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Staff perceptions of “inclusive” and “excellent” teaching in a changing HE landscape (0537)

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The competing pressures of “inclusion” and “excellence” contained in the TEF metrics express themselves within universities in a number of initiatives which focus on teaching qualifications and teaching practice development for academic staff. Concurrently, the recent introduction of an Academic Professional Apprenticeship Standard has prompted some to question the nature and purpose of teaching qualifications in the University environment. Whilst both developments imply a relationship between formal training and “excellence”, this view is not a universally accepted one, and in the context of a rapidly evolving HE landscape, the lack of recent development in the standards against which HE teaching qualifications are awarded is relatively overlooked. This study seeks to address questions of currency by comparing the views of newer and more established academics in relation to aspects of “inclusion” and “excellence” in their respective teaching practices.

Many of the existing studies of teaching development in Higher Education focus on one of three domains: the sector, an single institution, or an individual’s personal academic identity. Within the first of those broad groupings, studies examine the changing sector environment and policy landscape, and consider changes in the nature of academic development in the light of these (Englund, Olofsson, & Price, 2018; Hannon, 2016; Hibbert & Semler, 2016; Stensaker, 2017). The second, and most extensive section of the literature, evaluates the impact of teaching development programmes, either on the staff who undertake them or the institutions they work in. Whilst evaluation reports by academic developers continue to account for a good deal of this (Botham, 2018; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Houston & Hood, 2017; Kreber, Brook, & Policy, 2001; Rathbun, Leatherman, & Jensen, 2017; Reimann, 2018; Shaw, 2018; Trigwell, Caballero Rodriguez, & Han, 2012; van der Sluis, Burden, & Huet, 2017), other work questions the impact and value of both academic development and teaching qualifications (Hardy & Smith, 2006; Knapper, 2016). A similar polemic exists within the third grouping. Whereas some studies attempt to depict how academics’ notions of themselves as educators evolve over time (Fraser, Greenfield, & Pancini, 2017; Lankveld, Schoonenboom, Volman, Croiset, & Beishuizen, 2017; McMillan & Gordon, 2017; Trautwein, 2018), others consider the rationale for resistance to teaching development (Deaker, Stein, & Spiller, 2016; Hannon, 2016; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2017; Spowart, Turner, Shenton, & Kneale, 2016).

This paper positions itself across the first and third of the categories described. Although the study described is contained within one institution (a common limitation for papers of this kind), it is not an attempt to evaluate a specific teaching development programme or activity. Instead, it examines academics’ perceptions of the teaching skills required for their

role, and how those needs persist or change over time, as both student cohorts and the academic body evolve and diversify. It therefore addresses an under-researched area in the literature on academic development, much of which examines the effectiveness of initial teaching development programmes for new academics, whilst the inclusion of more established staff in such an investigation is more unusual.

The study which forms the basis of this paper invited staff to self-identify as either “new” HE staff” (within three years of their first academic appointment) or “established” (more than three years experience in HE). Each group was invited, via an individual questionnaire, to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses in teaching, and invited to comment in general terms on teaching skills they had observed within the “other” population. Methodologically, the survey-based study design combined elements of narrative inquiry with more straightforward categorical data analysed by means of descriptive statistics. “Established” academics were encouraged to reflect on those aspects of their teaching development which had maintained or gained currency over time, and areas where a need for new skills had arisen. They were also asked to consider the teaching development needs of new staff, and any areas where they felt those staff had teaching skills that they were lacking. Staff new to HE teaching were offered a complementary set of questions about their own teaching skill sets and their perceptions of the relative strengths and weaknesses of more established staff. As a part of this investigation, commentary was also invited on the teaching development offered to both groups, and its fit with their perceived needs.

Whilst the findings of this study may inform future directions in academic development work in the University where the study is based, they also ask further questions of the value of teaching qualifications as a measure of teaching quality. This paper therefore speaks to a number of areas of sector-wide practices in educational development and, in particular, questions the some of the assumptions on which some teaching development schemes are based. Consequently, although this study is a part of the literature on academic development practices, it sits at a distinct distance from much of that work, positioning itself conceptually alongside other critiques of the UK’s neoliberal, marketised HE environment. With some philosophical reservations, this study acknowledges the current realities of the situation and asking how to turn them to the best advantage of academic staff and students alike.

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