'A sector in transition': exploring the nature of professional development in the Scottish HE sector

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This paper discusses the findings from a research project* on the nature of professional development of teachers in Scottish higher education. This paper reflects the 'state of play' of professional development in 2013 based on cross-sector research completed between January and June 2013 as part of the first phrase of larger project funded through the 2011-2014 QAA Enhancement Theme, *Developing and Supporting the Curriculum*.

Within HE the environment in which educators work is rapidly changing in terms of scale, new technology, and student diversity (Brew, 1995). In particular, Web 2.0 and the ubiquity of social media are potentially transformative in influencing academic practice and changing the ways in which students access materials and learn (Freitas and Conole, 2010; Weller, 2011). This is further evident in the development of online learning spaces and distance learning provision amongst campus-based institutions. This raises challenges for the professional development of teachers in HE and there is no doubt that the sector has been responsive. Notably we have seen the development of specialist roles to support professional development, those with teaching roles have access to postgraduate qualifications in teaching and learning, and many institutions have achievement of professional recognition as a key strategic objective. In this sense we can see that key external drivers, such as the revised UK Professional Standards Framework (HEA, 2012), have acted as a catalyst for institutions to consider existing professional development arrangements.

To examine the nature of professional development of teachers in HE in 2013, the focus of the project was built around five research questions identified by the *Developing and Supporting the Curriculum* steering group representing the nineteen HEIs in Scotland.

1. How are staff (academic, academic-related or support staff) in teaching roles supported, formally and informally, to develop their teaching?
2. How are staff supported at different stages in their careers?
3. What recognition and reward is there for teaching staff?
4. How is it known that staff are developing their teaching, and how is practice shared?
5. What are the challenges and opportunities in all of these?

It was envisaged that the five questions would allow the development of an evidence base useful in contributing to longer-term consideration of issues of professional development and quality enhancement.

The research team devised a methodology that would incorporate different voices within the HE sector and also take emerging ideas back to the sector at different project stages in a process of research triangulation. Following an initial literature review that allowed us to contextualise responses to the five questions, we then interviewed one member of staff in HEI that held key responsibility for academic/ professional development. A cross sector workshop with a more diverse group of staff including

students, programme administrators and lecturers allowed us to then explore the emerging themes with a more diverse group, before we undertook a short online survey targeted at HE teaching staff.

The data analysis was grouped into four thematic areas (as well as suggestions for future research):

- learning, teaching and organization of professional development: the Scottish sector 2013;
- formal professional development;
- informal professional development;
- recognition and reward.

The research indicates that despite the diversity of the Scottish sector, there remain common themes in terms of approaches to professional development and issues and challenges. Across all institutions there is evidence of strong support for new full-time staff at the beginning of their HE teaching careers. In Scotland a qualifications approach, through accredited postgraduate certificates, is dominant which is in keeping with the rest of the UK (Parsons et al, 2012). Such support for new staff was marked against the challenges identified in relation to addressing the needs of longer serving members of staff and the wider groups of staff involved in teaching such as technical staff and practitioners.

Challenges related to professional development appear to be shared across the sector. Significantly, the data points to a divergence between what teaching staff want (in terms of support for teaching) and what the institutional contacts felt was required (seemingly influenced by strategic objectives). From the teaching staff completing the survey, concern was expressed about the 'time and space' for reflection on teaching practice and for opportunities to engage with colleagues within disciplines and across disciplinary and institutional boundaries. Expression of a substantial desire for the latter emerged in the survey and also at the project workshop. Significantly, recognition of the status of teaching and opportunities for reward and promotion were seen as critical issues for those participating in the survey and amongst the institutional contacts interviewed, particularly in the context of the UK REF agenda. This mirrors the expression of such issues in a recent European Union report (2013):

> *Institutions need to ensure there is manifest and actual parity of esteem for teaching and research in their core identity and culture and expressed in their system of rewards, incentives, promotions and priorities*

Following this initial cross-sector exploration, the project team identified a list of areas that could benefit from the sharing of best practice, produced a small number of good practice case studies, and identified key thematic areas that could benefit from further research as: developing professional skills; digital literacy; the interface between formal and informal learning; and exploring the links between professional development and enhancing student learning.

Please note that references to the author's own report have been removed from this version of the outline as part of the 'blind' review process.

References

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