The SRHE Digital University Network: Trends in conference papers 2013-2022, and future directions

Katy Jordan, Jeremy Knox and Janja Komljenovic
Digital University Network convenors
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Abstract

It is ten years since the Society for Research in Higher Education annual conference began hosting the Digital University as one of its themes. During this time, the changing nature of online and digital technologies and platforms has arguably changed dramatically. It is therefore timely to ask, what is the meaning of the Digital University? How might the network focus its activities, looking forwards? In this session, we present an analysis and reflection on the range of contributions which have been presented under this theme at the SRHE annual conferences, in order to look back and reflect on the nature of the 'digital university'. We will present and discuss themes in the collection of papers, with the intention that it will form a starting point for broader discussions about the concept of the digital university and the future of the network.

Introduction

The inaugural meeting of the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) Digital University network was held in 2012 (Atkinson, 2012; SRHE, 2012). From its inception, the network has been intentionally flexible in its definition and scope; "The intention is not to focus on 'elearning' as such but to explore a range of issues (both theoretical and practical) that arise through the impact of technological processes on social networks, research methodologies, identity formations, publications and theoretical developments." (SRHE, 2013). At the 2012 SRHE conference, the Digital University sought to gather suggestions from the community about potential key topics to focus its activities upon. The initial range of topics identified included methodologies for online research; digital literacies; virtuality and education; social networking for learning; staff development needs; e-citizenship; and managing change around technologies (SRHE, 2013).

Since then, the Digital University network has hosted 24 events, and from 2013 the Digital University has been one of the topics which papers could be submitted under to the annual SRHE conference. It is the latter which is the focus of our inquiry. Given that a substantial period of time has elapsed, and the definition of the Digital University and network has been flexible from the outset, what can we learn about the communities' working definition of the Digital University in practice through the body of conference papers? Has this changed over time, and how can this help inform the future of the network?

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using the SRHE conference papers archive available online at the SRHE website (SRHE, 2023). All of the conference papers which were categorised as being under the theme of the Digital University were logged in a spreadsheet. From conferences

between 2013 to 2022 inclusive, a total of 122 papers were identified. The papers, and direct links to each, are collated in the Appendix. In order to look at trends over time, the following information was recorded for each paper: date; authors; location; research methods; and research topics. As the papers did not already have keywords associated with them, the papers were tagged manually with keywords for the analysis. The keywords were visualised as a co-occurrence network; that is, keywords are represented as nodes in a network, and connected by a line (or 'edge') if they are both related to the same paper, with edges weighted to reflect how frequently this is observed.

Findings

The number of conference papers associated with the theme of the Digital University each year is shown in Figure 1, and typically is in the range of approximately ten to fifteen papers per year. Note that the 2020 conference was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Two years stand out as having notably higher numbers of papers. In 2015, 25 papers were associated with the Digital University - a high proportion of which were focused in particular on digital literacies. 2021 also stands out, with 18 papers, which may be due in part to the renewed interest around online and remote learning prompted by the pandemic.
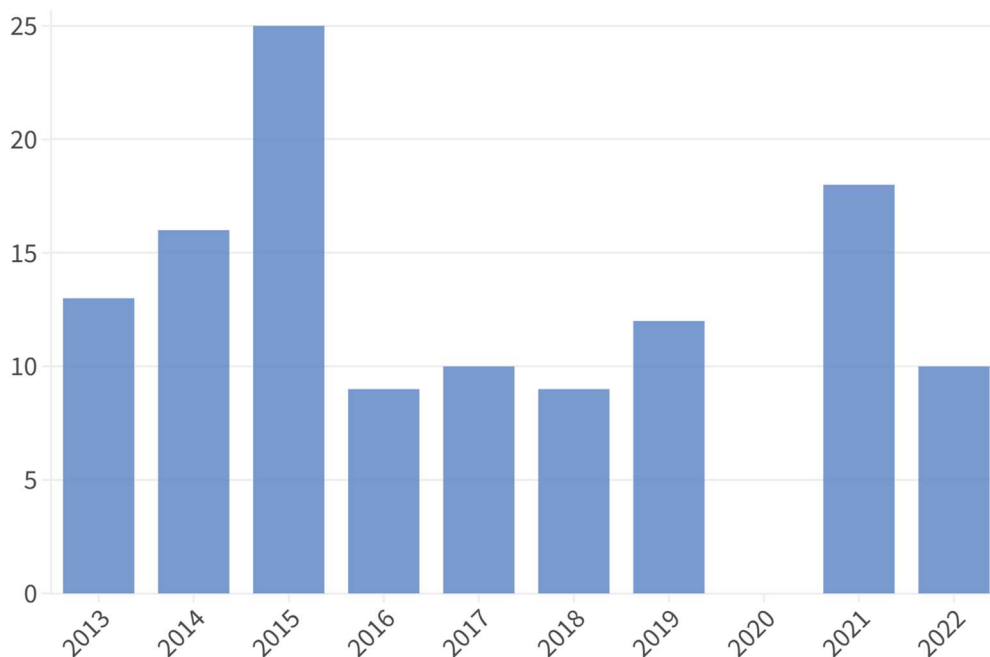

Figure 1: Number of conference papers within the Digital University category in the conference archive, according to year.

A total of 199 unique authors had contributed to the 122 papers in the sample. The authors are represented in the co-authorship network shown in Figure 2. Grey nodes represent papers, and nodes attached to them represent their authors. Blue nodes have authored a single paper, green nodes two papers, teal nodes three papers, purple nodes four papers and pink nodes five papers. Node size is also scaled to reflect the number of papers an author has contributed to, and authors who have contributed to two or more papers are labelled. The network shows that there is a small proportion of multi-paper authors, and that the network is quite fragmented with limited connection between authors across multiple

papers. The majority of authors were affiliated to UK-based institutions (85) but a range of countries were also represent across the globe (Figure 3).
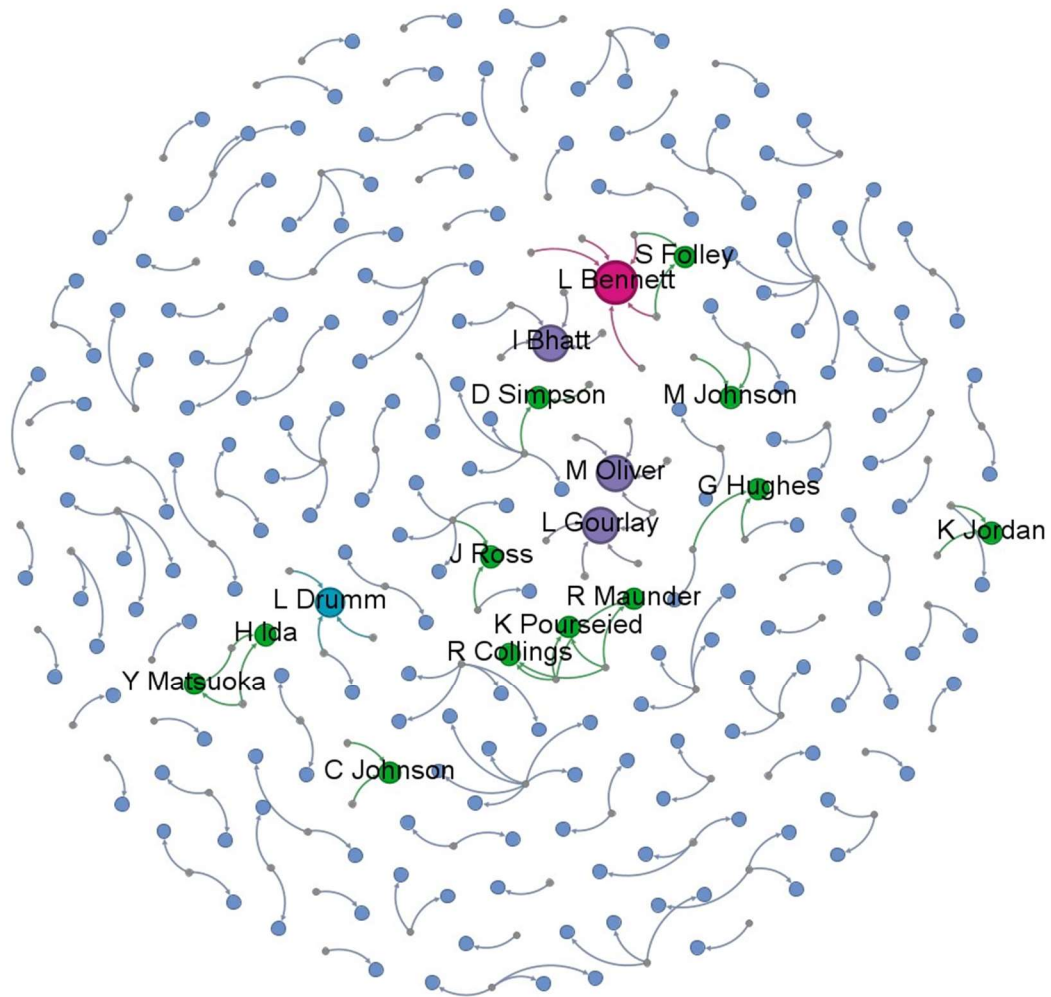

Figure 2: Co-authorship network of authors and papers within the sample.
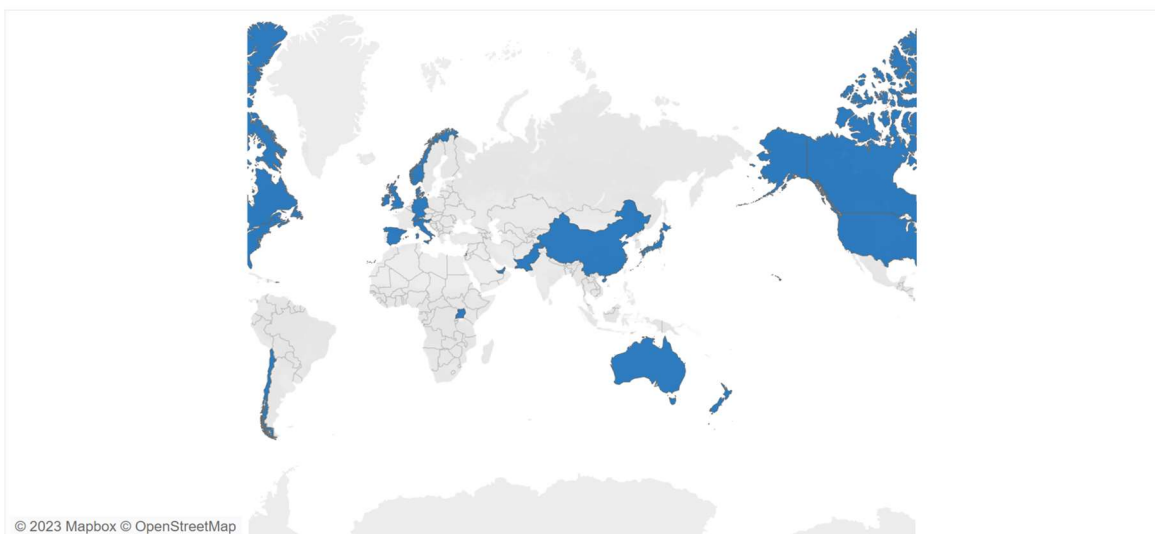

Figure 3: Geographical distribution of authors within the sample.

In terms of the content and focus of the research presented within the sample, papers were categorised in relation to the research methods used and the topic. Figure 4 illustrates the range of methods and approaches used, from participatory research to quasi-experimental research designs as two contrasting examples. However, the approaches used most frequently are common to educational research as a whole (such as surveys, interviews, case studies, or literature-based papers). Methods are often used in combination, with mixed methods being the single largest group in Figure 4. The combinations of methods used within the mixed methods category are illustrated as a network in Figure 5. This also demonstrates that interviews and surveys are frequently used, but both Figure 4 and 5 also point to the use of innovative methods and digital data.
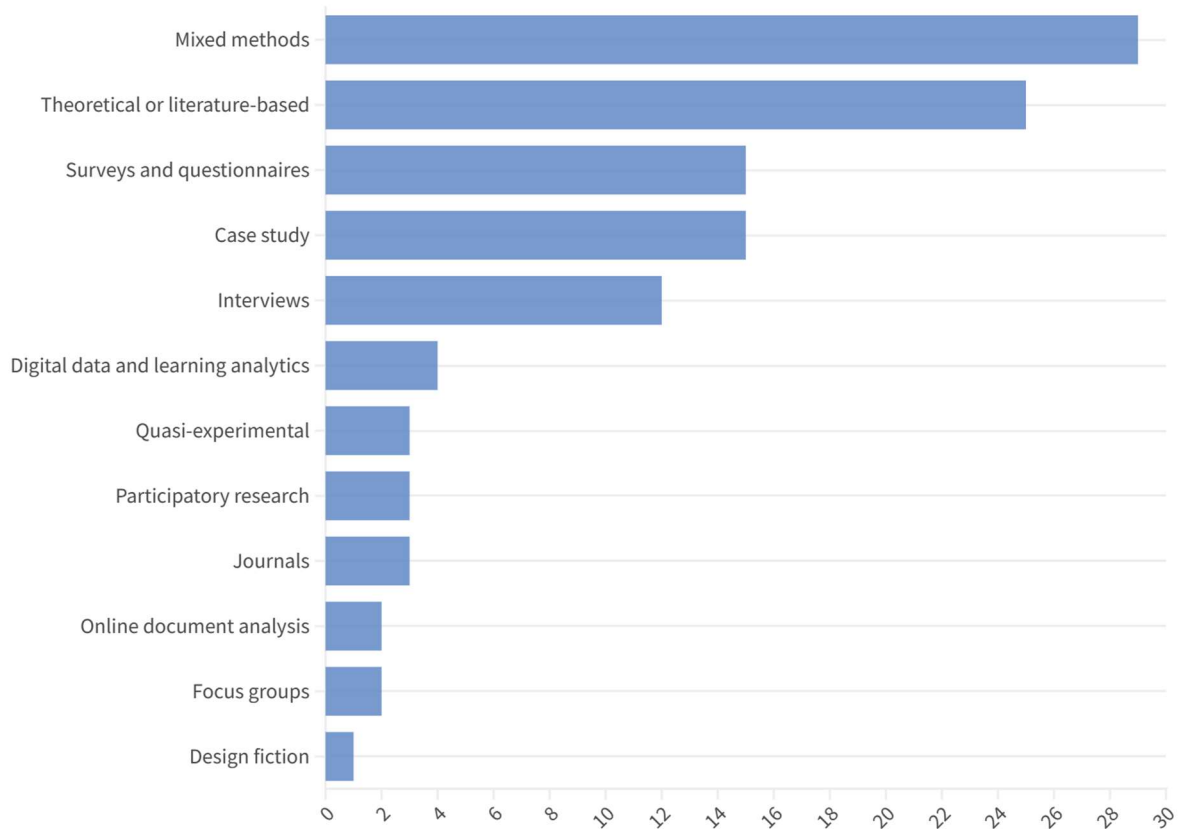

Figure 4: Frequency of research methods used in the papers in the sample.
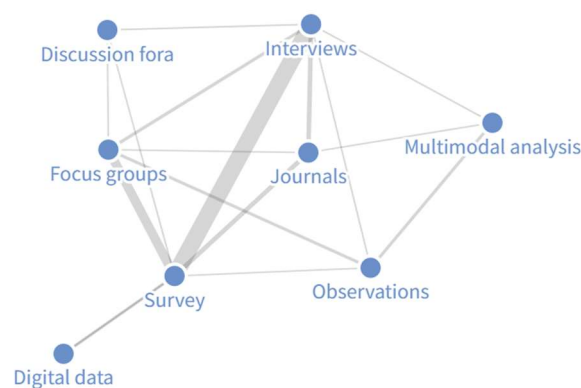

Figure 5: Co-occurrence network of different combinations of methods used within the category of mixed methods.

Finally, we considered the topics addressed by the papers within the sample, by reviewing the papers and assigning approximately three keywords to each paper. In order to create a map of the topics and look for clusters of keywords, a co-occurrence network is shown in Figure 6. The range of keywords and topics is notable, illustrating that the Digital University network theme is a broad and diverse subject area in terms of conference submissions. Note that the size of each node is scaled to reflect the number of papers which were tagged with each keyword, and the weighting of lines connecting edges reflects how frequently the pair of keywords were used together. Nodes are also colour-coded to indicate six clusters which make up the network. The clusters were largely determined using a community detection algorithm within the social network analysis package Gephi (Blondel et al., 2008), with few borderline cases being manually reassigned on close reading.

Figure 6: Co-occurrence network of topic keywords associated with the papers within the sample. Node size is scaled according to frequency, and nodes are colour-coded according to clusters.

While the identification of clusters is mainly based on the mathematical features of the network structure and are open to interpretation, the communities identified serve to give an overall impression of the themes and trends within the body of papers. The six clusters can be characterised as follows:

- EdTech and learning design [purple]
- Critical perspectives [green]
- Institutional perspectives [maroon]
- Literacies and multimodality [yellow]
- Online and blended learning [blue]
- Social media and identity [pink]

The clusters also raise a question of to what extent they are static, or whether their prevalence has changed over the ten-year period. To address this, the number of papers principally aligned with each cluster is shown visually in Figure 7. The clusters of 'EdTech and learning design' and 'Online and blended learning' are consistent over time, with the latter perhaps showing an uptick in particular following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. 'Social media and identity' and 'literacies and multimodality' were more prevalent during the first half of the decade, while 'institutional perspectives' and 'critical perspectives' appear to be receiving increased attention.
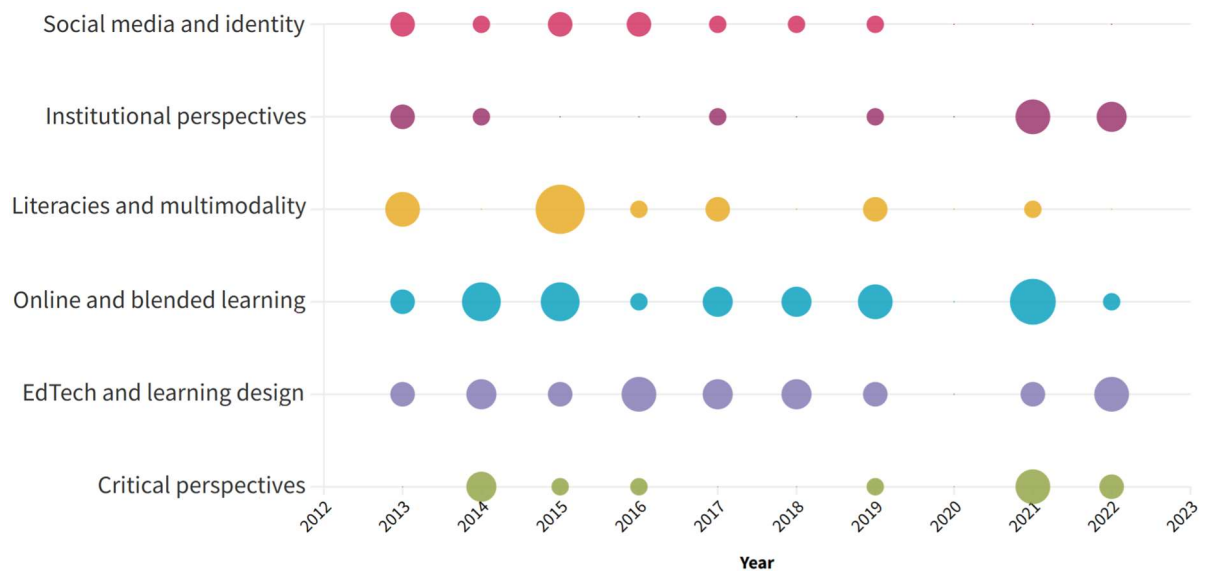

Figure 7: Number of papers which were principally aligned with each cluster, per year. Dot size is scaled to indicate the number of papers, with values ranging from one to eight.

Conclusions and next steps for the network

As the Digital University did at its first appearance at an SRHE conference (SRHE, 2013), we intend to use this session to invite discussion and suggestions for focal topics moving forwards. This paper is intended to prompt reflection and be a conversation starter for dialogue about the future of the network. As a virtual space for these conversations, we have started a blog for the network. To share your views on the future of the Digital University Network, explore the archive of previous resources and keep up-to-date with news of the latest network events, please visit and subscribe to the network blog site at: **https://srhedigitaluniversity.wordpress.com/**

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SRHE (2023) Conference archive. SRHE website. https://srhe.ac.uk/conference-archive/

Appendix

2013 Conference

Bhatt, I. The sociomaterial workings of a college writing assignment. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0084.pdf

Cooper, T. & Scriven, R. Harnessing digital potential: a curriculum approach to the use of Digital Learning Environments. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0089.pdf

Fransman, J. Framing impact in the digital university: Representational affordances of the websites and blogs of Early Career Researchers. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0252.pdf

Gonzalez, C., Valenzuela, C., Jara, M. & Olivares, R. Promoting the teaching-research nexus through digital research tools: a conceptual model. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0218.pdf

Goodfellow, R. These research training resources are digital, open, and global. Who cares? https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0113.pdf

Gourlay, L. & Oliver, M. Technologies and text trajectories: the curriculum as emergent network. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0253.pdf

Jensen, T., Albrechtsen, C. & Pedersen, N.F. Digital natives revisited: the need to reorganize academic institutions and conceptual categories in a digital world. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0087.pdf

Lea, M. Researching academic literacies in the digital university: considering individual accounts and network practice. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0167.pdf

Mundy, D. & Gaskell, C. Dimensions of openness in MOOC environments. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0207.pdf

Owens. T. New tablets in old bottles? Do mobile technologies encourage innovative learning and teaching practice? https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0148.pdf

Round, A. Pragmatics for online learning - communicative competence and learning technologies. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0228.pdf

Sheail, P. The digital university: translocal, transtemporal. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0108.pdf

Smith, E. Undergraduate perceptions of social media trends: Understanding meaning making within the 'Digital University'. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2013/abstracts/0073.pdf

2014 Conference

Boulton, H. Identifying the challenges of technologies with transnational post-graduate students. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0021.pdf

Chen, S. Revisiting the research-policy-practice nexus: Boundary objects and boundary brokering. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0014.pdf

Cosser, M. The evidence for access, mobility and progression in the pathway outcomes of previously disadvantaged students. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0185.pdf

Gourlay, L. The Digital University, critique and utopian fantasies. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0305.pdf

Hughes, G. & Smith, H. Opening the feedback 'black box': how can mass digital assessment support individual student progress? https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0044.pdf

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Lameras, P. & Whitelock, D. Essential features of serious games design: Search and analysis process. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0105.pdf

Macdonald, K. & Minett-Smith, C. When a prop becomes a hurdle: effectively scaffolding the level 4 learning experience. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0166.pdf

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Morgan, S. & Benson, V. Barriers to the adoption of social technologies in Higher Education. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0136.pdf

Moussa-Inaty, J. Do I prefer to see a face? https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0302.pdf

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Whittaker, R. & Brown, J. Working together to make a difference: A collaborative approach to enhancing recognition of prior learning policy and practice in Scottish Higher Education. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2014/abstracts/0170.pdf

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Borup, R. Can a MOOC help me get a job? Reflections from an EU funded project on MOOCs and employability. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2015/abstracts/0160.pdf

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Evans, L. & Morris, N. Technology-enhanced learning in English universities: what do students want? https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2015/abstracts/0046.pdf

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Fiserova, J. Videos in higher education - why bother?
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Jameson, J. Trust, the visibility/invisibility leadership paradox, and a model for reflective negative capability in the academic management of English Higher Education.
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Rolfe, V. & Kernohan, D. Exploring textbook use and culture with Higher Education staff and students. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2017/abstracts/0359.pdf

Vuori, J. Process improvement or transformation: e-learning strategies in U.S. Higher Education institutions. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2017/abstracts/0236.pdf

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Abdollahi, S. & Omar, S. The educational value of using simulation games in the classroom: learners' perspective. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2018/abstracts/0572.pdf

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Handley, F. Staff-student partnership initiatives to promote digital technology use in UK Higher Education: Their emergence and role in defining Students as Partners (SaP). https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2018/abstracts/0328.pdf

Hughes, G. & Norgard, R.T. Global Online Inter-university Teaching (GO-IT): an inclusive approach to students as global researchers? https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2018/abstracts/0325.pdf

Johnson, C. Designing an online music tutor development programme. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2018/abstracts/0148.pdf

Jordan, K. Networked selves and networked publics in academia: Exploring academic online identity through sharing on social media platforms. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2018/abstracts/0230.pdf

Nesbit, T., O'Steen, B. & Bell, T. Implementing the one-minute paper using applications on personally owned devices: Student perspectives on the benefits. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2018/abstracts/0329.pdf

Rogaten, J., O'Dowd, R., Hauck, M., Muller-Hartmann, A., Guth, S. & Helm, F. Evaluating and upscaling telecollaborative teacher education. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2018/abstracts/0333.pdf

2019 Conference

Andrew, M.J. Going multimodal in an undergraduate English Communication course: student participation and reactions. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2019/abstracts/0199.pdf

Ashford-Rowe, K. Consider the role and value of authentic assessment in a contemporary HE assessment framework. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2019/abstracts/0152.pdf

Bennett, L. & Folley, S. Doctoral students, social media and learning considered through the lens of identity formation. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2019/abstracts/0100.pdf

Collings, R., Maunder, R. & Pourseied, K. Academic staff and students perceptions and attitudes towards blended learning. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2019/abstracts/0404.pdf

Collings, R., Maunder, R. & Pourseied, K. The tangled web of active blended learning. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2019/abstracts/0401.pdf

Grindle, N. & Hallett, R. New economies of student engagement using a digital curation learning-cycle. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2019/abstracts/0361.pdf

Knox, J. & Wang, Y. Lecture recording for inclusive education. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2019/abstracts/0420.pdf

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Nesbit, T.R. Adopting apps in the classroom - the case for technical support.
https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2019/abstracts/0184.pdf

Wood, J.M. Perceived effects of technology-mediated dialogic feedback on feedback engagement and use. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/conference2019/abstracts/0183.pdf

2020 Conference - postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic

2021 Conference

Braithwaite, N.J. If shoes could talk …. How a student led research project generated collaboration, peer learning and the co-creation of knowledge.
https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0545.pdf

Coverdale, A. & Lewthwaite, S. Positioning and sustaining accessibility expertise and teaching in the Computer Sciences and the digital university.
https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0530.pdf

Cox, A.M.M. Telling stories about artificial intelligence and robots in higher education.
https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0516.pdf

Detyna, M. & Kadiri, M. Assessing the use of immersive virtual reality in the higher education classroom to enhance learner engagement. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0274.pdf

Drumm, L. & Zike, J. Radically reconfigured or just broken? How emergency online teaching has altered staff and students' identities, wellbeing and conceptions of learning and teaching. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0218.pdf

Gravett, K. & Ajjawi, R. Belonging to and beyond the digital university: belonging as situated practice. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0096.pdf

Hermansen, H., Lund, A. & Abualrub, I. Beyond "implementation": Enabling sustainable transformation of digital teaching and learning in Higher Education. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0054.pdf

Ida, H. & Matsuoka, Y. Supporting engagement in English language learning during COVID-19 using paper-based textbooks: A case study of Japanese universities. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0230.pdf

James, A. Remote research bootcamps for preproposal and post data early career researchers. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0160.pdf

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McClure, C. & Zhao, X. Supporting online personal tutoring with gather.town: An innovative approach to foster student belonging. https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/21/0157.pdf

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