

Perceptions of New Academic Staff: A Qualitative Study Exploring How the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice (PCAP) Has Impacted on Their Professional Development

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Abstract

This paper reports a small-scale qualitative study currently in progress. This is a study of the influence of a postgraduate professional development programme for new academic staff at one university on them and their professional practice. Ten staff out of two cohorts (numbering sixteen in total) agreed to be surveyed via an online questionnaire. From an initial analysis of this data a number of broad themes emerged, from which two key aspects were selected for further exploration in three open interviews. These two aspects concerned: the influence of the programme on participants' understanding of approaches to assessment and constructive alignment; and on the development of professional academic identity. The authors distil from the data the personal nature of this influence on participants, their confidence, emerging professional identities and the development of their practice.

1. Introduction

As Skelton [1] has noted, 'Teaching excellence is now part of the everyday language and practice of higher education'[p3] and the research reported in this paper is first of all located within some of the changes in the policy landscape which have contributed to teaching quality in higher education achieving more prominence at the macro level.

Exploring some of the changes in the nature of higher education in recent years, Biggs and Tang [2] identify an increase in participation rates, creating the need for the classroom to 'cater for a diverse range of students, all demanding the quality they believe they have paid for and should be receiving. As a result, universities are much more concerned with improving teaching and maintaining quality assurance of teaching than hitherto' [p12]. In terms of insights into students' perspectives on teaching quality, the National Union of Students Student Experience Report which reported on research into students' experiences of higher education, is interesting and relevant. It found that features of teaching quality the students particularly valued included teaching skills, interactive sessions and lecturers who motivated them to achieve. The report also found that students were more motivated to

learn if they had good lecturers who taught the subject well. [3] The recent Higher Education Academy (HEA) consultation on the Professional Standards Framework [4] drew attention to the growing importance of initial professional development for teaching quality in higher education. Furthermore the Browne Review of the funding of higher education (2010) included recommendations regarding teaching development programmes for academic staff which meet nationally recognised standards.

This paper reports on research carried out at a small new university in the UK. With a foundation as a teacher training institution dating back to the 1800s, today it has a stated commitment to 'excellent, open and progressive higher education' and to learning, teaching and a student experience which are exceptional. The institution has a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Framework as a means of achieving these ambitions and of gaining sector recognition in terms of meeting the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). The initial postgraduate professional development programme designed for new academic staff which is the subject of this research study, is called the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PCAP) and sits within the institution's CPD Framework. Its rationale is built on the development of practice through pedagogic research and academic reflection. The programme itself aims to develop high quality professional practice as part of the university's commitment to exceptional learning and teaching. The researchers were particularly interested in finding out about the ways in which respondents felt that participation in this programme could be said to have had an influence on them personally and professionally. With reference to the work of Whitehead and McNiff [5], the researchers preferred to think in terms of 'influence' rather than trying to establish a causal link between participation in the programme and specific outcomes achieved. Drawing on a framework developed by Frost and Durrant (2003) for thinking about professional development work, Earley and Bubb [6] make the point that causality is very difficult to establish, and the impact or effects of a particular programme or activity cannot be isolated. Van Manen [7] reminds us that rather than suggesting a cause-and-effect relationship, '...

influence is something that radiates or flows and may have very different consequences, effects or significance' [p16]. It was in participants' perceptions of these effects and their significance that the researchers' interests lay.

2. Methodology

The research strategy for this study falls within the broad phenomenological approach, centring on the perceptions and explanations of academic staff of their experiences. According to Denscombe [8] the everyday world of lived experience lies at the very heart of what phenomenologists wish to study. Firstly, qualitative data was collected via email survey. Two cohorts of the PCAP programme were invited to take part in an initial online survey giving a total sample size of sixteen, ten of whom agreed to participate in the on-line survey. This survey was adapted from a data collection tool previously used for surveying postgraduate students' views of postgraduate professional development and was checked for relevance before being sent out to the sample group. The questions (see Table 1) were designed to explore participants' experiences of the programme, reflecting on the impact both on a personal and professional level.

Table 1. Survey questions

1.	Can you outline the work undertaken and particular areas of interest developed through the programme?
2.	Could you describe any strategies or resources incorporated into your practice arising from your study on the programme?
3.	Has your engagement in the programme impacted on your own practice and on students' learning? What kinds of impact? Can you describe any specific strategies or examples?
4.	How has the programme contributed to your own knowledge and skills? Do you feel that you have developed in other ways? Other benefits?
5.	Has the programme been linked to your Professional Development Review (PDR) in any way?
6.	Have you been able to transfer any learning from the programme to other areas of your professional work?
7.	Have there been any impact/benefits wider than benefits for your own practice i.e. colleagues in your team/Faculty? And what kinds of benefits?
8.	Have you disseminated your work on PCAP to colleagues in your Faculty? If so has it had any influence e.g. on other colleagues?

	practice or course development?
9.	Have you disseminated your work on PCAP beyond your Faculty e.g. conferences, publications etc.?

The sample of ten respondents ranged from those having completed the programme five years ago to those having completed it within the last twelve months. The survey was conducted using the participants' University's email accounts which provide a secure environment and a usual means of communication with which staff are very familiar. The nature and purpose of the research was explained to participants in the initial email invitation to participate and informed consent was obtained. Approval and permission for the research to proceed was also gained from the University Research Ethics Committee.

Following the survey and an initial analysis of the results, all respondents were then invited to take part in an individual interview focusing on two key aspects that are core elements of the PCAP programme namely; *Assessment with aspects of constructive alignment* and *Development of professional identity*. This process is common within qualitative research i.e. the analytical process begins during data collection as the data already gathered are analysed and shape the ongoing data collection. This sequential analysis or interim analysis has the advantage of allowing the researcher to go back and refine questions, develop hypotheses, and pursue emerging avenues of inquiry in further depth, Miles and Huberman [9]. The interview was carried out and recorded for transcription purposes and each researcher took responsibility for one of the two core elements explored.

As lecturers in higher education and also specifically on this programme, the researchers recognise issues of positionality and how these may influence the research process. Opie [10] suggests that 'Usually, the most significant factor that influences choice and use of methodology and procedures is 'where the researcher is coming from' ...' [p18]. Their positioning in relation to the research participants whom they currently teach or previously taught on the programme and their own bias in favour of the programme which they each helped to design, were particular considerations. These considerations also explained why the researchers were interested in carrying out the research. However, the researchers were aware too of the potential for bias and for their own assumptions to undermine the rigour of the research. The researchers were mindful of Opie's reminder of the need to think about and to honestly and explicitly acknowledge their stance and the influence of this on their work [p19] Wellington [11] refers to what he calls the 'Education Uncertainty Principle': the researcher influences, disturbs and affects what is

being researched in the natural world...'[p41] and therefore the researchers acknowledged this and reflected critically on it. Adopting a reflexive stance and aware of how they were situated in relation to the research, they were careful to reflect on any inbuilt assumptions they may bring to the research and to follow Wellington's advice to examine the language used in the interviews and the survey in this regard. They used two methods of data collection to develop fuller and richer explanations from the participants' perspectives and during the interviews were able to check the accuracy of their interpretations of the data with the participants. Carrying out the data collection together also allowed for a measure of investigator triangulation too.

3. Results and findings

Of the original two cohorts ten participants were willing to take part in the survey, which represents a response rate of 62.5%, a figure which McColl et al [12] suggest is acceptable. Whilst there is no existing gold standard for an acceptable response rate, Warwick and Lininger [13] and Grady and Wallston [14] suggest that survey response rates of over 50% are very good, which then allow conclusions to be drawn from them.

Both researchers explored the survey data inductively using content analysis to generate categories using the approach advocated by Pope et al [15] and the following broad themes emerged:

Assessment and feedback, the development of reflective practice, participant confidence and capability, the role and contribution of pedagogic research to professional development, the practical knowledge, understanding & skills acquired, the role of reading and theory, the wider impact on colleagues' practice, the process of induction into the academic culture of the university and the development of a professional academic identity.

In general terms, ideas about influence in relation to these themes can be grouped into three broad areas:

1. Gaining new practical knowledge, understanding and skills which participants were able to apply to their practice. An example of this, frequently cited by respondents, was in terms of the design of assessment and feedback strategies which had been informed and shaped by new learning on the course. Respondents noted the very positive impact of this on their students too. (It is worth explaining that assessment and feedback is listed above as another discrete theme because the data on this was extensive enough to form a category in its own right, given that the data on this went beyond practical knowledge and skills).

2. Developing as reflective practitioners was evident more implicitly than explicitly in the data. It was clear that the course had provided them with

space to reflect on their practice and to share these reflections with other course members. In fact the course identifies the development of reflective practitioners as a key aim and this capacity for critical reflection on practice was evident in their responses. They felt that their reflections were informed and deepened through reading and theorizing practice.

3. Experiencing a heightened sense of being capable practitioners and gaining the confidence to try new ideas and contribute to course development was the third broad area. This linked to a stronger sense of being part of the academic culture of the university and feeling affirmed and more secure in their identities as academics. This appeared to be linked to the development of their identities as practitioner researchers. Developing research skills enabled them to research their own practice and this was cited as having impacted positively on improved practice. They also referred to the subsequent dissemination to colleagues in their Faculties of the knowledge they had gained through their pedagogic research which they felt had value and a positive impact.

Following this initial analysis, three in-depth open interviews were carried out focusing on two themes in particular. This number of interviews was due to the fact that saturation of data occurred at this point and no new information was appearing, a process identified by Pope et al [15]. As highlighted previously, two themes in particular were explored in more depth in the interviews although each necessarily touched on some of the other themes too.

The first theme was in the area of assessment and constructive alignment as it was most commonly cited and appeared to be the theme having the greatest influence. Good grasp of constructive alignment and a clear idea about how to apply this principle to practical design of modules and courses was highlighted. In addition linkage had been made between learning outcomes and their role in assessment. Participants felt more informed about general assessment strategies and confident in introducing a variety of formative and summative assessment approaches. For example, one participant reported that this new knowledge and understanding had fed directly into their thinking and that of a colleague about the assessment strategy within redesigned modules:

'We were both keen to ensure the assessment criteria and guidance was really clear, and PCAP informed my thinking during this process'. Other pertinent comments from respondents were:

'I have adapted the assessments for the second year science module to include more aspects of peer and self-assessment as well as face to face discussion and feedback with small groups of students about their presentations, rather than an impersonal feedback sheet. This has been very well received by the students and they are able to explain much more

fully their rationale for approaches they have chosen.’

‘I developed an interest in assessment – and I think a better understanding of the association between learning outcomes and assessment guidelines’

‘I always try to apply good practice principles and ‘feed forward’ during the process of providing ‘feedback’

‘Constructive alignment really made an impression and now I make sure all sessions align to the learning outcomes for the module... Students report this positively’.

These survey comments need to be considered in light of the university actively adopting the ideas put forward by the The Weston Manor Group, Price et al [16] in that active engagement with assessment standards needs to be an integral and seamless part of course design and the learning process in order to allow students to develop their own, internalised conceptions of standards, and monitor and supervise their own learning. It also reflects that the university has engaged in the philosophy that underpins constructive alignment, a system advocated by Biggs [17]. Furthermore, the advantages of this approach are recognised, namely that it encourages clarity in the design of the curriculum and transparency in the links between learning and assessment [18].

3.1. Constructive Alignment

Houghton’s article on constructive alignment, commissioned by the HEA, is instructive in developing our understanding of this concept. Houghton tells us that there are two parts to constructive alignment:

- Students construct meaning from what they do to learn.
- The teacher aligns the planned learning activities with the learning outcomes.

According to Houghton, ‘The basic premise of the whole system is that the curriculum is designed so that the learning activities and assessment tasks are aligned with the learning outcomes that are intended in the course. This means that the system is consistent’.

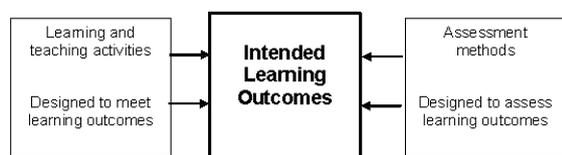


Figure 1. Aligning learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities and the assessment. Adapted from Biggs(1999) p 27 taken from Houghton [18]

Houghton tells us that alignment involves getting students to take responsibility for their own learning,

and establishing trust between student and teacher. He suggests that clarity about what we want the students to-be able to do at the end of a unit of study and communication of these intended learning outcomes to students helps them to share responsibility for achieving them [18].

Results from the interviews support and deepen the findings from the survey. For example, the importance of formative assessment was highlighted by all three interviewees:

‘I think that probably the most important element of assessment for me is formative assessment’.

They also suggested that assessment had been a key change driver in many instances:

‘PCAP, that kind of opened up some of the wider debates. Just how much more creative might we be’

‘The stimulus for that is usually to do with the assessment strategy’.

The impact of constructive alignment was commented on by all three and is best reflected by the following quotation:

‘So it’s making sure that within the structure of that module we’ve overtly addressed all of the learning outcomes so that ...we’ve built in a number of sessions that’s almost formative that’s helping to gear them up towards writing that final summative assessment. So that they’re prepared for it along all steps of the way and they can see how the teaching links into that’.

In addition, increased confidence in assessing was mentioned in all three interviews. It appeared that this confidence had helped to develop a professional identity, an idea which provides a link into the second theme:

‘Probably my views on assessment were similar to what they were, what they are now. But perhaps I have the confidence now to push my views through’.

The second key thematic area selected to be explored in the interviews was the role of the programme in forging a sense of professional identity as academics for those entering higher education as academic staff for the first time. This theme was chosen because it crossed a number of the other themes of reflective practice, confidence and capability, pedagogic research and the academic culture of the university. It was therefore considered a useful vehicle through which to explore a number of embedded ideas from the on-line survey in more depth.

A number of the respondents had gained employment as lecturers at the university having previously been in fields as diverse as occupational therapy, physiotherapy, school teaching, counselling and ordained ministry. The programme appears to have played a role in inducting participants as lecturers into the academic culture of the university and, as one respondent reported, it *‘taught me a lot*

about the HE world'. Another respondent felt the programme had given them a stronger '*sense of achieving something pertinent to being an academic*' through the HEA Fellow recognition which is gained on successful course completion. Another spoke of his sense of having grown into the academic world and his view was that the PCAP course had started this process. Another suggested that before taking up her lecturer post, she had never considered herself to be an academic person and that it was participation in PCAP that had '*set the professional identity thing rolling*'. One respondent reported that she entered higher education as a lecturer after a career in physiotherapy and that whilst she had a strong sense of professional identity as a physiotherapist, academic identity has taken years to develop. Another reported that whilst in her previous profession she had been 'at the top of her game', she had a lot of academic 'catch up' to do on taking up an academic post in higher education and she experienced a feeling that she was at the 'bottom of the pile in terms of academia'. She expressed the view that PCAP had acted as 'a bit of a launch pad' in engaging her in academic research and helping her to grow into the academic environment.

As mentioned previously, upon successful completion of the course, the postgraduate certificate is awarded and with it the recognition by the Higher Education Academy of having attained the professional standards needed for Fellow. Respondents viewed this as an important part of their credentials and identity as lecturers in higher education. For example, one respondent reported that this 'felt like a recognition of being an academic'. Respondents expressed a sense of excitement and pride at achieving this HEA recognition and said that this was important to them, especially in aiding their transition into an academic post in higher education. This external recognition has perhaps in turn fostered what appeared to be their stronger sense of self-efficacy, of being capable and confident as higher education practitioners to innovate in teaching and learning and to research their own professional practice. The recognition as HEA Fellows appeared to increase a sense of being valued within the higher education professional community.

3.2. Professional Identity and Recognition

Cross [19] has discussed recognition and teaching quality and the contexts for this. The context referred to by the respondents in this research appeared to demonstrate how the macro wider policy level and the mid levels of professional body and institution as identified by Cross [19] interact at the micro level with self perception and professional identity of new academic staff. Professional identity 'defines who we are as teachers, while we engage in dialogue with learners,

colleagues, sponsors and society as whole' [p55]. The concept of identity is multi-faceted and, as noted by Forde et al [20] it is a highly personalized construct and one which rests, in part, on emotional dimensions such as the person's feelings and attitudes about the job they do [p11]. Many factors influence professional identity and amongst these Forde et al suggest is agency. There was a sense from the respondents' narratives of a sense of agency through the emphasis on gaining the capability to research, reflect on and develop one's own practice. For some respondents this had fed directly into their capability to act and to have an influence, for example on the application and development of thinking and practice in curriculum development, constructive alignment, assessment practices and student learning.

Planning and carrying out pedagogic research is an important part of the PCAP course. The close association between research and academic life was clear in the minds of some respondents. For example, referring to having carried out pedagogic research, one respondent reported how they reflected on this in relation to academic identity, asking himself '*Is this me now that I'm an academic?*' Practitioner research was new to some of the respondents and the development of practitioner research skills was considered to be an important aspect of the course. This was evidenced through comments such as '*I did not know much about pedagogic research before I took the programme*' and '*Without a doubt, my knowledge and understanding of research methodology and methods have improved. This has supported both my practice and own professional development*'. One respondent spoke about having shared their research with the students they teach and noted with pleasure the interest that students had shown in this. Another indicated how her small-scale research study into developing active learning strategies in higher education had been the starting point for the further research that she had subsequently carried out into other aspects of her practice.

The data therefore conveyed a sense in which the respondents felt 'professionalised' by the programme and this appeared to be both in terms of external recognition through becoming a Fellow of the HEA and in terms too of a sense of agency which they developed through the learning and the research skills they had acquired. As one respondent said, '*Research is what academics do*'. A sense of greater self-determination as practitioners came through strongly from the narratives and with this for some respondents, the beginnings of a professional identity as academics in higher education. One respondent reported that it was during the course that a sense of his professional academic identity began to be forged and that this has grown and developed from these beginnings.

Wenger [21] has maintained that ‘there is a profound connection between identity and practice. Developing a practice requires the formation of a community whose members can engage with one another and thus acknowledge each other as participants’ [p149]. Wenger et al [22] define communities of practice as ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ [p4]. For our respondents, the social aspects of engaging with other course participants in ‘communities of practice’ appeared to influence this sense of a developing academic identity. In discussing beginning teachers’ views of their professional identity, Forde et al [20] make a link between professional identity and the need to feel valued as part of a professional community. Relevant to this in our respondents’ narratives is the way that knowledge and understanding gained through the programme have prompted discussion about pedagogy with other colleagues. The course seems to have been an important catalyst for collegiality through these conversations as the means to share new thinking and to develop practice. This appears to link to the idea of participation in a community of practice as developing and sharing knowledge, thinking and practices. For example, one colleague told us that disseminating their research findings with Faculty colleagues has had ‘*a positive impact on curriculum planning, assessment and evaluation*’ in the subject team. A sense of their agency in stimulating and leading the development of thinking about practice, their own and that of their colleagues, is therefore also an emergent motif from the data collected. One colleague reported that he became aware that the critical questioning that was part of the course discussions and ‘*discovering that everything we do is contested and debated*’ was an important part of examining higher education practice from the inside.

4. Conclusions

The research has provided insights into some of the ways in which this professional development programme has had an influence on the participants, both personally and professionally. ‘Influence’ seems to capture the values of teacher agency, professional freedom and autonomy and a critical approach to the development of practice.

The influence of participation in the programme has been evidenced in different ways. There appears to have been an influence on the development of practice in course design and assessment and on confidence to try out new strategies and approaches. There is some evidence too of influence on participants’ colleagues and also on students. Confidence was widely referred to by participants

not just in relation to assessment practices but in terms of developing a confidence more generally in having an academic role in higher education. The award of the postgraduate certificate and the HEA Fellow recognition represented the achievement of ‘*something pertinent to being an academic*’. It also appeared to have played a role in beginning to forge a sense of academic professional identity and the social interactions with others on the course appear to have played a role in this too. Respondents appeared to have begun to see themselves as shifting from talking about ‘what academics do’ in terms of an outsider looking in, to an insider view of themselves as part of and within this academic community. Professional academic identity emerged as a key idea, appearing to be forged through a stronger sense of confidence, agency and capability to develop their practice, share their knowledge and thinking with other colleagues and to have a positive influence on student learning,

An implicit theme which could be detected through the narratives was the ability to theorise about practice and so to think differently and at a deeper level. After engaging in the programme, for some respondents the focus appeared to shift from a concern to know about ‘what works’ to a deeper understanding of ‘why’. In terms of an understanding of assessment, the data showed a direct influence on the development of thinking and practice. Furthermore, changes to assessment practice appeared to have had a positive influence on students too.

Some respondents saw the programme as the start of a learning journey. In some cases, having taken the first steps as a practitioner researcher through study on the programme, the appetite for pedagogic research as a form of professional development could not be sated and seems to have gathered momentum, becoming a continued source of professional renewal and tool for improving practice.

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