Shaping Higher Education with Students

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Links to the R=T Framework

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• One key element of this chapter is how fieldwork can foster the development of a professional identity, by interacting with more experienced members of the discipline (PhD students, academics). Frances mentions that by engaging in fieldwork early on in their educational career, students could see what it is like to be a member of a discipline, rather than just learning the discipline. This kind of identity development could also happen in an institute setting; however, the cross-disciplinary nature of the institute could equally prevent the reinforcement of disciplinary boundaries – a potential downside to identity development. A further key message is that students will become aware of how what they are learning in the classroom, the lab, and in fieldwork is important to their future and to the mastery of their discipline. This helps to encourage students to engage more with their studies, especially on issues that might not seem as engaging (such as safety protocols or ethical concerns).

• The use of fieldwork and institutes as a way to master research skills embodies all of the key opportunities in the framework. Fieldwork (1) promotes interdisciplinary work; (2) provides a space for innovative research through collaboration with other staff and students from other disciplines; (3) promotes the development of research skills early on in student careers; (4) challenges the student–teacher dichotomy and helps staff and students to learn from each other; and (5) helps make the relevance of what students are learning more apparent by emphasising connections with the real world.

The main challenges lie in the lack of resources, especially time and funding, and in the case of institutes, space (3). Another
significant barrier is that of the current approach to curriculum and assessment design in British Higher Education (5). Student-led research in the Institute or in the field can be difficult to assess and give feedback on, making it problematic in the current system. Frances suggests using portfolio-based assessment, but this requires an even larger and on-going time commitment from academics, as well as a change of mindset. However, I believe the benefits of integrating institute projects and fieldwork into courses far outweighs the cost to students and academics, and the time/work burden can also be shared by PhD students (as suggested by Frances).

- Challenging the traditional relationship between staff and students is essential for all research-based education that involves student–staff partnerships. In my opinion, this is an overarching principle from the framework that needs to be appreciated and addressed. In order for research-based education to be successful, educators and students need to be willing to push the boundaries of what is ‘normal’, what is easy to assess, what takes the least amount of time and effort, and what they take for granted as being the right way to do things. Higher Education is not just about getting a qualification, or getting a grade – it is about gaining knowledge and experience. Educators should have that in mind when they design courses and programmes. As Frances says, ‘Teaching should not be just about imparting knowledge, a transfer from teacher to student. Instead it should be about discovery and learning from one another and from the situations the students are put in’. Encouraging more equal student–staff partnerships can inspire both staff and students to be more creative and passionate about their work.