

Postgraduates as teachers: exploring expectations and highlighting disciplinary differences

Deesha Chadha
King's learning institute
King's College London
deesha.chadha@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract

Postgraduates are increasingly being given greater teaching responsibilities in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. They are often required to undergo some form of training to prepare them for this role. Increasingly, the training that is offered is quality assured and leads to either an accredited qualification or enables the postgraduate to accumulate transferable credits. The training is often generic with opportunity for postgraduates to explore disciplinary differences through engagement with the material. What is less well known, are the initial expectations postgraduates have prior to undertaking such training and how these expectations potentially could shape the ways in which postgraduates engage with the training they are offered. In this article, empirical evidence is presented that suggests the disciplinary background of the postgraduates influences the expectations they have of their role as teachers, and the expectations they have of the associated training they are provided to develop their capabilities and skills as teachers. Findings suggest that postgraduates from pure sciences are more expectant of gaining particular transferable skills that enhance their knowledge of teaching whilst postgraduates from social sciences are more expectant of using the characteristics of their discipline to inform their teaching.

Keywords: teaching provisions, disciplinary backgrounds, postgraduate expectations

Introduction

Increasingly, there is a requirement by departments in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK that post-graduates teach and that they are sufficiently trained to do so. In the

UK, there are a number of drivers that have resulted in more regulated and accredited training being made available, which is mostly institution-wide rather than discipline-specific for these postgraduates. For example, 'The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers' (2011) included as its fourth principle:

12. Employers will ensure that where researchers are provided with teaching and demonstrating opportunities as part of their career development, suitable training and support is provided.

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2011 p.11)

Similarly, following on from the most recent Government publication, the Browne Review (2010), one of the principal recommendations of that report was the mandatory publishing of data providing information on the teaching qualifications of staff who taught in HEIs.

Postgraduate teaching provision assumes a significance in international as-well-as national debate, whereby countries such as USA and Saudi Arabia, for example, are confronted by external and internal drivers to ensure that the training provisions in place for postgraduates are of the highest standard. According to Austin (2002) – in a study conducted in the USA – the professoriate is an aging population and not only are fresher teaching staff required, but also staff that possess a skills-set that can accommodate the advances in teaching, in terms of content, process and knowledge. Additionally, pressures are placed on academic members of staff to continue to produce high quality research and this, coupled with a significantly higher student-staff ratio in HEIs and reduced funding, has meant that postgraduates perform a much-needed and valued function as substitute teachers. According to DeChenne *et al.* (2012), 91% of biology laboratory teaching and 84% of counselling psychology teaching is provided by postgraduates at research HEIs. As postgraduates are principally hired upon their knowledge and expertise, there is a risk that their quality of teaching may be under-par (Hadré & Burris 2012). In Saudi Arabia the concern is somewhat different, although the potential outcome is similar. Even though there is mass funding available for higher education, due to the expanse in student intake, high quality teaching has become more necessary, again providing a focus on adequate postgraduate teaching provision (Onsman 2011).

To address UK-based concerns, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has begun to initiate a series of discussions around postgraduates who teach, to better support their

teaching practice. For example, a one-day event led by the HEA in association with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (HEA 2011) considered a range of themes related to postgraduate teaching provision:

- Professional development of postgraduate students including accredited institutional programmes
- *The subject dimension: variance in practice between disciplines, institutional faculties etc., support opportunities available*
- Results of HEA Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) on career aspirations, motivations and opportunities to teach
- International dimensions: teaching international students, international postgraduates who teach and international policy and practice around development of postgraduates who teach
- Skills development for postgraduates who teach (teaching and pastoral)
- Preview of the National Union of Students (NUS') new charter for postgraduates who teach

This article explores this idea of 'the subject dimension' in further depth.

It is fair to say that a number of articles (see for example Brandl 2000; Meyers & Prieto 2000; Gordon & Debus 2002) demonstrate that postgraduate preparation is at least equally nurtured at a disciplinary level as it is through generic programmes at institution-wide level. Departments provide different levels of support based upon the resources available to them and their perceptions of postgraduates' needs at the time (Park & Ramos, 2002). Whilst individual departmental initiatives can address specific issues associated with teaching, it is suggested that continual investment towards departments cannot be sustained and that therefore it is important to maintain and support central provisions (Muzaka, 2009). Striking an appropriate balance between developing generic and subject-specific teaching skills can be particularly problematic, (for example, Prosser, Rickinson, Bence, Hanbury & Kulej, 2006), especially if postgraduates view themselves as discipline-based experts and do not recognise the generic cross-over with other disciplines in terms of their teaching habits (Chadha 2009).

Furthermore, previous research suggests that differing orientations to learning are adopted by students depending upon their disciplinary background (Ramsden 1992) – as a

consequence of which teachers also teach differently depending upon their subject specialism. A report published by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (Prosser, *et al.* 2006) on accredited programmes, further highlighted the disconnectedness between the generic aspects of teaching and learning and the more discipline-based aspects. From the report findings, it was not altogether clear whether students were unable to apply generic skills to their discipline or whether the disciplinary differences were not discussed within the formal context of the programme. Wareing (2009) points out that there is a disciplinary discourse that is used to form an identity for that discipline and that this notion extends to the teaching and learning that takes place within that discipline. Therefore, if our programmes champion a constructivist-based approach to education, we cannot be entirely surprised that they lend themselves better to some disciplines rather than others. What does this mean though for the disciplines which are positivist by orientation? Wareing goes on to suggest that there ought to be a place within an academic development programme to nurture a more intense, context specific debate where intra rather than inter disciplinary groups come together, but who assumes responsibility for creating such a space and what would be the value in doing so? One of the concerns that had been raised by external examiners from a previous programme annual report of a graduate certificate programme for postgraduates and support staff with teaching responsibilities run at a UK-based HEI was that participants needed to be more encouraged to discuss their disciplinary background as part of their assessed narrative.

One of the issues raised was in ensuring that participants develop a greater appreciation of their values and the context in which they teach and that this ought to be reflected in their writing.

Chadha, 2010 Annual Report for the Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (GCAP) Programme 2009-10, King's College London

Such a concern reiterates this notion that teaching does not take place in a context-free environment and needs to be recognised as such.

Preliminary Research

Rarely, do we enquire about the expectations of postgraduates prior to their undertaking any teaching preparation and then focus on these expectations – seeking suitable ways in

which to fulfil them and develop a more nuanced understanding of our student population. These expectations are usually informed by a disciplinary discourse and the students' experience of what it means to learn in that discipline. Teaching requires a different awareness and set of skills, but our initial expectations often guide our philosophies and provide a foundation for our taught practice. It is therefore important that we take a closer look at these expectations and the study reported on in this article aims to do just that.

Postgraduates attending an academic development programme, at a Russell-group (research-led) HEI in the UK, were asked to voluntarily complete questionnaires prior to undertaking any teaching preparation activity. The questionnaire was designed to gather open responses to questions around the expectations postgraduates had of the training they were about to receive. Three questions were asked of the postgraduates:

- Why did you enrol on this programme?
- What expectations do you have of this programme?
- What are your expectations of yourself as a teacher?

The participant postgraduates were not required to identify themselves or their disciplinary background unless they were willing to be involved in a more extensive study involving in-depth interview and focus group sessions. If this was the case, they were asked to provide contact details and state their disciplinary background. Once the postgraduates had completed the questionnaires, it was possible to collate school-specific data from six of the nine schools of the HEI: natural and mathematical sciences (3 participants), biomedical sciences (5 participants), dental institute (5 participants), law school (4 participants), arts and humanities (5 participants) and social science and public policy (5 participants). In terms of the premise being explored in this current study, the central question asked was: how are the expectations of postgraduates influenced by their disciplinary background and discourse? The responses to the questionnaire were tabulated and colour-coded according to discipline. Words and phrases were analysed by making a note of those contained in the written commentary that related to skills, attributes and behaviours and which were mentioned on more than one occasion using a form of content analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The inferences that could be made, based on such a small sample were speculative. However, the findings are indicative of a discipline-

orientated understanding of what precipitates teaching and necessitates the idea of preparation for teaching in higher education amongst postgraduates.

Analysis and Discussion

Two of the three postgraduates from natural and mathematical sciences, listed as their expectations that they would like to receive instruction on teaching large groups.

Q. What expectations do you have of this programme?

I hope that the programme will help with my skills in planning, organisation as well as confidence – important in large groups. The portfolio is intimidating, but a challenge that I believe will be beneficial.

To learn the fundamentals and basic information about how to prepare myself before teaching and how to handle a large group of students.

Such statements follow the culture of the institution and are in response to the way the discipline is taught which is often in large groups and causes a little anxiety amongst inexperienced teachers. These postgraduates are seeking instruction and are looking for information that will help them to develop very particular skills.

Indicative comments from students from biomedical sciences, when asked about their expectations of themselves as teachers, denote a desire to impart moral values and make good use of multimedia in their teaching. Four of the five respondents expect to be able to 'inspire' their students or 'make the subject interesting' suggesting that those they teach tend to lose interest and that this is a particular experience of learning in the discipline that needs to be redressed through teaching.

Q. What are your expectations of yourself as a teacher?

To inspire students, to introduce the wow factor into science, holistic teaching which includes imparting moral values as a part of the education system.

To make the subject interesting, to make sure that I am getting through to everyone, that I have explained things clearly and that I am always trying to improve. Everyone is different so I aim to use different communication techniques and media to help individuals.

Three of the five postgraduates from the dental institute, when asked about their expectations of themselves as teachers repeatedly emphasised this idea of wanting to be good communicators, for example by simplifying messages and by communicating

effectively. Similarly, as for postgraduates from biomedical sciences, there were other attributes that postgraduates from the dental institute expected to have developed as teachers, but the acquisition of communication-related skills was mentioned on more than one occasion. Again, the comments reflect the significance of acquiring a particular set of skills that are important to teaching which could be equally relevant to a number of disciplines.

Q. What are your expectations of yourself as a teacher?

Simplify a topic to key messages, be able to reflect on own practice.

To be able to communicate a curriculum effectively to a student. To enthuse students, to generate interest by teaching by example.

Three of the four respondents from the law school, focused upon developing an understanding of the associated theory when asked about the expectations they had of the academic development programme they were about to commence. These responses were interesting as the postgraduates understand teaching in the same way that they have cultivated an understanding for their discipline which depends upon students developing the ability to read, interpret and apply law mostly through theorising and then abstracting relevant information.

Q. What expectations do you have of this programme?

To provide me with information and techniques for improving my teaching methods, to gain some perhaps theoretical background to teaching methods.

To gain some hints and tips for meaningful teaching. To learn names of the theory behind teaching.

Three of the five postgraduates from arts and humanities expected themselves to exercise some innovation in their teaching practice by encouraging their students to 'see things in a new way'. Again, this idea of what it means to teach in the discipline resonates with postgraduates' understanding of the fundamental make-up of the discipline itself, for example, the arts and humanities are symptomatic with this idea of providing a new angle of interpretation or creation to established texts and compositions.

Q. What are your expectations of yourself as a teacher?

Hopefully to inspire a desire to learn in others; to be clear, helpful and approachable to students; to help people see things in a new way.

I view each teaching event as a creative interaction between student and teacher. There is an electric connection as both teach each other to learn something new. I want to create something beautiful in this as well.

In response to the question on initial enrolment on the programme, four of the five postgraduates from social sciences and public policy volunteered comments that suggested they wished to engage in a personal journey directed towards personal growth. They enrolled on the programme to be able to benefit from personal feedback and reflection. It is the process of learning that is more relevant to these participants than the content knowledge itself.

Q. Why did you enrol on this programme?

To gain teaching experience, especially the supervised practice because I think departmental feedback would be particularly helpful.

To improve my teaching skills through reflection

To see what is wrong and develop my teaching capacity

Concluding remarks

The findings from this current study reveal a number of interesting insights into the types of expectations postgraduates have of themselves as teachers and what type of teaching preparation they ought to be privy to. The insights presented are:

- As new teachers, postgraduates from particular disciplines, namely those from health sciences and pure sciences expect to develop transferable skills and skills that help them to manage the teaching-learning environment.
- As new teachers, postgraduates from particular disciplines, namely those from humanities and social sciences use the characteristics of the discipline itself to identify the skill set they ought to acquire as teachers.

These statements may seem bold when considering the amount of data on which they are based, although this explorative study provides scope for a lengthier investigation and dialogue on postgraduate provision and its relationship with disciplinary discourse. It has already been suggested that the disciplinary background of the academic significantly

influences their beliefs and values, which in turn influences their approach to teaching (for example Neumann 2001; Lueddeke 2003). Andresen (2000) suggested that “on the contrary, the scholar-teacher becomes one who knows, from the position of inhabiting some discipline or field of knowledge itself, what it means to make *this* knowledge (not *any* knowledge, let alone *all* knowledge) intelligible, organised, structured and available to learners to grapple with and to appropriate for themselves” (p.146). To go further, one could argue that the very idea of content, disciplinary knowledge can become so embedded in the psyche of a disciplinary expert that the way in which they approach other disciplinary discourses or fields of practice, such as teaching can only be understood in the way they understand their own discipline, for example being knowledge led or process led. In accordance with such a claim, the UK-based HEA runs events for postgraduate teachers, centred upon disciplinary practices rather than generic skills (HEA 2013). The current research suggests that this notion of teaching being a disciplinary-embedded practice is as true of postgraduates as it is of academics, or at least this is the case up until the point they begin practicing as teachers.

References

- Andresen, L.W. (2000), A useable, trans-disciplinary conception of scholarship, *Higher Education Review and Development*, 19(2), 137-153
- Austin, A.E. (2002), Preparing the next generation of faculty: graduate school as socialization to the academic career, *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(1), 94-122
- Brandl, K.K. (2000), Foreign language TAs' perceptions of training components: do we know how they like to be trained? *The Modern Language Journal*, 84 (iii), 355-371
- Browne Review, (2010), *Securing a sustainable future for higher education: an independent review of higher education funding and student finance*, Retrieved December 2010 from www.independent.gov.uk/browne-report,
- Chadha, D. (2010), *Annual Report for the Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (GCAP) Programme*, King's College London
- Chadha, D. (2009), Developing an innovative educational framework for graduate teaching assistant (GTA) provision, *paper presented at SRHE conference*, Wales, December, 2009

- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007), *Research Methods in Education*, (6th Ed.), Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group
- DeChenne, S. E., Lesseig, K., Anderson, S.M., Li, S.L., Staus, N.L. & Barthel C. (2012), Toward a measure of professional development for graduate student teaching assistants, *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 12(1), 4-9
- Gordon, C. & Debus, R. (2002), Developing deep learning approaches and personal teaching efficacy within a pre-service teacher education context, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 72, 483-511
- Hadré, P.L & Burris, A.O. (2012), What contributes to teaching assistant development: differential responses to key design features, *Instructional Science*, 40, 93-118
- Higher Education Academy (2011), *Postgraduates who teach: developing the next generation*, Retrieved August 2013 from www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2011/academyevents/30_March_postgraduates_who_teach_event
- Higher Education Academy (2013), *HEA STEM (Psychology): Postgraduates who teach psychology*, Retrieved August 2013 from www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2013/29-may-pgwt-psychology-gmu
- Lueddeke, G.R. (2003), Professionalising teaching practice in higher education: a study of disciplinary variation and 'teaching-scholarship', *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(2), 213-228
- Meyers, S.A. & Prieto, L.R. (2000), Training in the teaching of psychology: what is done and examining the differences, *Teaching of Psychology*, 27(4), 258-261
- Muzaka, V. (2009), The niche of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs): perceptions and reflections, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(1), 1-12
- Neumann, R. (2001), Disciplinary differences and university teaching, *Studies in Higher Education*, 26(2), 135-146
- Onsman, A. (2011), It is better to light a candle than to ban the darkness: Government led academic development in Saudi Arabian universities, *Higher Education*, 62, 519-532
- Park, C. & Ramos, M. (2002), The donkey in the department? Insights into the graduate teaching assistant (GTA) experience in the UK, *Journal of Graduate Education*, 3, 47-53

Prosser, M., Rickinson, M., Bence, V., Hanbury, A., & Kulej, M. (2006), *Report: Formative Evaluation of Accredited Programmes*, York: The Higher Education Academy

Ramsden, P. (1992), *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, London: Routledge

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2011), Retrieved August 2013 from www.researchconcordat.ac.uk,

Wareing, S. (2009), Disciplines, discourse and Orientalism: the implications for postgraduate certificates in learning and teaching in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(8), 917-928