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Connections and community: some reflections on the long-term impact of a teaching development programme for new teachers at the University of Oxford (0101)

Most UK universities run teaching development programmes, accredited by the Higher Education Academy at associate level, to help researchers with their first teaching experiences. Given that many of those who participate in such programmes subsequently move institutions, what sort of impact – if any - does experience of an associate-level teaching development programme have on these later roles? In many institutions, the associate-level programme is a shorter version of the fellowship programme, but are the needs of participants the same, or should associate-level programmes have different aims?

This paper draws on a survey and interviews of successful completers of the University of Oxford's associate level programme, 'Developing Learning and Teaching' to consider these questions, and to begin to outline ways in which the programme might evolve to take into account the likely future career paths of this group. I will argue that because of the movement of early career academics between institutions, the whole academic community has a responsibility to this group in a way that is more apparent than with newly appointed lecturers who might be expected to work in one institution for a reasonable length of time.

Developing Learning and Teaching at the University of Oxford

The 'Developing Learning and Teaching' (DLT) programme has been running at the University of Oxford since 2005. Although the course varies in different areas of the university, most participants do some teaching observation, discuss teaching with a mentor, and complete a portfolio in which they explore one or two areas of interest to them. Many also attend seminars to discuss teaching issues, read relevant literature and meet others who are also starting to teach.

81 individuals had successfully completed the course by 2010. An online survey of 72 of these 80 individuals in 2011, 39 responded and interviews were conducted with 10 of these respondents. One aim was to understand the longer term impacts (if any) of the programme, and to compare with previous work which has sought to elucidate the short term effects (Hopwood and Stocks 2008)

The findings from this survey and interviews cannot be, and do not aim to be, statistically significant. They represent a small group who were not only interested in teaching but also willing to participate in a programme which was just beginning to be established. So rather than assuming general validity, I am using this small survey to open up avenues for further inquiry and debate, and picking up on comments which may have only been made by a small number of individuals, but which may give pause for thought in the development of the programme.

Community and positive connections

A striking finding is that having one's teaching observed, observing others (whether peers or established academics) and having a teaching mentor are widely thought to be the most valued aspects of the programme. 23/39 respondents cited these

elements as the most significant part of DLT in enabling them to feel more confident or skilled as a teacher. 10/39 respondents specifically identified mentoring and observation as vital and/or an aspect of the programme to be strengthened. This finding is not a great surprise, and is also represented in the literature on teaching development (see for example, xxx). Nonetheless, it is useful to note that this emphasis on mentoring and observation remain memorable long after completion of the programme.

A broader community?

A more troubling finding, however, is that when individuals move institution they need to adapt their teaching approach and this can be a challenge. This suggests a tension for the associate programme at Oxford between immediate and long term needs. one of our former participants commented:

As Oxford is attracting so many from all over the world, who have never come in contact with tutorials, and are given to tutorials to run by their PIs [principal investigators], you don't know what to do! Should I make the students dance or read their essay aloud or...? We don't know. (Respondent A, now at Russell Group institution)

However, in the longer term, most researchers will go on to work in other institutions. When they do this, the value of the work they put into the DLT programme can seem irrelevant or hard to adapt to this new situation.

I would say that teaching in Oxford hasn't prepared me for the very different type of teaching that I now do, which is to much larger groups of students, you know, completely different from the tutorial system obviously. And obviously, I knew, in abstract, that it would be completely different, but you don't really know what that means until you experience the two different types of teaching. And so, teaching at Oxford is...is incredibly useful in sort of developing skills and experience in career terms, but it's...you know, it's certainly not representative of the sort of teaching that you would do in any other university, basically. (Respondent B, now at 94 Group institution)

There is, therefore, a tension between immediate and long-term learning for the DLT programme. The gap in approaches to teaching may be particularly apparent when moving from the tutorial system at Oxford elsewhere, but other literature suggests it is not just an Oxford problem (Oliver 2004).

An additional issue is that several individuals who were enthusiastic about their teaching had found it difficult to pursue this interest. Respondents both at Oxford and those who had moved to other institutions commented that they had been unable to access further teaching development opportunities. It seems that well-intended management of courses for particular roles can exclude those on temporary contracts, or who do not fit the pre-identified roles. Thus, the very individuals who might be future teaching leaders may be neglected at this key early stage in their career.

Concluding remarks

When viewed retrospectively, the associate-level programme at Oxford may need to serve additional interests to those that new participants identify. As well as helping with the teaching that is being done at Oxford, the associate programme could also promote critical analysis of similarities and differences in teaching approaches in

different institutions, cultures and disciplines. Encouraging this form of critical exploration is an activity from which the whole academic community could benefit, not just a single institution.

Similarly, picking up on teaching enthusiasts when they move roles or institutions (or both) and ensuring that they can continue to pursue their teaching development is an issue that goes beyond any individual institution.

The positive endorsement of mentoring demonstrates that local cultures do much to encourage teaching development. I would argue that an even bigger community is required to ensure that individuals are supported as they move between roles and institutions. Far from seeing the associate-level programmes as a cut-down version of fellowship programmes, is it time to give them greater emphasis and to develop a new focus for them, as the critical place in which early career academics engage critically with teaching for the first time?

References

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