FEATURE

University teacher development courses in the UK neoliberal higher education context

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Synopsis

In this feature, we view the professional recognition of university teachers through Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) training courses via the perspective of the neoliberal university approach. This perspective, and the lack of research into the developmental potential of such courses, necessitates a call for large-scale research into academics' perspectives on the teacher training they receive through PGCert courses. This would develop our understanding of the scope of teacher training courses and facilitate the sharing of best practice as well as identifying areas for improvement. This is particularly important in the rapidly shifting context of the current global pandemic which requires teachers to draw on a range of online pedagogies.

Keywords: university teacher training, PGCerts, neoliberalism

Introduction

The concern about whether university teaching staff need special training in teaching and whether provision for it has to be organised was raised in the literature a long time ago (see Carrotte, 1994). Particularly staff who are new to teaching struggle with things like choosing appropriate and diverse teaching methods, making the teaching process interesting for students, and establishing an effective relationship with students (Ferman, 2010). ICT training (García-Valcárcel, 2009) and the skills to teach abroad (Gribble and Ziguras, 2010) are amongst other training needs that teaching academics have. There is consensus in the literature that university teaching staff do need training in teaching before or during their university employment (Hodkinson and Taylor, 2010) or as early as during their PhD (Harland, 2010). These issues seem to be universal as they are discussed in different regions of the world in the studies mentioned above.

UK universities increasingly expect their tenured staff with teaching responsibilities to gain teaching qualifications and/or formal teaching recognition as a benchmark for standards in higher education (HE) teaching. There are three routes to professional recognition: (1) direct application to the central recognition body1 through reflection pieces, (2) university professional recognition schemes, targeted at experienced staff and (3) training courses for new academics - Postgraduate Certificates (PGCerts), some of which are accredited by Advance HE (e.g., 'Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in HE', 'Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice') (Advance HE, 2020). These courses aim to introduce

the practices of university teaching, including session planning, delivery and assessment to staff with less than three years full-time teaching experience.

In this feature, we view professional recognition of university teachers through Postgraduate training courses via the perspective of the neoliberal university approach. This perspective, and the lack of research into the developmental potential of such courses, necessitates a call for large-scale research into academics' perspectives on the teacher training they receive through PGCert courses. This would develop our understanding of the scope of teacher training courses and facilitate the sharing of best practice as well as identifying areas for improvement. This is particularly important in the rapidly shifting context of the current global pandemic which requires teachers to draw on a range of online pedagogies.

Contemporary neoliberal context in HE in the UK

The expectation of university teaching staff in the UK to gain professional recognition as a benchmark for standards in teaching is an example of the 'credentialisation' and the race for benchmarking in university teaching (Peat, 2015, p.93). Such a race is a distinctive feature of neoliberalism (Ball, 2015).

Ball's (2015) neoliberal university approach rests on the ideas of competitive relations in HE, the all-devouring focus of universities on benchmarks and audits, and the production of experts who can ensure competitive results in these audits. Ball (2015) suggests that this emphasis on performativity is often accompanied by the bureaucratisation of university processes which may divert the attention of universities from the professionalism of education practitioners. Ball (2015) calls for the need to reignite the focus on 'real educational work' (Ball, 2015, p.1046). Based on this logic, UK universities may be increasing the numbers of their 'experts' in teaching through their teaching training courses while not fully addressing their staff's teacher training needs. In Ball's (2015, p.1045) terms, whether the 'real educational work' of academic staff is being addressed in these courses could be questioned.

University teacher training courses

Despite HE teaching provision in the UK having a history of around 30 years, research focused on this area remains limited. Existing studies are mainly focused on exploring the attitudes of teaching staff to the process and tend to rely on single institutional studies. These studies have highlighted positive experiences of teaching staff going through the three different routes, such as the process of reflecting on their teaching practice (Eccles and Bradley, 2015; Beckmann, 2018); feeling braver as a result of taking stock of personal achievements (Butcher and Stoncel, 2011); improving the design of subject materials (Hibbert and Semler, 2016); encouraging networking opportunities (Thornton, 2014; Asghar and Pilkington, 2018); and developing positive relationships with mentors (Botham, 2017; Asghar and Pilkington, 2018).

While some positive experiences have been found, the developmental potential of some routes to teacher education has also been questioned (e.g. Thornton, 2014; Peat, 2015; Asghar and Pilkington, 2018; Spowart et al., 2019; van der Sluiz, 2021). For instance, van der Sluiz (2021) focused on the relationship between recognition schemes leading to HEA Fellowships, and the enhancement of teaching practice in a comparative study of a post-1992 university and a research-intensive university.

He concludes that 'no significant positive or negative association was found between the growing number of HEA Fellowships and the NSS[1] scores indicating teaching quality over the same period. Moreover, the findings of this qualitative study indicated that senior academics who obtained an HEA Fellowship through an institutional recognition scheme experienced limited relevance for the enhancement of their practice' (p.10). While this is unsurprising in terms of the routes for experienced staff being founded on reflective exercises that do not presuppose training, PGCerts presuppose development. Only a limited number of small-scale studies to date recognise such development.

Butcher and Stoncel's (2011) research was based at a single institution; it demonstrated that some teaching staff feel braver after the course. Hibbert and Semler's (2016) study cites an earlier HEA report that acknowledges that some staff reported the improvement of their teaching expertise as a result of PGCerts. Similarly, Spowart et al's (2020) report confirms that PGCerts have some positive impact in such domains of teaching and learning as the improvement of learning activities, assessment, etc. On the contrary, Thornton (2014) noticed some skepticism amongst academics about the benefits of a fellowship for teaching practice. Again, Thornton's research relied on a single institutions data set. However, it flags up potential weaknesses of HE teacher training courses and questions the value of a teaching qualification and fellowship status. Additionally, Hibbert and Semler (2016, p.585, citing HEA, 2013) highlight that some people who 'completed formal certification courses reported no awareness of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) with which PGCerts (many of which are accredited by Advance HE) are aligned. Since the UKPSF is a benchmark for standards in HE teaching and the PGCerts that are aligned with it aim to help achieve it, this finding can be viewed with some concern about whether accredited teaching courses in the HE sector provide what they set out to provide. Similarly, the developmental potential of the courses not accredited by Advance HE is also an interesting area of enquiry.

Due to the dearth of research in the area of the developmental potential of university teacher training courses, the significant cost to institutions to provide such courses, and university teacher training being, arguably, the backbone of the HE that students receive, there is a need for cross-university studies to determine the extent to which PGCerts help new academics to develop their teaching expertise. Such studies could consider exploring university teachers' perspectives on what PGCerts provide for them to assist with the development of their teaching knowledge and skills, what they feel is missing, and where room for improvement is.

This is particularly important in the pandemic and (hopefully soon) a post-pandemic context. UK universities moved to online teaching delivery in March 2020 for the rest of the 2019-2020 academic year, and blended learning with a period of fully online learning during the second national lockdown in 2020-2021 academic year. Moving away from face-to-face delivery triggered a lot of dissatisfaction from the student cohort. The media suggests that a degree of this dissatisfaction is due to the lower quality of teaching delivery (BBC, 2020). This has, arguably, highlighted weaknesses in the skillset of university

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[1] National Student Survey NSS https://www.thestudentsurvey.com

teaching staff particularly in the area of online teaching, although the difficulty for many to combine their private and work lives in one space – home – should not be underestimated. Aggravating discontent led many current students to request tuition fee refunds and withdraw from universities (BBC, 2020). This is a huge loss to universities. In this situation more than ever, teaching excellence, flexibility and adaptability are essential to the functioning of universities, determining their survival by retaining student numbers and educating future generations. Relevant research in UK universities is focused on what Watermeyer et al (2020, p.623) call a 'digital disruption' in the pandemic. Challenges in moving to online or blended teaching have also offered opportunities regarding redesigning learning activities and building a different level of partnership and understanding with students, which is discussed by Bacon and Peacock (2021), Cutri et al (2020), and Rapanta et al (2020). While this is interesting, this research does not tell us what training PGCerts have incorporated to assist new university teachers in adapting to the online or blended approach.

Concluding remarks

Ensuring that new university teachers and institutional strategic leaders are confident that PGCerts offer academic teaching staff appropriate training is essential, particularly in the challenging times of the pandemic and its aftermath. The neoliberal context of UK HE has facilitated the importance for new academics to go through PGCerts which has perhaps turned into a route to become an 'expert' in teaching, in Ball's (2015) terms. However, the extent to which these courses really prepare academic staff for teaching should be investigated further with the aim to identify the areas of strengths of the PGCerts and areas for improvement. Building on the work of Spowart et al., commissioned by Advance HE in 2020, which identified positive impacts of accredited teaching courses on teaching, we now need to explore the finer detail of what works best. This is essential to appropriately prepare HE teachers of the future and ensure that they are fully supported for the rapidly changing context they now find themselves operating within. This could be achieved through large-scale, longitudinal research into academics' perspectives on the teacher training they receive and the resulting impacts on their teaching practices 12 months on and two years on.

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