

Teaching and learning in the disciplines: an HEA-funded project

Summary report
Dr Stephen Bulman, Project consultant HEA

October 2015





Contents

Section	Page
Foreword	3
Introduction	3
Key Findings	4
1. What are the key challenges faced in HE teaching and learning across the disciplines?	4
Students	4
Staff	4
Institutions	4
2. Looking to the future	5
Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)	5
Employability skills	5
Internationalisation	5
3. Learned Society/Professional Body responses	5
4. Suggestions for the HEA	6
5. Resources employed by academics in their teaching	6
6. Gaps in resources (including events and other activities) that the HEA and/or PSRBs/learned societies could address	6
Conclusions	7
Appendix A: Professional and subject bodies that participated in the project	8
Appendix B: The questions used in focus groups	9

Foreword

We are delighted to share the findings from this research study. The contribution of participating learned societies, professional bodies and their members adds an important insight into the key teaching and learning issues faced in higher education through a crucial disciplinary lens. Supporting high quality innovative teaching and learning in the disciplines is a core objective of the HEA's mission and we are excited to be working closely with a whole range of learned societies and professional bodies to respond to the issues identified.

Steve Denton, Director of Education and Professional Practice

Introduction

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) established the Teaching and Learning Issues in the Disciplines project in spring 2015 in order to research the state of higher education (HE) teaching and learning in a wide range of subject disciplines from the viewpoint of academic teachers within those disciplines, and through the networks created by relevant learned societies and professional bodies. The HEA wanted to identify key themes and issues arising from higher education academics across the range of subject disciplines in order to best understand the sector's needs from a discipline perspective, and to determine how best to work with professional and learned bodies to meet those needs.

Its objective was to further enhance sector knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning from a discipline perspective, including identifying:

- challenges faced by academics at a discipline level;
- likely future developments in each discipline;
- the role that professional or learned subject bodies, and the HEA, currently play in meeting the needs of academics, and how those roles might be enhanced or developed in future;
- resources used in teaching in HE and any significant gaps in their coverage.

The HEA engaged with 23 learned societies and professional or subject bodies across the sweep of higher education provision in the UK.¹ Each body was asked to organise three focus groups composed of their active HE teaching members, and each focus group was asked the same set of questions.² Each learned or professional body produced a report analysing and responding to the focus groups' discussions, and suggesting key areas of activity that the body and/or the HEA could undertake in order to best meet the needs of teaching academics within the relevant discipline.³

This summary report reflects the common findings from across this diverse sample of individual societies and bodies, each of which faced a different blend of challenges and

¹ For a list of bodies please see Appendix A.

² For a list of questions please see Appendix B.

³ Full individual reports can be found on the websites of participating Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) and learned societies.

opportunities. The views below do not of course necessarily represent the official position of any of the professional and subject bodies, nor do they reflect the opinions expressed in all of the focus groups.

In total 492 HE teaching staff from 23 learned societies and professional or subject bodies took part in 72 focus groups during summer 2015, held in locations across the UK, with staff ranging from lecturers to professors.⁴

Key Findings

I. What are the key challenges faced in HE teaching and learning across the disciplines?

The academics who participated in the focus groups identified challenges in their teaching that can be grouped under three broad themes:

Students

- Students' difficulties with self-directed, independent learning activity and other learning skills associated with success in higher education, often linked in academics' minds to inadequacies in the preparation for undergraduate programmes provided by school- and college-level study;
- Wide variation in student ability in classes, often linked to growth in international student numbers and/or widening participation, requiring staff to re-work or develop new or more sophisticated teaching strategies;
- Increased student expectations of their tutors and the perception by staff of an increasingly instrumental approach to learning by students, often linked to the impact of higher fees, marketization and the National Student Survey (NSS);
- Heightened pressures on students deriving from fee-related debt and other commitments such as work and children.

Staff

- Growth in class sizes/module groups associated with recent expansion in HE student numbers and its consequent impact on the range of teaching strategies that can be deployed and the quality of interactions between staff and students;
- Increased pressure of work upon academics, linked to growth in student numbers and expanding areas of activity, reducing time for development and innovation in teaching and learning;
- A tendency for research activity to overshadow teaching in academics' roles, to the detriment of high quality teaching and learning, and a paucity of incentives and opportunities for academics to develop skills and abilities in teaching and learning.

Institutions

- A perceived impact of marketization on university behaviour, caused by national university league tables and the NSS, leading at times to more pressure on teaching resources, narrower curricula or subject offer and less sharing of teaching resources and best practice;

⁴ The HEA chose partner PSRBs and learned societies to reflect the diverse fields of enquiry, study and teaching across UK higher education.

- An increased focus on student employability as a necessary outcome of university courses resulting at times to a tension between academic and vocational dimensions of university teaching;
- While new technology offers opportunities for improved teaching and learning there were downsides that were not always recognised, in particular staff needs around ongoing training and skill development;
- A perceived growth in managerialism and centralised control by university managers resulting in diminished local autonomy in respect of, for example, flexibility around individual subject requirements and experimentation in learning and teaching.

2. Looking to the future

In general, participants predicted a continuation of the trends identified above. Particular emphasis was placed on the growth in importance of the following:

Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)

TEL's continued growth was anticipated given the ongoing pace of technological advance coupled with the expectations of increasingly digitally-immersed students. Examples of likely developments include: greater use of virtual learning environments (VLEs), lecture capture, podcasts, simulations, social media, video clips, flipped classrooms, gamified learning, digital resources, online learning, distance learning, blended models of learning, mobile learning, on-demand learning and tracking of student progress using digital data and systems. Concerns were expressed about a likely widening gap between their own digital competences and those of their students.

Employability skills

Ensuring good employment outcomes was recognised to be an increasingly fundamental requirement in higher education impacting on the design of courses and student assessments, the balance between academic and vocational content and approach, the frequency of work experience and work placement elements within courses, and the skills and experiences required of academic staff. Staff teaching in non-vocational subjects were most concerned about the impact of employability and how they could respond to the challenge of embedding employability in their teaching.

Internationalisation

International student numbers were predicted to grow in the future leading to the need for course curricula and learning, teaching and assessment strategies to evolve and adapt to student cohorts' different and changing needs and expectations.

3. Learned Society/Professional Body responses

The responses of learned societies and professional bodies varied with their specific mission, context, and the particular requests made in the focus groups they held, but some common themes emerged. A number of bodies indicated that they would undertake some of the following:

- start or enhance a teaching and learning working group, network, conference, set of events and/or resource hub;
- develop subject-specific continuing professional development (CPD) or training for HE teaching;

- seek HEA accreditation for teacher-related CPD or map professional qualifications to the UKPSF⁵;
- lobby to raise the status of HE teaching in their subject/profession;
- work to create a stronger career path for HE teachers in their subject/profession;
- develop resources and/or support for staff dealing with generic issues such as:
 - teaching large classes;
 - encouraging student engagement;
 - aiding student transitions from school;
 - best use of technology in teaching and learning;
 - incorporation of employability skills into teaching and learning;
- support and encourage pedagogical research among their membership;
- shift from research as the primary focus of their activity to embrace teaching in HE as a larger part of their agenda.

4. Suggestions for the HEA

As part of their reports, learned societies/professional bodies were invited to suggest actions for the HEA in response to the needs identified by their members. Common suggestions included:

- continue to champion HE teaching and teachers;
- continue and further develop subject-specific resources, events and CPD;
- consider developing subject specific teacher education;
- improve the accessibility of existing pedagogy publications (including those from the old subject centres) on its website.

5. Resources employed by academics in their teaching

The types of resources used in teaching most commonly referred to were:

- websites and other digital resources, software programmes, e-books and social media;
- textbooks and books;
- journal articles;
- conference outcomes and papers;
- newspapers and magazines;
- publications and resources from learned and professional bodies and the HEA;
- government and industry reports;
- guest lecturers;
- fieldwork;
- specialist equipment.

6. Gaps in resources (including events and other activities) that the HEA and/or PSRBs/learned societies could address

Areas for improvement included:

- more or better resources, events, networks and training to support the development of pedagogy for new and existing staff, ideally discipline-specific;
- resources and training to address the following generic issues:
 - teaching large classes;

⁵ The United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning (HEA, 2011). See: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/recognition-accreditation/uk-professional-standards-framework-ukpsf>

- teaching international students;
- using technology effectively;
- incorporating employability into teaching and learning;
- optimising student transitions from school/college;
- easier access to older HEA publications and resources;
- better evaluation and access to existing resources to support HE teaching;
- continued and enhanced HEA and professional/learned body activity to raise the profile and status of teaching in HE and to invest (or lobby for investment) in pedagogical research.

Conclusions

The HEA will use the findings of this project to continue to develop its activities with relevant professional, learned and subject bodies as part of its mission to improve learning outcomes by raising the status and quality of teaching in higher education. Work is already underway to strengthen and widen our disciplinary and subject-relevant CPD opportunities and resources and these insights will help us develop this work further.

The HEA acknowledges, and is grateful for, the support and hard work of the officers, staff and members of those professional and learned bodies who took part in the Teaching and Learning Issues in the Disciplines project.

Appendix A: Professional and subject bodies that participated in the project

Association for Tourism in Higher Education
Academy of Marketing
Academy of Medical Educators
Association of Law Teachers
Association of University Language Centres (who also invited members of the University Council for Modern Languages to participate)
British Academy of Management
British Accounting and Finance Association (Committee of Departments of Accounting & Finance)
British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences
British Psychological Society (Division of Academics, Researchers & Teachers in Psychology)
British Sociological Association
Conference of Heads of University Departments of Economics and the Economics Network
Council for Higher Education in Art and Design
Council for Hospitality Management Education
Council of Professors and Heads of Computing
Historical Association
Institute of Mathematics and its Applications
Leisure Studies Association
Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association
Political Studies Association
Royal Academy of Engineering
Royal Geographical Society
Royal Society of Biology
Royal Society of Chemistry

Appendix B: The questions used in focus groups

- 1 What are the key resources you use in your own teaching?
 - a. For subject knowledge/skills/pedagogy?
 - b. Include books, text books, journals, websites, databases, other?
 - c. Your institution's own material?
 - d. Information from sector-owned or based organisations such as learned society/PSRB/subject association, Higher Education Academy, or other organisations?
 - e. Events and services (conferences, seminars, webinars) online courses, databases, networks?
- 2 What are the learning and teaching challenges you face in your subject area/discipline?
 - a. Highlighting in particular those challenges that are particularly relevant to this discipline context.
- 3 How do you think the teaching in your subject area is likely to evolve over the next few years?
 - a. As above, highlighting the particular challenges expected in the discipline, or exploring how more generic challenges may differentially impact within the discipline.
- 4 What gaps can you identify in the current coverage of teaching and learning resources for your subject discipline and how might your PSRB/learned society or the HEA best address the identified gaps?
- 5 Thinking back to question 2, what gaps might emerge in the near future, given the projected evolution of teaching and learning in your subject?
- 6 Can you think of any other ways in which your PSRB, learned society or the HEA could support and advance learning and teaching in your subject-based practice?

Contact us

**The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York
YO10 5BR**

**+44 (0)1904 717500
enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk**

© The Higher Education Academy, 2015

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is the national body for learning and teaching in higher education. We work with universities and other higher education providers to bring about change in learning and teaching. We do this to improve the experience that students have while they are studying, and to support and develop those who teach them. Our activities focus on rewarding and recognising excellence in teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice, and by helping to influence, shape and implement policy - locally, nationally, and internationally.

The HEA has knowledge, experience and expertise in higher education. Our service and product range is broader than any other competitor.

www.heacademy.ac.uk | www.twitter.com/heacademy

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Editor. Such permission will normally be granted for educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the communications office at the Higher Education Academy: 01904 717500 or pressoffice@heacademy.ac.uk

The Higher Education Academy is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607. Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946.

The Higher Education Academy and its logo are registered trademarks and should not be used without our permission