Higher Education Rising to the Challenge: balancing expectations of students, society and stakeholders

Professional development for part-time teachers in challenging times.

Context

The proportion of part-time teachers in universities, in the UK and elsewhere, has risen steeply in the last decade, reflecting changes in policy, university curricula and increased student numbers. External scrutiny has increased, with universities required to publish information about teaching patterns, staff qualifications and student satisfaction and the advent of the Teaching Excellence Framework. While most UK universities attend to the professional development of fulltime staff, the literature suggests less attention is paid to part-timers, whose tangential and precarious status may mean that access to professional development varies (e.g. Leigh (2014); Standing 2016)

Anderson 2007; Brennan, Locke & Naidoo 2007; Beaton& Gilbert 2013; Harvey & Luzia 2013; and Beaton 2017 have highlighted that part-time teachers are not an homogenous group. The development needs of Graduate Teaching Assistants, Hourly Paid Lecturers, and professional practitioners vary considerably. The latter, with rich practice/industry experience, are making a career transition into HE and learning to function in a different context from their previous one. This disparity has implications for the initial and continuing professional development of these groups of staff.

Research project overview

This paper reports on a project to determine factors enabling or hindering part-time staff from finding out about and participating in teaching-related professional

development, the relative importance of aspects such as timing, method of delivery, content and relevance to different staff groups' current role and aspirations.

Research questions

The research explores five questions.

1) What institutional structures and provision in relation to professional development as teachers and scholars are available to each of these groups of part-time staff?
2) What is the extent of part-time staff's awareness of what is available?
3) How, when and by whom is that provision communicated to these staff?
4) What is the experience of each of these groups of staff about finding out about and accessing relevant provision?
5) How could provision be improved?

Process

The internal pilot of this research generated data from two sources:

1) Institutional documents (such as job descriptions, contracts, letter of appointment) and internal teaching-related sites to identify the provision available and how this is communicated to staff

2) Data from an online questionnaire, structured around the research questions, sent to all staff who, according to institutional records, had any kind of part-time teaching contract. This was followed by a request for voluntary participants for focus groups to explore the survey findings. Although respondent numbers were relatively modest (Questionnaire: 35%, Focus Groups 10%), consistent themes emerged, generating areas for future research with a purposive sample of other HEIs.

Key findings

Inconsistencies emerged in how institutional expectations were set and communicated to part-time staff, and where responsibility lay for clarifying what was available to support them in their teaching and other student-facing roles.

A significant proportion of **all** part-time staff were unclear on appointment what their teaching-related work would entail. This uncertainty coalesced around three main aspects. Firstly, what teaching actually was i.e. direct teaching (paid), compared to preparation and marking time, tutorial and/or office hours (mostly unpaid), and being asked to take on *ad hoc* duties (variously paid or not). Secondly, there were discrepancies in how institutional expectations and supporting provision was communicated, varying from a written contract to word of mouth from fellow part-timers if their paths happened to cross.   70% + of part-time staff depended heavily on their fulltime departmental colleagues and mentors to find out what support was available and appropriate for their role. Thirdly, a high proportion of all respondents noted that relevant information could only be found if they already knew where to look, and resented using (unpaid) time to track down what they wanted.

Greater disparity emerged in the themes from each subgroup. GTA written contracts laid out details about teaching they would be expected to do but (as stated above) not what else it actually entailed. 80% felt well- informed about institutional teacher education to support them, as this was part of their Graduate School induction. Overall, however, they report as the most conflicted group. Their primary role is to gain a PhD, while engaging in some teaching.   They are both nascent researchers and teachers, needing time to prepare for both properly while getting different messages about priorities from PhD supervisors and teaching mentors.

HPLs reported either receiving no contract (if they did, it only detailed their rate of pay, term dates and who their line manager was) or having a line manager who was 'contract blind' and asked HPLs to do additional work, leading to embarrassing conversations about whether this work was paid for or not. Many HPLs were teaching in several universities and could not afford to turn down work to participate in professional development.   This group was the most vocal about wanting the time they spent preparing to do their job well to be planned, recognised and paid for.

Professional practitioners and HPLs lamented not being invited to a university induction which would have engendered a sense of belonging (e.g. Wilson 2013) and answered many of their initial questions. While some welcomed the flexibility which their part-time contracts afforded, most felt this itinerant approach was not sustainable; both groups wanted clearer career paths. Institutional opportunities for career progression was identified by respondents as key, followed by access to relevant teacher education provision.

80% + of HPL respondents reported they felt they had no voice or agency in their department of the university, exemplified by the following comment:
Respectfully, it is obvious the University benefits from the cheap labour that (we) *provide... we feel demoralized that our role and work here is not recognized.'*

Institutional implications

At the broadest level in this study, clear and consistent communication of expectations and provision is critical for all three groups of staff. Institutions can do much in this respect by setting these in good time and in clear language and signposting sources of help and recognising that for itinerant scholars, such as HPLs, time is precious. If an institution attaches importance to professional development for teaching and a high quality student experience it should facilitate part-time people to participate and offer potential pathways for career progression. It is for all involved – senior leaders, HR managers and academic developers – to enable nuanced professional development to support staff at all career stages.

References

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