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Exploring collaboration in the implementation of a national assessment strategy: perspectives of advanced practice educators

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Abstract:	Summary A mixed methodology was used to explore the perceptions of the Advanced Clinical Practice End Point Assessment Organisation (EPAO) network members regarding the collaborative community of practice developed to support the implementation of a national assessment strategy. Collaboration on course design between Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in an increasingly competitive market is still relatively under-researched particularly in the UK, making this study a valuable contribution to the field. The study focuses on a series of workshops facilitated by the Association of Advanced Practice Educators UK (AAPEUK) to gather the faculty staff of HEIs intending to deliver the ACP apprenticeship end point assessment (EPA), to operationalise and meet the requirements of the EPA assessment plan. These workshops eventually led to the formation of the EPAO Network, which currently has representation from over 50 HEIs across England. The study collected both quantitative and qualitative data from sixteen participants to understand their experiences in the EPAO network. The thematic analysis of the data resulted in three key themes: Collaboration, Support, and Quality and Consistency. The findings of the study revealed the benefits of learning communities working as a community of practice and the positive impact of collaboration on individuals and faculties in a higher education setting. Through the community of practice, it was clear to see the strong vision of enriching education and training in a professional, workforce development context with true collaboration and innovation across the HEIs.
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Title page

Exploring Collaboration in the Implementation of a National Assessment Strategy: Perspectives of Advanced Practice Educators

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No conflicts of interest declared.

Table 1

Click here to download Table Table 1.docx

Table 1 Characteristics of the study population		
Current primary role (%)	Lecturer/senior lecturer	4 (25%)
	Programme/course lead	9 (56.25%)
	Work based learning tutor	1 (6.25%)
	Apprenticeship manger/team	1 (6.25%)
	EPA unit lead	1 (6.25%)
Professional Clinical background (%)	Physiotherapist	1 (6.25%)
	Nurse	13 (81.25%)
	Paramedic	1 (6.25%)
	Podiatrist	1 (6.25%)
Time employed in teaching/supporting role in HE (years) ± SD		11.86 ± 8.21
First EPA (number)	2021	3
	2022	6
	2023	6
	2024	1
Length of attendance (months) ± SD		11.75 ± 9.69

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Exploring Collaboration in the Implementation of a National Assessment Strategy: Perspectives of Advanced Practice Educators.

Summary

A mixed methodology was used to explore the perceptions of the Advanced Clinical Practice End Point Assessment Organisation (EPAO) network members regarding the collaborative community of practice developed to support the implementation of a national assessment strategy.

Collaboration on course design between Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in an increasingly competitive market is still relatively under-researched particularly in the UK, making this study a valuable contribution to the field.

The study focuses on a series of workshops facilitated by the Association of Advanced Practice Educators UK (AAPEUK) to gather the faculty staff of HEIs intending to deliver the ACP apprenticeship end point assessment (EPA), to operationalise and meet the requirements of the EPA assessment plan. These workshops eventually led to the formation of the EPAO Network, which currently has representation from over 50 HEIs across England.

The study collected both quantitative and qualitative data from sixteen participants to understand their experiences in the EPAO network. The thematic analysis of the data resulted in three key themes: Collaboration, Support, and Quality and Consistency. The findings of the study revealed the benefits of learning communities working as a community of practice and the positive impact of collaboration on individuals and faculties in a higher education setting.

Through the community of practice, it was clear to see the strong vision of enriching education and training in a professional, workforce development context with true collaboration and innovation across the HEIs.

Keywords

Apprenticeship, Assessment, Advanced Practice, collaboration, community of practice.

Key points

Implementing the End point assessment (EPA) assessment plan held challenges for educators acting as the EPA organisation which have been collaboratively addressed in the end point assessment organisation (EPAO) network hosted by the Association of Advanced Practice Educators UK (AAPEUK). The findings of the study revealed the benefits of learning communities working as a community of practice and the positive impact of collaboration on individuals and faculties in a higher education setting. Through the community of practice, it was clear to see the strong vision of enriching education and training in a professional, workforce development context with true collaboration and innovation across the HEIs.

CPD/Reflective questions

Why is collaboration an important activity in advanced practice education?

To what extent might a more competitive environment inhibit collaboration?

How might educators work more collaboratively across HEIs?

Main text

Introduction and background

Apprenticeships have been in existence in the United Kingdom (UK) since the medieval era, but their popularity had waned since the 1960s (Macarthur 2023). However, in 1993, a new apprenticeship scheme was introduced, where apprentices were considered employees, paid a salary, and required to work towards a UK National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3, equivalent to UK A level/Scottish Highers or American advanced placement (AP) qualifications. In 2010, higher apprenticeships were introduced, which were comparable to foundation degrees and above. The Advanced Clinical Practitioner (ACP) apprenticeship, a master's (MSc) level 7 or graduate-level programme, was launched in England in 2018.

Every apprenticeship, regardless of the academic qualification it contains, has an end point assessment (EPA) (Institute for Apprenticeships 2018). The purpose of the EPA is to assess whether the learner is occupationally competent to perform the role that

they have been in training for during the apprenticeship. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education set out the requirements of an EPA in an EPA assessment document for each apprenticeship. The ACP EPA is integrated within the master's programme and as such the higher education institution (HEI) acts as the end point assessment organisation. The HEI as the end point assessment organisation is responsible for developing the EPA materials and administering the EPA in accordance with the EPA assessment plan.

It was quickly appreciated by early adopters of the ACP apprenticeship that a collaborative approach would be beneficial in producing the materials required and in achieving a consistent approach across England. It is also a stipulation in the EPA assessment plan that EPAOs participate within an EPAO network to share and discuss areas of improvement and to report on best practice. To this end, the Association of Advanced Practice Educators in the UK (AAPEUK) hosted a series of workshops in 2019 for HEIs delivering the ACP EPA which has become an EPAO network with over 50 members HEIs which has become a community of practice. Communities of practice are defined as "groups of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al. 2002 p.4).

Much of the literature regarding collaboration in higher education in the UK tends to focus on international collaboration, employer-university collaboration, or research collaborations. Literature about collaboration on course design is sparse and there is nothing in the UK context.

Newell and Bain (2020) used a qualitative case study approach to explore 8 Australian academics' perceptions of collaboration in higher education course design within one

mid-sized multi-campus regional university, rather than between HEIs. They found that while respondents recognized the importance of collaboration and were willing to engage, a lack of understanding of required processes and skills, along with insufficient organisational leadership and support, hindered effective collaboration. The authors concluded that there appeared to be a reliance on individuals having the goodwill and skills to collaborate in the absence of organisational support and capacity for building collaboration at scale.

McGraw et al (2021) used a self-study methodology to explore factors and processes that enabled teacher educators from 10 Australian universities to collaboratively design a high-stakes national assessment task impacting multiple stakeholders. Similar to our study, they focused on universities collaborating to design Teaching Performance Assessments for pre-service teachers (PSTs) called Assessment for Graduate Teaching. Collaborative leadership, social processes (dialogue, storytelling, humour, respectful debate), and personal dispositions (openness to learning, appreciation for change, care and commitment, respect for diversity, optimism with a critical lens) were found to foster teamwork. They particularly noted that despite a culture supporting individualised, hierarchical, and competitive practices, the collaboration achieved success.

This study focuses on collaboration on course design in the UK by seeking the views of members of the EPAO Network in England who worked collaboratively to implement the EPA for the ACP apprenticeship.

Methodology

A survey research methodology was used within this study underpinned by the positivist paradigm (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017). A mixed methods approach utilised quantitative and qualitative data about the participants' experience of the ACP EPAO Network. In order to apply this method, the survey consisted of open and closed questions, collecting the data simultaneously, whilst analysing the results separately and then integrating the conclusions (Shorten & Smith 2017). The qualitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, whilst the qualitative data underwent thematic analysis.

All sixty-three members of the ACP EPAO Network were sent an email inviting them to participate in an online survey consisting of seventeen closed and free text questions taking no longer than thirty minutes to complete. Participants were free to withdraw their answers at any time. In order to maximise the number of participants within the study reminder emails were sent each week for the one month duration that the survey was open. The data was collated on the Qualitric platform where participants were asked to provide their consent to the use of the data. All anonymous data was stored securely on password protected devices, in accordance with the academic integrity policy, and kept securely in electronic form in Arkivum for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, in line with Oxford Brookes University Ethics guidelines. Sixteen participants responded to the survey (see table 1).

The results from the demographic questions were descriptively analysed to measure variability within the sample. This collated information on role, teaching experience

and clinical background. The 3 closed questions were analysed in the Qualtrics platform using net promoter scoring which indicates those who were satisfied (promoters), those who were dissatisfied (detractors) and those who were neutral (passive) (Fig. 1). Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data from the free text questions. Thematic analysis allows the development of themes by identifying patterns in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). The researchers utilised the Braun and Clark, 6 step approach to reviewing the data: Step 1. Become familiar with the data, Step 2: Generate initial codes, Step 3: Search for themes, Step 4: Review themes, Step 5: Define themes, Step 6: Write-up (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017)**.** To increase reflexivity and sense check the themes developed, both researchers independently analysed the data and then came together to discuss their outcomes. This ensured a rigorous analysis process to ensure consistency in results. From this process, three key themes emerged from the analysis: Collaboration, Support, and Quality and Consistency.

Research governance

The proposal for this study was developed by the primary researcher with the second providing peer review. Ethical approval was then gained from Oxford Brookes University ethics committee (UREC reg no L22284), the principal researcher's institution. The project was also registered at Sheffield Hallam University.

In line with ethical governance of research projects, the participants all provided their informed consent at the start of the survey. The study was undertaken in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki 2013, autonomy, beneficence, non maleficence and justice.

Results

Descriptive analysis

Sixteen participants responded to the survey. Most respondents were programme/course leads and nurses, although the study population reflected the diverse makeup of the EPAO network. The majority had extensive educational experience in teaching or supporting roles in higher education (table 1). The majority of respondents had already delivered the EPA with a number yet to deliver their first EPA. The closed questions indicated high satisfaction with the network and potential positive impacts on members and therefore students' knowledge and understanding of the EPA (fig. 2). Thematic analysis of the free text responses revealed three key themes: Collaboration, Support, and Quality and Consistency. Collectively the three key themes showed a positive impact on the members of the collaborative group. Considering these in more detail shows further positive elements of working in a community of practice.

Thematic analysis

Collaboration

Several respondents mentioned that the collaborative nature of the group was a positive aspect. Collaboration is defined by Chrislip and Larson (1994 p.5) as a ‘mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties who work toward common goals by sharing responsibility, authority, and accountability for achieving results…the purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party’.

The benefits of collaboration can be summed up as providing cost savings and efficiencies, but in the specific context of higher education, Walsh and Kahn (2009 p.5) outline particular benefits:

- A greater resource than just the individual on which to draw
- Several, rather than one, potential lead to maintain the momentum of the project and refresh the initiative with new ideas and energy
- Cross-fertilization of ideas and enthusiasm
- The satisfaction of realising a significant project that would have been unthinkable, and less enjoyable, without the support of others.

The respondents' motivation for joining the network was reported to be able to share best practices, experiences, and not least resources for the EPA. The EPA is a complex assessment with several parts each requiring various elements to be designed and validated (MacArthur 2023). This perhaps represents the 'unthinkable task' referred to in Walsh and Kahn's (2009) above list. Respondents reported that being able to hear from other HEIs about their real-life experiences of delivering the EPA, gaining ideas and tips, and learning what worked well helped to give them a better understanding of the requirements. This assisted members with the practicalities of setting up a new predetermined assessment and supporting colleagues and students better. One respondent commented,

"Attending the meetings had a very positive impact on me, as I found that my understanding and knowledge of the modules and the assessment requirements were enhanced. Moreover, I felt that I gained new ideas on how I could best structure the module's timetable and facilitate my students' learning."

And another,

"I went from understanding what the abbreviation means to understanding and developing an EPA module - I could simply not have done this without colleagues sharing their experiences."

These findings and comments concur with the benefits of collaboration outlined above by Walsh and Kahn (2009).

In the context of secondary education, Hargreaves (1994) discusses the importance of teacher collaboration in understanding how teachers can work together to improve student learning. He draws a distinction between collaboration which tends to be spontaneous, voluntary, and development-orientated, and contrived collegiality which is administratively regulated, compulsory, and implementation-orientated. He argues that collaboration with the characteristics of contrived collegiality does not tend to lead to meaningful or sustainable change. This may help to explain why the EPAO network was a positive experience. Members joined voluntarily, with the expectation that working together would be a productive and valuable exercise.

This collaboration is significant when changes to UK higher education over the last 15-20 years mean that Universities find themselves in an increasingly competitive market. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2023) data from 2014-15 to 2021-22 reveals that tuition fee growth has become the primary source of income for universities, emphasising the shift towards treating students as customers. This is one of the six conditions required to support competition as described by Adcroft et al (2010); any buyer in a given marketplace has the option to buy the same product from a rival seller. A competitive orientation is associated with certain activities and behaviours summed up by Adcroft et al (2010) as; improvements to relative performance in order to secure a competitive advantage. Research on the impact of

competition on research collaboration in higher education is extensive, highlighting the tension between collaboration and individual achievement evaluations. However, limited research exists on the effect of competition on course design collaboration, particularly involving educators from multiple universities (McFarlane 2016). Less is known about the effect of competition on collaboration for course design and even less about collaborations involving educators from multiple universities. It might be expected, therefore, that a competitive environment such as that created in UK higher education would be less conducive to collaboration. This was not the experience of respondents in this survey.

When asked to identify what had facilitated the beneficial experience, respondents commented on the positive and constructive discussion and the honest, open, and generous collegiality of the membership. Newell and Bain (2018) in their review of the literature on team-based collaboration in HE explored the success factors required for effective collaboration and identified the role of attitudes, dispositions, and interpersonal skills as key. Attitudes such as valuing and choosing collaboration, trust, respect, reciprocity, commitment to shared work, self-awareness and adaptability, and an openness to others and tasks were described as important prerequisites that predispose individuals for collaboration. These prerequisites would appear to be evidenced in the EPAO network members. One respondent said that the benefits they had experienced by being part of the network were due to,

"Generosity of others to share experiences, to be honest, and open about what they have done, even if something had not gone to plan."

With another commenting,

“…sharing pitfalls and concerns, refreshing for competitive organisations. It has a 'we are all in it together' feel.”

The respondents joined the network to share best practices, experiences, and resources related to the EPA assessment. This collaboration helped them with the practical aspects of setting up the assessment and supporting colleagues and students. The benefits reported by the respondents align with the advantages of collaboration outlined by Walsh and Kahn (2009). The EPAO network experience was positive because members voluntarily joined with the expectation of and disposition to productive collaboration. The respondents attributed the beneficial experience of collaboration to positive and constructive discussions, as well as the honest, open, and generous collegiality within the group, creating an environment where sharing experiences, even when things didn't go according to plan, and supporting each other were valued.

Support

Another common theme amongst responses related to the support offered by the network. While collaboration was seen to provide practical support in delivering the EPA assessment leading to professional growth, respondents also reported gaining personal benefits from being part of a supportive network leading to personal growth. Many noted that they had gained personal confidence. One respondent commented,

“The EPA is very detailed and specific, as someone who is new to academia I don't think I would have the confidence to implement it without support from the network.”

And another,

“The discussions and feedback that I received from colleagues from various institutions across the country, was very positive and useful; and I found that my confidence was boosted.”

This in turn enabled them to support others;

“More confidence in being able to articulate this EPA to the wider ACP team, and apprenticeship lead.

I felt reassured to support colleagues and students doing their EPA.

I have felt confident to become a buddy and an IA (independent assessor for the EPA) thanks to this group.”

McGraw et al (2021) in a very similar study also found that membership of a collaborative group produced personal gains and increased confidence brought about by the group's willingness to be open and reflective. Chang (2018) considered three studies about university faculty communities from a relational perspective, using Confucian relationality as a lens. She considered collegiality as a form of personal cultivation and therefore a goal in itself rather than purely as a means to achieving the aims of the group. Chang (2018) would argue that the fact that many respondents reported these personal benefits should be considered as much a measure of the success of the network as the achievement of the groups' original aims related to the EPA. In fact, it is clear that the impact of the network on the successful delivery of the EPA across multiple HEIs in England is as much to do with empowering educators as with providing practical resources.

This may be a significant benefit of collaborative work in the current climate as UK surveys of staff well-being revealed that 47% of participants described their mental health as poor (Dougall et al 2021). This study was carried out during the pandemic, but pre-pandemic studies also found that university staff documented higher levels of

stress and burnout compared to the general population (Morrish 2019). Amongst other factors that might contribute to this, Jayman et al (2022) cite extrinsic pressures such as high-stakes external audits which are a feature of the apprenticeship system with the EPA coming under specific scrutiny by the office for students since 2021. Many respondents in this study said that they joined the network specifically to gain support with one respondent saying that '*hearing that others feel as stressed as me'* was one of the most useful aspects of the meetings, indicating that implementation of the EPA was a source of stress for educators. Jayman et al (2022) point out that there is evidence of an association between teacher and learner wellbeing and that efforts to improve staff wellbeing will ultimately benefit students. It was heartening to get the following response:

"I really enjoy these meetings- there aren't many meetings I feel that way about!"

Quality and consistency

Many respondents reported that a motivation to join the network was to ensure quality and consistency in delivering the EPA. Through the collaborative and supportive environment, members have been able to learn from each other and share best practices and ideas and this has resulted in improvements to their provision in line with other HEIs.

"I have reviewed the number and the structure of the required tutorials for each cohort based on the suggestions made by the members of the network.

I have listened to the experiences of others and have developed my EPA module on the back of HEIs shared experiences."

It is clear to see how this activity would result in consistency among those HEIs who are members of the network.

The existence of a collaborative professional community is associated with enhanced teaching methods and academic success among students (Newell & Bain 2018). Collaborative work has been linked with high-quality courses in teacher education for example (Zundas-Fraser 2014). Newell and Bain (2018) argue that successful programme design in HE relies heavily on collaboration as a crucial element particularly as student populations become diverse, societal expectations of education increase, and external drivers mean academics cannot meet these demands alone.

Discussion

Collaboration helped members of the network with the practical aspects of setting up the assessment and supporting colleagues and students. The respondents attributed the beneficial experience of collaboration to positive and constructive discussions, as well as the honest, open, and generous collegiality within the group, creating an environment where sharing experiences, even when things didn't go according to plan, and supporting each other were valued.

While collaboration was seen to provide practical support in delivering the EPA assessment leading to professional growth, respondents also reported gaining personal benefits from being part of a supportive network leading to personal growth. The impact of the network on the successful delivery of the EPA across multiple HEIs in England is as much to do with empowering educators as with providing practical resources.

Through the collaborative and supportive environment, members have been able to learn from each other and share best practices and ideas and this has resulted in

improvements to the quality of their provision in line with other HEIs. This activity has resulted in consistency among those HEIs who are members of the network.

This study is the only study on the impact of collaboration on course design outside of Australia, with most of the literature about collaboration in HE concerned with research collaboration. It supports many of the findings in previous studies on collaboration for course design. Whilst this was a successful example of collaboration, as found by Newell and Bain (2020) it too relied on the goodwill and existing skills of the community of practice for its success. Many of the social processes and personal dispositions identified by McGraw et al (2021) were also found to be important in this study including respectful debate, and openness to learning in an increasingly competitive environment.

Limitations of the project

Throughout the process, the researchers tried to limit an unconscious bias of their opinions of the group as they were also members of the EPAO. Although all efforts were made to minimise this, completely eliminating it is acknowledged to be difficult.

The themes that emerged in this study can be used to inform more specific research questions in order to deepen the understanding of the processes and practices that lead to successful collaboration for course design in HE. The insights into participant experiences of the community of practice can guide the development of effective strategies to promote HEI collaboration in an increasingly competitive market including professional development needs for developing the skills and providing support for engaging in collaborative practices.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that collaboration has the potential to produce benefits to the design of programmes, the personal growth and empowerment of educators, and the quality and consistency of provision. The network has enabled academics from a diverse range of HEIs in England to engage in professional development towards improved teaching and learning in a safe, non-competitive collaborative and encouraging space.

What is evident from this study is the passion for the successful implementation of assessment. The community of practice allowed a safe space to discuss challenges and learn from others to ensure consistency and rigour of the assessment.

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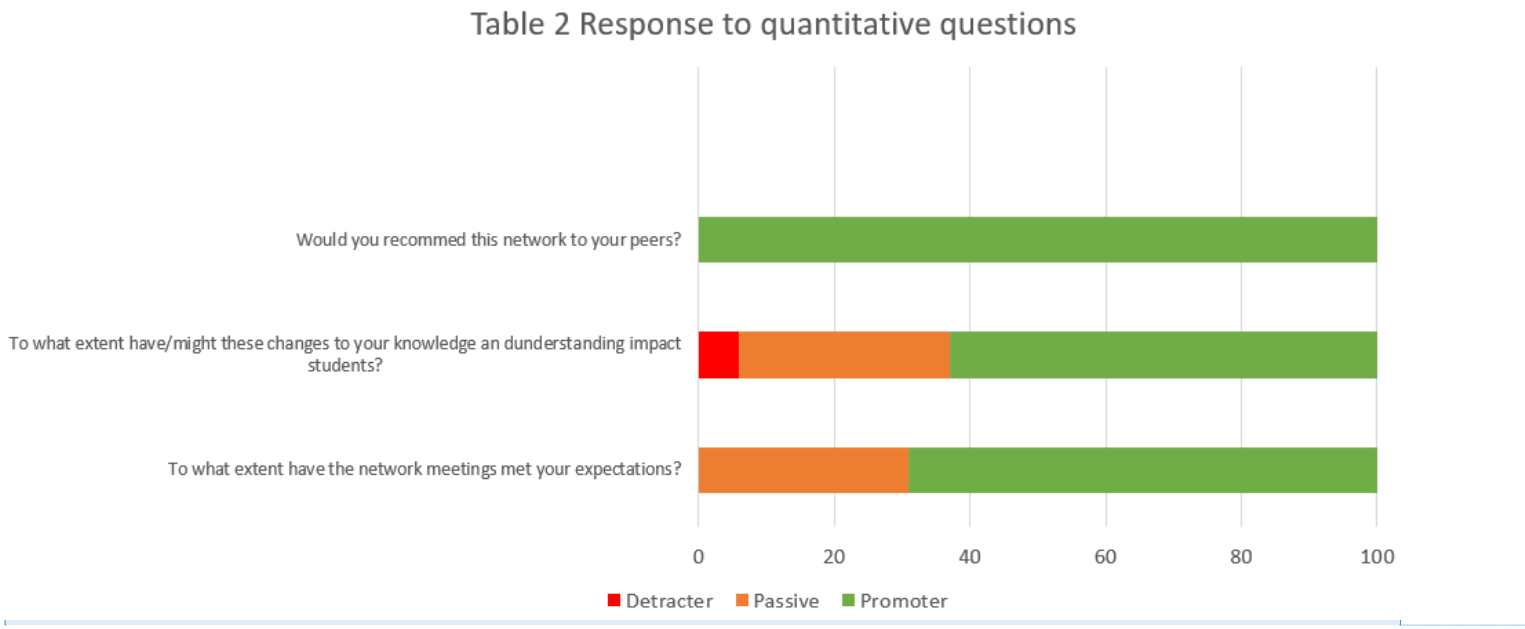
Figure 1



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