

## **The importance of research for educational developers: a view from the SHED**

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# The Importance of Research for Educational Developers: A view from the SHED

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## Introduction

### Wha's like us?

Peering over the notes of the past,  
Teasing out the threads of what used to matter  
Only to find  
The same threads now interwoven  
In different shades and patterns.

No avatars.  
But lots of women (no register required).  
No more money  
But a shared history and an unshaken sense of what matters:  
Equality,  
Diversity,  
Support,  
Scholarship.

Many a storm has been cooked up in the SHED kitchen -  
The sound of the CETL singing helping us along the way  
But what it boils down to - the very essence  
Of what makes SHED endure  
Though the landscape shifts and changes -  
Is a distinct Scottish flavour.  
Call it what you will -  
SHED is a place for us all.

(Poetic Transcription written for SHED 25 Yearbook in 2018)

This poem, written by SHED colleagues to celebrate the 25-year anniversary of its existence, summarises the diversity of approach, highlighting the role of scholarship throughout. There are several words we could emphasise in relation to how research has been used by SHED to develop HE professionals. But the main thing that strikes us is *context*. In Scotland, the QAA

commitment to enhancement (not merely assurance) means that the focus shifts from the deficit 'where is the problem that needs to be fixed?' to a more appreciative 'what is working and how we can all learn from this?' approach that underpins the Scottish approach to learning and teaching. It is this enhancement culture, the 'Scottish flavour' identified in our poem, which influences and shapes research in HE in our context. Each university is supported by QAA Scotland, with funding through their Enhancement Theme (QAA, 2024) activity as well as additional funding for inter-institutional Collaborative Cluster work that fosters a shared purpose and drive for enhancement through theme-led research. The diversity of educational developers in terms of their disciplines shapes the transcultural nature of academic development. We are at once linguists, geographers, biologists, chemists, even philosophers (Cunningham, 2022). As this short piece argues, there is no singular field or approach that underpins our scholarship. What unites us, as the poem makes clear, are the 'threads' woven into our academic practices. Our exploration below explores these individual 'threads', teasing out the importance of research to educational developers is used for professional development in HE in Scotland.

The first question of course is who, or what, are educational developers? Somewhat confusingly, the terms 'academic development' and 'educational development' are often used interchangeably in the literature. At the core of our work is what Leibowitz (2014, p.359) describes as 'the creation of conditions supportive of teaching and learning, in the broadest sense. This would include the provision of the support, as well as the generation of conditions that are supportive.' Educational developers in HE support staff to enhance their teaching practice, guide colleagues in achieving professional recognition for their teaching and/or support for student learning, and (increasingly) lead enhancement projects related to learning and teaching at institutional and sector level.

### Research Led

Given our role is to support staff develop their practice in teaching, learning and assessment in HE, it is vital for our credibility and currency that we are research led in the work we do. The Professional Standards Framework for teaching and learning in higher education (Advance HE, 2023), on which much of our work supporting staff is based, explicitly mentions research as a basis for effective practice. Developing this credibility and trust (a topic of a recent call for papers in the International Journal for Academic Development) is central to building relationships with staff.

Our SHED meetings include sessions of sharing of best practice from educational developers in Scotland and further afield. We also have a SHED reading group, hosted online, which meets to discuss current and influential papers in learning and teaching. Our last reading group, for example, focussed on assessment and the argument of Ajjawi et al. (2023) that we need to shift our focus from authentic assessment to authenticity in assessment. These discussions are stimulating and informative in themselves. But they have also led to enhancements to our shared practice. For example, a reading group discussion of Felton et al. (2019) paper on students-as-partners in the work of educational developers explicitly informed student partnership activity in learning and teaching during the pandemic response at both the University of Stirling and Edinburgh Napier University.

## Research Active

Educational developers are also, increasingly, becoming involved in the research process itself, and conducting their own research projects. This helps develop credibility in our work and in the validity in what we say and do for staff colleagues. At SHED we have instigated a 'scholarly series' for educational developers to share some of their research ideas, or work in progress, to a sympathetic but critical audience. We see our role here to help foster research practices, as educational developers often come from different disciplinary backgrounds with differing research practice. Once a year SHED organise a 'writing retreat' which gives participants the opportunity to craft, develop and edit their written work for publication.

An example of such active research, from our own work (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2022), is a project we led exploring staff perceptions of student engagement. Using a creative and playful fairy-tale storyboard approach we explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the move to online and blended learning, and the role of educational developers in this process. We gained ethical approval to interview staff before, during and after the Autumn 2020 semester. This was particularly relevant for us, given we had designed and led sessions for staff over the summer of 2020.

There are many other, diverse, examples of ongoing research SHED colleagues have shared with the community. Colleagues have used the 'writing retreat' in different ways, including writing up research, which they have then shared at subsequent SHED sessions

## Opportunities and Challenges

Recent developments have placed the work of educational developers in the limelight like never before. The response to the pandemic in terms of moving teaching to an online and blended model (arguably) made educational developers 'institutional heroes' (Cunningham et al. 2021, p.102) for the support and guidance they provided to staff. Recently, educational developers have been called upon to support institutions develop their response to generative artificial intelligence and the impact this will have on teaching, learning and assessment.

Despite this limelight, there is ongoing debate about whether educational development can be called a 'field' at all. Clegg (2012), for example, has written on what ways Higher Education could be considered a field, and so educational development a sub-field of it. More recently, Evans (2023) has argued that the scholarship of educational development is at a crossroads, between what she calls the 'critical' and the 'mainstream' understandings of the field. There are growing voices for a more 'academic' and 'holistic' approaches to our work (Sturm, 2022; Sutherland, 2018) – calls which place research in a more central role. Roni Bamber, in her 2020 SEDA report, highlights the opportunities and challenges that metrics offer to educational development as both a rich source of 'data' as well as a potentially dangerous weapon.

## Conclusion

As our short piece shows, the roles and even identities of educational developers are multidisciplinary, contextual and complex with ongoing debates about the validity and even relevance of our research to develop and/or support HE professionals. Often, we are

required to balance the demands of the 'day job' with our desire to be active scholars in learning and teaching. Some of us are on academic contracts, some not, some of us are expected to contribute to the scholarship of learning and teaching, some less so. Despite this, and although there is not yet explicit REF recognition for our 'field', there are multiple ways in which the appreciative approach of educational development within Scotland makes, we believe, a tangible and meaningful difference. Arguably, it is the 'common threads' of our values-base as well as the increasingly diverse and critical voices in our midst that help us navigate the tensions around metrics research so thoroughly by Roni Bamber. All of which helps us focus on what matters in higher education in Scotland.

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