

Developing applied research skills through collaboration
in extra-academic contexts



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HEA Social Sciences strategic project 2012 -13

Teaching research methods in the Social Sciences

In June 2012 HEA Social Sciences held its first learning and teaching summit, which focused on teaching research methods in the Social Sciences (Further details of this summit, including papers and presentations, can be accessed via: <http://blogs.heacademy.ac.uk/social-sciences/2012/09/10/teaching-research-methods/>)

In December 2012 we commissioned 11 projects that were designed to explore further the issues identified at the summit. All the outputs from these projects are available via <http://bit.ly/1jZe0Ft>.

The role of assessment in teaching research methods: a literature review

Anesa Hosein (University of Surrey) and Namrata Rao (Liverpool Hope University)

Count: Developing STEM skills in qualitative research methods teaching and learning

Graham R. Gibbs (University of Huddersfield)

Creative research methods in a college-based higher education setting

Alex Kendal (Birmingham City University) and Helen Perkins (Solihull College)

Developing applied research skills through collaboration in extra-academic contexts

Andrew Kirton, Peter Campbell, Louise Hardwick (University of Liverpool)

Developing innovative support structures for students undertaking small-scale research projects in work settings

Paula Hamilton, Peter Gossman and Karen Southern (Glyndŵr University)

Developing peer assessment in postgraduate research methods training

Hilary Burgess, Joan Smith and Phil Wood, assisted by Maria Scalise (University of Leicester)

Engaging students in quantitative research methods: An evaluation of assessment for learning strategies on an undergraduate social research methods module

Ciaran Acton and Bernadette McCreight (University of Ulster)

Innovation in the assessment of social science research methods

Luke Sloan (Cardiff University)

LSE100: An innovative, multi-disciplinary approach to assessing research methods learning

Jonathan Leape (London School of Economics)

Mapping, understanding and supporting research teaching within college-based higher education (HE) networks

Claire Gray, Rebecca Turner, Carolyn Petersen, Carole Sutton and Julie Swain (Plymouth University)

Northern Ireland by numbers: new open educational resources for teaching quantitative methods

Emma Calvert and Paula Devine (Queen's University Belfast)



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I. Introduction

The development of research competencies among undergraduate students is high on the agenda of most Social Science departments presently. Among other things, this interest in the teaching and learning of research methods reflects a growing acknowledgement that research competencies are valuable to students in terms of graduate employability and that encouraging undergraduate students to develop skills in and an appreciation of research at undergraduate level might have positive implications for postgraduate degree recruitment. In this context we should not forget that there is a real need and place for competent social researchers both within and outside of academia. We live in an age when social data of various kinds and its uses proliferates, creating numerous and diverse new research opportunities for those with the requisite competencies. We also live in a period when the social problems/issues that social scientists have traditionally occupied themselves continue to be deserving of research attention. These problems/issues are taking on new dimensions, however, and new issues/problems are constantly emerging to be investigated. To reiterate, there is a crucial need and place for competent social researchers in society today. It is in this sense that lecturers in social science and social research methods should feel some responsibility and be motivated to ensure that Social Science undergraduates are provided with effective opportunities to develop strong research competencies and a broader appreciation of the value and place of social research in society.

The question is, of course, how do we best ensure that Social Science undergraduates develop strong research competencies? How do we instil in them a sense of the value and place of social research and of those with research competencies? What might those opportunities that encourage and enable students to achieve these things actually look like? It is in this context that the sharing of practice and of experience among lecturers in research methods is required and must be further encouraged. With research methods now making its way up the Social Science curriculum agenda, spaces for discussion have begun to open up and are slowly being populated. The HEA has been instrumental in this process via the hosting of events and provision of funding for research (including ours) under the strategic theme of 'teaching research methods in the social sciences'.

In producing this report we hope to make some contribution to discussion and debate about the teaching and learning of research methods in the social sciences. We hope to make this contribution by drawing attention to a particular undergraduate course (module) in applied social research. This course, we suggest, represents a unique example of how we might successfully encourage and enable the further development of strong research competencies among Social Science students. In what follows we describe and discuss this course in some detail. We first outline and discuss the aims and desired learning outcomes of the course. We then go on to outline the course process before outlining and discussing the particular teaching and learning strategy employed. Following that we draw on data generated via in-depth interviews with students and VCOs to discuss and consider the relative merits, success and outcomes of the course.

2. The course: SOCI 303 Applied Social Research

SOCI 303 Applied Social Research (hereafter ASR) is an optional level three (third year) undergraduate module offered to students studying for degrees in the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology at the University of Liverpool. The course provides students with an opportunity to undertake a small-scale social research project on behalf of and in collaboration with a local voluntary/community organisation. In doing so, students are provided with an effective opportunity to develop applied research competencies and an appreciation of the value of their actions as researchers in this context. In this section we outline the design and nature of the course in more detail.

2.1. Course aims

In terms of teaching and learning, the aim of the ASR course is to encourage and enable the development of further research competencies among undergraduate students. By providing opportunities to work with local VCOs that have real research needs, the course provides students with an opportunity to see the value of their research competencies and outputs at a very real and tangible level. As we will discuss later, the research that students engage in and the knowledge they produce as part of their ASR projects is of real value to the organisations they work with and to the communities those organisations serve.¹ The value of research in this context in turn encourages students to engage much more enthusiastically in the research process and the development of competencies. Furthermore, in providing students with an opportunity to engage in a 'real life' social research project, students get to experience research practice first hand, through direct application. As suggested, it is the specific nature of the context in which research is being practised that makes this course unique and effective in terms of encouraging students to develop strong social research competencies.

Opportunities to apply techniques and methods are clearly of great value in terms of the development of research competence. It is only when we experience first-hand the application of a particular data generation or analysis technique that we begin to develop any real sense of competence. The context within which application takes place is clearly important, however. There is a world of difference, for instance, between experiencing the application of a research technique in the context of a teaching and learning workshop and experiencing the use of that same technique in the context of a 'real life' research project. This is not to say that practising one's techniques in a safe learning environment prior to going out into 'the field' is of no value – it clearly is. It is only to say that such de-contextualised practice of single techniques might only get one so far in terms of the development of research competence. It is in this sense that opportunities for students to experience first-hand the practice of research in *extra-academic* contexts are of particular value. The ASR course provides students with these very opportunities.

The ASR course provides students with the opportunity to experience research in a context where the interests and needs of others have to be taken into account and responded to appropriately. In turn, students find themselves subject to pressures and encountering issues that they would not otherwise experience as an undergraduate student, but which are real and important research issues. They must also be responsible in ways and

¹ In this sense, the ASR course reflects a broader commitment to forging and fostering mutually beneficial links between the University and local communities.

to an extent that would not usually be expected of them. In working with local VCOs, and in responding to *their* research needs, students are provided with a level of access to people, groups and communities that would otherwise be extremely difficult to attain. Moreover, students are offered opportunities to undertake research that they would not otherwise have the opportunity to undertake as an undergraduate student. In sum, ASR students get the opportunity to engage in a unique and extremely valuable learning experience. It is an experience that not only encourages them to develop strong research competencies, but also encourages them to develop an appreciation of what good social research might actually involve and of what can be achieved.

The underlying course aim is reflected most clearly in the desired learning outcomes of the course, which can be usefully summarised as follows. In successfully completing the course, students would have demonstrated the ability to:

- plan, negotiate and agree a research project that responds to and addresses the needs of an external partner appropriately and successfully;
- consider and respond appropriately to relevant problems of access, ethics and resource both in planning the research and during research practice;
- successfully develop and apply appropriate methods of data generation and analysis;
- report on the research project and findings in an appropriate manner;
- maintain a good working relationship with partners at all times.

As the desired learning outcomes suggest, the course aims to enable the development of competencies in social research as an actual practice. In undertaking and completing a whole research project, from planning through implementation to reporting, students are being provided with an opportunity to experience and develop competencies in all aspects of the social research process. This makes it distinct from the research training that students receive at earlier stages in their degree programmes where the focus is on specific elements of research practice. The course is also clearly distinct from other opportunities during which undergraduate students might have to undertake a discrete research project (such as the standard undergraduate dissertation) in that it involves working and collaborating with others in an extra-academic context – a context in which pressures, requirements and expectations are quite different.

Of course, achieving the aims set out above is no simple task, and the placing of students in this extra-academic context presents particular challenges and raises particular concerns for those responsible for the successful delivery and management of this course. First, there is the issue of ensuring the availability of suitable research placements and projects. Potential projects must be found, and there is a need to ensure that the research proposed and subsequently undertaken as part of the course is reasonable and appropriate in all the usual ways (i.e. that the research is ethical, does not present any particular health and safety concerns and is also feasible/realistic). Second, there is the challenge of ensuring that the collaboration between student and VCO remains mutually beneficial, that the needs of both parties are adequately and reasonably being addressed and considered as part of the collaboration, and that productive working relationships are established and maintained. Addressing these general concerns in turn presents a big challenge in terms of course resources. In the next section, we outline the course process before going on to discuss the teaching and learning strategy that has been developed in order to encourage and enable the

achievement of those learning outcomes stated above, and which also enable the effective management of those challenges identified briefly here.

2.2 The course process

For students, the ASR course process begins towards the end of their second year of undergraduate study when they are introduced to third-year options and asked to express their interest in undertaking an ASR project rather than a standard undergraduate dissertation. Those students who are interested are invited to attend a briefing/introductory session wherein staff and previous students talk to them about the course, how it works, what it involves, its relative merits and so on. Students who wish to undertake an ASR project then contact the course leader and await confirmation that they have a place on the course.²

Once students have a place on the course (usually over the summer period) they are sent a booklet outlining available ASR projects. The projects outlined in this book are the result of a separate process of contact, discussion and negotiation between the course staff, local organisations and Interchange – an independent charity housed in the University of Liverpool.³ Interchange effectively acts as ‘broker’ between the University and local organisations for the purposes of developing mutually beneficial links. Specifically, in this case, they are linking organisations that have specific research needs, which they do not have the immediate capacity to address themselves, with students who are looking to engage with such organisations and with such work as part of their degree studies. Interchange firstly takes responsibility for identifying local organisations with potentially suitable projects. This process obviously involves some promotion and explanation of the ASR course and initiative on the part of Interchange staff.

Potential projects are passed on to the ASR course leader who often discusses them with the organisation further to ensure their general suitability. This would also involve further discussion and briefing on course process, expectations, roles and responsibilities. A final list of available ASR projects is made available to students at the start of the new academic year (September). Students then select the projects they would be interested in undertaking and make contact with the organisation to discuss and negotiate the specific dimensions of the project. Following this the student, organisation and a member of the course staff sign a document outlining the agreed project and detailing the responsibilities of each party. This is usually an opportunity for the course staff to ensure that the agreed project is suitable and appropriate, and that both the student and organisation are happy with what has been proposed. These agreements are to be signed off by the end of October at the latest to ensure enough time for projects to be completed (by mid-May in the following year usually).

In conjunction with this ‘learning agreement’, students are also required to complete and submit a risk assessment and an application for ethical clearance, which again allow the course staff to ensure that the planned research is not obviously problematic in these respects. While these various ‘checkpoints’ may seem onerous in some regards, they are of course essential to the process. These checkpoints not only allow the course staff to review

²Ideally, all interested students would be able to undertake an ASR project, but this depends upon the availability of both staff and suitable projects. In this sense, the course has often seen more students express an interest than can be accommodated at any one time.

³ For information regarding Interchange, see <http://www.liv.ac.uk/interchange>

the proposed ASR projects, but they also encourage the students to think carefully and seriously about the research they are proposing to do on behalf of the organisation. Students may not begin the actual research until these requirements have been fulfilled. The successful running and management of this initial process (from the securing of projects to ensuring agreements are reached) is obviously resource heavy, and this represents a major challenge. The University of Liverpool is extremely lucky to have an established and good working relationship with the charity Interchange, which takes on a major role in and responsibility for identifying and briefing suitable organisations on potential projects.

From the point of having signed off project agreements, students are expected to continue with the research project as planned before submitting a final report of around 10,000 words in mid-May. In the period between the signing of project agreements and the submission of research reports, students are further encouraged and enabled to achieve the desired learning outcomes, via attendance at both formal teaching and learning sessions and via individual supervision meetings with course staff. Again, this allows course staff to retain an overview of how projects are proceeding and developing. It is via teaching and learning sessions that students are introduced to the core teaching and learning strategy.

2.3. Teaching and learning strategy

In undertaking an ASR project, students can be understood to be engaging in a process of *experiential learning* (Kolb 1984). In simple terms, they ‘learn by doing’ – a process involving both action and reflection upon action. The teaching, learning and assessment strategy employed is designed not only to support students in their undertaking and completing of an ASR project, but also to support and enable students’ engagement in this particular mode of learning from experience.

During the first term of the academic year (September–December), teaching and learning sessions provide students with knowledge to draw upon in planning and beginning their research projects, and allow for student-led discussion of particular research-related issues. In providing space for this discussion, the sessions encourage students to reflect on their experiences and understandings of particular research-related issues. They also encourage the students to *share* their experiences and understandings, and to reflect on the experiences and understandings of their peers. In this sense, the regular teaching and learning sessions also encourage and enable a mode of social- and peer-based learning.

In order to further encourage and enable the kind of *reflective* practice that is central to experiential learning, students who undertake an ASR project are also required to register for a linked (co-requisite) course, Reflecting on Applied Social Research. Through this course students are introduced to the concepts of experiential learning, reflective practice and its importance. As part of the ASR course, students are encouraged to keep a research diary that encourages ongoing reflection on practice and experience. At the end of the course, students are required to submit a 4,000-word ‘reflective report’ on their ASR project. As part of this task, students are encouraged to consider the particular context within which they have been acting as a researcher. Students reflect on and discuss the nature of the organisation they have been working with alongside including the political, social, cultural, and economic environment within which those organisations exist. It is hoped that this consideration of the context of their actions as a researcher encourages them to develop a fuller and more nuanced understanding of what they did, the value of what they were doing, why they were asked to do it, the challenges they faced, and

ultimately, what they have learnt about research, themselves as researchers, the organisation they have been working with, and the broader context.

3. Experiences of the ASR course

In this section we report on and consider the experiences of ASR students and VCOs. In particular we were concerned to explore whether the course aims and learning outcomes were realistically and reasonably being achieved. In this regard, we firstly report and discuss what our interviews and focus groups with students indicate about their experiences of the ASR course. More broadly, also of concern to us was understanding the ASR process from the perspective of the VCOs with whom students are placed and work. These actors have an important role to play in the ASR process and it is important to ensure that they are benefiting from their engagements with students in the ways it is hoped. As such, in the second section we report and discuss what our interviews and discussions with organisations suggest about both the role of VCOs in the process and the extent to which the commitment to mutual benefit is being realised.

3.1. What the students say

Before talking to students about their experience of the ASR course more generally, we asked them why they chose to undertake an ASR project rather than the standard dissertation. In reviewing responses to this question, it is clear that most students had clearly formulated motivations for undertaking an ASR project. These motivations and expectations did vary to some extent.

Of the 15 students who took part in our study, two indicated that they simply thought the ASR course would be more interesting than the alternatives. For most students however, it was the applied and practical nature of the course that attracted them. One student described it as presenting 'unique chance to learn by doing' (Student 2). Another described being attracted by the fact that 'it's not just like sitting in the library and doing your own research. We actually get to use some practical skills' (Student 4).

For some of these students, the practical nature of the course was attractive not simply because it would make for a more interesting third-year project, but was also deemed as being valuable in terms of employability. Several referred to their 'CVs' in responding to this question. In reflecting on why they had decided to undertake an ASR project, one student described how 'for me it was partly that it was a great experience in terms of going on and finding jobs afterwards, being able to show that you've done something practical and you've been able to apply what we've learned over these few years' (Student 3).

For other students, it was the not just the opportunity to do something practical in terms of research that attracted them, but also the opportunity to undertake some research that they believed would be of value to others: 'it was because you were producing something that was being used [...]. [...] it was because you were helping someone' (Student 5). Such responses were not surprising to us, but were interesting in that they confirm our suspicions that there is a real appetite for research among undergraduate students, especially opportunities to apply their prior learning in a practical sense.

In talking to students further about their experience of undertaking and completing an ASR project, we heard much to indicate that the courses aims are being achieved and that students are achieving the desired learning outcomes. This was of course one of our main concerns.

In reflecting upon what they felt they had gained from the experience of undertaking and completing an ASR project, students often talked about the development of quite specific research skills. As might be expected, these varied from student to student since the methods and techniques practised vary from project to project. For instance, whilst one student talked about how they had 'learnt loads about analysing quantitative data in SPSS really, especially things like recoding and tidying a data-set up' (Student 4), another student talked about the way in which they had applied and developed a particular interview technique that they had been introduced to in a teaching and learning session:

in one of the earlier lectures we got, it was about how to make people feel relaxed during interviews and focus groups, so offering them something to eat [...] something that doesn't make a noise, so I've been bringing grapes to all my interviews and all my focus groups! And actually they work quite well, because people have some water and have some grapes, and they feel quite relaxed having something to nibble on, and so that was quite a – I'm definitely going to use that in the future. (Student 3)

Several students expressed a related appreciation of the value of the opportunity to actually apply research techniques they had been introduced to as part of their research project. For example:

I think when we did our research methods in the second year, some of it sounded interesting and you did think, 'Oh I'd like to try that,' but you don't really get a chance to do it properly [or] much sense of what it's like to actually do research for real even though you cover a lot of useful stuff [...]. But then when I was doing this project, I had to stop and think about what I was going to actually do. I spent loads of time going through the stuff we had done in the second-year methods course and it was really useful in some respects, but I kind of think that you get a totally different take on what research involves when you actually have to do it yourself [...]. Like, I totally got a sense of what it takes to get stuff going, like recruiting participants... It's just like 'Oh, OK, this isn't that easy' but you just have to get on with it and you start being more practical about things, and it's like stuff just starts falling into place as you're doing it. (Student 8)

The above quote reasserts that students clearly valued the *unique* opportunities to apply research skills that the ASR course provided, but it also reflects that students also valued the more traditional class and lecture-hall-based forms of teaching and learning that they had been party to previously. Another student confirmed that they 'wouldn't really have known where to start without having gone through some of that stuff in earlier modules' (Student 6). What many of the students' responses seemed to reveal about the value of the other methods training they had received was that it was not until they got the chance apply that learning as part of the ASR projects that they began to appreciate and see the value of the knowledge they had developed. This lends weight to the notion that in order to ensure that students develop any real research competence, the teaching and learning of research methods really needs to incorporate practical and applied elements *as well as* the kind of 'research in theory' learning that typically takes place in the lecture hall and seminar.

Many students also talked about the wider and more generic competencies they felt they had developed as part of the ASR course (such as interpersonal skills, communication skills and self-confidence). Most acknowledged that these skills were going to be of wider value to them. Several students indicated feeling much more confident as a researcher, and in this context there were indications that students were thinking about research as something they would be doing more of in the future. For instance, one student described how 'in terms of sort of how it's benefited me I think it's like given me a lot more confidence and different skills and has actually shown me this is something that I might actually want to go into in the future' (Student 4).

Indications that the course is encouraging students to consider research as something they may go on to do more of, in whatever context, are of course especially pleasing. Of the four former ASR students interviewed as part of this project, one was in employment as a researcher outside of academia and two were engaged in postgraduate study/research. Each of these three former students talked about their experiences as part of the ASR course as crucial in encouraging them to go on and pursue further research and study. One student described how the data analysis skills they had been able to demonstrate as part of their ASR project helped them get a job in research, while another described how in going on to undertake research as part of their Masters degree was 'easy, 'cause I knew I could do it, and I knew what I needed to do and how it would work' (Student 9).

It was also pleasing to hear indication that students were developing a sense of the value of what they are doing as a researcher through this course. For instance, one student reported feeling that 'it's something, something good that we're doing [...], trying to improve this organisation and trying to improve the support that they're providing to these people' (Student 3). Another student's response indicated similar sentiments: 'the fact that we've just been able to do this in a proper way with a serious organisation, yeah, just makes it feel ... good or important and – yeah, good' (Student 6). It seems that these students not only value the opportunity to do something 'applied' and 'practical' then, but they also appreciate the opportunity to do something of which they can see the wider value. In this sense, most students indicated in some way feeling a certain 'satisfaction' and even 'pride' in having done something that one student described as 'having been worthwhile not just to me but to [the VCO] mainly' (Student 9).

In relation to the above point about students feeling a sense of satisfaction and pride in having done something that benefits others, when talking to ASR students, we also began to see how acutely aware they were of the responsibility that they had undertaken in working with an external partner.

Several of the students acknowledged the particular challenges/pressures that working in this context presented. This raised a couple of interesting points. Students not only reported feeling under a certain amount of pressure, but also feeling under pressure to produce findings that would be of value to the organisations they were working with. We can see in this sense how this pressure can have particular implications for the research and is something that the students need to reflect upon as part of their research. For example, one student expressed having felt a great deal of concern and uncertainty about whether what they finding in their project was going to be of value to the VCO they were working with: 'I just kept thinking, this is really bad, they're not going to like what I'm finding, it makes them look bad [...] I was really worried' (Student 7).

Here we can see how in researching within this context, students face a real research dilemma. The students are aware that evaluations which paint organisations in a favourable light have a particular value (in terms of supporting the organisations' applications for funding and support). These students are also aware that as researchers they should strive to remain objective of course, and strive ensure the validity and reliability of their research and this could lead to tensions with the organisation. Indeed, a couple of students reported feeling a little conflicted at times in terms of what they felt they should 'report', and that this had ultimately been a source of some anxiety.

But we do not think this is a reason to reconsider putting students in these situations; dealing with such 'problems' and 'tensions' is an important and realistic part of social research. One of the advantages of placing students in these particular real-life research settings is precisely that they may encounter such issues, come to appreciate the importance of thinking about such issues carefully, and hopefully, through experiencing them, will learn how to respond to them appropriately. Indeed, in talking to students further about the challenges they faced, most of them could acknowledge and appreciate that they had gained something from being challenged. For instance, one student conceded that 'it's meant to be a challenge [...] it's meant to, kind of, raise the standard of, of our work' (Student 3). Another student referred to the pressure they had felt under:

if you mess up as well, they can't be like 'Oh, it's ok, you're a student' kind of thing. You have to be quite, like, as professional as you can be [...]. But it was, it's, in that sense it's a really good experience to step out of your comfort zone and become, you know, you grow up a little bit. (Student 4)

Further challenges reported by students again relate to what they perceive to be the understandings of VCOs. It seems that the VCOs' expectations of them as 'researchers' are the source of anxiety for some students. One student reported: 'we feel like we're not, sort of, good enough to be the researcher, whereas they sort of have like the high expectations of us as the researcher' (Student 5).

Another student reported being frustrated by what they perceived to be unrealistic expectations on the part of their host VCOs:

My link person or contact person has been expecting things to be very easy. He has, it feels like he has the impression that you can just throw together an interview like that [clicks fingers]. Or a focus group like that. And you can do it the day after you've talked about doing it, and he's been very bad at planning, he wants things to kind of go like that. Which has been a bit frustrating. (Student 3)

Such comments highlight the need for the expectations of VCOs to be carefully managed. There is no doubt that the ASR course staff and Interchange as the linking charity have a role to play here. It is crucial that partnerships/collaborations do not go ahead without VCOs first being fully briefed about what they can reasonably expect from these students and their projects.

As discussed above, the ASR course process involves points at which these expectations and understandings can be checked and managed by the course staff. However, we should also recognise that such tension between the expectations of one party and another is, once

again, a common and realistic issue in research. As part of the course, students are made aware that such issues may well arise as part of these 'live' collaborative projects and that part of their job as a 'researcher' in this context would be to manage the expectations of the VCO as a partner in the research. Of course, they are also assured that if relationships become particularly problematic in this regard, course staff will intervene to try to help alleviate and resolve the issues. In our experience, however, these tensions very rarely if ever become problems that require intervention in that sense, and that students are in fact quite capable of resolving issues themselves in an appropriate manner. Most of the tensions that might arise between students and VCOs are easily alleviated through good communication, and the students are well aware of the importance of maintaining a good-quality dialogue with their partners. Most seem able to maintain a good working partnership in this sense. Students talked openly in interviews about specific instances where they have had to negotiate dimensions of the research with their hosts, and students also talk about this in other arenas, as part of the course. In fact, the student who made the comments about the expectations of their VCO partner above also said:

I think you can negotiate about everything [...] my impression is that most of the people who've been working with organisations who maybe have expected a bit too much, they've been able to [...] – *renegotiate* that, and kind of set them straight, or explain to them that this not do-able. So we need to do it in this way instead, and it doesn't seem to be – or it seems to be very rare that it's a problem. (Student 3)

What this discussion of the challenges students face seems to demonstrate is that students are facing real-life research dilemmas, which is one of the main attractions of placing students in these research contexts: it gives them a realistic experience of what it is like to do research in the 'real world'. The reflections that students offer on the challenges they face as part of their projects indicate that they have gained a great deal in terms of competencies and confidence from facing and having to deal with them. This is also reflected in some of the comments we highlight at the start of the section about what students generally felt they had gained from the ASR experience.

With further regard to the nature of relationship between the student and the VCO, we were particularly interested to explore the extent to which they could be considered collaborative partnerships and furthermore, how students saw their role in relation to the organisation. When talking to students about the nature of the relationship they shared with their organisation, no students reported having experienced anything particularly problematic. This is reassuring given the obvious potential for these relationships to become strained and in some senses dysfunctional in relation to the objective of mutual benefit.

Most students talked extremely positively about the individual VCO staff they had been in contact with and about the support they had received from them. The extent to which VCO staff became involved in the project varied; however it seems most students worked independently. However, these students talked of being in regular contact with the VCO, of feeling 'a member of the team' (Student 6), of the relationship feeling very much like 'a partnership' (Student 4), and of feeling that the research had indeed been 'collaborative' (Student 10). That students talk of the research in these ways, despite them most often suggesting that the research itself was something they did largely independently, probably reflects that most of the students were relying on the organisations to provide access to data and participants and thus the VCO did have some involvement and regular contact.

All students seemed to be aware that the research was something they were carrying out on the VCOs' behalf. Interestingly, most students did seem to think of themselves as 'providing a service' in this sense, and as indicated earlier, this notion was a source of some satisfaction and pride in their work. We have already noted that the pressures and anxieties related to this sense of providing a service were often cited by students as challenges associated with the ASR projects. Finally, in relation to the nature of the relationship between students and VCOs in the context of these ASR projects, while students were clear that organisations were gaining something of value, this was most often understood in terms of the outputs of the research exclusively.

While students were aware that the reports they produced would be of value in allowing the organisation to develop their services in different ways (either through the securing of funding or acting on findings and/or recommendations), they were doubtful as to whether the organisations would have gained anything from having been part of the research process itself. For instance, when asked whether they believed their host VCOs had learnt anything about research from the collaboration, responses included 'I very much doubt it' (Student 7) and 'not really' (Student 3). When asked why they thought this was, Student 7 suggested;

Well, I ... they might have picked up a couple of things about research ethics procedures ... but I don't think they are really that interested in how the research gets done. I think they just rely on us to do it well. But they did keep asking me about how it was going and stuff so maybe that's not true [...]. I think probably they are interested in whether the research is going well, and they want to make sure what you are doing is OK, but I don't think they would be interested in knowing all the details of the methodology, 'cause that's what we're there for at the end of the day isn't it? I guess like, we're the experts, so they put some trust in us, and that means they don't feel like they need to be involved all that much in the actual research. They probably haven't got the time anyway. I mean, yeah, again, that's why we're there, to do something they can't [...]. Maybe they would like to learn more about the research, but I don't think they did really, no. They just want to get the findings and the report I think ... that's what's important to them.

In terms of how students have responded to the teaching and learning strategy in place on this course, many of the comments that students have offered about their experiences suggest that students do reflect a great deal on their practice and actions as researchers and students operating in a particular context. This is something that the course is designed to promote, as discussed under the heading teaching and learning strategy above. There is a danger that students simply undertake and complete the research requested by the organisation, and that this becomes their only focus. In encouraging them to engage in reflective practice as part of this process, we hope to encourage them to focus also on what *they* are learning and what *they* can take away from the experience, as well as the value of what they are doing for the organisation they are working with.

While some students reported finding the concept of reflective practice somewhat difficult at first, it seems that the process of keeping a reflective log and writing a final reflective report was something they could ultimately see value in. For instance, one student described the process of keeping a reflective diary as being like 'a self-debrief [that] really helped to take a step back from the research' and that 'it was really useful to stop and think about things in a bit more detail and think about why certain things had happened at

different points' (Student 1). Another student had the following to say about writing the reflective report:

I actually quite liked the reflective report, as it helped me discover things about myself that I didn't realise before. I realised that I held certain biases which I never knew, or perhaps never wanted to admit to. The reflective report basically helped me learn a lot about myself which I never thought it would. (Student 3)

The kind of social and peer-based learning that student-led discussion on the course is hoped to provide space for was also being valued by students, it seems. They suggested that the opportunities to hear about the problems other people were encountering and about the anxieties they had were particularly 'reassuring' and 'comforting'.

It seems clear then that the students *are* thinking about what they have learnt and gained in a very broad sense, which is precisely what the reflective dimensions of the course are designed to encourage. Moreover, though, as has been argued throughout, through placing students in a context where there is an actual need for good social research, the course hopes to provide students with a sense of its value as not simply an elitist, exclusive, self-interested academic enterprise, but also as something that can be of great value to others. Particularly pleasing in this regard are those comments from students cited earlier that reflect precisely this sense of having done something more broadly worthwhile and valuable. The comments from our students indicate that the ASR course is doing well in relation to the achievement of its aims. In being provided with an opportunity to undertake research in a real-life extra-academic context, students are developing a range of research and other competencies, as well as a sense of the value and place of research in the community. 'I definitely think that there's a great exchange there – they get free research, we get great experience' (Student 3).

3.2 What the VCOs say

As part of our study we interviewed staff from a range of organisations that had provided placements and projects for ASR students. Broadly speaking, we concerned ourselves firstly with exploring the value (actual and potential) of an ASR project from the perspective of the VCO. We were interested to hear what VCOs actually experience as a result of these projects and what they understand is to be gained from having engaged in the process. Secondly, we concerned ourselves with exploring the nature of the relationship between students and VCOs from the perspective of the VCO. In this sense, we were interested in how VCOs understand their role in the projects, how they understand the role of the ASR students, and the extent to which these relationships are understood to be collaborative partnerships in the way that is suggested by the ASR course. In this section we draw on the reported experiences and understandings of VCOs in an attempt to address the above concerns.

In talking to VCOs about the ASR experiences, it immediately became that they place a great deal of value on the final reports that students produce as part of their ASR projects. These reports contain knowledge, understanding and information – in the form of research findings – that is considered to be of value in two related senses. Firstly, the reports are considered valuable 'internally' in that they provide information that the organisation can use directly in the development of services. In this regard organisations talk about how findings in reports will be used directly to 'shape the programme in the future' (VCO 7) and

to 'inform our staff development agenda' (VCO 6). Secondly, the reports are considered valuable 'externally' in that they can be used to promote the organisation and the services it provides, and in particular can be used in attempting to attract and secure further support for the organisation's work, in the form of funding especially. For example, organisations regularly talked openly about plans to include copies of reports and extracts in funding applications. Moreover, one organisation talked about how the report a previous ASR student had produced was used to help them secure funding that will enable them to deliver services for a further five years. Most organisations seemed to emphasise the external value of the ASR reports over the direct internal value, but some were keen to stress that the work students produced would likely have multiple values, both internal and external. For example:

[the report] will be used to understand the experience of the service user, to inform service development and delivery, to inform commissioners and funders about what this particular client group has to say about their needs, and about how effective or not the support from us was. And that also would in turn inform our staff development agenda. (VCO 4)

Of course, hosting an ASR student represents just one particular way of getting valuable research done, but this route has particular attractions and advantages according to the VCOs we spoke to. There is the obvious financial advantage of having an ASR student conduct the research, rather than a private party. Many organisations talked about the kind of research that ASR students do for them being something they could not otherwise fund. For instance, with regard to a project one ASR student was currently completing, their host organisation stated:

It would have been – at the moment – a piece of work that we couldn't have undertaken, because we don't have the resources to do it [...]. It is very, very difficult – certainly within the third sector – to get money for research. (VCO 5)

In this sense, most organisations talked about research 'evidence' as something they desperately needed in order to survive, but which they severely struggled to secure, mainly due to the cost of having someone come and undertake such projects.

One organisation talked about the research one ASR student had undertaken as potentially saving the organisation, stating that 'without it, I don't know what we would have done, because we wouldn't have been able to fund something like this' (VCO 4). It is in this context of course that the ASR students in turn are subject to a sense of responsibility and pressure that they are not likely to encounter in other research and learning contexts, as discussed in the previous section. It's not just financial cost that prevents organisations from undertaking research of course – many simply do not have the capacity in terms of time and expertise. VCOs described for instance having 'identified things we'd like to do – but no one actually has the time, or the skills, to do it' (VCO 2). Students in this sense are seen by VCOs as possessing certain competencies, skills and even expertise.

As discussed in the previous section, these expectations on the part of VCOs appear to be a further source of anxiety among the ASR students. The access to these students that Interchange provides is seen as an incredibly valuable resource:

It just seemed amazing, that I could ask someone to do this, and they said yes – I was like ‘Yay!’ It will really benefit us [...]. I just think it is a brilliant resource. I think that, for a charity, who wasn’t got any money, it is fabulous [...]. I just thought it was amazing that there is this facility that can actually benefit people. (VCO 5)

Another frequently cited benefit of having an ASR student come in and conduct research on behalf of the organisation was the ‘objectivity’ that these students could offer. Having someone conduct an ‘objective’ and ‘unbiased’ analysis of services was considered to be of immense value among the organisations we spoke to, and again, they often spoke of the difficulties they faced in securing such analyses. For instance, one organisation had the following to say about the value of an ASR project to them:

Having somebody who doesn’t work in the organisation look at it from a different perspective is invaluable. And it is so rare that you get that, someone with the skills. You might get someone express an opinion, but not in a research assessment, an objective assessment – it is invaluable. You can’t get that in another way, unless you pay someone X thousand pounds to come in and do a little report on your organisation. So for us, that is really, really helpful. (VCO 2)

As suggested, organisations frequently cited this objectivity as a benefit of having a project conducted by an ASR student. The frequency with which this was cited as a ‘benefit’ or ‘value’ of an ASR project was unexpected and in turn prompted some further questioning on our part. In response to our questioning, one organisation acknowledged that while they had their own internal evaluation mechanisms, ‘there is always the temptation to make things seem better, or to focus on an outcome you are looking for’ (VCO 6). In this sense, organisations appear to appreciate the value of objective research, and it seems that this is what the organisations expect from the students. Interestingly, as we saw in the previous section, students in turn report feeling anxious about producing findings and reports they believe the organisations may not appreciate, or ‘like’. In turn, this highlights the importance of good-quality dialogue and communication between the organisation and the students as part of the ASR project process.

With regard to the relationship between VCOs and students, and how VCOs see their own role and that of students, all VCOs had positive experiences to report, and their understandings of roles and the nature of the relationship did seem to be consistent. For instance, organisations frequently characterised the relationships they had with students as ‘partnerships’ and talked of working closely with the students as part of the projects, even where students had, from the perspective of the organisation, ‘led’ on the research. In this regard, VCOs often talked about productive negotiations and discussions with the students about the ways in which the research would be carried out and why. Organisations were overwhelmingly complimentary of the students in this context. For example:

it has been very much a negotiation. I don’t know if that is the same for all people who have used Interchange, or whether that is just [the student’s] approach is just a very good approach. I have been at work for 20 years since I was at uni and I think that is a really good skill to have. I was quite surprised about how good [the student] was at that. I think it is something you gain through work quite often, but she already had it [...]. I don’t know if it is just [student] or if that is the approach all students take, but finding a shared outcome and then looking at the different ways to achieve this, and not being inflexible [is very important]. Because in a working environment,

things do come up and suddenly something changes, you can't always know that today things will be A, B and C. That came across in working with [student], her understanding of that and willingness to work around things. (VCO 2)

The experience that this organisation reports in terms of working with the ASR student was not uncommon at all. Organisations frequently report being impressed by the 'professional', 'flexible', and 'mature' attitudes/approaches of the ASR students they come into contact with. In describing these processes of negotiation and discussion about the research, some VCOs also reported having themselves gained some understandings of the research process and certain issues therein. The following is a good example of how the process of working with an ASR student presents opportunities for the exchange of research skills between the students and the VCOs. This organisation is responding to a question about the potential for conflicting interests, expectations and ideas in relation to the research process:

There were obviously some areas where we were 'Yes, that is exactly the same' but there some areas ... as an example, I said 'maybe you could find out about how other charities are doing it'. But [...] I didn't want to say to other charities '[We] are looking at how we do feedback' so is there a way of doing that anonymously, without saying it is a piece of research for us? [The student] said 'No, that wouldn't be appropriate' [...]. It was quite interesting to get that 'no it doesn't meet our ethical standards' and things like that. It was an interesting insight. Obviously, for me, I was like 'It's a really great idea' but [the student] was quite clear that that really wasn't a good idea to go down that avenue. There were differences in opinion, but I think [the student] was really good in guiding what would be a good way forward and what wouldn't. She was really pragmatic, saying: 'What can you manage?'; 'Who can I meet?'; 'What is the best way to do that so that we can both achieve what we need to?' I would say past the proposal stage, once that was agreed, I think [student] was the person leading on it and I was just there going 'Yep, that's possible' or 'That's not'. (VCO 2)

The above quote raises a number of noteworthy points. First, as suggested above, the quote is a good illustration of the opportunity for sharing of research skills and understanding that these projects present. The quote also illustrates how expectations of VCOs might present problems for the student in terms of the student's attempts to remain objective and adhere to certain research principles. In this regard, a capacity on the part of the student to be assertive and adopt a position of authority in relation to the conduct of the research is clearly important. It is therefore necessary to make sure students understand that this is something they will realistically have to demonstrate as part of their research, and to provide them with the confidence to do this as far as possible in the context of teaching and learning. Some students may be understandably reluctant to adopt such a position, but the above quote illustrates a willingness of VCOs to take on board and work with what the student – as 'expert' – suggests in such contexts. It is clearly important that VCOs are able and willing to adopt such a stance, and this is precisely the kind of issue that VCOs need to be clearly briefed on before entering into the ASR process with students.

While students need to be afforded some capacity to take a lead on the research, students in turn rely upon their VCOs to offer some direction in terms of what it is they want from the research, and what is possible in terms of access to participants and data, for instance. It is also incumbent upon the organisation in turn to ensure as far as possible that students are not engaging in any problematic practices whilst conducting research on their behalf. In this

sense, the relationship between the VCO and the student is complex and multifaceted. Most organisations appear to appreciate the complexity of this relationship, and the need to adopt different roles at different times. For instance, in response to a question about their role, one VCO suggested that 'It is one of those "wiggly" ones: you manage them when you need to, you support them when you need to' (VCO 3) and another agreed that 'It's difficult to put it in one category. I am there to support her in her work at [the organisation], which is more of a supervision role. But on the other hand, we are kind of like a customer, because she is providing this piece of research for us' (VCO 2).

The nature of the relationship between student and VCO, including expectations and roles, clearly need to be set out and discussed at an early point in the research process. On the one hand, the ASR course staff have some responsibility to ensure that certain issues are addressed as part of a briefing process with the organisation and with the students. In this regard several of the organisations highlighted the value of having meetings with both the student and their academic supervisor:

I think actually sitting down and discussing it with the tutor as well as the student was I think an important first step, that is integral to its success [...] to have a meeting with [the student] and their tutor to discuss and agree ... what could be done, how it could be done and what its value was to all stakeholders. You know, it didn't take a lot, but that was absolutely critical. (VCO 6)

As is the case above, most organisations pointed towards the importance of having a clear sense of what each party wanted to achieve and what their interests were, and talked about the need to establish a project that was of shared benefit and value as part of the process. In this sense, VCOs frequently demonstrated sensitivity to the needs and interests of the students, as well as a desire to have the student do something useful for them as an organisation in terms of addressing their research needs:

It is about mutuality [...]. It has been about sitting down and discussing with [student] what she wants, what she is interested in, what she is trying to achieve and trying to find some 'fit' with what we are doing. So that it works to both our advantage. Therefore it is not an onerous responsibility in providing a student placement, it becomes something that is of real mutual benefit, you know? (VCO 6)

As is indicated, the organisations we spoke to are sensitive to the needs and wants of the student, but they tend to see it less as an onerous task in terms of providing the student with work experience, rather as something they benefit from also. There were indications in this regard, that because the student was doing something of unique value to the organisation, that organisation was actually more inclined to engage with the student and their learning:

Because I knew I was getting a definite output or product or outcome, then obviously ... I wouldn't approach it as an onerous responsibility. It is the first time I think that I have really engaged with a student on placement, as the chief executive of the organisation. It is not something that I would normally do. But I think because there was some potential real value to us out of this, then obviously I was much more interested and much more inclined. (VCO 5)

Another VCO made further direct comparisons with placements they had provided for other students on other programmes:

A lot of our students only want to be here for 20 hours or they have to do a 5,000 or 10,000 word essay, which is just a literature review to all intents and purposes. They want to interview five parents, you know – we will help them, we always will, but there is no real value to us in there. Whereas what Interchange is offering is potentially of real value to us. (VCO 4)

The fact that these organisations are benefiting directly from the placement appears to encourage those organisations to engage more fully with these students and the projects. This in turn helps further ensure that these projects are of real mutual benefit, as the above organisation concluded. 'I just think it is a fantastic opportunity that they are offering out there for organisations and for the students to be part of' (VCO 4).

4. Conclusions

In this report we have outlined and discussed a particular course in applied social research. We believe this course is deserving of some attention in the field of the teaching and learning of social research methods. We have outlined and discussed the aims, desired learning outcomes and teaching and learning strategy associated with the course. We then moved on to discuss the reported experiences of both students and VCOs, drawing on data generated via interviews in order to explore the relative success and merits of the course. In conclusion we wish to offer some summative points about the course and potential lessons to be learned about the teaching and learning of research methods in the social sciences.

The reported experiences of ASR students suggest that the ASR course is extremely successful in encouraging and enabling students to develop strong research competencies. Students particularly appreciated the opportunity to apply and practice research in a context where there were real research needs and where the research they were conducting was of tangible value. Being able to see the value of what they were doing to others seemingly actively encourages students to develop their research competencies. While students reported having experienced certain anxieties, pressures and challenges associated with the particular context within which they were operating as researchers, the reflective practice that the course encouraged saw students recognising the lessons they had learnt from facing those challenges. This in turn highlights the importance of embedding reflective practice within such practice-based experiential learning contexts. In sum, we find that placing students in this extra-academic context – where there are real research needs and particular research challenges to be faced – provides them with unique and valuable research experience. These experiences, when supported by appropriate teaching and learning strategies, encourage students to develop competencies and understandings that other research methods training opportunities would not.

The course we have described and discussed here also reflects a commitment to developing exchanges and links between the university and community that are of real value, not just to the university (and its students in this case), but to the community as well. Our interviews with VCOs uncovered a great deal in terms of reassuring us that those organisations experience real benefits from having hosted and collaborated with ASR students. These

organisations have real research needs that they often lack the capacity to address. ASR students represent an incredibly valuable resource to these organisations in this sense. The reports that students produce contain knowledge, understandings and information that these organisations use to develop the services they provide, both directly through the provision of feedback on those services, and indirectly through the provision of evidence and data that can be used to promote those services and attract further support. In turn, the work that the ASR students do in collaboration with these students has the potential to benefit the communities that those organisations serve. This in turn encourages VCOs to engage enthusiastically with the ASR projects, which in turn benefits the students in their development of skills, competencies and understandings. What's more, there is some evidence that organisations are in turn developing further understandings of the research and the research process through their engagements with ASR students – something which represents an extra dimension of knowledge exchange which needs to be explored further in the context of developing such initiatives in teaching and learning.

Given the relative merits of this course, as outlined and highlighted here, we hope that those involved in the teaching and learning of social research methods might consider incorporating similar practices, or elements thereof, into their own teaching and learning practice.

This particular course presents challenges in terms of resourcing, and the teaching and learning process we have outlined here is the product of many years of development and experience. We appreciate in this sense that this course would not be directly replicable for many. We also recognise that the course we outline here will not be of relevance to all. What we hope, however, is that those involved in the teaching and learning of research methods broadly consider the course we outline here as reflecting the importance and value of practice-based and more applied modes of learning in research methods. If we are to take seriously the development of research competencies among undergraduate Social Science students as an issue – and we think we should for reasons stated in the introduction to this report – then it is absolutely essential that we share and explore alternatives to some of the more predominant (and in many respects limited) modes and of teaching and learning in this particular field. We hope our report on the ASR course is of some value to others in this regard.

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