

# The TQEF Research Informed Teaching Scheme at the University of Plymouth: Current Impacts and Future Developments

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*“Research informs all aspects of our teaching – a vibrant research dimension is the hallmark of transformative and enabling higher education – and we are committed to translating excellence in research into research-engaged opportunities for students”  
(University of Plymouth, 2009: 4)*

### Introduction

The relationship between staff research and student learning is a longstanding and controversial issue in Higher Education (HE). Historically there has been staunch support for the argument that research is part of the meaning of ‘the university’ (Barnett 1990) and HE has enjoyed a close institutional relationship with research; yet any conceptual relationship between the two has been difficult to establish (Wisdom 2009). Recent pressure from research-led universities for state funding of research to be concentrated has yet again raised the profile of this debate, with a growing number of contributors outlining the pedagogic advantages of aligning research and teaching and arguing for research-teaching links to be made explicit and nurtured within HE institutions (Healy and Jenkins 2009; Jenkins and Healy 2005).

*“We want all students to access the benefits exposure to teaching informed by research can bring...We believe an understanding of the research process – asking the right questions in the right way; conducting experiments; and collating and evaluating information – must be a key part of any undergraduate curriculum” (Bill Rammell, UK Minister for Higher Education 2006:3).*

In 2006 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) provided £40 million through the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) to support teaching informed and enriched by research. 158 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were successful in securing funding including the University of Plymouth<sup>1</sup>. Plymouth used the funding to support staff in introducing measures designed to enrich teaching and learning by making more use of research in their discipline or professional field. In total 42 projects were funded across the then six faculties. An evaluation project was also funded to investigate the impact of the Research-informed Teaching (RiT) initiative at the University of Plymouth, and to draw out recommendations for strategic development, and it is the evaluation which forms the basis of this report.

The full report is available at <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=28964>

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<sup>1</sup> The UoP received £850,237 over a three year period to fund research informed teaching initiatives.

## Key findings

### a) Strengths of the RiT initiative:

- The RiT scheme has proved particularly significant in its impact upon UoP institutional strategies. In the updated *Teaching and Learning* and *Research and Innovation* Strategies (2009-2012), the profile of RiT has been raised significantly across the university. In addition, '*Providing access to research-informed teaching and learning to all who can benefit*' is now a key institutional value.
- The scheme attracted interest from a wide range of academic staff from early career lecturers to professors in all parts of the institution, and drew in academics with very strong research outputs, as well as 'teaching and learning champions'. Staff viewed the links between research and teaching as fundamental to their academic practice and central to their disciplinary identity in many areas, and they welcomed the opportunity to reflect on and explore these links. The scheme was perceived to challenge widely held values which prioritise research over teaching.
- Staff voiced strong support for student participation in research activity through all levels of their degree programme - for example through apprenticeships, fieldwork, seminars, conferences and writing for student journals. RiT approaches were used to promote the development of research methods and skills in undergraduate programmes, as well as to teach key disciplinary content using research findings.
- The RiT scheme assisted, in many cases, in moving forward other key institutional agendas such as employability, internationalisation and sustainability. Staff maximised opportunities to embed professional and vocational skills within their academic programmes and expressed strong beliefs about research-informed teaching enhancing employability.
- RiT projects helped forge new inter-disciplinary collaborations between staff both within and beyond the university, as well as enhancing collaboration and dialogue between staff and students.
- 8 new modules and 2 new degree programmes were developed as a result of the scheme.

### b) Weaknesses of the RiT initiative:

- Although RiT is now embedded in various institutional strategies, the staff interviewed (who were directly involved in the RiT programme) appeared to have limited awareness of the existence of institutional level strategies and their potential relevance to work in the faculties. It is questionable therefore the extent to which changes at strategy level will impact upon practice unless further action is taken.
- Specific barriers to future RiT development include lack of requisite time and funding for developing new ideas and resources, technological constraints, copyright issues, and the long-standing belief that promotion is dependent on discipline-based research.

- Providing opportunities for students to work alongside staff on projects was seen as one of the most beneficial aspects of the scheme; however, this raises potential issues about time commitment for staff, and also about student selection processes for such schemes.
- There is a risk that benefits of the scheme may be dissipated owing to a lack of on-going funding. Whilst some projects were embedded well into the curriculum, others, whilst very worthwhile projects, fitted less easily into this model and will be unable to continue without further funding.
- Dissemination of project benefits beyond the immediate teaching team was weak. Staff felt that the discussion and management of RiT through faculty-wide Teaching and Learning Committees was likely to be ineffective and suggested that school-based working groups would provide a more successful vehicle for change.

### **Recommendations for future development**

Based on the evaluation of the research-informed teaching scheme at Plymouth, the following are suggestions for future development:

- Mobilise staff support for research-informed teaching by:
  - Providing staff development and ongoing guidance around research-informed teaching (and funding sources for such work), including examples from the relevant disciplinary area.
  - Promoting the relationship between RiT and other university agendas, particularly employability, in order to encourage wider buy-in.
  - Embedding research-informed teaching into the concept of the 'Plymouth Student' (and perhaps, in future, the 'Plymouth Academic') – in order to provide a framework for future development.
  - Celebrating internal and external RiT based collaborations perhaps through teaching fellowship funding and travel funds
- Enhance the effectiveness of institutional commitment to RiT by:
  - Engaging a wider range of staff with this and other institutional agendas – perhaps through having a clearer process for the trickle-down effect from institution level to faculties, schools and individuals
  - Embedding research-teaching links in the criteria for programme approval/ APM.
  - Continuing to challenge cultural values which prioritise research activity over teaching, and which view research and teaching as separate activities, for example by explicitly recognising the link between research and teaching in promotion criteria
  - Developing mechanisms for funding T&L projects beyond the project time-span, or enhancing methods of embedding projects within the curriculum

## Conclusions

The Research-informed Teaching scheme at Plymouth has raised awareness of the links between research and teaching activity by providing a platform for staff to be creative and to explore the links in their disciplinary area. The RiT projects have generated a range of pedagogic innovations which have enhanced the student learning experience through learning activities based on disciplinary research. In addition, Plymouth is one of the first examples of a UK higher education institution which has parallel commitments to research-informed teaching in both its teaching and research strategies and this is an important step in enhancing links between these activities. However, there is still further development required in terms of making these strategic aims 'real' for all academic staff, especially those who were not directly involved in the original research-informed teaching scheme. It is crucial that all new research institutes and centres take seriously the research-informed teaching agenda to ensure that the considerable progress made in this area is not dissipated.

## References

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