

# Shifting Sands: Why Pedagogical Research In Higher Education Matters To Us All

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The validity and relevance of Higher Education (HE) is being challenged by the marketisation, value for money and negative discourse of educational relevance within society. This leads to ever-increasing pressure and opportunity for us to scrutinise, discuss and interrogate the purpose of teaching in HE. Since it is only through researching our pedagogic practice that we will be able to confidently respond to, and inform, the ever changing 'shifting sands' of the HE landscape.

Despite recent developments towards parity of career pathways in response to the TEF and REF agendas within the sector, there remains a perception that pedagogic research has 'credibility problems' (Kneale *et al.*, 2016, 24). As highlighted within this recent review of HE pedagogic research, this is often seen as a poor relation to most research in established disciplines, exemplified by the disproportionately low numbers of professorial appointments who hold chairs in teaching and learning across the sector. It is within this context that this opinion piece sets out to challenge current views, explain why pedagogical research is important and attempts to reposition it as a central tenet to a university's purpose and mission.

Pedagogic research contributes to our own and collective understandings of teaching and learning scholarship, and is intimately connected to reflections on practice. Notwithstanding the value of scholarship, which can be viewed as a creative and public endeavour to engage with ideas within one's practice and discipline, pedagogic research explores the many activities associated with learning, teaching and assessment. This may or may not involve empirical research but should always contribute to the body of knowledge and advance pedagogic theories.

Pedagogic research can take many forms such as case studies, systematic reviews, observations and evaluations, all of which have individual merit and contribute to the continual enhancement of practice. It is intertwined with local and sector practices (such as leadership, governance, student engagement and policy) and is a mechanism through which the academic community is able to make sense of the shifting sands of HE.

HE pedagogic research enables us to better understand the impact of policies and practices more deeply and allows us to reflect on potential and possible future benefits. For the individual, HE pedagogic research is integral to our professional identity. It is part of the DNA of an academic to create new knowledge, enhance existing knowledge, and ensure that students benefit from research informed-teaching and differential learning opportunities. It forms part of the innate scholarly curiosity in the pursuit of designing a creative and innovative teaching and learning environment and culture. It is reflective of our HE values and practice since we have a duty of care to be the best teachers we can and strive to maximise the potential of our students, our institutions and ourselves. Finally, it acts as a change agent through which we can debate and enhance our practice with the wider sector.

Within an institutional context, HE pedagogic research is the embodiment of a self-reflective learning organisation. It is central to the political action which through institutional Communities of Enquiry individuals can come together to address critical pedagogic issues and inform policies (Naidoo, 2003; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Lynch *et al.*, 2017). Finally, it presents an opportunity to inform and direct pedagogic agendas across disciplines. These strategic principles are pivotal to counteracting the negative discourses which the HE sector currently faces.

From a cultural perspective, HE pedagogic research has historically been undervalued (Cotton, 2017). This has been compounded by an overall paucity of research council funding which has seen a rise in the esteem associated with successful discipline specific research, and declining recognition of the value of institutional pedagogic research. Given the shifting sands of funding for organisations and the uncertainty, and in many places demise, of traditionally funded pedagogic research (e.g. HEFCE, JISC and HEA), the onus will be upon the institution to bridge the funding gap. This will require institutions to reconsider how the income from teaching and learning fees are deployed, and to ensure that

pedagogic research receives similar support to that of (inter)discipline specific research.

Institutional key performance indicators such as recruitment, retention, good honours, and graduate employability can be positively influenced by the adoption of strategic, national benchmarking frameworks (for example the HEA) informed by the funding of pedagogic research. In essence, it can be argued that the funding of pedagogic research fuels the core business of a university, that is, teaching and learning. And what institution can afford not to invest in HE pedagogic research in a TEF era?

Furthermore, given the engagement, reach and impact that HE pedagogic research should have within and beyond the institution, it remains incumbent upon senior leadership teams to invest in leadership to nurture and develop – and in many places, introduce – a pedagogic research culture within schools and departments. This investment should consider time constraints, individual and institutional priorities, resources, incentives and skills development. The importance of career progression through a clear and respected teaching and learning pathway from lectureship all the way to professor, alongside relevant role models, should not be underestimated.

As highlighted from REF 2014, HE pedagogic research has been predominantly located in Schools of Education (Kneale et al., 2016). Instead, with appropriate leadership it should be embodied within and across all disciplines to develop a collective and inclusive discourse that fosters communities of educational practice, reflection and outputs. Such narratives, played out through deep and meaningful school and department-level HE pedagogic research ensures that the academic capital which is anchored in one's own discipline (and the research thereof) is broadened. The challenge is for colleagues to reframe their subject expertise as pedagogues and increase their academic capital by incorporating the pedagogic side of their discipline into their research. Does the academic community have the courage to embrace this?

Finally, the need for institutions to be distinctive in a crowded and competitive sector results in the endless pursuit for 'innovation'. It is only by making space to interrogate existing practice can academics develop new approaches. Without pedagogic research to provide the evidence and grounding there cannot be truly innovative changes in teaching. However, the imposition of rigid, sector-wide quality

frameworks has historically led to institutions being risk averse and has resulted in a sector with many barriers to innovation. The emerging Office For Students regulatory framework for HE has the potential to provide institutions with the opportunity to unshackle their quality processes and adopt more risk-based approaches. This will provide the space and scope to engage in pedagogic research leading to innovation.

We are now facing a time of opportunity, one in which we must acknowledge the challenges yet embrace an outlook that positions HE pedagogic research centre stage. We must move beyond prescriptive curriculum designs, delivery and assessments to allow flexibility, creativity and innovation. For if we don't interrogate our own practices now how can we measure our success, identify areas of enhancement, and inculcate a culture of self-awareness and reflexivity? As we look forward we must better articulate the benefit and impact of our pedagogical research both within and beyond the sector, strengthening our collective insights and findings to further understand current and emergent teaching and learning challenges. By encouraging a wider discourse across all forms of HE pedagogic research, we will be able to confidently respond to, and inform, the ever-changing 'shifting sands' of the HE landscape.

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