

# TEF plus transformational learning: the key to enhancing student learning and improving the student experience?

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## Abstract

*This Viewpoint paper was developed from a presentation given to the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference (15-16 June, 2016).*

*Current discussions around the Teaching Excellence Framework provide numerous opportunities and challenges for the HE sector. An awareness of transformational learning, with its focus on understanding the connection between a student's overall sense of the world together with personal components, such as knowledge, skills, values and beliefs about one's own experiences, is especially pertinent in these times of change and scrutiny in the sector. A focus on excellent teaching with transformational learning at its core can build on the strengths of the university. A strong network of educators creating innovative pedagogy, for maximum impact, and disseminating their findings provides sound basis to deal with the new challenges of competing as an HE institution nationally and internationally.*

## Keywords

enterprise education; transformational learning; employability; teaching excellence

*Please cite this paper as:*

Gibson, D. (2016) 'TEF plus transformational learning: the key to enhancing student learning and improving the student experience?' in *Innovations in Practice*, 10 (2): 78-81



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### TEF plus transformational learning: the key to enhancing student learning and improving the student experience?

The Government's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), presents numerous challenges and opportunities to the HE sector. As someone engaged in enterprise education over many years, I was excited when the Minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson (2015), in a speech to Universities UK, proclaimed he wanted students to engage in "original thinking" and, thus, be better prepared for the world of work. These sentiments dovetail really well with Mezirow's (1981) depiction of transformational learning and its focus on a person's overall sense of the world ('meaning perspective') and smaller components, such as knowledge, skills, values and beliefs about one's experiences ('meaning schemes').

When arriving at LJMU, in 2014, initial research revealed a substantial number of academics from all disciplines who have worked on practice-based assignments and, in many cases, had the opportunity to carry out pedagogical research around their core subject area. Working from the Centre for Entrepreneurship, there was greater focus on extra-curricular entrepreneurship with limited lectures delivered by business advisers on the legal, marketing and financial requirements of starting a business.

Guidelines provided by the QAA (2012) on enterprise and entrepreneurship education provide a wider perception of the subject; students should have the skill and, very crucially, a mind-set to bring about change and innovation in a variety of situations and within organisations of differing sizes.

There is then a real challenge as to how enterprise education is embedded within all degree subjects and how the pedagogy could enhance the student learning experience and thus develop their graduate attributes.

Prior to LJMU, I worked with educators at Queens University Belfast in order to embed enterprise skills into the curriculum, linked to appropriate pedagogical strategies to maximise learning, competency development and authentic assessment. Curricular development was undertaken to ensure capabilities were developed, where possible, from 'live' subject-specific case studies. Over a period of eleven years, I developed a model of enterprise competency and a research questionnaire to measure the impact of teaching, captured over a ten-year period, for over 30,000 students. The study found significant increase in self-efficacy over the ten-year period; the creativity, resilience and personal branding of students increased by over 40 per cent over the same period. Significantly students attributed the transformation in their skills and mind-set to the pedagogical approach adopted by the educators; especially those with an emphasis on creating experiential learning projects within 'live' organisations and, therefore, the opportunity to learn from failure and reflection to enable 'deep' learning (Gibson and Partington, 2015).

Shifting focus back to LJMU, Ron Barnett's keynote address at the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference in 2015, followed closely by keynotes I observed from Colin Jones (a leading educator and researcher on international enterprise education from the University of Queensland) and Sally Brown (a former PVC Education and leading expert in assessment) showed there was consensus towards support for transformational learning and a methodology for applying it to any discipline. Ron Barnett highlighted the need for students to deal positively with the challenge of being a global citizen. He highlighted the "pedagogy of risk" and

focus on developing curricular opportunities for students “striking out on their own.” He did recognise that this might not always correlate with a short term increase in student satisfaction, but felt this was the way it must go. Colin Jones argued the need for students to become “reasonable adventurers” in their own learning; the core to enabling students was through the creation of customised curriculum and assessment which would facilitate individual student learning and “connect their learning to the local community.” Sally Brown championed authentic assessment as a means of maximising student development. She highlighted the need to engage staff and ensure continuous development for educators. Echoing Boyer (2015), she also recommended “a culture of scholarship of teaching that encourages evidence based dissemination of good practice.”

What was gratifying, was the clear and consistent message communicated in all three keynotes. Despite the growth in metric based quality assessment there is a need for all educators, in whatever discipline, to create an active learning environment that allows students to learn by application.

As communicated via the 2015 Green and 2016 White papers on HE reform, the UK Government has made it clear that it wishes “to ensure all students receive an excellent teaching experience that encourages original thinking, drives up engagement and prepares them for the world of work.” The aforementioned longitudinal study at Queens Belfast, provided significant quantitative evidence that innovative pedagogy and assessment will achieve this along the lines of the recent transformational learning insights of both Ron Barnett and Sally Brown. In this area the challenge is in the implementation. Much careers education prepares individuals

for a corporate career and for standard business processes; the focus now is on student satisfaction and this must include preparing for a global economy with the ability to freelance and develop portfolio career options at any time. The Government uses the term ‘employability’, but there is a clear need to specify what exactly this means in relation to the TEF and whether it goes much further than preparing for standard corporate posts; graduate employers have also highlighted the need for future graduates of all disciplines to exhibit greater confidence, creativity and capacity to make ‘live’ projects happen.

There is, naturally enough, a government aspiration to raise the status of teaching in universities, developing careers on par with research specialists. This is a worthy goal but needs to ensure that excellent teachers have areas of specialist pedagogical research and publish widely on their practice, particularly in the area of transformational learning. Already cross-disciplinary pedagogical research is being carried out by members of the LJMU Enterprise Educator Academe with, for example, Forensic Science academics working with their Food Science counterparts; and Nursing and Product Design course leaders comparing and contrasting their related practices. Established in 2014, first as LJMU Enterprise Educators and now as the Academe, this dedicated group boasts over 300 academic staff of all disciplines. There are educators from over 60 different subjects from all four LJMU academic faculties who have now embedded enterprise skills within their core curriculum and developed strategies to enable students to learn experientially and to have a practical impact in a wide range of civic projects. At the time of writing, the Academe won the Enterprising Britain Award given by the UK Government for embedding enterprise skills

in the curriculum and, as the only UK entrant, the European Enterprise Promotion Award at the European Summit in Bratislava, Slovakia. The robust foundation that has been built, together with this current recognition, provides us with ample confidence to make a difference for both students and staff at LJMU.

New educational initiatives imposed by government inevitably create pressure and uncertainty; there is always the reality that many institutions can operate adequately without evidencing deep commitment to the underlying purpose of the reforms. Many academic programme leaders continue to face massive administrative challenges and the worry is that the impact of the TEF is another burden. However, all too often UK universities have been forced by the ranking system to make research and internationalisation the core emphasis in order to be recognised as a 'good' university. The fee regime has changed the landscape, to some extent, to increase the emphasis on improving the student experience. A focus on excellent teaching with transformational learning at its core can build on the strengths of the university. A strong network of educators creating innovative pedagogy, for maximum impact, and disseminating their findings provides sound basis to deal with the new challenges of competing as an HE institution nationally and internationally.

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