Exploring Learning Gain

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Measurement of learning gain at university level is a hot topic. It has been suggested that the TEF should include metrics or proxies for learning gain. But there is no clear consensus about what learning gain is and certainly none about how it can be measured. Candidates include engagement surveys, grades, results on standardised tests or a mixture of these.

In the United States, common assessments of learning gain are used in parts of the University system, but always as an enhancement tool where individual universities know their detailed results but are only given anonymised benchmarks about other universities using the same methods. Some research suggests that moving from an enhancement role to an evaluative one, where data are published and ultimately used in league tables, undermines the measurement, inviting gaming rather than stimulating improvement. So one outcome for the TEF might be that universities are expected to use assessment of learning gain in their enhancement activities but the results are not published. On the other hand the desire to stimulate competition might lead to a TEF where learning gain figures explicitly in university and subject-level evaluations. Either way, there is a need to be prepared.

We are part of a sixteen-university consortium funded under the HEFCE learning gain programme (http://blog.hefce.ac.uk/2015/09/22/hefce-seeks-the-measure-of-learning-gain-2/). Three of the four strands of activity in our project are to do with employability, but the largest seeks to develop an explanatory framework for talking about learning gain.

In the workshop I will outline the various existing positions on learning gain, what the HEFCE programmes are investigating, and the status of our particular project. However most of the time will be given over to participants discussion of the meaning, measurement and implications of learning gain.