

Chapter 13

Does Accredited Professional Development for Academics Improve Teaching and Learning in Higher Education?

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ABSTRACT

The authors are part of a team delivering accredited programmes in teaching at tertiary level, and have collaborated to examine the impact of their work and that of the team over more than ten years in this area: whether accredited professional development programmes for academics have improved teaching—and students' learning—in higher education. A review of the literature is presented, along with new research undertaken in their home institution. The authors' findings from both the literature and their most recent research indicates a range of benefits for higher education in providing and supporting accredited programmes for educators. However, they have also identified methodological issues in measuring these benefits and impact overall. The chapter discusses this work and connects it with the broader themes of this book. The authors emphasise the importance of effective teaching in the midst of the many complex changes influencing higher education at this time.

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Since the early 1990s, academic professional development has emerged as a formal activity in most third level institutions in the UK, Ireland, Australasia and the US (Gosling, 2009). This trend led to the inception of centres for academic

development, including the Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre (LTTTC) at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) in Ireland. Since 2000, the LTTTC has provided accredited academic development programmes and short courses for academics within and externally to the Institute. DIT spans a number of sites in Dublin city, with some 20,000

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students from apprentice to doctoral levels. Disciplines are organized into four Colleges: Arts and Tourism, Business, Engineering and the Built Environment, and Sciences and Health. Given the range of staff attending, the longevity of our programmes, and the many challenges now facing higher education, we sought to re-examine our provision and to evaluate the impact of accredited courses over some years.

The value of teaching as a professional area of activity in higher education has only relatively recently been identified and studied (Hanbur *et al.*, 2008; Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009). The past two decades have seen concerted efforts made to develop teaching as a formal professional activity in higher education in many parts of the world (Fink, 2013; Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009). A strong trend for professional development programmes has emerged, particularly for new staff, and many universities have developed postgraduate qualifications in higher education (Chalmers & Thompson, 2008). Critical reflection on practice in higher education has emerged as potentially an important means to develop teaching practice (Bamber & Anderson, 2012; O'Connell & Dymont, 2006).

Funded initiatives have also foregrounded teaching enhancement. In Ireland and the UK, funding has been connected directly with the creation and implementation of institutional learning and teaching strategies (for example, the Teaching Quality Enhancement Funds in the UK (2000-2004) and Strategic Innovation Funds in Ireland (2006-2011)). National forums and academies for teaching and learning have emerged (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk>; <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/>), defining priority themes for academic professional development and the enhancement of students' learning.

Academic development units and services began to challenge the predominance of traditional teaching methods, taking more constructivist approaches in their workshops and courses (Bostock, 1998; Laurillard, 2001; Entwistle, 2009; Jordan,

et al., 2008), gaining funding as well as senior level support for their efforts. Innovation and change in teaching and learning were articulated in a manner that was appropriate to institutions and to their lecturers through the development and launch of accredited programmes (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009).

In light of this history, our objectives in this Chapter are twofold. First, we examine in detail emergence of accredited teaching courses at tertiary level, and where these may fit in the evolving landscape of higher education nationally and internationally. Second, we consider the evidence in relation to this kind of professional development, and whether it can be said to have improved teaching and learning. We draw both on the literature, and on a local evaluation of accredited courses at DIT. We will identify the learning points from this work, and the future directions in which research could be taken.

CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature related to our research objectives indicated three over-arching themes for discussion:

- The development of teaching as a formal, professional activity in higher education;
- The evolving national and international contexts for this work;
- The potential impact of accredited programmes and measuring this impact.

Each of these will be addressed in this section.

Professionalising Teaching in Higher Education

For approximately 20 years, programmes of continuing professional development have been established in universities and other tertiary institutions

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