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The relationship between participants' perceptions of time commitment, facilitator guidance and anticipated professional efficacy in a subject of a graduate certificate of higher education course: some preliminary analyses.

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This study examines participants' evaluations of a single subject in Monash University's Graduate Certificate of Higher Education over a four year period to look for possible relationships between three factors: manageability of time commitment; co-ordinator guidance; and an anticipated increase in teaching efficacy. The responses of 139 exit comments made by four separate cohorts of academic staff who completed the subject Teaching for Learning (HED 5002) from 2002 to 2005 were tabulated and analysed for possible causal relationships. The results of the preliminary analysis indicate that for reasons that were wholly unexpected none of the factors could be shown to have relationships at all. Nonetheless the results suggest that the subject has had a consistent and positive impact upon the approach to teaching as well as the practice of the participants. Nearly all participants indicate that their teaching would likely improve as a result of completing the subject.

Key words: academic development, mandatory tertiary teaching training.

Introduction

In 1999, Monash University was one of the first Australian universities to make tenure dependent upon the completion of the Graduate Certificate of Higher Education (GCHE) for all new staff under professorial level. However, staff who have a qualification from another university formally recognised as equivalent by the University Teaching Qualifications Committee (UTQC), may be granted equivalence, and so avoid having to do the GCHE. Staff who can show prior experience relevant to a set of specific criteria may be granted Recognition of Prior Learning for up to 50 % of the course. Again the decision is at the UTQC's discretion.

Whereas more than 30 out of Australia's 38 universities offer graduate certificates in higher education, not all are structured the same (Devlin, 2006). Monash's GCHE complies with the standard Australian requirements of any graduate certificate in that it is a 24 point accredited course of study, usually completed part-time over two years by means of four discrete 6 point subjects, taken one per semester. It is a graduate certificate rather than a post-graduate certificate because it assumes any undergraduate degree as a prerequisite rather than specifying an undergraduate degree in Education.

Administratively the GCHE sits within the architecture of the Faculty of Education's suite of courses, and its results are ultimately accredited by that faculty's board of examiners: a process that is normally nothing more than a rubber stamping. In practice the GCHE's design and delivery are wholly the responsibility of the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT).*

* The Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching was established on January 1, 2006. Prior to that, Monash University's academic development unit, the Higher Education Development Unit, was

The GCHE is delivered through mixed media mode: both on-line and face-to-face. The first subject starts in the second semester of each academic year, on the assumption that all participants will by then have had at least one semester's experience before commencing, allowing meaningful reflection. In practice most, if not all, new staff have some or even substantial teaching experience. The University recommends that because the qualification is required, faculties arrange a reduction in participants' workloads whilst they are enrolled. As discussed below, faculties' responses to the recommendation vary.

From 1999 to 2003, the certificate had a settled and logical curriculum: the first subject was to do with student learning; the second was to do with teaching; the third was to do with assessment and the fourth was a self-directed, pedagogy-based project on a topic that was of relevance to the participant. For a number of reasons (including large-scale and on-going staff turn-over; a number of program reviews; and increased discontent voiced by a number of faculty and department managements) major changes in both curricula and delivery have been made to much of the course of study since 2003. Only the second subject, Teaching for Learning, has remained virtually constant. Consequently, it is this subject that provides the data for the present study. Perhaps fortuitously, the focus of the subject, teaching practice, also lends itself to the purpose of the study, as it is the most practical of all the subjects.

As may be anticipated of any mandated competition to the University's stated primary activity (i.e. Research), the GCHE has come under severe and constant criticism throughout its existence. In this, Monash is not unique. A study by Spafford Jacob & Goody (2002) on the practical effect of a foundation course found that such was also the case elsewhere, with participants in the study consistently referring to research rather than teaching as the activity most highly valued and rewarded by departments. In Monash, as in other universities, participants comment that upon completion of the course, and in particular this subject, they are filled with enthusiasm for teaching but encounter constant and debilitating opposition to implementing new ideas when they try to establish them in their workplaces.

It is unsurprising that the majority of the criticism comes from Deans and Heads of Departments who resent having the time of their (mostly) junior staff forcibly committed to the completion of the GCHE at a time when they need to establish themselves as researchers. They have a valid point: departments in general tend to rate themselves and be rated by their research output, grant success and higher degree students, rather than their teaching. But whilst the freedom to evaluate and critique its programs and practices openly and fearlessly is an institutional strength, criticism of the GCHE has, in some instances, been strident and aggressive, and scattergun in its sweep. Nonetheless, some of the questions being asked seem to be justified, and deserving of legitimate and considered responses. For example, Monash University's Committee of Associate Deans of Research (CADRE) argue that

there appears to be a lack of assessment of the effects of the GCHE on:
- *Departments, in terms of cost and teaching outputs*

responsible for delivery of the GCHE. CALT operates primarily as a task force dedicated to ensuring the University maximises the student experience.

- *Participants' research careers*
 - *Actual teaching outcomes after having undertaken the GCHE.*
- (CADRE, 2003: unpaginated)

There has indeed been minimal, if any, systematic evaluation done within the University for any of the variables cited above, a fact that ultimately provides evidence for neither side of the argument. However, in substantiating their concerns, CADRE does make a pertinent point: whenever staff are required to attend GCHE workshops they usually give up research time rather than teaching time. Completing assignments also eats into research time rather than teaching time. In fact, because the GCHE is delivered in accordance with the Faculty of Education's protocols, it is delivered during semester time: exactly the time when junior staff are under most pressure with their own teaching programs.

The GCHE has a nominal time commitment of twelve hours per week for thirteen weeks. Therefore, theoretically at least, staff (as students) are entitled to a half day load reduction for each subject they are enrolled in. However, the reduction is not necessarily a reduction in teaching load – simply a reduction in workload, which often results in the scenario suggested by CADRE. Whereas the University may call for workload relief, it is somewhat ironic that in practice any time given usually comes from research rather than teaching.

Furthermore, in practice any workload relief granted depends entirely upon the attitude of individual departmental managers: often no relief is arranged at all. Some of the smaller departments maintain that they simply cannot afford it – in terms of either time or money. Anecdotal evidence supports the claim: for example, the head of Monash University's Department of Biology has a staff of seven, four of whom are required to do the GCHE at this time. For such a small department, that will indeed be a substantial, if not impossible, commitment.

It seems then that the deans' concerns are justified. Until reliable data about the effect that the GCHE has upon (particularly) smaller departments in terms of cost and teaching output; on the participants' research careers and on their practice as teachers, the arguments about the effectiveness of making all staff acquire such a qualification will remain unresolvable. Although these questions are outside the parameters of this study, it will however generate some data related to time requirement. Although the principal focus of this study is upon whether or not staff believe that completing the subject will actually have a discernible impact upon their practice, it will be considered in terms of the time required to complete it and the amount of guidance they received whilst completing it.

Literature Search

Whilst there have been some studies that investigate whether training courses have a measurable effect upon actual practice, this study aims to discern whether or not participants upon completion of a training course believe that participation was worthwhile and that it was likely to have a positive effect upon their teaching. It triangulates with two specific factors: the amount of time required to complete the course and the amount of interaction with the course coordinator. It was anticipated

that the strongest correlation would be between time commitment and perceived benefits.

There have been a number of studies made in recent years that attempt to shed some light (either directly or indirectly) on whether academic development courses are of discernible benefit (Hake, 2002; Obenchain, Abernathy, & Wiest, 2001; Shevlin, Banyard, Davies & Griffiths, 2000; Watchell, 1998). The conclusions of these studies are at best contentious and at worst contradictory. Whereas most studies (particularly Gibbs & Coffee, 2004) seem to want to show a positive correlation between training and practice, others (particularly McArthur, Earl & Edwards, 2004) show that such a correlation may not actually exist. Whilst it is an interesting and necessary line of enquiry, in terms of intellectual discourse it is a long way from being resolved. Because the present study is much less ambitious in its scope, in that it seeks to discern whether or not participants in a specific course of study believed that their practice would benefit from it, parallels to studies that investigate a similar question are of greater relevance. Very few such studies have been done, particularly in Australia.

Support for the findings of the current study comes from Radloff (2004), who reports in her extensive review of the University of New South Wales' Graduate Certificate of University Learning and Teaching (GCULT) that the majority of participants and graduates indicated that they expected the course to have had a positive effect upon their practice as teachers. Although the numbers who responded to the survey were very low, it gives some indication that participants consistently believe that participation will lead to an improvement in their teaching. In summation, the executive summary states that

Findings from the review indicate that staff who have participated in the ... programs ... describe positive changes to their teaching practice ... (Radloff, 2004: p5)

The present study seeks to reproduce those results.

Ethical Clearance

The project was approved by Monash University's Standing Committee on Ethics in Research involving Humans at meeting C5/2005 on 13 September 2005, with the standard terms of approval applying.

Methodology

At the completion of the course each participant of every cohort from 2001 to 2005 was asked to complete a detailed feedback questionnaire. They could do so on-line through an anonymous survey; by means of a paper-based questionnaire, also anonymously or as an attachment to an e-mail, which would identify the correspondent. Slightly more than 70% of the surveys were returned via e-mail. Just under 20% were returned via mail and 8% were returned via the Monash University Studies On-line (MUSO) site. As in each case the surveys were returned after the grades had been posted there was little reason to suspect that participants were

influenced by whether or not they were anonymous and the overwhelming preference for email returns indicates that such was the case.

A number of questions were grouped under the following general headings:

1. **Purpose.** Did you think that the aims of the subject were clearly stated? Were they attainable for you? Were they relevant to your teaching? Were they achieved?
2. **Content.** *Was there enough/too much content? Were the sections evenly balanced? Were the tasks achievable? Did you have to spend too much time on the subject? Was the reader appropriate to the subject? Should there have been different emphases?*
3. **Structure.** Was the content well structured? Was the reader easy to use? Are you likely to refer to the reader again, after the subject/the certificate?
4. **Guidance.** *Did you find that you had sufficient interaction with the coordinator? Were the written instructions clear and easy to follow? Were the activities too intrusive/ too time consuming?*
5. **Efficacy.** *Do you feel that the subject has made a positive difference to your practice as an educator?*
6. **General comments.** How could the subject be improved?

The answers to the italicised questions form the basis of the current study. They were recorded and tabulated as positive response, negative response or no response.

Results

Table 1. Tallies of raw survey responses

	Time	Guidance	Efficacy
0 =	98	96	130
1 =	15	12	2
2 =	26	31	7

Key: 0 = positive; 1 = negative; 2 = no response

Table 1 indicates that only two respondents considered that the course would not have a positive effect on their practice as tertiary teachers. Even allowing for all 7 of the nil responses being potentially negative, it means that at least 94% of all graduands considered that the course would make a positive difference to their teaching. Based upon the qualitative commentary made by the respondents, this figure is in all likelihood closer to 99%. For the purposes of this study it meant that only 2 respondents indicated that the course would not have a positive impact on their teaching. Qualitative feedback indicates that both respondents considered their teaching to be at an optimum standard already: an opinion that was in both cases substantiated by their Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning (SETL) scores, which were consistently rated as over 4 on a Likert scale of 1-5.

Table 2. Tally of variable totals.

Time	Guidance	Efficacy	Total
0	0	0	84
2	2	0	16
1	0	0	11
0	1	0	9
2	2	2	7
0	2	0	5
1	2	0	2
1	0	1	1
1	1	0	1
2	2	1	1
2	0	0	1
2	1	0	1
		Total	139

Key: 0 = positive; 1 = negative; 2 = no response

Table 2a shows that 84 of all participants considered that the subject didn't require too much time to complete; were happy with the amount of guidance they received from the coordinator and believed that their teaching would improve as a result of having completed the subject. Slightly higher than 6 % of respondents indicated that whilst they considered the course did not require too much time to complete, they were unsatisfied with the amount of guidance received. Nonetheless they considered that the subject would have a positive effect upon their practice. A further 8 % indicated that whilst they were happy with the amount of guidance they received and they believed that the subject would have a positive effect on their practice, they consider that the workload was not manageable.

The anticipated variation in the collected data that would, it was anticipated, allow a triangulated study of variables proved to be non-existent. One respondent who believed that the subject would not have a positive effect upon their teaching was happy with the level of guidance but thought the workload was not manageable. The other respondent who believed that the subject would not have a positive impact on their practice did not respond to either of the other two questions. Whilst such results are a rousing endorsement of the course, it provides little if anything in terms of interpretable data in the quest for causal effects.

Analysis

Whilst the results were indicative of a successful course, they preclude any meaningful examination of causes. It had been anticipated that there would be a strong correlation between those who considered the course too time consuming and those who anticipated no benefits to their practice. Because so few participants considered to course not to result in improved practice, that hypothesis remains untested.

At best, it may be stated that the particular subject has met the expectations of the participants and consistently engendered enthusiasm for teaching amongst the various cohorts. Whilst this is no small thing, it does not indicate that their enthusiasm will be translated into improved SETLs or semester grades. Other studies have shown that the enthusiasm the graduates bring back to their departments has to overcome substantial hurdles before it has a manifest impact (Spafford Jacob & Goody, 2002). Nonetheless,

in general terms it is reasonable to conclude that participants leave this particular course enthused about the possible improvements to their practice. Acknowledging that much more accurate data needs to be gathered, the present study indicates that the first part of certified academic development, participant satisfaction, is generally satisfied by the course.

Discussion

As implied above, the most pertinent result from the study was undoubtedly the almost unanimous positive response of the respondents to the question of whether or not they considered the course to have contributed to a discernible improvement in their practice as tertiary teachers. In part, the study was precipitated by the commentary from Heads of Departments and Dean who consistently called for the GCHE's removal because they felt it made no difference to the quality of teaching of their staff. In rebuttal this study shows conclusively that those who actually complete the subject do not share that belief. Rather, they indicated that they felt it would make a significant improvement to their practice. Further, CADRE's concern that the course takes too much time is also in the main contradicted by the staff themselves. Most felt that the course requirements were manageable. However, an important proviso must be added here: the accusations made by CADRE are against the GCHE in its entirety, whilst this study was limited to one of its four subjects. As usual, further work needs to be done.

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