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Independent Research at A level: Students' and Teachers' Experiences

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Abstract

Background

In the UK there is often intense competition for university places. Many courses are over-subscribed, forcing even academically successful applicants to find new ways to distinguish themselves from competitors. However, some universities claim new undergraduates arrive ill-equipped for higher level study, having been 'spoon-fed' material at school/college.

To counter criticisms and support students, some teachers of 16-19 year-olds provide opportunities for independent study and research. Arguably, this enables sixth-formers to deepen and broaden their understanding of topics, linking them to others within and beyond subject domains whilst developing skills including time-management, problem-solving, critical reviewing of sources, and report-structuring. At present, the extent and nature of independent research among 16-19 year-olds is unclear. For example, although some A level courses purport to prepare students for university, resources and teaching practice may vary considerably across subjects and schools/colleges.

Research Questions

As part of a wider empirical study of A level teaching and learning, three research questions were posed:

- i Do teachers think A levels enable the development of research and investigative skills?
- ii What resources and formal guidance do students use?
- iii Do subject-specific differences arise?

Research Methods

The research focused on three contrasting A level subjects: Economics, French and Mathematics. Questionnaires were sent to teachers and students in a sample of 400 schools/colleges which represented the wider A level population in terms of social deprivation, academic achievement and school/college type. Additionally, nine students were interviewed about their experiences.

Analytical Framework

20% of schools/colleges responded, returning 663 student questionnaires and 86 teacher questionnaires, thereby providing sufficient data for analysis. Teachers' responses relating to the extent of research opportunities and the development of research skills were analysed quantitatively, as were students' responses about the resources used. Interview transcripts were analysed qualitatively for common themes, some of which were valuable in explaining quantitative findings. Cross-subject comparisons were made.



Research Findings

For all three A level subjects, there were teachers who felt their courses enabled students to develop research and investigative skills. However, the view was strongest among French teachers. Students of all three subjects relied heavily on the internet for information, although textbooks, teachers/tutors and families were also well-used resources, with usage varying across subjects. The findings offer teachers an overview of how A level students currently engage in independent research and will also be of interest to university admissions tutors, course developers and researchers.