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Developing self-authorship through participation in student research conferences

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1. Context

- emphasis on graduate attributes in HE indicative of global debate about role of HEIs in producing employable graduates (Arrowsmith et al. 2011, Erickson 2012)

- our graduates should possess knowledge, skills and values to enable them to cope with dynamic employment opportunities

but ...

- they must also understand who they are and how they might contribute positively to the heterogeneity they will encounter in their communities (Barnett 2000)

2. Research aim

- to examine how participation in BCUR by undergraduate GEES students might develop their **graduate attributes**:

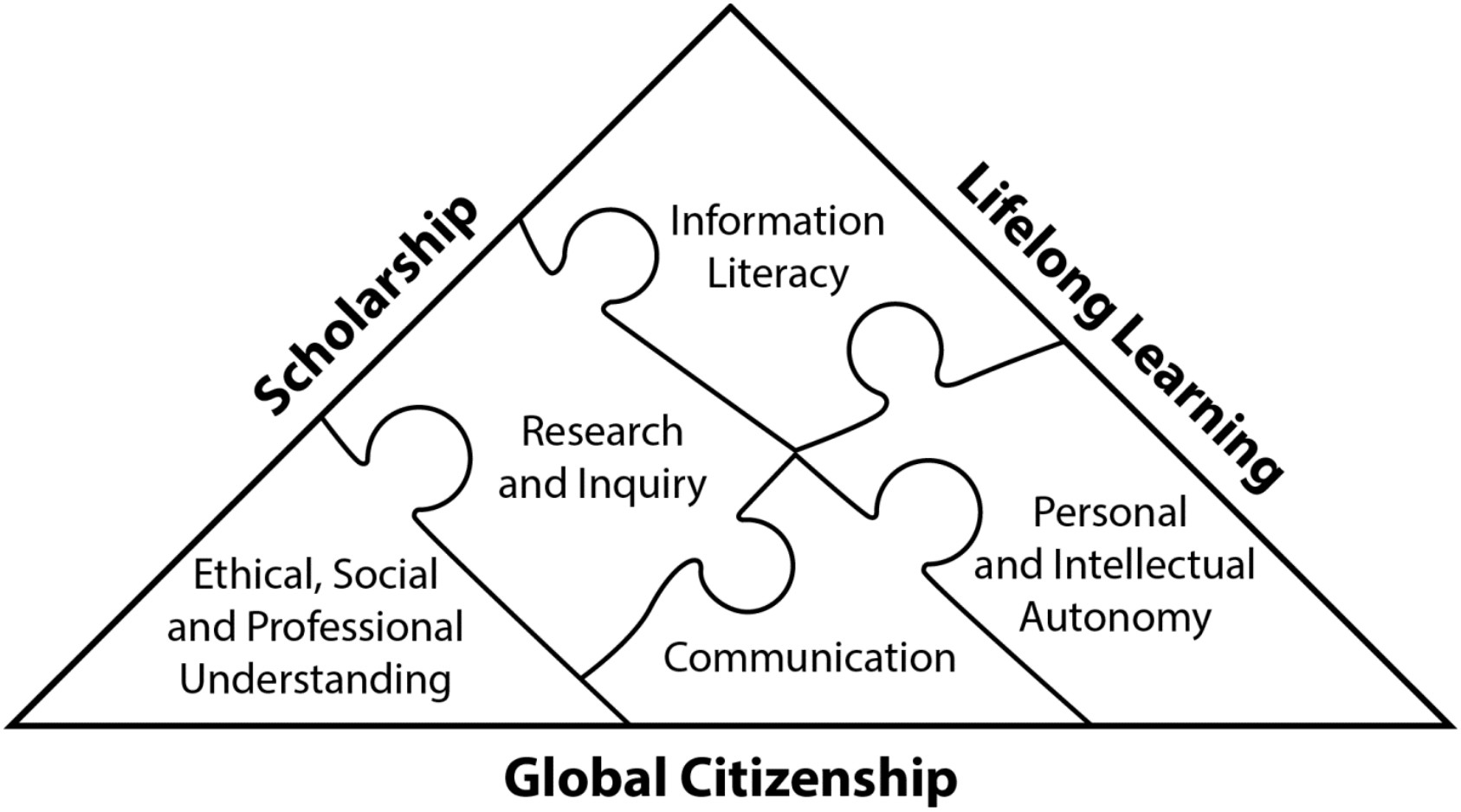
'*the skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable to a range of contexts*'

Barrie (2004)

'*They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future*'

Bowden et al. (2000)

- we adopt the Conceptions of Generic Attributes model (Barrie 2004)



- we further identify **self-authorship** as an overarching pedagogic concept emanating from the acquisition of multiple graduate attributes:

the ability to know oneself, to know what one knows, to reflect upon it, and to base judgements on it

(developed from Baxter Magolda 2004)

3. Research methods

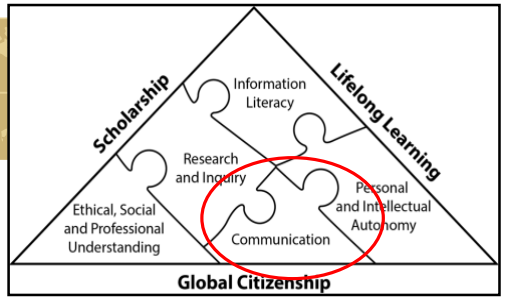
- 22 semi-structured interviews with GEES students following participation in BCUR 2012, 2013, 2014

- respondents:

  - final-year geography students presenting dissertation
  - equal proportions delivering poster / verbal paper
  - balanced gender

- transcripts coded manually and independently by both authors in relation to the five translation graduate attribute clusters of Barrie (2004)

4. Results



1. Communication

- specific aspects of oral delivery: pacing and fluency, not reading from notes, maintaining eye contact with audiences

- students mindful not only to convey their key messages clearly to a diverse audience, but to keep audience engaged

- acutely aware of thinking critically about their research, to **re-purpose** it for a multi-disciplinary external context:

- summarising content (n=20):

'I found after doing a dissertation, ***condensing 16,000 words onto a side of A1 was quite challenging****, but also I think it* ***really makes you own your research****, because you can't abbreviate that much without really* ***having a firm understanding*** *of what you're talking about'* R18

- organising a global structure (n=13)

*'It was a case of **going back** through my ... **breaking it down into kind of more bite-size chunks** and making what I'd written more **accessible for a wide audience**'* R6

- clarifying GEES-specific terminology (n=13)

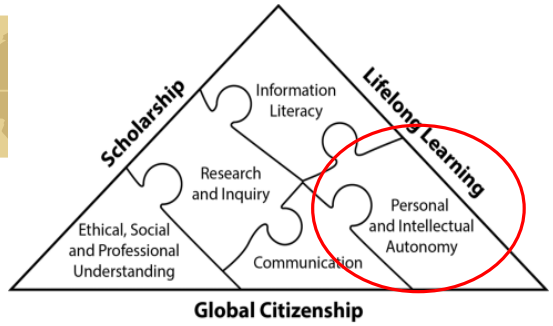
*'this was **presenting to people with a wider range of topics** and I think it was quite **important to make sure that I didn't use jargon** and hide behind long words that people might not understand'* R22

2. Research and inquiry skills

- GEES students felt responsible for communicating their research findings (n=19):

*'**I don't think science is there just to have ...** I think so much work gets done at an undergraduate level which could really help PhD research, academics' research ... **It's a way of helping others in their own developments**'* R15

- participating in BCUR legitimised them as having undertaken research that matters - to their audiences, to their disciplines and to the wider field of science



3. Personal and intellectual autonomy

- students explicitly evidenced self-regulation in their BCUR preparations

- demonstrated a process of preparation, rehearsal, solicitation of feedback, and subsequent development of presentations (n=14)

*'I did about **three or four trial runs in front of people** and **I also did them on my own in my head**. We had practise sessions with a couple of tutors, which gave feedback'* R20

- students who presented posters, or who received relevant questions about their oral presentations learnt to negotiate and verbally organize their thoughts in real time (n=13)

- students were learning from / with each other in reflexive cycles that began before the conference and reached forward into future work

- 13 students noted the opportunity to present their work unconstrained from formal grading, to be judged by peers who they described as ‘genuinely interested’ in their work

- BCUR process not constrained by high stakes assessment, allowing freer expression of identity and argument:

‘Here you’re [presenting] for a completely different reason compared to university. ***At university you’re doing it with the mindset that you’re going to be marked and you have to meet all these different criteria****, whereas* ***here*** *it’s more for the enjoyment and because you want to do it -* ***it’s your own piece of research, you feel proud of that and you want to express it ... I learnt a lot more about myself as a person****’* R1

4. Ethical, social, professional understanding

- students commented little about ethical responsibilities beyond the need to be honest in their research and in communicating the extent of their understanding

- aware of their need to develop social competence: many comments involved the terms ‘network(ing)’ (n=13)

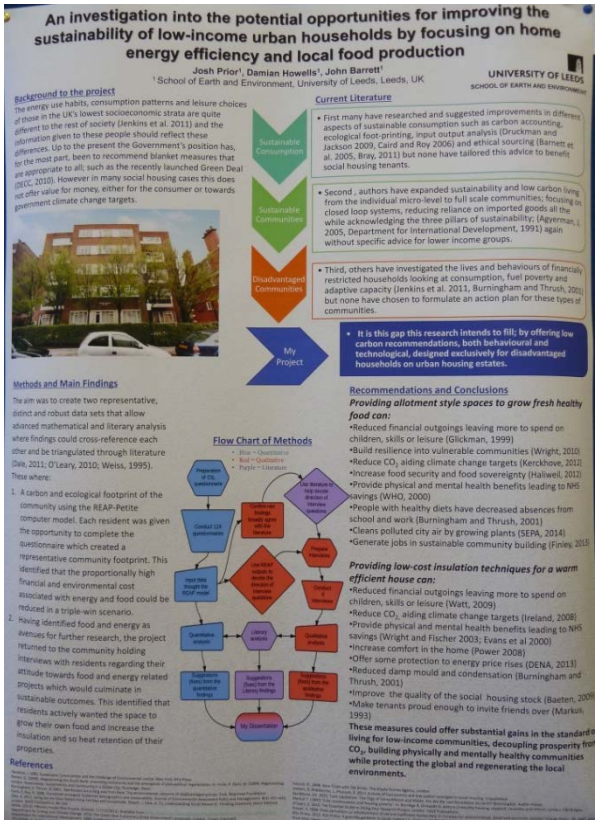
- taking account of alternative perspectives from other academic fields, students recognised the opportunities and limitations of their own disciplines

5. *Information literacy*

- students made little comment regarding information literacy

- minority of students (n=5) mentioned specific skills associated with visual presentation and balancing text, images and verbal information for their presentations

- reference made to PowerPoint for supporting both poster and verbal presentations



5. Discussion

Undergraduate research conferences: moving to self-authorship

- undergraduates unlikely to develop self-authorship if HEIs do not offer productively disruptive experiences (Glasser & Powers 2011)

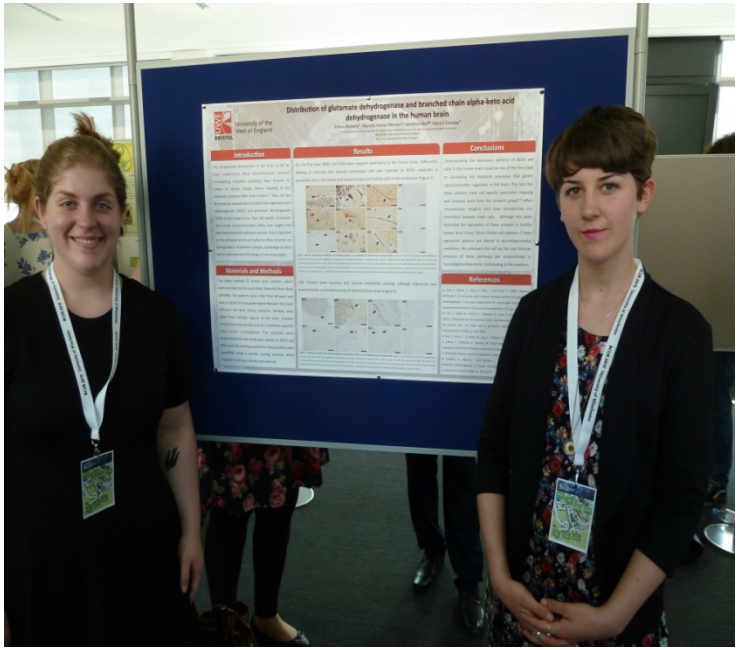
- we must encourage students to transit from familiar contexts of their undergraduate experience to situate themselves in unknown, 'other', challenging spaces

- we define such spaces as **borderland**, prompting the fashioning of new identities, permitted by fluid configurations of power (Giroux 1992)

- initial expressions of uncertainty by BCUR students as to what they were letting themselves in for

but ...

- encountering unfamiliar contexts, diverse audiences and externally referenced benchmarks, they reassessed their knowledge, understanding and conceptions of self to develop potential graduate professional identities



- perceived as meaningful by students because it connects to ‘real-world’ situations they may encounter outside their universities

6. Conclusions

- participation in BCUR provides an extra-curricular **signature learning experience** (Spronken-Smith 2013), with the potential to develop multiple **graduate attributes** (Barrie 2004) and **self-authorship** (Baxter Magolda 2004)

but ... it is essential that *all* undergraduate students experience a research-based curriculum with opportunities for research dissemination

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