Developing an Evidence Base for Engagement and Impact in Higher Education Institutional e-Learning Projects

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Abstract

This poster argues that an evidence-informed approach can be appropriate for ensuring accountability and validity of change initiatives in Higher Education (HE) in general and e-learning specifically, if recognition is made of the local context and the evidence-base gathered and used in situ. We describe how this model of evidence-informed practice is applied in relation to the HE Academy Pathfinder programme, a national "transformation initiative" in the UK. The goals of the programme are focused on exploiting and developing synergies to enhance and change practice where necessary. Four institutions (Cambridge, Reading, Brunel and London South Bank) are implementing an evidence-informed approach in different ways depending on their institutional context and culture. This poster draws upon collaborative activities of these institutions, focusing on the way in which they adapt common approaches to support their respective institutional change processes. It outlines the approaches adopted by each project and highlights the role of evidence in informing engagement with stakeholders and participants, and the development of practice in HE; ways of sharing models of evidence-informed practice in HE; and research approaches that can improve engagement with stakeholders and participants - while still generating high-quality research outcomes.

Keywords

higher education, e-learning, evidence-based research, evidence-informed practice, knowledge transfer, pathfinder projects.

Oliver and Conole (2003) note that 'Policy makers are increasingly looking to evidence-based practice as a means of ensuring accountability and validity in education and more recently in e-learning.' But they caution against an evidence-based approach which essentially attempts to replicate large-scale meta-analyses of the type common in medical research, arguing that such an approach is inappropriate in an e-learning context. In this poster, we argue that an evidence-based approach can be appropriate if recognition is made of the local context and the evidence-base is gathered and used in situ. This is more in line with the approach of Carmichael et al. (2007), who describe how evidence, appropriately selected

and structured, can be used to support co-interpretation and co-research activities, agenda-setting and managed change processes.

The poster explores how this broader model of evidence-based practice is being applied in relation to a national initiative in the UK (http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/pathfinder/). The Pathfinder programme links to a related initiative on institutional benchmarking in e-learning (Plenderleith et al, 2007). The Pathfinder programme is intended as "a transformation initiative which has organisational change, development and dissemination as its core aims. The goals of the programme focus on exploiting and developing synergies to enhance and change practice where necessary." The poster draws upon collaborative activities of four institutions involved in the programme, and the way in which they adapt an evidence-based research approach to gathering data and representation of activities to support their respective institutional embedding of e-learning. The four institutions (Cambridge, Reading, Brunel and London South Bank) approach the embedding agenda in different ways, depending on their institutional context and culture; a common thread across all four is a commitment to adopt an evidence-based approach.

- The Cambridge project aims to create a descriptive framework for use in learning and teaching initiatives across the University in a wider context. The project will demonstrate how innovations can be embedded within the wider learning and teaching picture, and how and where they can add value.
- The project at Reading aims to transform institutional quality management processes. It aim focus is to develop a strategic approach to the expansion and embedding of e-learning in order to enhance the student experience. This enhanced focus will allow schools to be more proactive and forward-looking in reviewing their provision and approaches to e-learning.
- Using a change management strategy, the project at Brunel aims to manage change in relation to e-learning within Schools. The evidence-base created will be used to explore what they might aim to achieve in the blended learning situation with the academic leadership of Schools, and to establish a process for the ongoing monitoring and development of explicit e-learning action plans within Schools.
- London South Bank University's project aims to explore how e-learning impacts on the academic endeavour, and the implications of this for academic and other staff roles in terms of their skills, knowledge and competencies. It will support the strategic human resource planning process by informing the nature and scope of the staff roles evolving in this area.

The poster will outline the approaches being adopted by each project and will highlight:
- The role of evidence in informing engagement with stakeholders and participants and the development of practice in HE;
- Ways of sharing models of evidence-informed practice in HE;
- Research approaches and techniques that can improve engagement with stakeholders and participants - while still generating high-quality research outcomes.

The meaning of an evidence-based approach in this context and the perceived benefits will be addressed by questions that will include:
- What informs and drives change in HE? Ideology, policy, demographic patterns, individual innovators, research and evaluation?
- What characterises the evidence-base which informs and supports change? How might such an evidence base be developed to complement, enhance or even replace existing structures and drivers?
- What kind of evidence, in what kind of evidence base, would best support: 1.Stakeholder engagement? 2. Development of practice? 3.High levels of credibility across our institutions? 4.High quality research activity?

The poster will also explore patterns of knowledge transfer in higher education, 'what travels' in educational networks, and how practices are adapted according to institutional and disciplinary contexts. This would include such themes from the four institutions' projects as might inform a collaborative network: Data collection methods and research instruments; Analytical frameworks or strategies; Engagement strategies; and Communication strategies.

The poster will review emerging themes which have relevance across not only the institutional contexts

described by the projects, but more generally across a rapidly-developing higher education sector.

References

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