Developing a Matariki Undergraduate Research Network – the Otago Connection

Professor Rachel Spronken-Smith, Dr Clinton Golding and Dr Angela McLean

(Higher Education Development Centre)

Snapshot of Project

This project involved the establishment of the Matariki Undergraduate Research Network (MURN). The rationale driving the MURN was the unique opportunity to connect students engaging in undergraduate research programmes across the Matariki universities. Led by the University of Western Australia, a MURN pilot was developed including Otago and Durham Universities. In each institution six-to-nine undergraduates were recruited from across disciplines into a six month studentship. They were trained in higher education research methods using a global classroom with web conferencing and online resources. The students then undertook supervised research on an agreed theme – in this case, 'internationalisation'. Students presented their progress to MURN members and wrote up their research in the style of an academic paper, with many submitting to a newly-instigated eMatariki Undergraduate Research Journal (eMURJ). Students highly valued undertaking supervised research and the development of research skills and enjoyed interactions with international colleagues, although they thought the collaborative aspects could have been better developed.

Introduction

This project was part of a Matariki initiative to create an Undergraduate Research Network amongst participating institutions. The initiative aimed to connect students across the globe, allowing sharing of ideas, experiences and findings in undergraduate research. The project has its origins at the University of Western Australia (UWA), which runs an undergraduate internship programme specifically in the domain of teaching and learning (Partridge and Sandover, 2010). In the semester-long programme the interns are allocated a supervisor and attend an extensive training period at the commencement and throughout the programme. The students each select a research area from an 'umbrella' teaching and learning topic of strategic importance to the University. The students collect and analyse data, and write and report the findings of their research in a variety of forums.

The rationale driving the MURN project was the unique opportunity to connect students engaging in undergraduate research programmes across the Matariki universities. Initially a pilot with four universities was proposed: UWA, Otago, Queens and Durham. A topic of interest to the four institutions – internationalisation – was chosen as the research focus for 2012.

The Otago Connection

As part of this Matariki initiative, CALT funding enabled the development of an Otago undergraduate research programme, similar to that at UWA, where Otago undergraduates undertook a research project on internationalisation. We gained funding for six undergraduates to engage in this research under the supervision of academics in the Higher Education Development Centre (HEDC).

The MURN Otago Connection Project aims were:

1. To collaborate with three other Matariki universities – Western Australia, Queens and Durham – to create a Matariki Undergraduate Research Network (MURN)

2. As part of this collaboration, to offer a MURN studentship for up to six undergraduates at Otago to pursue supervised research on internationalisation at the University of Otago.
3. As part of this studentship, to advance understanding and knowledge of internationalisation at Otago.
4. As part of the MURN, to advance knowledge and understanding of internationalisation across four Matariki universities, and indeed more widely.

Methods

The project involved four phases – establishing the relationship with Matariki universities, providing a studentship to Otago undergraduates to explore internationalisation, dissemination of results and evaluation of the impact of this research. Each phase is considered in turn.

1. Establishing the relationship with Matariki universities

The first step, which addressed the first project aim, involved collaboration with Matariki institutions to ensure the infrastructure was in place for the development of the MURN. This step involved liaising with pilot institutions to develop a shared understanding of the aims of this project and how projects would operate within each institution. As well as numerous Skype meetings, a meeting of project partners at Otago in April 2012 greatly assisted the planning process. Initially UWA, Otago, Durham and Queens were on board for the initiative but Queens had to pull out (however they were subsequently involved in the 2013 iteration of MURN).

2. Providing a studentship to Otago undergraduates to explore internationalisation

This phase of the project addressed the second and third research aims. Funding was gained to allow the generation of six contestable MURN studentships with a stipend of $3000 each. Students were recruited by a competitive application process and selection was made to ensure students in their second or third year of undergraduate study were selected from each Division. Successful students then embarked on a programme that included:

- Provision of a research supervisor from HEDC
- Participation in preparatory workshops covering the basics of research in higher education. These were run across the institutions using web conferencing and online resources, and some workshops were also offered locally.
- Participation in discussions (synchronous and asynchronous) with other members of the MURN throughout the research process
- The design and implementation of a research project on the topic of internationalisation.

3. Dissemination of results across the MURN

This phase addressed the fourth research aim. Through regular conversations across the MURN, results were shared, debated and discussed. All MURN participants presented their research findings using Adobe Connect (although the connection with UWA was problematic). Moreover, many students presented their work locally at research seminars or conferences. Two of the Otago students (and many others from UWA) had their papers accepted for an electronic *Matariki Undergraduate Research Journal* (eMURJ) that was developed within HEDC (see http://hedc.otago.ac.nz/ojs/index.php/eMURJ/issue/view/40).

4. Evaluation of project

This phase involved ongoing gathering of data throughout the project to allow a careful and systematic evaluation of the both the studentship programme offered for Otago undergraduates and on the wider MURN initiative. Evaluative data included: recording of group meetings – both at Otago, and any international meetings; reflective diary entries from all participants; collection of survey data assessing motivation for research and the development of research capacity for undergraduates; and staff perceptions of the initiative.

Project Outcomes

The project was successful in that it established a MURN with 21 students participating across three Matariki universities in 2012. At Otago six students completed projects and two produced high quality papers that are now available in eMURJ (see Table 1). We had hoped some students could present their findings at research seminars or equivalent but the timing was not conducive to that occurring.

Table 1: Projects completed by Otago students as part of the MURN in 2012.

- Computer aided collaborative teaching and learning across borders (Priyanka Patel)
- Internationalisation of higher education and environmental sustainability (Holly Adcock)
- An investigation of relative ethnocentrism among undergraduate business majors (Gregor Whyte) (available in eMURJ)
- Analysing New Zealand undergraduates' exchange destination choices (Hamish Russell) (available in eMURJ)
- International students and their benefits (Kamil Patel)
- Is the undergraduate Accounting curriculum as internationalised as the profession? (Hayley Brass)

Evaluation of the project is ongoing but preliminary findings are very positive. Feedback from the students showed they highly valued the research skills they obtained and appreciated working in a supervisory relationship. They also appreciated interactions within the Otago connection of the MURN, but found that the international collaboration was not developed as well. Because there were no cross-institutional projects or collaborative teams, there was really no need for liaising with international peers. They did enjoy the web-conferencing meetings across the Matariki Universities but were frustrated by issues with the technology.

Feedback from staff has also been positive. They enjoyed working with partner universities. As one said it has been "challenging but definitely worthwhile". Staff have appreciated sharing the teaching load (since UWA developed resources) and staff particularly enjoyed supervising undergraduates and assisting the development of students' research skills. Staff found the local communities of learners very powerful and rewarding and many projects have helped progress institutional knowledge and, for some, contributed to the field of higher education as well. Staff have also relayed certain challenges such as the creation of a global community of learners, which was hampered by different time zones and semesters, differences in implementing the MURN programme in 2012 across the universities (Durham adopted a different style of implementation), communication – issues with technology for web conferencing, and the fact there were no collaborative projects across the universities. Continued funding has also been problematic in some

institutions – both for securing studentships and support to send students to undergraduate conferences.

Other outcomes:

In addition to the student papers described above, there have been several conference presentations – at the *International Society for Teaching and Learning Conference* (2013, Hamilton, Canada), two *Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Conferences* (2012 Hobart, 2013 Auckland) and the *European Conference of Educational Research* (2013, Istanbul). Papers are also being prepared for submission to international higher education journals.

References

Partridge, L. and Sandover, S. (2010). Beyond 'listening' to the student voice: The undergraduate researcher's contribution to the enhancement of teaching and learning. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 7(2), article 4. Available at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol7/iss2/4.