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The context of the institutional teaching and learning conference: a ground-clearing exercise

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Abstract

Institutional teaching and learning conferences are a significant part of the academic calendar in many UK universities. A simple ground-clearing exercise was undertaken to investigate the scale and scope of these events in the 2015/16 academic year. This study notes the impact that national discussions have had on the content and focus of some conferences, and highlights consistencies in theme and sub-theme, with sessions imbued with a learning, teaching or strategic orientation. Institutional teaching and learning conferences are pervasive but their essence is also shaped by institutional culture and mission. However, patterns of conformity were apparent in the way programmes were structured, often with a mix of short paper presentations and workshops. The paper concludes by considering these implications and offers questions for future research. A version of this paper ('Measured discussion: what UK institutional teaching and learning conferences tell us about 'what matters most') was first presented to the HEIR (Higher Education Institution Research) Conference, hosted by LJMU in September 2016.

Keywords

conferences, staff development, communities of practice, organisational learning

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Conversation is part of how we co-create our knowing, and the processes we use to create that knowing.

Martin (2015: 90)

Introduction

In general, academic conferences offer a forum to enable people to learn or to exchange information on a particular subject or theme. In a study on what academics found useful, in terms of their professional development, Ferman (2002) noted the benefits of attending a conference, which included, “broadening one’s professional perspective; being stretched by new ideas; being ‘taken out of [the academic’s] own frame of reference’” (p. 152). This is amplified by Hood and Forey (2005), Verbeke (2015a) and Wiessner et al. (2008), who considered conferences to offer presenters an opportunity to seek and to gain peer approval, establish their professional identity, whilst audiences could elicit stimulation (particularly from keynote speakers), reassurance and opportunities to gossip, make contacts and ‘do business’; as Neuilly and Stohr (2016) discovered, “Conference presentations are our calling cards, our way to introduce not just our research, but ourselves” (p. 204). In short, conferences serve many practical, strategic and personal functions.

LJMU’s Annual Teaching and Learning Conference (LJMUTLC) has been a regular and prominent feature of the academic calendar since 2001. In 2016, the Conference (LJMUTLC16) attracted 523 delegates, its highest recorded figure; this two-day event featured three keynotes, including two international speakers, three presentations from LJMU’s Directorate, 73 short paper or breakout sessions, 14 ‘demo’/workshop sessions and other poster and networking opportunities. This paper

provides further overview of LJMUTLC, based on delegate feedback to LJMUTLC15 and LJMUTLC16. It also offers a comparison with other UK institutional teaching and learning conferences that were staged in 2015/16.

LJMUTLC

Organised on behalf of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) by the institutional Teaching and Learning Academy (since 2015; the Academic Enhancement Unit prior to 2015), LJMUTLC is a strategically significant event. Its relevance to institutional pedagogical development and scholarship was acknowledged in the Institutional Audit undertaken by the QAA (2009: 11),

[LJMU has] an annual two-day learning and teaching conference, attended by many staff, which provides further opportunity to explore the relationship between teaching and research... [This is] supported by the staff, and the audit team noted the students’ awareness of the impact of both discipline and pedagogic research on teaching and learning... The team found that the University had a clear commitment to delivering teaching and learning informed by research and scholarship, and had created the mechanisms for achieving it. The impact on the student experience of staff engagement with pedagogic research and development was considered to be a feature of good practice.

As illustrated in Figure 1, there has been a marked increase (up 156 per cent) in the number of delegates attending LJMUTLC since the start of the decade. Whilst there may be other contextual issues, the spurt after 2011 coincides with the publication of the current LJMU Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy (2012-17) as well as revision to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) (Higher Education

Academy [HEA], 2011) which, as Laycock and Shrives (2009) noted on its previous iteration, “has provided institutions with a degree of flexibility about the nature of professional development provision and encourages the development of bespoke institutional arrangements” (p. 7). The steep rise also coincides with the closure of the HEA’s network of 24 discipline-based teaching support centres in 2011 (Attwood, 2010a), many of which organised local, regional and national events (Economics Network, 2011), as well as fears of a “pedagogical crisis” with the end of the CETL (Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) initiative (Attwood, 2010b). LJMUTLC can be viewed as an opportunity, in part, to plug this gap as many of the papers presented have been set within a disciplinary context.

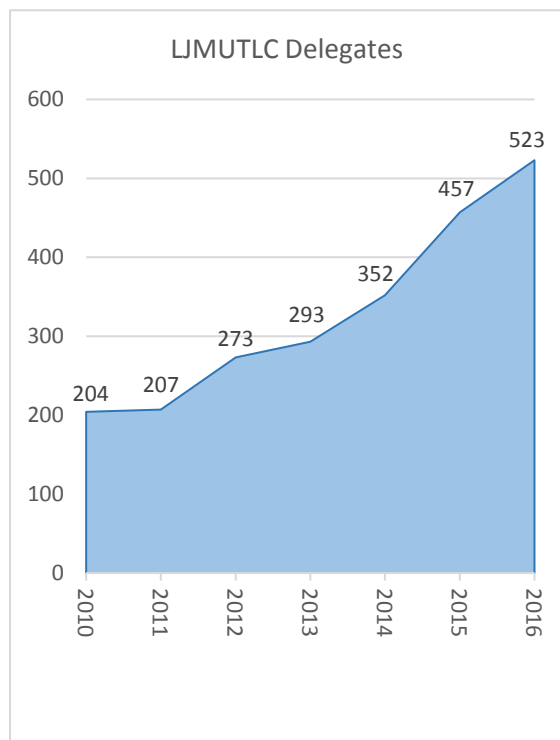


Figure 1: Number of delegates registered to LJMUTLC (2010-16) over both days of the event.

In 2015 and 2016, two short paper sessions attracted in excess of 125 delegates, an attendance figure matching those in keynote sessions at the start of the decade. Further

evidence of growing engagement with the event was also reflected in the growing number of abstract submissions to LJMUTLC16 during the ‘call for papers’, which was active from December 2015 to the beginning of February 2016; 138 compared with 118 in the previous year.

In evaluation conducted immediately after LJMUTLC15 (response rate 17.3 per cent) and LJMUTLC16 (response rate 20.8 per cent), people’s main reasons for attending the Conference remained largely consistent (Table 1):

	2015 (n=79)	2016 (n=109)
Appropriate content	21.2	24.0
Networking opportunities	12.9	12.8
Personal growth or development	34.8	35.2
To see specific speakers	6.1	10.1
Other	25.0	17.9

Table 1: Please specify the main reason for attending LJMUTLC (%).

Reasons provided for ‘other’ included, delegates attending the Conference because they were part of ‘fringe’ activities or simply there to give a presentation. LJMUTLC represents a great coming together of staff from all faculties and professional services. This willingness to engage was reflected in a comment provided to the 2015 evaluation, “I think it is essential to contribute to the LJMU learning and teaching community.” Others saw the Conference as a means to derive a better or shared understanding of the issues:

Great to get a sense of problems others within LJMU are dealing [with] and how they’re being tackled - good to know we’re not the only ones. (LJMUTLC16)

I am [a] new member of staff so it was helpful to see what people were working on and where priorities lay. (LJMUTLC16)

In short, there is a familiarity and different sense of affiliation that sets the institutional teaching and learning conference apart from other academic conferences. In contrast to the ‘tribes and territories’ literature on academic identity, achieved by increasing socialisation into disciplinary networks and cultural organisations (Becher, 1994; Becher and Trowler, 2001), the final comment supports Gale’s (2011) research which suggested that what binds early career academics to their colleagues is not the discipline, but the organisational framework; LJMUTLC is an expression of this framework and, in common with other academic conferences, is a site of social, emotional *and* intellectual activity (Henderson, 2015).

Satisfaction has also been high over the last two years. In 2015, 79.7 per cent of respondents indicated that the Conference had ‘absolutely’ met expectations, compared with 70.6 per cent the following year. Further, 95.4 per cent were either ‘very satisfied’ or ‘somewhat satisfied’ with LJMUTLC16’s content, which compared with 95 per cent in the previous year. In evaluation data from LJMUTLC15 and LJMUTLC16, delegates commented, in particular, on the breadth of information, sense of stimulation and ability to network and communicate with colleagues. The focused and dedicated time was viewed to further maximise the development opportunities for staff, making it efficient for them (e.g. in terms of time and travel). To some, LJMUTLC also embodied a celebratory atmosphere, drawing attention to accomplishments at the end of a busy academic year.

The LJMUTLC programme structure has been largely unchanged, save for the growing number of parallel strands. In 2015, six parallel strands were introduced, up from four, which had been *in situ*

between 2007 and 2014. A large proportion of the programme comprised of short sessions/papers (typically 20 minutes plus five minutes’ Q&A) and built into the LJMUTLC16 programme were opportunities to network and engage with fringe activities, largely led by teams from LJMU’s professional services (library, careers, student support, IT services).

Methodology

In order to compare LJMUTLC with other UK institutional teaching and learning conferences, a simple online search, using the following terms were applied: “Teaching and Learning Conference” or “Learning and Teaching Conference” + [institution name] + 2015 or 2016.

For the purposes of this study the only conferences considered were those held in the academic year 2015/16. The institutions inputted into the search engine were derived from an up-to-date directory of UK HE institutions (those with degree awarding powers, as defined by the QAA). Information varied considerably and was categorised as follows:

- No information available (and, therefore, a possible indicator that the institution does not host a teaching and learning conference or did not organise an event in 2015/16)
- Information that a teaching and learning conference existed (e.g. date of conference)
- Partial information (e.g. conference theme and some highlights, which tended to be referenced in institutional blogs or news items)
- Conference programme (i.e. titles of sessions only and excluding abstracts)
- Conference programme with book of abstracts

It should be noted, in terms of the second category (“information that a teaching and

learning conference existed’) there were, in some instances, links to a dedicated conference website. However, as information was hosted on an institutional intranet, and not accessible owing to further authentication, it was not possible to view any conference programmes or abstracts. This paper only considers information that was publicly accessible in 2016; the searches were conducted between June and July 2016. In total, information related to an institutional teaching and learning conference was gleaned from 61 English HE institutional websites, eight Scottish HE, seven Welsh HE and one Northern Irish university website.

Nvivo 11 was used for initial coding, which resulted in emergent codes that were refined to produce a coding framework. A total of 903 sessions (comprising short papers and workshop sessions) were analysed in this study. 78 keynote session abstracts and titles were also analysed.

There are a number of methodological issues. This paper cites evaluation responses to LJMUTLC, which was captured using BOS (Bristol Online Survey); access to other institutional ‘happy sheets’ is limited to the conference organisers and, therefore, it is not possible to reflect on the success or value of the sessions to individuals in those institutions. Further, at many conferences, some sessions are cancelled or replaced by others at short notice. This study only included information available during the period of enquiry (June and July 2016) and did not re-check for revisions or additions to the conference programme.

Findings

Since 2011, LJMUTLC has been scheduled for June; prior to this, it was held in April. As illustrated below, a June event aligns with a majority of other institutions’ conference dates (Figure 2):

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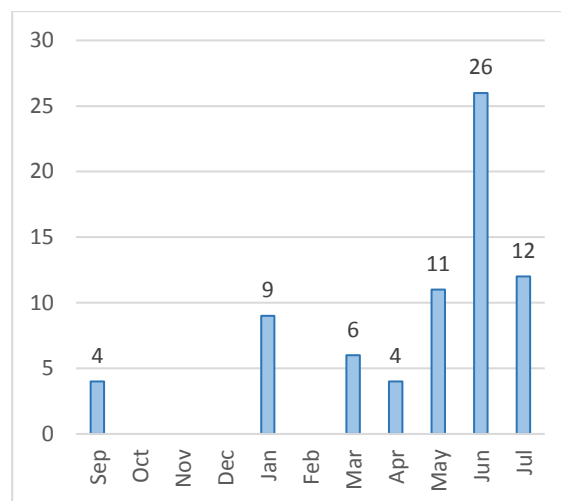


Figure 2: *Timing of institutional teaching and learning conferences (2015/16)*

This tallies with Barlow et al.’s (2000) observations on the efficacy and practicalities of organising a summer event (p. 359):

One year we held the [teaching and learning] conference in mid-September, rather than the usual July date, but the dawning realisation of how much work was to be done in preparation for the new academic year, and the loss of continuity from the previous year, led to many late cancellations or absences. In addition, the final stages of administration and preparation were very difficult in the academic limbo of August.

LJMUTLC is a two-day event and 74 institutional websites indicated the duration of their conference: 63 of these were single-day events (this also includes Loughborough, which hosted a half-day conference, running from 9am to 1pm); seven were two-day events; three held over three days; and one (Teesside) over four days. Most were branded as ‘conferences’ or ‘learning and teaching days’, whilst others, such as Heriot Watt, opted for ‘colloquium’, LSE, ‘education symposium’ and Sunderland, Teesside and West of Scotland, billed theirs as a ‘festival of learning’.

In general, teaching-led post-92 institutions demonstrated longer engagement with teaching and learning conferences. For instance, 2016 was the fifteenth conference for LJMU; Anglia Ruskin delivered their seventeenth that year. Research-led institutions, such as Sheffield, organised their tenth teaching and learning conference, whilst Glasgow and York, their ninth such event in 2016. (Though not considered in the main analysis, as it fell in the following academic year, Durham hosted its inaugural learning and teaching conference in September 2016.)

Conference Themes

Discussions around HE teaching in 2015/16 were dominated by the UK Government's intention to introduce the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS, 2015; 2016). Institutional conferences were touched by this rhetoric and this was reflected in the decision to opt for 'teaching excellence/excellence' as a main conference theme, for instance:

- Birkbeck ('TEF, social mobility: fulfilling our students' potential')
- Chichester ('Celebrating excellence')
- City ('Promoting and enhancing teaching excellence')
- Huddersfield ('Bridging the gaps: redefining excellence in learning and teaching')
- Leeds Beckett ('Teaching excellence: excellent teaching')
- Liverpool ('Recognising and sharing teaching excellence')
- Loughborough ('Celebrating teaching excellence')
- Southampton Solent ('In search of excellence')
- Worcester ('Showcasing and exploring excellence')

Whilst the TEF proposals were focused on English HE providers, interestingly,

Aberystwyth also chose teaching/learning excellence as their theme ('Appreciating excellence').

Overall, many institutions opted not to have a theme or applied a very general title (e.g. East London – 'Shout for learning!'). After teaching excellence, the most prominent themes in 2015/16, in descending order were:

Conference Theme	Example
Transition or retention	LJMU – 'Supporting transition: exploring pathways for success'
Times of change or uncertainty	Bedfordshire – 'Thriving in a changing world'
The research-teaching nexus or scholarship	Nottingham Trent – 'Transforming learning through scholarship'
Creative or learning spaces	University of Arts London – 'Reimagining creative spaces'
Employability or graduate attributes	York – 'Value-added graduates: enabling our students to be successful'
Assessment	Buckinghamshire New – 'Using assessment to enhance learning'
Inclusive practice	London School of Business and Management – 'To boldly go! Redefining the inclusive curriculum'
Technology-enhanced practice	Staffordshire – 'Digital capability: transforming our learning and teaching'
Student partnerships	West London – 'Students as partners in learning'

Table 2: *Conference themes for 2015/16*

In the case of Bradford, in celebration of its fiftieth anniversary, the teaching and learning conference was reimagined to

include research and knowledge transfer, which it billed as a 'new conference'. As far as Plymouth was concerned, an institutional digital learning conference had been arranged on one day (29 June), and was followed by their 'Vice-Chancellor's Teaching and Learning Conference' (30 June); in effect, a two-day conference with two themes, technology-enhanced learning and general teaching and learning. Sheffield Hallam also organised a two-day conference with different themes on each day; partnerships on day one, followed by learning spaces on the second day.

Whilst the main theme offered a sense of identity, the conferences tended to include sub-themes (or conference tracks), which were generally clustered around these five areas:

- Assessment and feedback
- Internationalisation
- Technology-enhanced practice
- Student partnerships
- Employability

The sessions presented were multi-faceted, comprising: local or international; campus or non-campus; and general, cross-disciplinary or discipline-specific perspectives. Overall, presentations were imbued with the following orientations:

- Learning orientation – how students learn, what students learn and how they develop;
- Teaching orientation – teaching tips and implementing teaching strategies; and
- Strategic orientation – e.g. strategies for creating the conditions to support effective teaching and learning/curricular design.

The papers presented were also focused on practice rather than pedagogical research and scholarship. Separate and focused conversations around pedagogical research

to support educational development have been present in some institutions. For example, Liverpool Hope hosted three international biennial Pedagogical Research in Higher Education conferences in 2006, 2008 and 2010, in support of its educational development activity (Norton, 2014).

Learning Orientation

Predictably, engaging students in learning was the most prominent feature. This included a vast array of approaches and keywords were clustered around: student behaviour; experiential learning; self-directed and independent learning; collaborative learning; practice and problem-based learning; peer support and mentorship; role playing; student communication; critical reflection; group working; coaching; creative thinking; student-led learning; inquiry-led learning; lab learning; situated learning; immersive learning; distance and online learning; and interprofessional learning. 33 of the 903 sessions audited included engagement with international students or the understanding of international student learning styles. Developing independent learning skills, undergraduate research capabilities, academic literacy and general academic study skills, together, featured in just under 50 sessions.

About one in ten sessions (n=85) looked predominantly at assessment and/or feedback. Again, the sub-themes here were varied and included: improving the quality of feedback; group and peer assessment; assessment design; authentic assessment; and niche areas (such as applying PeerWise [assessment software] or the use of OSCEs [Objective Structured Clinical Examinations]). Sessions solely focused on employability also loomed large (n=89). These were largely focused on developing graduates' soft skills, but also included: internship experiences; placement and work-

based learning effects; e-portfolio use; developing a social media profile (e.g. LinkedIn); digital badging; engaging students with alumni; developing video resources; and postgraduate employability issues. The prominence of assessment and employability can be attributed to sector concern in metrics collected for the National Student Satisfaction survey, where satisfaction in assessment and feedback has consistently been below overall satisfaction (HEFCE, ND), and the Higher Education Statistics Agency's Destination of Leavers in HE survey.

As noted, supporting student transition was a prominent conference theme in 2015/16. These included sessions on the first year experience, induction (including postgraduate induction), pre-arrival experiences, transitioning from college to an HE environment, adjusting from BTEC to university learning and supporting those in part-time study. There were allied themes, which included sessions on personal tutoring, student support, well-being (including developing student mindfulness and emotional intelligence), but these sessions were largely dwarfed by those with a much more prominent teaching/learning focus within a conference programme. 57 sessions were focused on equality, accessibility and inclusive practice issues. The topics centred on BME attainment and developing an inclusive curriculum, but also included presentations on unconscious bias, cultural awareness and digital inclusion.

Technology-enhanced practice was another conspicuous theme; conference programmes echoed the challenge to reflect on how better to construct and deploy highly supportive environments to provide learning in a highly flexible way, to individuals or to collaborating groups, in synchronous and asynchronous settings. There were a total of 39 sessions that focused solely on the

flipped classroom/lecture, lecture capture (especially Panopto). For example, Bath organised a debate around the following motion, "This house believes all lectures should be Panopto recorded"; students and staff were involved on both sides of the argument. Gaming and/or simulation, augmented reality and second life featured in 29 sessions. 38 sessions focused on general notions of digital learning, remote/off-campus engagement (including MOOCs). There were specific sessions on a wide variety of subject areas including; using personal devices (BYOD – 'bring your own device'), digital storytelling, developing video resources/using open education resources (OERs), blogging and social media, plus specific tools or learning environments (3D printing, Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas, PebblePad, Turnitin, Peer Mark, Google Apps/Docs, 3Doodler 2.0 pen, Adobe Connect; Guanxi 2.0 [Chinese webchat]; and Snaggit).

Institutions that did not opt for teaching excellence as their main conference theme (such as Keele, Plymouth, SOAS or York), did include short sessions on 'learning gain' (a measurement that might, as outlined by BIS (2015), be used to inform metrics in the TEF after 2019). In the case of York, this short paper session was delivered by a prominent member (pro-vice-chancellor) of the institution.

Teaching Orientation

From a 'practical' perspective there were sessions on effective techniques (classroom management, mixed methods teaching, being creative and developing teacher-learner relationships). Six institutions included sessions on gaining HEA recognition (Fellowship, Senior Fellowship). Rather than opting for a mixture of short presentations and workshops, Canterbury Christ Church scheduled workshop sessions only (a total of 18 one-hour workshop

sessions) in two blocks (morning and afternoon) across nine parallel strands. Participatory workshops offer a different dynamic and are more interactive. In Rowntree's (1998) view, workshops develop both knowledge and vocational competence; they are not a vehicle for the transmission of information but for the thinking through of ideas or practising of skills and a reconstruction of knowledge (*cf.* Haley, 2009; Weissner et al., 2008). Glasgow's programme largely comprised short paper sessions, but the event was preceded by a pre-conference event, comprising some workshops and discussion groups on student engagement and partnership. The duration of most workshops was in the region of 45 minutes to an hour.

Strategic Orientation

LJMUTLC16 included two international keynotes (an academic from Australia and a senior policy advisor from Ireland). Full or partial keynote information was available from 50 institutional websites, blogs or conference programmes; 78 other (i.e. non-LJMU) keynote sessions were analysed. There were only four other instances of academics from non-UK institutions delivering keynote presentations. Both York St. John and West of Scotland included academics from Australia in their programme; Oxford Brookes' keynote was delivered by a scholar from Finland; and Glasgow featured a speaker from the United States. Sector organisations, such as the HEA, HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute) and Jisc, featured in six keynotes. Most institutions tended to invite external speakers only (n=28); twelve institutions used a combination of internal and external speakers and ten opted for internal keynotes only. Internal keynote speakers included both specialists in education research, policy or leadership, or senior staff (e.g. deputy or pro-vice-chancellors); Bedfordshire and Plymouth included presentations by vice-

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chancellors, which were billed as 'keynotes'. LJMUTLC16 featured a plenary presentation by the Vice-Chancellor, a sort of 'state of nation' address; pro-vice-chancellors at other institutions also used the teaching and learning conference as an opportunity to deliver similar sessions (e.g. Bradford, 'Strategic directions' delivered jointly by two pro-vice-chancellors). Conference programmes also contained presentations of strategic significance to the institution. For example, at LJMUTLC, curriculum enhancement project teams have reported their findings in short paper presentations. This was reflected at other institutions, such as Leeds Beckett, who used their conference to highlight six of their 'curriculum innovation projects' at a special showcase slot within the programme.

Students contributed to, or led, some presentations with a strategic focus. For example, both Aberystwyth and Trinity Saint David dedicated sessions on NUS Wales's framework for student engagement, whilst Bedfordshire included a prominent NUS officer to deliver a session on policy. At Leicester, the students' union chaired a debate on "the use, purpose and value of examinations as a mode of assessment in higher education"; at Queen Mary, University of London, students and the students' union debated the motion, "this house believes that the main function of university teaching is to ensure students get a better job." Greenwich featured a joint keynote delivered by a deputy-vice-chancellor with their students' union on teaching excellence. At Huddersfield, staff were given the opportunity to speak to a panel of students, in a session facilitated by the students' union, to find out "how [the students'] own background and circumstances impact[ed] upon their experience of higher education." These practices give further weight to the notion

that student engagement is best conceived of as delivered through strategic partnership between an institution and a representative student body (McVitty, 2012).

LJMUTLC is an event that is open to all colleagues, partner institutions and other post-16 education providers. Whilst not all of the institutional websites stated their policies, some conferences, such as Glasgow, invited contributions and attendance from all HE providers; others, such as Chester and South Wales, limited contributions to their staff and their partner institutions. In the case of South Wales, a plenary session was arranged specifically for their 'strategic partners'. As noted by the QAA (2010), good practice in collaborative provision is evident if a university is able to nurture activities "in the spirit of genuine partnership" (p. 8). In the case of Derby, an additional annual Collaborative Conference and UK Partnership Forum has been established as a means to offer discussion on teaching and learning issues; this initiative was recognised as a feature of good practice in a Higher Education Review undertaken by the QAA (2016a).

Conferences, especially those scheduled at the end of the academic year, appeared to have a celebratory tone. This was reflected in the presentation of teaching awards at a number of institutions, including Derby, Leeds Beckett and UCL; award giving has also been a feature at LJMUTLC, either scheduled within the formal conference programme or at the Conference dinner. The awards can be seen to dovetail quite well with a conference in that they recognise and reward staff who have made significant contributions in teaching and raise the profile and status of teaching and learning.

Delivery

Non-keynote sessions were delivered by a mixture of staff (teaching staff,

professional/support staff, partners or external staff and students). Whilst difficult to determine the experience of many of the speakers, Nottingham's programme included the HEA Fellowship status of each speaker. Of the fifteen internal presenters featured in their programme, two had Principal Fellowship and ten had Senior Fellowship status (including one National Teaching Fellow). The remaining three speakers were directors, including one with Fellowship status, or were heads of divisions. Overall, it is highly probable that most other sessions at other institutions were delivered by people with varying expertise and experience. In a small-scale study on academic professional development practice, Ferman (2002) found that those who valued engagement in conferences (as delegates or presenters), tended to have 'moderate lecturing experience' (between four and six years) and surmised, "Perhaps by this stage of their careers, academics feel that they have something to contribute to their field and the confidence to do so publicly" (p. 152).

In addition to workshop and standard short paper sessions and, perhaps as a means of ensuring wider staff engagement in the conference programme, some institutions opted for different methods of dissemination. For instance, whilst some institutions organised poster sessions, King's College London and Cardiff scheduled a series of 'lightning talks' in their programme where, in the latter, staff presented "for a maximum of four minutes on any topic associated with learning and teaching"; Hull, SOAS, UCL and Exeter had similar arrangements of five minute 'pop-up presentations'. As previously noted, debates featured in some of the conferences; Portsmouth structured their event to engage staff in two discussion topics (lasting 75 minutes), each focused on two questions:

- [Discussion Group One] Why do some of our students not engage with the learning process? How can we engage students more fully?
- [Discussion Group Two] What are the challenges faced by students as they transition to HE? How can we better structure and use the induction period to support students?

This structure and focus, highlights the potential of teaching and learning conferences as consultative arenas.

The application of technology, and encouragement of off-site engagement, was a notable feature in the delivery of a few sessions. For example, University of the West of England’s schedule of live feeds included two keynote presentations, two symposia and two workshop sessions.

Teaching and learning conferences can act as a vehicle for trying new or innovative means of engagement. For example, at LJMUTLC16, a labyrinth was set up to offer contemplative time to staff (Figure 3). Bright and Pokorny (2012) describe the labyrinth as,

... a single path leading to and from the centre. This releases the person walking from all decisions about direction and path and, as a result, has the potential to facilitate focused rather than scattered attention (p. 23).



Figure 3: LJMUTLC16 labyrinth (photograph courtesy of Paula Baines and Alex Irving, Liverpool Screen School, LJMU)

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A similar exercise was trialled at University of the Arts London in a session called ‘Learning and teaching in silence’. This involved guiding a group of staff on a silent walk around Oxford Circus, taking in “churches, pubs, the BBC and an underground car park” – and followed by a post-walk discussion. These examples underline how the events can be used for other purposes, such as reflection, well-being and general mindfulness.

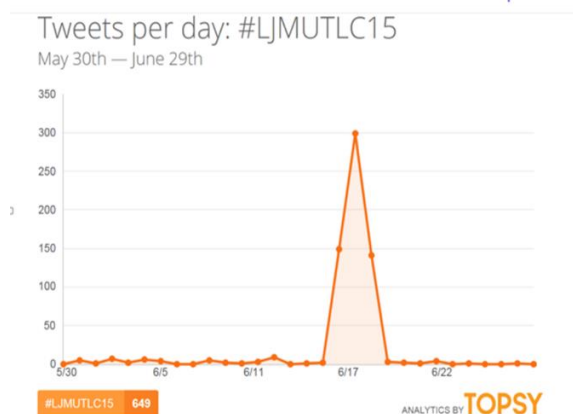
Conference Resources

For some institutions, the resources generated from previous conferences were archived on their website. For instance, Oxford Brookes archived conference information from 2007, York from 2008, Bradford from 2010, the London School of Business and Management from 2011 and Aberystwyth from 2013. These generally took the form of previous programmes and conference abstracts and papers.

Liverpool trialled an “open publishing experiment” aimed at “bring[ing] innovative academic practice together to increase exposure and encourage networking by remixing and redistributing presentations”: here any speaker was encouraged to submit a version of their presentation at a specially created Wordpress site. Southampton Solent used their conference as an opportunity to encourage their presenters to develop their work into papers for publication in their in-house learning and teaching journal, *Dialogue*. In two issues of LJMU’s *Innovations in Practice*, popular conference sessions have been developed into Viewpoint papers for publication (e.g. Hanneghan, 2016; Money et al., 2016).

Many institutions published dedicated Twitter conference hashtags. The use of microblogging, and importance of the ‘backchannel’, in academic conferences has been observed. For example, in their review

of the literature, Ross et al. (2011) note that tools like Twitter can improve conference participation and be used to share ideas, commentaries or resources. In observations of #LJMUTLC15 and #LJMUTLC16, many of the tweets have included photographs of presentation slides. The graph below illustrates the spike in activity during LJMUTLC15:



Institutions, such as Anglia Ruskin, Sussex and Queen Mary, capitalised on reflections on Twitter and archived this engagement, using Storify as a means of capturing tweets, photos and videos.

Discussion

It was not a bad idea, whoever first conceived and proposed a public means for teaching the sum of knowledge, in a quasi-industrial manner, with a division of labour where, for so many fields as there may be of knowledge, so many public teachers would be allotted, professors being as trustees, forming together a kind of common scientific entity, called a university.

Kant (1979: 23)

Teaching and learning are central to the purpose of higher education; institutional teaching and learning conferences represent a tool to maintaining a corporate memory of, and sustained engagement in, the issues and innovations in teaching at a local level. In spite of their general pervasiveness in UK HE, published research on institutional

teaching and learning conferences is very limited. Papers, such as Barlow et al. (2000), a case study focused on practice at the University of Brighton, are rare. (Looking slightly further afield, but within the British Isles, Lewis et al. (1989) outline an annual ‘learning and teaching showcase’ held at the Dublin Institute of Technology.) Some additional ‘grey literature’ offers other, limited, glimpses. For example, a QAA Higher Education Review report of the University of Birmingham, gives some sense of the scale of their event (QAA, 2016b: 21);

A Teaching and Learning Conference, themed around topics arising from teaching and learning reflections, is held annually and in 2015 was attended by 185 members of staff. This provides a further opportunity for teaching practices to be kept under review as well as for good practice to be shared.

Despite the dearth of published papers, there has been sector interest in this area, as reflected in notes from a former chair of SEDA’s Research Committee (Macdonald, 2004: 19) on a small grant which was made available to examine the “rationale and impact” of institutional learning and teaching conferences. SEDA (ND) also funded further work in 2012 (‘Researching the impact of conference participation on academic practice’) in which 15 UK institutional teaching and learning conferences were examined though, and at the time of writing, the outputs appear to have been disseminated in conference presentations and workshops only.

This ground-clearing exercise has revealed that institutional teaching and learning conferences fulfil many roles and functions; they are symbolic, strategic and personal. In very broad terms, and encapsulated in the findings of this paper, they can be seen to have three levels of interpretation, each with a distinct ideological focus or purpose that interplay with one another (Table 3):

Level	Emphasis	Ideological Focus
Macro	External	Legitimacy
Meso	Internal/External (organisational)	Standards
Micro	Internal (personal)	Motivation

Table 3: *Three levels of interpretation.*

The visibility of vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors, and many strategically focused papers in 2015/16 (possibly stimulated by TEF), have significant symbolic and political value. In this regard, the macrolevel perspective of the institutional conference can be viewed as a means of re-emphasising the social contract a university has with its community (within and outside the institution), and as an instrument to establish a harmony of interests between institutional leaders and their teaching staff. The mesolevel perspective of the conference, is reflective of how an institution maintains quality (e.g. showcasing how teaching is complying with accessibility legislation or the QAA's *Quality Code*), and emphasises the harmony of interests between the institution/subject groups with a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. students, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and government agencies). The microlevel perspective views the conference as heightening an individual's motivation and psychosocial state (e.g. inspiring someone to try new ideas, acquire knowledge or enhance their professional identity and socialisation), and thus establish a harmony of interest between an individual and their colleagues (emphasising the collegium), and with the institution (emphasising the psychological contract).

In consideration of the macro, meso and microlevel perspectives, this study has indicated that, though there are some consistencies in the themes (and sub-themes) discussed, the way in which the overall programmes are structured vary

considerably. This, in part, reflects the mission, culture and strategic priorities of the institution. Whilst debates featured in a few programmes, short presentations and workshops point to a pattern of conformity, perhaps imitating other 'standard' academic conferences. Accommodating short paper presentations offers obvious benefits, such as enabling early career staff in gaining confidence to present in front of their peers and ushering them to be engaged towards a practice of dissemination (Boyer, 2015). In LJMUTLC evaluation data, delegates have felt both excitement and frustration, in equal measure:

This has enthused me to want to present more research. (LJMUTLC15)

This year the conference was excellent - real variety yet a good focus on pertinent areas. (LJMUTLC16)

I wondered when I saw the programme if the sessions would be too short but actually they were perfectly timed to get the essence of the research and see how it might impact on practice. I really enjoyed being able to listen to lots of short presentations. (LJMUTLC16)

Good choice of breakout sessions (there is always something of interest) and the fact that they are short! (LJMUTLC15)

[There needs to be] more time for Q&A at [the] end of sessions - some felt a little rushed. (LJMUTLC16)

25 minute sessions is really not long enough for some topics. The speaker rushes through their material and then there's no real time at the end for discussion. (LJMUTLC15)

Whilst I appreciated the variety of sessions there were too many sessions in each day, by the end of the day we were overwhelmed, and did not have an opportunity to reflect on what we had seen. (LJMUTLC15)

The last three comments amplify Graham and Kormanik's (2004), Sawhney's (2013), Sweeting and Hohl's (2015) concerns that some conferences rely heavily on one-way communication and spend too little time on discussion or ways to integrate information in theory, research and practice. To Verbeke (2015a; 2015b) the passivity in many conference models, and failure to facilitate knowledge processes among conference participants, represents a lost opportunity; conferences, he argues, should be realigned using constructivist principles (see also, Haley et al., 2009 and Weissner et al. 2008). Delegates at LJMUTLC have understood these issues and offered solutions:

It is a very full programme and how this would be done, I have no idea but some opportunity to catch up for discussion around interesting points.
(LJMUTLC16)

I think the conference needs to evolve into partly an open conference, where the participants can set some agendas and work in discussion groups.
(LJMUTLC15)

There are clear implications for practice, together with a compelling agenda for further research. This study is a simple ground-clearing exercise but the following questions could be incorporated into future qualitative investigation:

- For whom and for what purpose is the institutional teaching and learning conference?
- How are conference programmes developed (content and format), and who is involved in that development?
- What are the criteria for inclusion in a programme, and how is this decided?
- How is success or impact measured?

It would also be insightful to gather the views of those institutions that do not routinely host an internal teaching and

learning conference, and their reasons for not doing so.

Conclusion

As participants, we have the opportunity to construct our own learning at conferences. As conference designers, we have the opportunity and obligation to develop conference content and processes that encourage interaction and engagement with new ideas and perspectives.

Haley et al. (2009: 81)

Institutional teaching and learning conferences represent significant investment. They have been established in many UK institutions to promote debate or reflection on learning, teaching, assessment, curricular design and the goals of higher education. In a few cases the scholarship of teaching and learning and research into higher education goals and practices is also evident.

It is relatively easy to gather evidence to modify certain conference activities; it is much more difficult to determine what might constitute valid metrics of success. Nevertheless, the debates that a few conferences are attempting to engender is a healthy sign for the sector. Many of the sessions examined appear to emanate from participants' own interests and may influence other staff, but the evidence for such influence may be difficult to establish. As reflected at LJMUTLC, and probably in common with other institutional conferences, we are reduced to our own beliefs about such achievements that arise from what participants say in evaluations, rather than what they subsequently do.

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