

Enhancing students' experience, engagement and academic performance through involvement in research: development of the Qualitative Inquiry Research Group

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The aim

The project aimed to promote student engagement and to foster a sense of belonging to the Sport and Exercise Sciences community by encouraging students to develop as independent and critical learners through enquiry-based learning. The main focus was on one specific method of enquiry-based learning: providing research experiences using qualitative approaches.



Benefits

- Learning new skills through expert talks and applied practice.
- Increasing motivation and feelings of autonomy by involving students in research projects.
- Producing thoughtful and critical graduates.
- Enhancing a proactive use of communication and transferable skills
- Developing ethical values and empathy - important for sport coaches, or members of sport science teams.

The approach

At the beginning of the 2018/2019 academic year, the Anglia Ruskin Qualitative lab (ARQlab) was advertised to students at all levels of study in SES.

The offer of the ARQlab was threefold: (a) six talks and workshops delivered by world-leading experts in the field of qualitative research in sport; (b) a student-led reading group, which would have met bi-monthly, to provide students with better understanding of different research approaches; and (c) collaboration on research projects conducted by ARU staff. Students from all levels of study, spanning from first years to PhD, joined the ARQlab and engaged with the activities throughout the year.

The invited experts for the talks were Professor Brett Smith, who discussed how to achieve quality in qualitative research, and Professor David Carless and Dr Kitrina Douglas, who showed ways of representing research to reach different audiences. Dr Melissa Day conducted a workshop on written methods of data collection, Dr Camilla Knight introduced grounded theory, and through a workshop via video-conference the students were guided by Professor Kerry McGannon, from Canada, on how to conduct narrative analysis.

A qualitative survey was conducted in October 2018 to identify the expectations of the students interested in being involved in the project. Responses to the survey were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) and the identified themes were used to plan a semi-structured interview guide for the focus groups that were run in May 2019, following the last reading group. The focus groups

were used as a way to conduct a reflection on the experience of participating in the ARQlab.

The students agreed that their initial expectations had been met, as they enjoyed the guest speakers' events and felt they learned applied aspects of research. Most importantly though – in line with the initial aim – a great sense of community had started to develop. Findings from the focus groups highlighted how the students had begun to rely on the reading group meetings as an opportunity to meet and discuss research with their peers, and this turned into a more general personal and academic source of support. The diversity of study level was particularly appreciated by the ARQlab members, who felt that sharing experiences in a varied environment enhanced a sense of mutual learning and collaboration. Finally, an aspect that was apparent throughout the project and repeatedly identified in the words of the students during the focus group, was an increased sense of ownership on the project. This ownership was reflected in the current students starting to plan how to advertise and involve new members in the next academic year, and suggesting the creation of new student-led activities, both in relation to academic and social aspects (e.g., student-led workshops for new students to 'catch up' on methods discussed in the first year of the lab).

The outcome(s)

The end of the project saw the ARQlab having developed fully into an asset for the ARU academic community, as a place that allows academic and personal interests to merge, and collaboration and support among peers to flourish. The students are now looking forward to planning ARQlab v2.0 for next academic year!

Profile

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Future Development

- ARQlab 2019/2020; it will maintain the characteristics that made it popular and it will develop aspects that have been highlighted as desirable by students.
- Focus on one shared research project that will be conducted from data collection to write up.
- Increased student-led aspects (academic and social).

Recommendations

Key to the success of similar projects:

- Careful organisation and planning of activities to potentially include all levels of students (i.e. need to cross-check timetable)
- Importance of students' collaboration
- Link to applied practice