

Investigating the PDR process in a UK university: continuing professional development or performativity? (0180)

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Introduction

Over recent years, factors affecting higher education such as globalisation, changing funding models, increased competition, and a rapidly changing student body have meant that an academic's role has become more and more complex (Makunye & Pelsler, 2012). Consequently, institutional professional development review (PDR) processes have risen in importance, as continuing professional development (CPD) programmes for academic staff have been identified as a crucial aspect of supporting them through these challenging times (Gerken, Beausaert, & Segers, 2016). Delivered correctly, CPD programmes can have a positive effects on student learning, staff recruitment and retention, and motivation (Bubb & Earley, 2007). However, with the rise of New Public Management practices, the annual review process (PDR or equivalent) may also be perceived as a controlling mechanism and part of a culture of "performativity", which implies a lack of trust, an undermining of autonomy and a reliance on externally driven tasks and targets to "manage" staff (Ball, 2012). Given its increasing importance in the sector, it is surprising to note that there is very little empirical evidence as to how the PDR (or equivalent) is experienced by both managers and academics. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to fill this gap in the literature by reporting on a Leadership Foundation funded study which, in part, explored academics' and managers' perceptions of the process. The main research question addressed in this paper is:

- What are academics' and managers' perceptions and experiences of the PDR process at a UK research-led university?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we juxtapose two key concepts, namely *continuing professional development* (CPD) and *performativity*, to help provide new theoretical insights into the PDR process in today's higher education climate. Here, we define CPD as "all formal and informal learning that enables individuals to improve their own practice" and link this to the notion that one of the key characteristics of being a professional is continually learning throughout your career (Bubb & Earley, 2007, p. 3). In contrast, based on neo-liberal principles and linked to the New Public Management agenda, performativity has been conceptualised by Ball (2003) to include aspects of regulation and productivity measurement which can negatively impact on professional identity and bring in to question the very nature of what it means to be an academic (Ball, 2012). The argument here is that the autonomy and trust of the profession is under threat as a consequence of over relying on business related practices such as setting externally driven performance goals (using terms such as key performance indicators) and linking these to rewards and sanctions to help improve productivity and performance; these practices are becoming increasingly important as part of the academic PDR. In turn, these issues are exacerbated by the marketization of the sector which has led to growing internal and external quality assurance and accountability procedures, institutional and national student surveys, research assessment exercises, and national and international published league tables.

This analytical framework has been used in a previous study exploring lecturers' response to feedback (Arthur, 2009), but has not, as far as we are aware, been used to better understand academics' experiences of the PDR process in the UK.

Methods

To answer our research question, we used an exploratory, sequential mixed methods design (Cresswell, 2014). In stage one, we conducted qualitative research undertaking interviews with 15 Academic Leads (ALs) and 15 Assigned Academics (AAs) - that is, academics who had been assigned to Academic Leads - about their experiences and perceptions of the PDR process. The sample contained male (ALs = 9; AAs = 8) and female (ALs = 6; AAs = 7) staff with a range of ages, levels of experience and discipline backgrounds.

In stage two we undertook a survey of all academic staff (n=1034) using an online questionnaire (Bristol On-Line Surveys) which was based on themes and issues emanating from the first stage of the project. In total 177 people completed the survey giving a response rate of 17.1%. The survey was completed by 42 academic leads (17 female and 25 male) which represents 32% of all ALs, and 135 assigned academics (69 female and 66 male) which represents just over 12% of academic staff at the University. The results of the survey were analysed and cross-tabulated to compare data from those who were academic leads with those who were assigned academics.

Findings and discussion questions

This study found that:

- Academics and leaders were unclear about the real purpose of the PDR process at the case study university – “was it conceived for individual development or for compliance and control”.
- Many leaders felt that they needed more training to help them undertake PDRs.
- A large number of staff felt that the PDR process was ineffective in helping support their work, with 25% feeling that they could not be honest about their needs during the meetings.
- The majority of academics and leaders were unhappy with the paperwork process associated with the PDR process
- Several staff wanted more clarity about the criteria being used as benchmarks and the overzealous target setting culture evident, especially for early career academics
- The majority of academic staff and leaders did not know what happens to the PDR paperwork once it has been completed.

In summary, both groups felt that the PDR process (especially one to one conversations) was potentially very important and could offer significant levels of guidance and support for professional development. However, they stressed the importance of a review structure which was adaptable, more professionally relevant, and less reliant on over ambitious target setting. They also emphasized a need to make more of the outcomes of the PDRs in terms of feeding into wider decision-making processes and the CPD needs of those involved.

The following questions arise from this work and will be discussed in this presentation:

- What is the purpose of the PDR process?
- How can it best be delivered?

- And how do we ensure it is viewed as a positive aspect of professional development and not a controlling aspect of performativity?

(992 words)

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