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How to cite:

Perry, R. and Robson, L. (2017). Developing a Community of Practice to Support Academics Engaging in Distributed Scholarship. In: Proceedings of the 11th International Technology, Education and Development Conference, IATED pp. 2272-2281.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21125/inted.2017.0659>

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# DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE TO SUPPORT ACADEMICS ENGAGING IN DISTRIBUTED SCHOLARSHIP

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## Abstract

We coin the term 'distributed scholarship' to describe scholarship conducted by staff outside their institution's principle physical location. While this way of working may provide the autonomy and flexibility for distributed academics to pursue scholarship, a distinct disadvantage is of working in isolation where there may be missed opportunities for collaboration, sharing of knowledge and expertise. The SHARE project was set up at the Open University to address these issues. In the first instance it was able to determine the level and type of scholarship being conducted by distributed academics through a cross-faculty survey. These findings led the SHARE project to develop a community of practice, both online for knowledge exchange, and providing opportunities for peer-to-peer networking. In building a community of practice for distributed scholarship the 'joining up' of scholarship activities can be of benefit to both the individual and institution as a whole.

Keywords: scholarship, community of practice, higher educational institutions, peer-to-peer networking, online communities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of globalisation and regionalisation in economic development has resulted in an increasing number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) operating across several geographical locations [1]. As a consequence of this, many HEI staff who are engaging in scholarship are finding they are having to do this in a more distributed way. This situation is compounded by the fact that HEIs are also employing greater numbers of staff on non-standard contracts. Percy et al. [2] reported that 40% of teaching staff were on contracts other than permanent full-time. The Higher Education Funding Council for England [3] reported nearly 80,000 academic staff, in their English funded institutions, being employed on atypical contracts. The characteristics of such contracts defined by the Higher Education Agency [4] include a lack of permanent working relationships, complex employment relationships and involve work away from the supervision of the normal work provider. For those academic staff on part-time contracts they often find that they have little time or opportunity to engage in scholarship due the heavy teaching and administration workloads they are allocated during their 'on campus' time. Consequently, there are now a significant number of academic staff engaging away from the main institutional campus. We have coined the term 'distributed scholarship' to describe this type of scholarship as its existence within HEIs is a topic largely unacknowledged within the current academic literature. We define this term as 'scholarship conducted by staff outside their institutions principle physical location'. Some examples of such remote settings include home working, 'satellite' campuses or affiliated regionally based centres.

Murray [5] highlights the importance of engagement in scholarship both for career success and development of excellence in teaching. Engagement in scholarship is embedded into the UK Professional Standards Framework which is the sector standard for benchmarking teaching professionals in the UK. Howell et al. [6] also suggest that one key strategy for success that should be adopted by providers of distance education is engaging with scholarship and research. However, they acknowledge that there are challenges associated with such a strategy, as do other authors [7-9]. As an entirely distance education institution, The Open University (OU) faces such challenges. The OU has approximately 174,000 students supported through a network of 5,000 part-time Associate Lecturers (ALs) who work from home. These ALs are managed and supported by 134 academic staff who are located throughout the UK. These academic staff are lecturers or senior lecturers employed on a full-time or part-time basis and are either home-based or working out of a regional centre. While their core role is the line management of ALs, there is an expectation of them engaging in research and scholarship as part of their academic duties. It is these distributed academics who are the main focus of this paper. Although the management aspect of these academics' role may be unique to the OU, the challenges relating to scholarship are equally applicable to any academic role undertaken away from the institution's main campus. Whilst it would be fair to suggest that the pursuit of distributed scholarship allows for autonomy and flexibility, a distinct disadvantage is that such remoteness may lead to feelings of

isolation. Furthermore, there may be an unawareness of other scholarship related work taking place in different areas of the institution, and, missed opportunities to engage collaboratively across disciplines [10-11].

The SHARE project was set up at the OU to address these issues relating to distributed scholarship, and to look at ways of harnessing its potential, as well as developing a supporting infrastructure.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE LEVEL AND TYPE OF DISTRIBUTED SCHOLARSHIP

Based on ideas by Boyer [12] and Glassick et al. [13], The OU recognises five different types of scholarly activity and it defines its scholarship framework as follows [14];

*Institutional Scholarship* - which includes the investigation of questions of interest to the strategy and operation of the University

*Scholarship of Teaching* - which refers to the scholarly investigation of one's own or others' teaching, including the investigation of pedagogy in relation to, for example, approaches to teaching, assessment and learning design

*Scholarship for Teaching* - which encompasses those scholarly activities and outputs that contribute to the development of learning materials, modules and curricula

*Scholarship in support of Professional Practice* - which is the application of findings and innovation to address social issues

*Discipline Based Scholarship* - the investigation that extends an area of academic discipline and seeks to add to knowledge

All staff are encouraged to engage with scholarship in order to develop professional practice, advance their careers and to gain professional recognition through the Higher Education Academy. Scholarship of teaching, for teaching and in support of professional practice between them cover the areas commonly referred to as Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Institutional scholarship would include study and development of systems and processes some of which would fall outside SoTL, whilst discipline based scholarship covers the more traditional academic research in specific disciplines without necessarily having a teaching focus. The SHARE project wanted to promote distributed scholarship within the OU to not only provide development opportunities to academic staff, but to also potentially gain institutional advantage from this form of scholarship. We suspected significant work was being undertaken but the wider benefits may not have been fully realised.

In this instance, we needed to understand the level and type of distributed scholarship being conducted across the University. We designed a survey consisting of a series of closed questions (see Appendix) which was sent out electronically using e-mail distributions lists to all academics known to be based away from main campus. A total of 50 surveys (37% response rate) were returned from academics (mainly lecturers on permanent contracts) in seven faculties who were based in different regions. Of the academics who responded, over 50% of them had worked for the OU 10 years or more and 76% had objectives set in their annual appraisals which involved actively engaging in scholarship. When asked about which type of scholarship they are actively engaged in, just under half of respondents indicated Scholarship of Teaching as shown in Fig 1.

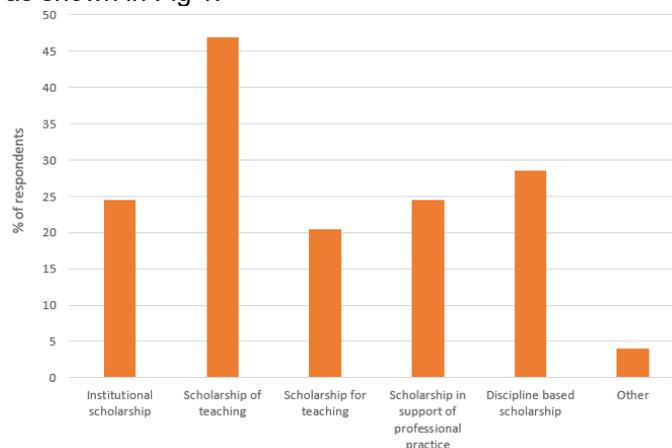


Fig 1: Type of scholarship currently undertaken by distributed academics

In response to what other types of scholarship would they like to be engaged in but are not currently, there was an equal split at 33% between Scholarship for Teaching and Discipline based Scholarship as shown in Fig 2.

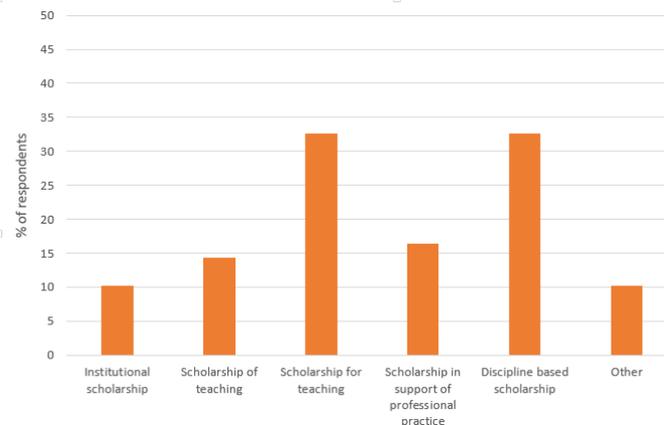


Figure 2: Types of scholarship distributed academics would like to engage in

Respondents were also asked how they disseminated their scholarship in which a third indicated through refereed journals. Over 40% of participants reported disseminating their scholarship by sharing it with colleagues but it was unclear through what common medium they used to do this, although a few respondents did indicate through conference papers and presentations as well as the use of social media such as blogging and Twitter. There is the risk that this scholarship work may be unrecognised and unrewarded despite its value. This is due to a default sector position of institutional focus on external publication [15], meaning useful scholarship work may not be effectively shared and capitalised on as individuals do not feel it is high enough status to be promoted. Love et al. [16] point out that establishing success in educational scholarship depends not only on the individual and the work they produce but also being provided with support, in the form of time and money, and recognition. In response to the question about what resources they have used to help them with their scholarship, over a third of the respondents reported the University library was reported as their main resource. Just less than 20% indicated that face-face events had helped them, citing internal conferences, and 15% indicated faculty-led events such as skills development. A worthy point to note from the results of this question of the survey was that there was very little uptake of other established OU networks such as the scholarship platform (6%) or knowledge network (5%). The final question of the survey was about how respondents felt that SHARE could support the pursuit of scholarship through a dedicated website. A list of possible resources were provided. Announcements of forthcoming internal and external scholarship event and/or resources (19%), academic profiles (18%) and a forum for networking and collaboration (15%) were considered to be the most useful resources.

A number of conclusions that can be drawn from the survey findings so far. Firstly, our experienced academics working away from main campus are expected to, and are currently engaging in scholarship in a distributed way. Secondly, although Scholarship of Teaching appears to be the main type of scholarship being conducted, there exists a desire to undertake other types of scholarship. Finally, while sharing with colleagues was considered to be the main way of disseminating scholarship, there appears to be a lack of tapping into existing university-wide networks. There is also a suggestion of a high degree of self-directed scholarship such as using the University library or the submission of conference papers where an opportunity to network may also present itself. However, this last finding may indicate that the needs of academics engaged in distributed scholarship are different or not met by other university-wide provision and that SHARE has the potential to bridge this gap and build a community of practice (CoP) for academics engaged in distributed scholarship.

### 3. SUPPORTING DISTRIBUTED SCHOLARSHIP THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In developing a CoP for academics engaged in distributed scholarship, we sought to create an online community where they would, according to Wenger [17] 'share an interest in a domain of human endeavour and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them' (p. 2). The bringing together of individuals with a common endeavour i.e. engaging in distributed scholarship not only allows them to learn from each other but also to learn together as there are shortcuts to both

knowledge access and knowledge generation through community participation. In order to create a successful CoP, Wenger [18] identified three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, a community of people and a shared practice. In this instance, the domain of knowledge is that gained through engaging with scholarship, the community of people are the academics engaged in distributed scholarship but with recognition that other non-academic staff may have valuable insight to offer and gain from participation with the community. Finally, the shared practice is what we hope the community will develop through working together to develop scholarship practice both individually and as a group.

### **3.1 Building an online community**

Through a dedicated Moodle website, the SHARE project offered forums for asynchronous discussions and online rooms for interactive discussions in real time. This provided a cross-faculty hub for information exchange and the provision of resources such as conference announcements, journal calls and funding opportunities.

The website hosts a monthly bite-size scholarship webinar called 'First Friday' in order to remind potential participants that the webinar occurs on the first Friday of each month of the year. The webinar involves academics across different disciplines, including those who engage in distributed scholarship, who volunteer to present their own scholarship, followed by a discussion session to an audience that includes academics and associated staff across the University. The idea behind the webinars is to reach out and build a sense of community and collegiality by encouraging academic colleagues to engage with a scholarly discussion over their morning coffee! It also echoes Glassick's [19] framework for scholarship which requires peer review as part of the process as it provides an informal environment or 'testing ground' for academics to receive peer-to-peer support on their scholarship. This can be in the form of presenting data not yet disseminated for sounding out ideas, a test run at presenting a conference paper as a confidence building exercise, or work that has been presented and/or published to raise its profile and receive further opinion. It also provides an opportunity for academics to reflect on their own pursuit of scholarship and the possibility of potential collaborations. All the webinars are advertised in advance across the University and are recorded for future reference.

### **3.2 Peer to peer networking**

The SHARE project co-hosted, with the University's Institute of Educational Technology, a one day university-wide conference to share scholarship collectively across the academic community. While the event was face-to-face and hosted on main campus, it was live streamed for delegates who wished to join remotely and recorded for later replay. The conference programme enabled a focus on different perspectives of scholarship across the university through a series of ten minute lightning talks on a variety of scholarly topics across faculties, 'show and tells' that were informative presentations about scholarship, strategy and support, and a poster session focused on distributed scholarship. For those engaged in distributed scholarship it was an opportunity to meet with their peers, exchange knowledge and look toward more collaborative working as well as raising the profile of scholarship they have undertaken.

A total of 79 delegates attended the conference in person with more than 100 others joining the event remotely. The conference was well received with 90% of delegates rating the event overall as good or excellent in the feedback they provided. The delegates were also asked about their objectives for attending the conference. The following are examples of objectives that delegates felt had been met during the conference;

*Learn about scholarship projects across the University*

*Inspiration for collaboration on scholarship projects and forge connections*

*To share scholarship work and see what others are doing*

*To find out good practices that we can learn from*

*Opportunity to network*

*Better understanding about what scholarship means*

One delegate commented on how scholarship appears 'fragmented and that we don't seem to be able to implement findings quickly' and this was echoed by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Learning & Teaching

who, in her key note address to the conference challenged the academic community to 'join up' scholarship activity and to begin to demonstrate value and impact.

### **3.3 Links with other scholarship networks**

Alongside partnering with the University's Institute of Educational Technology for the one day scholarship conference, the SHARE project has also made links with other networks within the University. These include eSTEEeM, a network of scholarship active academics in Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, and the University's Scholarship Exchange platform which provides resources to support the pursuit of scholarship institution wide. In doing so, it was discovered that such network relationships were reciprocally beneficial, for example, eSTEEeM promotes SHARE's First Friday webinars to its own network members and Scholarship Exchange promotes the SHARE project and website. Likewise, SHARE promotes eSTEEeM and the Scholarship Exchange activities and websites.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

We have described in this paper that where academics work away from main campus there is likely to be engagement in distributed scholarship. While the isolated nature of distributed scholarship may appear to offer some benefits, these may be outweighed by disadvantages of working without opportunities to collaborate or share knowledge and expertise. The OU's SHARE project was set up to address these issues and as a result has been developing a CoP to support distributed scholarship by building an online community and providing opportunities for peer-to-peer networking. Developing CoPs as an approach to supporting scholarship is well documented in the literature but they can take on many forms to serve different purposes [20]. The form of SHARE's CoP is predominantly online and its purpose is to provide a cross-faculty hub to support distributed scholarship. The so called 'virtual' CoPs are defined by Gannon-Leary et al. [21] as 'a network of individuals who share a domain of interest about which they communicate online' (p.2). The main purpose of such communities is about knowledge creation and transfer among its participants who benefit from a 'sense of connectedness' and belonging to a community as a whole. Although the distributed academics discussed here are a cross faculty group who often define themselves as coming from different disciplines, the shared domain of interest in scholarship brings them together into an interdisciplinary CoP.

This sense of 'belonging to community' has particular resonance where such individuals work remotely or in geographical isolation as in the case of academics engaging in distributed scholarship. Cumbie et al. [7] described a collaborative scholarship community developed to support academic writing where there is a lack of collegiality on the basis of scholars working in geographic isolation. They used an inter-professional forum (and teleconferencing) to enable the building of collegial relationships as well as the sharing of information and ideas. One of the benefits of this approach was reducing the barrier of distance and isolation in the pursuit of scholarly activities which was also the aim of the SHARE CoP. Moreover, the importance of a CoP being across faculties and disciplines is also highlighted in what Cumbie et al. [7] describe as the need for 'interdisciplinary enrichment' within a CoP, that is, the need to have a multi-disciplinary perspective and be able to understand and be supportive of a diverse range of scholarship involving different views, concepts and theories. SHARE's 'First Friday' webinar series is an exemplar of crossing the boundaries of disciplines and appealing to a cross-faculty audience. In addition, it brings people together on a regular basis and therefore goes some way to alleviating the feelings of isolation and offering collegial support in scholarly projects and activities. Jamali et al. [22] found in their study on how academics engaged with online communities that engagement with online communities for scholarly work was rated highly but that online communities were often formed because of geographical factors.

Networking and peer engagement are believed to be pivotal in developing collegial relationships [23-24], but in some cases, face-to-face interactions are considered to be the preferred option to exchange knowledge, information and ideas [22,25]. The SHARE project recognised that integral to its role is the provision of opportunities for peer-to-peer networking and the one day university-wide scholarship conference exemplifies this, particularly in how the objectives of the delegates were met. According to Howell et al. [6], the importance of 'community building' via formal channels such as conferences is a way of building camaraderie and sharing ideas about scholarship. Matzat [26] also points out that academic meetings or conferences are not just about presenting papers but can act as a catalyst for informal scholarship discourse among colleagues. This informal discourse may later develop into formal working partnerships or start an idea which forms into a scholarship project. The combination of the

scholarship day and online forums provides both the potential catalyst and the medium for ongoing discourse, despite the spatial separation of individuals.

Finally, in building a CoP to support distributed scholarship, the importance of making collegiate links with other networks and their reciprocal benefits was recognised in promoting scholarship as one, rather than working in competition. As Jamali et al. [22] postulate, 'all scholarly communities and networks are the very bedrock of academe' (p. 604). However, the survey results indicated a lack of tapping into other university-wide networks and it raised the question of whether the needs of academics engaged in distributed scholarship are different or not met by university-wide provision. We would surmise that needs may not be different, it may be a case of unawareness or reticence about other networks, or that they are not accessible from a remote location, rather than needs not being met by university-wide provision. Hence, the importance of the SHARE project where its website can be seen as a portal for distributed scholarship, making links with other networks and bringing them under one roof, albeit 'virtually'. This provides not only a collation of scholarship resources but legitimises the use of other scholarship networks as part of a community of practice.

## 5. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Looking to the future, the SHARE project hopes to increase its impact through further development of the peer-to-peer support network to support academics engaged in distributed scholarship. To date, the SHARE website is averaging on 45 unique visitors per month.

We are looking to launch a blog encouraging academic colleagues to share experiences of conferences and other events they have attended, both internal and external. It is hoped that this will increase the return on investment, when attendance at such events involves sponsorship, as it will facilitate the sharing of knowledge across the institution and help colleagues to make connections and develop ideas from mixing information gathered from a variety of sources.

Work is also underway to produce a database of academic profiles to help colleagues find potential collaborators who are working on similar scholarship projects. Frequently, academics, particularly those engaged in distributed scholarship, may be unaware of others working in similar areas until the project reporting stage and hence miss collaboration opportunities. By making connections between different academic groups and 'joining up' scholarship activity, it would be possible to increase the richness and value of scholarship being undertaken at both individual and institutional level.

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## APPENDIX

The SHARE project survey questions about distributed scholarship

Q1. How long have you worked for the OU?

(Please select):

- <1 year
- 1-4 years
- 5-10 years
- >10 years

Q2. Which faculty do you work for?

(Please select more than one option if you work across faculties):

- Arts
- Maths, Computing & Technology
- Science
- Health & Social Care
- Business & Law
- Social Science
- English & Languages

Q3. Which region are you attached to?

(Please select more than one option if you work across regions):

- London
- South
- South West
- West Midlands
- East Midlands
- East of England
- Yorkshire
- North West
- North East
- Wales
- Scotland
- Ireland

Q4. Which category best describes your role?

(Please select one option):

- F/T lecturer/permanent contract
- F/T lecturer/fixed term contract
- F/T senior lecturer/permanent contract
- F/T senior lecturer/fixed term contract
- P/T lecturer/permanent contract
- P/T lecturer/fixed term contract
- P/T senior lecturer/permanent contract
- P/T senior lecturer/fixed term contract
- Other (please specify)

Q5. Do any of your career development staff appraisal objectives involve you actively engaging in scholarship?

(Please select):

- Yes  (go to Q6)
- No  (go to Q7)

Q6. How does your scholarship match the five types identified in the Senate paper: Scholarship: A framework for implementation (S/10/4/10) as described below?  
(Please select more than one option if appropriate):

- Institutional Scholarship   
*(The investigation of questions of interest to the strategy and operation of the University)*
- Scholarship of Teaching   
*(Scholarly investigation of one's own or others' teaching, including the investigation of pedagogy in relation to, for example, approaches to teaching, assessment and learning design)*
- Scholarship for Teaching   
*(Scholarly activities and outputs that contribute to the development of learning materials, modules and curricula)*
- Scholarship in support of Professional Practice   
*(Application of findings and innovation to address social issues)*
- Discipline based Scholarship   
*(Investigation that extends and area of academic discipline and seeks to add to knowledge)*
- Other (please specify)

Comments:

Q7. What types of scholarship (as described in Q6) would you like to be engaged in but are not currently?  
(Please select more than one option if appropriate):

- Institutional Scholarship
- Scholarship of Teaching
- Scholarship for Teaching
- Scholarship in support of Professional Practice
- Discipline based Scholarship
- Other (please specify)

Comments:

Q8. If you are actively engaged in scholarship how would you normally disseminate it?  
(Please select one option):

- Not published or shared
- Shared with colleagues internally and/or externally
- Non-refereed publications
- Refereed articles/chapters/books
- Other (please specify)

Comments:

Q9. What resources have you used to help you with research and scholarship?  
(Please select more than one option if appropriate):

- OU Library
- Scholarship Platform
- Knowledge Network
- Face-to-face OU Scholarship events
- Faculty-led events
- Regional-led events

- Other websites/virtual workspaces
- Events external to the OU
- Other (please specify)

Comments:

Q 10. We are currently developing a new website dedicated to supporting scholarship conducted away from main campus. Which of the following features would you find useful in helping you with your scholarship?

(Please select more than one option if appropriate):

- Academic profiles
- Mentoring programme
- Forum for networking and collaboration
- 'Virtual' classes on scholarly topics
- Help and support in getting published
- Bibliographical links to published work
- Announcements of forthcoming internal and external scholarship events and/or resources
- Other (please specify)

Comments: