

Changing views of research activity in college-based higher education (0302)

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Introduction

Research activity within the college-based higher education (HE) sector is limited compared to their colleagues in university settings. This is primarily due to the contractual differences between the sectors where college-based lecturing staff have a full teaching commitment and as such research is not expected nor supported (Feather, 2011). Not being part of the Research Excellence Framework also reduces and external drive to engage in research. Research into the identity of college-based HE lecturers shows that they primarily identify with their teaching role, and scholarly activity is focused on the synthesis and transmission of knowledge rather than its production (Young, 2002), although research informed teaching is seen as a vital component of their teaching practice (Turner, McKenzie, & Stone, 2009). This is not to say that they do not wish to be research active, but are restricted by economic constraints (Feather, 2011) and a lack of managerial understanding of the role (Feather, 2012; Turner, McKenzie, McDermott, & Stone, 2009). This is often dealt with by their engagement in higher-level qualifications, often in their own time and at their own expense, therefore often not receiving institutional acknowledgement for their efforts (Harwood & Harwood, 2004; Young, 2002).

Where college-based lecturers have shown to be more research active is within the realm of pedagogic practice and often the benefits of such research go beyond that of enhancing the reputation of the researcher involved. Cunningham and Doncaster (2002) showed that both students and staff may benefit from the tangible outputs as well as the increase in staff morale from the process.

This study used the opportunity afforded by a college-based HE lecturer research funding scheme whose premise was to increase the staff and student experience through engagement of staff in scholarly activity. Lecturers applied for funding and

various types of awards were made based on the merit and potential impact of the project proposed.

Methodology

Award holders were asked to complete questionnaires with open questions relating to their perspective of the institution's attitude to research through, encouraged to write in as much detail as they saw fit. This method was repeated at the end of the research experience to allow for comparison to be made. Responses were received from fifty-one award holders from five annual cohorts.

Results

The data was analysed through thematic analysis and the following themes were established. Overall there was a positive view of research within further education institutions and the direction of travel seemed to be positive. The way that this positive view was expressed has changed over the research period where views have moved from a general positive view of the conception of research, to it being 'valued' and 'well received'. This was not uniformly the response where some initial responses saw research as being 'low on the agenda' through to the experience of being ignored when they had become research active.

With respect to recognition for their research efforts there was a balance between those who were and were not recognised. Recognition included institutions seeing research activity as part of the HE role and was latterly encouraged, whereas those who felt unrecognised suggested that there was no mechanisms or forum for this to be achieved, leaving them feeling unappreciated. At a practical level prior to being research-active may felt unsupported in their efforts, a trend that reduced on completion of the project. The lack of support initially stemmed from the inability to reduce teaching time, but having been bought out of teaching hours the view was any lack of support was at an interpersonal level with managers highlighted as

unsupportive. On the few occasions where support was mentioned at the outset it this was offered through staff development opportunities and working from home whereas post-research views were that there was more support in dedicated time or remuneration.

Conclusion

It seems that it is possible to change institutional views on research activity by deepening their understanding through having one member of staff showing them the benefits. The negative and uninformed views were changed to more positive, pro-active outlooks where they saw the benefits not only to those undertaking the research, but how much this could benefit other members of staff in their pedagogic practice. If HE departments could develop means of communication where lecturers could disseminate their findings not only would their colleagues benefit from the new pedagogic development but may also feel more inspired and empowered to take on research themselves; engendering a cultural shift.

References

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