

**Academy  
literature  
reviews  
2005/06**

Executive  
summaries





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The full reports of the literature reviews are available at:  
[www.heacademy.ac.uk/researchpublications.htm](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/researchpublications.htm)

## Foreword

I am very pleased to introduce this summary of the reports from the Higher Education Academy's first round of Literature Reviews.

There is a growing debate in higher education about what constitutes evidence-based or evidence-informed approaches to policy development and improving teaching and learning. What is appropriate evidence? How important are contextual factors in considering that evidence? How can evidence – both qualitative and quantitative – be brought together to address particular issues? Are systematic reviews a way forward? Is there a difference between evidence-based or evidence-informed teaching at a broad sector level, for individual higher education institutions, for faculties and departments and for individual academics?

The Academy is closely involved in this debate. Some of the questions and issues on which we would like to generate discussion include:

- What does research evidence tell us about effective practice or the issues and problems that need to be addressed in developing effective practice?
- What sorts of evidence can and should the sector, individual institutions and individual academics be collecting for themselves, based on what we know about good practice and issues to be considered?
- What sorts of structures and processes should institutions be building to enable them to reflect and act on the evidence that they collect about their own practice?

My own view is that what constitutes good teaching and learning is both generic and contextual. It is unlikely that educational research in higher education can identify the best way of teaching something. But this is not to suggest that evidence-based or evidence-*informed* practice (my preferred terminology) is not possible. Indeed, generic educational research in higher education can and does play a very powerful role in improving teaching and learning. One of the most powerful outcomes of such research is the development of ways of thinking about educational issues and the development of a language to discuss such issues within particular contexts.

The Academy has begun a programme of activities to support the development of more evidence- and research-informed approaches to the improvement of teaching and student learning experiences in higher education. These include funding a number of research projects aimed at improving student learning experiences, commissioning surveys of staff and student experiences of various aspects of teaching and learning, and commissioning of a series of literature reviews on strategically important issues in the improvement of student learning experiences: see our website at [www.heacademy.ac.uk/4493.htm](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/4493.htm)).

The literature reviews we summarise here aim to identify the issues, concepts and evidence associated with the topics they address rather than specific questions of practice or policy. We hope that the reviews will help teachers, policy-makers and researchers in higher education to identify relevant questions, issues or sources of evidence to inform their own research or practice.

**Michael Prosser**

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# The first-year experience

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The first-year experience in higher education has been the topic of research and comment in English-language academic publications in the UK and worldwide for more than 40 years. The expansion of higher education has led to an increased requirement to support the diverse student population, a possible reason for an increasing concern with the first-year experience.

This literature review aims to consider the research literature and institutional 'grey material' exploring the undergraduate and postgraduate first-year experience and to identify key emerging issues to inform university policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and other interested parties.

In this review 'first year' refers to the first-year of study of an undergraduate or postgraduate student in a higher education institution. Almost all the published literature refers to students in their first year of undergraduate study. The available published literature was extensive, around 750 publications were reviewed and there are 545 different citations in the final report. Additionally over 200 institutional grey items were reviewed in an additional close-up study of the first-year material generated by four UK institutions.

## Methodological approach to the review

For purposes of this review published literature has been defined as anything with an ISBN or ISSN. Grey literature is defined as that which is in the public domain but does not have an ISBN or ISSN or which has limited distribution.

The review contains two types of literature: first, published literature identified as a result of an extensive search going back 20 years, augmented by significant material prior to 1986 and supplemented by 'accidental' grey literature; second, a systematic exploration of institutional grey literature produced in-house in a sample of four institutions.

## Overview of the published research

The range of enquiries into the first-year experience is wide but there are recurrent themes.

1. Performance and retention, including predicting success, assessing performance and withdrawal and retention
2. Factors impacting on performance and persistence, including institutional, personal and external factors
3. Support for the first year, including induction, adjustment and skill support
4. Learning and teaching, including new techniques for first-year groups and first-year learning behaviour.

The majority of the reported research on the first-year experience is based on single institution studies, often with small samples of students, not uncommonly from a single programme of study. Often, existing data relating to a student cohort, such as registry data, grades and to a lesser extent satisfaction ratings, are used to identify significant factors that impact on the first-year experience, in particular decisions whether to persist or withdraw.

### Performance and retention

There have been many attempts to predict the success of students in their first year (and beyond). Most of the research tries to identify a simple determining factor of first-year performance.

The literature suggests that secondary school grades and special tests do not closely relate to first-year performance in general. Prior knowledge or expertise in a subject and grades achieved in the early part of the first year are indicators of success but only in combination with other variables. Results of previous assessments at all stages are the best predictor of subsequent results.

Published research evaluating performance suggests that first-year students tend to overrate their knowledge and abilities. Such evaluative studies are designed to identify gaps as a basis for implementing interventions designed to overcome student deficiencies.

Predicting success and evaluating performance overlaps with concerns about retention of students in the first year. The main theory in this area is based on notions of social and academic integration. Students withdraw from the first year if they feel they are not integrated. Models of social and academic integration have been criticised because they tend to reflect a traditional (white middle-class residential) college student experience. Augmentations of the integration model include cultural capital theories. One clear message from the literature is that no model fits all situations.

## Factors impacting on performance and persistence

There is a large body of research on the factors that affect first-year performance and persistence in higher education. The research suggests that there is no simple relationship between integration variables and retention. Withdrawal is the result of a complex combination of student characteristics, external pressures and institution-related factors. Students' decisions to leave are often the result of a build-up of factors. In the UK, research seems to suggest that persistence is related to student satisfaction, which is integrally linked with their preparedness for higher education and expectations. Choice of institution and programme of study is often crucial.

Working-class students, it seems, have less peer support to draw on and there is some correlation between class and first-year grades and persistence, especially where family problems intervene for working-class students. Some research suggests that working-class students become integrated and perform better when living in residences in the first year.

There is some suggestion that first generation students make assumptions about higher education, not least the support they will get, which are unmet. Although performing at least as well as younger students, mature students are likely to feel more socially isolated and have financial and family concerns that impact on their first-year performance and persistence. Access to teaching staff and feedback on progress are important motivators for first-year mature students. Males tend to have lower persistence rates than females. Older men are more likely to withdraw for course-, finance- or work-related reasons, whereas older women withdraw for family reasons. Although there are differences in ethnic group performance and persistence, this is not an issue of race per se. Within ethnic groups there are differences in male and female success.

Another area of research was to see whether providing support services for students improved first-year performance and persistence. The research suggests that those students who participate in support activities benefit, although it does depend on student characteristics. However, students who most need the support are not always those who make use of it.

Research suggests that finance is not as big a factor in student persistence as is often presumed. It is rarely the only reason for withdrawal. Many students undertake paid work but there is little evidence to suggest that moderate amounts of part-time working adversely affect first-year performance. Furthermore, the impact of paid work during term time is not always negative.

Another area of research has been the impact of student residence. Living on campus is presumed to be an important factor in social integration but there is ambiguous evidence about whether living in residences actually enhances grades. The beneficial effects of residential living seem to be dependent on the context

and may be more beneficial in small institutions or where students not only live in residential settings but also study together.

Stress and health of first-year students is also an area explored for its impact on performance and persistence. The limited evidence suggests better health leads to better academic performance and persistence in higher education. There is some evidence that health tends to deteriorate over the first year. The main causes of stress appear to be study factors rather than external factors.

### Support for the first year

There is a sizeable literature on support services for first-year students, much of which outlines good practice and the need for appropriate and integrated interventions.

Induction is important and published material suggests that induction processes should avoid information overload and unnecessary bureaucratic procedures. There seems to be a strong case for a gradual process of induction.

Learning skills development is best contextualised and embedded in the curriculum rather than being supported by stand-alone courses or workshops.

Research suggests that students need help in adapting to university life and becoming autonomous learners and that feeling positive and having a friendship group greatly aids social and emotional adjustment to higher education. It is also noted that students shift emphasis from one source of support to another as they progress through the year. Students adjust quicker if they learn the institutional 'discourse' and feel they fit in. Integration, through supportive interaction with teachers, greatly enhances adjustment, as does access to learning resources and facilities. Some research has explored how different types of student adapt. Males and females adjust differently. Mature students often find adjustment difficult, especially when they are a tiny minority. Adjustment is a particular problem for students from local authority care.

External influences such as family and friendship groups (outside university) can impact significantly on adjustment in the first year. The difference between those who think about leaving but persist and those who leave appear to be motivational factors such as goal orientation and self-efficacy.

### Learning and teaching

Research suggests that the first year is a time of considerable cognitive growth and appears to be important in developing learning behaviour. However, rigid prior

conceptions about the subject area or approaches to learning can inhibit learning. Research shows that students find conceptual development difficult and staff need to assess whether their teaching styles enable students' conceptual development.

Males and females appear to develop different learning behaviours although there is little correlation between learning behaviour and student achievement in the first year. First-year students tend to adopt surface learning or instrumental approaches. This does not seem to impact greatly on first-year results.

Research suggests that students may accept the principle of autonomous learning but need help in becoming autonomous learners. There is a movement, particularly in the US, promoting the advantages and effectiveness of first-year learning communities.

Research shows that students prefer student-centred, active learning rather than lectures. Problem-based learning, practical projects and team working seem to be effective provided the student is well prepared.

Research on assessment shows a preference by students for coursework assessment, although this is not the case in all settings. Peer assessment appears to be beneficial and, if carefully planned, online assessment can be a useful learning aid. However, it is important that students and staff have a shared understanding of the language of assessment.

## **Conclusions of the review of the published literature**

There is no first-year experience; there is a multiplicity of first-year experiences. The research suggests that two things are special about the first-year experience. The first is the process of transition and adjustment and its concomitant high incidence of withdrawal, about which there is much research and advice. The second is the mass experience of being a first-year as opposed to the differentiated experience of later years: as not being seen as individuals, as being taught or instructed rather than as having one's learning facilitated, as being perceived as a (potential) problem. There is much less research on this second aspect.

Modelling and theorising is mainly around the issue of retention. This is dominated, particularly in the US, by social and academic integration theory. In the UK, there is more emphasis on preparedness for higher education, expectation and satisfaction with the quality of the experience.

The key factors in ensuring progression appear to be: personal goal setting and motivation; family and friends; paid work and financial situation; peer support; institutional habitus; cultural capital; prior information and choices; expectations; satisfaction; teaching and learning process and engagement with teachers; assessment and discussion of progress.

It is not easy to identify determining factors for the first-year experience because of the idiosyncratic way students engaged with it. The search for determining factors has, though, suggested good practice. The focus tends to be on first-year students' deficiencies and how to provide for them rather than on exploring their individual learning needs and building on their strengths. Perhaps the key to improving success and persistence is not to focus just on the first-year experience but to improve the student experience generally.

### Institutional grey literature

The research team reviewed grey literature in four institutions to see if institutional concerns and approaches related to published literature. The institutions generate and collect information on an annual basis that, at least incidentally, is about the first-year cohort. This information is for internal use only. The close-up study showed that connections did not seem to be routinely made between the different types of information to illuminate the first-year experience.

None of the institutions had grey literature specific to first-year postgraduates. The impression gained was that the institutions did not perceive the postgraduate first-year experience to require specific attention.

### Statistical data

All four institutions produced statistical data about the composition of the first-year undergraduate cohort on an annual basis. The information was only available in-house, although summary data were provided in institutional annual reports available on institutional websites. Although there is full information for first-year undergraduates, university publications, such as annual quality reviews, usually presented data by subject area rather than by year of study.

### Information given to first-year students

First-year students receive a large amount of information at induction. Welcome packs indicate the areas considered to be of importance to first-year students and include information on: university processes; fees; university facilities and support services; accommodation; useful contacts; sports and recreation; personal safety, drugs, alcohol, health; and the locality.

First-year students also receive information about the programme and individual modules, which covered: aims; learning outcomes; learning, teaching and assessment; assignment guidance and resources.

## Evaluations of modules and courses

All the institutions have systems for evaluating modules in all years of study. Institutions had differing views on the confidentiality of module feedback, with some seeing it as for the individual module leader and others collating information across modules. Module evaluations fed into annual quality reviews of courses but these tended not to report by year of study, although issues arising for a particular year may have been highlighted.

## Reports on the usage of facilities or services for students

Institutions produced reports on student support services, although only the reports on the counselling services were commonly published on the institutions' websites. In most cases, information was collected by year of study but it was not reported in that way, unless a service was for first-years only.

## Institutional surveys on the student experience

At the time of the review, two institutions carried out annual institutional surveys that included first-year students and analysed them, *inter alia*, by year of study. Both surveys fed into quality processes. The surveys seem to be the only mechanism in any of the institutions through which information about a range of aspects relating to the first-year experience are pulled together and reported, although only as one aspect of a broader review of the student experience in general.

## One-off studies

Staff in institutions conduct studies on an *ad hoc* basis, usually in response to a personal interest and some of which are subsequently published. This provides an insight into the reason for the plethora of small studies in the published literature and suggests that caution might be required in assuming that the findings from such studies are generally applicable to other contexts.

## Conclusion of the review of the institutional grey literature

The review of grey literature in four institutions revealed a high degree of commonality between those institutions in the information they collect and provide about the first-year experience, and in their processes and provision. Generally, it was difficult to pull together information about the first-year experience and this suggested that it has not been seen as important to explore the first year as such.

Information given to first-year students suggested that institutions perceive the following realms as important: the institution; the course; the environs; the individual. The published literature addresses some but not all of these factors, or gives differing amounts of attention to them. For example, the published literature on the first year places little emphasis on the locality, personal safety, health issues or alcohol and drug abuse. Institutions do not generally seem to monitor or explore many of the areas covered in induction information. The exception is where there is a student satisfaction survey.

Interviews within the four institutions indicated an increasing concern with the first-year experience around two main issues. Widening access to courses means that students may not be familiar with or prepared for traditional university learning, teaching and assessment methods. The financial situation facing students is affecting study modes and impacting on workloads. However, little grey literature was identified in the institutions that dealt with these issues. Although the interviews suggested that postgraduates also have transition issues, there is little identifiable grey literature on the postgraduate first-year.

### **Implications for policy, practice and research**

The first-year experience is not a homogeneous experience but a multiplicity of experiences contingent on type of institution and student characteristics. The published studies have tried to identify key factors that relate, for example, to retention, but it is clear that the first-year experience is complex. Furthermore, the first-year experience evolves and changes both temporally and culturally. Issues facing students when they first arrive are not the same as issues half way through the first year or towards the end: expectations and satisfaction with the experience change. The culture shock of induction becomes replaced by issues of assimilation and absorption of values. Some students become integrated academically and socially and others experience an accumulation of issues and problems.

An in-depth exploration of grey material in four higher education institutions revealed a concern with the immediate move into higher education, uncovering, as it did, the large amount of information given to students at induction.

The legitimate question can be raised: is there a first-year experience, however diverse, or should it be seen as part of a long process of cultural, social and intellectual assimilation? The published evidence seems to suggest that to de-contextualise the first year from the entire student experience deflects from a need to ensure a positive learning experience suited to the evolutionary stage of the student. The institutional grey literature suggests that institutions often do not focus on the first-year experience separately from the experience of other years.

The review raises several implications for researchers. Most of the research is small-scale, usually institutionally-based studies with limited focus (reflecting the funding and status of education research). The result has been an accumulation of piecemeal studies. There is a need for a more systematic attempt to explore and theorise the totality of the first-year experience. This does not just mean larger samples in more than one institution but attempts to synthesise the literature and address substantive issues. What is needed are more studies that explore why, for example, particular practices are effective in integrating students and holistic research that reflects the complexity of the student experience.

There is, therefore, an onus on those who publish research to seek studies that answer substantive questions. What is needed is the encouragement of approaches that go beyond simple answers to safe but insubstantial questions and that adopt approaches other than empiricist reductionism.

A clear implication from the research, then, is that institutions should do more with the data they collect that relate to the first year of study.

However, institutions should treat the first-year experience as more than about induction and retention. There is a latent view that retention, keeping students once they are in higher education, is beneficial. This is exacerbated by governments and quality agencies that take retention rates as performance indicators and regard withdrawal from programmes as indicative of poor quality provision, despite the fact that those withdrawing may later return to the same course. The research has shown that integration is a complex business depending on the type of institution and the characteristics and circumstances of the student.

This review does suggest some important areas that institutions might usefully address: providing accurate information to applicants; greater collaboration with schools and colleges; more flexibility in provision to allow for individual difference; more focused inductions.

The key to success is to work with students, building on their strengths, rather than do things to students on the basis of a deficit model that emphasises inadequacies. This requires an approach that sees the first-year experience as holistic and evolving and that attempts to match changing student expectations with their experience. It is important to take first-year student perspectives seriously and evaluate the students' satisfaction with their total experience.

In essence, the policy implication of the review requires an approach that sees the first year as an important part of the long process of cultural, social and academic assimilation into the world of higher education.

# The role and effectiveness of reflective practices in programmes for new academic staff: a grounded practitioner review of the research literature

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This report outlines a literature review of the role and effectiveness of specific approaches to reflective practice in programmes for new members of academic staff. Rather than focusing on a simple notion of 'reflective practice' we operate at a more detailed level by considering specific forms of reflective thinking as applied to given aspects of practice. This literature review has as broad aims to:

- ascertain the role and effectiveness of specific approaches to reflective practice in programmes of initial professional development for new members of academic staff
- trial and evaluate a review methodology based around practitioner collaboration.

The Higher Education Academy clearly has an interest in the subject of this review, given its role in accrediting programmes for new academic staff and in framing national standards within the UK. It is clear also that the effectiveness of these programmes is an issue of wide interest within the sector.

## Overview of the report

- Clarifies the purposes of the review
- Discusses the methodological approach employed
- Provides a conceptual introduction to reflective practice
- Offers an overview of the included literature and an analysis of the emerging findings
- Looks at initial changes in their practice proposed by the reviewers in light of

the review work

- Concludes by considering implications for practice, policy and research
- Appendices include an interim evaluation of the approach, given its innovative nature in helping to establish a dialogue between theory and practice; and a study of the state of practice within programmes for new academic staff.

## Methodological features

The review can be best be characterised as a **grounded practitioner review**, with the grounded elements emerging more strongly as the review unfolded.

We sought to create a mediating discourse between both theory and the research literature more broadly, and the development of practice. To support this discourse, a range of features was included in the review:

- A study to assess the current state of practice within the field. The purpose was to explore the use of the concepts ‘reflection’ and ‘reflective practice’ within current programmes for new academic staff, thereby raising key issues in relation to the review itself
- Use of programme directors from such programmes in the UK to carry out the review
- Reviewers completed proformas for the studies they had chosen, indicating whether the study possessed scope for fostering learning on the part of the practitioner or policy-maker, or for influencing future practice or policy
- The initial criterion for inclusion in the review was the extent to which papers were relevant to each of six overlapping aspects of reflective practice, as interpreted by an initial statement from a consultant to the review.

The initial basis for the review sought to draw on a range of established reviewing methodologies, including realist reviews where the aim is to discover the outcomes to which specific approaches or mechanisms are likely to lead in a range of contexts (see Pawson et al, 2005). The positivist associations of this approach, however, proved problematic in the given practitioner context, and an approach based more directly on grounded theory was thus adopted (see Glaser, 1998), while still retaining categories of approach, context and outcomes derived from realist reviewing, as a basis for the data extraction from the included studies.

Grounded theory was employed to analyse the extracted data in the proformas, and to provide a basis for further theoretical sampling, resulting in the creation of nested sets of categories, which taken together provide a framework of understanding through which the studies could be interpreted. We primarily base the synthesis on insights from studies that showed links between the sub-categories, and also from a specific set of 12 studies identified as both most relevant to our context as contributing most to this framework. This resulted in

a theoretical synthesis of the studies, which could also be contrasted with insights emerging from the study into the state of practice in the field.

We hence measure quality not in a direct way, through robustness of methodology or effect size, but primarily in terms of contribution to development of understanding, as viewed through a practitioner lens. Judgements on effectiveness or on the strength of reported outcomes are thus made in light of the framework.

### **Developing conceptions of reflective practice**

Our starting point for defining the term ‘reflection’ is shaped by Dewey (1933), who considered it to involve deliberation in relation to knowledge or beliefs in light of the supporting grounds and the further conclusions to which it tends. This definition, however, even when applied to practice, remains wide open, and many theorists have thus introduced further terms in order to clarify the territory. We consider contributions from Schön, van Manen, Mezirow, Hatton and Smith, Moon and others.

These considerations required the review to operate at a commensurate level of detail in order to generate convincing conclusions. We thus generally prefer the term ‘reflective process’ to reflection or reflective thinking, by which we mean a specific course or train of reflective thinking with a given set of characteristics, in order to emphasise that a range of different reflective processes are possible. We retain the term ‘reflective practice’ to describe the field as a whole.

### **Summary findings of the review**

The included studies cover only 12 focusing on programmes for new academic staff, given the limited number of immediately relevant studies addressing the concerns of the review. As a result, further studies were included from related domains: 18 for development of academics more widely, 20 within initial teacher training, 10 within medical or health-related practice and eight from other contexts. The studies were mainly from the UK and Australia. The review makes no claim for comprehensive coverage; in particular studies that consider reflective practice as a single approach were less likely to be included. The grounded approach to the analysis further ensures that the studies contribute to varying extents to both the framework and the narrative synthesis.

## Enabling a reflective process: the grounded framework

Our approach led to six major categories with which to code the data. We list these in **Table I**, with short definitions and summary comments as relevant.

These categories, however, should not be viewed in isolation. In particular, the core reflective process and all of the remaining categories must lead or point in the same direction if a targeted and sustained process of problematic deliberation is to result. It is clear within a pedagogic context that the task and focus both need to fit with the social and personal basis, the wider context and the desired outcomes, with theoretical perspectives underpinning categories and thus assisting the alignment.

Our model combines considerations from both pedagogy and reflective practice itself in order to do justice to the complexity of how practitioners learn to engage in reflective processes. We term this model 'a directed reflective process' with the choice of the term 'directed' emphasising the way in which the process must both be targeted and supported, enabling it to achieve the necessary depth.

## Conclusions on the strength of outcomes

What conclusions can we draw from the outcomes emerging from the highlighted studies, and from the wider outcomes across all of the included studies? It is reasonable to claim that specific reflective processes applied to practice on programmes for new academic staff can yield changes in capacity for practice or the ability to engage in specific categories of reflection on practice, to the extent that these can be claimed as learning outcomes for the programme.

Beyond this, specific interventions are seen to lead to further outcomes, although it is harder to establish whether these outcomes are evident across an entire cohort, as for instance in relation to changes in professional identity. Programmes seeking to lay claim to such outcomes, for instance in shaping professional identity, may thus find it difficult to substantiate such claims, laying them open to concerns over the use of rhetoric for institutional or accreditation purposes. At the least, it will be important for such programmes to focus more selectively on outcomes that are regarded as central to the programme, and to ensure that specific strategies are employed to effect these outcomes.

**Table 1**

Theoretical underpinnings	The studies are underpinned by a wide range of theories of both reflective practice and practice. Overlaps identified during the coding process between reflective processes and social, programme, workplace or professional considerations point to the importance of social relations both within reflective processes themselves and for learning how to engage in reflective processes, as for instance explored by Vygotsky.
Core reflective process (task and focus)	Task: subjects within the studies are asked to complete a range of tasks in relation to specific aspects of practice (e.g. peer observation). Any given task may include a number of constituent parts (e.g. action research) or may be combined with other tasks, whether in a cycle or to ensure progression.
Focus	This term describes the specific aspect(s) of practice at which the task is directed, including practice itself, bases for practice and reflective processes. The focus is further shaped by such factors as timing in relation to practice.
Social basis	Dialogue whether with fellow participants, colleagues, facilitators or others, is seen to play a key role in problematising practice, with further sub-categories comprising expressing experience and the views of others, modelling good practice, challenges, prompts, questioning, crossing of boundaries, use of literature and specialist language, the role of technology and feedback. In part these features allow a sustained focus on problematic issues in relation to practice, and in bringing insights to bear that will allow for the transformation of that practice. A positive social atmosphere is further seen as an important factor in enabling such dialogue.
Personal basis	A reflective process is directly affected by the way in which a person engages with the task, to such an extent that the process can become inherently different as individual abilities, qualities and identities vary. Ownership, level of experience, professional identity and roles are all important factors.
Wider context	The wider context incorporates the programme context (e.g. addressing accreditation, the use of rhetoric within documentation and Masters level issues), the workplace context (e.g. addressing factors such as the workplace as a site for reflective processes, the role of constraints on practice, and models of engagement) and institutional factors (given institutional control of programmes).
Outcomes	Changes in practice, ability to engage in reflective practice, and other outcomes, at both personal and collective levels.

## Insights for the practice of the reviewers

One of the aims of the review was to see whether findings would impact on the practice of the reviewers in particular. We were able to see ways in which a greater insight into the nature and pedagogy of reflective practice can influence the practitioner, leading to immediate changes on a programme, greater awareness of key issues that influence one's practice more widely, a common mind with colleagues, seeds of more extensive developments on a programme, and recognition of the need to adapt one's own behaviour and connections with issues of which one is already aware. There are many possibilities for practice that enhances understanding, especially when an active attempt is made to integrate that understanding with practice.

These insights stem both from the reviewers' own review work and from their interactions with colleagues on the review team. Colleagues seeking to learn from this report might thus find it helpful to pursue a time-limited enquiry within their own programme team, using the report to provide an overview, and following this up with a detailed reading of specific studies that are of interest, particularly those studies highlighted during this review.

## Conclusions and recommendations

### Implications for practice

We contend that the grounded framework developed during the review offers a means to shape practice on programmes for new academic staff and elsewhere, enabling directed reflective processes that result in desired outcomes.

The report thus recommends that practitioners should either spell out the meaning of the notion 'reflective practice' or introduce terminology that reflects a more differentiated usage, given the open nature of this notion. Furthermore, in looking towards 'directed reflective processes' practitioners may wish to consider drawing on the framework for understanding developed in this review, to ensure that dialogue, factors that support personal engagement, the wider context and the intended outcomes are appropriately aligned with each other, and designed to support the core reflective process, ensuring that this core process is both targeted and sustained at the appropriate depth.

This directedness is particularly important given the context of professional education. Practitioners involved in related areas of education, where students are being inducted in complex open-ended practices, may thus also find this of interest. The challenge is to ensure that reflective processes are supported by appropriate pedagogic considerations, for instance in relation to the social construction of reflective thinking, that take due account of the context in which this thinking occurs.

## Wider recommendations

A further set of wider recommendations emerges from the study with regard to practice, policy and research relevant to a range of stakeholders:

- For those involved in running programmes for new academic staff, professional development emerges as critical
- Institutions themselves need to be aware of ways in which support for or strategies to control a programme affect the unfolding of reflective processes; there is also scope to apply reflective processes at departmental and institutional levels
- Approaches to developing continuing professional development in relation to reflective practice for academic staff in general will benefit from considering directed reflective processes, while strategies to encourage staff to engage with the research literature may benefit from the use of studies that can be highlighted on a similar basis to those within this study, so that the focus is initially on developing understanding rather than on evidence
- Those involved in the accreditation of programmes for new academic staff should consider how their accreditation requirements might impact on the way in which reflective practice is interpreted on programmes
- Further research into the effectiveness of programmes for new academic staff should take into account the wide variation of practices employed under the term 'reflective practice', rather than simply combining these approaches under one term.

## Implications for the methodology

We see in this report the development of an innovative approach to reviewing research literature, based on practitioner engagement and drawing on grounded theory. We suggest there is scope for grounded reviews to make a significant contribution to review methodology, allowing for the development of understanding rather than simply providing empirical evidence for interventions. The pedagogy of reflective processes applied to practice is too complex a subject for straightforward answers.

A grounded review moves the methodology away from the positivist aspects of the established reviewing methodologies, which the interim evaluation of the methodology indicated were problematic. Clearly, though, a grounded review is only one way in which to move away from these positivist elements: it would be fascinating to consider how approaches from other research methodologies might lead to further reviewing methodologies, which have hitherto been dominated by positivist approaches.

# The impact of working context and support on the postgraduate research student learning experience

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The report provides:

- an account of producing a review of research in collaboration with the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Centre (EPPI-Centre): following its guidelines, with advice from its staff, and using its software
- a general map of the empirical literature that exists on the experiences of doctoral research students in the UK
- an in-depth analysis of studies focusing on the viva
- an indication of the implications of existing research for policy and practice and areas for future study.

There is also:

- an associated annotated bibliography of the key literature on UK research students' experiences and outcomes on Endnote software; and
- a searchable bibliography on the EPPI-Centre website for future use by researchers.

## Systematic review methodology

In carrying out the review, we adopted the approaches developed for the social sciences and education by the EPPI-Centre at the Institute of Education, following the Cochrane and Campbell collaborations in health care and social welfare. These produce a review using wide-ranging and explicit strategies for searching for studies, including 'grey literature' and unpublished reports, and clear criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of studies from the review. They also involve assessments of methodological quality. That is to say, this is not a review essay on the state of the field, informed by the literature and including publications on policy and practice and 'informed opinions', but rather an overview of what reliable and valid empirical literature exists.

We started by collecting a wide range of literature on doctoral studies and we located and entered 1135 references into an Endnote file. These consisted of 415 UK studies, 334 Australian studies, 103 USA studies, 11 New Zealand studies, 10 South African studies, and 7 Canadian studies. The other 255 studies focused on (non-UK) Europe.

However, within the time-frame available we could only deal properly with studies which were research-based and included material directly on postgraduate research students (home and international) within the UK.

All the 120 UK studies classified as eligible following an initial screening were downloaded into a customised version of the specially developed EPPI-Centre systematic review software. These were then key-worded using a set of key words which we developed for this study.

A subset of 19 studies which addressed a more specific review question, developed in consultation with our advisory group, was subsequently identified from the key-wording. The question was as follows:

*What is the impact on research students of the process of examination of a doctoral thesis by viva voce?*

These were analysed using a shortened version of the EPPI-Centre data extraction and quality assessment procedures. This review also presents the findings from these studies together with some assessment of their quality.

### **Findings from the main review: mapping studies of the impact of working context and support on the postgraduate research student learning experience in the UK**

- The majority of studies focused on the PhD, or the PhD together with other doctorates but without exploring the differences between them.
- Research on the doctorate has usually noted the disciplinary area(s), but tended to focus disproportionately on the social sciences and (especially) Education.
- All 120 studies included students studying in universities, but a few also included research students outside HEIs.
- The majority of studies have little information on the mode of study, i.e. whether full- or part-time, how students were funded or whether the mode of study was face-to-face or distance learning.
- Details of the gender of students were given in the majority of studies, but not age, 'race', ethnicity, social class or disability, and very little analysis was carried

out comparing students across these attributes.

- Just over half of the studies focused on the working/studying context in terms of institutional provision but there is no systematic comparison across institutions, nor between areas of the UK.
- One-third of the studies focused on pedagogy; the majority of these concerned supervision.
- Peer support was a focus of one-third of the studies.
- The viva and other forms of assessment were a focus in a quarter of the studies.
- One-third of the studies were concerned with outcomes, such as, completion times and rates, and employment patterns, but there was little systematic information on causes of drop-out.
- The majority of the studies were not based on any discernible theoretical framework, and the majority presented mainly qualitative data.
- Generally, there has been very little research done on the students' perspective on doctoral experience.

### **Findings from the in-depth review on the viva voce**

- There is a lack of clarity on the part of examiners, supervisors and candidates about the purposes of the viva.
- The viva is perceived by both supervisors and candidates as an unpredictable process and difficult to prepare for.
- 'Mock' or practice vivas are a rare occurrence, although candidates who experienced them reported that they were useful.
- Mismatches between the research paradigms of the student and the examiner can lead to disagreement about the quality of a thesis.
- The attitude and personal conduct of examiners is a key factor in whether the viva is perceived as a positive experience, even among successful candidates.

### **Recommendations – review methodology**

- HE researchers should specify fully the details of their sampling frame and of the individuals in their studies and justify their methodological approach (Newman and Elbourne, 2004).
- HEIs and official bodies should ensure theses and publications (including their own publications) are recorded on BEI and made available electronically.
- The Academy should consider the EPPI-Centre methodology and particularly the EPPI-Reviewer tool as a future mechanism for literature reviews.
- We recommend that this Report and supporting data is made available through the EPPI-centre site as well as from the Academy.

## Recommendations – policy and practice

- This review should be the start of an on-going database of the literature relating to doctoral education for the use of researchers in this field and policy-makers.
- The Academy should consider ways to periodically update the literature map for doctoral education.
- The Academy, or other funding bodies, should consider extending the in-depth review of the viva to other aspects of doctoral education.
- The current Report should be reworked into forms appropriate for different audiences: organisations representing postgraduate students, staff supporting doctoral researchers (PVCs, Directors/Deans of Graduate Schools and supervisors), and researchers with an interest in doctoral studies.

# The undergraduate experience of blended e-learning

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The review of blended e-learning was undertaken by the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development at Oxford Brookes University for the Higher Education Academy. The aim was to review existing research and practice on blended e-learning, identify key studies and issues, and make recommendations to guide future policy, practice and research.

## Methodology

A key aim was to ensure that the review findings would be grounded in practice and relevant to the needs of the Academy's audience. Consistent with this aim, we adopted a methodology that combined traditional desk research with institutional visits and interviews with key personnel.

The review of over 300 studies of blended learning aimed to reveal methodologically sound evidence of the impact of blended learning on the student experience. We used a best evidence synthesis to identify the key papers with the aim of creating a manageable knowledge base for the synthesis. The following inclusion criteria were used in the selection of key studies: published since 2000, scenarios which blend technology with face to face teaching, experiences of undergraduates, representative of UK learning environments, clear rationales and/or objectives, embedded, evaluation of the learner's experience, justified and rigorous evaluation methodology.

The institutional visits and interviews aimed to give access to unpublished literature and to reveal practices that we could not know about as 'outsiders'. Interviews were conducted with seven institutions with reputations as long standing implementers of blended e-learning. The group represented a range of institutions including post-92 universities, research-intensive universities, and institutions with a sharp metropolitan focus or those serving a broader, regional area. We identified five attributes that were part of the blended learning agenda for some institutions: widening participation, enhancing learning, flexibility of provision, prominent e-learning early adopters, and computer aided assessment as a dominant feature.

## **What is blended learning?**

Throughout this review we have been keen to find evidence of how the potential offered by technology is actually being interpreted and used by institutions, their staff and their students. We avoided reaching our own definition, noting instead eight dimensions implicit in the definitions we found: delivery, technology, chronology, locus, roles, pedagogy, focus and direction.

From the institutional visits and the review of course evaluations, we observed that there were three ways in which the term ‘blended learning’ was being used. Currently the most common type of blended learning is the provision of supplementary resources for courses that are conducted predominantly along traditional lines through an institutionally supported Virtual Learning Environment. Second, we found some, but far fewer, impressive examples of transformative course level practices underpinned by radical course designs. These often make use of technology to facilitate interaction and communication and replace other modes of teaching and learning. Third, we are aware of students taking a holistic view of the interaction of technology and their learning, including the use of their own technologies, although this is currently under-reported and under-researched in higher education.

## **What underlying rationales are being used for promoting blended e-learning?**

Institutional rationales for blended e-learning were highly contextualised and specific to each institution. They included: flexibility of provision, supporting diversity, enhancing the campus experience, operating in a global context and efficiency.

A few course-level rationales related to institutional strategy, particularly offering flexibility in time and place of learning. However, most rationales at this level were in response to practical challenges being faced by staff and/or in response to student feedback (loss of staff-student contact, large classes, inconsistency in quality and quantity of feedback between markers) as well as responding to the demands of professional bodies in vocational courses. The rationale reported most frequently was maintaining quality in response to increasing cohort sizes.

## **What monitoring and evaluation strategies are being adopted for ensuring and enhancing the quality of blended e-learning?**

All seven institutions we visited described current plans for initiating institutional monitoring and evaluation strategies to assess their students’ experiences. All were finding establishing institutional practices problematic. We suggest this

was due to the pressure to implement rather than evaluate, the low status of pedagogic research, and poorly defined measures of institutional success in embedding blended e-learning. All institutions welcomed the opportunity to share approaches both through this review and the Academy's Benchmarking e-Learning project. In response to the requests for support for evaluation, we have taken the opportunity to highlight examples of suitable approaches and techniques and make recommendations for those wanting to undertake their own evaluations.

Despite the difficulties of establishing institutional monitoring and evaluation strategies, we identified and described a number of effective practices at various levels of operation in universities: regular module evaluations being used to inform departmental action plans, triangulated evaluations of students VLE use and institutional support for the collection and dissemination of case studies. We also suggested the promotion of pedagogic research both within institutions and for assessing the impact of course redesigns and drew on the pedagogic literature to make recommendations about conducting such research, concerning triangulation of data, collection of rich data and planning longitudinal and ethnographic studies. Finally, we noted the importance of making use of the findings of evaluations in course planning and redesign and noted examples where this had been achieved.

### **What impact is blended e-learning having on the student experience?**

We find that student response is overwhelmingly positive to the provision of online course information to supplement traditional teaching. Students make regular and frequent use of electronic resources with few reported problems of access. They particularly value flexible access both from home and on-campus. The impact of the provision of course notes is discussed in relation to support for students with disabilities and the possible impact on attendance. Students are concerned about the costs associated with downloading and printing and are critical of inconsistent use between staff and modules.

We find from evaluations of redesigned courses that while students recognise the value in the blend of face to face and technology-supported activities, there are large individual differences in how they experience the blend. It seems to be important that students understand the role of technology in their learning and the implications for their study strategies and engagement in learning activities.

There is an increasing recognition that students are making use of their own technologies as well as those provided for them and that they are doing this in ways that are not planned for, difficult to predict and may not be immediately visible to their teachers and researchers. Taking a holistic view requires an understanding of the individual. We found that where there is a significant individual difference such as disability or culture, this dominates the experience

for the individual, although not in ways that are stable or predictable. Other individual differences which seem to be important are prior experience and attitudes towards using computers within learning.

## What are the success factors for blended e-learning?

Drawing out themes emerging from the review, we make the following recommendations for successful blended e-learning in practice:

- **Use the term blended learning.** Although difficult to define, the term ‘blended learning’ is finding acceptance among higher education staff. We suggest that the advantages of the term include its poor definition – which allows staff to negotiate their own meaning – the implication of the protection of face to face teaching, and the implication of designing for active learning.
- **Work with and within your context.** We found that institutions whom we had identified as successful implementers of blended e-learning had highly contextualised and specific rationales for their adoption of technology. Similarly, successful local implementations were often in response to a real relevant issue occurring at the course level.
- **Use blended learning as a driver for transformative course redesign.** The importance of transformative course design was identified as one of three characterisations of blended e-learning. Throughout the review, staff repeatedly identified engaging in course redesign as critical to their success. The valuable features of the course redesign were identified as: undertaking an analysis of the current course, collecting and making use of student feedback, undertaking the design as a team, designs which make explicit their underlying principles, and developing the course iteratively over a number of years.
- **Help students develop their conceptions of the learning process.** How students conceive of their engagement with the learning processes and activities within a blended e-learning context seems to be important. In order to support students, it is vital that we are consistent and transparent in communicating our expectations about, for instance, attendance or how to engage in purposeful dialogue in asynchronous discussions.
- **Disseminate and communicate results of evaluations.** The need to co-ordinate, promote and disseminate results from evaluations was identified as a crucial aspect of monitoring institutional strategies and course redesigns.





## **Academy literature reviews 2005/06**

### **Executive summaries**

Published by:  
The Higher Education Academy  
Innovation Way  
York Science Park  
Heslington  
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United Kingdom

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ISBN 1-905788-23-1  
© The Higher Education Academy  
October 2006

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