

Institution: Lancaster University		
Unit of Assessment: 23, Education		
Title of case study: Evaluating and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching in higher education		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000 to 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Paul Ashwin	Professor of Higher Education	2004 to present
Murray Saunders	Professor of Evaluation	1996 to present
Paul Trowler	Professor of Higher Education	1999 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 to December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research by Ashwin, Saunders and Trowler has significantly enhanced the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (HE) nationally and internationally. Their research into HE learning and teaching has significantly influenced educational policies and practices in two key areas:</p> <p>a) It has directly shaped national policies aimed at evaluating and enhancing learning and teaching internationally. For example, in Norway, Scotland and England, it has shaped national policies that govern the educational provision of over 200 universities and the learning experiences of more than 2 million students.</p> <p>b) It has informed the development of institutional and practitioner approaches to the enhancement and evaluation of learning and teaching in over 50 universities across Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>It is common for national and institutional policy-makers to identify individual examples of good practice in learning and teaching in HE and then to attempt to 'scale up' to institutional or national level. Ashwin, Saunders and Trowler have exposed the deficiencies in the 'theory of change' associated with this model and demonstrated how policies and practices have often been unable to effectively and sustainably support the enhancement of learning and teaching. Their contribution is underpinned by a distinctive practice-focused evaluative research methodology which has generated trustworthy and authoritative evidence.</p> <p>Building on joint research evaluating the impact of the UK Centre's for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in HE [R3], a series of conceptual, empirical and evaluative projects were developed to increase understanding of how to evaluate and enhance the quality of learning and teaching in HE. This included Ashwin's longitudinal study of the quality of undergraduate degrees (with McLean, University of Nottingham; and Abbas, University of Bath), and Trowler's conceptual work on Teaching and Learning Regimes (with Cooper, Lancaster University). The approach they developed emphasises that change, exemplified in the idea of enhancement, requires shifts in practice that are situated, adaptable and embedded. Their collective work demonstrates that changes need to be captured in new systems and structures as well as individual routine practices. It shows that evaluating and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching in HE requires:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An awareness of the differently situated demands that quality-enhancement involves at individual, institutional and national levels. This means that evaluating national policy instruments intended to enhance learning and teaching requires an assessment of how these policies are enacted at the national, institutional and individual levels [R2-R5, G1-G3]; • At a national level, policymakers need to deploy an explicit 'theory of change' that explains the underlying thinking in relation to how and why new initiatives can lead to improvements in the quality of learning and teaching, and offer a path to achieving this. It is important that policymakers understand that any new initiative will be adapted to the specific contexts in 		

which it is implemented. They need to anticipate and even encourage this by initiating 'low fidelity' interventions which can be creatively shaped to fit with particular local settings. [R3-R6, G1-G3].

- At an institutional level, those leading change need to take account of how new initiatives will be integrated into the existing practices of those engaged in learning and teaching. This highlights the need to focus on how current practices are enhanced to align with the new initiative rather than ensuring the initiative is implemented in the way originally planned. [R1-R3, R5-R6, G2-G3].
- At an individual level, rather than simply providing examples of 'best practice' that do not take account of the situational context of day-to-day practices, educational practitioners need to be supported to develop evidence-informed reflective practices that can change their everyday approaches to teaching and learning. [R1-R2, R5-R6, G1, G3].

3. References to the research

[R1] Ashwin P (2009) *Analysing Teaching-Learning Interactions in Higher Education: Accounting for Structure and Agency*. London: Continuum. Held at HEI. *Peer-reviewed*.

[R2] McLean M, Abbas A, Ashwin P (2018) *Quality in Undergraduate Education: How Powerful Knowledge Disrupts Inequality*. London: Bloomsbury. Held at HEI. *Peer-reviewed*.

[R3] Saunders M, Machell J, Williams S, Allaway D, Spencer A, Ashwin P, Trowler P, Fanghanel J, Morgan L, McKee A (2008) *2005-2010 Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning programme: Formative evaluation report to HEFCE*. Lancaster University: Centre for Study in Education and Training.

https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/65661/1/2005_2010_CETL_programme_formative_evaluation.pdf

[R4] Saunders M (2011) Capturing effects of interventions, policies and programmes in the European context: A social practice perspective. *Evaluation*, 17: 89-103.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1356389010394480>. *Peer-reviewed*.

[R5] Trowler P (2008) *Cultures and Change in Higher Education: Theories and Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Held at HEI. *Peer-reviewed*.

[R6] Trowler P, Cooper A (2002) Teaching and learning regimes: Implicit theories and recurrent practices in the enhancement of teaching and learning through educational development programmes. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 21: 221-240.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436022000020742>. *Peer-reviewed*.

Peer-reviewed research grants:

[G1] Ashwin (CI), *Future of HE: Centre for Global Higher Education*, ESRC and Office for Students and Research England: (2015 to 2021) GBP4.8 million.

[G2] Ashwin (CI), *Pedagogic quality and inequality in university first degrees*, ESRC: (2008-2011) GBP421,209. *ESRC rating: Very Good*.

[G3] Saunders (PI), Trowler and Ashwin (both CI), *Evaluation of Scotland's teaching and learning enhancement strategy for higher education*, Scottish Funding Council: (2008 to 2011) GBP495,000.

4. Details of the impact

Through the education of graduates, HE makes significant economic, social, cultural and political contributions to societies globally. For this reason, governments across the world, as well as many international agencies including the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank, have identified enhancing the quality of university learning and teaching as a significant and urgent policy priority. For example, in 2015 European HE ministers (<https://bit.ly/3imhCEa>) concluded that "enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching is the main mission of the European Higher Education Area". Research by Ashwin, Saunders and Trowler has addressed this pressing concern through shaping (a) policy mechanisms and (b) institutional and individual approaches to evaluating and enhancing learning and teaching in HE.

a) Shaping policy mechanisms to evaluate and enhance learning and teaching in HE

The findings of the underpinning research have informed the development of policies that evaluate and enhance learning and teaching across global HE systems. This is demonstrated

through illustrative examples from 3 HE systems where the research shaped educational practices in 200 universities, enhancing the educational experiences of 2 million students.

In Norway, which has around 300,000 students in 21 public HE institutions, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) reports that the research [R1-R6] has *“been crucial in developing policies for enhancing higher education in general and has shaped the Centres for Excellence in Education Programme (SFU)”* [S1]. The SFU is an ongoing long-term initiative, launched in 2010, which an independent evaluation has found to have been successful in enhancing the quality of HE programmes across Norway and beyond [S2]. Lancaster’s research has been *“crucial in evaluating and developing the further incentives and enhancement programmes in Norway... [has] influenced practices across the Norwegian higher education sector and inspired the HEIs and educators to work more systematically with reflective teaching and curriculum change”* [S1].

In Scotland, which has 18 HE institutions and 170,000 students, the research [R1, R3-R6, G3] played a key role in developing policymakers and practitioners’ understanding of how to evaluate the enhancement of learning and teaching in relation to the sector-wide Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF). This research has enabled the Quality Assurance Agency, Scotland to understand that the QEF is *“about culture change... to promote and sustain a collegiate and collaborative approach which would create the conditions in which other, more specific, enhancements were more likely to be achieved”* [S3]. It has also informed the sector-wide QEF ‘Enhancement Themes’ aimed at improving students’ experiences across HE. For example, it shaped the development of the ‘Transitions’ theme (between 2014 and 2017) [S4], which examined student transitions into, through and out of university study. An independent evaluation found this theme *“led to changes in process and practice through the development of new student support services, academic workshops and practice-sharing forums, the implementation of new forms of cross-disciplinary teaching, and recognition through Scotland-wide excellence awards”* [S5].

In England, the research has contributed to the formation and initial development of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), played a key role in public debates that held the initiative to account, and informed the process and outcomes of the Independent Review of its effectiveness. Acknowledged experts in this field, Trowler, Ashwin and Saunders were commissioned by the Higher Education Academy in 2014 to evaluate the role of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in enhancing learning and teaching and found that HEFCE needed a more strategic and coherent approach. HEFCE endorsed these findings [S6], which the Department for Education (DfE) implemented through the development of the TEF in England. The TEF was introduced in 2016 and it is now a condition of registration with the Office of Students for all HE providers. It assesses the quality of teaching and student outcomes across all 165 English HE providers and directly shapes the experiences of 1.5 million undergraduates with evidence that it is helping *“to drive a cultural change amongst students and providers”* [S7].

By invitation, Ashwin advised both HEFCE (between 2017 and 2018) and the DfE (between 2017 and 2019) on the development of the TEF. The advice to HEFCE *“greatly influenced both [HEFCE’s] work and, indirectly, the eventual policy decisions”* [S8]. In relation to the DfE, *“Professor Ashwin’s research, publications and direct engagement played a notable role in the development of the TEF, in particular with regards to learning gain and contact hours... Ashwin’s work was influential in the government reaching the realisation that there was no ‘silver bullet’ to measure learning gain and that it was unlikely that one would be developed in the near future; rather, learning gain was a highly complex and multifaceted quantity. This realisation in turn meant that the position of those arguing that TEF should be delayed until a robust metric of learning gain was developed was not a tenable one and, accordingly, informed the decision to proceed with TEF using proxy metrics, with learning gain addressed through the qualitative submissions of providers”* [S9].

As well as directly influencing policymakers, the findings [R1-R6, G1-G3] were used to make a sustained contribution to critical public debate surrounding the TEF, thereby contributing to efforts to hold policymakers to account. Ashwin wrote more than 50 press articles and blogs (including the Guardian, the Telegraph, Times Higher Education (THE), University World News

and Wonkhe) on issues relating to the TEF, with a total reach of 9 million readers [source: Kantar]. These contributions argued that TEF should focus on the enhancement of teaching and learning and offered alternative models for the TEF. According to a senior reporter at the THE, Ashwin *“is without doubt the foremost commentator on the teaching excellence framework, the introduction of which has been one of the UK’s most significant reforms of recent years”*. He added that Ashwin’s contributions *“have had a significant impact on preventing the implementation of several of the policy proposals for the development of the TEF that would have had a significant adverse impact on the interests of students and universities”* [S11]. In addition to preventing the introduction of elements of the TEF that may have been detrimental to the HE sector, these pieces have also provided a conduit to inform the public about the TEF. For example, Ashwin’s policy briefing on the TEF was used to explain the initiative to readers in a THE article detailing the 2017 outcomes of the TEF [S12], which *“informed the understanding of hundreds of thousands of THE readers”* [S11].

Ashwin drew on his contributions to public debate and research [R1, R2, R4, R5] in his discussions with the Lead of the Independent Review of the TEF. The central recommendations of the Independent Review reflected the arguments made by Ashwin, particularly to focus the TEF on enhancement and the development of an alternative model for the TEF. The Lead of the Independent Review *“valued both his published research and his personal contribution to the debate about the conceptual framework and the practical process of assessing teaching excellence. His expertise was helpful to me as I considered how best to respond to evidence from the sector that enhancement of educational provision should be at the core of a revised TEF. The TEF review, which has just been published, presents a proposed revised model that drew on a range of ideas and evidence of which Professor Ashwin’s work was an important part”* [S10].

b) Developing institutional and practitioner approaches to evaluating and enhancing learning and teaching

The research has directly supported institutions and practitioners in introducing changes to learning and teaching. There have been two principal mechanisms for this: a Doctoral Programme in Educational Research and the book *‘Reflective Teaching in Higher Education’*.

Through research-led teaching, Ashwin, Saunders and Trowler have systematically shared the findings of their research with students on Lancaster University’s Doctoral Programme in Educational Research over a twenty-year period. More than 300 students, who are typically mid-career HE professionals from institutions around the world, have studied this part-time programme. A qualitative survey found that, during the current REF period, graduates have used the research to introduce innovative practices within universities, which have enhanced the practices of over 4000 staff and 150,000 students from 34 institutions across 9 countries in Europe, Africa and Asia [S13]. Three examples give a sense of how the research supported graduates to lead significant changes in a range of HE institutions.

First, in her response to the survey, a graduate who was the Director of Academic Practice at Queen Margaret University, Scotland explained how, between 2015 and 2018, she drew on Saunders’ work [R4] to change how her institution evaluated enhancements in learning and teaching. This had an *“institution-wide impact, as groups took greater cognisance of the importance of ongoing evaluation. For example, programme leaders were influenced to gather data about programme achievements/ feedback as they went through the year, in a new approach to annual programme monitoring and evaluation”* [S4]. Second, a graduate who is the Director of Quality Assurance at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science & Technology in Kenya described how, in 2014, she adopted Ashwin’s ideas [R1] to design a curriculum supporting 600 trainee teachers to become more effective through employing reflective educational practices. Between 2014 and 2019, she also used these ideas to provide workshops on teaching quality at four other universities within Kenya and Uganda that further engaged 130 university teachers and 400 students with the research [S14]. Third, a graduate who is an HE consultant [S13- Respondent 04] explained how he drew on Trowler’s work in 2015 [R5] to radically redesign Leeds Arts University’s approach to assessing creative practices and to map the progress of all 3,500 students at the institution [S15].

Ashwin, Saunders, and Trowler's approach to evaluating and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching is a key element of *Reflective Teaching in Higher Education* (Bloomsbury 2015, 2020). The book, lead authored by Ashwin, has helped thousands of higher education teachers around the world to develop evidence-informed reflective educational practices, which are an essential element of enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. As the former Chief Executive Officer of the Higher Education Academy remarked "*Reflective practice was one area where higher education teachers continued to get stuck as too many couldn't understand how it was, or at least should be, embedded in day to day practice. Not until Professor Ashwin's rigorous and comprehensive text came along, embedding the notion in the day to day practice of teaching... For too long theoretical texts had been drawn upon for 'new to teaching' staff, often becoming just an academic exercise. This text provides a means of linking theory with teaching practice, reflecting, aiding the reader in building their own repertoire of pedagogic approaches ... Professor Ashwin's text has brought the term 'reflective practice' into the terrain of a well tried, respected, grounded, useful everyday skill for anyone offering teaching in higher education* [S16]. The book has been adopted by more than 20 universities in the UK and the United States to support the training of HE teachers. It has sold 4,000 copies (up to December 2020) with sales across Europe, Asia, Africa and North America.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[S1] Statement from The Chief Executive and the Director for the Department of Analysis and Evaluation, Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) (2020)

[S2] Kottmann, A., Westerheijden, D., & Barend van der Meulen, B. (2020) *Evaluation of innovation impacts of the Norwegian Centres for Excellence in Education initiative*. Enschede, the Netherlands: Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente: www.nokut.no/globalassets/nokut/rapporter/ua/2020/learning-from-innovations-in-higher-education_2020.pdf

[S3] Statement from the Head of Quality & Enhancement, QAA Scotland (2021)

[S4] Statement from the Lead of the 'Transitions' 'Enhancement Theme', Quality Assurance Agency Scotland and Director of Academic Practice at Queen Margaret University submitted in response to [S13 – Respondent 7] (2020).

[S5] Formal Evaluation of the 'Transitions' 'Enhancement Theme':

https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/student-transitions/student-transitions-evaluation-of-year-three.pdf?sfvrsn=e2f0f681_10 (2017)

[S6] Link to the Higher Education Funding Council England response to the Lancaster Report: (<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20150106193235/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newarchive/2014/news87896.html>) (2014)

[S7] Vivian, D., James, A., Salamons, D., Hazel, Z., Felton, J., & Whittaker, S. (2019). *Evaluation of Provider-level TEF 2016-17 (Year 2): measuring the initial impact of the TEF on the higher education landscape*. London: Department for Education

[S8] Statement from a Former Senior Economist, HEFCE (2019)

[S9] Statement from the Former Deputy Director TEF and Quality, Dept. of Education (2019)

[S10] Statement from the Lead of the Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) (2021)

[S11] Statement from a Senior News Reporter, Times Higher Education (2020)

[S12] Times Higher Education article (2017):

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/teaching-excellence-framework-tef-results-2017>

[S13] Survey of graduates of the Doctoral Programme in Educational Research, Lancaster University (2020)

[S14] Statement from Director of Quality Assurance at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University submitted in response to [S13 – Respondent 14] (2020)

[S15] Outcomes reported in Kleiman, P. (2017) "We Don't Need Those Learning Outcomes": Assessing Creativity and Creative Assessment. Case Study 2 in Elkington, S. and Evans, C. (Eds). *Transforming Assessment in Higher Education*. York: Higher Education Academy

[S16] Statement from the Former Chief Executive Officer at Higher Education Academy (2021)