Enhancing the Student Learning Experience in HE Education Programmes across the UK: an evaluation of the work of ESCalate

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INTRODUCTION

ESCalate is part of the UK Higher Education Academy. The Academy is funded by grants from the UK higher education funding bodies and subscriptions from individual institutions to enhance the student learning experience through the development and dissemination of improved practice and sharing of expertise within higher education (HE). As the Subject Centre for Education we are working to enhance the experience for students following education programmes in HE throughout the UK (ESCalate, 2008). We work directly with those staff in universities and colleges who provide courses in education studies, continuing and adult education, teacher education and lifelong learning.

Our primary aim is to support departments and academic staff groups to offer the best possible HE experience to their students. We provide:

- Advice and support based on current knowledge and understanding;
- Practical material for departments and individual staff in the form of toolkits, project reports and downloadable resources;
- A regularly updated and searchable website with a wide range of resources and online event registration;
- External Examiners register and Expertise Exchange;
- Articles and discussion papers on a range of topics to promote pedagogic development;
- Education based book reviews on our website;
- National, regional and departmental events;
- Support for staff-groups and departments with specialist in-house events and
- Collaborative work with a range of outside organisations such as UCET, FACE, BERA and CETL's.

We also offer a wide range of resources, publications and grants to help with research and to support a scholarly approach to teaching, learning, curriculum development, the research-teaching relationship and curriculum development itself. Each year ESCalate funds different types of grant. These include:

- Pedagogy and Practice awards aimed at supporting smaller projects focusing on a wide range of curriculum based teaching and learning;
- Larger themed funding awards (up to £15K) for groups working to a given topic in education;
- Student Grants (up to £1k) to help students to kick start their research or enable completion of a project;
- Small grants for sharing ideas such as Hot Topics (£50).

This poster paper disseminates outcomes of an internal review (Blackie & Moseley, 2010) of the ESCalate Subject Centre's work in order to highlight successes in and challenges to ways of supporting teaching in education and educational research. This will be a broader evaluation of the subject centre's work than that carried out by Gilpin & Pincas (2005) which focused on the importance of small grant scheme projects.

METHOD

External evaluators took a mixed methods approach informed by the broad range of activities supported by the ESCalate subject centre. In most cases telephone interviews were carried out eg. with key contacts such as the ESCalate institutional representatives, workshop and conference organisers and consultants. Additionally, in a comparison study, staff in highly engaged HEIs were contacted and their responses compared with staff in HEIs that are minimally engaged. All current and recent grant holders were surveyed via a short, targeted questionnaire and a sample followed up for telephone interview based on their responses.

RESULTS

Engagement with institutions

Contacts at 33 HE institutions were surveyed (18 'highly engaged' as judged by the number of their staff involved with ESCalate activities and 15 'minimally engaged'. Ten responses were received from the first group of institutions and 3 from the second.

They reported attendance by institutional colleagues at workshops and conferences, professional development programmes as well as use of ESCalate's website, learning resources and funded projects. Indeed, almost all aspects of ESCalate's work were considered valuable by one or another respondent but the most frequently mentioned items were conferences, smaller events and workshops; materials and resources; the website in general; and the small grants programme.

What came across most strongly was the role played by ESCalate in relation to creating a community of practice: "A friendly, supportive environment that allows colleagues to develop and communicate regardless of what stage they are at in terms of their own research and practice […] it is a warm and hospitable space where people can make links beyond their own institutions and where they can think deeply about practice in new and exciting ways"

However, their responses raised an important issue in that the current model for communication with institutions based on links with named contacts clearly relies heavily on the effectiveness of further links between those contacts and their institutional colleagues. The 'outward' flow of information from ESCalate, to be disseminated more widely via contacts, seems relatively unproblematic e.g. respondents mentioned circulating details of specific events and the newsletters. But the reverse flow of information – from possibly dispersed colleagues in an institution back to the contact (and thence back to ESCalate) - appears to be much more challenging.

Impact of ESCalate grants

All 70 past holders (excluding who had retired or for whom there were no current contact details) of an ESCalate grant were asked about the impact their grants had had on them individually, on their departments and their institutions. Though only 21 responses were received (response rate = 30%).

Although there was some evidence offered in respect of the departmental and institutional impact, overwhelmingly it was impact on the individual award holder that was commented on. The most commonly cited impact was the extent to which the award had provided a platform for further development. For some respondents the impact was seen more in the direct outcomes of the work: "It informed pedagogical practice which I am still implementing today, both in my own work and in that into which I induct new tutors, and it remains very rewarding".

In addition, many grant holders noted the help they had received from ESCalate, from the earliest stages of writing a proposal to producing final reports and the great majority (80%) believed that their project would not have taken place without ESCalate funding. Outcomes of grants included: the establishment of networks of contacts, which, on at least one occasion, had led to collaborative work and further (non-ESCalate funded) research projects; the production of various published papers and conference presentations subsequent to the final report; and the generation of new research ideas.

Impact of ESCalate events

In total over 1,000 attended ESCalate events, mostly workshops with three larger conferences, during 2007-09. The events over these two years can be broadly classified thus:

Initial teacher education/professional development:	22
Internationalisation:	6
e-learning:	5
Students:	2
Embedding employability	1

The most well-attended events are focused on ITE, with some being directed at specialist areas like assessment, the professional doctorate and employability.

There was a sense that the larger events provided a particularly valuable opportunity for the presentation of papers, leading workshops and disseminating research. But the more specialised events which will perhaps inevitably involve smaller numbers of participants are equally valued, albeit in different ways. Given that those who attend gain a great deal from them, ESCalate's policy of offering and organising events of different types and which vary in scale seems an appropriate strategy although it may become difficult to sustain in more straitened financial circumstances. As a way of resolving this and involving more institutional contacts in the work of ESCalate it may be worth exploring the extent to which contacts who suggest activities with a narrower, specific or more specialised focus would themselves be willing to set up an event.

REFERENCES

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