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‘Common themes’ and ‘missing pieces’: a reinterpretation of existing research on postgraduate teaching development programmes

Context

This paper has its basis in a postgraduate teaching development programme (TDP, hereon) at a UK university, and our interest in previous research which can be used for the continued enhancement of the programme. TDPs are generally provided for staff who have a teaching or lecturing role, or another role which involves the facilitation of student learning. They represent a relatively new development, many evolving following the Dearing Review (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997).

Rationale and central argument of the study

In this paper, and based on a preliminary review of relevant literature, we present the view that research on postgraduate TDPs for higher education staff may be characterised in terms of ‘common themes’ and ‘missing pieces’. Common themes refers to issues and areas for which there is already a reasonable range of published research, whilst the missing pieces represent areas in which there remain gaps in the literature. Whilst such a categorisation might be regarded as simplistic, we argue that whilst TDPs offer genuine educational value, more research is needed to address the missing pieces in order for such programmes to be enhanced further and as a means of demonstrating their value (or otherwise) for learners and institutions. In addition, and by way of linkage to the Conference theme, we will suggest that the continued enhancement of teaching development programmes can be, and needs to be considered as one example of a shared ambition in the higher education sector. There is also a practical rationale for undertaking the project. The authors work together as part of a programme team on one such programme which has been running for 11 years, and undertook the literature review as a means of informing the on-going development and enhancement of this programme. Whilst ‘conventional’ evaluations and reviews of the programme and its constituent modules have regularly taken place (for example: module feedback, annual programme evaluations, periodic review and re-approval), it was felt that a project of this type would enable a deeper and more research-informed review to be undertaken.

In the sections that follow, we identify some of the common themes and missing pieces which we argue characterise the existing research on TDPs: these will be discussed further during the Conference presentation itself.

Common themes

We have identified common themes in the literature as falling under the following broad categories: learning content and curriculum; studies based around departmental, faculty or institutional support for those undertaking such programmes; studies informed by and / or testing a particular theoretical framework; and finally, evaluation studies. In terms of learning content and curriculum, most TDPs discussed in the literature follow a modular programme structure, offering modules with similar learning outcomes, topics and approaches to teaching and assessment, with an underpinning philosophy toward improving teachers' reflective practice (Gibbs & Coffey, 2000; Quinn, 2003; Bamber, 2008; Hanbury, Prosser & Rickinson, 2008). Criticisms of TDP content and curriculum include being too generic (Trowler & Cooper, 2002) and having learning outcomes which are 'not clear' (Knight, 2006). In terms of departmental, faculty, or institutional support for TDPs, the literature suggests that this tends to be lacking (e.g. Gibbs & Coffey, 2000; Hanbury *et al.*, 2008) and so may represent an area whereby improvements can be made. The third common theme suggests that a range of theoretical frameworks have been used to inform research on TDPs. For example Lave & Wenger's (1991) communities of practice theory has been used in various studies (including Trowler & Knight, 2000; Viskovic, 2006). Other studies have drawn on forms of learning and knowledge, and, in particular, Eraut's (2000) distinction between formal and non-formal learning. For example Knight, Tait & Yorke (2006) emphasised the importance of non-formal learning in the context of activity systems within which teachers in higher education work. Finally, many TDP evaluation studies have been published since 2000, although it must be said that the majority use self-reporting methods, often collecting the data on completion of the programme rather than throughout (e.g. Quinn 2003; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Donnelly, 2008; Ginns, Kitay & Prosser 2008; Cilliers & Herman 2010).

Missing pieces

Our literature review also pointed to the existence of a number of missing pieces, each of the following areas being under-represented in the research on TDPs: learner 'motivation(s)' to undertake such programmes; learner experiences; (and) the inter-professional nature of these programmes. First, with respect to learner motivation, it is known that the majority of TDPs tend to be compulsory, particularly for staff new to an institution (Stes, Clement & Van Petegem, 2007; Bamber, 2008; Cilliers & Herman, 2010). However, it would be useful to find out more about how and why TDPs are undertaken beyond an obligatory requirement, in order to inform and enhance TDP design and provision. Next, the experiences of staff undertaking TDPs represent another area where there is some discussion in the literature, yet this could be explored further and in a richer and more direct way. Finally, whilst the inter-professional, generic nature of TDPs remains an on-going debate (Trowler & Cooper, 2002; Hanbury *et al.*, 2008; Smith, 2011), we believe that, particularly in relation to the TDP at our own institution, there are valid reasons for fully researching the benefits of cross-disciplinary conversations and shared practice that occur between participants undertaking a TDP.

Some further points

During the Conference presentation, we will elucidate further on our argument that it is important to 'fill the missing pieces', on the basis that the results of further research can serve to enhance such programmes and, hopefully, provide new impetus and support for their continued existence and development. We will also provide some discussion time to enable delegates to express their views on the issues we have addressed, based on their own experiences and interpretations of the existing literature.

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