



Undergraduate involvement in research

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The host introduced the session by mentioning that in times of massification of higher education, which results in very high student to professor ratios, and when in many higher education systems it is difficult for professors to even learn the names of all their students, the question is: "Can undergraduate students even be involved in research?"

Besides trying to find an answer to this question, the session also aimed to explore what are the different ways undergraduate students can be involved in research as well as how they can be motivated to take up their own research. As an example, in the times of almost limitless information available online, one of the ways how to organise the learning and teaching process can be through students researching various topics themselves, where professors are more facilitators of the process than teachers. Taking this into account, the session aimed at identifying what kind of support the professors can offer to students and how could they involve students in their own research.

Three different groups discussed the questions. One group consisted only of students, the other two represented different HEIs in Europe and beyond. Depending on the requirements in the higher education systems, it might be mandatory for students to write a thesis during their third year. The growing number of students has influenced the way research is done. Often 2-3 students form a group, writing the thesis, as the supervision available is restricted. The thesis might also be shorter than before - from 50 pages to 20-25 pages. The situation is also dependent on which field students study. It is more common in social sciences. If there is a thesis in mathematics, it has quite another character than a thesis in political science. In subjects with a strong collaboration with business and industry, the thesis work could be part of such collaboration.

The discussion also touched upon the question if the work done by undergraduate students really is research. There is a large variety in what kind of work the students do. More problem based learning will probably strengthen the research involvement by bachelor students. In the learning process for a scientific approach, the students have to start exploring and writing on the bachelor level. It is a training situation for academic writing.

The HEI representatives discussed whether bachelor students could be involved in existing research projects. It might happen, but was more often the case at the masters level. Some of the participants found an advantage if the students have such a possibility.

The situation with students, contributing to scientific articles without being mentioned, was discussed, but the problem did not seem to be large at bachelor level. At other levels it could exist, even though it should not be the case.

All agreed that it is necessary for bachelor students to meet researchers during their studies, but the situation in the social sciences is severe with many students and many teachers only involved in teaching. The students did not find that they were involved in the research of their professors, but half of the student group had been very interested in their respective discipline and wanted to stay at university, continue studying and doing research. It was not mandatory for all of them to write a thesis. Problem based learning was not on the agenda in their studies.