Creating an environment to foster pedagogic research informed decision-making on quality matters

A summary report for the QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project scheme

Preamble

Institutions across higher education (HE) often grapple with challenges of tackling quality issues that are informed by the literature and exemplars of good practice. Such quality issues can include matters relating to effective digital assessment practices and academic integrity, student feedback mechanisms and inclusive learning. This is even more exacerbated in further education (FE), who often have fewer resources and staff with the capacity, skills or experience to take scholarly informed approaches on quality matters. A few institutions across the sector and internationally have created pedagogic research centres to address this, often at the cost of significant investment but most in HE and FE lack this capacity. So how can we create an environment to foster pedagogic research informed decision-making on quality matters that is self-sustaining? This project aimed to unpick these challenges and create a model approach with exemplars which both HE and FE can adapt to promote a culture of a scholarly informed approach to their own institutional decision-making processes.

Introduction

Decision-making around improving the student learning experience should build on evidence informed literature and good practice across the sector. For example, a recent report by TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes) (Andrews et al., 2023) outlined research into approaches that address the ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) and how this work could be used to "…*influence policy and decision-making in the sector*…". How do institutions take a similarly literature-informed approach to inform and influence their own quality processes? To address this challenge it is important to unpick the underlying factors facing HE and FE and promote a culture to include more of a literature informed approach to curriculum enhancement that positively impacts the student learning experience.

This project aimed to better understand the current culture around pedagogic research (PedR) and scholarly activities and if, or how this culture might be able to inform our institutional matters of quality to promote a positive student experience. It has been demonstrated that staff often lacked time, personal motivation or the skills and knowledge of appropriate methods of pedagogic inquiry to develop a scholarly approach to teaching and learning (Draper et al., 2019). Further work also found a lack of confidence, partly from working in isolation without any apparent networking opportunities, contributed to the issue (Johnson et al., 2021). Part of the project therefore explored how pedagogic research was perceived within the HE and FE sector. Experiences from project members and other stakeholders showed there were mixed opportunities and practices and there was also limited opportunity to link this up with committees and/or senior management. This

project therefore was able to identify a range of challenges that hinder the development, support and celebration of a pedagogically research informed culture. Alongside these challenges however, were examples of good practice, demonstrating opportunities to develop a positive scholarly culture.

This project identified a range of practices that help address the challenges of developing and promoting a scholarly, pedagogic research culture and integrating it with institutional decision-making processes. Core to this is how we empower staff to engage with pedagogic research and explore how we can promote a positive culture around it. Staff should feel empowered to actively engage in scholarly practice with confidence and this includes providing a platform to showcase, share and celebrate their work. Project findings showed examples of good practice of promoting a positive scholarly culture and opportunities to feed into decision-making bodies. The project also raises considerations about future work on how national bodies such as QAA, Advance HE and even bodies like the REF can promote a pedagogic research culture and help link it with institutional decision-making processes.

Project activities

A core focus of the project's activities was the development of the consortium team as a fledgling community to share cross-institutional practices and experiences relating to engagement with, and promotion of a pedagogic research culture. This collaboration enabled the team to build on their own existing experiences in order to develop a default PedR model which others can then customise to suit their own needs based on their individual contexts. The development of the model was further informed by experiences of the consortium team during the project and with additional feedback from the broader HE and FE communities. The activities of the consortium team and broader HE and FE input, combined to develop a model based around the following specific project activities.

1. Community meetings

The project consortium team met regularly to learn about the scholarly cultures in their respective HE and FE institutions. This provided the opportunity for members to learn about practice across the different HE and FE institutions and share examples of practice with each other. Early meetings involved the original project members but as the project evolved and colleagues shared information about the work, this attracted other contributors and sharing of additional practice.

2. Case studies

As part of the sharing of practice the team committed to produce at least two case studies, documenting examples of how scholarly activities had informed local practice. At the time of writing three case studies have been confirmed with a further potential two being written up. The case studies focus on different aspect of work across HE and FE in relation to how scholarly work has influenced and informed practice. The case studies are being published alongside other project resources on the project legacy website.

3. Pedagogic research (PedR) model

A key activity of the project was to develop a PedR model (appendix 2) outlining the core considerations for developing and promoting a scholarly culture across an institution. This includes suggestions around how to empower staff to engage in pedagogic research and promoting a culture that encourages broader support for pedagogic research. This then provides a foundation for engaging policy makers and committees to collaborate with key stakeholders from the scholarly

communities to help inform practice to support the student learning experience. Whatever approach is considered for promoting a PedR culture, the model provides the basis for users to adapt and customise to suit the context of their own institution. The model therefore outlines key factors to consider and institutions can use them to inform their own scholarly activities.

4. Community conference

An integral component of the project was the plan to conclude the project with a community conference. There were two key aims of the conference, firstly being an opportunity to share information and learning points from the project with the broader HE and FE community. The second aim was to use the conference as an opportunity to hear from others across the HE and FE sector about their own scholarly cultures, current practices and examples of practice from their own institutions. The community conference proved to be very successful, with a good range of experiences and practices being shared. Conference delegates also expressed an interest in exploring ways of developing a community of practice beyond the scope of the project.

Project outputs

This project set out to develop a model for promoting pedagogical research communities across HE and FE, addressing the challenges of lack of institutional culture and resources for promoting a scholarly approach to quality matters. Another key output was to produce at least two case studies across HE and FE, showcasing examples of practice relating to scholarly activity that inform decision-making around the student experience. Furthermore, the project team became a pilot community of practice itself, through the project member collaborations and concluded the project with a national online conference to share practice and showcase the benefits of research informed practice. The conference was also an opportunity to gauge interest in future networking opportunities.

Given that this project centred around a consortium of HE and FE institutions, the intention was to use this as a foundation for a community of practice exploring scholarly practice across HE and FE. This approach proved effective, with regular meetings and the development of a common goal of promoting the benefits of active pedagogic research communities in our institutions. This community approach involved open invitations for others to join the conversation as the project developed and succeeded in enlisting the help of several other colleagues from the partner institutions. In addition to this and based on feedback requests, training sessions were offered to community members, including a session undertaking a literature review and ethical considerations for pedagogic research. Furthermore, a number of delegates from the conference expressed interest in engaging in any future work of the community.

The aim of producing case studies was for members of the project team to showcase some examples of their work in relation to scholarly practice and where it might have been able to inform strategy or operational decisions. For example, one case study used the literature around academic integrity to inform the development of guidance around its transnational education provision. Another case study demonstrated how they had developed a framework to support a culture of scholarship-based practice. By creating the case studies as a project output it was possible to share examples of good practice to promote a scholarly culture and use this approach to inform and develop their student facing practices.

Another key output was the conference, which provided an opportunity for the project team to share the work of the project with the HE and FE sector. This attracted good interest from both HE and FE and proved to be successful in raising awareness of the topic and providing a forum to discuss the challenges and opportunities for developing a pedagogic research culture. Examples of practice

at other institutions were also shared and there was good interest in developing the community further, after the formal conclusion of the project.

The final output of the project was to collate and combine existing experience and practices from the project team and use that to help inform the development of a pedagogic research model. There was already existing practice amongst team members which helped form the basis of a practical approach to developing a scholarly culture and this was further informed by the experiences gained by the team of actually working together across institutions and across HE and FE. Another key contribution to the development of the model came from the conference, where delegates from a range of HE and FE institutions offered further insights into their practices. This broad range of cross sector knowledge and experience helped inform the development of the final model.

Project outcomes

The primary outcome of this project was to develop a model for promoting pedagogic research which could be used to inform decision-making processes in relation to supporting the student experience. The project was able to identify a range of factors that can contribute to promoting a literature informed approach to decision-making. These included the development and support of a pedagogic research culture, recognition of the role such scholarly communities can have, and their inclusion and consultation in committees and other strategic bodies.

As well as developing the research model, another beneficial outcome of the project was the richness of the feedback around current practice gained from the project members through their case studies and also from the broader HE/FE community arising from the conference. This helped raise awareness of the challenges around promoting a pedagogic research culture and also drew out some good examples of practice this already exists.

Evaluation

Policy and strategy decisions can be maximised when informed by the literature and sector-wide good practice. Given that many institutions across HE and FE lack the resources, staff or experience to promote a pedagogic research culture to feed into decision-making processes this project aimed to address this challenge. This project therefore set out to better understand what factors may be involved in developing and promoting a sustainable pedagogic research culture, particularly from cross-sector collaborations. By investigating the factors involved, it was possible to develop a model whereby institutions could support the development of a scholarly culture, with the ultimate aim of tapping into this community of practice as a resource to contribute to decision-making processes.

In terms of evaluating the outcomes of the project there are some initial results that can be measured and other aspects of the project will be measured beyond the life of the project. This project has developed a model which is designed to promote a pedagogic research culture that feeds into the decision-making processes of an institution. The model outlines factors for empowering staff to engage in scholarly practice; develop communities of practice for knowledge-sharing and skills development; develop an institutional culture around pedagogic research by celebrating scholarly practice; and explore opportunities for supporting the student experience through contribution to institutional decision-making bodies. Initial changes made as a result of the project has been the community awareness raising of promoting literature informed quality processes.

The initial difference arising from the outcomes of this project is how it has helped raise the profile of pedagogic research across not only the project members but also a wider range of institutions

who attended the community conference, raising awareness of this issue across the sector. Through the project, it has identified examples of current practice around the promotion of scholarly activities informing strategy development and identified opportunities for further community development. A number of people from across the sector have indicated an interest in continuing this work after attending the project conference.

As the project has recently concluded it will not be possible to measure any medium to long term impacts at this stage. Measures of short term impact will arise from sector engagement with the project findings and outputs. This will include interest in this field from practitioners continuing to engage in networking activities to promote and develop a culture of scholarly activity, and work with existing bodies already working in this field. Longer term changes will be considered from any changes in practice, culture and strategy that may have been informed by the pedagogic research model developed by the project team.

Early encouraging outcomes of this project have included the fact that several case studies were developed that showcased examples of existing practice across the sector. There was also a positive response to the conference, with 40 people registering interest in the project. Whilst 24 were able to attend on the day, this generated additional feedback, ideas and other examples of practice. Several conference delegates also replied afterwards, offering to become involved in future work and were willing to contribute to potential networking opportunities. This work will be taken forward by the project team lead at the University of Bath who will continue to act as a focal point for future work and decision-making around the project outcomes. Bath will host a legacy webpage for the project and act as a first point of contact for future queries and activities that may arise out of the project.

Learning points from the project

The project provided several key learning points that helped inform its work and which also provided valuable experience of the challenges of promoting pedagogic research. The opportunity to share experiences, culture and practices across HE and FE was valuable, demonstrating common challenges and opportunities. These included mixed institutional support for scholarly practice, a willingness from staff to engage in scholarly practice and mixed cultures about supporting and celebrating scholarly practice. One key learning point from the project was the time commitment challenges from some project members. This demonstrated the high demands on staff time which impact on their ability to engage with scholarly activities. So whilst this project was successful in achieving its goals, it also demonstrated the constant challenges staff face in trying to engage in scholarly activities alongside their core roles.

One of the aims of the project was to develop a model which institutions could take and adapt to their own contexts. This would involve developing practices and activities that would promote a scholarly culture with the ultimate goal of influencing the development of quality processes. However, during the project the experience was that such an approach would need a champion in the early stages to initiate any change. This might come from existing internal units (such as teaching and learning units), or appointed/seconded staff to support change. The development and implementation of the pedagogic research model would therefore likely face some early inertia that would need championing to gain momentum in the longer term. This can be addressed with specific attention to how the community develops, including logistical considerations for how the community operates.

Community development

Bringing together a community of practitioners offers a range of benefits but this project highlighted a number of logistical considerations for effective working. One of the biggest barriers is time and these challenges are echoed in a recent Advance HE report (AdvanceHE, 2023) on scholarly activity in colleges. There are many competing priorities with work so it is better to schedule regular project meetings early on so members have the times pre-blocked out in their diaries. This project found that when some meetings are poorly attended the community 'feel' did not always come through. As well as pre-scheduling all major meeting points, careful consideration of technology use is important. Cross-institutional resource sharing can be complicated if institutions are limited in sharing their cloud services with external contacts. For example, this project settled on Google Drive as the most accessible medium for all members.

A common challenge for staff within institutions is the institution's focus on pedagogic research and scholarly culture. Anecdotal evidence from project members found that if there is a strong teaching focus in the institution then scholarly activity is more supported. Counter to this however, is that institutional strategic priorities can shift, which can sometimes create competing priorities for scholarly practice. From a scholarly community perspective therefore, it is important to set a clear direction for pedagogic research activities that are allowed to grow independently over time – but which will still align with an institution's broader goal of supporting the student experience.

Whilst there are challenges for staff to engage in scholarly activity through demands of time from core duties, or shifting strategic priorities, there are also a range of benefits from developing scholarly communities. Such benefits include the ability to share practice and experience and appreciate that pedagogic research need not be discipline specific and a community can be built around common scholarly interests rather than a specific subject area. This can be helped for example, by creating academic away days to focus on scholarship rather than operational-type business away days. Community development can therefore be nurtured to provide a valuable source of collaboration and opportunity to engage in shared scholarly practice.

Sector practices

As part of the project a community conference was organised, to share work on the PedR model being developed and also to gain a broader perspective of sector wide practices. Twenty four attendees from 16 different institutions provided insights on current challenges they face, examples of practice within their institutions and ideas for further good practice.

Challenges

One of the key challenges highlighted in the conference was the status of pedagogic research, with some considering PedR being prioritised less significantly than discipline research: "[pedagogy is] *not sympathetically treated in REF*" and "*perhaps the QAA (and Advance HE) are not aware of how badly HE pedagogy research is treated in the REF?*". Whilst the reference to REF may be a bit complicated this sentiment was backed up with comments such as "*There is support for FHEA and SFHEA applications but nothing beyond that level to engage in pedagogic research.*" However, another commented:

"*For me, there needs to be more understanding of how SOTL* [scholarship of teaching and learning] *adds value to the strategic aims of schools and institutions. This would help embed SOTL in to the day to day activities of relevant staff and would be the biggest "recognition" of such work.*"

Alongside the challenges noted, there were also pockets of good practice identified, that suggests that there is a growing recognition of the importance of pedagogic research.

Current practice

Although there was little mention of high level strategic oversight and support for PedR, there was a range of responses demonstrating current practice aimed at supporting PedR. Some institutions offer support for scholarly practice: "*There is a central T&L team who are fairly new and in the process of creating internal resources and setting up events and training so there is more of a pipeline of support beyond the PgCert stage.*" and "*we have SoTL embedded into our PGCAP and participants engage in a small ped res project; we run an annual conference and are intending to bring back a Ped Res focused conference too.*"

There was some reference to more time being allowed for PedR activities, though this was in the early stages in some institutions (and there was still a feeling it was considered secondary to discipline research). Other reference to current practices included an in-house SoTL journal and journal club, as well as internal scholarship networks and practitioner groups. So there are some signs of active scholarly practice, with a core motivation to move PedR higher up the agenda for institutions.

Potential activities

A range of initiatives were suggested during the conference that could raise the profile of PedR and the profile of staff. There was reference to recognition of staff through promotion criteria and more support for future REF submissions. Some comments mentioned early initial support from teaching and learning units and that this support could continue to grow, which could include more dedicated staff development time built into workloads. Staff could also be supported to showcase and publish their work and take more of an action research approach to their practice. A key aspect discussed was around the mixed culture of pedagogic research and how it appears to be growing in pockets in some quarters, but is still weak in others. It is important therefore to keep pushing to develop a principled culture around promoting, supporting and recognising the importance of PedR and its strategic importance to the student experience.

Future considerations

Given the nature of this project, it had a specific staff-facing focus to investigate quality matters from the institutional perspective. This helped better understand and document practices staff were able to describe relating to processes that could be impacted by scholarly interventions. Future work related to the findings of this project should include reference to the student perspective. The student view can investigate their understanding of how quality processes are informed by the literature and also whether local Students' Unions recognise and consider the role pedagogic research can have in informing the development of quality processes.

An additional consideration relating to how matters of quality are informed by the literature can relate to how sector organisations can also help promote a positive culture around pedagogic research. This can include bodies like the QAA, who can champion the promotion and inclusion of practices that support scholarly research which is directly used to inform quality process developments. This would also include promotion by Advance HE, who are well placed to provide tailored resources, practices and even training on how to link scholarly practice to matters of quality. This sector-wide approach could change the narrative on how we take an evidence informed approach to our work.

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Appendix 1

Summary of project outputs and outcomes

PROJECT OBJECTIVE What is the project trying to achieve?	OUTPUT/OUTCOME OR IMPACT MEASURE DESCRIPTION What is the expected output, outcome and/or impact of the project?	INDICATOR FOR EVALUATION Which indicator will help identify whether this output/outcome/impact has been achieved? Will this be a quantitative or qualitative indicator, or a mix of both?	REPORTING – WHEN AND WHO? Who will take the lead on evaluating this activity and when will you report progress?	END OF PROJECT SUMMARY
Develop a model that outlines key factors for promoting the development, support and recognition of pedagogic research	Pedagogic research (PedR) model	A model for promoting and support pedagogic research activities across an institution has been created.	University of Bath project member	The PedR model was delivered and will be hosted on a legacy project webpage.
Provide at least two case studies that showcase examples of good practice relating to the promotion of pedagogic research informing quality matters	Case studies of practice	At least three case studies were produced which provided examples relating to institutional support for scholarly practice, digital assessment and transnational education.	University of Bath project member	The case studies were successfully reported and will be hosted on a legacy project webpage.
Organise a community conference	Community conference	An online conference was delivered which attracted 24 people from 16 institutions. Additional examples of practice from across the sector were reported.	University of Bath project member	Feedback from the conference provided additional insights into sector wide practice that informed the development of the PedR model.

Appendix 2

A PedR model for promoting an institutional approach to literature informed quality processes

Develop a pedagogic research environment

- Create a central focus for pedagogic research
- Support and nurture PedR communities
- Promote benefits of engaging with PedR

Provide support for scholarly research

- Link and promote pedagogic research to probation and early career development
- Provide resources to support skills development
- Promote funding opportunities

Promote a positive culture

- Celebrate practice
- Promote alongside discipline research
- Develop governance for establishing baseline of support and activities

Recognise the achievements of PedR

- Recognise opportunities to record PedR achievements
- Develop career development pathways for scholarly activities
- Encourage senior management to endorse PedR

Engage with key PedR stakeholders

- Recognise and collaborate with PedR stakeholder groups
- Include stakeholder groups in teaching and learning planning activities
- Encourage involvement of PedR groups on key committees

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