Everything you need to know from those who have been there

Flinders University student panel

Part 1 (of 2)

What I might do before we actually jumped into any sort of questions is to actually introduce Laura, Tara and Emily and I will let them explain who they are and I’ll give you 60 seconds I reckon to explain what you did at school for your project and where you are at the moment.

Ok, so my name is Emily, I’m a 1st year education student at Flinders and I completed my Research Project last year as a year 12 and my topic was whether we should assimilate Indigenous students into urban boarding schools or whether we should improve the educational outcomes offered in rural communities.

Hey guys, I’m Tara, I graduated from sacred heart in 2013 when I completed my Research Project then, and I’m currently studying education in my 2nd year. I did my Research Project on anxiety and how it impacts academic performance.

Hi, so my name is Laura, I studied at Banksia International High School, and I graduated in 2013 and did my Research Project in my year 12, so that was 2 years ago, and I am 2 years into my bachelor of criminology.

Cool, thank you guys. So three quite different projects and obviously girls from different schools, as well, so probably went through very different processes. One of the biggest things that you’ve all said that a lot of you, sorry have said, that you haven’t actually started yet, so one of the biggest processes you are actually going to go through is actually getting it started. And it is finding something that you genuinely interested in and passionate about, that you want to research and it might be something you can’t do as a subject at school, and it might be something you really interested in and you can’t maybe do as part of your curriculum that you can actually study, and actually get assessed for and achieve credit for.

And the other thing too that you will be wanting to be looking at is working out if that is something you can research properly or big enough. So I guess getting started is one of the biggest things, and when we were talking with some of you girls about your own projects, I know Tara you’ve had a lot, you’ve got your big folio book that you’ve been showing to everyone , how did you, what advice did you get about getting started?

So, for getting started I basically, you know, brainstormed areas of interest that I had and looked at them quite broadly, so I have always been interested in psychology, so I had a couple of topics that you know, within psychology I thought I would be interested in, so I was thinking something to do with forensic psychology, and something to do with anxiety or depression or something like that. So I just, the first thing I did before choosing was I did a quick just google search on different, I just typed in forensic psychology, and I even just look at the number of google results that came up and just had a quick look at how good those sources were, and then I did another search on anxiety and also looked at anxiety and school performance and I found that I had lot more credible information from that. So that is why I leaned towards anxiety and academic performance, and I also had access to a lot of people to talk to, cause obviously at the school itself I could talked to teachers and students about stress and how that impacts school performance, so the prior research before choosing your topic is a really good idea otherwise you will get half way through and you might run out sources, that would be my tip.

Did you get advice from school on looking at those topics? As a whole, yeah, I talked to my teacher about the couple of topics I had in mind and then she pointed me in the direction of how far I could go with that, as a whole and how she thought that maybe I could point in a specific direction so that it is not too broad and I’m left out in the cold.

What about yours Laura cause I know that is quite a big topic to look at? Yeah, so I probably forgot to mention, but my research project focused on animals in captivity. And, I choosing my topic was the hardest part for me, I had a horrible time choosing my topic, so many people kept saying to me choose something you are interested in, choose something you are passionate about, and the more people kept saying that, the more I kept forgetting what I liked and what I was passionate about, and I just had no idea, and I ended up choosing animals in captivity literally as we went to the zoo with biology and I think it was the last week that we could decide, so I’d done all of the brainstorming and it wasn’t working, it wasn’t coming together, but eventually kind of came to me, but it was a really difficult process. So if you do struggle like, don’t worry, you will get there, you might just have to choose something a bit randomly.

For me, it was very much based on again a prior school experience, so, I had an opportunity with school to go the Northern Territory and experience life in a rural Indigenous community for a few days, and the gap, the educational gap that exists between rural Indigenous students and what I had seen and an experienced at St Ignatius was just so vast and really got to me a little bit, so when I, you know, got back and started thinking about my Research Project, it was really what do I want to do in the future, you know, potentially looking at teaching or law, and then how can I make this into a Research Project that I can study because it’s just such a complex area and I think it is about narrowing it down so that Indigenous education and the gap is such a, such a massive issue so then I needed to go, right, where can I define the scope of this, so I have enough information to do this, the project successfully as Tara said, but not be too broad that my information is going to be all over the place and I don’t have a succinct answer, so that was really important.

So, something that is quite important that Emily actually just touched on then is around the scope of your project and that is something you are probably going to work with your teachers a little bit on and it’s quite important cause you want to, like I said at the start, have something you’ve got enough information to research on, but not be too broad, that you’ve got too much to be able to try and digest.

So, refining your work can be quite important, so, Emily mentioned a bit about how she has done with hers, did you , how did you go about doing yours either Laura or Tara cause I know that they can be quite big topics and defining that I guess

I kind of touched on that a bit before, but when I was just saying I just gonna do my project on anxiety, and then I was just gonna have a field day, but then I realised that was so so broad and then I would have just kind of got lost in all the information so, then my teacher was kind of talking to me about how there are all sorts of things that anxiety impacts, so you could, I could of looked at how it impacted sleep, so she really spoke to me about refining that down even further and so then when I thought about academic performance I thought about how I know that stress impacts my academic performance, so I thought I’d chose something that would actually then benefit me. So I went in a direction that I knew would benefit me in the future and in my studies outside of the Research Project. And then I also picked it, refined it down to that specific topic because I had access to teachers and students and I was able to survey the whole school because they’re obviously pursuing like academic endeavours, so they know all about that sort of thing, so it was probably how I refined it.

And how did you go with yours Laura, looking at animals in captivity? Yeah, so when I started researching it, I found, so originally my focus question was about animals in captivity in Australia, but that was too narrow, often people have problems of it being too broad, but mine was too narrow, and there was just no research, and I got half way through my research and I had to change my whole question, and reorganise it all because there was no, there was no research at all about it, from an Australian perspective, so I had to open it up to a global kind of perspective and see how animals were treated in zoos across the world and how it could relate to Australia. Yes, so, that was a bit of a problem, it was a challenge that I faced again.

Is that something that teachers were able to help with a little bit, or anyone in those fields? Yes, so, my Research Project teacher was amazing and she helped me broaden it but not make it too broad, so, it just like a fine balance, you know, it’s like too broad or too narrow. Yes, so when I changed my question too, I had to kind of change my sources and that when I tried to contact some academics in animal behaviour. But, I unfortunately , because I had to change the question, it was kind of a bit late and by the time I needed the responses I hadn’t gotten any, so that’s also a challenge you might face, getting your primary resources if no one response to you, that’s a big issue. So I managed to overcome that by creating my own survey, and again, kind of re-changing my question to focus on the general public’s perspective of zoos, so my question changed a lot and my research changed a lot, but I got there.

So, something to probably take away from all of that, from all three, is actually getting that question right, and I guess, it doesn’t matter if you don’t get it right straight away, but drafting that with your teachers, or going back over that and refining what you are looking at. So, Laura’s for example had to be broadened, whereas the other two girls have had to look at theirs and define that even more, so narrow that down so you’ve got the right scope for your project. And remembering as well you’re gonna have a certain amount of time to complete that in, and how long it is going to be.

Once you’ve actually got that question set, the next big thing that is going to be quite different from other projects that you’ve probably done in other topics is actually getting a lot that, a lot of those primary and secondary sources, and that might mean using things like academic or scholarly articles for the first time, they might quite different to other ones. It might be going out and doing things like interviews or surveys and maybe using a combination of those to actually research quite widely. So something that is quite different for that would be actually using those type of things, so how did you girls find that, using these different types of sources and using that for the first time?

Yeah, so for me, I think just going back to that last point as, I think it is really important to be flexible with your Research Project. So, none of us had our question at the start that was the same question at the end, you know. I really had no idea where I wanted to take my project until I got, you know, maybe half way through when I was gathering my resources, and, so for me, when I was doing that sort of research process, I started with it just, finding papers on Indigenous education and highlighting what the issues were, so whether it was funding, whether it was resources, teacher retention, what were the issues that were facing the rural communities and then from there I could narrow my research down into a few key areas that I found important, so I found teachers and relationship to be quite important as well as funding, as well community support and where students can learn best, so from these scholarly articles that I found via google scholar, is a really good source, as well as google books, I don’t know if anyone’s has ever told you this sneaky trick, and the teachers might disagree with me to some extent, but from my experience if you use google books because it’s a print source that has just been photocopied and put online, you can actually reference it as though you’ve reference a book, so you know those assignments when they say you have to use 5 books, you use google books and I reference all of those as print sources because they technically are. So, we had google scholar, google books, I also had a look at a lot of government sites, so the ABS, Kevin Rudd’s closing the speech gap, and then from there I contacted different schools and different people to interview so I tried to keep my resources nice and broad, but it is really important to understand that every topic is going to be quite different, so if you are doing a very hands on project or whether you’re constructing something as your outcome, obviously your research and your Research Project processes are going to be quite different, so.

Yeah, I think with mine, I, before I even brainstormed what areas I would look into, I actually, like, even at the start of my kind of big folio I’ve done a couple of just like broad pages on anxiety, from a health website, I looked at all of that and then I used that information to make a big brainstorm kind of mind map of areas I could research and it was, I got a lot of you know information from those sources to put then on my brainstorm, but then I also made a brainstorm about qualitative resources that I could find, so , I wrote down you know, all the different people I could possibly interview. When I found out that the Research Project you were going have to actually talk to people that was something I thought that going to be impossible to do, but I was actually able to just email quite a few different academics from Flinders, even from like Beyond Blue and they would send back some really great information and Flinders actually has a website called find an, find an expert, which I didn’t know about so kind of went a roundabout way of trying to find different experts, like I had to read articles to find who to talk to. But on the Flinders website, under find an expert, you can just type in the search bar, you can start specific around your research question, like I could of typed in anxiety and academic performance and if don’t get anything, then broaden it a bit and just type in say anxiety, and then you will get a whole list of academics that come up that have anything to do with that area, then emails will pop up and you can email one of the them or all of them, probably best to email all of them because then you can email them all the same questions, but then what you’re going to get back is going to be a lot greater than just if you email one of them, so that’s a really good source that I wish I knew about I guess when I was doing my Research Project.