

## **SRHE Outline**

### ***What do we think we are doing? Perceptions of mentors 'mentoring' on a PGCTHE programme in a new university (0161)***

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**Theme:** Academic practice, work and cultures

This paper investigates 'mentoring' as experienced by mentors on a PG Cert at the authors' university. In the context of this 'new' post-92 university with a curriculum driven by a discourse of employability and dominant disciplines in professional and vocational areas such as Education, Health, Business and applied arts and sciences, many teaching staff are appointed on the basis of their professional expertise rather than (necessarily) academic credibility as measured by a PhD or track record of research. Workplace experienced lecturers entering HE and academia as a 'second career' often arrive having experienced mentoring and developed their own 'mentoring' styles in diverse work-based cultures. They also can find the transition to the role of lecturer in HE a challenging one (Boyd, 2010). We set out to explore mentoring support for new lecturers at a time of complex change and uncertainty in UK HE.

Building on previous research into the (positive) impact of the PG Cert on the acculturation of HE teachers appointed from professional backgrounds (Butcher & Stoncel, 2009, 2010), this study explores perceptions and experiences of successful PG Cert 'graduates', who are now mentoring in their academic Schools. We wanted to understand the reality of the role of mentor in a HE professional learning environment and investigate whether mentors could identify barriers to effective mentoring in that environment. We also wanted to explore the potential for lecturers to enhance professional practice and CPD through mentoring activities.

This study was driven by a review of the mentoring and academic development literature in HE in the context of support and teaching provided on PG Certs. This revealed a gap in credible studies, with a chasm between ubiquitous university policy statements on mentoring, and limited research into what mentoring actually means in the practice of university academic development. Due to this relative paucity of literature on mentoring in UK HE, especially in relation to the PG Cert, we scoped the academic literature both for international (mainly US) studies of mentoring in HE, (see north American perspectives ie Angelique et al, 2002, Cunningham, S, 1999, Smith et al, 2001, Hubball et al, 2010) and re-visited the existing generic literature on mentoring to determine the extent to which it 'aligns' with the specific context of HE.

While mentoring has been extensively researched in relation to Initial Teacher Education (Griffiths et al, 2010; Bryan & Carpenter 2008), health professionals (Brad Johnson et al 2000) and business (Gibb 1999) little has been published specifically on the HE mentoring role as it relates to the PG Cert. Lopez-Real and Kwan (2005), from a HE context, report on

the potential for professional development that mentoring activity may be instrumental in supporting. They also highlight mentors' perceptions on the significance of their own learning through self-reflection. Critical self-reflection is an embedded element of our PG Cert assessment process, indeed our earlier study found evidence from participants that they were routinely engaging in varying levels of routine evaluation of practice. However, learning of the realities of the mentoring process from the perspective of the mentors who had once been PG Cert mentees themselves offered a valuable level of insight into the process that we intend to support (but may hinder).

In order to investigate the mentor role in a context bounded by our own institution, we chose a mixed methods case study approach. In three iterative stages, we explored the extent to which a discourse of learning and teaching, and the mentors' own experiences of being mentored, permeated their role. This allowed us to address our research questions, exploring: the realities of the mentoring role; obstacles to developing the role; and opportunities for professional development.

- First, we re-visited interviews with past PG Cert participants (now mentors on the programme) on their own experiences of being mentored, and made use of existing PG Cert course documents to 'frame' mentoring in relation to our institutional prescriptions.
- Second, informed by insights gained from the first stage, we issued an electronic survey to all mentors who had previously supported participants on the PG Cert, to establish an understanding of what approaches were taken, what worked, and what institutional barriers existed to effective mentoring.
- Third, drawing on understanding gained from our analysis of the responses to the survey, we interviewed a sample of new mentors on the current PG Cert to elicit perceptions over the first few months of their role.

Our approach was informed by grounded theory, so that each stage of data collection was analysed to inform the questions we would ask in the next stage. Individual perceptions were explored using a phenomenographic framework, enabling comparisons to be made across data and with key literature.

Our early findings raise a range of issues. There appears to be confusion over terminology/nomenclature (misunderstanding of the notion of a 'mentor' and how to undertake 'mentoring' in relation to other institutional uses of the term). There are also significant School/disciplinary-specific differences in relation to expectations of the role (including time allocation) and PG Cert participant expectations of their mentor (which are often school/subject-specific). For example, in one School, mentors are highly pro-active, drawing on their own prior professional experience, and give over and above what is 'required'. In the same School, mentees are more demanding. In other Schools, mentoring was entirely reactive and not prioritised or recognised. We also found shortcomings in our own induction processes for PG Cert mentors.

However, we did find in our data possibilities and opportunities for more formally planned and structured CPD for mentors, aligned to Standard descriptor 3 of the UK Professional Standards Framework.

We intend this study to begin the process of bridging the gap in the literature around mentoring in HE as it aligns with developing pedagogy and professional practice. We would welcome opportunities for further discussion to explore this aspect with other researchers, particularly in finding appropriate ways to support experienced members of staff in developing a HE professional mentoring identity /profile that explicitly contributes to their continuing professional development.

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