

The position of teaching and learning skills training in postgraduate research programmes: The Role of Teaching Fellows.

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It is a long established practice to utilise postgraduate students in undergraduate teaching and it is becoming more widespread. In recent years, government policy on student numbers, accessibility and widening participation has led to increasing undergraduate class sizes and accordingly an enhanced workload for academic staff. Coupling this to the increased pressures for research outputs and the escalation of quality assurance and enhancement procedures, academic staff, ironically, have less time to engage in the delivery and assessment of teaching and learning. Consequently, postgraduate students increasingly are invited to take a central role in both these activities.

Setting the Scene

The HE sector in the UK comprises a range of institutions which are funded by the Higher Education Funding Councils of the respective countries. The Universities are categorised in three phases: 1) "red brick" universities which received their charter before 1960; 2) "glass ceiling" institutions which received their charter during the 1960s; 3) the "post-92" universities which had previously been polytechnics. All the "pre-92" institutions tend to have a strong research focus, whilst the majority of post-92 universities tend to be less research-oriented and have greater opportunities to focus on their teaching activities. These are generalities and there are exceptions.

Unlike other countries, the HE system in the UK has dual funding streams for teaching and research. Income for teaching is decided on the number of students recruited and the nature of their degree programme. In addition, there are sums available to institutions to meet required targets and standards. Research-related income is dependent upon the outcomes of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and is determined by the number of departments/divisions within an institution which achieve a certain rating on a defined scale. In the RAE, consideration is given to the number of postgraduate research students and their completion rate within four years. Thus, institutions which are research led tend to have large numbers of postgraduate students and academic staff whose central focus is research rather than teaching and learning.

Influences on Postgraduate Research Student Training

Benchmarks and quality standards are well established in the UK Higher Education system and are monitored by the Quality Assurance Agency which was established in 1997. An independent body, the QAA is financed through contracts with the UK Higher Education Funding Councils and subscriptions from UK HE institutions. The QAA assures the standard of HE qualifications and encourages enhancement of quality by facilitating the definition, dissemination and embedding of academic standards and quality.

The QAA Code of Practice comprises a number of sections, produced between 1998 and 2001, covering numerous aspects of teaching and learning in HE, including postgraduate research programmes. Since the publication of the latter section, several relevant articles have been produced including: "the Roberts Review" (which focused on the supply of people to the UK workforce with science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills); "*SET for success report*" (April 2002; based on the outcomes of the Roberts review); "Improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes" (HEFCE 03/23, which described the threshold standards for research degree programmes); "*Skills training requirements for research students*" (the research councils' and the Arts and Humanities Research Board's (AHRB) joint statement published as Annex A to *HEFCE 03/23*). These have informed a subsequent review of the QAA Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Programmes in 2004. This section, more than any other in the Code, sets out clear guidelines on expectations with regard to the

management, quality, and academic standards of research programmes. Interestingly, QAA also stress the importance of the research councils' expectations.

Code of Practice in Relation to Teaching by Postgraduate Students

The QAA Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Programmes clearly articulates the need for institutions to support the professional development of postgraduate research students through appropriate training. Although it is not prescriptive of the nature of this training and how it should be delivered, it does specifically mention institutional responsibility towards postgraduate students involved in teaching:

Where postgraduate students are provided with opportunities for teaching (for example, acting as demonstrators in laboratories, or teaching small groups), appropriate guidance and support will be provided. If the student's teaching activity also extends to assessing students, training will reflect this. It is helpful for postgraduates to be part of a larger teaching team, so they can benefit from the support and mentoring provided by experienced teachers. QAA Code of Practice – Postgraduate Research Programmes Sept 2004.

Interestingly, the Joint Statement by the major research councils (*Skills training requirements for research students*) states that:

The Research Councils would also want to re-emphasise their belief that training in research skills and techniques is the key element in the development of a research student..... The development of wider employment related skills should not detract from that core objective.

This statement, which informs the QAA Code of practice, not only emphasises the disadvantages of encouraging postgraduate students to develop a wider range of skills. Additionally, the stated employment-related skills in the document do not specifically include those related to teaching and learning. The implications are that the major funding bodies for research in the HE sector do not encourage the involvement of postgraduate students in teaching and learning but that where such activity does occur, the nature and extent of the training and support provided is at the Institution's discretion. This would suggest that around the UK, practice in respect of postgraduate student training for teaching is highly varied. Indeed, this was the position found by the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) survey, the results of which were published in 1999, before the QAA Code of Practice. Information was obtained from 83% of HEIs in England, Scotland and Wales. Of these, 93% had some form of professional development in teaching and learning for postgraduate research students. This provision ranged from a half day course to 9 days training. Only some courses were mandatory. The major aspects of teaching and learning delivered on such courses included small group teaching, assessing students, giving lectures, demonstrating, designing and planning courses and presentation skills. The majority (80%) of these were delivered by interactive workshops. In 34 of the programmes, some award was given ranging from a certificate of attendance to a postgraduate certificate in Higher Education. It was unclear from the publication whether the responses obtained were from an institutional or departmental perspective. My own experience of both pre- and post-92 institutions is that where institutional policies/codes of practice exist, they are loose enough for interpretation at departmental level to stimulate a wide variety of practice within a single institution. This is demonstrated by the examples given below from institutional policies or guidelines:

*Unless Students have undergone previous equivalent training, they shall, in the year in which they are recruited, receive not less than one day's training specific to their roles. General training (relevant to the activity type) of at least half a day's duration must be provided and additional guidance must also be given that relates specifically to the module... **University of Wales, Cardiff.***

an assessment is made of the teaching capability of any Postgraduate Student Teacher before they start teaching, including their ability to communicate clearly and effectively....on the basis of such an assessment they are given appropriate training.

University of Nottingham

Thus, although there is recognition of the need to give relevant training to postgraduate students who are engaged in teaching activities, the extent and effectiveness of this training is variable.

The Role of Teaching Fellows

In the 1999 report from the UKCGE only one institution suggested that it was useful to have their teaching and learning courses delivered by experts in the field or educationalists. In 2000, the first National Teaching Fellowships were awarded. The fellows are regarded as a valuable resource in Teaching and Learning circles. The newly formed Association of National Teaching Fellows is an organisation created to enhance and embed the impact of National Teaching Fellows in promoting excellence in teaching and learning. It is an association of the Higher Education Academy (which is funded by mandatory institutional contributions) and shares its remit to enhance the student learning experience. Therefore it might be expected that the fellows would be highly valued by their home institutions and that their expertise might be exploited to deliver teaching and learning courses to staff and those research students who contribute to teaching activities. When canvassed about this, responses were received from fellows representing 19 institutions. Four of these were pre-92 universities, the remainder being post-92. Of these, fellows in 11 institutions are aware of some form of training being in place for post-graduate students ranging from voluntary attendance on a 3 day introductory course to mandatory courses, which may be spread over a year and lead to a postgraduate certificate in Learning and Teaching. Several fellows were unsure of the details, suggesting considerable variation between departments. Others stated that the nature of the provision was still evolving. The uncertainty expressed or implied in several responses suggested that there is little involvement of fellows in the design or delivery of such programmes, an assumption confirmed by the individuals themselves. Exceptions to this occurred where fellows were from central teaching and learning development units or where they had developed departmental/faculty-specific programmes themselves. This suggests that institutions still fail to recognise the value of expertise in teaching and learning and fail to utilise fellows in the delivery of teaching and learning courses for postgraduate students.

Interestingly, one Fellow who responded to the questionnaire emphatically stated that in his opinion, PhD students should not be expected to incorporate skills development associated with teaching and learning into their doctoral studies. This is an opinion echoed in various places. Doctoral students are required to obtain their awards within four years from the date of first registration. Failure to meet these deadlines affects a department's completion rate which counts against them in the RAE. Pressures on students (particularly financial constraints) often mean that they have some form of casual employment or commit to more than the recommended number of hours teaching. This distracts from their studies, and threatens their timely completion. Thus, particularly in research-intensive institutions, there are disparate pressures on doctoral students – those to ensure completion and those to support the academics by taking on teaching and learning activities. I believe that if a research student is engaged in teaching activity, they need to be appropriately trained to ensure quality is maintained for the undergraduates being taught. With the emphasis on life-long learning and continuing professional development, it is likely that a postgraduate student will be required to take on some sort of educational role in their future career. Thus, I think delivering appropriate training during an individual's postgraduate studies would be an investment. However, I say this with the caveat that the funding bodies involved should be prepared to allow a longer period for completion and institutions must be prepared to fund this period of training. Since the students act in an academic capacity the expenses associated with such training should be included in the estimate of costs for the programme to which the student contributes.

Planned Developments

Although it would appear that little has changed in the past six years with regard to the considered value of teaching-associated skills in postgraduate research programmes. Recent initiatives in funding for Higher Education have supported a key initiative in this area. The University of Oxford has been awarded funding for a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning to prepare postgraduate research students and postdoctoral researchers for Academic practice.

The Centrewill support the implementation of programmes to develop the teaching, research and professional skills of future academic staff, in all departments across the five academic divisions of the University. <http://www.admin.ox.ac/il/po/050127.shtml> April 25th (last accessed).

In addition to supporting students at Oxford, the Centre will co-ordinate a network of other institutions including the University of Cambridge; Imperial College; University College, London; King's College, London; the London School of Economics; University of Edinburgh; University of Warwick. It is proposed that this network will evaluate and compare the effectiveness of programmes designed to support the professional development of postgraduate students. It is also incumbent upon the participants to disseminate their findings both nationally and internationally. It is unclear from the material available whether or not the proposed teaching programmes are aimed at those whose requirement to participate in teaching activities is part of their doctoral studies, such as those reading for a PhD in Education, Psychology or the Social Sciences. Also, the range of skills support to be provided is not detailed. I was unable in the time available to get a response from the Director of the new centre. However, since its remit is to prepare students for academic practice, it is hoped that this will include all students, if successful in achieving their aims, This network of prestigious and successful research-focused institutions, will be highly influential in ensuring that the skills associated with learning and teaching are embedded in all postgraduate research programmes.

The ExPERT Centre (a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Portsmouth) will be validating a professional doctorate programme aimed at professionals in health-related sciences and designed to develop their teaching and learning skills in support of their professional development. Perhaps in Medicine and the allied professions, above all others, there is a clear recognition of the need for academic development of senior staff and this may support the evolution of graduate programmes in relation to the development of the skills related to teaching and learning.

Conclusions

There is evidence which demonstrates a commitment within Higher Education establishments to ensure that postgraduate students involved in teaching activities receive relevant training as set out in the QAA Code of Practice. The pressures here are transparent in that we have a duty to ensure the quality of our undergraduate provision. There is also evidence to suggest that provision varies not only between institutions but also between departments within the same institution. There certainly seems to be little support for more extensive skills training in relation to teaching and learning, particularly in light of the research councils' joint statement. This gives research-intensive institutions little encouragement to look at the professional development of their postgraduate students.

The role that National Teaching Fellows have played in developing policy appears to be limited. However, many of the recently established Centres of Excellence are led by fellows. This may give them the vehicle through which their skills and expertise can influence practice.

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