

# Embedding Student Research in the Undergraduate Curriculum: Learning in the Field

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## Introduction

This paper is based on the premise that undergraduate research is beneficial. It is student-focused by increasing student engagement, participation and inquiry, and it emphasises both epistemological and ontological aspects (Brew 2013:604). Making discoveries and developing curiosity that may have practical, real-life applications constitutes significant value. Students' engagement in the total learning process through immersion in the research field can lead to deeper-level and long-lasting learning, whilst fostering independent and collaborative working abilities, as well as the ability to handle ambiguity. By coupling undergraduate research with formative and summative outcomes of course assessments, it can help students to organise and develop more creative thinking, foster more sophisticated levels of intellectual development, and gain confidence in their own intellectual abilities, perhaps leading them to continue their education beyond their undergraduate degree. Presentations of research results can lead to improved oral and written communication skills, making students more competitive for employment. Importantly, students who engage in research often develop a quest for new knowledge by asking important questions about the world around them, and, in turn, gaining a sense of solidarity and compassion for the people they encounter.

The benefit surrounding the student experience of research has become the subject of much recent academic debate (e.g. Healey and Jenkins 2009a; Healey and Jenkins 2009b:113-120; Lopatto 2010), often suggesting that "students' learning in 'research mode' should be central to the curriculum" (Jenkins and Healey 2009:3). The arguments in support of the student research experience, to my mind, often tend to emphasise a move away from "absolute knowing" (behaviourism) and towards "contextual knowing" (constructivism). In other words, undergraduate research shifts students away from being passive recipients of knowledge and towards active seekers and producers of knowledge. It is a powerful means of engaging students, and has the capacity to stimulate students' interests in the world around them and the knowledge produced within it. Undergraduate research is thus often seen as a way of radically transforming students' higher education experience (Brew 2013:609). The benefits are evident in many ways, including how students can be inspired to adopt research in final year projects, such as dissertations, notably enhancing their CVs and employability prospects (Walkington and Jenkins 2008:8). Indeed, "research and inquiry is not just for those who choose to pursue an academic career. It is central to professional life in the twenty-first century" (Brew 2007:7).

Yet what constitutes undergraduate student research is subject to ongoing academic debate (e.g. Jenkins 2008; Jenkins and Healey 2009:5-6), as HE institutions define student research according to different priorities (e.g. Beckman and Hensel 2009:40; Jenkins and Healey 2009:6), often concluding that the meaning of undergraduate research is context-specific and varies across and within institutions. This paper presents an example of how student research is embedded in the undergraduate curriculum at LJMU, with specific focus on how the degree programme in Popular Music Studies has successfully supported the incorporation, publication and dissemination of undergraduate student research. It illustrates some of the various strategies of how research can be experienced and contribute to student learning in the undergraduate curriculum.

## Learning in the Field

The embedding of research in the undergraduate curriculum means that students can learn in "research mode" and often outside the formal university setting and premises (Jenkins and Healey 2009:3). This inquiry-based and self-directed learning is termed here as "learning in the field". Learning in the field signifies the varied places and spaces—physical, virtual, diasporic—where students can observe, study and understand the sonic, visual, textual, material and other manifestations of music in self-directed, independent and uniquely individual ways. Yet learning in research mode in the field requires formal training

in research approaches and methods. A central component of our students' research experience thus involves the delivery of research components in modules throughout the degree programme so that research is not regarded as a final-year activity only, but seen as integral to all levels of study right from the beginning of their degree (Healey and Jenkins 2009b:88; Walkington and Jenkins 2008:5). This is achieved by addressing four ways of engaging students with research, namely research-led, research-oriented, research-based and research-tutored teaching and learning (Healey and Jenkins 2009b: 6-7), which represents a useful model as it is inclusive of different pedagogies for engaging students in research (Figure 1). The aim in our programme is a gradual move from research-led (identifying knowledge) to research-based (authoring knowledge) teaching as our students progress from the first to the third year.

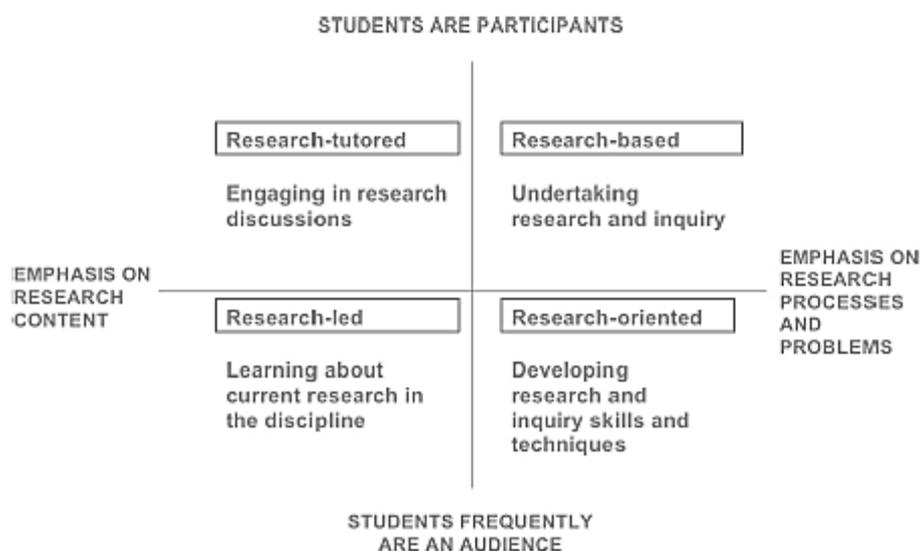


Figure 1: Model depicting four main ways of engaging undergraduate students with research: (i) research-led: learning about current research in the discipline; (ii) research-oriented: developing research skills and techniques; (iii) research-based: undertaking research and inquiry; (iv) research-tutored: engaging in research discussions. (Source: Healey and Jenkins 2009b: 6-7)

Students are first introduced to research in a first-year module (4012POP Analysing and Researching Popular Music), a highly didactic module with a focus on the process of research, the basic characteristics of quantitative and qualitative research, and the procedures for implementing the two approaches at each step of the research process, including the ethical issues students must account for (Figure 2). A requirement of the module is to design a small piece of research and present it in the form of a *research proposal*, including an ethics form, whilst providing details of the research context, a discussion of key research questions, a literature review, and details of the research methods to be deployed. The aim is for students to demonstrate knowledge of a freely chosen research problem or issue in popular music and to choose a suitable research method. Accompanying the research proposal, students are also required to submit a *written rationale* in order to demonstrate their understanding of the principles of good research design, management and analysis. The purpose of the rationale is for students to articulate and substantiate the aims and objectives of their research proposal; explain why certain research methodologies have been chosen, and the ways in which these approaches relate to the specific research plan; why particular resources have been included; and what ethical considerations have been accounted for and why. In the final session, students actively engage—through peer review and feedback—with previous students' research proposals and rationales, which helps them to gain a sense of the academic level they can aspire to, and to learn from the achievements and mistakes of their predecessors. In their critical reflections, students are encouraged to apply professional standards of academic peer review (e.g. Gray 2010), which enhances their understanding of academic values and of effective undergraduate research. Interestingly, students often tend to judge other students' research and writing far more critically than their tutor, whilst struggling to achieve this standard of writing, and so tutor opinion and training helps them to take a more critical, self-reflexive stance towards their own perceptions and abilities. Peer review of past student research thus provides excellent opportunities for formative feedback.

In subsequent years of the undergraduate curriculum, our students are introduced to empirical field- and participatory research approaches, notably ethnography, which is embedded within year-long critical modules on music, gender and ethnicity (5013POP Music and the Other) and musical globalization (6012POP Globalisation, The State and Popular Music). The embedding of research components into these modules, rather than delivering them as a discrete module, is often deemed preferable (Walkington et al. 2011:316-317). Moreover, ethnography is often regarded to be a particularly useful research approach in popular music studies in order to study and understand music in its sociocultural context, which can in turn enable students to become critical, self-reflective and deep-thinking learners. By focusing on empirical field- and participatory research approaches in years two and three, we acknowledge the fact that "disciplinary cultures shape the conception of what is 'research', the research methodologies employed and the forms of research distribution" (Healey and Jenkins 2009b:48). Meanwhile, and as in the first-year module, peer review and feedback of past student research is integrated in the research training programme. The syllabus covers a range of sessions, which are not necessarily delivered consecutively but intersected by subject-specific sessions on gender and/or globalization (Figure 2).

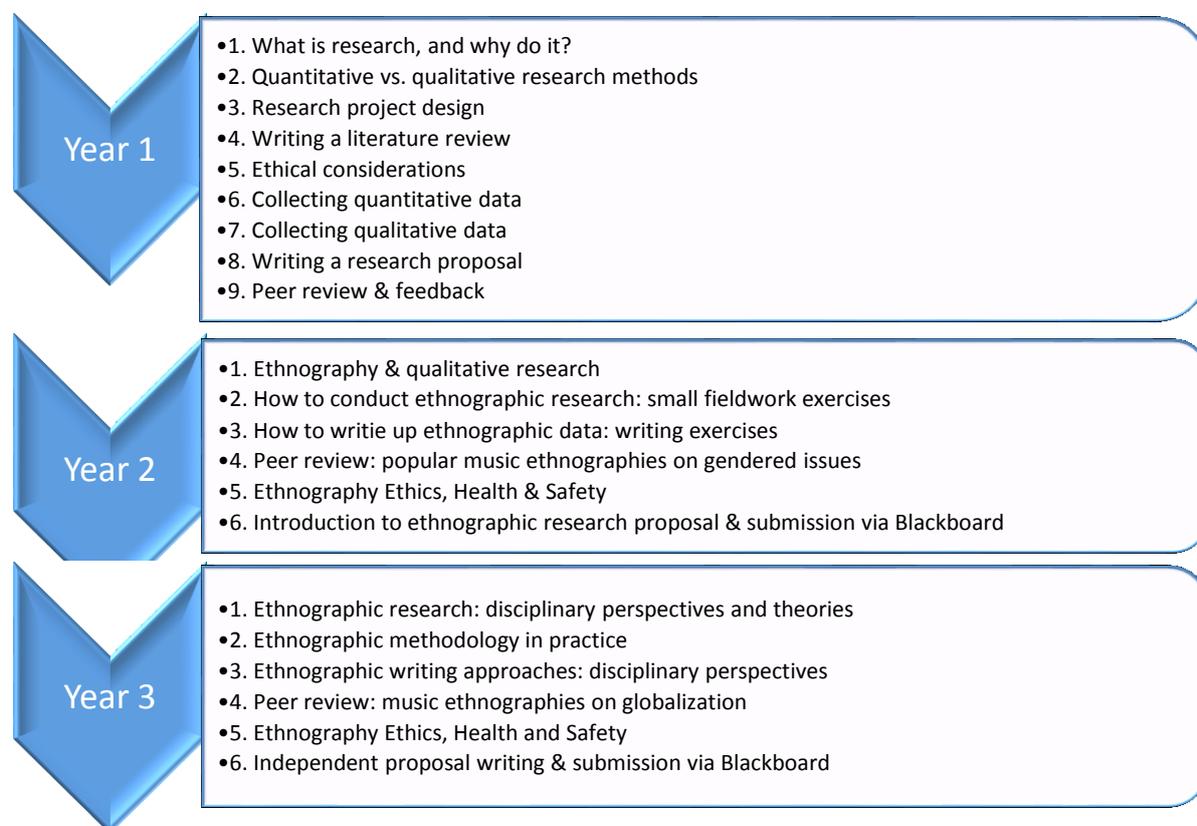


Figure 2: Syllabus for introducing research in the first year of the undergraduate curriculum in module 4012POP Analysing and Researching Popular Music, available at [https://www.academia.edu/2552740/Module\\_Handbook\\_Analysing\\_and\\_Researching\\_Music\\_](https://www.academia.edu/2552740/Module_Handbook_Analysing_and_Researching_Music_), accessed on 9 June 2015, followed by the syllabi for introducing empirical field- and participatory research approaches with in-built progression from the first to the third year module. Source: 5013POP & 6012POP module guides, available at [https://www.academia.edu/2525296/Module\\_Handbook\\_Music\\_and\\_The\\_Other\\_](https://www.academia.edu/2525296/Module_Handbook_Music_and_The_Other_) and [https://www.academia.edu/2525298/Module\\_Handbook\\_Globalisation\\_The\\_State\\_and\\_Popular\\_Music\\_](https://www.academia.edu/2525298/Module_Handbook_Globalisation_The_State_and_Popular_Music_), accessed on 9 June 2015.

Both modules include the requirement to independently conduct an ethnographic fieldwork project in a freely chosen music culture with (a) focus on the gendered norms and behaviours expressed by the people within it, and (b) the impact of globalization on the chosen music culture, and to present a fully-referenced written essay that reflects the conventions of ethnographic research and writing. The student research experience is supported by my student textbook on ethnography as a method of research and writing in student research projects (Krüger 2008), which introduces the basic characteristics of quantitative and qualitative research so as to contextualise ethnography as a qualitative research method, illustrates the

multiple, complex steps of ethnographic research and writing, and presents them one-by-one in simple, reader-friendly language.

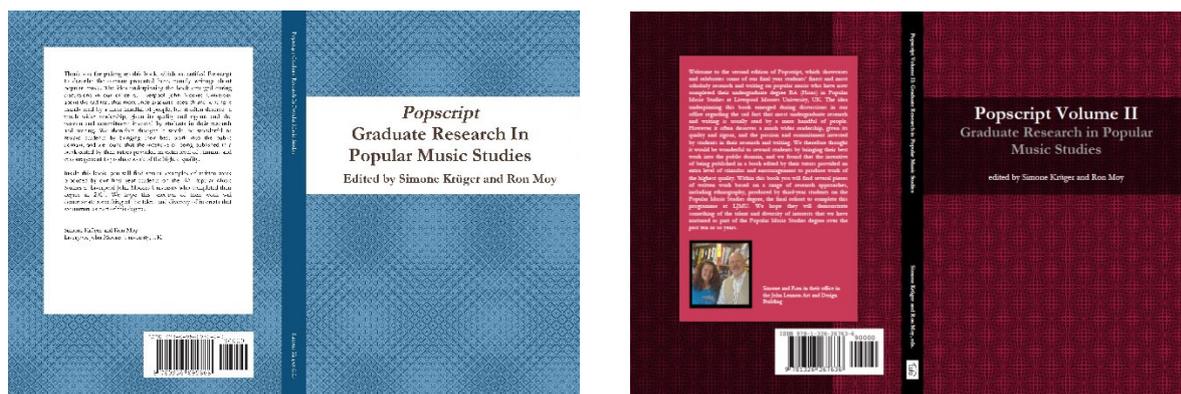
Students' ethnographic research experience is combined with the use of blogging for critical self-reflection and fieldnote taking, an initiative fostering creative, self-directed learning environments whilst utilising online technologies to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. Students are also encouraged to complement face-to-face empirical with virtual fieldwork by conducting skype interviews with informants; gaining entry and maintaining research relationships via social media (facebook, twitter); using MySpace, SoundCloud, YouTube and Flickr for music-related research; and utilising NVIVO or Microsoft Word for qualitative data management and analysis. Our students' experience of research thus makes effective use of current and emerging technologies, which further enhances their discovery learning (Walkington and Jenkins 2008:8).

### **Embedding Publication in the Student Research Experience**

The publication of students' research is another important theme in the literatures, which is based on the fact that undergraduate research is rarely disseminated in the public domain, or subject to feedback and comment from a broad audience (Healey and Jenkins 2009b:20). Walkington and Jenkins (2008:2), for instance, argue that undergraduate students should experience the full research cycle, including the opportunity to publish their research in the form of a poster, conference paper, website, podcast, video or academic journal article. They acknowledge that the process of writing and re-writing for publication is central to "re-search" and to understanding academic values, and suggest numerous strategies for embedding undergraduate research publication in the student learning experience, of which I will illustrate one example here.

In order to address the importance of disseminating undergraduate research as part of the student learning experience, the degree programme in Popular Music Studies at LJMU has over the past two years disseminated selected final-year dissertations and essays through the publication of a tutor-edited book, *Popscrip: Graduate Research in Popular Music Studies* (2014) and *Popscrip Volume II: Graduate Research in Popular Music Studies*. The idea underpinning this book emerged during discussions regarding the fact that most undergraduate research and writing is usually read by a mere handful of people. However, we felt that it often deserves a much wider readership, given its quality and rigour, and the passion and commitment invested by students in their research and writing. We therefore aimed at building reward and recognition of students' research and writing by bringing their best work into the public domain, and we found that the incentive of being published in a book edited by their tutors provided an extra level of stimulus and encouragement to produce work of the highest quality. Building publication into undergraduate students' research experience has received positive feedback from students, who say that the experience of research and writing for publication at undergraduate level has enabled them to actively engage with their learning in new and creative ways. Perhaps one of the great potential advantages of publishing student research is that it provides documented evidence for CVs and jobs applications, whilst some of our own graduate students have in fact gained employment in creative professions (e.g. music journalism) as a result of being published in *Popscrip*.

*Popscrip* contains a selection of final-year students' most scholarly research and writing on popular music, which were chosen on merit, with only the very best pieces being selected from the assignments submitted by the whole cohort. Even so, we opted for a broader definition of research in order to allow for wider participation in research dissemination, and to show what undergraduate research is "really like" so as to encourage aspiring music students that "good" writing is not beyond their reach (Walkington and Jenkins 2008:6). Most of the essays were written as part of the final-year dissertation module, which allowed students the freedom to choose their own research topic and methodology. Although they were given tutorial guidance, the resulting dissertations are very much their own and all the more impressive as a result. The shorter essays were written for final-year modules on globalisation, authorship and audio technology, some employing ethnographic research methods. The book is typeset by the author, and printed and published by the self-publisher Lulu, thereby cutting out unrealistic waiting times for academic peer review, typesetting, copy-editing and printing by a traditional publisher.



## Conclusion

Embedding student research in the undergraduate curriculum allows students to learn in new and creative, exciting and explorative ways. This paper has demonstrated how the degree programme in popular music studies at LJMU has successfully supported the incorporation, publication and dissemination of student research in the undergraduate curriculum (Figure 3). The strategies outlined here have enabled our students to gain knowledge in planning and carrying out research, learn research skills and pursue research appropriate to their discipline, and present and disseminate research through writing and publication. The strategies are by no means a holistic conceptual framework to reflect the wide variety of ways in which research can be experienced and contribute to student learning. Instead, this paper has illustrated *one* successful example of how research-based components can be considered as integral to, rather than separately from, research experiences initiated by academic researchers and inside, rather than outside, of students' formal classes (see Brew 2013:605 for critiquing current literature and practice in this regard). It has also demonstrated that positive attitudes to and appropriate perceptions of research amongst both staff and students are critical if student research is to be successfully embedded in the undergraduate curriculum.

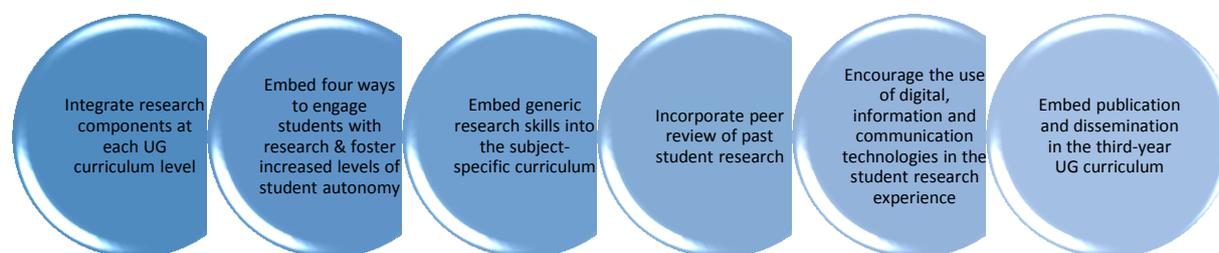


Figure 3: Strategies used to support the incorporation, publication and dissemination of student research in the undergraduate curriculum on the degree in Popular Music Studies at LJMU

A key aspect that informs our students' research experience on the degree in Popular Music Studies at LJMU is the opportunity to engage in dissemination and publication, and to utilise digital, information and communication technologies in their undergraduate research. These strategies are coupled with the embedding of research components at each level of the undergraduate curriculum in ways that accommodate a gradual move from research-led to research-based teaching along the continuum of behaviourist, cognitive and constructivist pedagogical philosophies (Figure 1). Engagement in undergraduate research has great advantages for students, institutions and society at large, as research skills—knowing how to enquire and to critically evaluate information—are necessary for graduates to function effectively in an increasingly complex world (Walkington et al. 2011:316), a global knowledge society marked by uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity and rapid change. As Healey and Jenkins (2009b:124) argue, "the central role of the university should be to help all students cope with supercomplexity... through mainstreaming research and inquiry throughout the curriculum". To prepare our students for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by enabling them to be both consumers and producers of knowledge has allowed us to

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make a small, but significant contribution, in providing the best possible learning experience and environment in which students can grow academically, intellectually, socially and personally, and to give them the best chances to lead successful and happy lives after graduation.

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