

Experts call for more pragmatic approach to higher education teaching

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A university lecture but could the standard of teaching be improved if a different approach was taken by educators? Credit: Swansea University

Millions of students around the world could benefit if their educators adopted a more flexible and practical approach, say Swansea University

experts.

After analyzing the techniques current being used in [higher education](#), the researchers are calling for a pragmatic and evidence-based approach instead.

Professor Phil Newton, director of learning and teaching at of Swansea University Medical School, said, "Higher education is how we train those who carry out important professional roles in our society. There are now more than 200 million students in HE worldwide and this number is likely to double again over the next decade.

"Given the size, impact, importance and cost of HE, it would be reasonable to assume that policies and practices employed are the best available, based upon rigorous evidence. However, this does not appear to be the case."

In a new paper, Professor Newton, Dr. Ana Da Silva and Sam Berry argue that the findings of higher education research are not being used to develop and benefit educational practice.

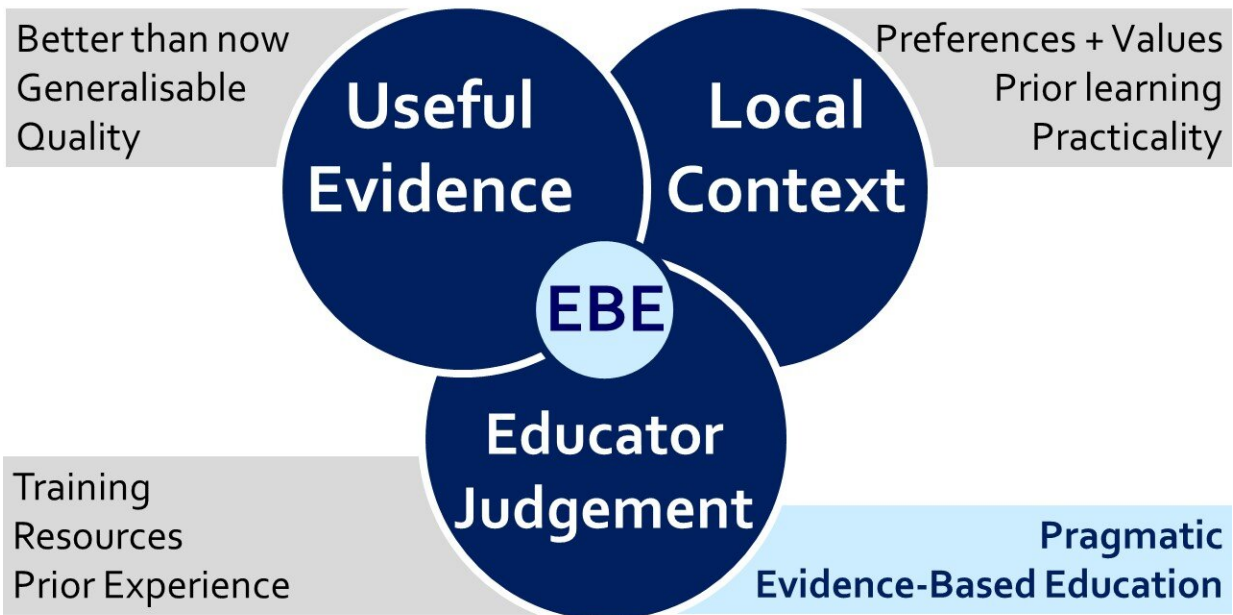
They say belief in ineffective methods such as Learning Styles persist, teaching quality and teacher performance are measured using subjective and potentially biased feedback while university educators have limited access to professional development.

Instead, the academics are proposing a pragmatic model of evidence-based higher education which they say could deliver results that are more obviously useful, focusing on practical teaching skills.

Prof Newton added: "The model is intended for educators and policymakers, to help them make the best use of existing education research evidence when making contextual decisions about local

practice.

"It can also be used by learners to make decisions about how, when, why and what to study, and for the teaching of study skills to learners."



A decision-making model for the application of research evidence to improving educational practice. The most useful research evidence is combined with practitioner judgement about how and why to apply it in a specific context, with specific questions for each aspect. At the intersection of these three factors is Pragmatic Evidence-Based Education (EBE). Credit: Prof Phil Newton

The model and how it can be applied in education settings is detailed in their research which has been published in the journal *Frontiers in Education*.

However, they say any decisions made using the model would need to be reviewed regularly, as the evidence base updates and the context shifts.

The need for this flexibility—and the benefits of adopting a pragmatic approach—have been highlighted by the pandemic which has led the global HE sectors to embrace online learning.

Prof Newton said: "There is an abundant evidence-base regarding learning online and at a distance, but much of this was developed to optimize learning under planned circumstances where students could choose to learn online, or in a structured blended way, very different to the situation we find ourselves in now.

"A pragmatic application of the existing evidence to the new context can help us with this rapid change and help us plan for what might become a 'new normal'."

Among the paper's recommendations, the researchers are calling for:

- Faculty development programs and credentials for HE educators to be practical and skills based;
- Establishing pragmatic practical evidence summaries for use across international HE, allowing adjustment for context;
- More syntheses of existing primary research that answer useful questions such as what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why? How much does it cost, what is it compared to, how practical is it to implement?
- Increased funding for research into the effectiveness of learning and teaching approaches in HE.

Prof Newton added "There is an abundance of academic literature on higher education, stretching back decades. We owe it to all involved in education to ensure that this can best inform innovation and

improvement, in a way that allows for professional judgment and a consideration of context.

"This could be achieved by adopting principles of pragmatic, evidence-based higher [education](#)."

More information: Philip M. Newton et al, The Case for Pragmatic Evidence-Based Higher Education: A Useful Way Forward?, *Frontiers in Education* (2020). [DOI: 10.3389/feduc.2020.583157](https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.583157)

Provided by Swansea University

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