

Learning through researching the resources: Producing online resources for the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre

Abstract

This project centred on learning through research and community engagement by supporting BA Criminology students in researching the materials held at the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre. From this research, and with the support of staff and the training provided, the students produced a set of online blog posts that can be accessed by the wider public and university staff and students. These posts provide further information on key topics and link to where in the Centre further resources on the respective topic can be accessed. Students also contributed to discussions and planning towards other student-focused activities that the Centre is now working towards. It is envisaged that this initiative can be expanded in future years to students from other discipline areas, who would benefit from working with materials relevant to their topic area.

Project aims and approach

There is a significant amount of materials located at the AIU Centre that is sometimes hidden to staff and students at the university, as well as the general public. Working with staff at the Centre, it was agreed to formulate a project that would see further examination, further research and dissemination of these resources to the wider public and members of the university. After consulting with a

group of students from the BA Criminology programme, a proposal was formulated that allowed students to focus on a topic and section of the resources that was thought to be engaging by the students, and also linking in with their studies.

After funding had been secured, a group of 1st and 2nd year undergraduate students from the BA Criminology programme applied to take part in the project. The project staff identified key areas that the students could select which were related to their degree programme, and specific course units that had been studied. These topics included resources that could be found in the 'Criminal Justice' section, as well as carrying out specific work on pre-determined themes, including 'Deaths in Custody', 'stop and search policing practices', 'disparities in sentencing', and 'Hate Crime' on which the AIU Centre holds materials. The project linked specifically to course units on the programme, including 'Foundations of Criminal Justice', 'Policing and the Police, and 'Crime and Society'. The resources benefited from being researched by those with some knowledge of the discipline area. The materials allowed the students to go beyond the learning offered in class, through the variety of resources and cases that were encountered. The students also had the opportunity to put into practice the research skills that they have learnt during their degree programme, specifically from course units 'Criminological Research Skills', and 'Accessing and Understanding Data for Criminologists'. The group were given training on the work and resources of the Centre and spent some time there researching the resources allocated to them and working with the project staff. As a collective, they expressed a clear preference in producing a series of blog posts for the Centre's popular blogging site. An external speaker was recruited to provide blogging training, which offered the students clear advice and guidelines on producing the best posts possible. The students also identified photos and other images that they thought could feature on the postcards and posters to advertise the blog.

This project has offered them a unique chance to engage in learning through research. It has also supported students in developing their communication skills, and provided experience that they can refer to during the rest of their degree studies and after graduation.

How has your project contributed to the strategic goals of the University and of CHERIL?

This CHERIL funded project engaged with the key university strategic goal of social responsibility alongside some of the key aims of the Centre for Higher Education Research, Innovation and Learning, notably learning through research, by engaging 1st and 2nd year criminology students with the materials available in the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre (hereafter 'The AIU Centre' or 'The Centre') to design and prepare online learning resources for the general public and for other university staff and students to access.

Key outcomes:

- Enhanced student, and teaching and learning experiences through 'real life' application of skills.
- Development of a variety of research and communication skills through different activities and development distinct graduate attributes.
- Better engagement with local people and resources pertaining to the Manchester area and nationally.

Outline your evaluation approach

The project was evaluated through examination by staff and by some of the users of the resources produced. The students involved were also asked to take place in a focus group, which explored their experiences and ways to improve the project in

the future. From these discussions, the sustainability of the project will be maintained through expanding the initiative to other discipline areas/Schools, such as education, law, and history, who can repeat the project with relevant resources located at the AIU Centre. It is hoped that the training received from outside speakers will be provided by staff at the centre and the cost of running the project following on from this pilot will be lower, increasing its sustainability.

Outline your project dissemination plan to ensure its outcomes are capable of making the greatest possible impact.

The outputs of the produced by this project were designed for the AIU Centre blog and webpages. The blogs may be crossed posted on the School of Law blog. The work has also be promoted via AIU Centre networks, which include their twitter and facebook pages, as well as the online newsletter and website. In addition, postcards that advertise the blog were produced and displayed in Central Library.

How well were you able to keep to budget?

The project kept within the budget allocated and did not exceed the funding provided.

If you were to undertake this project again, what would you do differently?

After a series of debriefing meetings with the students, we were able to learn what they struggled with, what they enjoyed and other ideas for new projects.

Challenges:

- Although they were given quite specific topics and resources to work with (e.g. on hate crime, stop and search policing practices), some of the students felt overwhelmed by the amount and the variety of materials that they encountered. In the future, we intend to be far more specific in the materials provided and the purpose of the blog post (or other online resource). For example, provide one or two texts for a book review, or formulate a more detailed project brief, which we are currently working on for student internships to be advertised.
- Due to when the funding was received and the ensuing planning/booking of the blogging training, the project primarily ran during the second semester. With assessment deadlines, Easter vacation and other commitments, some unforeseen, a number of the students found it difficult to do the task during the time allotted. Extensions for these individuals were given to enable them to complete the work during the summer, although this was still problematic for some. Being able to begin the work in semester 1 would have alleviated some of the issues.
- All students were provided with training on blogging, which an external speaker provided, recommended by the University's central communications team, there was a need for additional, more long-term support for some students. This included guidance whilst in the library plus the provision of feedback and advice on drafts of their work.

In continuing the groundwork established by the project, the Centre has now produced a guide to blogging for staff and students, and is also working with publishers to provide books for review, and staff/students from various discipline areas to open up the blogging project to a wider range of people. After consulting with the students who participated in this project, the Centre has also developed student internship and volunteering opportunities to work on specific online projects that are linked to existing archival materials and will benefit the wider community. The topics are linked to those studied across a range of discipline areas.