

The Strategic Position of EAP in the Academy: A Case Study of a Scottish ▶ University

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BALEAP PIM on Leadership and Management in EAP

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- ▶ As per the ethics approval, the institution and individuals involved will remain anonymous. The taboo nature of this research topic in EAP requires a level of trust and the existence of personal relationships between the researcher and informants (Matthews 2008), without which the research would not be possible.
- ▶ This allows the researcher to catch the close-up reality of participants' lived experiences and provide a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973).

Structure

- ▶ Background to the macro and meso context of the neoliberal university and language centres
- ▶ Specific context of this study and research questions
- ▶ Implementation Staircase & attitudes of the EAP practitioners
- ▶ Implications for the strategic position of EAP
- ▶ Effects on EAP practitioners' practices & identities
- ▶ Conclusions
- ▶ Questions/Discussion

Macro Context- The Neoliberal University

- ▶ ‘Academic Capitalism’ (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009)
- ▶ ‘The new vocationalism’ (Symes and McIntyre, 2002)
- ▶ ‘Entrepreneurial university’ (Barnett, 2015)
- ▶ An increased emphasis on higher education as a private good rather than a public good, and so a move towards making students pay more for it (Trowler, 2011)
- ▶ Encouragement for internationalization (Barnett, 2015)

‘The overt use of the international student ‘market’ by governments to shore up the finances of universities is an embarrassment to many of us, and is discussed in small fora and face to face among EAP teachers and programme managers, but is not found in the research literature’ (Hamp-Lyons, 2015)

‘There is a significant BREXIT risk due to the high proportion of EU students that needs to be mitigated’ (Marketing & Student Recruitment External Review 2018)

Meso Context of University Language Centres

▶ Fulcher (2009) study of the organisation and activity of University Language Centres found:

- ▶ Most within an academic department- only 3 providers departments in their own right
- ▶ Majority placed with MFL
- ▶ Business School second most likely structural location
- ▶ Smaller number placed in Central Services or the International Office
- ▶ *‘The range of locations within the structure of the institution indicates the uncertainty institutions face about the place and role of TESOL/EAP’* (Fulcher, 2009:133)

Decline and Conflict of MFL

- ▶ 6,165 MFL students in 2010, down 38% to 3,830 in 2020 (UCAS, cited in *The Guardian*)
- ▶ At least nine modern languages departments have closed in the past decade (*The Guardian*)
- ▶ Growing trend for MFL departments to cease teaching language, and to concentrate on literature or cultural studies (Kelly & Jones, 2003, cited in Fulcher 2009)
- ▶ ‘Teaching the language is now seen as a ‘lesser activity’ that can be done by academic-related staff’ (Fulcher, 2009:128)
- ▶ MFL teachers frequently see TESOL/EAP teaching as ‘less academic’ BUT
- ▶ Institutions most frequently require the cross-subsidy of MFL from TESOL/EAP commercial activities (Fulcher, 2009:129)

Micro Context

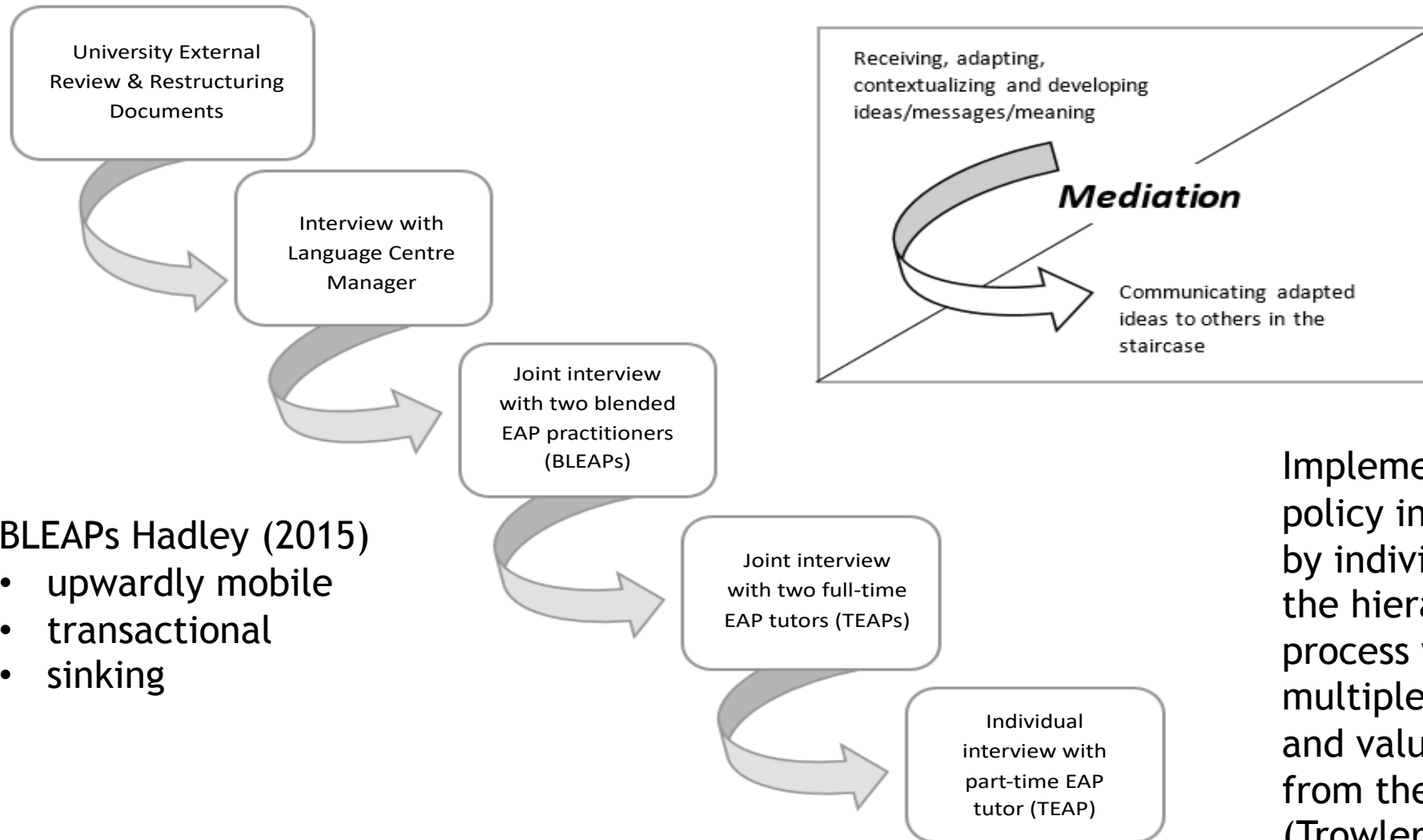
- ▶ Language Centre had been part of the School of Language, Literature, Music & Visual Culture for 20 years
- ▶ Originally closely orientated to the wider MFL student body- language learning library, language labs & learning resources for MFL students' additional study
- ▶ English language provision initially only consisted of a four-week Summer School with the LC manager STP manager employed as EFL Coordinators
- ▶ Since then, the Language Centre Manager described '*an increased dominance of EAP and a slower decline in other languages*'
 - ▶ Language labs removed- changing teaching methodology, but also more space needed for EAP classes
 - ▶ EAP provision became year-round with both pre-sessional and in-sessional
 - ▶ Reorientation of the centre more towards international students
- ▶ In 2019, the Language Centre underwent a restructuring to move from the School of Languages to the Directorate of Marketing & Student Recruitment (External Relations)

Research Context & Questions

This study had the following research questions:

- RQ1- What was the rationale for the restructuring of the Language Centre into the Directorate of External Relations?
 - o RQ1a- How was this interpreted by different EAP practitioners going down the implementation staircase from university management, to the centre manager, blended EAP practitioners (BLEAPs), and the EAP tutors (TEAPs)?
 - o RQ1b- What are the implications for the strategic position of EAP in the contemporary neoliberal university context?
- RQ2- What effect has the restructuring had on EAP practitioners' practices and identity?

Implementation Staircase (Reynolds & Saunders 1987, cited in Trowler 2002)



BLEAPs Hadley (2015)

- upwardly mobile
- transactional
- sinking

Implementation staircase: policy interpreted differently by individuals and groups in the hierarchy of the policy process with each level having multiple agendas, meanings and values that they bring from their local circumstances (Trowler et al. 2009)

RQ1a- Institutional Perspective

- ▶ The Language Centre Restructuring (LCR, 2019) clearly positions the Language Centre's role in internationalisation and student recruitment. The EAP provision is categorised as *'feeders'* that *'support international recruitment to the wider portfolio of degree programmes across the institution'* with *the Language Centre fundamental to three key elements of the University's internationalisation strategy:*
 - ▶ *The achievement of international recruitment targets*
 - ▶ *The University's commitment to an outstanding international student experience to create ambassadors for further recruitment*
 - ▶ *The support to key sponsors (government and industry) to provide the required English Language support to provide clear pathways to our degree programmes.*

RQ1a- Language Centre Manager Perspective

'in order for us to fulfil our institutional function I think we have to understand where we all fit in. We have to understand that English for Academic Purposes, you know one of the values that's ascribed to it is its ability to help learners to join the university.... we don't work for the Language Centre, we don't work for the directorate, we work for the university... we don't operate in isolation, universities operate in a context which they can't divorce themselves from'

'it's a culture that I personally really enjoy, it's a culture of collaboration ... where you are encouraged to share your achievements ... because there are people within our directorate engaged with senior management'

BUT Interpreted internationalisation as:

'a much fuller package ... not just about providing pathways although I think we provide very important pathways. I think equally important is that we're bridging points, ... for many international students, their first point of contact with the university', and 'equally important, we have a really important role in supporting students once they're here'.

'upwardly mobile' perspective aligning with the goals and values of the university management/ command & control (Hadley, 2015)

Sotirakou (2004, cited in Saunders & Sin 2014) heads of departments play a critical role in mediating practices, often serving as buffers between the different internal operation modes.

RQ1a- TEAP Perspectives

Role of the Language Centre

- ▶ *‘they wanted us to be almost like a gateway for international students that they would come to us first and then they would filter into the other departments in the university’.* Several of the tutors commented that this was something they already did: *‘That was always part of our role I think, but maybe it was just more formalized, and more grandiose to introduce this idea of pathways’.* (EAP Tutor 2)

Regarding recruitment:

- ▶ *‘I guess we want to promote the Language Centre in a positive way, and I think most of us would be happy to be involved in some aspect of that [recruitment] if that was suggested. Yeah, because it’s in our interests obviously to promote the Language Centre’* (EAP Tutor 2)

Regarding finances:

- ▶ the university had said they wanted to *‘promote us on an equal level ... because at that time there was also this talk of an external competitor coming in as well, so that anything that the outside provider got, we would be given equivalent’* (EAP Tutor 1)

Evidence of
‘transactional’
attitudes more
from a LC
perspective &
more cautious of
institutional
values and goals

RQ1b- Implications for the strategic position of EAP

LC in School of Language- not necessarily an ideal fit

- ▶ The relative decline of MFL and the growth of EAP led to the Language Centre being valued in financial terms for the School, and lacked status & visibility:

‘previously all the money that had been earned by the Language Centre would be kind of siphoned off (laughs) into language and literature to offset losses there’ (EAP tutor 1)

‘The financial position I understand, is the Language Centre has always been very successful. It has always, I believe, run a profit, but that’s not reflected in the kudos that the Language Centre gets from other departments’ (EAP tutor 3)

‘it wasn’t particularly well known that we existed, because if people did find out sometimes, they would express surprise that there was such a place. And I don’t know whether it’s a cliché ... they would say things like ‘Oh yes, my sister did that for a year before she got a real job’. Yeah, an EFL teacher bumming our way around Europe’ (SPT Manager)

RQ1b- Implications for the strategic position of EAP

LC in External Relations

- ▶ The move out of the School of Languages has exposed EAP practitioners to the wider practices and neoliberal context of the university, but also has the possibility of allowing practitioners to assert an EAP identity:

‘One of the biggest impacts it’s had is I personally am much more aware and understand the wider context I’m working in ... so I’m able to situate my work, the work of the Language Centre into that much more broader institutional context and I think that benefits the Language Centre’ (Language Centre Manager)

‘It’s a different environment there, ... I feel they’re all go-getters, all these young millennials ... you have to learn a whole new language (laughs)’ (SPT Manager)

‘I think they have commoditised education quite a lot, and you know I think unfortunately maybe that takes priority sometimes at university, it’s about customers now, it’s not about students’ (EAP Tutor 1)

‘I think you become more aware of that being in External Relations with all the marketing talk that goes on, it’s quite eye-opening in a sense’ (EAP Tutor 2)

Evidence of
‘upwardly mobile’
perspective

vs.

‘transactional’
attitudes cautious
of institutional
values and goals

RQ2- Effects on EAP practitioners' practices and identity

Main impact was the significant rise in the number of students by 200% (2017-2019)

- ▶ Hadley (2015) mentions a common theme of 'burnout' among teachers who take what he calls an EAP 'artisan' view of designing specific courses for students needs and providing an individual level of attention, as opposed to the SPU mass-produced, generic courses designed to process every higher numbers of students.

BUT this was not supported by the respondents in this study:

'It's not about student numbers it's about resources. If we had the sufficient resources to develop the courses systematically and incrementally, and to put in structures in place to support teachers and learners, then numbers shouldn't matter' (Language Centre Manager)

Tutors commented that the increase in student numbers did not affect their own teaching because *'you would have a similar number of students in a class'*, but tutors were having to support higher numbers of teachers: *'lots of other teachers would have things that were going wrong and you would have to try to support them in what they were doing because they weren't always aware of the system'*.

RQ2- Effects on EAP practitioners' practices and identity

Instead, the rise in the number of students allowed:

More potential for discipline-specific classes:

'I think we've always been forced to do the English for general purposes, ... but I think we've always felt a bit dissatisfied. You can't have specific courses for business, law, oil and gas, unless you've got the numbers, that's always been our problem.' (EAP Tutor 2)

Increase in insessional EAP support:

SPT Manager designed bespoke subject-specific insessional EAP sessions on a range of subjects from Business, TESOL to Law and Public Health.

The insessional provision was cross-funded by revenue from the preessional. When asked why academic departments do not financially support insessional provision, the Language Centre Manager responded: *'schools are strapped for cash, everyone is financially challenged, and they refuse to do it'* and when such a model had been attempted the number of students *'almost went to zero'*.

RQ2- Effects on EAP practitioners' practices and identity

This study draws similar conclusions to Taylor (2020) that EAP practitioners have fragmented identities between academic and service roles:

- ▶ Some of the EAP tutors were resistant to being labelled as 'academic services' or 'teaching assistants'

'that is saying we're servicing them so to speak' (SPT Manager)

'sometimes you sort of think they just still don't see us quite in the same league, even though you know we're teaching on a core module [of the MSc TESOL] as well as an optional one, and not just teaching on it, you know the Language Centre runs it' (SPT Manager)

- ▶ It should be noted that all the EAP staff had a high level of education and qualifications, with master's degrees, postgraduate certificates, HEA accreditation and four staff members engaging in PhD research.

RQ2- Effects on EAP practitioners' practices and identity

However, others were more critical of the notion of being an academic and instead identified more in the third space between the two, with our work supporting students just as prestigious as research:

- ▶ *'even if I were to, you know, get a doctorate or something like that doesn't mean that I'm going to be an academic'* (SPT Manager)
- ▶ *'support isn't a dirty word as far as I'm concerned. Supporting students is one of the key values at the centre of teaching and learning, ... if we value supporting students then that should be equally prestigious as researching'* (Language Centre Manager)
- ▶ *'I believe they [the university] are entrenched in what we call the old school of management ... it would be good if they tried to move away from this academic, sole academic side, they have to be service providers as well'* (EAP Tutor 3)

Conclusions

Ding & Bruce (2017:156) call for more studies of the '*micro-politics of EAP, [and] the ways in which specific centres respond and act within structural forces*'.

- ▶ I would argue that this study shows that moving from being part of an academic department to professional services does not necessarily lead to deprofessionalisation.
- ▶ It is hoped that this case study can provide insights into other similar situations.
- ▶ I would suggest that further research could be done particularly at larger EAP units which may have more opportunities to provide more specialist courses but may also be under greater tensions to process larger numbers of students.

Questions/Discussion



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