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**Education research as a route to collaborative work practice in HE**

What is university for? Whilst we can debate the changes in purpose brought about by cheap access to information and increasing costs of higher education (HE), the core answer remains simple: universities have the twin purpose of generating new knowledge via research and equipping students with the skills to generate and share knowledge i.e. educating. Research plus education equals learning. Everything else HEI employees do is in support of these activities and to inform their direction and operation. Collaborative education research provides a route by which we can bring together individuals with different student-facing roles. It can result in improved provision for our students and our personal learning as education professionals.

**Centre for Higher Education Research**

At the University of St Andrews, we decided that collaborative education research was a priority and, to that end, set up the Centre for Higher Education Research (CHER), aiming to:

1. Conduct evidence-based HE research to inform local, national and international policy and practice.
2. Promote a reflective, analytical view of HE activities; empowering professional engagement in teaching and educational provision.

Our mission statement is:

“CHER empowers the lifelong learner in each of us. The University of St Andrews’ staff and students are a community of actively engaged learners, learning from, and with, one another. In all that we do, we aim to maximize and realize the potential of students and prospective students, and to make a significant impact on understanding at societal level.”

CHER’s intentions are noble, but are they realistic in this RAE dominated HE world? A research centre usually springs from the co-location of academic researchers, who have synergistic interests and prior publications in related fields. CHER is not a branch of a Faculty of Education. CHER is peopled by lecturers, teaching fellows, librarians, admissions personnel, careers advisors, student counsellors and information technologists. Most CHER members do not have a primary role in research and all of us are trying to fit education research around our day-to-day occupations. Our first priority was to build capacity, providing training in social research methodologies and moving from the isolated practices of individuals to collaborations among like-minded colleagues. Via seminars and structured discussions, individuals from different perspectives of learning provision, have reached more complete understanding of students’ experiences and identified specific research goals and research partners. CHER has provided opportunities for colleagues to be explicitly commended for their professionalism in the study and practice of student engagement/support. Thus I’ve seen over-stretched, tired colleagues become reassured and energized. The Centre has made significant local impact on members’ job satisfaction and sense of belonging within an educational research community. One year on from the Centre’s inception we may have a low profile, but, as architects of learning, have built strong foundations.

**Newer researchers**

CHER members are “newer researchers” in education. “Newer researchers” often lack familiarity with social research tools and language but they bring professional understanding of education as practice. In many HEIs it is common for an academic to cross research fields mid-career from e.g. biochemistry (random example) to education. However, the sole support for this change in research focus is usually to embark upon a second PhD or Doctorate in Education. It is surprisingly rare for HEIs to contain a research centre for HE; it is even more rare that education research not be the preserve of academics. If universities do not prioritise learning about learning; if we do not prioritise education research as a fundamental raison d’etre for our students and staff, then have we lost track of what we exist for? Can we also waken up to the non-linearity of modern careers and support education research across the whole life-course for ourselves as researchers and for our ever-widening pool of learners?