

# **Early Career Academics and their Perceptions and Experiences of Linking Research and Teaching**

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### **Introduction**

The significance of the link between research and teaching has become increasingly important within debates on higher education in the UK. The Higher Education Research Forum, chaired by Sir Graeme Davies, has highlighted the need for both research intensive and non-research intensive institutions to maximise the potential of students learning about research “ranging from vicarious exposure to the current research of their teachers through to the immediate impact of being researchers” (HERF, 2004). A significant body of work now exists across a number of countries exploring possible theoretical and conceptual issues of the integration of teaching and research (Rowland, 1996, Elton, 2001, Brew, 2006). There has also been a focus on defining approaches to the integration of research, teaching and learning with general agreement on four main approaches: learning about others’ research; learning to do research – research methods; learning through the research process – enquiry based learning; and pedagogic research – enquiring and reflecting on learning (Brew, 2006; Healey, 2005; Jenkins *et al.*, 2003).

There can be little doubt that UK higher education funding policies have served to increasingly differentiate the higher education sector and further fragment academic work, particularly in relation to research and teaching activities. The HEFCE research funding to universities has served to differentiate the sector by ensuring that a small elite group of universities gain the majority of the research funding leaving many institutions with little or no funding for research. Many universities, however, continue to put effort into engaging in the ‘research game’ despite often very little financial gain (Lucas, 2006). In terms of universities and departments there is clear evidence that funding policies and particularly the RAE has served to fragment academic work and differentiate between ‘researchers’ and ‘teachers’ whilst undermining the teaching work being done as significantly less important than research (McNay, 1997; McNay, 2003; Lucas, 2006; Sikes, 2006; Young, 2006).

The White Paper (2003) made the case that some universities could be ‘teaching only’ (DfES, 2003). The high cost of research, particularly in the sciences and medicine can lead to the overly simplistic economic reductionist argument that only a small number of elite research-intensive universities can be funded for research. But this argument perhaps misses the point that there are a whole variety of ways of interpreting what it means to engage in research (and scholarship) which is not reducible simply to the high resource

intensive model of medicine and the sciences where the apex of research is pure research or the scholarship of discovery (Boyer, 1990). The Hong Kong RAE (similar to that of the UK) utilises all four of Boyer's scholarship categories, the scholarship of discovery, application, integration and teaching to evaluate the research work being conducted in university departments, with an attempt to recognise and value each form of scholarship.

The arguments for 'teaching only' universities in England have been counterbalanced to some extent by recent initiatives such as the research-informed teaching fund which exists to provide extra resources for institutions (who are not research intensive) to ensure that their teaching is informed by new research. There are also Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) and in particular The Reinvention Centre based at Universities of Warwick and Oxford Brookes, which actively endorses linking research and teaching and in particular, active undergraduate student involvement in research.

However, the reason why so much is spent attempting to justify the link between research and teaching in academic work is primarily that UK government policy and funding of higher education has and continues to drive a wedge between the dual activities of research and teaching both across and within institutions (Deem & Lucas, forthcoming). Much research evidence has shown how funding policies have impacted on universities such that research has been prioritised often to the detriment of teaching (McNay, 1997; McNay, 2003; Lucas, 2006).

One way forward, however, is to start to re-think the perceived duality of teaching and research roles to focus more on knowledge and knowledge communities (Scott, 2004; Brew, 2006). Brew (2006) argues that there is a need to move beyond the divide of research and teaching towards a more integrated view of the development within universities of "inclusive scholarly knowledge-building communities of practice" (Brew, 2006: 180). She argues, following Barnett (2000) that university teaching and learning in an age of 'supercomplexity' is required to "prepare students for a world which is uncertain, supercomplex, unpredictable..." (Brew, 2006: 180). The language of linking research and teaching becomes transformed as research and teaching become inseparable and suffused into the idea of 'knowledge work' (Scott, 2004). Scott (2004) argues that "...in a knowledge society we have all become to some degree, knowledge workers (or, at any rate knowledgeable actors)...(as) a result the role of dedicated specialised 'knowledge' institutions like universities is changed, even challenged – because all institutions have to be knowledge organisations..." (Scott, 2004: 13). The common point to be made is that the production and communication of knowledge cannot easily be separated and the debates on the future development of higher education institutions need to reflect this rather than remaining ossified in polarising research and teaching as two separate activities.

One possible forum, which may be significant for encouraging the perception and experience of the integration of research and teaching roles are teaching and learning programmes in Higher Education. There is very little known about the extent to which, and the ways that, UK advanced certificate/diploma programmes for teaching in higher education encourage academics to focus on the integration of their research and teaching roles, and how best to implement and maximise the potential of their research experience within the curriculum. Particularly for early career academics, this is perhaps an important forum for exploring this issue and the possibilities for integrating their research and teaching experience. There is a growing body of literature that explore issues of academic identity development and academic work life balance issues (Robertson and Bond, 2003, Colbeck, 1998, Deem and Lucas, forthcoming). Early career academics in particular may struggle with the tension between the demands of teaching and of research so this is an important group to look at in order to better understand the ways in which further integration of these roles can develop. It is also feasible that early career academics will bring innovatory and exciting ideas to the development of teaching and research links, which may help to rejuvenate practices within departments.

This paper reports on part of a study funded by the UK Education subject centre (EScalate), which involves a comparative case study investigation of early career academics participating in mandatory and optional teaching and learning programmes within two UK universities and one Canadian university. This research is currently ongoing and the final report will be completed in July 2007 and will be accessed on the project website at <http://escalate.ac.uk/1979>. The project includes, an investigation of a sample of approximately

nine Teaching and Learning programmes being run in universities in the UK and Canada in order to find out the extent to which they directly address issues around linking research and teaching, semi-structured interviews with early career academics at the three case study institutions and finally the development and trialling of a workshop designed to enable the exploration of research and teaching roles and the possible linking of these roles and experiences for academic staff.

This paper will report only on some tentative findings from the interview data collected at the two UK institutions. The concern here is with the experiences of these early career academics in terms of their conceptions and experiences of their research and teaching roles, their participation in the teaching and learning programmes and their developing ideas around the possible way in which their research and teaching are linked. Utilising a communities of practice model (Wenger, 2000), the interview data will be explored in relation to the enculturation of early career academics within *communities of practice*, their negotiation of *boundaries* and developing academic *identities* utilised in previous research (Lucas, 2007). This approach fits with a desire to move to a more socially situated understanding of the development of conceptions of teaching and of research that take into account the socio-cultural and also the socio-political context of these within institutions (Akerlind, 2003; Pickering 2006; Trowler & Wareham, 2007; Deem & Lucas, forthcoming). Participation within a teaching and learning programme, therefore, may be seen as only one part of a complex socio-cultural context within which early career academics negotiate their beliefs and conceptions of teaching, learning and research.

### **UK Teaching and Learning Programmes in Higher Education and Early Career Academics**

Institutional programmes for development of teaching and learning and academic practice developed first in the late 1980s in the UK as a direct result of the Dearing report (DfES, 2003). This has been fuelled by national initiatives aimed at enhancing the professionalisation and status of teaching and learning in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) was responsible for initiating the accreditation of programmes in the 1990s. In the late 1990s the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) further developed the accreditation process which was taken over by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2004.

The *Future of Higher Education* (2003) White Paper called for programmes on teaching and learning to be mandatory for all new members of academic staff. The rationale behind this decision was that teaching should be viewed as a professional activity in its own right and that teachers should be equipped and supported in developing the skills necessary to fulfil this aspect of their role (DfES, 2003). Whilst mandatory programmes for new lecturers have not been implemented across all institutions in the UK, the development of the recently published national framework for standards in teaching and learning has facilitated this movement in HEIs (Universities UK, et al, 2004). Most HEIs in the UK have some mandatory development for new staff in teaching and learning and/or academic practice. The focus of these programmes to date has been on initial professional development for staff with continuing professional development typically following less formalised routes and focusing less on pedagogy (Kahn et al, 2006).

A recent review commissioned by the HEA on the use of reflective practice in postgraduate programmes has indicated that these types of programmes are intended to create meaning around practice (Kahn et al, 2006). Accomplishing this is an inherently collaborative and social process that can lead to changes in practice, capacity for change, and changes in professional identity (Kahn et al, 2006). This process can also be extended to include reflections on participant's research and lead to a conceptualisation of academic practice that is more integrated (Young, 2006). In recent years there has been a move towards programmes for new academics that incorporate support and development for all aspects of academic practice including research and administration (for example University of Warwick).

The literature which looks at the impacts of teaching and learning programmes is fairly mixed. A recent Evaluation Report (Prosser et al, 2006) found that such programmes had the primary positive impact of encouraging academic staff to become more 'student focused' rather than 'teacher focused' and in helping to form linkages between departments. However, problems were cited with the varied perceptions of these

programmes held within departments and of the balance between generic versus disciplinary concerns on aspects of teaching and learning (Prosser et al, 2006). A review of the effectiveness of postgraduate certificate programmes conducted by Knight et al (2006) concluded that there were varying levels of satisfaction regarding these programmes as a method of developing as a teacher.

Attempting to investigate the impact of Teaching and Learning Programmes on the practices and beliefs held by academics is not something that is a simple or even feasible undertaking (Pickering, 2006) and is not what we intend to do here. What is of interest, however, is the extent to which these programmes may allow participants to reflect on and explore ideas around research and teaching roles, how these may be potentially interlinked and to what extent these possibilities are then supported within wider socio-cultural contexts. It is important, therefore, to situate academic beliefs and experiences of research, teaching and learning within the complex array of disciplinary, department and institutional socio-cultural contexts to which they are exposed where “encounters with colleagues, students and university systems and day-to-day stresses and pressures will all have a role to play” (Pickering, 2006: 321). Kahn et al. (2006) highlight the importance of dialogue in problematising and developing teaching practice and in situating this dialogue within the wider workplace and institutional context.

### **The Research Project: early career academics and links between research and teaching**

As discussed earlier, this paper will focus on a small part of a larger comparative UK/Canadian project on early career academics and conceptions of the link between research and teaching. The aims of the project were;

- To explore the ways in which new academics perceive the teaching and research relationship and the extent to which they can articulate and demonstrate ways in which they link these two activities within their work
- To investigate the possibilities that new lecturers have to explore the link through their participation in institutional Teaching and Learning programmes in the UK and Canada and to gather their ideas for how they could be better supported in this through these programmes.
- To develop materials and activities, and collect best practice examples, that will allow new academics to explore the link between research and teaching in their work that can be utilised within institutional Teaching and Learning programmes in the UK, Canada and elsewhere. The user potential of these materials will be enhanced by developing online access.

The research design of the project involved, firstly, conducting semi-structured interviews with 3-5 early career academics from a variety of disciplines at each of the three institutions to explore their existing conceptions of the link between teaching and research, and strategies for the integration of teaching and research and secondly, running workshops with 10-15 early career academic staff at each of the three institutions to pilot and evaluate the materials, activities, and examples of best practice. It is intended to report here only on the tentative findings from the UK interview data. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms in order to protect their confidentiality.

### **Backgrounds and routes into the role of Lecturer in Higher Education**

The participants in this study are all early career lecturers in a variety of disciplinary departments within two research intensive, pre-1992 UK universities. The departments included Dentistry, Health Sciences, Mathematics, Politics and Social Policy. The majority of the eight participants that will be discussed here followed a fairly traditional route into their lectureship posts from initial first degree or Masters to PhD and then to a Postdoctoral position before taking up a lectureship or going straight from a PhD to lectureship. However, a few from the more professional disciplines, in particular dentistry, came to the lecturer post after a significant period of working in a professional post and indeed for the dentists in particular, this involvement in practice or consultancy continued to be a significant part of their role.

Most of the participants had extensive research experience through completing a PhD and from previous postdoctoral research positions. There were significant differences, however, with some having very extensive experience of working on a variety of research projects and with a publication record to others who were just close to completing a PhD and had little experience of publishing. Similarly, in terms of teaching experience, there was a lot of variety with some who had substantial teaching experience whilst doing their PhD and/or postdoctoral work and other who had engaged in very little teaching. Where they had teaching experience this tended to be more around small group teaching in tutorials and seminars rather than teaching larger groups or having responsibility for inputting on course design. For one participant, there was a hesitancy about teaching but it was then found to be something they enjoyed and which created a motivation to apply for a lectureship rather than continue in research positions.

“So for the first two years I said I wouldn’t like to teach, then in my final year I did start teaching and I found I enjoyed it and the students seemed to respond well and I got good course evaluations. Then in the first term a lectureship came up and I applied and got the job, so I have been here for nearly a year now...” (Rachel, Health Sciences).

For others, however, their research role and/or professional role continued to be central to their identity as academics, as shall be discussed later.

### **Teaching, Research and Administrative Roles**

There was an enormous variety of perceptions and experiences of different teaching, research and administrative role reported by the participants. This may in part reflect different disciplinary or departmental cultures and organisations or may be primarily influenced by the perceived role that the new early career lecturer was employed to fulfil. One participant from a Mathematics department, for example, was given a fairly light teaching role and was encouraged primarily to develop his research and to concentrate on applying for research grants and getting publications. Whereas others felt quite overwhelmed by their teaching role and the preparation and contact time required left them struggling to find time to do research.

“I spent 75% of my time doing teaching and even more, probably the two previous terms it was even more... certainly in the first term it was a real struggle to get any research done really, and it felt like I was losing touch with a research project that I was involved with. We had a research assistant and so it sort of felt like I was ending up leaving it to her and my colleague, so it’s hard trying to do research at the same time isn’t it really?” (Marie, Law)

Most of the participants did report a significant amount of time spent on teaching, at least for certain parts of the year during perhaps the first and second terms. These early career academics spent a lot less time on administration and were often given fairly minor administrative roles such as ‘International Student Advisor’. Again there were exceptions with one participant in the Health Sciences given the role of Director of MPhil/PhD students (although in a department with a very small number of such students). Research was perceived by all of the participants as very fundamental to their role and it was something that they seemed to experience both as a passion and in some cases as a pressure in relation to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and demands required for this exercise.

However, their perceptions of these different roles and their beliefs of how they impacted on their sense of academic identity was again quite varied. Some saw themselves fundamentally as researchers first and foremost whereas others were enthusiastic about their role as both research and teacher/educator (no-one particularly identified themselves strongly with administration).

“I mean everybody in this department knows that I view myself as a researcher first and the rest of it is what I do to pay the bills.” (Jim, Health Sciences)

“Personally, where I am in my career if I was to be brutally honest I would say that research is quite a lot more important in terms of my overall goals but that doesn’t mean that I neglect teaching...my

desire to prioritise research comes from my own personal ambition (a) because I really enjoy it and (b) because it's important for my career and probably it is because actually I enjoy it when it comes down to it because I am quite happy in the position I am in. We would all like to get promoted and get more money but one thing leads to another and it's because I am genuinely interested in the subjects and I like having my stuff published." (Ian, Politics)

"Certainly research probably seems the most important because if I didn't have the others I could still kind of keep going in a way but I also think that teaching is very important and I do devote a lot of time and attention to try and do it well." (Rachel, Health Sciences)

The analysis is as yet too tentative and the sample size quite small but there does appear, at least for the participants here, to be a gender split around identities formed primarily by research and teaching roles. This gender difference may also be reflected in the discussions around ideas for teaching and learning engaged in with the participants.

### **Experiences on Teaching and Learning Programmes and Development of Ideas for Teaching and Learning**

Although, there were some participants who clearly felt that teaching was just something that had to be done as part of 'paying the bills', most of the participants discussed very thoughtfully their beliefs and experiences about teaching and learning. Much of the focus of their discussion was on teaching and how best to do this. Many of the participants outlined a developmental change from transmission of information-based teaching or "death by powerpoint" (Terry, Mathematics), to more flexible and interactive forms of teaching and learning. Participation in Teaching and Learning programmes was sometimes reported as enabling the development of teaching practices.

"Yes, I would say that when I first started teaching my style was more – I would kind of write a long script and then agonise over kind of remembering it and saying it as though I wasn't reading it...but I think that (participation in the teaching and learning programme) has kind of suggested ways that it can be more interactive, for example, brainstorming at the beginning... and then student feedback has told me "I really enjoyed that bit and it woke me up". (Rachel, Health Sciences)

Often, the participants reported that the teaching methods used were fairly traditional lecture then seminar formats with structured presentations for lectures and less structured, more discussion based seminars. In one department, discussions had taken place to move from this format but reluctance to make large scale innovation blocked any moves for change. In some disciplines, particularly in the professions, it was felt that constraints were made by the authorial positions of external accrediting bodies.

However, many of the participants demonstrated innovative and impassioned reflections on how they wanted to develop their teaching and some of this related quite strongly to a greater integration of their own research work into their teaching.

"...and I did begin to think well is there, you know, a way of doing some research which then would make this whole subject more live to students. So I mean maybe looking at the cases of students who have been arrested under the prevention of terrorism legislation and what their experiences of that is. So but that really is only things that I have been thinking about over the last month or so really since I've been thinking a lot about terrorism." (Marie, Law)

There was quite a significant amount of endorsement for the linking of research and teaching, although the ways in which this was conceived varied tremendously among the participants. There was also an almost majority view that linking research and teaching was much easier with postgraduate students and difficult, or perhaps impossible with undergraduate students. The relationship was usually but not exclusively seen as being about linking content rather than through process and (certainly in terms of undergraduates) students engaging in research (Healey, 2005). It was stated by some that their research interests were too specific and therefore did not fit with the need for wider, more generic knowledge needed for

undergraduate teaching. By the same token, this need for the teacher to read more widely in order to prepare for teaching was perceived to have a very beneficial role in rejuvenating their thinking in some research areas. There was a lot of description of active learning, mainly problem based learning, particularly in Mathematics. The notion of students engaging in research was primarily seen to be the preserve of final year undergraduates and postgraduates. There was one participant who was keen to involve some students within one of his research projects but again this was at Masters level.

There was some confusion, therefore, of the feasibility of linking research with teaching but overall, participants were keen to develop their work in this way where possible and to achieve more integration of these roles. This ranged from developing new courses which specifically linked to research specialist areas to utilising one's research to rejuvenate and innovate one's teaching across the board such that the possibility of participating in cutting edge, new research developments and the excitement of this was communicated to students.

“...that seems to me to be an ideal way of, actually teaching and research should be interconnected...we shouldn't have this dry set of things we're trying to teach students which isn't connected to what we are coming across when we're doing our research...” (Marie, Law)

### **Perceptions of departmental research and teaching cultures and of departmental support**

In terms of enabling early career academics to develop and innovate their teaching, the perception of departmental cultures were not always seen to be conducive to this. In general, there was agreement that department colleagues were supportive and that in particular, mentors were very helpful in the development of one's teaching.

“You know having a meeting with your mentor and discussing issues as they come up, that's helpful, you know, having a mentor critique you, that's great.” (Jim, Health Sciences)

However, not all participants found such support.

“I would say that being observed would be quite useful (as part of the Teaching and Learning Programme)... Though I have to say, I was observed last week by someone in my department who gave very different feedback and points and he wanted to know 'why I was walking around'. They made me do that on the (teaching and learning programme)... I tried to explain to him about breaking up the lecturer/student space and he thought it was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard.” (Rachel, Health Sciences)

In this same department, advice was given by senior members of staff to this early career academic, to be less concerned with teaching and more with research.

“But people do kind of say – or more senior people have said to me that what I need is to aim for an 'A' on your research and a 'C' n your teaching and a 'C' on your admin. It has been said 'you can't get sacked for doing admin badly', but that isn't in my nature because I don't want to do anything badly.” (Rachel, Health Sciences).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The findings presented here are as yet very tentative but it is intended to explore the complex themes and questions raised by utilising a communities of practice model (Wenger, 2000) to better understand the ways in which early career academic experience their early roles as researchers, teachers and administrators and the extent to which, through participation in teaching and learning programmes and through enculturation into departmental and disciplinary cultures these roles can be perceived to be more fruitfully integrated. Their negotiation of developing *identities* and attempts to transcend *boundaries* both within and outside departments is significant (Wenger, 2000). In the interplay of experiences on teaching and learning

programmes with experiences in departmental teaching and research cultures new academics act as brokers as they navigate the boundaries between these two communities of practice.

The role played by Teaching and Learning programmes is a fundamental question raised here and is also another dimension to this research project, which will be further explored. The approach within a number of programmes is fundamentally based on the ideas of professional formation and as such attempt to pull in participants non-formal experiences, include much social interaction and discussion and as a result be constructed around each participants own practice and context (Knight, 2006). This approach is also thought to be vital given the importance of contextual factors such as discipline in influencing participant conceptions of and approaches to linking teaching and research. The impacts of these factors have been seen in regard to Teaching and Learning Programmes more generally (Prosser et al., 2006, Knight, 2006), building on the 'community of practice' that participants within these programmes have already established thus allowing for meaningful interactions and discussions within the programmes due to this past social participation (Warhurst, 2006). This community may be seen to complement that of the communities experienced by early career academics in their departments and externally within their disciplines in order to better support them in negotiating the complex roles and identities they inhabit.

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