

4.5

From Heifer so Lonely to Flightless Bats in New Zealand: a perspective on collaborative research approaches at a land-based college

DR JAMES LITTLEMORE AND DR WANDA MCCORMICK, MOULTON COLLEGE

Background

For colleges of further education (FE) with a substantial higher education (HE) portfolio, there remains an exigent requirement to foster scholarly output. This aims to improve both the quality of the learning experience and to meet the expectations of validating partners to promote the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) culture of 'scholarship and research'. Yet how is this done in a vocational setting where the traditional focus has always been on teaching and learning?

The research timeline

For the past 16 years, an evolving and dynamic applied research model at Moulton College in the East Midlands has: encouraged innovation; stimulated partnership working and funding acquisition with industry; promoted collaborative skills development for participating staff and students, and enriched the undergraduate teaching and learning experience to help foster the much-lauded HE ethos. An evolving timeline outlines the stages in developing an approach to managing research in a land-based FE context and how this has ultimately fostered research output amongst undergraduate students (Figure 1).

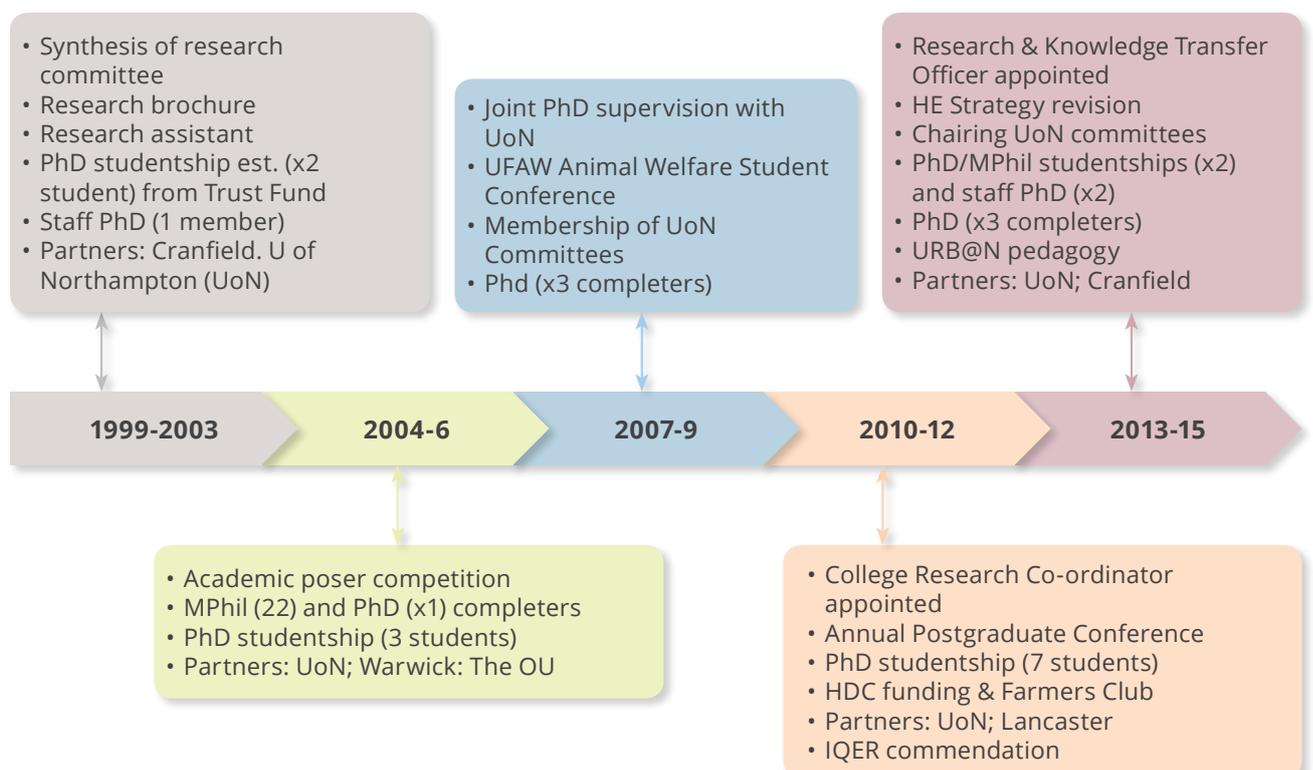


Figure 1 - Timeline of research development at Moulton College from 1999 to the present day

Guide to acronyms in Figure 1 above: Undergraduate Research Bursaries at Northampton (URB@N); Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW); Horticultural Development Company (HDC); Integrated Quality Enhancement Review (QAA) (IQR).

Key determinants remain to play to curriculum strengths and to link to experienced staff using an appropriate research strategy, invoking a defined research culture by strengthening links with just one university. Embedding a research culture within FE will increase quality, enhancing the professional identity of staff; and remission of time and consideration of membership of the Higher Education Academy may help galvanise activity and assist in bidding for funds with partners. By virtue of the niche provision offered by land-based colleges, support should be streamlined for discipline-based or pedagogic projects with an applied outcome that can generate publicity and involve undergraduates.

Collaborative research examples from Moulton College

Case study 1: Why did the harvest mouse cross the road?

This ecological PhD studentship was developed with staff from the University of Northampton and set out to investigate the habits of this diminutive, secretive, wild mammal – the harvest mouse. With funding from the Thomas Harrison Trust and the People's Trust for Endangered Species, this project has captured the interest of the public with national coverage on BBC Earth, The Guardian and a recent feature in BBC Wildlife Magazine.

Case study 2: Heifer so Lonely

This PhD studentship was based on the college farm and set out to investigate social bonds in dairy cattle and how dynamic group systems impacted upon welfare and productivity. Developed with Cambridge Veterinary School, the impact of this research was of both academic and generalist interest on a national stage, with the student attending Parliament as part of the Set for Britain initiative for early career researchers.

Case study 3: Flightless bats in New Zealand

A research link was made with the New Zealand Department of Conservation and, so far, two students have undertaken their undergraduate dissertations abroad. Travel expenses have been awarded from the University of Northampton Vice-Chancellors' Innovation Fund, and alongside media interviews some scholarly output has been generated.

Conclusion

Diverse outputs from postgraduate and undergraduate research in animal welfare, wildlife conservation and agriculture subjects can clearly initiate an argument of parity of perceptions and experiences of research with mainstream universities. Yet while there is evidently a climate for cautious optimism, there also needs to be a reality check as the value and impact of scholarly activity may not always be visible to management working in the traditional FE domain.

References:

Barkham, P. (2015) Dogs help to count tiny harvest mice for UK survey, *The Guardian* (online). Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/22/dogs-help-to-count-tiny-harvest-mice-for-uk-survey> [Accessed 25 January 2016]

Beer, A-J. (2015) In search of the micro-mouse, *BBC Wildlife Magazine* 33(11): 60-66.

Coles, J. (2015) The sniffer dog that detects harvest mice, *BBC* (online). Available from: <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150930-why-train-a-dog-to-smell-harvest-mice> (Accessed 25 Jan. 16).

Exelby, E., Littlemore, J. and Scrimgeour, J. (2013) The forest dwelling walking bat. *Journal of Practical Ecology & Conservation* 9(1): 23-31.

Heifer so lonely: How cows have best friends and get stressed when they are separated (2011), *Daily Mail*. Available from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2011124/Cows-best-friends-stressed-separated.html> (Accessed 25 Jan 16).

McLennan, K. M. (2012) Farmyard Friends, *The Biologist*.

Wilson, A. and Wilson, B. (2011) Pedagogy of the repressed: research and professionalism within HE in FE, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 16(4).