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# Students as researchers: the effects of employing law students on an empirical research project

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## ABSTRACT

Given the increasingly competitive higher education (HE) marketplace, it is becoming progressively more important for university law schools to distinguish their offer. In England and Wales, it is commonplace for non-law undergraduate degree programmes to incorporate compulsory empirical research training within discrete modules or as part of a broader research skills package. Yet this element is typically missing from traditional LLB programmes. Addressing the gap in the literature around HE students' perceptions of conducting empirical research, in this paper we explore insights into the benefits of or barriers to undertaking such research and the extent to which students believe that it should form part of their undergraduate experience. This paper is based on findings from a small-scale, pilot case study at a post-1992 higher education institution (HEI) involving students who participated in an extracurricular empirical research evaluation project. The findings reveal perceived benefits for three key stakeholder groups: students as researchers, the host HEI and the local community where the research took place. Drawing on these themes, we conclude by offering recommendations for law schools to learn from their counterparts in other disciplines and explore potential opportunities for incorporating empirically based research training within law undergraduate degree programmes.

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**KEYWORDS** Empirical research; extracurricular; higher education; law students as researchers; undergraduate

## Introduction

The global commercialisation of higher education (HE) as a result of the neoliberalism agenda has been well documented.<sup>1</sup> Its "marketisation and commoditisation"<sup>2</sup> has resulted in "individualised incentives and performance targets ... and more stringent conceptions of

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Mark Olssen and Michael Peters, "Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy: From the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism" (2005) 20 *Journal of Education Policy* 313; Theocharis Kromydas, "Rethinking Higher Education and Its Relationship with Social Inequalities: Past Knowledge, Present State and Future Potential" (2017) 3(1) *Palgrave Communications*. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/96883988.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Alex Nicholson, "The Value of a Law Degree" (2020) 54 *The Law Teacher* 194, 195.

accountability and monitoring”.<sup>3</sup> Transitions to “a mass education system” that champions applied learning has led to an influx of vocational courses.<sup>4</sup> Against this backdrop, higher education institutions (HEIs) find themselves in a “crowded global marketplace”,<sup>5</sup> characterised by increasing competition<sup>6</sup> and “steepening ... hierarchies”.<sup>7</sup> Factors including: capped student numbers, diversification in HE providers, and technological advancements have led to a “fundamental metamorphosis” which has seen HEIs prioritise institutional brand management<sup>8</sup> and adopt “aggressive marketing strategies”.<sup>9</sup>

The sector’s focus on metrics such as the Knowledge Excellence Framework and the Research Excellence Framework (REF)<sup>10</sup> has collectively led to narrow evaluations of HEIs.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the breadth of factors assessed under the more recently introduced Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)<sup>12</sup> and the National Student Survey<sup>13</sup> has resulted in concerns about the evaluation of teaching.<sup>14</sup> Despite relying on separate metrics systems for assessing research and teaching, the HE sector does distinguish itself from other teaching and learning environments through drawing on the interconnections between these two components.<sup>15</sup> Whilst not explicitly evaluated under either REF or TEF, undergraduate research has become an essential feature of the HE environment<sup>16</sup> and can be important for HEI brand-building within an increasingly competitive market.<sup>17</sup> Such research opportunities can also confer myriad advantages for students.<sup>18</sup> These include the development of critical thinking and communication skills;<sup>19</sup> self-confidence;<sup>20</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Mark Olssen, “Neoliberal Competition in Higher Education Today: Research, Accountability and Impact” (2016) 37 *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 129, 129.

<sup>4</sup>Margaret Thornton, “The Law School, the Market and the New Knowledge Economy” (2009) 10 *German Law Journal* 641, 641.

<sup>5</sup>Francesca Pucciarelli and Andreas Kaplan, “Competition and Strategy in Higher Education: Managing Complexity and Uncertainty” (2016) 59 *Business Horizons* 311, 311.

<sup>6</sup>Christine Musselin, “New Forms of Competition in Higher Education” (2018) 16 *Socio-Economic Review* 657.

<sup>7</sup>Simon Marginson, “Competition and Markets in Higher Education: A ‘Glonacal’ Analysis” (2004) 2 *Policy Futures in Education* 175, 175.

<sup>8</sup>Justin Beneke, “Marketing the Institution to Prospective Students – A Review of Brand (Reputation) Management in Higher Education” (2011) 6(1) *International Journal of Business and Management* 29, 37.

<sup>9</sup>Peter Naudé and Jonathan Ivy, “The Marketing Strategies of Universities in the United Kingdom” (1999) 13 *International Journal of Educational Management* 126, 126.

<sup>10</sup>REF 2021 Research Excellence Framework, “What Is the REF?” <[www.ref.ac.uk/about/what-is-the-ref/](http://www.ref.ac.uk/about/what-is-the-ref/)> accessed 9 July 2020.

<sup>11</sup>Mark Olssen, “Neoliberal Competition in Higher Education Today: Research, Accountability and Impact” (2016) 37 *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 129, 134.

<sup>12</sup>Office for Students, “About the TEF” <[www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/about-the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/about-the-tef/)> accessed 9 July 2020.

<sup>13</sup>National Student Survey, “NSS 2021” <[www.thestudentsurvey.com/](http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/)> accessed 22 December 2020.

<sup>14</sup>Andrew Gunn, “Metrics and Methodologies for Measuring Teaching Quality in Higher Education: Developing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)” (2018) 70 *Educational Review* 129.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Gayle Brewer, Anne M Dewhurst and Dawn Doran, “Undergraduate Research Project: Practice and Perceptions” (2012) 11 *Psychology Learning and Teaching* 208.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, Brenda Sternquist, Patricia Huddleston and Ann Fairhurst, “Framing the Undergraduate Research Experience: Discovery Involvement in Retailing Undergraduate Education” (2018) 40 *Journal of Marketing Education* 76; Heather Thiry and others, “The Benefits of Multi-Year Research Experiences: Differences in Novice and Experienced Students’ Reported Gains from Undergraduate Research” (2012) 11 *CBE – Life Sciences Education* 260.

<sup>17</sup>Yvonne J Moogan, “Can a Higher Education Institution’s Marketing Strategy Improve the Student-Institution Match?” (2011) 25 *International Journal of Education Management* 570.

<sup>18</sup>Christopher Madan and Braden Teitge, “The Benefits of Undergraduate Research: The Student’s Perspective” (2013) 15 *The Mentor: Innovative Scholarship on Academic Advising* (No page numbers).

<sup>19</sup>John K Petrella and Alan P Jung, “Undergraduate Research: Importance, Benefits, and Challenges” (2008) 1 *International Journal of Exercise Science* 91.

<sup>20</sup>David Lopatto, “Exploring the Benefits of Undergraduate Research Experiences: The SURE Survey” in Roman Taraban and Richard L Blanton (eds), *Creating Effective Undergraduate Research Programs in Science* (Teachers College Press 2008).

educational aspirations and progression;<sup>21</sup> and career development.<sup>22</sup> These attributes are particularly pertinent given concerns about graduate recruitment market structures;<sup>23</sup> the necessity for, and impacts of, part-time work;<sup>24</sup> and students' mental health and wellbeing.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of the different types of research that may be undertaken, the literature reveals that there is a "developing crisis in the capacity of UK universities to undertake empirical legal research".<sup>26</sup> This may be because conducting empirical research can cause issues in terms of "time ... cost ... access ... skills ... convenience ... [and working within unfamiliar] settings".<sup>27</sup> Yet such research can generate multiple benefits including: "knowledge ... publications/fame ... business contacts ... [and access to] resources not otherwise available".<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it was as far back as 1984 that Patricia Leighton published, in this journal, a case for the use of empirical research methods to "enhance the quality and perspective of law teaching".<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Leighton admits to her own interest in research as being the driver for this enthusiasm in the teaching of research methods, but notes that a hesitancy in a more widespread delivery of this form of research might lie in the limited exposure and understanding of the teaching staff – an issue that may be exacerbated with the increase in a Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE)-driven LLB programme across parts of the sector. In more recent work, Guth and Ashford<sup>30</sup> highlight how Nuffield Inquiry reveals that the "lack of skills and familiarity with empirical research" means that "when law graduates who do consider an academic career choose postgraduate courses and topics for doctoral research, they naturally gravitate towards doctrinal topics and issues in law" (29).<sup>31</sup> Yet for both Guth and Ashford and Cownie,<sup>32</sup> there is also a decline in the influence of doctrinal research. Despite calls for law schools to embrace empiricism,<sup>33</sup> the literature suggests how the market pressures exerted by law societies on law schools to focus on teaching practical skills put the potential for teaching academic legal research at risk of being sidelined,<sup>34</sup> leaving many law students with little

<sup>21</sup>Ernest T Pascarella and Patrick T Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*, vol 2 (Jossey-Bass 2005).

<sup>22</sup>Susan H Russell, Mary P Hancock and James McCullough, "Benefits of Undergraduate Research Experiences" (2007) 316 *Science* 548.

<sup>23</sup>Michael Tomlinson, "'The Degree Is Not Enough': Students' Perceptions of the Role of Higher Education Credentials for Graduate Work and Employability" (2008) 29 *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 49.

<sup>24</sup>Claire Carney, Sharon McNeish and John McColl, "The Impact of Part Time Employment on Students' Health and Academic Performance: A Scottish Perspective" (2005) 29 *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 307.

<sup>25</sup>June SL Brown, "Student Mental Health: Some Answers and More Questions" (2018) 27 *Journal of Mental Health* 193.

<sup>26</sup>Dame Hazel Genn, Martin Partington and Sally Wheeler, *Law in the Real World: Improving Our Understanding of How Law Works. Final Report and Recommendations* (The Nuffield Foundation 2006) 39.

<sup>27</sup>Roger J Gagnon, "Empirical Research: The Burdens and the Benefits" (1982) 12(4) *Interfaces* 98, 98.

<sup>28</sup>Roger J Gagnon, "Empirical Research: The Burdens and the Benefits" (1982) 12(4) *Interfaces* 98, 99.

<sup>29</sup>Patricia E Leighton, "The Case for Empirical Research" (1984) 18 *The Law Teacher* 13, 13.

<sup>30</sup>Jessica Guth and Chris Ashford, "The Legal Education and Training Review: Regulating Socio-legal and Liberal Legal Education?" (2014) 48 *The Law Teacher* 5.

<sup>31</sup>Dame Hazel Genn, Martin Partington and Sally Wheeler, *Law in the Real World: Improving Our Understanding of How Law Works. Final Report and Recommendations* (The Nuffield Foundation 2006).

<sup>32</sup>Fiona Cownie, *Legal Academics: Cultures and Identities* (Hart Publishing 2004) 198.

<sup>33</sup>Felicity Bell, "Empirical Research in Law" (2016) 25 *Griffith Law Review* 262.

<sup>34</sup>Vincent Kazmierski, "How Much 'Law' in Legal Studies? Approaches to Teaching Legal Research and Doctrinal Analysis in a Legal Studies Program" (2014) 29 *Canadian Journal of Law and Society/Revue Canadienne Droit et Société* 297.

experience of empirical research.<sup>35</sup> Guth and Ashford continue later in their article noting the reasons for the lack of empirical work forming part of the law students' arsenal as including, among others, the limitation of the qualifying law degree (as was) and the lack of appropriate methods teaching – a point we address and incorporate in this paper's findings. Indeed, in relation to our study, the HEI had developed a particular emphasis on applied learning and research underpinned by theory and practice and this was a particular driver in assessing how to engage law students on an empirically based research project and what might be the effects of doing so.

Therefore, our literature review reveals that whilst there has been an appetite for the development of empirically aware and trained law students, there is a gap in knowledge around the actual running of such an initiative and, fundamentally, in relation to HE students' experiences and perceptions of conducting empirical research that could inform the potential for law schools to develop such opportunities for mutual benefit. In response, this study draws on the model adopted by Turner and others for examining students' awareness, experiences and perceptions of research.<sup>36</sup> This study specifically aims to explore HE students' perceptions of conducting empirical research through examining the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent are students aware of empirical research and their experiences of it?
- (2) What do students perceive as the benefits, if any, of an empirical research approach?
- (3) What do students perceive as the barriers, if any to an empirical research approach? and
- (4) To what extent do students believe that they should undertake empirical research as part of their undergraduate experience?

## Methodology

Prior to beginning the project, the students in this study were subject to a training programme which identified the nature of the project, with whom we were working, the questions we wanted answering, what the aims of the project entailed, and how the research methodology used in this study was distinct from others of which they might have been aware. For instance, the students at this stage of their studies were engaged with doctrinal research, and had some knowledge of some forms of critical legal studies, but were unaware of many forms of jurisprudence, comparative studies and also socio-legal studies as legal methodologies. This was understandable as these were not explicitly taught to undergraduate law students, but it allowed us to explain and explore, albeit briefly, the alternative forms of research available and how our current use of qualitative empirical investigation, used as it was to discover meanings and opinions of the users of greenspaces, was just one form of empirical research method, but how this was justified given the requirement for depth of insight into the population under study. It further emboldened our survey of the student volunteers as the students were consequently

<sup>35</sup>Mandy Burton, "Doing Empirical Research: Exploring the Decision-Making of Magistrates and Juries" in Dawn Watkins and Mandy Burton (eds), *Research Methods in Law* (Routledge 2013).

<sup>36</sup>Nancy Turner, Brad Wuetherick and Mick Healey, "International Perspectives on Student Awareness, Experiences and Perceptions of Research: Implications for Academic Developers in Implementing Research-Based Teaching and Learning" (2008) 13 *International Journal for Academic Development* 199.

aware of why we used the same research method when seeking an understanding of their experiences following involvement with the research project.

The students participated in a research project jointly undertaken by the authors and the local council investigating the use and opinions of users of greenspaces across parks and recreational venues across the city. The qualitative research involved the students helping to cooperatively devise and then administer, in person, a questionnaire survey to users of the venues each day, over a two-week period.

The qualitative research presented in this paper, drawing as it does on a small-scale pilot case study<sup>37</sup> to develop deep insights and understanding,<sup>38</sup> relates to the students' experiences having completed this empirical research project. We present in this paper the students' lived experiences of an empirical research approach; their perceptions as to benefits or barriers; and the extent to which HEIs should include opportunities for conducting empirical research as part of their undergraduate provision. Following receipt of ethics approval from the host HEI's Ethics Committee, the research was conducted at a post-1992 HEI<sup>39</sup> within the United Kingdom. Participants were drawn from a pool of 40 students who had volunteered to become paid student researchers in a collaboration between the host HEI and the local authority in a research project which involved an empirical evaluation of public parks. We invited participants from this pool to complete a semi-structured online survey using Qualtrix. This facilitated the generation of rich data. In relying on such processes of self-selection, we recognise the potential limitation that only those students who had something to say would volunteer<sup>40</sup> and took this into consideration when conducting the data analysis. The survey generated a 20% response rate. As noted by Morton and others,<sup>41</sup> response rates may be defined in a number of ways, and result in conflicted meanings,<sup>42</sup> but we followed the standard of the total number of participants divided by the total number of those who were eligible to take part. A 20% response rate may appear low and we acknowledge the effect that this has for the reliability of our results. However, we take this opportunity to explain that we are not seeking generalisability of our results (if for no other reason than this was not a random sample of participants) nor do we claim that we can extrapolate our results to a wider field than the cohort who participated in our study. Rather, we focus on the quality of the responses and the detailed analysis and contributions from the answers provided by the participants. Morton and others explain the presence of falling participation rates in research due to a general lack of "volunteerism", the lack of time available for participants and the complexity of life which has a negative impact due to the invasive nature of research. However, as Visser and others<sup>43</sup> have demonstrated, low response rates – such as those studies with a 20% response rate – remain capable of producing accurate results, even

<sup>37</sup>Robert Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Sage Publications Limited 2018).

<sup>38</sup>Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Sage Publications Limited 2009).

<sup>39</sup>"Post-1992" refers to HEIs based within the United Kingdom that became universities as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

<sup>40</sup>Gaganpreet Sharma, "Pros and Cons of Different Sampling Techniques" (2017) 3(7) *International Journal of Applied Research* 749.

<sup>41</sup>Susan MB Morton and others, "In the 21st Century, What Is an Acceptable Response Rate?" (2012) 36 *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 106.

<sup>42</sup>Sandro Galea and Melissa Tracy, "Participation Rates in Epidemiologic Studies" (2007) 17 *Annals of Epidemiology* 643.

<sup>43</sup>Penny S Visser and others, "Mail Surveys for Election Forecasting? An Evaluation of the Colombia Dispatch Poll" (1996) 60 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 181.

more so than studies with response rates as high as 60% and 70%. Further, in Holbrook and others<sup>44</sup> findings of studies with a response rate between 5% and 54%, the studies with the much lower response rates were only marginally less accurate than those with the higher rates. Thus, despite our relatively low response rate, we have confidence that the results are sufficiently meaningful for us to draw, at least preliminary, important conclusions from the pilot study.

The participants in this study were students who had little exposure to empirical research, were studying a range of courses including Law, Law and Criminology, and Criminal Justice Practice programmes, had each participated in the same training and the same data collection methods and were willing participants in our research study. They were at different levels of their studies: 38% of participants were studying at level 5, 50% at level 6, and 12% at level 7. Whilst face-to-face administration could have improved the return rate,<sup>45</sup> the researchers opted to conduct the survey online given the challenging logistics of bringing together students from a range of courses, across campuses, and with different timetables.

Utilising processes of primary data analysis,<sup>46</sup> the researchers adopted the six-stage approach advocated by Nowell and others<sup>47</sup> in thematically analysing the data to examine and compare the participants' perspectives of empirical research. As researchers and members of staff who wished to encourage our students to take an interest in research, we were also aware of the potential for respondent bias in our surveys. These were students who had voluntarily joined a project to conduct research and therefore may be viewed as having a proclivity to this form of engagement, one which might not be replicated in the rest of their peers. Therefore, whilst we did only survey this group as part of this project as presented in this paper, we did use various tactics to minimise the following and most obvious forms of bias. In respect of acquiescence bias, where the respondent might feel inclined to answer a question in a particularly positive or agreeable way, we were mindful not to use leading questions; rather we adopted a neutral tone which avoided the suggestion to the students of what the "correct" answer should be. For instance, we did not ask students if they agreed or disagreed with statements we prepared. We attempted to adopt different forms of questioning and a great use of open-ended questions to avoid habituation bias, which can detract from the respondent's assertiveness and lead them to answer questions using the same response each time (for instance on a Likert scale).

Our main concern, as we are sure can be imagined in research of this nature, was about confirmation bias where we asked questions of research interest to students who had voluntarily engaged with a research-based project. Therefore we adopted the following tactics to mitigate the worst consequences. In respect of the respondents, we did not ask them directly if they valued research, but rather we asked them what they hoped to have gained from their involvement in the project. We asked them about their experiences of the project (in both the short and long term) and what they had

<sup>44</sup>Allyson L Holbrook, Jon A Kroshnick and Alison Pfent, "The Causes and Consequences of Response Rates in Surveys by the News Media and Government Contractor Survey Research Firms" in James M Lepkowski and others (eds), *Advances in Telephone Survey Methodology* (Wiley 2007).

<sup>45</sup>Duncan D Nulty, "The Adequacy of Response Rates to Online and Paper Surveys: What Can Be Done?" (2008) 33 *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 301.

<sup>46</sup>Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (4th edn, Oxford University Press 2012).

<sup>47</sup>Lorelli S Nowell and others, "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria" (2017) 16 *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1609406917733847>



learned from their time working on qualitative data collection. We asked the students whether their experiences had affected their decision to volunteer or be involved with research projects in the future, and we asked for their opinions on the value of empirical research projects and their opinions on their role in their education. The fact that several of the respondents noted that they thought the project had value, but should remain as extracurricular, gave us confidence that the students did not “feed us” with the answers they might think we wanted.

## Findings

### *To what extent are students aware of an empirical research approach?*

The participants’ experience of research varied between no experience (50%) to having previously supported academic staff on projects (25%). In between these extremes, a few participants had some experience of preparing (non-empirically based) dissertations (12%) or involvement in extracurricular events showcasing the results of research undertaken by others (13%). What was evident from the majority of the participants, however, was that the process of conducting or being involved in the creation of primary research was a new experience.

Whilst only 38% of the participants had previously been involved directly in any form of empirical research, all of the participants provided positive reflections on their experience, describing it as being “insightful” (Participant A), “mind-opening and fun” (Participant H), and “enjoyable” (Participant F). They also commented on the design and facilitation of the project, commenting that it had been “well organised” (Participant E) and how they had felt “well-supported” (Participant F). These latter points demonstrate the students’ positive experience of engaging in this research initiative. Our findings demonstrated that the project delivered benefits for three key stakeholder groups: the student researchers, the host HEI, and the local community. Each of these is considered in turn.

### *Personal benefits for the students as researchers*

Reflecting Parker’s findings about the potential for students’ engagement in undergraduate research to produce positive impacts,<sup>48</sup> the participants revealed their perceptions of how this opportunity had benefited their personal skills, attributes, knowledge, employability and career development. Further, in line with the literature that demonstrates a positive relationship between student engagement and wellbeing,<sup>49</sup> the participants noted how conducting empirical research with members of the public had positive effects on their mental and physical health. Related to this, Participant A explained how involvement had enabled them to “gain confidence [and] knowledge about the area of research and how research takes place”. This was reflected too in commentary where the project had given the student researchers knowledge of “how empirical research was conducted” (Participant D). What was evident throughout the responses was the participants’ previously limited exposure to empirical research and perceptions of the tangible benefits

<sup>48</sup>Jonathan Parker, “Undergraduate Research, Learning Gain and Equity: The Impact of Final Year Research Projects” (2018) 3(1) Higher Education Pedagogies 145.

<sup>49</sup>Chris Boulton and others, “Student Engagement and Wellbeing over Time at a Higher Education Institution” (2019) 14(11) PLOS ONE 1. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0225770>

that this form of learning would provide. For instance, in an interesting dimension to career progression, and evidencing Brown and Hesketh's "player strategy",<sup>50</sup> Participant C explained how the experience of being part of the project would "add to my CV for PhD applications [in the future]. [This had been] commented on by an application panel from a Russell Group university in comparison to other applicants that had applied during a recent interview."

Further, beyond the academic advantages and intellectual stimulation that may be derived from involvement in empirical data collection and analysis, the participants also noted several practical positive attributes. Despite some feeling somewhat overwhelmed and experiencing an initial sensation of being "daunted" by the tasks involved, these feelings diminished during the project once the students had the opportunity to experience the data collection process (Participant F). For instance, and reflecting findings from the literature,<sup>51</sup> when dealing with members of the public, students referred to the development of transferable skills including face-to-face communications, commenting how they had learned to approach and speak to different people, including those from a range of age, class and demographic groups. One participant talked about how they had developed a practical understanding of presenting the project to members of the public, and the significance of "grabbing [the member of the public's] attention with an opening line" (Participant C). In a similar vein, another participant identified the importance of being concise in asking questions so as to maintain the listener's interest. These practical skills complemented the students' learning from other "applied" modules such as those in the host HEI's law clinic setting, with one commenting how the project "will help me with my confidence and research for other tasks" (Participant D). It is generally accepted that students benefit from working in a law clinic setting as they interact with clients on real-life cases, offer support to people in need, learn active listening skills, present information to a range of audiences and have to establish trust between themselves and members of the public. Therefore, the project was important for our students as they were required, as part of the LLB and LLM courses, to work in the various law clinics operated at the HEI. They could identify how the experience in this research project would help them to develop and/or further the skills on which they would be assessed as part of the compulsory law clinic module, and having an understanding of the theory and practice surrounding empirical research offered them a competitive advantage compared with other students (both at the HEI and outside). The interactions with members of the public, engaging people on everyday issues and cooperating with them to influence decision-makers on matters having an impact on the local community, had profoundly positive implications for the participants' enthusiasm for research with impact.

The participants commonly cited a perceived increase in their confidence as a reason for their involvement in the research project. They noted how such an advantage provided both short- and long-term benefits for them. In respect of the long-term gains, the answers were varied but very positive and encouraging. General skills

<sup>50</sup>P Brown and A Hesketh, *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy* (Oxford University Press 2004).

<sup>51</sup>See, for example, John K Petrella and Alan Jung, "Undergraduate Research: Importance, Benefits, and Challenges" (2008) 1(3) *International Journal of Exercise Science* 91; Helen Walkington, *Students as Researchers: Supporting Undergraduate Research in the Disciplines in Higher Education* (The Higher Education Academy 2015) <[www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Students%20as%20researchers\\_1.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Students%20as%20researchers_1.pdf)> accessed 22 December 2020.

development was a consistent theme which included “time management skills, research abilities, dedication and commitment to see projects through, even at difficult times” (Participant C). The participants were exposed to a new form of learning, putting their freshly acquired knowledge into practice, and developing their understanding of research techniques to further improve their abilities to conduct their own research in existing research-informed subjects.

As may be expected, the participants also identified improvement of knowledge as a key driver; they talked about their enthusiasm for learning about both the subject area and the research process. On a practical level, one participant revealed how their involvement in the project had increased their awareness of the technology available from the host HEI to support their studies. Another identified how the project had developed their appreciation of local amenities. A further participant also commented how their experience had taught them to ensure that they were better equipped for future projects.

As previously acknowledged, one of the most popular motives for the students taking part was to enhance their career prospects, because it involved them “doing something different” (Participant G) and would be a “good example of paid work experience” (Participant F). Reflecting findings from earlier studies,<sup>52</sup> they explained how they perceived that the project “would look great on their CV” (Participant A) through “evidencing their skills and a willingness to get involved” (Participant F). One participant revealed how they had already been able to refer to the project at an assessment day interview whilst another referred to the “Award Scheme” operated at the host HEI, noting how it specifically highlighted involvement in student research as a “brilliant example of developing skills”. For another participant, it also reflected how the positive feedback they received from members of the public “proved how far they had come in knowledge and recruiting participants” (Participant C).

Finally, the participants were asked to comment on how their experience of the project had affected their willingness to undertake future research. The overall consensus was positive, the participants remarking “it would really incline me to work in other projects” (Participant A), “this experience has encouraged me to become involved in other research projects” (Participant C) and “it would definitely encourage me to take part in other research projects as I gained so much knowledge” (Participant E).

### ***Benefits for the HEI***

The primary focus of the research project was to align our interests in research with a local authority which, as co-investigator, was interested to know how members of the public used their local greenspaces and, subsequently, where improvements could be made to this provision. The research findings would provide an empirically driven evidence base to underpin decisions around the allocation of public resources and future funding bids to generate income. In speaking with the local authority, we agreed to use this as an opportunity to help students become involved in empirical research and, perhaps more significantly, research which would have a direct impact on local amenities and people’s lives. We were aware that most of our students did not have an empirical research background; there were no training courses or modules, particularly for the students studying on the LLB programme, which instructed the students as to

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<sup>52</sup>See, for example, Elaine Seymour and others, “Establishing the Benefits of Research Experiences for Undergraduates in the Sciences: First Findings from a Three-Year Study” (2003) 88 *Science Education* 493.

research methods generally, beyond the classic “doctrinal” methodology favoured in law as a discipline. Therefore, this project provided a unique opportunity for completing impact-driven research, exposing law students to a new form of research, and seeking their views on the process. We were also interested to identify what the student researchers thought of the implications of this type of research for the host HEI and whether this should form part of a law degree programme. We would then consider their responses in light of the viability for the introduction of an empirical research methods course into the existing LLB programme.

Echoing the literature,<sup>53</sup> the findings suggest that students’ involvement in initiatives such as this pilot study develops their understanding of the value of research. On being asked whether they thought HEIs should provide opportunities for empirical research, all the participants agreed that this was important. When questioned further, they discussed how it would facilitate the development of future researchers (“teaching the next generation how to research” (Participant A)), and that allowing the cohort to engage in initial analysis of the data would prove advantageous because students “can’t gain from studying alone [and] need to see some form of application first-hand” (Participant C). Notedly, one of the students saw the potential of this work as being instrumental to the host HEI’s offer as “other universities don’t provide [such] roles/opportunities” (Participant C). Another reinforced the idea of the personal benefits for students being a positive advertisement for the host HEI: “I think there should be ample opportunities for students to take part in empirical research as it can help both students and [university]” (Participant D). Two participants were even more emphatic about the positive need to instil research training into the students’ undergraduate education: “I think there should be a precedent set for every course [to] involve research. It forces you to truly understand the subject outside of just being talented at meeting criteria” (Participant H).

Whilst the participants were all of the opinion that the empirical research with which they had been involved aided them in numerous ways, some were less convinced that empirical research and training should form part of an assessed module or the assessed law degree programme. One participant noted the practical limitations of providing such an experience through a credit-bearing module, suggesting instead that it would be “more realistic” to offer it as an extracurricular activity. A more nuanced approach was offered by Participant F who explained:

[This should be offered] as an optional module. I feel that engagement in a research project would be a positive experience and of great use to undergraduates, however, further or deeper involvement [in work of this kind] would be required to validate this, which might cause problems in terms of how many students might be able to get involved. As an extra-curricular activity, I wholeheartedly recommend that students get involved in research projects and feel that it would be the most realistic way for universities to offer the experience to students. As a whole, I feel universities should definitely offer research opportunities to students, as . . . students (such as myself) can gain experience, develop skills, and refer to their involvement in the future.

This point was corroborated by the views of Participant B who commented “I think universities should definitely engage with research projects – as extra-curricular – not as part of the degree.”

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<sup>53</sup>See, for example, William McConnell, Hendrien L Kaal and John P Marton, “Do Social Science Students Value Empirical Research? Answers from a Canadian and Dutch Investigation” (2013) 7(1) Article 10 International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning 1.

Consequently, whilst the project was universally popular with the participants and each took positive aspects away from their experience, there was a marked difference between those who saw it as a necessary part of the undergraduate students' development, and those who considered that there was simply no space in the current curriculum to introduce such training and, perhaps more realistically, to conduct a practical research project. This lack of training and exposure to empirical research is manifested in the (lack of) take-up of optional modules such as a dissertation and/or the instruction to students selecting the module not to conduct empirical research. Comparatively, at the host HEI the students studying on the BA (Hons) Criminology programme do have research training as part of their compulsory education and this is used in the (very popular and double-weighted) dissertation module.

Our reflection on these findings led us to consider the viability of introducing compulsory research methods training within the undergraduate law curriculum. The literature suggests that undergraduate students who engage in research as a core component of their courses may derive the same benefits as those students who voluntarily undertake research.<sup>54</sup> Yet a mandatory element could also help to ensure that all students who embark on doctoral studies, regardless of their undergraduate specialism in social sciences, are starting from a similar point in terms of their knowledge and understanding. The process of developing the learning resources for such a research component could involve drawing on introductory materials from existing postgraduate research programmes which could, in turn, encourage beneficial collaboration between the undergraduate and postgraduate degree teaching teams. An alternative would be to retain existing opportunities for undergraduate students to develop their knowledge about research methods, including staff/student research projects (such as the one featured in this paper) and/or optional, informal training. Particularly given the number of other pressures faced by students (referred to earlier in this paper), there may be a need to introduce additional incentives to encourage engagement: for example, through creating formal paid student researcher roles and/or recognition through the HEI's professional development programme. Connected to this, there could be potential for piloting a new student ambassador role, specifically to champion the development of student-led research initiatives and activities.

### ***Benefits for the local community***

So far, the results of our investigation into the benefits and experiences of students as researchers have demonstrated positive effects for the students themselves and the host HEI where they are based. We also wished to examine what benefits might be available for the community with students as a cohort of available researchers. This was, based on the nature of our project, taken from the perspective of the student researchers in an attempt to understand what they considered were the implications and impact of their work for the communities either where they were based or where the research was conducted.

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<sup>54</sup> Joanna Gilmore and others, "The Relationship between Undergraduate Research Participation and Subsequent Research Performance of Early Career STEM Graduate Students" (2015) 86 *The Journal of Higher Education* 834.

The important role that HEIs can play in engaging with their communities is well documented.<sup>55</sup> Related to this, the participants spoke positively about their experience of being involved in a project which had a direct impact on members of the community who were using greenspaces. Given that the data collection was carried out in December 2019, with inclement weather, and in some cases “it was difficult to recruit participants” (Participant C) other participants found that “there were more responses than I believed there would be and nearly every person I spoke to had, and gave, an opinion” (Participant D). The participants also discovered the value of communicating with people they met in the parks (Participant G) and “meeting strangers and learning new stories” (Participant H). It was also found that the students enjoyed representing the host HEI in an official capacity and developed their confidence in engaging with people from the local community who may not have had direct contact with university researchers before. “My approach was commented on by several members of the public due to being both approachable and polite, which they emphasised was a good representation for the university” (Participant C).

Specifically, in respect of the results intended from the research and its effect on local community greenspaces, the students were equally pleased with the work and how they were contributing to the betterment of the living areas of the participants in the project. As Participant H discovered, it gave “[me] more insight into how to help [the local] community rather than just being a student there”. The students also learned how important greenspaces and parks were to the local communities and how much they relied upon these spaces for their mental and physical wellbeing. Participant D also commented how they had learned to appreciate local amenities more and their importance to members of the community. Further, Participant C observed the power of this form of empirical research and of researching *with* members of the community rather than researching *about* them: “[I understood] how much individuals and communities believe the research will have an impact and how grateful they are for being given the opportunity.” This dimension to the research was powerful and had a marked effect on the participant. Here, Participant C appreciated the potential for disenfranchisement of members of local communities with regard to spaces which were their homes and how they had, in broader conversations with him, felt part of the decision-making process and how they could play an active part in shaping the future direction of a significant local amenity. Participant F continued this theme, appreciating the need to engage members of these communities who may otherwise walk past the researcher, distrustful of their motives for stopping and questioning the person: “I now have [a] practical understanding of how to present a project to a member of the public, as often individuals are quick to dismiss you and walk on without grabbing their attention ...”.

## Conclusions

We began our research project with two principal aims: first, to help a local authority in its aim to generate empirical data to support its agenda for developing parks and greenspaces in the locale of the host HEI; and second, to provide an opportunity for us to engage law

<sup>55</sup>See, for example, James R Cook and Maury Nation, “Community Engagement: Universities’ Roles in Building Communities and Strengthening Democracy” (2016) 47 Community Development 718; Philip Wilson, Any Woolger and Michael Dodd, “Students: Experience, Engagement and Communities” (Report to HEFCE by York Consulting, 2017) <<https://re.ukri.org/documents/hefce-documents/students-eec-pdf/>> accessed 22 December 2020.

students, who typically do not have opportunities to participate in empirical research projects, in a project which is impact-driven. The local authority would therefore gain the evidence it was otherwise unlikely to obtain, and law students would have a chance to experience a different form of research from the desk-based endeavours on which most of their previous work had been based.

What we have found from this small-scale pilot project is that the participants were overwhelmingly positive about the experience of empirical research. They engaged fully with the research methods training they received, applied these positively and with increasing confidence through the running of the data collection phase and during its initial analysis. They also understood the responsibilities of conducting research on behalf of the host HEI and the local authority, taking seriously their role as researchers and their interactions with members of the public, and demonstrating maturity beyond their (very limited) experience. Whilst the study illuminated numerous benefits for all three stakeholder groups, the findings particularly revealed students' positive perceptions of the value of empirical research training and opportunities to get involved in empirical and impactful research in an official capacity as participant investigators. This, they considered through wider conversations with friends and fellow students, was not widespread among national law schools.

Corroborating the ultimate conclusions of the participants, we agree that exposing law students to empirical research methods training and projects has profoundly positive implications. It opens opportunities for future research-based work and study, it helps differentiate the student researchers from their peers and offers an almost unique selling point to their HEI. Yet to suggest these findings would allow us to conclude that this training should form part of the compulsory education of undergraduate law students would be too great a leap. Rather, we present our findings in the hope that they stimulate discussion between administrative and course/programme leaders about how similar training and roles may be made available to their law students; consideration by researchers about engaging members of the undergraduate law cohort in their research projects; and wider reflections about developing the "students as researchers" approach.<sup>56</sup> The literature demonstrates that undergraduate researchers rise to the challenge when given the choice to take part in empirical research; we have found that undergraduate law researchers simply need the opportunity.

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<sup>56</sup>Helen Walkington, *Students as Researchers: Supporting Undergraduate Research in the Disciplines in Higher Education* (The Higher Education Academy 2015) 29 <[www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Students%20as%20researchers\\_1.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Students%20as%20researchers_1.pdf)> accessed 22 December 2020.