

Project title

Developing an undergraduate Social Research fieldwork module

Details of project team

The original applicant was Carole Sutton, but due to Carole's departure to SERIO, Julia Frost temporarily took over Carole's role in the project.

Summary of the aims of the project

- 1) Establish the teaching, learning and assessment requirements for field work research based module. This would involve a scoping exercise of existing modules based within the UoP and current practice/courses offered at other universities. Interviews with appropriate staff to establish best practice.
- 2) To identify and attend any appropriate training courses that would benefit staff working on the field work module.
- 3) To run and evaluate a pilot field work trip with students on the current social research programme and students taking the Social Research Stage 2 modules as an elective. This trip would not form part of the student's current assessment but would link to the existing research work undertaken in these modules.
- 4) To develop a 20 credit Field Work module as part of the overall re-design of the Social Research programme. This module could be made available as an elective across the School.
- 5) To develop and incorporate the fieldwork into the PDP of a new programme.
- 6) To explore the possibility of linking the proposed MSc Work base learning module. For example, it may be possible to include a MSc student in a management role in the fieldwork.

Methods used

- 1) To identify existing field work based modules in the Natural Sciences and Business School to ascertain best practice and guidelines in the managing/planning of fieldtrips; establishing learning outcomes; assessment processes; incorporating into PDPs; student evaluation; and securing future funding. This will be achieved by interviewing relevant module/programme leaders and obtaining specialist advice of the Learning Development Team.
- 2) To identify and build synergies with regional and national Centres of Research Expertise and other appropriate agencies in the public and private sector.
- 3) To undertake and evaluate a pilot field work trip for existing social science students.
- 4) To identify appropriate student learning outcomes, field work activities and assessment formats.
- 5) To disseminate the evaluation of the pilot initiative to School, Faculty and a University wide audience via relevant learning and teaching committees.
- 6) To validate a field work research module.
- 7) To identify future funding sources for the module.

Number of students involved

In Year 1, six students enrolled to participate in the fieldtrip, but one later withdrew late due to illness. In Year 2, unfortunately only four students attended the fieldtrip. Three other students who withdrew their expression of interest cited the 'credit crunch' as the reason that they were unable to attend. In both years, students combined Social Research with Sociology, Criminal Justice and International Relations. On both occasions, two members of staff attended – in year one both were from the Social Research programme, whereas in year two, one member of staff was from the Social Research pathway, and the other from Sociology.

Results

Highlights

- Historical, Social and Political Tour of Belfast – Although the students had spent considerable time in the classroom considering the key political and socio-economic aspects of life in Belfast (which were reflected in various assessments in both years one and two), all of the students commented on the power of experiencing life on the streets of Belfast 'at first hand'.
- Field work: students executed a street survey developed in "The Research Process" module – The students found the experience of conducting survey research both exhilarating and 'exhausting'. Those who are considering a career in research stated that the fieldwork was a useful 'taster' of what conducting research is 'really' like.
- Collected data was entered and analysed back at UoP in a separate session – Although the students have worked extensively with existing data, seeing the research process through to the construction of the 'research product' was perceived as challenging but also 'rewarding'.
- Training workshop with the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey Unit including use of CAPI/CASI (Computer Assisted Interviewing) – While the students had spent considerable time developing their own questionnaire, the comments of staff at both Queens and Ulster Universities were viewed as 'positive' and 'encouraging'. Students experienced at first hand the pros and cons of using technological devices to record data and assist with analysis.

Points for reflection

- Students enjoyed the experience – The general perception was that conducting fieldwork 'brought to life' the research experience.
- Opportunity to build closer relationships with other students – This gave the students insight into the dynamics of working with collaborative partners, and viewing their peers differing learning and work styles.
- Opportunity to build more informal relationships with academic staff – Students had an opportunity to ask staff about their research careers, and their academic roles aside from teaching, which they would not have gleaned under 'classroom conditions'. For example, having attended the NILT training, students expressed surprise at how hard staff worked, and how expensive conferences were to attend.
- The unfamiliar environment and student learning – Although students had 'piloted' their questionnaire on their peers, and run through a presentation for NILT staff with their familiar tutors, the students reflected that conducting fieldwork with strangers in unfamiliar locations, and presenting their work to

other academics was challenging and replete with potential pitfalls (e.g. how to deal with ‘the unexpected’).

Challenging

- Reflection on the social setting - Some students stated that they were unprepared for the powerful experience of viewing the sites of sectarian tension, viewing sites of memorial, and talking to ‘real people’ about their lives. However, the fieldwork demonstrated that religion was not the only lens through which people viewed their quality of life.
- Networking/contacts – With a change in staff, considerable time was spent re-establishing relations with academic and non-academic partners (e.g. arranging permissions to for the students to conduct the research in a range of locations, and gaining the authority of the Northern Ireland Police Force).
- Risk Assessment – In Year 2 a comprehensive risk assessment for the fieldtrip was undertaken – following the University of Plymouth guidelines.
- Deeper learning and understanding – The students were surprised how keen the people of Belfast were to talk to them, once both had overcome their inhibitions.
- Future plans - Work is now ongoing, to establish a field trip element in the Social Research programme, and potential sources of student funding are being considered. Furthermore, work is underway to embed the assessment in the fieldtrip (e.g. mark students on their conduct, ethical behavior, reflection on their role in the research ‘product’ etc).

Continuation/ dissemination plans

- Following Year 1, feedback was provided to EDALT, and a book chapter prepared for publication.
- Following Year 2, work is underway to inform possible amendments to the current fieldtrip (e.g. securing funds and embedding assessment), and the project has also acted as a pilot for further proposed fieldtrips across the Social Research and Sociology programmes.

Year 2 Pre-trip survey comments

How do you think the fieldtrip will benefit you:

- Help me with organisation skills. Confidence builder
- It will give us valuable fieldwork experience to include in our CV
- By giving me a real experience of research
- Learning about how NILT [Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey] was put together.

What aspects of the fieldtrip are you most looking forward to:

- Gathering views of local people
- Feedback on our proposal from ARK [who produce NILT]
- Seeing what it is like in Ireland
- The historical/political tour

Year 2 Post-trip survey comments

In the post-trip survey, all students were ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ with the fieldtrip arrangements, their learning experiences from the political tour and ARK training.