PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: Becoming Agents of Change: An examination of teachers' perceptions of how the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCAP) develops their agency as teachers
Project type:

A Research Project (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

Principal Investigator: Dr Hazel Christie and Dr Andrea English
Schools/department: Instiutue for Academic Development and Moray House School of Education and Sport

Team members (including Schools and Departments):
Dr Diana English, Moray House School of Education and Sport

For further details, please contact:

Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project.
Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

Report (maximum 1500 words)

What did you do?
Agency in teaching is a much discussed attribute amongst university staff because it has the potential to foster high quality learning environments for students. Little was known about how teachers become agents for change around learning and teaching here at the UoE, or about the capacity of the Pg Certificate in Academic Practice to enhance this agency. With the assistance of research Assistant, Dr Diana Murdoch, we set out to interrogate these issues. In partnership with the Institute for Academic Development we distributed a survey to 150 members of staff at the University who had completed the PgCAP within the last five years to find out if, and how, the PgCAP, alongside wider questions about culture and institutional practices, had an impact on their agency. We then asked staff who took part in the survey if they would be willing and able to participate in a phenomenological interview about their practices. In total we received 30 survey responses and undertook 15 interviews. The interviews were transcribed in full and detailed analysis was undertaken using thematic coding to identify key issues.

What did you find out?

The survey data indicated that UoE staff are strongly committed to teaching at both a personal and a professional level, and that they recognise the importance of continually reflecting on their own practices as teachers. They recognised too that part of their role as a teacher was to be involved in decisions concerning the wider aspects of student teaching and learning, such as curriculum design, course delivery, assessment and teaching methods. Further, they credited the PgCAP with improving their teaching practices by giving them: a greater understanding of learning and teaching; the confidence to improve their practices; and the ability to understand and reflect on

where they could continue to learn and develop as a teacher. In response to questions about the wider environment of teaching, they indicated research seems to be more valued than teaching although a majority agreed that the Head of School created an ethos of support for teaching, although they did not always report that this led to changes in practice.

The interviews confirmed that staff are strongly committed to developing high quality learning environments and that the PgCAP had been pivotal in this process. Common themes included the confidence that the programme gave them; the space for ongoing reflection; learning with and from peers; the opportunity to think like a student; introduction to theory that would back up changes in practice; and exposure to a more diverse range of teaching strategies. It was clear throughout the interviews that our staff are strongly engaged with teaching and actively want to develop their agency. The PgCAP enabled them to pursue excellence in learning and teaching by improving learning environments for their students.

Two other messages emerge from the research. First, agency is not the sole preserve of the individual teacher. Rather it is something that resides in the collective and includes the teams in which teaching occurs and the culture of the School, as well as wider issues about institutional priorities and strategies. In discussion of how they enacted agency, interviewees were very clear that this involved gaining the backing of influential colleagues and the teaching team, and was thus a collaborative process. Further, they reported the significance of informal conversations about learning and teaching to their efforts to implement change, as well as their own passion for and pleasure in teaching and creating student-centred learning environments.

Secondly, there is a need to recognise the considerable barriers to implementing agency. Interviewees spoke with great feeling about these including; contractual status with Teaching Fellows and Research Fellows especially affected; the lack of time to implement new initiatives; the cycle and structure of the academic year; a sense of going against a wider culture that prioritises and rewards research over teaching; feeling isolated; and the difficulties of the size and diversity of the student cohort.

How did you disseminate your findings?
To date, we have disseminated the research findings in the following ways: 1. Findings were presented at the University of Edinburgh Learning and Teaching Conference 2020 as well as at the Director's Update at the Institute for Academic Development. 2. In March 2021 we will share the findings with the Experienced Teachers Network. In preparation are: a co-authored paper for the *International Journal for Academic Development* and a co-authored paper for *Teaching in Higher Education*.

What have been the benefits to student learning?
There were two main benefits to student learning. First, the data indicates that there are lots of exciting initiatives being undertaken by our graduates and that our students are being exposed to creative learning environments that enhance student engagement and active learning. The PgCAP gave staff the time, space and confidence to investigate a variety of pedagogical tools to use in their teaching, bringing a range of benefits to student learning. Second, graduates were firmly committed to creating more inclusive learning environments for their students. This was especially important when they were teaching large and diverse groups of students who benefitted from learning in more inclusive classrooms.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

The PgCAP is open to all members of academic staff at the University and the results presented here are drawn from across all three Colleges. More staff coming on to the Programme would enhance the ability of Schools to drive positive change around learning and teaching. Parallel schemes for teaching in existence at the University seem to be confusing to those interested in gaining more knowledge about teaching as well as skills. It seemed that some of the interview participants did not know which scheme to follow, and this decision was sometimes based on external criteria, such as expectations of the Head of School or some kind of status thought to be gained.

Financial statement:

This project has remaining funds unused and we require details of how to return the balance. The Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

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