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A MELTing Moment in UK Higher Education?

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Reflections on how the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) challenge academic leaders to foster new ways to integrate education and research

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Abstract: REF and TEF in the UK

- Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and changes to Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK incentivize integration of research and education in universities.

- MELT and RSD frameworks are ideally suited to meet these needs.

- **BUT** this cannot happen unless universities adopt professional development that fosters academic interest in these approaches **AND** sustains the incorporation of these frameworks within teaching practice.

- This paper summarizes one approach to PD inspired by RSD and MELT

- How we can influence university leaders to adopt RSD/MELT approaches is a new focus for research.

An ever-present tension: Balancing the needs of education and research

- This ever-present tension in the life of most academics is also celebrated.

- Fusion of these twin pillars of higher education often leads to intense creativity, BUT this does not lessen its consequences for the careers of academics and students at all levels.

- It structures everyday life in universities by influencing everything from the allocation of teaching responsibilities, promotion criteria, and investment in campus infrastructure.

Policies for resolving these tensions: REF and TEF

- Key policy tool in the UK has been the **Research Excellence Framework** (REF, 2014, and its predecessors; the Research Selectivity Exercise, 1986 and 1989, and the Research Assessment Exercise, 1992, 1996, 2001, and 2008) and now the **Teaching Excellence Framework** (TEF, 2016 onwards).
  - The implementation of each exercise has been highly controversial (Molesworth et al., 2011), but in the context of a governance landscape typified by audit cultures of various stripe (Waters, 1989), they are accepted by many as a price worth paying to maintain public investment in universities.
- TEF tries to correct perception that REF reinforces research dominance within universities at the expense of education.
  - The failure of several 'elite' universities to achieve more than a Bronze award in the 2017 TEF exercise, the first in which such graded evaluations were made, was seen by many to be a sign that this corrective action was at last starting (Galbraith, 2017).

TEF and REF: Seeking a new balance?

- **TEF** guidance documentation provides the following information about one of the main 'aspects of quality', **Learning Environment**:

  - Learning Environment includes the effectiveness of resources such as libraries, laboratories and design studios, work experience, opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and extra-curricular activities in supporting students' learning and ***the development of independent study and research skills***. The emphasis is on a personalised academic experience which maximises retention, progression and attainment. ***The extent to which beneficial linkages are made for students between teaching and learning, and scholarship, research or professional practice (one or more of these) is also considered*** (Department of Education, 2016, p.19; emphasis added).

- In addition to the baseline metrics used in the TEF exercise, universities must articulate through a fifteen-page written statement how they can evidence their achievement of the linkages between education and research referred to in this aspect of quality.

REF: 'Integration of teaching and research'

- In reviewing REF, Lord Stern's 2016 report observes that:

  - Many HEIs argue that their research and teaching activities are closely intertwined. Indeed, some argue that **research and teaching are 'jointly produced'** and that the economies of scope in this joint production should be recognised in order to avoid the distortion of allocations and career choices, and indeed the strength and effectiveness of the UK academic base.

  - How a subject is taught, and what is taught in a discipline could be an important indicator of research impact…[We must] ensure…that TEF and REF do not incentivise universities to separate inappropriately or dichotomise their research and teaching missions (ibid., p.17)

- HE further recommended:

  - 7: Impact case studies…should also include impact on government policy, on public engagement and understanding, on cultural life, on academic impacts outside the field, and **impacts on teaching** (ibid., p.23).

  - The renewed emphasis on the range of research and scholarship based activities that can be used for Impact Case Studies, and their broadening to include, for example, the **impact of research on innovation in teaching theory and practice** (ibid., p.28).

Carpe Diem: A MELTing moment in UK Higher Education?

- MELT and the Research Skills Development Framework can support research-integrated education (or research-engaged education or some other term – the nomenclature is not really important).

- **BUT** how can we seize this moment to encourage those in leadership positions in our universities to implement these approaches?

- Laissez-faire reliance on renewal arising from uncoordinated actions of academics who have developed their own teaching practice through chance discovery of models of engaged learning and teaching achieves change at a very slow pace or perhaps not at all.

Getting the word out: Necessary, but not sufficient

- Telling people about RSD or MELT is only part of the solution.

- Studies in schools (Hattie, 2009) and universities (Matthews, 2017) indicate that awareness of positive potential of innovations in learning design and pedagogy does not reduce reluctance to utilise these in own practice, often in fear of negative consequences should change lead to problems that outweigh positive outcomes.

- THEREFORE, author led a change project in Faculty of Health, Arts and Design at Swinburne University of Technology in 2015-16 to develop and use a more structured approach for staff PD to help redesign the units coordinated and taught (Kehoe et al. forthcoming).

Outline of the Unit Improvement Planning process

Module Title and Topic	Week	Activities
"Scope for Change" Learning outcomes and curriculum alignment	1	Pre-Workshop Tasks
	2	Workshop 1
	3	Post-Workshop Tasks
"Assessment is Learning" Assessment design and alignment with learning outcomes	4	Pre-Workshop Tasks
	5	Workshop 2
	6	Post-Workshop Tasks
"High Impact Blended Learning" Use of technology	7	Pre-Workshop Tasks
	8	Workshop 3
	9	Post-Workshop Tasks
"Evaluation and Professional development" Career advancement	10	Pre-Workshop Tasks
	11	Workshop 4
	12	Post-Workshop Tasks

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Constructive alignment through RSD structure

- Research Skill Development framework used explicitly as a resource in the PD materials only occasionally.

- **BUT** provided implicit structure to articulate how the learning outcomes of each unit and their constructive alignment to proposed learning activities and assessment in the new version of units could be rethought and explained to students.

- Structured dialogue led to clearer understanding of how academics' own research could inform the learning outcomes of the unit and its assessment strategy, including the reconfiguration of assessment criteria.

Some comments on aligning teaching and research

Area of Teaching/Unit Coordination	2015	2016
1. Approach to teaching	"I was too nice. I would change due dates etc. when students asked." "I was **inconsistent**."	**"Students need boundaries and need to know what they're doing."** "A teacher needs to be organised." "Teaching is the highest expression of human endeavour."
2. Method of delivery	**"I'm a researcher, so I was giving them three hours of didactic lectures. It was all I knew."**	Regarding a blended approach: "It is working like a dream." "Engages students."
3. Content selection	**"I taught them what I knew."**	To engage students, **"content must be made relevant to what [the students] perceive they will be doing in a professional context."**

Winning hearts and minds at every level

- The advent of new approaches to TEF and REF in the UK should make it more likely that university leaders will respond positively to RSD/MELT because they are **well suited to requirements of this moment**.

- **BUT** convincing leaders and those at the 'chalk face' of the opportunities for improvements in student learning can be a challenge (Bolam et al., 2005).

- Initiating **AND** sustaining the UIP process were the biggest obstacles.

- This provides a new focus for RSD/MELT research: understand how to bring these frameworks to the attention of colleagues **AND THEN** ensure they are enthusiastically and successfully adopted as part of on-going teaching practice and learning design to **make this more than a**

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