

## EDITORIAL

# Refocusing the links between research, teaching and learning in Higher Education: a case for a 'research-learning nexus'?

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### Summary - *Crynodeb*

The links between research, teaching and learning are arguably at the heart of university-level education, yet the debate about the significance of such links remains ongoing. In the UK, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2003 suggested the creation of teaching-only institutions and so decoupling the links between research and teaching, which stimulated a sector-wide discussion and a general appreciation of the links. More recently, commentators are warning about a renewed threat of a split between research and teaching stemming from the growing attention on institutional ranking. Academics contribute to research and teaching in a number of ways whether they are considered research-active or not, and it may be that it would be more beneficial going forward if the debate is refocused to be based around a 'research-learning nexus' in appreciation of the growing transformation in Higher Education towards student-centred learning.

*Gellir dadlau bod y cysylltiadau rhwng ymchwil, addysgu a dysgu wrth wraidd addysg lefel prifysgol, ond eto mae'r ddadl ynghylch arwyddocâd y cyfryw gysylltiadau'n parhau. Yn y DU, yn 2003, awgrymodd yr Adran Addysg a Sgiliau (DfES) y dylid creu sefydliadau addysgu'n unig gan ddadgyplu'r cysylltiadau rhwng ymchwil ac addysgu, a sbardunodd drafodaeth ar draws y sector a gwerthfawrogiad cyffredinol o'r cysylltiadau. Yn ddiweddarach, mae sylwebwyr yn rhybuddio am fygythiad newydd y gall rhwyg godi rhwng ymchwil ac addysgu yn sgil y sylw cynyddol a roddir i safleoedd ('ranking') sefydliadau. Mae academyddion yn cyfrannu at ymchwil ac addysgu mewn nifer o ffyrdd p'un a ydynt yn cael eu hystyried yn weithredol ym maes ymchwil neu beidio, ac wrth fynd ymlaen efallai y byddai'n fwy buddiol ailffocysu'r ddadl yn seiliedig ar 'blethwaith ymchwil-dysgu' gan werthfawrogi'r trawsnewid sy'n digwydd ym maes Addysg Uwch tuag at ddysgu myfyriwr-ganolog.*

**Key Words:** research, teaching, learning, nexus, higher education, university.

Within the past two years there has been a renewed debate in the news about the significance of the links between research and teaching in Higher Education that, since the 1990s, has often been referred to the 'research-teaching nexus'. This is not the first time such a debate has taken place and in a previous editorial (Haslett, 2009) I recalled the UK Government's proposal to split off research to create teaching only universities (DfES, 2003). This proposal subsequently inspired sector-wide discussion and a series of monographs on the topic published by the Higher Education Academy (e.g. Jenkins and Healey, 2005; Jenkins et al., 2007; Healey & Jenkins, 2009; Haslett, 2010) that helped to re-invigorate interest across the Higher Education sector, including in Wales (see Haslett & Rowlands, 2009, 2010; Haslett & Usei, 2018). Indeed, this growing interest is perhaps reflected in the number of scholarly articles that have appeared which, according to Google Scholar, totals 2,040 in the period 2010-2020 compared to 486 in the previous decade (surveyed 26th February 2020). These contributions are wide ranging, for example, from subject-

specific discourse (e.g. Day, 2012; Tcholakova et al., 2012; Higgins et al., 2013; Quinn, 2016) to modes of delivery that embeds research in the curriculum (e.g. Tweed & Boast, 2011; Webster & Kenney, 2011).

Yet given this increased focus, and apparent support for the 'nexus', it is interesting to note a survey undertaken by the *Times Higher Education* in 2018 who surveyed 404 academics and found that 50% disagree that "research-inactive staff make worse lecturers" whilst only 21% agree (Grove, 2018, p. 34). But why should research-inactive staff necessarily make worse lecturers when they are likely to engage in scholarship to stay up-to-date? Cutterham (2019), for example, offers a personal view that he "could never teach effectively, on any topic, without some actual knowledge and engagement", a view that arguably might invoke scholarly activity as well as research, but goes on to conclude clearly that "without research, teaching at university level is impossible" (p. 32). Therefore, the argument returns to the Humboldtian tradition that it is research that makes university-level education distinctive.

The threat of a split between research and teaching-focused institutions, which was envisaged in the UK by the DfES (2003), appears to have resurfaced due to the "rankings-driven rationalisation of higher education's key functions" (Ross, 2018, p. 8). This threat led Nobel winner Professor Brian Schmidt to warn that this would "sever the teaching-research nexus and trigger a 'dangerous and unsustainable' cycle" (Ross, 2018, p. 8; see also Gill, 2018). Schmidt suggests that such a split would ultimately lead to students being "decoupled from the research of the day" (p. 8).

An example of a potential split is highlighted by Matthews (2018) in Humboldt's homeland of Germany where the dominance of the English language in research might lead to the hiving off of researcher's into English language-based research institutes, leaving other staff to deliver German-language courses to students in local teaching-focused universities. However, in general terms, Pell (2018) offers a counter to this suggestion in noting that independent research institutes around the World may be declining in favour of concentrating research more in universities alongside teaching, notwithstanding local variance. This is a changing situation the sector should monitor with interest.

Returning to the *Times Higher Education* 2018 survey results, 50% of those academics surveyed were also of the view that it was very important for improving the learning experience of undergraduates to involve them in a research project (Grove, 2018). Therefore, a question for consideration, is whether the 'nexus' requires refocusing from 'research-teaching' to 'research-learning', with the emphasis not on teaching but on student-centred learning and the learning experience, and so creating the concept of the 'research-learning nexus'. Indeed, Tierney (2018), in a response to Arum (2018), highlights the work of 'teaching-focused academics' in the area of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and pedagogic research that aims to "improve both their [academics] teaching practice and their students' learning" (p. 28). Such research-informed teaching, as it is often termed, is now widespread and is an important aspect of what Haslett (2009) considered as a wider 'research-teaching complex' that includes both discipline-based and pedagogic research in improving curriculum and the learning experience.

The issues regarding research-teaching-learning links continue to be complex but university leaders and academics should decide what university level education means for them, their institutions and their students. My own opinion is that universities should be places that create new knowledge through research and innovation, and to educate the researchers and teachers of the future. Indeed, any institution that provides doctoral and other research degrees must, as part of the criteria for the award, offer the opportunity for those students to undertake research and create original knowledge, an opportunity that should also cascade to other levels, such as to taught postgraduate and undergraduate students.

Within Wales, the University of Wales and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David has continued to champion and celebrate the links between research, teaching and learning, not least in the annual Wales NEXUS Conference, which is a descendant of the Newport NEXUS Conference that I began at the University of Wales, Newport, in 2009. A number of papers included in Volume 2 of the *Wales Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* originated as presentations and/or workshops at the Wales NEXUS Conference 2019 at the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea. I am extremely grateful to the authors, both academics and students, for taking the time to write up their papers for wider dissemination across the higher education community.

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