



Exploring scholarship and scholarly activity in college-based Higher Education

Part 3. A Practice Guide to scholarly activity in college-based HE: what works?

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Contents

Page No.

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 4 |
| 1. What is the purpose of Scholarly Activity | 4 |
| 2. Does “pure” research have a place in college-based HE? | 5 |
| 3. How does Scholarly Activity articulate with continuous professional development and college staff development? | 6 |
| 4. What is the role of “live briefs” and teaching by practitioners? | 7 |
| 5. Should those teaching Higher Education have different conditions of service from their colleagues teaching Further Education | 8 |
| 6. How do colleges manage teaching loads in HE in FE? | 9 |
| 7. How can colleges create and sustain an HE ethos amongst teachers? | 9 |
| 8. How is Scholarly Activity defined and recorded? | 10 |
| 9. How is the impact of Scholarly Activity measured? | 11 |
| 10. Conclusion | 12 |

Introduction

This Guide is derived from the work undertaken in Parts 1 and 2 of the MEG project “Exploring scholarship and scholarly activity in college-based HE”. It provides illustrations and examples of how colleges approach the issues of scholarly activity in all its forms. The definition of “scholarly activity” used here follows the broad guidelines set out in Parts 1 and 2. These took as a starting point a definition evolved by the Mixed Economy Group in 2010¹, which proposed that scholarly activity could be defined as:

An activity or activities with the potential to:

- create or affirm knowledge and/or expertise of a subject or discipline*
- develop or enhance understanding of a subject or discipline*
- develop or enhance methodologies for the delivery of a subject or discipline*

This activity must be shared with peers, disseminated across the institution and possibly beyond and archived in ways which are easily accessible to all staff.

Whilst some colleges reported an element of “innovation” in activity recognised as “scholarly activity”, others described a focus that was more on professional updating and curriculum development. Some colleagues reported their assumption that peer review is a key accompaniment of scholarly activity. This position may be similar to that indicated in the BPP University definition, referred to in Part 1: the University describes scholarship “as the application of the most current knowledge of a discipline or professional specialism to broader activities and practice, communicated in ways which are validated by peers and influence others beyond the organisation.”

This Practice Guide does not seek to identify good or best practice. It identifies a range of current scholarly activity in colleges and provides vignettes of practice that practitioners may find useful, and which may be used to enhance the further development of scholarly activity in colleges. It is offered to practitioners as a means of reviewing their own practice and applying it to the individual contexts of their own institutions.

What follows are a series of questions, some related commentary and some examples of approaches taken by colleges to deal with the issue under discussion.

1. What is the purpose of Scholarly Activity?

The lack of clearly-articulated definitions of scholarly activity in many colleges means that the underlying reasons for supporting teachers to undertake such activity are difficult to identify. In some cases, the expectations of the QAA, the HE review process or the need to provide evidence for applications for Degree Awarding Powers provide the main drivers for strategic engagement with scholarly activity, with the implication that if these drivers were not present, scholarly activity would have a far lower priority. As in

¹ Scholarly Activity in Higher Education delivered in Further Education, 2010

earlier studies carried out by MEG,² few colleges cite the requirements of a validating university as a stimulus to greater or more embedded activity. It is perhaps unsurprising then that few have gone beyond the broad terms set out by the QAA in January 2013.³

Where the purpose of scholarly activity has been considered, several strands emerge. For some individual teachers, scholarly activity is seen as something that teachers of Higher Education do as a matter of course; it is perceived as being part of the persona of the HE professional. For these teachers, scholarly activity is undertaken for their own personal development, as “scholars” in their own right. Indeed, for some tutors, any further application or impact may be purely secondary and incidental to this main purpose. One correspondent noted that experienced teachers or those still active in a previous profession should aim to be considered experts in their field, contributing as much to their own development as the industry within which they are working/researching. Not only do these teachers provide a platform of relevant professional practice but in many cases they provide an industrial context and opportunities for students that college-based staff may not be able to access. In some cases, outputs from scholarly activity have the potential for commercialisation through partnerships with industry.

The scholarly activity of a teacher who is “research active” is assumed (by both their peers and college senior management teams) to have a beneficial impact on their students, but this is notoriously difficult to evaluate or define. Some college policies appear to adopt this assumption, but with no real measures of impact. However, within most colleges, value is seen in undertaking an activity that other HE providers (principally universities) regard as a key to their HE identity and credibility.

For others, including those in some private sector institutions, the impact on the quality of teaching and learning and thus the student experience is described as the prime purpose in supporting staff engagement in scholarly activity. In a smaller number of colleges, scholarly activity is seen as a means of connecting learning with industry via live briefs.

2. Does “pure” research have a place in college-based HE?

Colleges often state that they are not research-driven institutions and as such cannot be required or expected to conduct original research in the same manner - or to the same extent - as universities. Several interviewees noted that FE teaching staff are not expected to undertake research as part of their job and as a consequence are not assessed by their ability to produce such work.

Nevertheless, some colleges do undertake classic “blue skies” research. This is particularly the case where either the college offers a distinctive specialism, for example a large land-based college or a college of art and design. More generally, the factors that are in place to make this particular level of scholarly activity happen include;

² E.g. Scholarly Activity in Higher Education delivered in Further Education, 2010.

³ Guidance on scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of staff: expectations for Foundation Degree-awarding powers and for Taught degree-awarding powers. QAA 2013

- Specialist staff with qualifications and experience at the appropriate level
- Staff willing and capable of undertaking work of this nature
- Institutional support at senior level
- Established internal conferences and staff development events
- A whole-college approach to research and scholarly activity which includes teachers of FE
- Financial support either from college sources or via bids to external funders (including employers)
- Appropriate level of teaching contact
- Access to publication via specialist journals
- Access to college based social media to record and promote activities

Factors that prevent this happening include:

- Staff unable to gain release from teaching and other duties
- Staff capability to undertake research. FE staff may not have either the skills to undertake pure research or the wish to do so
- Time-consuming research applications
- A college culture which does not recognise such research as a core activity for academic staff
- Impact on colleagues e.g. perceived lack of equity in allocating time for research when compared with other functions e.g. course leadership.
- Ineligibility for funding due to the status of the institution

Hartpury College has an integrated *Teaching Learning Research and Knowledge Exchange* strategy. The college has established organisational structures and budget lines that have been designed to support a culture of research within the college. Such structures have engaged teaching staff in research and consultancy whilst also enhancing the learning and progression opportunities of students. [Link to Hartpury College strategy](#)

However, as implied in the bullet points above, funding “pure” research can be difficult for many general FE colleges. In the case of some specialist institutions, employers from their sector will sometimes fund specific research topics, which in most cases are not intended for academic publication but to be of direct use to the funder. In many cases, such projects may involve the application of existing knowledge rather than original research. That, coupled with issues of commercial confidentiality, may make much work of this nature difficult to detect.

3. How does Scholarly Activity articulate with continuous professional development (in a “parent” profession) and college staff development?

Many college staff will retain their membership of a related professional body to underpin their teaching of courses in that subject area. To do so they will in most cases have an obligation to undertake the Continuous Professional Development required by

that body. However, those requirements are often poorly articulated and have relevance to professional practice rather than teaching. Some colleges support staff by funding professional body membership where this is a requirement to teach particular courses or by paying for attendance at professional updating events. Activity of this type may be particularly important when supporting the delivery of Non-Prescribed Higher Education or that requiring approval by a professional body.

The QAA has set out its expectations⁴ on scholarly activity. Many college staff development policies include specific provision for those teaching HE. The usual practice in many colleges is to require staff to possess a qualification higher than that on which they teach, and most institutions contribute to the cost of gaining this. Where study for these qualifications involves research activities, research outcomes are sometimes shared at teaching staff conferences or via internal publication.

The professional bodies contacted as part of the survey were uncertain as to the role of scholarly activity in preparing college staff to teach on courses leading to their higher qualifications. In most cases, reference was made to matters such as membership of that body or a related institute and familiarity with current practice, rather than academic research. There did not appear to be a direct link between teaching NPHE and undertaking scholarly activity.

Plymouth College of Art is a specialist college. Over 50% of its students pursue HE courses and it puts a high premium on the research output of its staff, many of whom are active in their original profession. The college sees a clear link between research, teaching and professional practice, and has established infrastructures to support its vision. [Link to Plymouth document](#)

4. What is the role of “live briefs” and teaching by practitioners?

The QAA definition of scholarly activity accepts that in some disciplines (e.g. creative arts) practice in the chosen field is recognised as scholarly activity. Indeed this practice is often replicated in other disciplines involving industrial and commercial contacts with live briefs and projects. However, it is unclear how this would translate across the range of disciplines supported by the college based sector, where such activity might be more readily classified as “consultancy”.

Many colleges make good use of current practitioners to deliver part of their provision. These individuals may be variously described as fractional, part time or visiting lecturers. In cases where only a small contribution is made, their role may be as guest speakers. In extreme cases where the provision is very specialised, whole courses may be delivered by such colleagues. This may give rise to concerns about how those individuals are integrated into course teams and how realistic any expectations may be for them to undertake “scholarly activity”. The engagement of teachers drawn from the “real” world of work is seen to bring a much needed perspective which is appreciated by students and adds to the professional understanding of full time teachers. In some

⁴ ibid

departments, particularly in small-volume providers of HE, external practitioners are a valuable link to the non-academic world, serving to inspire and contextualise learning.

Weston College is pleased to employ and to support the scholarly activity of teaching staff who undertake practice based research and who retain significant involvement with industry. The College offers an illustration of how students may benefit from the experience of a teacher who is still active in their original profession. [Link to Weston College document](#)

5. Should those teaching Higher Education have different conditions of service from their colleagues teaching Further Education?

Before dealing with the specific issues of teaching Higher Education, it should be borne in mind that standard national terms and conditions for teachers in FECs no longer exist. All colleges are responsible for determining their own approach. Since college incorporation in 1992 there has been a progressive move towards locally-applicable terms and conditions. For example, holiday entitlement for all staff can vary as can job gradings, post titles and internal college structures. What follows has to be read against that background.

A small minority of colleges have introduced separate conditions of service for specialist HE teachers. In most cases this has accompanied a policy that does not permit staff to teach on both HE and FE courses, a move sometimes brought about or even supported by separate campuses for HE provision. Where Full Time teachers cannot fulfil all of the teaching hours required by the provision, specialist Part Time teachers are engaged.

However, a majority of colleges apply the same conditions of service to all staff irrespective of their teaching commitment. This is done for a number of reasons. Foremost amongst these are questions of equity across teachers of all levels and types of student in what are in all cases “mixed economy” institutions. Whilst comparisons may be made with the terms and conditions enjoyed by lecturers in universities by college based HE teachers, other colleagues may compare their role with teachers in school sixth forms, trainers in industry or even practitioners.

Many teachers of HE in colleges also teach FE. Indeed this may be more typical than having dedicated HE teachers in most colleges. Separate terms and conditions for staff employed at the same institution may raise questions of equal value and ultimately have implications for the culture of the college. Such specialisation may also have implications for flexibility in deploying staff and longer term employment prospects. Arguments are also made for the beneficial effects of having teachers crossing the sectoral divide in terms of teaching quality, student progression and professional development. Following the introduction of variable fees, with many new entrants to HE provision setting those fees at £6,000 or less, a further set of issues may arise over resourcing scholarly activity, particularly in comparison with the resources available to universities charging £9,000 per annum.

Ultimately, the decision as to how to engage staff to teach Higher Education is a matter for individual colleges, to be balanced against other factors within the institution.

6. How do colleges manage teaching loads in HE in FE?

Against this background, colleges have adopted varied strategies. In some cases, no allowance is made for the demands of teaching HE. Previous MEG⁵ research suggests that this is often based on the assumption that teaching HE is a valued and sought after role, and thus teachers will be prepared to work in their own time. Indeed, the 2013 survey shows that virtually all HE in FE teachers report a significant commitment of their own time in supporting their role as HE teachers. This approach does not appear to be confined to new entrants to HE teaching or even colleges with small amounts of provision, but rather reflects individual college decisions.

Instead of adopting separate contracts, many colleges use a formula-based approach which allocates additional time to those teaching HE in a transparent way alongside other activities which might attract remission from teaching. This approach is well established in most colleges as it reflects a pre-existing model offering a balance between teaching and what is often described as “marking and preparation”. Examples include:

- A “one for one” approach which offsets every hour spent to teaching HE to one hour for preparation etc.
- An allocation of time for specific activities. For example one college allocates fifteen minutes per week per student for supervision of final Honours dissertations
- Time based on an agreed formula for specialised activity such as clinical supervision and observation of practice in the workplace
- Time for activities such as curation of exhibitions or direction of performance activities

In all of the above examples, the allocation of time is according to agreed formulae and is not contractual. In most cases they are in place for one academic year and are adjusted according to the individual’s teaching commitment.

7. How can colleges create and sustain an HE ethos amongst teachers?

Staff teaching Higher Education in colleges often work in small teams, sometimes including Part Time teachers. Many teach on Further Education courses and may spend the greater proportion of their time doing so. This can make it difficult to create an environment that allows teachers to consider specific issues relating to their HE teaching and in particular the distinctive needs of their HE students. A wide variety of approaches have been taken to creating an appropriate HE ethos. These include:

- Supporting teachers to study for higher degrees to update knowledge and gain familiarity with research skills and methodologies
- Designing staff development activities and conferences specifically for HE teachers
- Establishing communities of practice to share ideas and approaches

⁵ Strategic options, operational challenges. MEG 2010

- Linking with teachers of similar subjects in other colleges and universities
- Encouraging External Examiner work and participating in external validations.

Blackburn College introduced the role of Research Co-ordinator in order to publicise research undertaken at the college and to support scholarly activity amongst teaching staff.

[Link to Blackburn College document](#)

Coleg Sir Gar has devised a system for making and considering funding bids. Proposals are captured in an application form which ensures that staff focus on the relevant bid criteria and most importantly the impact of their research on their students. [Link to Coleg Sir Gar document](#)

Bournemouth and Poole College has organised an annual HE conference for some 10 years. Their experience may be of interest to both those considering such an activity for the first time or to others who are seeking to expand their existing arrangements. [Link to Bournemouth and Poole document](#)

8. How is Scholarly Activity defined and recorded?

The results of the survey show that many colleges do not have a definition of scholarly activity. Against that background, it is perhaps unsurprising that difficulties have been identified in recording the activity that takes place. Parts 1 and 2 of this research give details of the definitions that are in use, but ultimately it will be for individual colleges to arrive at and implement their own definitions to meet the objectives they themselves have set. When colleges come to recording activity undertaken within the boundaries of their stated definition of scholarly activity, a number of approaches have been tried. Means of recording scholarly activity include:

- Using wikis or other social media
- Capture via college staff development documentation. In some colleges, teaching staff of all types are asked to declare and record the range of activities undertaken. In some cases colleges report that teachers need constant reminders as to what can and should be recorded e.g. many will not record acting as Chair for Validation Panels etc. In some colleges these documents are updated on an annual basis and form part of the core documentation used for QAA and validation with partner HEIs
- Regular staff conferences, where current issues for both the college and the HE system in general can be considered. These may also include the opportunity for staff to provide updates or dissemination of scholarly activity they have undertaken
- Events dedicated to sharing good practice in both scholarly activity and pedagogy. In some cases, these events also involve students
- Journals published by the college circulated either internally or more widely. See below for further details.

Grimsby Institute is using e-technology through an on-line research and scholarship wiki called The Network. It has provided a dynamic platform through which research and scholarship can be peer reviewed, published, rapidly disseminated and used to drive forward reflective practice linked to learning and teaching. It has also provided a simple

means through which to increase staff engagement in knowledge transfer activity. Following its launch in 2012, The Network has become an innovative on-line community of scholarly practice and is owned by a team of teaching, learning and scholarship fellows. [Link to Grimsby document](#)

Blackpool & the Fylde College also use an online environment to support scholarship. *Scholarnet* is a web based scholarship tool designed to capture and record all scholarly activity in one place and to support social engagement between staff undertaking scholarly activity. [Link to Blackpool & the Fylde document](#)

Other colleges use a variant on this approach. Several colleges produce an HE Journal. Havering College offers a commentary on how such a publication can be of value, as well as a more informal approach to sharing information with colleagues. [Link to Havering College document](#)

9. How is the impact of Scholarly Activity measured?

Given the difficulties experienced by some colleges in simply defining and recording scholarly activity it is not surprising that there are few robust means of measuring its impact on the teaching and learning process. As indicated in the main report, some argue that active scholarship is valuable in its own right and does not necessarily have to demonstrate impact directly on the student experience. However, most colleges expect to see some measurable and direct impact on the quality of the student learning experience or the quality of teaching in return for remitted hours or similar adjustments to a standard college contract. Means of doing so include:

- Sharing the outcomes of SA with colleagues or peers
- Income generation via consultancy or other work with employers
- Success in gaining funding from external bodies
- Feedback from student surveys
- Publication either in peer referenced journals, college or other publications
- Off-site exhibitions or working as an artist or writer in residence, all of which are open to a wide range of audiences.

In “Scholarship Assessed”, Glassick, Huber and Maeroff (1997)⁶ refer to six criteria against which scholarly activity may be judged. These are proposed as a means of developing a common language for the discussion and evaluation of scholarly activity and include:

- Clarity of goals in undertaking the research
- Adequate preparation
- Appropriate research methods
- Significant results
- Effective communication

⁶ Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Learning.

- Reflective critique

Engagement with these criteria may be useful in stimulating further discussion within colleges.

10. Conclusion

The definition, nature and purpose of scholarly activity in college-based Higher Education will continue to stimulate debate. This Practice Guide has emerged from a literature review and primary research: it seeks to address a number of practical issues within colleges whilst at the same time encouraging discussion about more qualitative or organisational matters that impact on the development of scholarly activity. In no particular order, these include:

- The approach to scholarly activity that is adopted across the whole college. Where both FE and HE staff are actively encouraged to undertake further work around their subjects, this appears to mitigate the often-isolated nature of HE in FE. Scholarly activity (however defined) is not solely the prerogative of the HE teacher
- Critical mass of HE. Where this is very small, collaboration with other colleges and universities may be needed in order to foster and sustain the development of scholarly activity. Previous papers in this research have noted the impact of the time demands placed on HE in FE staff – they may teach across two timetables, which can also be two-semester for HE provision and three terms for FE courses. This could in turn generate a heavy admin burden which may be undertaken without access to the admin support levels found in universities. By sharing expertise in bid writing, research techniques and resources, groups of colleges (ideally with support from a partner university) will be able to nurture and sustain not only their HE teaching colleagues but also a sector-wide approach to HE in FE. Wikis, social media and similar on-line tools may help to break down institutional isolation and enable the sharing of good practice
- An on-going need for a shared *understanding*, if not a shared *definition*, of scholarly activity across the HE in FE sector. As we have illustrated, some colleges have a clear concept of scholarly activity, others significantly less so. Given that all are offering HE, which generally perceives scholarly activity as a core component of an HE ethos, some general principles must be adopted across HE in FE if the sector is to maintain credibility in a competitive environment. This is not to deny the distinctiveness of the HE offer made by FE colleges and which marks it out from that delivered in a more traditional university setting
- Classroom-supported research. This aspect of scholarly activity, in which students are made aware of their teachers' research interests and feel able to discuss investigative approaches, was only occasionally referred to in our survey but offers an opportunity for a different approach to the development of research skills

- A key aspect of scholarly activity is to be able to step back and develop a critical view (on practice, existing research, attending a seminar, etc). One correspondent notes that professional updating becomes something more than keeping up to date if the teacher reflects on why and how things have changed and in whose interests. Producing something as a result of updating or attending a conference is just as important as going to it. One form of production is writing. This could be an article for a journal but synopses for students, on-line materials and resources for students are also relevant outputs which reflect critical review.

The Mixed Economy Group of colleges is keen to promote a discussion of the issues arising out of this research. Its members have several decades of experience of delivering HE and are keen to share and develop this expertise. The authors of our vignettes have provided their contact details as a means of beginning this process.

As students become more concerned about the value of their higher qualification in the job market, teachers will be expected to reflect those concerns in their teaching and curriculum design. At the same time, tutors will be expected to ensure that their teaching reflects academic knowledge of the subject at an appropriate level. Maintaining an effective balance between these two demands will present challenges to teachers, managers and institutions as the Higher Education landscape continues to evolve.