

Quality Enhancement Review Case Study

On-Campus Research Internships - the Cardiff Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (CUROP)

Introduction

The Cardiff Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (CUROP) was established in 2008 with the objective of enabling undergraduate students to work on research projects under the supervision of academic staff for four to eight weeks during the summer vacation. The original rationale for the initiative was to:

- help bridge a gap between research, and learning and teaching
- provide Cardiff University students with valuable work experience
- give an opportunity for students to contribute to live research and gain experience of postgraduate research
- enable staff developing their research to work closely with students.

The On-Campus Research Internships scheme has developed significantly over time. The initial pilot, supported predominantly by HEFCW learning and teaching funding, had 15 projects which awarded students a £1,300 stipend. But, in 2015, the University Executive Board (UEB) committed to resourcing a significant growth of CUROP with an increase from £170K to £400K per annum between 2015-16 and 2019-20. A learning and teaching sibling scheme, Cardiff University Education Innovation Projects (CUSEIP), was introduced in 2017 to offer similar placements focused on live learning and teaching projects. In 2020, the scheme was rebranded as 'On-campus Internships' to allow inclusion of other campus-based placements - for example, with the Careers Service which organises placements across the University's professional services. Across CUROP and CUSEIP, 179 placement opportunities were awarded in 2019-20. Since 2008, over 1,300 students have undertaken either a research or learning and teaching placement and over £2 million university funding has been invested in the schemes.

Staff applications to the scheme

The scheme is managed by the Cardiff Learning and Teaching Academy (the Academy), formerly the Centre for Education Support and Innovation, which oversees an annual, competitive call for applications. Academic staff are asked to put forward potential projects, focusing on the student experience, engagement and potential outcomes, such as transferable skills, rather than the research or learning and teaching project itself. The emphasis is on what students will get from the placement:

- What will the student be doing?
- How will they be integrated into the work culture?
- What transferable skills will the student get from the placement?
- What training opportunities do they have?
- How will students benefit?

The applications are assessed and scored against key criteria - the proposal's context, plus levels of support and resource; the proposed student activities; and the potential student development - by a panel of academics with experience of the scheme. The Academy aims to include student representatives on the approval panels.

Advertising projects

Successful projects were originally advertised within the university schools, but they are now advertised centrally through Target Connect - the University's careers and employability platform - to promote awareness and opportunities of the scheme. This shift has led to an increase in applications.

Student applications for internships

The application process is designed to support students by developing their employability skills. They are required to submit a formal application and a CV and are also encouraged to discuss their application with the Careers team. Applications are assessed by lead supervisors and interviews undertaken to identify suitable candidates.

The placement

Successful applicants are now paid on national pay scales and through the normal channel of the Students' Union recruitment agency, 'Jobshop', which also undertakes students' 'right to work' checks prior to placements commencing. Students work to a standard university role profile and job description. However, within the four to eight weeks' duration, the placement can be designed flexibly to meet students' personal circumstances. They are capped at 200 hours with a maximum of 35 hours per week.

Once recruited, students are provided with a cohort handbook containing all the generic information they will require during their placements. The Academy team is available to offer advice and support to students as well as direct them to appropriate university departments for further support as required. The Academy also holds a range of events for all placement students. A welcome event brings the entire cohort together and invites former placement students to share their experiences. The opportunity for all the students to meet each other is particularly valuable in a context where, over the summer period, students may need to call on peers for focus groups and other research activities. During the placement period, Student Futures (formerly Careers and Employability) run a skills development workshop.

The internships culminate in an exhibition of student-created posters. Students receive guidance on research poster design and communication skills in what, for the majority, will be a new experience. The exhibition is open to everyone and begins with supervisors and students having a lunch and a preview of the projects. Various other university staff are invited including members of UEB, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education, school senior management teams and professional service leads, as well as students. Both students and staff involved in the project have commented on the value of the poster exhibition, giving as it does, the chance for students to develop presentation skills and learn from their peers.



Student feedback

The University undertakes an annual evaluation of the scheme and reports that student feedback on the project has been overwhelmingly positive at over 90%, year after year. Moreover, the feedback has enabled the University to make regular enhancements to the scheme, such as the introduction of set hours for the programme and the alignment of the pay rate against the University's HE Research Associate scale.

Intern comments from 2019 include:

- 'I would suggest this to everyone. I'm really struggling to put into words how valuable it has been!'
- 'This has been the best experience, has helped support my future study.'
- 'It is very good that placement students gain a wage. It shows that their work is appreciated, especially as most experiences such as this are unpaid.'
- 'The placement was thoroughly enjoyable and has confirmed that I want to pursue a career in research. It taught me a lot about what research involves day-to-day and a number of different research skills, which will help me with final year and dissertation.'
- 'I feel the CUROP placement allowed me to develop my academic and interpersonal skills, providing me with valuable experience in my own subject and also transferable skills.'

Feedback from students affirms the University's view that the scheme provides a meaningful work experience which develops research and employability skills, helping students to progress.

Impact

The University has been keen to assess the impact of the scheme, and points to annual evaluations as evidence for the initiative's value in developing research skills and employability.

- DLHE data from 2015-16 showed that 59% of graduated placement students were in full-time or part-time work, 4% in part-time study and 29% in full-time study.
- The 2019 student evaluation of the scheme revealed that 97% of the cohort believed they had developed valuable employability skills, 90% that they had developed their research skills, and 67% had an increased desire to enter postgraduate study having taken part in CUROP or CUSEIP.
- Staff are similarly enthusiastic; in the 2020 staff evaluation of the scheme, 87% felt that students make an important contribution to research/learning and teaching projects, 94% that the CUROP/CUSEIP experience enhances the abilities of the students for subsequent years of study, and 100% thought that the CUROP/CUSEIP experience develops students' research skills.
- Several members of the University's academic staff are graduates of the scheme and point to the role of the placement in developing their strengths, with one graduate and Cardiff lecturer saying: 'I'm a big fan of CUROP and genuinely believe that I wouldn't have got my PhD without it.' Placements have led to students presenting conference papers, publishing research papers and developing specific research skills.

Quality Enhancement Review (QER)

For its QER, the University put forward CUROP and CUSEIP as evidence for of how students are supported in their learning development and how the institution works in partnership with its students. The QER reviewers were able to discuss the scheme with students directly, who were very complimentary. This helped provide the evidence for the QER team to commend the initiative for the opportunities for students to engage with research activities, enhance their learning experience, and improve their career prospects.

Next steps

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scheme was postponed for 2020 and 2021 with approved projects rolled over to the 2021-22 academic year. The Academy has started planning for 2022 to identify how projects can be adapted for delivery in a blended or completely online context, and to work with projects - for example, those which are laboratory-based - that require face-to-face participation.

For the longer term, the aim is to secure the financial future of the scheme and to think further about its development - for example, in aligning with University research priorities, and engaging more students from widening participation backgrounds, where engagement has been less evident. Regardless, the aim is to continue to provide students with supportive, excellent work experience opportunities.

More information

Find out more about the [Cardiff University on-campus internship opportunities](#) via the [Cardiff Learning and Teaching Academy](#).

Abbreviations:

CUROP - the Cardiff Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme

CUSEIP - Cardiff University Education Innovation Projects

DLHE - Destination of Leavers of Higher Education

QER - Quality Enhancement Review

UEB - University Executive Board

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