Bettie Higgs, Catherine O'Mahony
University College Cork, Ireland

The integration of research, teaching and learning: the impact of national and international collaborations on practice. (0202)

Programme number: K1.1
Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

In Ireland, the research-teaching nexus debate led to the establishment of the National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning in 2007. This is an inter-institutional collaboration, led by University College Cork, that serves all higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland.[1] The strategic framework that guides the work of the National Academy has a number of goals including investigation of international models of good practice in linking research, teaching and learning and enabling higher education institutions to develop, share and implement good practice.

The National Academy has, since its inception, operated annual national grants schemes, teaching excellence awards schemes and research conferences, as well as providing other forms of staff development opportunities. This current investigation seeks to discover to what extent the language and practice of the integration of research teaching and learning has changed over the five years' of operation. Analysis of the language used in grant applications, award nominations, and conference abstracts (but particularly the former) over the five year period has been conducted to detect any changes that have occurred. This paper will present the results of this analysis.

During the past 5 years the National Academy disbursed over 1.2 million euro in a series of small and large grants to 161 projects involving 420 researchers. Analysis of 123 grant applications received in the earliest years, 2007 and 2008, from the 5 initial partner institutions[2] indicated that while all applications referred to teaching, not all applications included reference to research. In some cases, applications did not refer to student learning. A significant number of applications were focused on describing changes in curriculum design and/or teaching practice, without associated enquiry. Applicants were, in most instances, 'blind' to the research-teaching nexus. Applicants who included the phrase 'integration of research, teaching and learning' failed to say how this would be achieved. Of those applications in 2007 and 2008 that connected research, teaching and learning, the majority were confined to the category of research-led teaching, that is, where the curriculum is informed by the research interests of the teacher.

The conclusion was that the language of the integration of research, teaching and learning (IRTL) was not highly developed. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning strand was particularly poorly represented in early grant applications. This data led the National Academy to more clearly define the multiple strands of IRTL that higher education teachers, and those supporting teaching and learning, can engage in. Influenced by Boyer's (1990) definitions of scholarship, and the work of Healey and Jenkins (2005),

---

1 See here for an overview of third-level education in Ireland http://www.hea.ie/

2 University College Cork (lead partner); NUIG, WIT, TCD and UCD

Brew (2006) and others, the multiple strands of IRTL were teased out, expanded and clearly articulated. The strands were then supported by annual conferences and other staff development events.

Subsequently, the National Academy grants initiative was expanded in 2009 to all thirty-eight Higher Education Institutions. The multiple strands of the research-teaching nexus were clearly articulated in the call for proposals. Prospective applicants reported 'light-bulb moments' when engaging with the call. Some had been already engaged in this work without having a language to articulate it. The number of grant applications increased significantly, rising from 126 in 2009 to 165 in 2010. The quality of applications also increased. The majority of successful applications managed to address more than one strand of IRTL. The successful applications included not only research-led teaching, but strands such as undergraduate students participating in research, postgraduate students tutoring and supervising undergraduate research, and teachers carrying out enquiry into their own (or others') teaching and student-learning. Even though additional funding was allocated to the scheme, the grants initiative became more competitive year on year, evidenced by an increasing ratio of applications to funded projects. In 2008 one in every three applications was successful, while one in every five was successful in 2010 (Murphy and Brennan, 2011). The percentage of interdisciplinary and collaborative applications also increased year on year.

Five years on, and teachers in Irish higher education have become more confident, fluent and innovative in their understanding and practice of the integration of research teaching and learning. This is evidenced not only by the quality of the successful applications, but also by an upsurge in the number of team projects featuring collaborations with other higher education institutions, across 4 continents, as well as other public sector and educational organisations, and industry (Murphy and Brennan, 2011).

Successful applications disseminated their work widely, via publications[3] and through conferences, and became another vehicle to practice the language of the multiple strands of integrating research, teaching and learning. By 2012 successful grant applications had covered the majority of disciplines, but the broad area of social sciences (taking in Law, Education, Political Sciences) achieved the highest success rate at 37% of the funding allocated.

Compared with the grant applications, the language used in national award nominations was of a high quality from the start, with awardees often having a high research profile.[4] However the language has deepened with evolving understanding of what is meant by the integration of research teaching and learning. In an independent evaluation of the National Academy, Davies (2010) noted the "significant effects on the entire third level community" in the development of the language and implementation of IRTL. The impact of the National Academy's work was strongly endorsed in the Irish Higher Education

---

3 View/download a range of resources available on the National Academy's repository at: http://www.nairtl.ie/index.php?pageID=320

4 Further information on the National Awards for Excellence in Teaching at http://www.nairtl.ie/index.php?pageID=68

Strategy to 2030 which highlights "much valuable work in …. promoting research-based teaching practices in academic professional development".

Strong links have been forged with international partners, enabling the National Academy to learn from and build on promising models of practice internationally. Implications for future national and international collaborations will be sought to continue and enhance this work.

Brew, A (2006) *Research and teaching: beyond the divide.* London: PalgraveMacmillan

Boyer, E L (1990) *Scholarship reconsidered: priorities for the professoriate*. Princeton University NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Davies, K G (2010) *Report of SIF evaluation.* Higher Education Authority: Available at www.hea.ie/files/files/file/FINAL%2025%20Jan.pdf

Jenkins, A and Healey, M (2005) *Institutional strategies to link teaching and research.* York: The Higher Education Academy http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/Institutional_strategies.pdf

Murphy, J., and Brennan, A. (2011) *NAIRTL Grants Initiative: Evaluation of Impact.* NAIRTL Published Report pp96.