

The impact of a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education on university lecturers appointed for their professional expertise at a teaching-led university: 'It's made me braver'.

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The impact of a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education on university lecturers appointed for their professional expertise at a teaching-led university: ‘It’s made me braver’.

This article explores the impact of a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PG Cert) on new lecturers, appointed for their professional expertise. It focuses on staff perceptions to acculturation into the discourses of university learning and teaching. Drawing on a literature review which reveals (at best) ambivalent evidence of impact, the authors developed a case study investigating impact on staff changing careers into university teaching on the basis of their professional expertise. The data reveals positive outcomes, including the transition into confident and competent HE professionals.

Keywords: HE teacher development; PG Certs; Impact of Continuing Professional Development

Introduction

Informal evidence (self-reported by participants and observed by colleagues) of the impact of the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PG Cert) at our post-1992 teaching-led university suggested there was tangible positive impact on most staff, especially those new to Higher Education (HE) appointed for their professional expertise. This challenged the perception that PG Certs had a merely limited impact on some university staff (Knight, 2006; Warnes, 2008). This article explores the impact of the PG Cert on all participants, but identifies an under-researched perspective. This concerns those new lecturers, labelled as ‘academics’ but often with no formal teaching qualification, who joined HE as career changers with experience as expert professionals, often from a training role. We traced a number of impact measures for this group, particularly participants’ shift from perceiving themselves as professionally expert ‘trainers’, to regarding themselves as ‘academics’.

In order to address our main research question (What is the impact of undertaking a PG Cert?) we identified Smith’s (2004) notion of impact on the individual participants as being of particular significance for our context, as many of our new teaching staff had embarked on a significant career change, and their experience of HE differed from those who have followed a traditional PhD route into their academic discipline. We explored this impact through perceived changes in: conceptual understanding; professional identity, confidence and self-belief; pedagogic approaches; and engagement with the wider learning and teaching community. In addition, our research framework drew on Smith’s (2004) conceptualisation of impact on: the experience of students; the department; and on participants’ careers.

The current PG Cert at our institution was reshaped during 2005/6 to take advantage of changes that had taken place across the sector generally and specifically within our own institution - awarded University status in 2006. The 60 credit (Masters, level 7) programme is designed as a ‘long, thin’ structure with two 30 credit units taken part-time over two (usually consecutive) years. Its pedagogy models reflective practice and constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003). Assessment is through a professional development portfolio and pedagogic research project. The programme team structure is significant to the participants’ experience, as it is led by the School of Education and

comprises the Learning and Teaching coordinators from each of the six Schools and one Department, thus offering a hybrid of generic and disciplinary perspectives. The team meet regularly, oversee programme participants, allocate discipline-specific mentors to each participant and organise subject/disciplinary-specific supplementary taught sessions. This reflects a hybrid organizational model which, according to Gosling's (2009) analysis of educational development units, is very much in the minority.

Since 2006 many work-based programmes have developed across our Schools in rapid response to external initiatives. Issues addressing both academic levels of study matched to professional standards, and flexible modes of study aligning with work placements/work-based study, are emerging. As a consequence, increasing numbers of new teaching staff join the university directly from the workplace. Currently all academic staff new to teaching are required to undertake the PG Cert as a condition of their employment and to-date more than 90 members of staff have enrolled on the programme in annual cohorts of 15-20. At least half of each cohort were colleagues from professional backgrounds (principally in Schools of Health, Education and Business).

Literature

National studies of the impact of HE teacher development, such as those reported by Knight (2006) and Warnes (2008), note decreasing levels of expectation and a gap between expectations of impact and perceived impact with regard to the PG Cert. Knight (2006) also concludes that benefits of the programme may only become apparent some time after completion but notes a significant difference between responses from 'new universities' (more positive on individual practice) and 'old universities' (less alignment with subject needs and research drivers). We had informal evidence of earlier impact from both our current participants and our graduates, but needed to investigate further.

A significant problem in gauging the impact of PG Certs is that theories of HE teacher development underpinning them remain contested. If there is no single accepted model of professional development for HE teachers (Sharpe, 2004) this presents particular challenges in putting together a programme to meet the needs of new colleagues coming from varied professional backgrounds – and not just, as in prior studies, from a research background.

Equally problematic are the wide ranging disciplinary contexts and cultural dimensions experienced by new HE teaching staff appointed for their professional experience. Our institution has staff from a wide range of professional backgrounds teaching on multi-disciplinary vocational programmes attracting an increasingly diverse student body. This issue is highlighted by Hunt (2007) who also considers the critical interdisciplinarity derived from the different perspectives of those involved. Opportunities to gain a cross institutional perspective and consider disciplinary pedagogies are identified as significant by Comber and Walsh, (2008).

It may be that colleagues appointed as lecturers for their work-based professional expertise bring with them professional knowledge and understanding gained from first-hand experience, shaped by their encounters in workplace cultures and embedded in social learning environments. However, whilst some theories of

experiential learning marginalize such contexts and environments, (Kilminster et al, 2002) other studies foreground the extended learning environment and highlight the potential of HE learning communities (Carnell, 2007).

New lecturers are not a homogeneous group, and our experience suggests a need to address and include a level of individualization in a PG Cert programme, a view supported by Rust's findings (2000) where he concludes that such a course, when personalized, had a positive effect. Rust argues that conceptual change may be achieved by addressing individual variations resulting in the development of reflective practitioners, which may become more apparent to the participant later in their teaching career. However, doubts around how reflective practice is conceptualized, how participants might engage in such a process, and its impact on practice and in shaping professional identity are raised by Kahn et al (2006; 2008), suggesting a need to consider how 'reflective practice' is being interpreted by programme participants.

The importance of recognising academics' differing understandings of teaching development, and aligning these with the development of appropriately tailored teaching strategies, is highlighted by Akerlind (2007), as are different models of HE teacher learning in relation to disciplines and preferred learning styles (Pill, 2005). Further problems for new lecturers, in coming to terms with a new discipline and seeing the complexity in key concepts, are identified by Kandlbinder and Peseta (2009).

In trying to identify the impact of a PG Cert, one important aspect of developing 'deep' as opposed to 'surface' level change could lie in encouraging a conceptual change approach. This may lead to improvements in teaching practices and student learning (Ho et al 2001). Evidence might also be sought through identifying conceptions of teaching (Gibbs and Coffey 2000a, 2000b, Trigwell et al, 1999). Identifiable shifts in practice from 'teacher-centred' to 'student-centred' might also provide evidence of impact (Prosser et al, 2006; Hanbury et al, 2008), particularly if ongoing opportunities for reflection on practice are included in professional development.

Adopting such an approach carries the assumption that by training HE teachers to teach, they will do a better job than untrained ones. This is questioned by Trowler and Bamber (2005) who argue that the discourse of pedagogical development is foreign to many academic staff, that expectations of PG Cert courses are too diverse and ambitious, and that no direct causal relationship between lecturer training and student outcomes can be reported. There is an argument that the locus of change at departmental level is a crucially important factor in supporting developments of good practice in university teaching (Knight and Trowler, 2000) whilst Trowler and Cooper (2002) point to resistance resulting from such disjunctions.

If all newly appointed lecturers face a pressing need to quickly develop teaching competence and confidence, those appointed for their professional expertise, we argue, have the greatest expectations and the greatest developmental needs. The inherent difficulties in addressing such varied HE teacher needs includes addressing individual understandings of how learning happens in different subject areas, and how to develop subject-specific strategies to meet the needs of students in their discipline. Our PG Cert programme has embedded 'local' disciplinary-specific support from those who are sensitive to the anxieties of 'new to HE' lecturers entering an alien context (with new

practices and culturally specific discourses) which may or may not align with their previous professional experience.

Methodology

The nature and extent of the impact of this PG Cert on HE teachers appointed for their professional expertise was explored through an institutional case study (Yin, 2003). In order to gather a wide a range of perceptions (Stake, 1995) of impact, we adopted a mixed methods approach at different stages, to provide in-depth understanding (Gomm et al, 2000). We investigated perceptions of graduates from the course (2006-9), as well as current participants, mid-way through their programme. We argue the implications of our findings have a 'fittingness' (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and a 'translatability' (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) to match other, similar HE contexts.

Data was collected in four iterative stages, the first three based on PG Cert graduates and the final stage with current PG Cert participants. In Stage One, the researchers analysed 'pre-data' (Boyle, 1994) gathered from icebreaker comments on 50+ 'stickies' from the first PG Cert sessions (2006-8), in order to establish key areas of shared agreement to the prompt 'what do you expect to gain from the PG Cert?' These expectations were compared to post-PG Cert reflective commentaries in the assessed portfolios. The resultant categories informed the wording and topic coverage of our second stage e-survey. For example we noted the significance of professional credibility to participants.

In Stage Two, a 24 question survey [see figure 1] was sent electronically to all 47 graduates of the PG Cert still working in the university: 21 participants (45%) replied. The questions broadly aligned with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) professional standards (a UK accreditation framework for academic development courses), and prior self-reported outcomes such as professional credibility. We sought categories of agreement across the responses, and shared significant items of perceived impact. The topics with the highest level of agreement (90-100%) or significant disagreement across the survey were used to inform the development of the face-to-face and focus group interview prompts. For example: *Student-centred learning continues to inform my approach to teaching* (95% agreement) led to the focus group interview question prompt: *To what extent would you say that you adopt a student-centred approach? What would this approach look like?* Asking for specific exemplification of approaches would, we felt, provide an additional perspective on individual development and understanding.

In Stage Three we conducted follow-up semi-structured face-to-face interviews [see figure 2] with a self-selected representative sample of five PG Cert graduates. Two interviews with senior staff (PG Cert course team members) from two of the Schools in which the graduates taught, were subsequently conducted. The findings informed the structure of questions in the final stage.

In Stage Four, an hour-long focus group (Kitzinger, 1999) was convened with nine current PG Cert students in the second half of their 2 year PG Cert [see figure 3]. We explored the extent to which PG Cert impact could be identified early in the course through open questions derived from analysis of the previous data. It was particularly

interesting that responses from current PG Cert participants aligned closely with the survey findings from PG Cert graduates.

The mixed methods enabled us to analyse the data through a framework of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) thus utilising 'sensitizing concepts' (Clarke, 1997) to identify suggestive ideas about what might be fruitful to examine, and to be aware of variation in the data. In the context of a lack of consensus on impact in the literature, we structured our investigation around four of Smith's (2004) impact themes: individual participants; experience of students; department; participant careers.

Findings

Impact on individual participants:

Four significant areas of impact were described by focus group participants who were only half-way through their two year part-time programme:

- Approaches to teaching, planning and assessment

New approaches to teaching, planning and assessment were described:

Prior to this course I went in, delivered my bit, and didn't give a second thought to the overall picture...or assessment framework...I now have an awareness of the wider picture...it's made me braver...I'm more able to deliver in terms of different methods...I wasn't aware of certain techniques...I'm braver in terms of certain learning styles...I am able to use different methods to tap into those different styles... (Focus group, Sport Lecturer)

This articulated a sense of excitement at the significance of the impact of the PG Cert on approaches to teaching and awareness of a range of learners. The notion of 'bravery' is an important concept, capturing both an enhanced professional status and an openness, a willingness to try new and innovative approaches and engage in discussion around practice with colleagues. This accords with Carnell's (2007) reporting of the importance attached to working with colleagues, collaborating with people speaking the same language, and finding opportunities for dialogue to sustain effective teaching and learning, and aligns with a number of our individual interviews. For example:

At the end of the first module I felt my confidence had grown and I had developed professionally in terms of my understanding of teaching and learning and was beginning to explore new methods with confidence (Interview 3 Health Practice Lecturer)

We also found evidence that developing teaching conceptions through a conceptual change approach may lead to improvements in teaching practices and student learning (Ho et al 2001):

[PG Cert] has built my confidence on the way assessment is embedded in the teaching...[through re-validation] I've been quite bold in the changes I've made and I don't think I would have been that...without the PGCTHE discussions around constructive alignment...I now feel confident in defending the changes, aware of the whole big picture (Focus group, Health lecturer)

This suggests an important impact of the PG Cert which reverberates beyond the individual. Greater confidence in understanding assessment issues (and the discourse surrounding them) has enabled this participant to change aspects of course assessment, and to provide a research-informed justification for those changes. This would not have happened without the ‘courage’ or ‘permission’ provided by engagement with the PG Cert.

- Student/learner-centredness

Student-centredness emerged as a second theme, aligning with literature claims of a significant shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches (Prosser et al 2006). Interestingly, it has been reported that newer institutions and health care sciences rated the programmes most positively (Hanbury et al, 2008). Evidence in our study confirmed that the impact on new lecturers in Health was significant in terms of adopting student-centred approaches to teaching, but was more widespread than this:

[What] I do is student-centred... supporting students on a one-to-one basis... understanding the actual individual needs ... has come out of the PGCTHE... I think I can see it from the students’ perspective... before I was doing it for me to get an understanding of where the students are – but it’s also about getting the students to know where they need to be... (Interview 2, academic librarian: Business)

The shift in academics’ use of ‘teacher-focused’ to ‘student-focused’ approach highlight the importance of university teachers’ conceptions of teaching. Our findings mirrored claims (Gibbs and Coffey (2000a and 2000b, Trigwell et al, 1999) of significant improvements in teachers’ approaches to teaching. In our context this suggests a movement away from ‘professional training’ mode to new lecturers perceiving themselves as ‘educators’:

I can be creative in the way I teach...there is now a justification in the literature...I feel brave enough to say this is what we’re going to do...they were expecting a lecture...but it became a really interactive session...[The PG Cert has made me] bold and confident. (Focus group, Health Lecturer)

This shift in assumption, to a more student-centred reflection, appeared regularly:

... the module in general.... [has] forced me to think about what university teaching is... it is not about transmitting knowledge from lecturer to student.... it is....about making it possible for students themselves to learn.... (Focus group, Business Lecturer)

- Theory/practice interface in a professional context

Third, there also appears to be evidence of shifting professional identity attributable to the PG Cert, most strikingly so for colleagues crossing the divide from professional practice to academia:

I have had 10 years as a practice-based educator before this...so adult learning theories underpinned my practice...a year ago I went to a practice-based conference and my conference badge had 'academic on it, and I was really uncomfortable with that...but a year on, that would not bother me...the impact is having a much more confident basis for a professional identity in distinct educational theory (Interview 3 Health Practice Lecturer)

In our teaching-led institution we found little evidence of conflicting departmental priorities as identified in Bamber (2002), who highlights the socio-political context, academic cultures and sometimes conflicting departmental priorities that threaten alignment between rhetoric and practice. However, we did find some evidence in Health and Education of external professional bodies sometimes constraining practice:

There is a tension between the nursing professional body and the academic side...a conflict in terms of where you actually sit...that sometimes doesn't help with some of the theory. It would be lovely to be less directive and more creative...but you are confined by the NMC guidelines that they must achieve this, they must do that...in some ways it opens a lot of ideas, but you can't do it... (Focus group, Health Practice Lecturer)

This suggests that in some disciplines, the impact of bravery may have to be tempered by professional accountability.

- Cross-institutional discussion/dissemination

Finally, the impact of opportunities to discuss learning processes within social and cultural settings, and the benefits of meeting as a cross-university group (both face-to-face and virtually) should not be under-estimated:

It's been a positive because you're getting fresh thoughts from people...some really good interactions (Focus group – Business Lecturer).

These findings aligned with Comber and Walsh's report (2008) on the inclusion of disciplinary pedagogies and programmes that allow participants to hear a cross-institutional perspective:

We all teach in different Schools...but we have learned we face the same issues...it's quite reassuring that the same issues come up [across disciplines] (Focus group, Education Lecturer).

The PG Cert appears to be important for our participants. Knight et al's (2006) argument that HE teachers learn most from non-formal and social learning practices rather than event-based approaches is not borne out here.

Impact on experience of students:

The perception of becoming more student-centred reflective practitioners, who had changed behaviours as a result of the PG Cert, was reported by all the interviewees. One informant described, as a result of reflecting on practice, changed behaviours

through the adoption of a more student-focused strategy, which enabled a brave and creative ‘take’ on professional requirements:

...what the PGCTHE has allowed me to do is actually not to be so focused on the [professional] standards, because ... I had some very specific ways in which students could meet them... what I am able to do now is actually listen to the students..... and actually allow them to develop...portfolios around their new experiences... (Interview 1 Health Practice Lecturer)

Co-ordinators also identified participant behaviour changes:

I've listened to presentations by people who have been on the course, and their awareness of students and their willingness to think through the issues and feedback....is really impressive...I think their ears are more open than many of us who have been in the business longer. (Interview, Mentor/Learning & Teaching co-ordinator 1)

Our findings thus suggest a more positive and open willingness to reflect on effective teaching approaches, and far less departmental or individual resistance than Trowler and Cooper (2002) suggest.

Impact on department:

The idea that the PG Cert helped participants develop credibility within their teams (Smith's ‘launch trajectory of CPD’, 2004) was reported by a number of participants. This is essentially acknowledging impact on their own professional identity, with comments suggesting a growing appreciation of belonging to a departmental academic community where pedagogic research was valued and how/where they ‘fitted’ in HE.

... As a new member of staff... those [learning and teaching focused] discussions and interactions with other members of staff... gave me an impression of the institution and where I fitted in....coming from a professional background into [higher] education, you don't know what you don't know.... (Interview 4, Teacher education lecturer)

Other comments align with Knight and Trowler's (2000) argument that enhancements to practice in university teaching derive from the departmental level:

I feel I'm more credible now that I've actually got the teaching qualification – and the way people respond to me is different - a lot will come and ask for advice and support...(Interview 1 Health Practice Lecturer)

... in terms of the department I'm more involved ... so I've become more involved in discussions about teaching and learning issues (Interview 5 Social Sciences Lecturer).

So one impact of the PG Cert seems to be enabling participants to develop a teaching voice in their departments.

Impact on participant careers:

Data tracking from the programme's inception suggests some participants attained the PG Cert and then found a post at another institution - arguably a positive impact! Additionally, interview data highlights pedagogic research, subject/discipline-specific developments or changes in role, as key career impacts. For example:

As a consequence of having finished this [PG Cert] I am now the leader for the PG Cert in the School of Health... I've been involved in some of the other teaching and learning ... that I wouldn't have done otherwise... (Interview 1 Health Practice Lecturer)

The extent to which a PG Cert programme can be directly attributable to participants' careers is difficult to determine in an institutional case study, but an individual's perception of how they feel 'changed' by the programme offers some insight into the possibilities over the longer term. The career impact on new staff in our institution seems to confirm findings of a more positive impact of a PG Cert on individual practice in a teaching-led university (Knight 2006).

Conclusion

The experiences and perceptions of staff undertaking a PG Cert, appointed for their professional expertise in newer universities, has rarely been captured. Our findings revealed evidence of positive, sustained impact on new staff resulting in: more confident teaching approaches; a shift to learner-centred conceptualisations; practice reflectivity and cross-institutional dialogue as a catalyst for personal change. Our findings concur with Rust (2000) regarding the importance of personalisation in the PG Cert, and with Smith's (2004) analysis of individual impact, specifically in terms of pedagogic confidence.

We suggest the PG Cert participants in this study demonstrate a predisposition towards engaging in CPD due to a professional expectation of access to ongoing development and the expertise they bring to HE from the workplace. A cohort committed to applied/professional or work-based learning allows closer alignment with the modelling of effective teaching practice than might be seen in PG Cert participants in research-intensive pre-1992 universities. It is the institutional context (newer teaching-led universities rather than old research-led universities,) which seems particularly relevant to our study findings. It suggests both a cultural dimension to impact, and a tension between traditionally conceptualised academic roles and newer academic 'professionals'.

However, while this PG Cert is reported as impacting positively on individuals' understanding of, and skills in, pedagogic research, it was hard to find opportunities within the institution to continue such initiatives. The PG Cert was reported as developing reflective practices linked to teaching, but this was not recognised through wider application of such skills in appraisal schemes. In only a few cases, where colleagues engaged with national subject centres or professional networks (ie beyond the confines of the institution) could evidence be found of professional credibility being recognised. The challenge for any institution is to embed positive outcomes in a

framework of CPD which supports career-long learning at a time of great change in the sector.

Three key points emerge from our data. First is the recognition that measuring the impact of any PG Cert is complex and contextually embedded. Second is a realisation that prior professional contexts and professionally orientated expectations and predispositions to learning are key factors in understanding impact. Third is the evidence that engagement with a formal institutional level programme can support the development of pedagogic confidence and identity, making new lecturers, especially those from a professional background, braver.

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