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Research methods teaching in vocational environments – developing critical engagement with knowledge? (0141)

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The relationship between higher education teaching and research is the subject of current debate—whether these are irrevocably linked (Rowland 2000, Jenkins et al., 2007) or whether they may more effectively be carried out independently (Mcintyre, 1997). The value of research-informed teaching (RIT), cuts across this debate, and draws out the value of student engagement with research within the teaching environment through engaged activity with academic staff. Undoubtedly the focus of these debates lie within the aegis of the university, however in recent years the massification (Scott, 1995) of UK Higher Education (HE) has seen the development of more college based HE. Engagement with issues that relate to the development of a pedagogy that supports critical enquiry in college HE teaching such as the role of research and scholarship (Lea and Simmons, 2012, Feather, 2012) is becoming more overt within this area. This paper draws on the findings from research conducted across college HE staff and students to examine the teaching of research methods within these environments, and draws focus on the question of whether a staff research culture that can support this pedagogy is a necessity.

This research aimed to examine research methods teaching within college HE from perspectives of staff and students. The primary tool used for data collection was two incentivised e-questionnaires, designed and piloted via a steering group made up of university and college HE staff. The final questionnaires were distributed via local partnership distribution lists in the South and North West and via national college HE groupings. Initial analysis of e-questionnaire data using SPSS was used as a basis for focus group questions from a range of subject areas. This data was analysed alongside the survey data, but in order to maximise participation by staff who were unable to attend focus groups in the busy spring period, telephone interviews were held and an online message board was set up to supplement the focus group data.

Research on HEIs suggests that limited curriculum space is likely to be contributing to a narrow approach to teaching research methods. In the HEI context quantitative methods teaching may in many cases follow a routinised programme covering only basic elements of questionnaire design, the use of a statistical package such as SPSS to enter data, simple descriptive statistical analysis of the data, and graphical presentation of the results (MacInnes, 2009). In contrast, our survey found that only a very small proportion of social science students (around 14%) had used SPSS (the social science industry standard in HEIs), with the majority (97%) having used Excel, for data analysis amongst other things. This suggests an even more limited coverage of research methods in FE colleges than in HEIs, and also indicates (and is substantiated by supporting data) that FE colleges may have specific resourcing issues, such as lacking the resources to purchase the relevant software licenses for their HE staff and students.

However, data indicates that students attending HE courses in FE colleges, with their much smaller class sizes and intensive teaching, are experiencing a much more tailored approach to

learning in research methods, with individual projects and 1:1 staff time to develop students' research skills. Another trend was in the focus of research projects as employment or sector based, or conducted as WBL activity. With a high proportion of Foundation Degrees offered within colleges where the focus on knowledge as skill is established (Bathmaker, 2013) the focus of this activity can come as no major surprise, it does however point to a conception of knowledge which is less based on a premise of criticality and more attuned to problem solving, action-research. Furthermore, research paradigms was found to be the area where staff felt they had the least skills and knowledge, with 60% of social sciences staff indicating confidence to teach this aspect of research methods. Contrast this with aspects such as literature searching where 90% of social science staff responses indicated sufficient skills and knowledge and 75% for research design. The confidence ratings were slightly higher for qualitative research than quantitative research, and reporting research was rated at 81%.

The research/teaching debate is highly political, and draws focus on both issues of status and the relative deployment of resources in higher education systems for teaching versus research activities (Deem and Lucas, 2006). To draw a dialectic may be simplistic, but decisions made in this area have implications on outcomes for students as well as staff. In some cases teaching staff lack sufficient time—both allocated curriculum time (MacInnes, 2009), and for carrying out their own research or for the development of research methods competencies. This is particularly pertinent in HE provision within the college sector, where the teaching load is higher, and the importance placed on research is less than in the better-resourced and more research-oriented universities (Feather 2012, Lea and Simmons, 2012, Parry et al., 2012). Within the college environment the focus is on teaching as the predominant academic activity, which generates the question of whether or not it is important for staff to engage in research activity when there is no overt driver such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), or indeed access to research funding. Evidence from this study additionally points to deficits in training and opportunities for skills development in research methods that would enable staff to teach and to engage students effectively on research methods, particularly quantitative methods. In essence there appears to be a need for developing awareness and dialogue within the college sector of the role and function of research engagement and research methods teaching in developing critical engagement with knowledge.

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