Looking like an ambiguous acronym, CUROP (Cardiff Undergraduate Research Opportunity Programme) allows undergraduates to embark on paid research during the summer vacation. This allows students to gain additional experience and skills alongside their degree schemes. Furthermore, in order to secure this opportunity, applicants experienced a typically gruelling interview process allowing candidates to gather a real sense of what is required in the current job market.

The project on offer was related to the evaluation of the maths support service. At Cardiff University our service consists of drop-in sessions that allow anyone to enquire about any mathematical difficulties or questions that they may have. The great feature of the maths support service is that nothing is a stupid enquiry. With guidance from my two supervisors we examined current evaluation techniques and also student perceptions of the service being provided. As an enthusiastic user of the maths support service I have found it extremely useful in aiding me with my mathematical studies in university. In a friendly environment it gives any visitor confidence in their ability and helps to develop their ability. It is not only the answers that are important but the problem solving skills that allow for further problems to be tackled effectively.

Nerves and excitement accumulated on my arrival at my 'job' with what felt like a mammoth task ahead. The literature, current teaching practices and the varieties of support currently offered in UK universities all seemed overwhelming. Luckily my supervisors helped calm my nerves as we discussed the route to take with the project. Many cups of tea later and much reading of current literature and my first day was over in a flash. E-mails were flying as quickly as the weeks.

The first task was to gather information on the student perception of maths support and the effect of the service on their ability and confidence. Students filled out an online questionnaire consisting of six questions; further analysis took place allowing me to enhance my skills using computer packages to communicate the current findings. Moreover, an e-mail survey sent around a variety of institutions allowed me to delve into the current practices that are taking place throughout maths support provisions today.

Our questionnaires allowed us to gain a quantitative measure of effectiveness of mathematics support, albeit in a rather crude way. We found a numerical value for the perceived change in confidence and ability following the intervention of maths support. This was then regressed with the time spent in maths support and the students’ perceived effectiveness of a tutor. We found that an effective tutor not only helps enhance a user’s ability but helps build their confidence thus allowing them to tackle other problems. We also found that in our centre, more female students than males made use of the service and there seems to be a greater effect on female users. All of this may lead to further research, for example on student engagement.

The skills gained have benefitted my studying and has solidified my decision that I would like to teach and assist with mathematics. This experience has allowed me to experience a variety of views and ideas within the teaching profession through many different levels. This exceptional opportunity for students allows the active involvement of students in university life, yielding a staff perspective. In summary, CUROP was important in allowing me to gain valuable professional skills in the present turbulent and testing job market. It gave me a ‘backstage’ pass to current research work allowing me to appreciate the extra work that benefits so many areas.