

# MAKING THE LINK BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH AND CONSULTANCY

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This paper reports on the first phase of a three year HEFCE funded project under FDTL Phase 3 (Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning). The project explores the *what, where* and *how* of linking teaching with research and consultancy, within Planning, Land and Property Management and Building related disciplines (LINK). It is being undertaken by a partnership of four universities (Oxford Brookes University, University of West of England, University of Westminster and Sheffield Hallam University).

The project partners are involved in collecting, identifying and disseminating evidence of effective practice, whilst focusing on issues of concern and developing practical resolutions to problems.

The analysis of findings from multi-disciplinary focus groups from the four universities will be discussed, together with examples of practice, which aim to inform and enhance the links to the benefit of teaching, employment, professional institutional needs, and student learning.

Keywords: research, teaching, planning, land and property management,

## INTRODUCTION

LINK is a three year long HEFCE funded project that explores the *what, where* and *how* of linking teaching to research and consultancy within the Planning, Land and Property Management and Building disciplines in universities. The aims and rationale for the project are explained, along with the projected outcomes that are expected. The paper reports on the findings from Focus Groups undertaken within the partner institutions to explore the key issues around the topic, and to identify effective practice and strategies for enhancing teaching and learning. The future aims of the project are outlined along with the opportunity for other institutions to become involved.

## THE CONTEXT

The external quality based reviews of teaching (Teaching Quality Assessment) and research (Research Assessment Exercise) in our universities and the link to resources has ensured that academics feel the pressure of accountability. Professional bodies

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encourage institutions to develop research / consultancy activity and to demonstrate how this feeds into teaching, as illustrated by the Construction Industry Board Common Learning Outcomes (CIB, 1996) and in some cases e.g. RICS, they set required standards for accreditation. The Quality Assurance Subject Overviews for Planning, Land and Property Management and Building praised departments where there was clear evidence of research and consultancy being incorporated in teaching.

*"The wide variety of courses...well supported by research, scholarly activity and professional consultancies"* (Town and Country Planning and Landscape, 1998)

*"..examples of best practice use research...to inform curriculum innovation and teaching"* (Building, 1998)

*"..providers maintain good links with the profession, which along with research and consultancy, enables universities to keep abreast of professional developments"* (Land and Property Management, 1998)

The relationship between teaching and research is a complex one, and a close link between research expertise and the quality of teaching in an institution cannot be taken as read (Jenkins, 2000). On the one hand there is the concern that research becomes separated from teaching

*"...the research universities have often failed, and continue to fail, their undergraduate populations, thousands of students graduate without seeing the world-famous professors or tasting genuine research."* (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1998,p1)

On the other hand, when academics are asked about their own practice the two terms can become closely inter-linked. An example illustrated by Rowland (1996) in Sheffield University considered whether final year projects in Engineering, that are done in collaboration with industry, and feed into the lecturer's own research are teaching or research. The benefits of linking research and teaching for students include the following (Rowland, 1996; Jenkins, 2000):

- Critical engagement with the subject matter is promoted
- The academic is cast in the role of learner and this helps them understand the learning process
- The academic is kept up to date with the cutting edge of knowledge within the discipline
- Teaching practices that encourage active learning are enabled for students with a move towards methods of assessment that mirror research processes.

## **THE PROJECT**

'LINK' is a project being funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Department for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment under the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning. The aim of the three-year project (started in September 2000) is to identify, develop and disseminate good (i.e. effective) practice in linking teaching with research and consultancy in the three closely related disciplines of Town and Country Planning, Land and Property Management and Building.

The project aims to explore and disseminate the ways in which teaching and research (and consultancy) can be mutually beneficial, so that there is a virtual circle linking teaching and research within the three disciplines. Of the thirty projects in FDTL Stage 3, there are about ten within the built environment disciplines, yet this project is the only one examining the links between teaching and research. It is hoped therefore that the outcomes will be transferable and generic to other areas. Whilst the project will firstly enhance and reinforce subject specific findings within the consortium departments, through extended partnerships and external dissemination, the aim is to embed the findings within other built environment providers, and ensure end user uptake and post -project sustainability. Dissemination will comprise extended partnerships; web based resources, conferences, good practice guidelines, teaching resources, an international network, and an end-user group and related publications.

The rationale for the project is to:

- Develop students' understanding of the role and value of research in the development, currency and relevance of their respective disciplines
- Develop and embed student capabilities and skills to carry out research in their subject areas
- Develop student awareness of the role of research in their future professional environment and a capacity to show evidence to potential employers of their research skills and capabilities
- Develop student awareness of, and learning from, staff involvement in research
- Enrich the quality of the students' experience, their learning expectations and raise standards of student performance
- Recognize the significance of organizational and management structures in optimizing the links between staff research and student learning
- Provide generic and transferable characteristics for other disciplines and providers, which can be embedded as good practice in cognate fields and institutional teaching and learning strategies.

The first phase of the project has included the design and implementation of the web-site (<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/LINK>) and a flyer, with the collection of examples of Effective Teaching Practice posted on the web-site and research within the consortium members departments to develop Good Practice Guidelines (under three broad headings of Curriculum Content, Design, Delivery and Assessment; Organization and Management and External Links).

## **RESEARCH AND COLLECTION OF DATA**

It has been evident from initial research within the consortium members that effective practice linking teaching and research is initiated by individuals, and that the Project should endeavour to highlight effective practice and enable academics to share and make use of ideas. One example of such practice has been taken from Sheffield Hallam University, School of Environment and Development, and a summary of the example is included in Table 1 below. The example has had positive feedback from External Examiners in terms of quality of outcomes and from students who are new to research who find the demands of a dissertation overwhelming. The Consortium partners are in the process of collecting further examples and other institutions are being invited to contribute.

**Table 1:** Example of Effective Teaching Practice

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**Title of Example: A framework for successful undergraduate dissertations in Building Surveying / Construction Management**

**Issue/problem addressed:** Development of skills in planning and implementing a project; Proficiency in written communication; Provides a framework for students new to research

**What does the teacher do?** The subject consists of two units with the first unit completed in the first semester and the second unit completed in the second semester.

**Unit One:** The student is allocated a personal supervisor on the academic staff who will help support, advise and guide the student through the dissertation and research progress. The student attends a series of workshops (total nine hours) on identifying a research topic, setting aims and objectives, selecting the appropriate research methodology and undertaking a literature review of the selected topic area. The student also has three hours of 1:1 tutorials. At the end of the unit the student submits a fully referenced final document (max 3000 words).

**Unit Two:** This unit is concerned with the implementation of the research programme developed in the submission produced in Unit One. The student undertakes additional workshops of three hours on data analysis and has three hours of 1:1 tutorials with their personal supervisor. The student undertakes data collection and data analysis of information in the chosen topic area and prepares and submits the final written thesis (max 12,000 words).

**Hot tips/ Things to look out for:** The unit works well partly because of the meeting record forms that tutors complete during each meeting. There is a summary of the issues discussed and a box identifying things the student needs to work on before the next meeting. This ensures no student is in the position of not knowing what they should be working on.

It is important to set the aims and objectives of the dissertation out for the students and to break the thesis down into its constituent parts because it reassures the students and gives them confidence.

Ensuring new staff members are given adequate support and guidance in dissertation tutoring and assessment. Ensuring existing staff are given opportunities to discuss and develop dissertation supervision through training and feedback.

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The main area of research carried out by consortium members to date is by means of focus groups in each institution to discuss and collect views and ideas on issues and practice on curriculum content, design and assessment that are often buried. A standard set of focus group questions was formulated, to allow comparison and ensure some consistency between consortium members. The questions were designed to consider the following:

- Key issues in linking teaching with research and teaching with consultancy
- The relevant importance of linking teaching and research and teaching and consultancy
- How course teams and individuals link teaching with research and teaching with consultancy in their units / courses / programmes
- Evidence of strategies to support links between teaching and research and consultancy
- The factors that help and hinder better links between teaching and research and consultancy
- How individuals / courses / the School can foster links between teaching, research and consultancy

**Table 2: Sheffield Hallam University Focus Group Findings**

Key issues	<p>Career structures within the department and the pattern of rewards</p> <p>Balanced workload</p> <p>Relationships between centres within the School</p> <p>Currency of ideas being important</p> <p>Specialized nature of research can be difficult to relate to broad nature of undergraduate learning</p>
Relevant importance	<p>Both important but different - consultancy gives realism to students and research keeps the currency</p> <p>Difficult to separate in our disciplines because much of research is linked with consultancy / industry</p> <p>Importance to staff for personal staff development and CPD should not be under-rated</p>
How it is done in practice	<p>Professional Institutes expect it in courses</p> <p>Embedded in course philosophies</p> <p>Course designs reflect staff expertise in research and consultancy</p> <p>Educational research is a growing aspect linking to delivery and not just subject matter</p>
Evidence of strategies	<p>Research seminars / research students teaching / external speakers / live projects / students doing consultancy / fostering a culture of awareness of current issues / dissertation unit in building surveying</p> <p>Lack of awareness of undergraduates of the extent of research in School is evident / mission statement of building consultancy is to underpin teaching</p>
Factors that help and hinder	<p>Writing release from teaching for staff involved in research is help - but practicalities in managing teaching / courses / admin interferes</p> <p>Practicalities of travel for research and consultancy interferes with teaching and availability of staff for students</p> <p>Staff need to see a reward for additional stress - can be personal staff development</p> <p>Physical separation hinders</p> <p>Size of School hinders - too large?</p>
Fostering Links	<p>A clear school strategy that addresses the following:</p> <p>Communication and information flow between various groups in School</p> <p>School needs to develop a method to bring on staff through coaching and mentoring and encouraging infrastructure of support</p> <p>Internal newsletter just for Research and Consultancy</p> <p>Developing a school focus or identity for the outside world e.g. Environment</p> <p>School web-site</p> <p>Consultancy and Research Forums</p> <p>Staff room / ways to overcome perception of separation between researchers and teachers</p> <p>Inter-professional links / projects / speakers</p>

**Table 3:** Summary of Focus Group Findings Across Consortium

	<b>Oxford Brookes University</b>	<b>University of Westminster</b>	<b>University of West of England</b>
Key Issues	currency of ideas differences between professions and expectations  awareness of difference between u/grad and p/grad	communication between research staff and teaching staff where separate	currency of ideas  awareness is different u/grad and p/grad
Relevant importance	practical application of theory		staff development through consultancy
How it is done in practice	linking courses to research specialisms	informal mechanisms	providing papers on the web for students
Evidence of strategies	involving students in research and consultancy with safeguards	involving consultants in teaching and students in real research	linking taught post graduate courses to research interests  involving students in consultancy an research
Factors that help and hinder	balance of time between teaching and research leading to absent staff and perceptions of lack of support by students	lack of communication channels  lack of incentives	balancing short term goals (teaching the next lecture) with long term goals (the PhD two years away)
Fostering links	clear school strategy	clear school strategy	clear school strategy

The membership of the focus group was by invitation and the Project Team member acted as facilitator. The aim was to collect a cross section of ideas from those involved in research and those involved in teaching across the three disciplines.

The findings unsurprisingly varied between institutions in the detail, depending on local issues and cultures within departments. However there were also findings across the partner institutions that reflect and support findings from other similar studies (e.g. Rowland, 1996 and Jenkins, 2000). The findings from Sheffield Hallam University are outlined in Table 2, and a brief overview of findings across the other consortium partners that are significantly different or are common across some partners is given in Table 3.

There are four main points within the rationale for the project that are emphasized within the findings from the Focus Groups;

- Developing students' understanding of the role of research/consultancy in their discipline
- Developing students' abilities to carry out research / consultancy in their discipline and
- Managing the student experience of staff research / consultancy

- Recognition of the significance of organizational and management structures in optimizing the links between staff research and student learning

The Focus Groups gave staff an opportunity to think about and discuss issues that are rarely considered in detail. Focus Group participation was enthusiastic in all Institutions and it is hoped to build on that enthusiasm. The findings from the Focus Groups are to be developed by individual members from the Consortium within their Institution.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The project is on course within the first year of its three year programme. The active engagement with the project that has been evident in the Focus Groups emphasizes the importance of the topic and its relevance to many individual academics, as well as to Schools or Faculties, Universities, students and employers and professional institutions. The next steps for the Project Team include the production of internal discussion documents and action points for the individual institutions; the further development of a summary of general issues to assist in the formulation of the Good Practice Guidelines to be posted on the web-page and publicized elsewhere in journals and at conferences. The process of targeted partnerships with up to 12 other built environment or cognate departments in additional institutions is programmed for September 2001. The project has the real potential to influence future practice within the disciplines and ensure progress towards effective teaching and learning to the benefit of all participants. Our aim is to improve the quality of teaching and consequently the quality and standard of our graduates and postgraduates and thus their employability.

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