

# Statement on ‘Valuing research in higher education practice’

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HALLAM GUILD GROUP

'ENCOURAGE, VALUE AND RECOGNISE RESEARCH INTO HIGHER EDUCATION PRACTICE'

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# Foreword by Professor Sir Chris Husbands

Research, as the late Lawrence Stenhouse defined it, is “systematic enquiry made public”. It’s an elegant and efficient definition, which in four words conveys three key ideas: research is systematic, research is always a response to an enquiry, looking to answer questions such as ‘why’, ‘how’ ‘with what effect’ and research is not complete if it is not shared. Research is ‘systematic enquiry made public’

Universities create knowledge through teaching and research, but too often they have been relatively incurious about the relationship between them within universities. I’m delighted to welcome this important and novel approach, which commits engaged colleagues to exploring the relationships between teaching and research, between innovation and its impact.

— Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University

# Valuing research in higher education practice

Higher education practice research is applied research which aims to inform, develop and enhance educational delivery - covering teaching, learning, assessment, and broader aspects of the student experience. It makes positive differences for the people who are the subject of the research. It engages with existing research literature and translates this into practice, and contributes in turn to the wider community via published research and professional literature and talks.

Higher education practice research at Hallam is conducted locally, institutionally, nationally and globally, and may emerge from strategic alignment, quality enhancement, professional development and academic research and scholarship. It can be a fruitful route for increased involvement in research for academics whose scholarly activity is focused on improvements to educational delivery.

There are many staff engaged in innovative educational practices across the university and this excellent work can be strengthened by systematic investigation and inquiry, which can move innovations onto a firmer, evidence-informed footing. This evidence can make a case for continuation of innovative practice or its transfer to a larger scale through buy-in from a broader constituency. Outputs from higher education practice research can provide evidence to support TEF submissions and access and participation plans.

Ultimately, higher education practice research can increase engagement with research activity for staff, improve the quality of educational delivery, and impact positively on learning and the student experience. Although this research is extremely valuable to the institution and its business, it does not always interact well with traditional research measures such as REF submissions and large external grant funding.

Practitioner research, being focused on applied delivery, can be less theoretical than traditional educational research and may be small-scale, which can impact on the suitability of projects for UKRI funding. Since the university is the key beneficiary of the impact of this research, it can be difficult to obtain significant external research funding, for example from corporate partners. The days of widespread and sometimes large external grants from the likes of HEFCE and the Higher Education Academy of a decade or two ago have passed, with current Government higher education policy less focused on positive funded interventions to improve practice. Effective and impactful research can be

completed without funding, and small scale funding from charities and professional bodies is sometimes possible where needed.

For similar reasons of focus and scale, outputs from this research may be less suitable for some journals, though there are many journals focused on practice-based research. Though this is not always the case, outputs can be suitable for REF submission, either via Education or through disciplinary sub-panels (many of which encourage higher education research in their discipline).

There are also complications because of corporate structures, because this is a research activity that has its impact on educational delivery and these aspects of university business can be treated as quite separate. For example, funding and support for educational innovation is more often focused on specific aspects of day-to-day business than might be ideal for true academic freedom research, and may prioritise educational innovation without foregrounding research aspects.

Because this practice-based, applied research topic does not always interact well with traditional research measures and structures, it can be overlooked in strategy and planning. However, as our university is the beneficiary of the impact of this research and as we are an institution that values both applied research and educational excellence, we see great potential for Sheffield Hallam University in valuing research in higher education practice.

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