



JOURNAL OF Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

Scholarly Activity in Provider Context

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ABSTRACT

College-based Higher Education (CBHE) is contributing positively to raising the profile of its scholarly activities. Rather than seeking to directly emulate more traditional universities, there is evidence that CBHE scholarly activity is much more closely tied to its unique provider context. But, in the process, CBHE is also contributing to debates about widening the scope of research and scholarship throughout higher education.

Keywords: scholarly activity; college higher education.

In the last ten years, there has been a steady stream of academic and policy literature expressing some concern about the ability of College-based Higher Education (CBHE) to develop a strong 'HE ethos'. Indeed, along with a colleague, we contributed to these debates by expressing some of our own concerns (Lea & Simmons, 2012).

It is against this background that we relished the opportunity afforded us by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in commissioning a report aimed at exploring some of the issues in more detail. In that report, we focused on how FE colleges in England were rising to the challenge of developing that HE ethos, with specific reference to developing forms of *higher* learning and a culture of research and scholarship. We did this in three ways: first, an analytical discussion which reflected on academic and policy literature related to HE in FE; second, a summary review and discussion of the findings of the Integrated Quality Enhancement and Review (IQER) reports produced by the QAA over the last five years; and third, the production of six case studies drawn from interviews and discussions with HE in FE colleagues around the country (Simmons & Lea, 2013).

When putting together the final report, we were struck by how confident many of the HE managers and teachers were about nurturing a distinct college HE ethos; for example, offering the kinds of tutorial support that many non-traditional students often need but fostering forms of independent learning at the same time. We also found a clear sense of FE colleagues not wanting to emulate some of the traditional universities but instead forging more unique HE identities tied to their own provider context and missions; for example, rather than worrying about whether local employer stakeholder needs might threaten their HE ethos, they were seeing this more as a knowledge exchange opportunity. It was also interesting to note that some of this confidence had been drawn from their (generally) positive experiences of the IQER process, and this had also given them confidence in preparing for the new Higher Education Review (HER) process, which will bring all HE providers under the same review umbrella.

We were also very pleased to be able to report positively on the ways that research and scholarship were being developed. Having witnessed in the past derogatory 'dereliction of duty' comments aimed at colleagues wanting to develop scholarly profiles for

themselves, and having read articles talking about scholarship as "the word that dare not speak its name" (Young, 2002), and with titles such as *Oh, to be a scholar* (Feather, 2012), it was extremely refreshing to be able to report on the ways that HE in FE colleagues were now busy forging scholarly cultures in their colleges. And, whereas in the past we had spoken of the usefulness of Ernest Boyer's four scholarships (i.e. the scholarships of discovery, of integration, of application and of teaching) (Boyer, 1990) as a way to promote scholarship in an HE in FE context, we were also very pleased to be able to report on some of the ways that this was actually happening. In this context, we found examples of colleges wanting scholarship to be avowedly connected to teaching and learning and the curriculum, and promoting their links with local employers as a firm basis for forms of scholarly activity. Indeed, in not elevating original research (the scholarship of discovery) above these other forms of scholarship, as Boyer had criticised many American universities for doing, we may also be seeing here some evidence to support a reframing of the nature of scholarship throughout higher education, regardless of provider context.

Although some of these scholarly cultures currently have a fledgling nature, there is a growing evidence base from which to showcase a wide range of scholarly activity throughout CBHE. For example, I have also been working recently with colleagues on a Higher Education Academy commissioned project looking at student scholarly activity in CBHE, where we were able to collect over fifty case studies drawn from around the world, all demonstrating clear examples of where students were engaged in higher, research-minded learning activities (Healey, Jenkins, & Lea, 2014). Taken collectively, CBHE is clearly demonstrating some strong evidence of being able to forge a vibrant culture of research and scholarship, and one which is avowedly tied to its provider context.

Biography

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