

IATL at 15: Educational Innovation Then, Now and in the Future

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Abstract

The paper traces the evolution of the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL) at the University of Warwick as it marks its 15th anniversary. Since its formation in 2010, IATL has served as a catalyst for educational innovation, championing interdisciplinary learning, undergraduate research and student–staff co-creation. The authors reflect on IATL’s foundations in Open-Space Learning (OSL) and Student-as-Producer, its development as an academic department and its influence on sector-wide conversations about agential learning and innovative assessment. They conclude with a discussion of possible directions of travel for educational innovation in the next decade, including the challenges and opportunities of artificial intelligence.

‘What’s past is prologue’: 2010–2013

IATL was established in 2010 when the CAPITAL and Reinvention Centres united to form a new academic department at Warwick (Bate and Brock, 2007; Monk *et al.*, 2011; Neary, 2020). Since then, IATL has become an institutional leader in educational innovation, undergraduate research and co-creation with students. This section will provide a short overview about the foundation of IATL and its initial years of operation. During this time, IATL further developed the *Reinvention* journal, hosted the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR) in 2012 and founded the International Conference for Undergraduate Research (ICUR) in 2013. IATL continued to innovate and disseminate experimental teaching methods through the Open-Space Learning (OSL) project:

OSL developed from the work of Warwick's CAPITAL Centre (Creativity and Performance in Teaching and Learning), which was one of HEFCE's Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (2005–10). CAPITAL was a collaboration between [Warwick] and the Royal Shakespeare Company. The basic idea was to apply the practices and theories of the theatrical rehearsal room and the theatrical ensemble across a university curriculum. From these early aspirations developed a pedagogy that [was embedded across departments] including Chemistry, Law, Business, English, Mathematics, Philosophy, and Medicine. ('Teaching Excellence' website, 2013)

Working collaboratively between 2010 and 2013, the first IATL team combined the OSL approach to learning with the 'Student-as-Researcher' philosophy to create an experimental portfolio of modules that would be open to students from any department or course of study at the University of Warwick. The final piece of the jigsaw was laid down when the University formally established IATL as an academic department, with its own academic staff, in 2013. This enabled the IATL team to start planning in five-year cycles, in consultation with key stakeholders such as the Provost and PVC Education.

'Becoming IATL': 2014–2023

Building upon these solid foundations, the newly established academic department set about embedding itself within the various faculties and services of the University. It engaged with the Academic Development Centre (then the Learning Development Centre), the Library and Teaching Quality (now Education, Policy & Quality) to develop innovative practice that would address key priorities in academic pedagogy, student engagement and teaching excellence (e.g. interdisciplinarity, internationalisation and student research). During this period, IATL funded Strategic Projects, Academic Fellowships and Pedagogical Innovations that brought staff and students together to collaborate and disseminate their findings. Additionally, the Monash–Warwick Alliance awarded IATL funding to expand ICUR into new areas of research by growing the international partners to establish a truly global network, which was supported by the re-launch of the *Reinvention* journal as a global platform.

As part of IATL's ongoing work with student leaders – as *Reinvention* editors and ICUR directors, as well as the Student Ensemble (which had emerged from

the OSL project) – the IATL team were increasingly in demand as academic advisers or educational consultants to external departments and universities. Adapting the ‘Student-as-Producer’ model (Neary, 2020), IATL continued to commission, fund and showcase student-led practice, including creative learning, student enterprise and interdisciplinary research. The Student Ensemble grew into an international network of graduate theatre companies and alumni artists, which was routinely showcased at the Emerge Festival at Warwick Arts Centre (2014 onwards), leading to a nomination for ‘School of the Year’ at The Stage Awards 2016.

The international partnership with Monash was greatly enhanced in 2015 by the foundation of two educational academies: the Warwick International Higher Education Academy (WIHEA) and the Monash Education Academic (MEA), which supported and disseminated pedagogical scholarship that showcased the work of IATL within the wider academic community. In particular, the Monash–Warwick Alliance enabled collaborative practice with new technology to enhance our teaching, learning and research with students (via funded projects and collaborative modules). Building upon the existing collaborations with Academic Technology, Audio-Visual Services and IATL, team members were actively co-constructing spaces for technology-enhanced learning (see Monk *et al.*, 2015) and global research events (see Barker and Gibson, 2022).

Working in collaboration with Monash, EUTOPIA and other international partners, IATL Teaching Fellows have developed both subject-specific and transdisciplinary practices that have complemented the student research portfolio and the research-based teaching agenda. Such was the collective and multi-professional character of these projects, there is insufficient time and space to name all collaborators, contributors and convenors here. However, it should be noted that IATL emerged as a professional environment that attempted to collapse the traditional distinctions that are often made between ‘academic’ and ‘administrative’ forms of labour (see IATL, 2024) and indeed the hard distinctions between ‘staff’ and ‘students’ (in the case of co-creation practice, which has since been replicated externally, by the 2022 Inclusive

Education Project with University College Birmingham, and internally, via the 2023 Institutional Teaching and Learning Review). Generations of students and staff alike have participated alongside each other as researchers, educators and leaders to enable the growing reputation of IATL within the sector as the ‘hub’ for educational innovation. Even during the pandemic, IATL continued to innovate and expand its horizons, hosting the 5th Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching Conference (2021) and the World Congress on Undergraduate Research alongside the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (both 2023).

‘A year in review’: 2024–2025

From 2024/25, IATL continued to pioneer in the design of interdisciplinary modules centred on student-led research. Three new modules were launched: *Engagement and Participatory Practice*; *Social Entrepreneurship in Action: How to Create Social Impact and Change*; and *Global Connections (Online)*. These new modules demonstrate IATL’s continued efforts to offer engaging, socially relevant modules that bring together students from different disciplines. IATL held a highly successful Module Fair in April, giving prospective students the chance to ask questions about our offerings, interdisciplinary methods and assessment innovations. As with previous years, there was a call for new module proposals, with Warwick staff encouraged to propose radically interdisciplinary learning designs that aligned with IATL’s strategic aims (e.g. participatory practices, inclusive structures and care-rooted approaches).

IATL led in the assessment space with the development of a new traffic light system clarifying the use of AI on assignments (IATL, 2025), and the publication of an article in *Nature: Humanities and Social Sciences Communication* on the humanising potential of IATL’s flagship ‘student-devised assessments’ (Riva *et al.*, 2025). A new assessment method was developed to highlight how students on IATL modules are empowered to shape their learning journeys based on their unique interests and talents. Philosophy student Athena Rong-Hui said of her experience on *Navigating Psychopathology*, ‘I learned a great deal about various subjects, including

biology, the arts, literature, and social sciences. Doing research for the essay [gave me] an opportunity to craft my own research question tailored to my interest, which spanned across Philosophy and psychopathology' (IATL, n.d.).

IATL pushed forward with its vision of a research-infused curricula centred on student agency, experimentation in assessment and visible student–staff co-creation. There were seven IATL student-led projects and twenty student co-creators involved on staff-led projects, including the LoCoR project, a two-year Education Fund initiative that unlocks the potential of undergraduate research for long-term, collective and interdisciplinary collaboration (Institute for Global Sustainable Development, 2025). A total of 117 IATL students wrote interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary abstracts as a formative task on their modules. Julie Derenne, an English literature student on the new IATL module *Your Idea, Your Research*, said of this opportunity: 'Writing my first interdisciplinary abstract as part of my IATL module helped me clarify the direction of my assessment project by thinking through potential findings and their broader relevance. Most importantly, it helped me see myself as a researcher communicating across disciplines, to any audience, regardless of their background' (IATL, n.d.). Nine IATL students presented assessed work at this year's ICUR event, two were funded to present at BCUR, and thirty-one exhibited their work in IATL's Assessment Exhibition – an incredible variety of research opportunities that were invaluable to students and demonstrate IATL's sector-leading commitment to supporting students.

IATL also 'infused' its curriculum with enterprise offerings with the launch of The IATL's Den, a student enterprise initiative that supported five students in advancing their entrepreneurial ideas by developing their assessed work into new ventures. Isaac Pilling, an IATL's Den participant and student on *Serious Tabletop Game Design and Development*, described it as 'an incredibly positive and formative experience' that left him 'feeling confident and energised to take [his] project to the next level' (IATL, n.d.). This example, taken together with those other examples from the academic year 2024/25, demonstrates recent examples of educational innovation and student-led practice. Fifteen

years on from its inception in 2010, IATL continues to innovate in assessment methods, inclusive education and embedding wellbeing in the curriculum.

‘Future trends’: 2030 and beyond

As the IATL community looks ahead to its 15th anniversary event, a new podcast series and more adventures in enterprise-infused education, the department continues to listen to and learn from our students, who remain the heart and soul of the Institute. This final section of the essay will speculate on future trends in higher education between the date of publication (2025) and the emerging decade (2030s); we imagine that:

1. AI will likely continue to redefine educational practice in significant ways, especially in relation to assessment methods and personalised feedback. Its rapid development presents challenges, risks and opportunities for universities. One central concern will be academic integrity: how can educators design assessment that meaningfully reflects the learner’s own thinking when AI can generate immediate answers? Alongside this is a broader question about the value of higher education itself, within the context of a rapidly evolving digital culture. As generative AI becomes more capable, some prospective students will understandably ask, and may already be asking, ‘Why attend university if I can access information, explanations and feedback from AI for free?’ These questions make it clear that higher education cannot continue with a ‘business as usual’ model, and most educators will recognise the need to adapt.
2. Access and participation will remain a key priority for universities, as government policy becomes more closely linked to learning outcomes and graduate prospects. There are several issues to unpack here, from universities needing to join up approaches to inclusive education, diversity and equity initiatives with curriculum and assessment reviews, as well as new investments in the built environment as a place of ‘belonging’. The academic systems that underpin teaching, learning and assessments processes will also need to be transformed, not only to cater for a more flexible, distributed student body but also to enable and incentivise student mobility across disciplines and, where possible, between institutions.
3. Students-as-leaders and decision makers will become a pressing concern for institutions that are keen to enact positive change in order to anticipate the needs of future students and to review the impact of university policies before they implemented. For many years, elected Student Union Officers and representatives have served within university structures across committees and have campaigned for change via direct action. One long-anticipated change, which may indeed finally come to pass in the 2030s, will be students taking charge of their own learning systems, making decisions in partnership with teaching staff, and co-developing research projects to benefit the wider society. In short, the future of higher education may, in fact, require new models of student identity and student-led policy change.

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