

A Perspective Piece On My Undergraduate Research Opportunity Scheme Experience

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Amy Gibbons is a third year criminology student at the University of Lincoln and is going on to study the M.A. Criminology and Criminal Justice course here at the University of Lincoln, with an interest in green criminology and crimes of the powerful. She is also a part of the School of Social and Political Sciences Crimestoppers Project 2018/19 Group.

Abstract

This paper is a perspective piece of my experience in carrying out a UROS funded project, which is a part of the institutional embedding of 'Student-as-Producer' that provides opportunities for students to experience the research process. My project attempted to explore how and why young women may fear terrorism and extremism differently to men, and to also explore respondents' political attitudes towards extremism and terrorism in general. The experience of receiving the UROS bursary and becoming more research-engaged has positively impacted my learning, as this paper will outline. It gave me first-hand experience of conducting higher education research, whilst being supported by my supervisor over the summer (2018), as well as receiving support from the UROS team through workshops. This project allowed me to build upon my skills learnt at Level One, such as using SPSS, and also learning new skills. These new skills include using Qualtrics to create and distribute the quantitative survey, designing an academic poster on Photoshop for the annual UROS Showcase Exhibition, and also creating a blog post for the UROS website. Further personal skills that I developed were presentation and communication skills when presenting my research at the UROS Showcase Exhibition. All of these skills learnt will help me on my career path to work towards my hopeful goal of becoming an academic within social and political science.

Introduction

UROS is the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme, which hopes to encourage 'undergraduates to become actively involved in the research work of the University' (Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching, 2018: <https://lalt.lincoln.ac.uk/aboutlalt/undergraduate-opportunities-research-scheme/>).¹ It uses the student-as-producer principle, which is about allowing students to be engaged and involved with research, collaborating with both academics and other students to help enhance learning, their university experience, and the development of skills (Neary et al. 2014). By providing an opportunity for undergraduate students to engage in real research with academics, it allows the student to feel more

¹ I would like to acknowledge my supervisor, Dr. Joshua Skoczylis, for his support throughout this research project and for providing me with many opportunities to enhance my undergraduate degree.

accepted and valued within the institution, and encourages students to be producers of knowledge rather than merely consumers in today's neo-liberal crisis within higher education (Neary et al. 2014; Neary and Amsler, 2012). Student-as-producer is a radical response to the 'consumerist ideology of neo-liberalism' (Neary and Amsler, 2012: 121), so involving students in the production of new knowledge will make universities more democratic and bring about more 'social value', with everyone learning something and being a part of it together (Neary, 2016: 93).

UROS applications involve submitting the details of the project and the predicted timelines. If you are successful you will receive a competitive bursary of £1,000 to support you whilst you carry out the project over the summer (Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching, 2018:

<https://lalt.lincoln.ac.uk/aboutlalt/undergraduate-opportunities-research-scheme/> My successful application allowed me to conduct my project over the summer of 2018, exploring young women's fear of terrorism in comparison to men, as well as exploring people's attitudes towards extremism and terrorism in general. This reflective piece will explore my experience of conducting research in higher education as part of the student-as-producer ethos (Neary et al. 2014). I will explore what skills were learnt and how it has positively impacted my learning, as well as explaining what issues and difficulties arose when conducting research, and how they were overcome. I will also touch upon my other experiences within higher education research, all of which embed the student-as-producer ethos (Neary et al. 2014), that helped me with this project. These include a successful Santander (2018) Mobility Grant that enabled me and other students to travel abroad whilst learning about the radicalisation of young people, and building international networks. Also, from learning and building upon skills gained from these experiences, I will discuss how these have helped with my contribution to the School of Social and Political Sciences Crimestoppers Project 2018/19 Group.

Project Background

This project attempted to explore young women's fear of terrorism and attitudes towards extremism and terrorism. We looked at how and why young women may experience fear and terrorism differently in comparison to men, and also explored respondents' political attitudes towards extremism and terrorism in general (see

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Braithwaite, 2013; Shechory-Bitten, 2016; Nellis, 2009; Wilcox et al, 2009 for more information on this topic). I chose this contemporary topic as terrorism and the war-on-terror is an ever present apparent threat, particularly since the 9/11 attacks and again after the 7/7 bombings (Braithwaite, 2013). I also wanted to look at it through a gender lens, as literature on the gender differences in this area is lacking despite research on other crime types finding that women tend to be more fearful of crime in comparison to men (Nellis, 2009). The methodologies of this project involved collecting quantitative data through an online survey, which also included some qualitative responses, then analysing the data using SPSS, as well as carrying out an in-depth literature review around women's experiences of extremism and terrorism to help situate the findings. The survey attempted to explore how media and political rhetoric affects and shapes women's views, and how this differs from men's attitudes and experiences. As found in the literature, the mass media plays a significant role in educating the public as well as instilling fear (Jackson et al. 2011). Some of the main and predicted findings include the majority of participants being fairly concerned about terrorism, and those who are exposed to and who use the most media platforms expressed more concerns over terrorism, particularly those who rely on tabloid or more right-wing media sources. Other findings that were interesting included a majority of 89% believing the fears of terrorism do come from the media, as well as 45.9% of participants seeing far-right extremism as dangerous as jihadi extremism, with many commenting on the lack of seriousness from the police on the far-right, and the potential danger of them having a fairly strong political voice within British politics. This research surprisingly did not find women to be more fearful of terrorism despite what the literature has found; however, there are limitations to this small-scale project which may explain the lack of findings in this area, such as having a small cohort, of which 70.6% were women. For more details on the research project and findings see Gibbons (2018):

<https://lalt.lincoln.ac.uk/portfolio/uross-2018-project-exploring-young-womens-fear-of-terrorism-and-attitudes-towards-extremism-and-terrorism/>

My UROS Experience

My UROS experience has enabled me to gain new skills that will help me with my future studies within higher education and my career interests, all of which is a fundamental function of the student-as-producer ethos (Neary et al. 2014). Through

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having the opportunity to conduct my own research alongside an academic, I have learnt how to improve many of my skills. Time keeping and planning are vital for any deadline, especially when conducting projects like this, with having to reach milestones within the timeframe of the project over the duration of the summer. This also included attending regular meetings with my supervisor, as well as the workshops put on by the UROS team. These workshops included how to use Photoshop; blog writing; effective presentation skills, and a final meeting for any issues or help and support that was needed. All of these new and enhanced skills are a consequence of how student-as-producer is designed, as it has better prepared me for the real world, and encouraged me to progress onto postgraduate studies (Neary et al. 2014).

Specific skills that I gained from this experience, and which have positively impacted my learning include expanding on my SPSS skills learnt at Level One and improving my data analysis skills, which was a challenge but fundamental in order to produce my findings in an easy-to-read and understandable way. I also had the opportunity to look into how the same could have been achieved using Excel, which I now know for the future. I was also able to learn how to use Qualtrics in order to produce and distribute the quantitative survey, with support from my supervisor, which I can now use for my future studies and career if necessary. Other practical and vital skills I gained during this experience included making an academic poster using Photoshop, which was used for the annual UROS Showcase Exhibition, and also writing a blog post (see Gibbons, 2018): <https://lalt.lincoln.ac.uk/portfolio/uross-2018-project-exploring-young-womens-fear-of-terrorism-and-attitudes-towards-extremism-and-terrorism/> This can be related back to the student-as-producer principles of developing research skills, as well as gaining a deeper understanding of the discipline and research process (Neary et al. 2014). Furthermore, these skills are vital for my future assignments, as well as helping me with my contribution to the School of Social and Political Sciences Crimestoppers Project 2018/19 Group, in order to amend a survey using Qualtrics and write and produce blog posts, posters, leaflets, and the like. The intention was to provide students with easy-to-read and succinct information to help them to reduce their risk of victimisation.

Further oral skills I developed from this experience included confidence with public speaking and presenting, which was needed when presenting this research project at the UROS Showcase Exhibition. Again, this will be vital for my future

studies and career. Confidence and public speaking has always been a personal challenge for me, so this task, as well as undertaking my general university experience, has helped me immensely to overcome some of the anxieties surrounding this; it has enabled me to have more confidence in myself, and when presenting, I have confidence to convey the information effectively. From this, I will now be more confident when faced with assignments or taking on opportunities where I must face public speaking, and the more practice I am able to obtain will only boost my confidence more and reduce some of my anxiety that comes with it. Again, such personal developments from this can be related back to student-as-producer, with one of the fundamental aims targeted at developing a student's voice, and therefore amplifying it (Neary et al. 2014).

Moreover, it was a pleasure simply to dedicate my summer to learn more about terrorism and counter-terrorism policies in general, and the impacts they have on society, as this is something I have not had an opportunity to formally study. However, by spending so much time reading around this topic and studying other modules, it has helped me to narrow my higher education interests further, to green criminology and crimes of the powerful. Whilst terrorism and counter-terrorism policies are an interesting and well-researched topic, I have found green criminology and crimes of the powerful more interesting, but from this experience I have found I am still interested in the gendered aspect of these crimes, as this was the focus in my UROS project. Furthermore, with limited research on green criminology especially, it is exciting to hopefully pursue and add to this field of literature within higher education in the future. Relating this back to student-as-producer, this outcome is a result of the student-as-producer principle of enabling undergraduates to be able to develop a deeper understanding of the discipline, namely, Criminology (Neary et al. 2014).

Working with my supervisor on this project has allowed me to gain the particular skills of being more independent, taking on responsibilities and drawing my own conclusions from the data. This experience also provided me with more confidence in myself, to trust my own decisions, and it has also enabled me to see and understand what I am capable of within university and higher education research. Again, this is all related back to the student-as-producer principles, by allowing me to be more responsible; take ownership of my studies, and develop my student voice (Neary et al. 2014). My supervisor also provided me with many further

opportunities within higher education that would not have happened if I had not become more actively involved with this research-engaged learning (Neary et al. 2014). An A-level student shadowed me for a week during the start of the project, and I was able to help her understand how the research process works, as well as what life is like studying criminology at the University of Lincoln. She also had the opportunity to learn about and access materials in relation to terrorism, as well as joining me and my supervisor at Lincoln Magistrates Court to observe the processes that happen there. This is all evidence of the student-as-producer principle of allowing me to support and help with the learning of another student (Neary et al. 2014). Also, related to my UROS project, my supervisor gave two other students and myself the opportunity to travel abroad, as we were successful with our Santander Mobility Grant. This allowed us to travel across Germany, Austria, and Italy to expand our knowledge on terrorism, with a particular focus on the radicalisation of young people. It was also an opportunity to build on our international connections, whilst representing the School of Social and Political Sciences and the University of Lincoln as a whole, as well as giving me a life-changing opportunity of being able to travel across Europe and experience new cultures and languages, which I never would have been able to experience without higher education, and by being actively involved with the opportunity to become part of research-engaged learning and teaching (Neary et al. 2014).

Lastly, my experience of UROS and student-as-producer research-engaged learning within higher education (Neary et al. 2014), taught me that no matter how much you plan a research project, it does not necessarily always go to plan. First, beginning the project was delayed by nearly a month as we struggled to gain ethical approval. This was valuable experience however, with having to undergo and understand how the process works and how hard it can be, especially when studying potentially distressing topics, as we had to make sure suitable provisions were in place, and with the chance of an interview participant being involved in extremism or terrorism-related activities. Also, we had to work on improving and making amendments to work following constructive criticism, such as checking grammar and spelling mistakes. Second, data collection lasted for a month, as we underestimated how tricky it can be to gain enough responses in order to make our results more valid and trustworthy. At the beginning of planning we hoped to receive over 300 responses, which was optimistic, but we managed to receive a more

educated prediction of 109, which was similar to other students who were also taking part in the UROS scheme. Third, we originally planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with respondents from the survey whom we selected to take part in them, but despite selecting several to do so we did not get any further interest in taking part. However, in hindsight, due to the earlier delays to the project, it may have been hard to fit it within the timeframe, as arranging, conducting, transcribing, and analysing the semi-structured interviews may have been difficult, but this would be interesting to look at in future research. Despite these challenges we overcame them and kept the project running smoothly, and we reached all our milestones in time for the final UROS Showcase Exhibition.

Conclusion

The experience of winning a UROS bursary and being able to conduct a research project within higher education as part of the institutional embedding of student-as-producer has profoundly impacted my learning at the University of Lincoln (Neary and Hagyard, 2011). Not only have I gained valuable practical and oral skills in order to help me conduct and present research, but I have developed more as a person, by becoming more confident in myself and my voice in relation to my studies, having been given the opportunity to travel internationally and to meet new people (Neary et al. 2014). The UROS programme clearly fulfils student-as-producer principles, as I have achieved and exceeded what I thought my university experience was going to be, and created further possibilities for myself that I would not have discovered if I had not engaged in this programme (Neary and Hagyard, 2011; Neary, 2010). This experience has made me certain of pursuing postgraduate studies, as I will be continuing them at the University of Lincoln, starting the M.A. Criminology and Criminal Justice course in 2019. It has also encouraged me to follow my interests with a hopeful career as an academic, but with a focus on my main interests of green criminology and crimes of the powerful. I would strongly encourage any undergraduates who have an interest in research or who thoroughly enjoy their studies and are interested in what academics do, to engage more with research-based learning, such as applying for a UROS bursary. They should take part in working on a research project alongside an academic and possibly other students, and also to represent their School (Neary et al. 2014). It is intrinsically valuable for these students to be able to take up these opportunities provided, to be

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fully engaged; be a part of the 'academic project of the university' (Neary, 2012a; Neary, 2012b), and to have a positive impact on their journey within higher education (Neary et al. 2014).

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