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Supporting the assessment, learning and teaching needs of part-time teaching staff

Laura Dean, Sue Smith and Graham Webb

Introduction

There are many different types of part-time teachers (PTT) at Leeds Met. There are hourly paid and fractionally contracted staff but also tutors from industry and the public sector who offer their services free, coming in for occasional sessions. Staff from other departments (such as Library staff and PhD students) can also offer one-off sessions. While we know PTTs make up a substantial component of the workforce in higher education, their exact number is difficult to establish (Husbands, 1998). At Leeds Met, in April 2008 there were 205 academic staff on fractional contracts, 902 hourly paid academic staff and 187 PhD students.

Bryson's (2006) literature review on PTTs outlined the context in which they work in HE and the issues they face. There is an increasing research base examining PTT deployment (Bryson and Blackwell, 2001), part-time distance learning tutors and online support communities (Macdonald, 2006; Macdonald and Hewling, 2008), and case studies of PTTs (Bryson and Blackwell, 2006).

This survey-based project, however, was catalysed by the need for Leeds Met to explore the context in which its own PTTs work. The research study's aim was to explore the issues PTTs face in the reality of their working practice and how they access development opportunities, particularly in relation to their assessment, learning and teaching (ALT) needs.

Methodology

Pilot questionnaires were distributed to a random sample of part-time academic staff. From these initial findings two separate but related questionnaires were designed, focusing on two separate groups: part-time teachers and PhD students. In September and October 2007, all University part-time teachers (those on fractional contracts and those who are hourly paid) and all PhD students across all Faculties were invited to complete web-based questionnaires which asked a range of questions about their experiences of accessing assessment, learning and teaching support at Leeds Met. The survey contained a mixture of closed and open questions exploring their experiences as PTTs. Forty-two part-time teachers and 26 PhD students responded. The emergent findings from the PhD students were analysed separately from the part-time staff data.

Findings and discussion

Findings from the PhD students

While the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2004) reports that fewer than a quarter of PhD students progress to teach in HE, all the research students at Leeds Met in this study stated this as an immediate or short-term career aim. However, 60% of our respondents were not involved in teaching or supporting teaching in any way.

The awareness of Leeds Met events, support and training was found to be high; however, the research students, even those who teach, appear to be treated differently from other PTTs and do not perceive the same compulsion to attend staff development events that other PT staff seem to do.

The majority of PhD students, when asked specifically about their staff development needs relating to ALT issues, stated they were interested in receiving staff development on: teaching (91%); assessment practices (78%); and designing curricula (80%). However, while their knowledge of their Faculty-specific days and the University-wide ALT days at the annual Staff Development Festival was reasonably high (73% and 60% respectively), attendance was very low (20% and 15% for at least part of the day).

The discrepancy between the statements of interest in staff development and actual attendance appears to be explained by the other commitments of these students. The major reason given for non-attendance was "other commitments": this was cited by 50% of respondents, while a further 43% gave "other paid work" as their primary reason for non-attendance.

There was no significant difference in attendance at ALT events by PhD students who did or did not actively participate in teaching. However, it is important to note that the students who do teach are not necessarily receiving other training or support. Indeed, less than half of those respondents who teach were currently receiving appraisal and only 10% reported having a mentor.

Findings from part-time teaching staff

It was clear that many staff in fractional posts began working with the University on hourly paid roles and then increased their hours. Overall, PTT staff remained with the organisation for a long time. More than half had worked for Leeds Met for more

than three years and 42% for more than five years, indicating a clear benefit in investing in the staff development of this group.

Most fractional staff attended both their Faculty day and ALT day at the Staff Development Festival. None of the hourly paid respondents attended either type of event. On analysis of the qualitative data, the fractional staff who did not attend commented that the main reason was insufficient notice to reorganise their other work. Fractional staff reported an expectation that they would swap their work around to accommodate the events, for example:

"I swapped my clinical and Leeds Met days that week to accommodate the staff festival."

The main reason given for non-attendance by hourly paid staff was that they were working elsewhere at the time and/or could not have attended as they would not be paid. Many respondents commented on their role plurality, indicating that they were not solely PT staff at Leeds Met and emphasising their other commitments. They needed advance notice in order to change their arrangements. For example:

"It wasn't one of my working days and I would not therefore have been paid to attend, although that would have been a secondary concern. I was not willing to additionally pay for extra childcare or to use an unfamiliar childcare facility for my youngest child."

More than half of the PTTs worked for at least one other organisation but were still keen to attend the staff development events: more than three-quarters stated they wanted more training on ALT issues.

While PTT staff were more likely than PhD students to use alternative staff development mechanisms to support their professional development, they were not all involved in University-based performance development (involvement did not significantly correlate with length of service). For example, appraisal was not used by most PTTs, only 47% having been appraised in the previous year and 45% never having had an appraisal through Leeds Met.

Future action and recommendations

1. The University should explore ways of generating teaching opportunities for and supporting PhD students who teach.
2. PhD students and all part-time staff should be explicitly targeted and welcomed to Staff

Development Festival ALT days. The University should ensure that the dates of Faculty and ALT days are provided as early as possible to allow PhD students and part-time staff to alter their arrangements as appropriate.

3. Subject Group Leaders should ensure that everyone who teaches is offered appraisal from an experienced teacher and teacher mentors.
4. A series of focus groups should take place with those University PhD students and PTTs who expressed interest in being interviewed as part of a follow-up for this project. This would enable the above recommendations to be discussed in more depth and allow consultation on how the University should now proceed.

Summary and conclusions

Flexible learning and flexible working are features of life at Leeds Met and, increasingly, of the modern economy. Our recent exploratory research into the changing nature and needs of part-time academic staff and PhD students emphasised the valuable contribution they make across practically every subject and programme area in the University.

Offering flexible contracts to PTTs helps attract staff with experience and talents that enrich our academic community and which might otherwise not be available to our students. Part-time contracts enable academics to bring experiences from teaching and researching at other institutions and from working in the private sector or the professions to benefit students at Leeds Met.

The project showed that every PhD student who responded aimed to teach at some time in their career. Many Leeds Met academic staff have become inspired to undertake research by those who have taught them, so it seems a natural progression for researchers to undertake teaching both to disseminate their knowledge and as another route to having their own theses tested by explaining them to others and receiving feedback.

This leads us to ask whether, in response to this clear relationship between researcher and teacher, PhD students should have a more structured access to teacher development opportunities and a direct involvement in ALT issues. The circle in which research supports teaching to inform content and methodology and where teaching then stimulates

further research to clarify and explain in increasing detail, is clearly a virtuous one. So, just as teachers should undertake research as part of their professional development, perhaps researchers should understand how their knowledge can be disseminated through teaching?

However, it appears that whatever type of academic staff are employed by Leeds Met on whichever type of contract, the University's focus on ALT priorities is consistent and therefore opportunities to engage with training, development and all other aspects of University life should be equally flexible to allow all teaching staff to participate fully.

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Laura Dean, Sue Smith and Graham Webb
Teacher Fellows