Sustaining a Matariki Undergraduate Research Network – the Otago Connection

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Snapshot of Project

This project involved the continuation 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 (UWA), a MURN pilot was developed in 2012 including Otago and Durham Universities. In 2013 the network continued, but this time involved the universities of Otago, Western Australia and Queen's (Canada). In each institution four 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), and three attending the *Spotlight on Teaching and Learning Colloquium* and the second *Australasian Conference on Undergraduate Research* in Sydney. Students highly valued undertaking supervised research and the development of research skills and enjoyed interactions with international colleagues, although they thought the international 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 originated from the University of Western Australia (UWA), who ran an undergraduate internship programme specifically in the domain of teaching and learning (Partridge and Sandover, 2010). In 2012, a Matariki Undergraduate Research Network (MURN) was established, led by UWA and included Otago and Durham universities. The CALT funding in 2012 enabled the development of the Otago connection, with six undergraduates being selected to participate. These students engaged in research projects on internationalisation under the supervision of academics in the Higher Education Development Centre (HEDC). Six undergraduates participated in the Otago connection, with two publishing their reports in the eMURJ (*electronic Matariki Undergraduate Research Journal*) – a journal which was developed by HEDC to support MURN.

The 2013 MURN Otago Connection Project aims were:

1. To collaborate with other Matariki universities – likely Western Australia, Queen's, Durham and possibly others – to sustain and expand the *Matariki Undergraduate Research Network* (MURN)
2. As part of this collaboration to offer a MURN studentship for up to four undergraduates at Otago to pursue supervised research on a topic of mutual interest to the participating universities.
3. As part of this studentship, to advance understanding and knowledge of teaching and learning at Otago.
4. As part of the MURN to advance knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning across four (or more) Matariki universities, and indeed more widely.

Methods

The project involved four phases: sustaining and possibly expanding 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. Sustaining and possibly expanding the MURN

The first step, which addressed the first project aim, involved collaboration with Matariki institutions to ensure the continuation of support for MURN. This step involved liaising with Matariki partners to determine who would be involved in the 2013 iteration. Otago and UWA continued to participate, and although we managed to get Queen's University involved, unfortunately Durham University did not participate, since their project leader was moving institution and a replacement was not found in time. Thus MURN in 2013 included undergraduates from:

- The University of Western Australia
- The University of Otago
- Queen's University, Canada

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 four MURN studentships with a stipend of $3000 each. Unlike the competitive application process run in 2012, in 2013, because the timing of the initiative was changed by UWA from second semester to first semester, we had insufficient time to run a similar selection process. Instead Deans and Heads of Department were invited to nominate students. Four undergraduates were selected from across the University – one in Law (Tiho Mijatiov), one in Science/Health Science (Stephanie Baddock), one in Science (Matt Keelty) and one in Commerce (Madhvi Laxman). 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 conversations across the MURN, results were shared, debated and discussed. In August 2013 three of the four Otago MURN students presented their findings at the *Spotlight on Teaching and Learning Colloquium*, and then carried on to the second *Australasian Conference on Undergraduate Research (ACUR) in Sydney*, where they presented their findings (see Table 1), and met most of the UWA MURN students. Figure 1 shows our MURN students at the Australasian conference. Moreover, two of the projects are being published – one in eMURJ (http://hedc.otago.ac.nz/ojs/index.php/eMURJ/issue/view/40) and another in a *Legal Education Review* journal (http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/LegEdRev/).

Table 1: Projects completed by Otago students as part of the MURN in 2013.

- **Tiho Mijatov (Law): Why and how to internationalise Tort Law curriculum content**. Presented at *Spotlight on Teaching* and the *Australasian Conference on Undergraduate Research*, Sydney, September 2013); in press in *Legal Education Review* – a peer reviewed Australasian journal.
- **Stephanie Baddock (Science/Health Science) and Madhvi Laxman (Information Science): Why international students choose to study at the University of Otago**. Presented at *Spotlight on Teaching* and the *Australasian Conference on Undergraduate Research*, Sydney, September 2013); in press in *eMURJ*.
- **Matthew Keelty (Science) Investment in internationalisation resources at the tertiary level.** Presented at the *Australasian Conference on Undergraduate Research*, Sydney, September 2013.

Figure 1. Three Otago MURN students – Matt Keelty, Stephanie Baddock and Tiho Mijatov – at the Australasian Conference on Undergraduate Research, Sydney, September 2013.

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. Analyses of the data are ongoing.

Project Outcomes

The project was successful in that it sustained the MURN with 22 students participating across three Matariki universities in 2013. We expanded the network in one sense, since Queen's joined, but lost Durham in the process. It is hoped Durham will re-join in the next iteration of MURN. At Otago four students completed projects and two projects resulted in high quality papers that will be publicly available in peer-reviewed journals. Moreover, we had presentation of projects at the *Spotlight on Teaching and Learning Colloquium*, as well as at the *Australasian Conference on Undergraduate Research* in Sydney.

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. Our students particularly enjoyed the opportunity to participate in the Australasian conference and meeting with their UWA counterparts.

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, and 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.