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Becoming a university lecturer in the UK: Negotiating knowledge, experience and learning

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Title of project: Becoming a university lecturer in the UK: Negotiating knowledge, experience and learning

Aims of project

The aim of this research was to investigate the knowledge new lecturers draw upon in their first year of teaching, the influence of differing cultural backgrounds, and the contribution this makes to their professional practice. This was achieved by:

- Exploring new lecturers' educational and professional experiences;
- Examining the development of new lecturers' knowledge of teaching and its application in their practice;
- Exploring differences in the experiences and expectations of new lecturers' in relation to the country of origin and / or their professional profile.

Based on the above we were subsequently able to provide recommendations for future development of programmes for new lecturers from international and professional backgrounds more effectively.

Background to project

Until recently, new lecturers in the UK generally received limited formal preparation for the teaching aspect of their role; hence, their expectations are largely based on their own experiences as a learner (Kane *et al.*, 2002). Commonly they participate in a period of education or training, which socialises them into the practices of university teaching. This socialisation process provides a forum where previous experiences that structure their professional knowledge can be examined in light of the values, integrity and judgement of the community they are entering (Bernstein, 2000). Today's universities are very diverse, with staff drawn from a range of countries and occupational backgrounds. They bring with them professional and educational knowledge constructed under differing contexts to those they are now operating in. Context plays a significant role in determining the approach lecturers take to teaching, yet this is rarely recognised explicitly in programmes for new staff (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996).

Methods used

This research used multiple methods to gather information from both the new lecturers and also their associated mentors in order to examine the development of their knowledge of teaching and learning. We employed a purposeful sampling regime to identify participants representative of the main profiles new lecturers have been identified in the literature as taking on teaching positions from. These lecturers were followed through this first year of teaching.

Initially, an observation of a 1 hour teaching session of each lecturer was undertaken to gain an insight into practice. This formed the basis of a semi-structured interview which employed a stimulated recall methodology (Calderhead, 1981) to examine the actions the new lecturers were taking in practice. In the summer term, a second round of interviews with the lecturers was conducted using a combination of a critical incident (Brookefield, 1990) and response methodology to explore their emergent practices and consider how they have reconciled their knowledge, expectations, behaviours and experiences against the backdrop of a new teaching environment. Through these two stages of data collection the differences in experiences and expectations in relation to the country of origin of participants and their professional backgrounds were also considered.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with PGCAP mentors to explore the views of more experienced staff regarding the knowledge these new lecturers were drawing upon in their teaching, and to gain a wider insight into the teaching practices of participants home departments.

This research was informed by the competing imperatives framework of Alexander (1999), Lave and Wenger's (1999) work around situated learning and communities of practice, and finally Eraut's (2004; 2007) models of professional learning.

Results

All the participants were recognised as new lecturers by the University – but demonstrated differing levels of experience due to their ambitions and expectations of teaching. A wide range of experiences shaped their first year, including the highlights experienced and challenges faced, and the adjustment to the workload and learning to deal with difficult emotions and confidence issues. Their prior educational experiences were generally perceived as less relevant for their current setting. Yet, these prior experiences still influenced the lecturers' experiences in their year. More often than not, negative prior educational experiences had spurred the new lecturers on to make positive changes to their own teaching.

Attendance at the PGCAP programme offered formal opportunities for learning about teaching and learning, and PGCAP was identified in the first phase as providing a source of valuable pedagogical, instructional and institutional knowledge. Although the knowledge gained in the PGCAP programme was valuable, it was the experiential learning 'on the job' - making mistakes, and learning by trial and error - that was perceived as the most useful. Interaction with colleagues was important for learning the basic rules and processes of the department and university. Although they had a PGCAP mentors their use of these to support their emerging teaching practices was variable. Instead, useful interactions were often quite informal, or ad-hoc, working to assist the new lecturers settling into the new culture of the department. Alongside the PGCAP programme, feedback from students about teaching approaches and module delivery emerged as a significant and formative source of learning for the new lecturers throughout the year.

This study extends the definition of 'culture' to include three different contexts from which new lecturers entered academia at Plymouth University. These are the international context, academic research (marked by possession of a PhD and postdoctoral research experience in other universities), and the professional context whereby new lecturers are taking on a teaching position based on their professional background and expertise. Four international academics took part in this research, and the impact of their country of origin

on their teaching practice differed considerably between them. They described how their own experiences of entering a different education culture had helped them to appreciate the challenges other international students faced in their programmes, and to think about how they could best cater for their specific needs, in writing and comprehension. For those not so familiar with universities, entering academia can be likened to encountering a different 'culture'. The five participants from professional backgrounds had varied experiences of adopting their new role in this context. Although their professional experiences could provide plentiful real-life examples, having a fuller appreciation of the vagaries of the world outside academia was not always easy on the lecturers. The dichotomous relationship between the 'real world' and academia, and the specific tensions it engendered, was discussed on several occasions. Difficulties were also experienced with the University or department's 'way' of doing things, and regulations and processes that could not be surmounted. There appeared to be very little distinction between the experiences of the lecturers coming from an academic research perspective, compared to international and professional contexts, except for the fact that some had already been teaching in some capacity, for some years already, and thus had prior experience to draw upon in their first year teaching at Plymouth.

Implications for the preparation available to support new lecturers to develop their teaching:

- Greater attention needs to be paid to the role of individuals' professional, cultural and educational backgrounds. Acknowledgement and discussion of this may assist in the management of expectations around individuals teaching roles and also of their students;
- Revision of the guidance and training provided to mentors in order to formalise this role and maximise the potential benefits new lecturers can gain from working in a productive way with their PGCAP mentor.

Outputs from this project:

Conference papers

Turner, R., Huang, R., Poverjuc, O. & Magne, P. (2012). Becoming a university lecturer in the UK: negotiating knowledge, experience and learning. Paper presented at the PedRIO Conference, Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK 18th April 2012.

Huang, R., Turner, R., Poverjuc, O (2012) Becoming a university lecturer in the UK: negotiating knowledge, experience and learning, Poster presented at STLHE annual conference, Montreal, Canada, May, 2012

Turner, R., Huang, R. & Poverjuc, O. (2012). *"I made a lot of assumptions..."* Becoming a university lecturer in the UK: negotiating knowledge, experience and learning. Paper presented at the International Congress for Educational Development Conference, Bangkok, Thailand 23-25th July 2012.

Turner, R., Huang, R. & Poverjuc, O.(2012). Challenging Times: An Exploration of The Diverse Experiences of Lecturers Learning to Teach in UK Higher Education. Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, University of Cadiz, Cadiz, Spain 18-21st September 2012.

Turner, R., Huang, R. & Poverjuc, O. (2012). Strangers in a lost land: new lecturers' experiences of the first year of teaching in a UK university. Paper to be presented at the SRHE Annual Conference, Celtic Manor – Newport South Wales.

Papers in preparation:

Huang R et al: literature review paper synthesising current research and methodological issues relating to this field of study. Target publication;

Turner, R. et al: Mentoring paper reviewing the data gathered from the PGCAP mentors and the new lecturers of the contribution of mentoring, and other sources of informal support in shaping their emergent practice. Target publication: *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*

Turner, R. et al: Competing imperatives paper synthesising the main findings from the project. Target publication: HERD.

Keywords: academic development, academic practice, teaching qualifications, mentors, new lecturers

Breakdown of project budget expenditure: Still awaiting confirmation of the final budget.

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