise and Tourism) and reflected the research interests of CESR. They included flexibility at work, globalisation, gender, discrimination and labour markets, subjects selected to reference many of the key graduate attributes outlined in the UWE 2020 Research Excellence Framework (REF) strategy.

The quality and variety of the research showcased was unprecedented and, despite the fact that students had been encouraged to engage in desk-based research, some groups had undertaken primary research. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a strong correlation between the research that students presented and the research of CESR members. Student research included graduate labour markets (drawing on the work of Nick Wilton), female experiences of employment (with a focus on Sylvia Walby's work; herself, a recent visitor to the CESR symposium on Gender and Austerity) and mental health (featuring research by Dom Page). Allowing students to develop their own research questions also gave students the opportunity to engage with subjects that spoke to their own interests. Some of the research undertaken on broader issues, such as corporate social responsibility, was born out of the students' own social conscience. Consequently, we have been able to nurture these budding research interests and encourage students to develop these ideas as part of their future independent research dissertations at level three.

We are excited to see how the seeds we have sown at level one may flourish in the future. To this end, plans for the 2014 first year research conference are already underway, with the continued objective of encouraging students to engage with contemporary research. We aim to extend the invitation to attend the conference to a wider audience outside UWE; encouraging those offering business placements to UWE students and graduate recruiters, as well as other local employers, trade union representatives and practitioners, to come and look at the often extraordinary research that our early researchers are doing and to witness CESR's commitment to developing students and widening our research. After the conference has taken place and prizes for the best research poster have been awarded, the winning group will have the opportunity to write a short article about their topic and publish it in the CESR review. Not only will this give them valuable and marketable experience for future job applications, it will also further strengthen the relationship between CESR and the student body.

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References

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