Integrated and situated academic development across the disciplines: lessons from an HEA-accredited Continuing Professional Development scheme

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OpenPAD was the Open University scheme for Higher Education Academy (HEA) professional recognition between 2013 and 2016. Participants demonstrated their alignment with the UKPSF by undertaking practitioner inquiry (PI), an approach aligned with the scholarship of teaching and learning. This study evaluates some aspects of the OpenPAD scheme. It asks in particular if OpenPAD was experienced differently depending on the disciplinary background of participants, explores why this might have been the case and asks what the lessons are for the design of similar schemes.

Disciplinary perspectives on engagement in practitioner inquiry and SoTL – what does the literature tell us?

- There are disciplinary differences between high- and low-paradigmatic fields (e.g. Engineering (high) and Education (low)) (1)
- Disciplinary threshold concepts and socialisation in communities of practice create and consolidate 'tribes and territories' (2) (3)
- Across disciplinary silos, there are different assumptions around appropriate research topics, the methods used and the nature of evidence (4): '*But this is an 'n' of one*' (5)
- Engagement with distinctive ways of knowing associated with SoTL and educational research can be associated with being 'strangers a strange land' (6)
- Discipline communities can be conceived as towers with discourse gap between them – absence of a common language and shared understanding around SoTL (2)
- But many academics in all disciplines have a strong and shared interest in teaching & learning, so disciplinary differences should not be over-emphasised.

Picture credit: Slawomir Wawak, Italy, San Gimignano

References and acknowledgements

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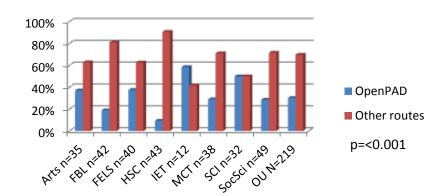
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The Problem:

Most completers spoke highly of OpenPAD and many found it to be transformative. They reported enhanced confidence and positive impacts of practice. Continuers returned more mixed responses. More than half were not making progress, with time pressures and difficulty with PI the two most significant reasons. One completer said:
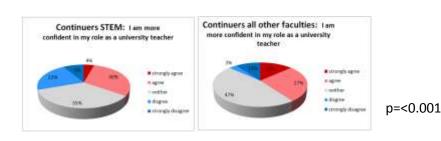
'I found it extremely difficult to understand what was required in the PI. Those people who made theirs available seemed to have produced pieces of work more suited to researchers in education, not practitioners. The language was alien to me (and the word evidence seems to be used in several different ways). … There was no way I was going to post questions on forums to reveal my ignorance.'

The data were analysed by Faculty to investigate if there was a disciplinary basis to these difficulties. We found:

Large variations between Faculties in choice of route

p=<0.001

Lower progression rates for STEM colleagues

p=<0.01

STEM colleagues reported less impact of OpenPAD on teaching confidence

p=<0.001

Fewer STEM participants completed OpenPAD

not significant p>0.05

Methods

Data are drawn from evaluation surveys undertaken in 2014 and 2015 and from the HEA database. Probabilities have been calculated in SPSS using Fisher's Exact Test for significance at p<0.05 or p<0.001.
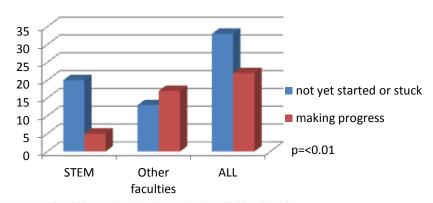
There were two survey samples:

CONTINUERS: OpenPAD participants who had been registered for >6 months on the scheme
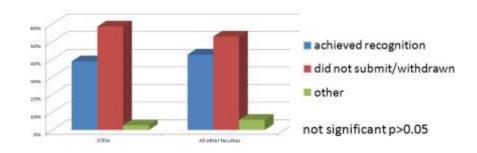
COMPLETERS: OpenPAD participants who had recently submitted a completed claim for HEA Fellowship.

Key: Arts = Faculty of Arts; FBL = Faculty of Business & Law; FELS = Faculty of Education & Languages; HSC = Faculty of Health & Social Care; IET = Institute of Educational Technology; MCT = Faculty of Maths, Engineering & Computing; Sci = Faculty of Science; OU = total across all Faculties. STEM = MCT + Sci.

Applaud: design for inter-disciplinarity

In 2016 OpenPAD was replaced with Applaud, a scheme which has been specifically designed to meet the challenge of being accessible across the disciplines. Applaud is:

- simpler and more flexible
- will accept PI as a methodology, but does not insist on this
- has been written in plain English, avoiding where possible discourse with which some colleagues might be unfamiliar

For example, participants are invited to reflect on their practice by asking

What? How? Why? So what? Now what?

rather than using the discourse of PI. It is hoped this will increase its appeal across the disciplines and this aspect of the scheme will be carefully evaluated.