

Context

There is increasing emphasis during the doctorate on the process of academic development in its broadest sense; not only concerned with the production of a thesis but with experience in a range of other contexts including teaching and administration (McAlpine & Åkerlind, 2010; Roberts, 2002). This has led to the increase in the popularity in GTA courses which provide research students with introductory knowledge and experience of university teaching (Hopwood & Stocks, 2008). The trend reflects wider moves internationally to professionalise the practice of university teaching, which in the UK is supported by the Higher Educational Academy (HEA) (Pickering, 2006). From 2012/13 the Higher Education Statistics Agency will also require institutions to return information on the qualifications of all staff who teach. Given that doctoral students frequently contribute to the delivery of teaching and assessment, there is a growing necessity that they too are appropriately qualified (Hopwood & Stocks, 2008), with some institutions insisting that training is undertaken prior to commencement of any teaching responsibilities.

Within this context it is important that the teaching and learning professional development and accreditation pathways for doctoral students are evaluated. To date in the UK such work has generally been limited to single institutional studies (e.g. Force, 2009; Gunn, 2007) considering modes of delivery, student experiences and course content. This paper presents the findings of a collaborative study between a research and a teaching intensive institution. It seeks to examine whether support is fit for purpose in relation to participants' immediate teaching needs and also, given the international and multi-institutional nature of postdoctoral careers, whether, and in what ways, such courses can prepare participants for engaging with differing institutional teaching cultures.

Methodology

This research evolved in response to a dialogue about GTA courses between Educational Developers in a research-intensive and a teaching-intensive university. They shared concerns about the purpose and fit of their respective courses in a sector concerned with fragmentation, internationalisation, student fees and quality issues (Trowler, Saunders & Bamber, 2012). Although the research undertaken at each institution was independent, themes and research questions were shared to make the findings comparable.

The research aims and objectives were to:

1. Identify motivations for undertaking GTA courses
2. Identify and examine challenges experienced during the courses

3. Evaluate the impact of the course for on-going academic development for different groups of postgraduate students

The methodology in each case was similar. Online questionnaires were developed which identified characteristics of the respondents, evaluated course content and delivery and established impacts of the course on continuing teaching practice. Wherever appropriate questions were repeated across the two questionnaires. These were sent to all contactable participants from the past ten years (72 at the research-intensive university, 300+ at the teaching intensive university). These were followed up by 10 semi-structured interviews with a purposeful sample of volunteers who had completed the questionnaire.

Provisional findings

Of the many findings emerging from the research, two specific themes will be explored here: that of how the GTA met the immediate teaching needs of participants; and the longer-term professional development value of the courses.

Immediate teaching needs

For the research-intensive institution the course broadly met participants' immediate needs, although there was some separation between the activities undertaken and the writing of the portfolio, which was seen as less helpful for teaching practice than some of the activities, particularly observation. Mentoring was strongly endorsed as helpful, particularly where it involved observation or feedback on teaching plans. A proportion of respondents indicated that the discipline specific nature of courses was important. Some suggested this should be strengthened so that they did not have to spend time translating and adapting ideas about teaching to their context.

Similarly, the course at the teaching intensive institution was seen as providing a general introduction to the practice of teaching, although the process of completing the portfolio was challenging, particularly for those for whom the idea of reflecting on practice was new. For doctoral students, obtaining teaching opportunities was highly variable and was often dependent on informal networks and relationships with established teaching staff, frequently to the disadvantage of international students. For many it provided a timely pause in their studies to think more broadly about their careers.

Continuing professional development

Teaching in the research-intensive university could take quite different forms to that in other institutions, particularly in relation to class sizes. Respondents did not always find it easy to adapt their teaching when they moved to a new institution – although this capacity to adapt did vary. Respondents reported that they often experienced difficulty in continuing to engage with ideas about teaching after the

course had finished. Particularly where participants moved institutions, they were not always able to enroll on further teaching courses even when they wanted to.

At the teaching-intensive university there was a perception amongst respondents that obtaining a teaching qualification would enhance their future employability, particularly if teaching experience had also been gained. International students, in particular, valued the opportunity to gain a UK teaching qualification. They perceived it as providing an insight into alternate ways of teaching and supporting learning, which they sought to integrate into their teaching practice on return to their home countries.

Conclusions

There are themes in our remarks about adaption, transference and equity. On the one hand there is a desire for learning about teaching to be closely adapted to the participants' setting; but there is also a need for this to be transferable to new settings – new institutions, new ways of doing things, later in the career. For the research-intensive institution, this manifests itself in issues of learning about teaching settings that are not typical of those found across the majority of the sector. For the teaching-intensive institution the question is, how does the course serve international students when they return home? How can we resolve the tensions between recognizing that the GTA is environmentally and culturally situated to the here and now whilst making it useful for the wider and future environment?

References

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