

SPECIAL ISSUE – Inaugural Enhancing Student Learning Through Innovative Scholarship Conference 2015 (ESLTIS15)

Developing a National Meeting for Teaching Focussed Academics

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In this short editorial, we'll discuss the evolution of the inaugural Enhancing Student Learning through Innovative Scholarship conference, of which this volume contains contributed papers. This conference, the first national meeting open to all teaching (as opposed to research) focussed academic took place in Durham in July 2015.

The Foundation Centre at Durham University is the institution's flagship enterprise for widening participation into HE. There are 15 teaching fellows and over the last five years a rich culture of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has emerged at the Foundation Centre with indicators of success including:

- Over £140K of funding secured from a variety of sources.
- Over 80 talks at national and international level including several invited contributions.
- Over 25 papers published, many in practitioner level journals, with a small number in pedagogical research journals.

Recognised institutionally for its exemplary scholarship the Foundation Centre led the development of a Teaching Fellow Network for Durham University, bring together over 100 TFs from across the institution to share best practice and work collaboratively on scholarly projects. The regular meetings of this network proved a success, with several spin out projects having impact across the institution. Examples include:

- The development of a discipline specific corpus of student texts bringing together experts in linguistics with teaching fellows from a variety of fields.

- A project to enhance the transition of undergraduate students as they enter Durham through the introduction of an online e-learning course for all new first year students.

Much of this work being published in the upcoming book “Widening Participation, Higher Education and Non-Traditional Students”¹. Through the dissemination of their own scholarly activity in their own disciplinary interest groups, the authors recognised that there was the need for a national meeting of those on teaching contracts, to link the community started at Durham to others nationally. This action was prescient given the increasing focus on teaching in higher education in recent years. Nationally a key issue is the role and place for teaching only staff. A recent study by the HEA puts this issue into context:

HESA data for 2012-13 show that just over 25% of academic staff were on teaching-only contracts. The report shows too that there is a predominance of teaching-only contracts among part-time academics, and that while an increasing proportion of teaching is undertaken in universities and colleges that do not have research degree awarding powers and do not receive significant amounts of research funding, a clear hierarchy exists, with research widely seen as ‘more important’ – for institutional reputation and career advancement than teaching. There remains, the report says, a significant gap between policy and implementation regarding promotion policies in higher education institutions, and few identifiable promotions to senior positions solely on the basis of teaching excellence. (Locke 2014)

This first meeting of a national teaching fellow network was therefore a forum to share innovative scholarship across disciplinary boundaries and to develop a national voice for teaching focused academics. This first meeting took place on 16th and 17th July 2015, and was attended by 116 teaching focussed academics, representing 29 UK Universities and 3 overseas Universities (the UAE, Malaysia and Australia). A short questionnaire was given out to delegates prior to attendance at the event, and over 40% of delegates responded.

The figure below show the frequency of common words used in responses to the stated questions using word clouds.

Figure 1a. What opportunities does a teaching-focussed academic role offer?



Figure 1b. What is the biggest challenge facing you in your role?



Key themes emergent from the questionnaire include the lack of recognition many teaching focussed academics feel within their own institutions. Although many actively engage with the scholarship of teaching and learning, they comment this is often seen

as a “poor cousin” to disciplinary research. One wonders as the TEF is implemented, if and how institutional opinions may change in this regard.

The meeting itself proved to be a highly successful event, and before this event had closed volunteers from 3 other universities had offered themselves as a venue for future years. The 2016 meeting will be based at UCL.

What follows are eight invited papers from the delegates, including our keynote Prof. David Read who discusses how he has developed a growing international profile in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning within his own discipline of Chemistry. The remaining contributed papers explore further the roles of teaching Staff and their scholarly activity and look in particular how many teaching focussed academics often work in partnership with students to develop their innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

Contributed chapters on the role of teaching focussed academics within UK Higher Education Institutions include, three distinct examples of how teaching staff are embedding best practice within their own, different institutions. Burnham for example, gives a personal story of her own career as a teaching academic at a research intensive university and the challenges and opportunities this has afforded her. The unique contribution of the scholarship of teaching and learning has significant prominence in Burnham’s story and is gaining increasing prominence more widely amongst the research intensive universities and Johnson and Mckinnon discuss how this is evolving within their work in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University in the UK. Baumann then introduces how scholarship will be embedded within the language teaching at the distance learning Open University (OU) amongst its associate lecturer community.

Running parallel to this work in developing a voice for teaching focussed academics, is the significant innovation they are involved with. Clifton for example, introduces to a study in how OU students within the Childhood, Youth and Education Programme engage with their hybrid approach to learning, actively engaging as they learn within a HE environment and in their workplaces.

The successful transition of students into HE is a vital component in their future success and in their chapter Slaughter, Harrison and Wyatt explore how students expectations of HE at entry effect their success at University through a longitudinal study of a student cohort in Chemistry at the University of Bristol. Furthering this argument, with a particular focus on widening participation, Hill introduces an innovative approach working with students as partners and developing “student sounding boards” to enhance the HE experience for students from non-traditional backgrounds. Finally, offering a welcome international perspective Ching Hei discusses the factors influencing student learning within a cohort of Malaysian students studying languages at the University of Malaya.

Uniting all these contributions is the voice of the practitioner, the HE teacher, innovating in learning and teaching, working to develop their own voice, and raising the profile of learning and teaching. With the advent of the TEF, if one is to actively define teaching excellence then who better than those working at the forefront within our Universities? One hopes that through organisation at national level, this network of teaching focussed academics can continue to weigh on in this debate and keep student learning at the forefront of the national discussion on the future direction our Universities will take.

References

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- Locke, W., “*Shifting academic careers: implications for enhancing professionalism in teaching and supporting learning*”, 2014, HEA, accessed June 2016 from <http://tinyurl.com/jqj5nr6>