

A phenomenographic study of academic identity construction within the context of a postgraduate certificate in teaching in higher education. (0056)**Introduction**

Higher education institutions design and deliver their own PgCertHE programmes in teaching aligned with institutional strategic goals. Many are accredited by the Higher Education Academy and mapped against the UK Professional Standards Framework introduced by the HEA in 2006 and currently under review. The recent Browne Report (2010) has stressed the importance of professionalising teaching in HE to raise the quality and the standards of teaching across the sector. Whilst initial professional development is contested territory in contemporary higher education, it has been argued that probation, during which many academics are introduced to the PGCertHE, is a transitional period which provides an opportunity to develop an academic identity. For some academics this may be a troublesome period (Smith, 2010). The enculturation of new academics can be dependent on the quality of a local learning community. Despite the importance of this period, there is a relative paucity of published research in higher education into the experiences of lecturing staff and their engagement with such awards. This is surprising in a current climate characterised by the emerging challenges raised within initial professional development and the changing landscapes of academic practice.

Review of literature

The PGCertHE in teaching often happens during the probationary period where new staff are working through a liminal space in the creation of new identities. Identity formation is, as Lawler (2008) suggests, a fluid process of co construction in a

variety of social situations. Smith (2010) has argued that potential wider variety of career choices in academic life and aspirations, can be seen as a space where identity can be (re)negotiated on a regular basis.

Donnelly (2008) used qualitative questionnaires with 25 successful graduates of a Postgraduate Certificate Third-Level Learning and Teaching programme with teachers in a variety of higher education institutions around Ireland to explore the self-perception of change in teaching approaches by lecturers. All indicated that change had been made in their teaching approaches, and a number of alterations had taken place. The most significant changes identified were increased reflection on current teaching approaches, the introduction of new teaching strategies, increased focus on the design and delivery of classes, more work taking place on course teams, an increase in confidence about learning and teaching and a more student-centred approach towards teaching.

Smith (2010) used a longitudinal approach by gathering stories from probationary lecturers to investigate how academic identities come to be formed. She found that overarching trajectories through the probationary period emerged from the data. For some, the transition to academic life is unremarkable, and identity is untroubled. For others, this appears to be a more troublesome time and a good deal of dissonance is encountered: an academic identity is hard fought and felt to be forged in difficult circumstances. The 'underlying game' of UK higher education may thus be experienced as confounding and inhospitable. Attention to this 'game' and explaining the 'rules' may well be beneficial to new colleagues, smoothing a sometimes difficult journey.

Lucas and Turner (2007) The project design began with a review of nine Teaching and Learning programmes being run in universities in the UK and Canada in order to find out the extent to which they directly address linking research and teaching. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with a small group of early career academics from a variety of disciplines at the three case study institutions to explore their existing conceptions of the link between teaching and research and strategies

for the integration of teaching and research. Finally running workshops with 10-15 early career academic staff at each of the three institutions to pilot and evaluate the materials, activities, and examples of best practice. Experiences on Teaching and Learning Programmes: mixed positive and negative responses on these programmes were reported, in keeping with other research studies (Kahn *et al.*, 2006; Prosser *et al.*, 2006).

The principal aim of this project is to investigate changing identities amongst practitioners involved at various stages of a PGCertHE in six universities across Wales. The study focuses on the changes in teaching approaches for these individuals and examine the influence of instructional strategies and context on identity formation and reformation.

Method

The main source of data collection will be focus group interviews with staff in each of the institutions. Interviews will take place with colleagues:

- 1) Just embarking/embarked on the scheme
- 2) About to complete/ recently finished and,
- 3) Completed at least two years ago.

Interviews will be semi structured and conversations will focus on the key issues relating to the aims and objectives of the research namely:

- Identifying practitioners' role and recent biography
- Reasons for engaging with the award
- Attitudes towards support they have received/did receive for those completed
- Perceptions of the assessments used for the award

- How being involved in the award has affected their teaching
- The extent to which the award has influenced them as a reflective practitioner in higher education.
- Whether being involved in the award has changed their perspectives on learning and teaching in higher education.

Data will be processed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and processed with NVivo software.

Approval for this project has been granted through the Education Ethics Task group in Bangor University.

Results

Data is being collected and will finish by early November 2011. Emergent themes will be presented at the conference and feedback used to inform possible future directions of the project. The research has value to a wide range of senior colleagues involved in a key aspect of university life. There is a paucity of research in this area, particularly in relation to the Welsh context and the experiences of studying through the medium of Welsh. The findings will be of great value in helping inform those responsible for coordinating awards such as this and act as a powerful evaluative tool to enhance current practice.

References

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