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## Effects of Postgraduate Certificates (EPGC)

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The full title of the project is 'The effects of postgraduate certificates in teaching and learning in higher education' and is intended to determine how effective postgraduate certificates (PGCs) are in assisting new staff to become lecturers.

The current longitudinal project is coordinated by Professor Tony Brand at Anglia Ruskin University, and is a continuation of a project created by Peter Knight of the Open University, with Jo Tait and Mantz Yorke. For a full report of the first phase of the project, please go to: <http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/document.cfm?docid=8640>

The project draws on qualitative and quantitative data drawn from seven participating Higher Education (HE) institutions and provides a valuable insight into the implementation of PGCs over the last decade. Data collection and analysis of the data is conducted at Anglia Ruskin University.

Participants are invited to complete an initial postal questionnaire, an online survey, a telephone interview and a further questionnaire at the end of the course.

### Background

Despite an absence of compulsion in the acquisition of a qualification to teach in the HE sector, many universities have adopted the PGC in learning and teaching, in one form or another. Some have gone further and, in some cases, have made attainment of the PGC a mandatory requirement for new lecturers. These courses vary between institutions, but Higher Education Academy (HEA) accreditation, under the 'Professional Standards Framework', mitigates against any major differences, and the resulting fellowship for successful individuals underpins the transferable value of the award.

However, as Brand (2007) notes,

*"Awards such as the postgraduate certificates in learning and teaching in higher education are arguably the most highly scrutinized... The outcomes of these broad ranging evaluations are complex but it is possible assert a claim that there exists*

*broadly positive, if at times modest, endorsement of the certificate courses in regard to impact upon learning and teaching. Areas of concern, not surprisingly, include the time and effort required to complete and the variable (and often inadequate) support provided across institutions and Departments. Some meta-themes were detected in the recently published EPGC study (Knight, 2006) and include a realization of the place of learning on the job and non-formal learning. Additionally delayed and banking effects have been noted as well as the inevitable tension between generic and discipline-specific aspects of the awards."*

### **Summary of Findings and Conclusions**

This second phase of the EPGC project focuses on current participants. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected between Autumn 2006 and Summer 2007.

Findings are broadly in line with phase one of the project, and, by extension, previous studies of professional formation as described by Knight (2006).

In outline, the conclusions are:

- Learning to teach in higher education is informed primarily by 'simply doing the job' and by informal means and less by formal methods
- The least influential way of learning to teach is online learning. Qualitative data suggests that this is due to the provision of online materials
- Levels of satisfaction with the ways in which lecturers develop are modest and decrease over the course of the PGC
- Participants had high expectations of the PGC at the start of their course but these had decreased by the end of the course
- Variations exist between institutions, but this is not related to their status as 'old' or 'new' universities. No variations were identified related to any other characteristic
- Qualitative data reveals that participants are generally happy with the course, and that they are learning
- The most significant unanticipated outcome of the PGC is networking

### **Implications and Practices**

The second phase of the EPGC project was designed to replicate the first phase in almost all respects. The findings of the second phase are, broadly speaking, commensurate with those of the first. This level of reliability emphasises the validity of the project and its instruments.

What the project has revealed is that new lecturers are learning to teach in higher education using a range of methods. The most widely used and most highly regarded of these is 'simply doing the job of teaching', with support and encouragement being obtained from informal discussions with colleagues. This 'in at the deep end' approach has its merits but is not without potential problems, not least of which is the student experience. Inexperienced teaching staff may not provide a level of quality which an increasingly discerning student body expects, particularly in the current fee-paying environment where students (have a right?) to expect value for money. In addition, support from colleagues may be restricted to guidance of the 'this is how we do it round here' approach, and be unaware of, or even hostile to, alternative forms of teaching and assessment. Indeed, while many universities have made the PGC

compulsory for new lecturers, there are calls for this to be extended to experienced staff as part of their continuing professional development (CPD). As the HEA notes,

*"The need to develop as a professional is ongoing. Teaching is a skill like any other and can be improved with reflection and training. Being good at research does not necessarily make someone good at teaching and it is an implied (sometimes explicit) part of your professional contract with your institution that you develop expertise in teaching that you may not have picked up as part of your postgraduate research work... In order that you can more effectively support your students' in their own understanding of the material you find most exciting, you need to have some training in how other learning styles might operate and the kinds of difficulties students less talented than you may run into. Because of the way professional standards are being developed across the sector, your Department will be implementing a range of staff development criteria in the future to ensure that it keeps ahead of the competition in recruitment by offering the highest quality of teaching: with higher tuition fees, students are going to demand higher educational standards."* (2007, online)

However, experienced staff, when offered the opportunity to undertake the PGC as part of a CPD package, may request that their institution take stock of accredited prior experiential learning (APEL). Decisions about following this route may be difficult to negotiate and great care must be taken concerning the nature of acceptable evidence. One participant, having to undertake the PGC following a move from one institution to another, remarked that it resembled an induction programme and that s/he should have been allowed to APEL the course. However, the value of the PGC to induct incoming staff to the university's 'house style' of learning and teaching is considerable and could preclude any misunderstandings at a later date.

Undertaking a PGC while involved in a standard teaching commitment has other attendant issues. A significant frustration that many of the participants discussed during the qualitative stages of the project concerned time constraints. Informants reported difficulties with finding protected time for the PGC, and cited issues of timetabling and other competing priorities as major impediments to successful and satisfactory engagement. If universities expect their teaching staff to fully benefit from the PGC they need to accommodate their needs more completely.

The EPGC data do show that there is some variation in PGCs across the partner institutions. These variations are, however, institution-specific and do not relate to any systematic influence. Even the national professional standards framework allows for 'the autonomy of higher education institutions' (HEA, 2006, p. 2). Nevertheless, despite the variation, some factors remained fairly constant. For example, participants at three of the four partner institutions that saw the project through to completion reported an increased appreciation for formal award-bearing courses, suggesting that the PGC itself was more highly valued after participation than before.

The data also show participants' ratings of satisfaction with ways of developing as teachers in post consistently fall short of their ratings of their importance. The lowest ratings for satisfaction and importance are, however, reserved for online learning. The implications of this for teaching innovations in the twenty-first century are acute: if new teaching staff do not regard online learning as an important way of learning, and also have unsatisfactory experience of using it, the possibility of engaging with existing online provision, not to mention emerging Web 2.0 technologies, is problematic.

Participants consistently rated 'hard-copy resources' more highly than online learning: a view that was supported qualitatively, with some participants stating a dislike of looking at a computer screen. Others noted a clear preference for face-to-face teaching along with reservations about the ability of equipment to manage. These traditional values are perhaps less significant than complaints concerning the nature and presentation of online materials. In the information age, many students expect universities to provide a significant level of online content to support and enhance both classroom-based delivery and distance learning. Not all students are 'digital natives', but many of those who are not are fast becoming 'digital immigrants' – adults who adopt digital technology, including university staff at all levels. The PGC is an opportunity to deliver high quality content and increase awareness of the need to engage with students in their own environment.

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## Executive Report e-Learning Benchmarking Exercise May 2007 to January 2008

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**1. Introduction:** We have always encouraged the development of e-learning by enthusiasts and pioneers, but felt that participation in the Higher Education Academy (HEA)-sponsored e-Learning Benchmarking Exercise would allow us to take a more strategic approach to our use of technology. We anticipated that participation in the Benchmarking Exercise would:

- identify strengths and weaknesses in our use of technology;
- enhance the student learning experience by evaluating the effectiveness of the current use of learning technologies, as well as identifying students' expectations and needs;
- establish staff development, support and resource requirements in order to help staff address changing students' needs;
- identify opportunities to integrate the effective use of technology into all our learning and teaching activities;
- develop a strategic approach to the integration of technology across the institution with a view to improving the links between the academic, organisational and technical infrastructure;
- build institutional capacity in order to rapidly respond to changes in the educational environment.