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Progressing Pedagogic Research – An Institutional Case Study

Andrea Cameron[1], Julie Blackwell-Young[1]

[1]*Abertay University, Dundee, United Kingdom*

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Abstract: The student experience has gained prominence in university decision-making driven by an amplified focus on metrics, league tables and institutional rankings. The advent of exercises like the Teaching Excellence Framework means that increasingly academics are expected to evidence the impact of their teaching activities. Pedagogic research or Scholarship of Teaching and Learning enables this evidence-base to be generated. In order to engage staff with this agenda the case study institution launched an annual competitive call for pedagogic project funding in 2014. Student partnership and dissemination of outcomes were requisite criteria to be supported. A review of the impact in 2019 revealed that a fifth of the academic staff group were actively engaged in undertaking higher education pedagogic research and that dissemination activity in this domain had quadrupled. A Pedagogic Research Community of Practice was then established, and this paper outlines the ambitions, the challenges and the progress made to date.

Paper: *'Teaching is the most impactful thing we do as academics'* (Hornsby, 2017) so it is logical, and often now required, that lecturers gather data, reflect on impact and consider associated actions. While many academics will engage in these evaluative processes annually not all will use this as a platform to launch pedagogic research projects or participate in internal and external dissemination of the outcomes.

Pedagogic research can be defined as '*research into the processes and practices of learning, teaching and assessment, which may involve systematic empirical research as well contributions to pedagogic theory*' (Flint, 2014). Given the significance and economic value of the student experience, higher education has become a 'business' where education managers and students ('consumers') have high expectations of classroom interactions (influenced by political demands and a metricised system of league tables creating a competitor-driven culture) (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009). University Learning Enhancement Units have therefore become the Research and Development (R&D) arm of the 'business'.

Intervention

Quality Enhancement was the driver for the case study institution launching an annual funding call (ATLEF) in 2014. The QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes were used to help situate and provide focus for the proposals, with student partnership and dissemination plans an integral part of the bids. Supported projects were required to submit a final report. In 2019 Pedagogic Research was one of five key priority identified in a Learning Enhancement Strategy. The intent being '*to build institutional capacity and reputation in the sector for pedagogic research*'. To inform the underpinning objectives a benchmarking exercise was conducted to:-

1. Understand the output associated with projects funded from 2014-2019
2. Search the university repository (PURE) to discover who was already engaged in pedagogic research
3. Explore the viability of a Pedagogic Research Community of Practice.

Results

Internal funding had supported 32 projects led by 28 members of staff (22 still at the university; 15 actively engaged in disseminating output)[1]. The range of output until the 2019 census point was:-

Figure 1

The search of the repository revealed that 40 staff (23.5% of academics) had a total of 180 pedagogic outputs lodged in PURE. These included conference proceedings and papers (82), journal articles (33), reports (17), posters (17), abstracts (16), book chapters (13) and a book. An analysis of the titles produced the following word cloud:-

Figure 2

The repository review also revealed seven thematic areas under which the pedagogic output could be clustered (Table 1):-

Table 1

It emerged that little of this output was being submitted to the Research Excellence Framework because of methodological rigour, reach and impact of the work, and ratings within a disciplinary submission – reflecting sector-tensions around perceptions of pedagogic research (Cotton, Miller & Kneale, 2018).

Those with authored output in PURE were invited to a meeting in February 2020 to garner interest for a Community of Practice (an invite was also sent to all university staff). Fifty-two attended and intimated their willingness to contribute to a pedagogic community. The following actions were then put in train:-

- Current pedagogic research to be shared to enable connections to be fostered, and peer support/mentorship to be established
- Research methodologies and theoretical frameworks to be the focus of future meetings
- A pedagogic research presence to be established on the university's webpage to showcase work
- To find external partners for projects using existing networks.

These actions supported four objectives and associated indicators of success articulated in the 2020-25 Learning Enhancement strategy:-

1. To apply a research-informed inclusive pedagogy

2. To develop and support a pedagogic research community of practice

3. To have an external facing pedagogic research web presence

4. To gain a national and international reputation for our pedagogic research-informed practices.

Conclusion

Key messages to distil from this evaluative exercise were that funding pedagogic projects legitimised the investigation of teaching practice and encouraged staff to innovate. However, as has been noted there are still credibility issues to navigate (Cartney 2015; Macfarlane, 2011). To this end the Community of Practice is focusing on rigour, scale and external collaboration. The investment led to an increased output (dissemination activity quadrupled), therefore could enhance reputation/recruitment and provide an excellent evidence base to support teaching quality reviews. *'Effective Learning and Pedagogy'* is one of the areas of Pooled Excellence that the university is now seeking to progress through it's new Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy. The Community of Practice meets on a termly basis, has mentorship in place, and members have already secured national funding for external collaborative projects.

[1] The case study institution employs circa 190 academics.

References:

| ATLEF project	Number funded	Themes	Output (all presented at internal conference)
ATLEF 1	6	Technology-supported learning; employability; assessment and Feedback; staff development	13 external conference presentations; 1 book chapter; 3 conference proceedings; 1 journal article; 1 runner-up award
ATLEF 2	8	e-resources; student engagement; enterprise; sustainability	3 external conference presentations; 2 conference proceedings; 2 book chapters
ATLEF 3	5	Transitions (employability/enterprise); impact of curriculum reform	7 external conference presentations; 6 conference proceedings; 2 journal articles
ATLEF 4	3	Development of online resources	1 external conference poster
ATLEF 5	4	Interactive learning; employment attributes	3 conference proceedings/presentations
ATLEF 6	6	Student engagement – facilitating learning; the student experience	1 conference presentation; 1 invited panel

Figure 1. Internally-funded pedagogic project output
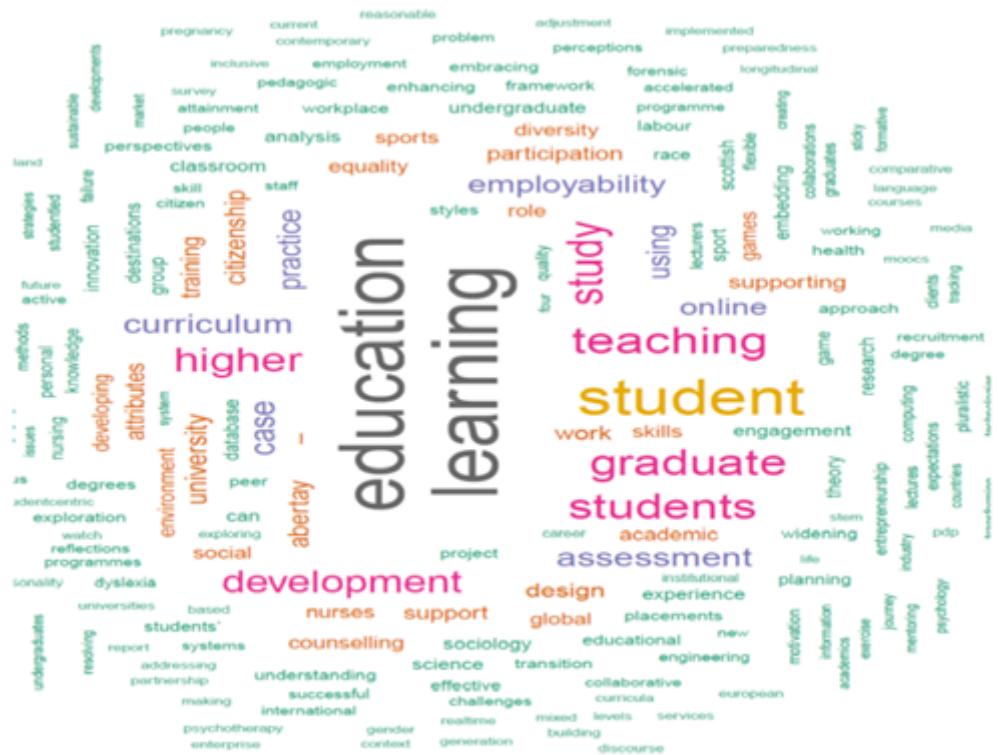
Figure 2. Word cloud generated from all pedagogic titles in the university repository

Table 1. Pedagogic Themes
Technology-Enhanced Learning in an era of Artificial Intelligence and Social Media
Preparing students for the world of work (aligned to discipline/profession and cognisant of the 4th Industrial Revolution)
Students as partners (co-design, co-production, informed learning perspectives)
Inclusive/Accessible Learning Experiences
Innovative Curriculum Design
Graduate Attribute Development in the context of global citizenship
Higher Education staff development

References

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