



Supporting excellence in teaching: The experiences of mentors within an institutional framework for CPD

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Abstract

The focus of this article is the experience of academic staff in their role as mentor within an institutional framework for CPD. A study was undertaken to explore mentors' experiences of participating in a pilot project that was established to support successful engagement with the framework. Qualitative data from one focus group and one interview were analysed using thematic and emotion coding. The analysis revealed challenges and rewards associated with the role of mentor and highlighted a need for practical support and development opportunities for mentors, as well as greater clarity of roles and responsibilities. An outcome is enhanced support for the project, such as the creation of a clear description of expectations of the mentor role and provision of opportunities for sharing practice.

Keywords: mentoring, continuing professional development; UK PSF, learning and teaching.

Introduction

This article reports on one aspect of a larger evaluation of a pilot mentoring project that supports an institutional framework for continuing professional development (CPD). Undertaken within a UK research-intensive university, the larger study investigated the perspectives of both mentors and mentees (Davidson, 2018) with the aim of enhancing the mentoring project. The focus of this article is the experiences of the mentors, exploring the impact on academic staff of taking on this role.

Background and context

The context in which this study was undertaken is the increasing emphasis on the quality of teaching in UK higher education (HE) that can be traced from the publication of the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997), an important point in UK policy development that brought attention to teaching and learning in universities (Cashmore, Cane, & Cane, 2013). This renewed focus gained momentum through such developments as the requirement for institutions to provide information about teaching qualifications of academic staff to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), and the publication of the results of the National Student Survey that aims to contribute to the quality of the student experience (Office for Students, n.d.). The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in England (BIS, 2016) is a further development in UK policy that addresses the quality of teaching in HE (Fung & Gordon, 2016).

One response to these developments has been a move towards the professionalisation of teaching in HE as a way of demonstrating quality (Thornton, 2014). The HESA statistics mentioned above are made public, and so it has become important for institutions to support staff to undertake academic and professional teaching qualifications, both to enhance their reputation with potential students and as evidence of quality (Botham, 2018a). For these reasons many UK universities provide CPD opportunities for academic staff that are aligned to a set of national standards described within the UK Professional Standards Framework (Higher Education Academy (HEA), 2011).

The UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF) is a nationally recognised framework for teaching and supporting learning in HE. It was developed in consultation with the HE sector and is managed by Advance HE, previously the HEA (Advance HE/HEA, n.d). The framework document has been adopted across UK higher education and as such, it "enjoys a legitimacy in the sector that greatly enhances its value at national level" (Lea & Purcell 2015, p. 6). The UK PSF centres on three dimensions of teaching and learning support practice: areas of activity, core knowledge and professional values. Based on these dimensions, it provides a framework for individuals to engage in CPD and achieve professional recognition of their teaching and learning practice.

Successful engagement with the UK PSF can lead to Fellowship of the HEA in one of four categories: Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow and Principal Fellow. However, while the UK PSF aims to support the enhancement of teaching and learning support practice (HEA, 2011), the award of Fellowships is managed by the HEA and therefore potential applicants must engage with the HEA's own fellowship scheme or one that has been accredited by them (Lea & Purcell, 2015). Fellowship of the HEA in any category is listed by HESA as a valid academic teaching qualification (HESA, 2019/20).

Since the publication of the UK PSF in 2011, many UK HE institutions have developed and implemented frameworks for CPD that are aligned to the UK PSF and/or accredited by the HEA. Currently there are 123 Advance HE-accredited CPD Schemes leading to HEA Fellowship (Advance HE, n.d). In their study into reward for teaching excellence, Cashmore et al. (2013) found that some universities used achievement of teaching awards and HEA Fellowship, especially the Senior and Principal Fellowship categories, as evidence towards promotion, with the aim of further encouraging high quality teaching. Since the publication of their research, many more UK institutions have made links between HEA Fellowship and promotion (Advance HE, n.d.).

However, doubt has been expressed by some about the extent to which Fellowship enhances academic careers that are focused on teaching (Willis & Davidson, 2017). Furthermore, in his study of staff experiences of applying for HEA Fellowship through an institutional scheme, Thornton identified a small number of academic staff that did not hold Fellowship in high regard and found their engagement with the scheme to be “of limited value” (2014, p.12). For others in Thornton’s study there were clear benefits such as opportunities for reflection and sharing practice with colleagues. Scholars have noted, too, that the assumed connection between Fellowship of the HEA and high-quality teaching has not been established and requires further research (Botham 2018a; van der Sluis, Burden, & Huet, 2017). There are ongoing debates within the sector about how best to support and reward excellent teaching in higher education and, as Lea and Purcell (2015, p. 15) observe “the jury is still out on how best to raise the profile of learning and teaching”. Nonetheless, the developments described above can be seen as part of what has been identified as a shift towards efforts to encourage and reward excellent teaching (Pickford, 2018).

In the institution that is the focus of this article, there has been a framework for CPD aligned to the UK PSF since 2014, which is an essential element of the university’s strategy for enhancing the quality of learning and teaching and recognising excellent teaching practice. The university’s framework is aligned to the UK PSF but is not accredited by Advance HE/HEA. Fellowship of the institutional framework and/or the HEA is embedded within the university’s criteria and processes for promotion, and Senior Fellowship is accepted as evidence of leadership of learning and teaching within the institution. Prior to the pilot mentor project reported here, potential applicants for Fellowship in all categories were supported through the provision of information and resources within the Virtual Learning Environment, alongside a series of development workshops. In addition, applicants were allocated into groups of up to five participants who planned to apply in the same category of fellowship, in order to provide peer support. All these mechanisms for assistance remain in place.

I took over as the coordinator of the university’s UK PSF aligned CPD framework in 2017. While it had operated successfully since its inception, I sought ways to further promote and enhance staff engagement with it. As one part of this, and having experience of mentoring within another institution, I piloted a mentoring project to support potential applicants to develop their claims, with the aim of increasing the number of successful applications. In the pilot scheme, volunteer mentors were sought from members of academic staff that had achieved Senior Fellowship of either the HEA or the institutional framework, who were then matched with existing peer groups of mentee participants aiming to apply for Senior Fellowship.

Brockbank and McGill (2006) have described the purpose of mentoring as supporting learning and development, which is a useful way to think about the approach in the pilot project. The mentors met with the peer groups at least once to encourage learning about the UK PSF and Senior Fellowship and they provided feedback on drafts of applications to support development. This chimes with Forde and O’Brien (2011) who note the power of mentoring in the context of teacher education, with the learner or mentee benefiting from the expertise of a more experienced colleague. In the context of this study Senior Fellows shared their knowledge of the institutional CPD framework with aspiring applicants for Senior Fellowship. The mentoring comprised informal guidance and was almost entirely about the completion of Senior Fellow applications. In that sense the outcomes of the mentoring relationship were focused and prescribed, in contrast to some of the more person-centred, evolutionary approaches described by Brockbank and McGill (2006).

The study

In this article I report on the mentors’ experiences as part of a small-scale exploratory study that aimed to evaluate and enhance the pilot mentoring project. Specifically, I sought to address the following question: “What is the impact of the role of mentor, if any, on academic staff?” Ethical approval for the study was provided by the institution in which the research was undertaken.

Mentors in the pilot project were invited to take part in the study. These were members of academic staff from across subjects and discipline areas that had achieved Senior Fellowship of the institutional framework in the preceding three years. Each of the mentors had been working with a peer support group of potential applicants for Senior Fellowship throughout the previous academic session. Six mentors accepted the invitation to participate and provided their informed consent.

As the aim was to explore the “meanings” that the mentors gave to their experiences related to the research question, a qualitative approach was chosen (Creswell, 2013, p.44). Data were collected during a group interview that lasted 50 minutes attended by five of the mentors, and a separate interview of 30 minutes that was carried out with one mentor that was unable to join the group. Group interviews are useful in exploratory studies as they can uncover views and feelings that might not be apparent in individual interviews (Gillham, 2005). The interviews were semi-structured and comprised a prepared set of questions that addressed broad themes, with additional prompts that were used to explore topics in more depth (Cousin, 2009). For example, I asked the participants about their role as a mentor and used prompts to elicit examples and stories of both positive and challenging experiences.

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The focus group and interview data were transcribed verbatim, and I carried out a two-stage process to analyse the data in depth. First, I undertook thematic coding informed by the six-phase approach advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves familiarisation and examination of the data to identify themes. In this process, I moved from codes to categories and finally to concepts or themes (Lichtman, 2013) to provide my interpretation.

In the second stage of analysis, I undertook emotion coding which is an approach that “labels the feelings participants may have experienced” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 124). It could be argued that this introduces additional subjectivity to the data analysis. However, Saldaña (2016) asserts that emotions provide motivation for human actions and interactions and therefore can enhance our understanding of human experience. As I sought to understand the experience and impact of the role of mentor on academic staff, I believed emotion coding might provide additional insight. I re-visited the transcripts to search for any references to emotions and added these labels or codes to my analysis.

Findings and discussion

The findings of the study are presented and discussed below as a series of themes that were the result of the two-stage analysis described above. The section begins with the challenges encountered by the mentors and then moves to more positive aspects of the project. I have made extensive use of quotes to illustrate the themes, and where relevant, I have highlighted the emotions the participants expressed in relation to the themes to enhance the interpretation.

Theme 1: Practical concerns

A strong theme in this research related to the practical aspects of arranging meetings and keeping in touch with mentees. All the mentors identified finding a suitable meeting time as a major challenge in undertaking their role:

But with the current group, we went through the classic sort of, well, ‘where do you want to meet, when should we meet, I could meet then, I couldn’t meet’, I mean, we must have spent a fortnight agreeing a 3-week window...we eventually found a day.

Organising five people, this is going to be a nightmare the next time round, so I suspect we will not manage another time we can all make.

So, I suggested a whole bunch of times before work, maybe on days I was on campus, at lunchtime or something, after work, you know, I could come here after being at work. And the problem was I couldn’t actually get a time.

On the surface, this could appear a minor concern, but the mentors described emotions related to this difficulty with one participant stating they were “nervous” about the responsibility of bringing the mentor group together. Others were concerned that they would lose touch with some in their mentor group: “I haven’t heard from the others”, and expressed doubt about what action they should take: “So I have no idea...I mean, it’s a question outwith this focus group, should we be following them up?”

These quotes demonstrate that the mentors took their role seriously and were keen to be available to their mentees. However, competing work schedules and priorities for both mentors and mentees made this difficult, as described by one study participant: “then it kind of went dormant, because I think he just got snowed under with work”. In her study of engagement with an institutional CPD scheme, Botham (2018b) found that the pressures of work and lack of time contributed to delays in some participants’ applications. The analysis of the data in this study suggests that similar factors created challenges for the mentors in providing mentor support.

Theme 2: The mentor role

The data analysis revealed issues arising from uncertainty about the mentor role. In the context of theme 1 (practical concerns), above, one focus group participant stated: “The funny thing was, I think the problem [was] that nobody knew who was in charge.”

Another participant added:

I don’t know quite how far we can push, and I did after leaving it for a while think, well, I should give a bit of a push here because some of them might want to meet up and not really be keen to come forward, so I just sent another message.

However, the analysis indicated that this issue was about more than simply who should take the lead in organising and directing meetings. It extended to uncertainty about the nature of the mentor/mentee relationship. For example, one of the mentors said, “I wasn’t sure how much guidance to give”. Another comment suggested the participant understood the mentor role to exclude leading or managing, but that this had caused confusion with the mentees:

Most of them didn’t know each other, so they didn’t know who to take the lead, and I didn’t want to take the lead because I’m not meant to be telling them what to do.

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For one mentor the issue related to the extent of feedback to provide, given that the mentee was a colleague and therefore the relationship was different from that with students:

It was quite hard to know...I wanted to take it the way I would with my students' work and just like pull it to pieces and restructure it and change it, but I wasn't quite sure what my place was with that.

The mentors had participated in a development workshop that included discussion about expectations of mentors, but these quotes suggest they remained unsure of their role. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that the mentor project was a new initiative within the institutional framework and there was limited guidance initially. The analysis points to a need for clear expectations about roles and outcomes that are understood by both mentees and mentors. This is supported by Martin (2011), writing in the context of mentoring for teachers' induction, who asserts that "implicit aims, which are so strongly influenced by context, need to be made explicit and then subjected to scrutiny" (p. 34). Martin goes on to state that the role of mentors is likely to be influenced by understandings of the intended outcomes of the mentor relationship, something that appears to have been left implicit in the pilot of the mentor project, causing uncertainty for the mentors.

Theme 3: Mentors' (lack of) confidence

The third theme overlaps with the feelings of uncertainty about the role discussed above and relates to low levels of confidence described by some of the mentors. For some mentors this arose from believing that they were not sufficiently knowledgeable about the UK PSF and Fellowship requirements to provide advice to others:

I have to admit, I feel myself I'm not a hundred percent confident in giving people feedback on this. It's not, like, when you're giving feedback to students where you know exactly what the criteria are, you know exactly what you're looking for.

So, some things I feel I can recognise but other things I'm a bit more, I don't know, I just feel that 'am I giving them the right advice? Do I know what advice I should be giving?' This, kind of thing is a bit harder to judge for me.

The mentors in this project had all achieved Senior Fellowship of the institutional framework, but most had direct knowledge only of their own application. While guidance on the requirements for Senior Fellowship had been provided at the development workshop, these quotes suggest a need for further development opportunities for the mentors to extend their knowledge and experience of the UK PSF and build their confidence about providing feedback on draft applications.

For other participants, the nature of the mentor/mentee relationship contributed to feelings of low confidence in the role. As one mentor said, "you're used to marking up PhD students' work", indicating that they were comfortable with the role of providing feedback to their students, but acting as a mentor to a colleague was more of a challenge. The emotion coding suggested the presence of strong feelings about this:

When I was giving feedback on the one that was submitted, I did find that quite nerve-racking actually. Hers was quite good, I mean, but it was just there was an element of 'who am I to tell her?'

The same participant went on to say:

I was very conscious of the fact that it's very easy to fall back exactly what you say, to treat them like students...but that's not the point.

It could be argued that the mentors' confidence was likely to increase as they became more experienced in the role. While there is a 'correct' answer for applicants to the framework in the sense of meeting the criteria contained in the UK PSF, experience of supporting several mentees is likely to demonstrate to mentors that academic staff work in a variety of contexts and there are many ways to achieve Fellowship (in any category). Furthermore, in their reflections on mentoring, Gravells and Wallace (2012) explore "the power of not knowing" (p. 21) and how this can contribute to continued development. They go on to note that "Very often, the mentor will be just as much out of their depth and there is no harm in admitting this and discovering new ideas together." (p.22), a sentiment that could be reassuring for new mentors. Nonetheless, this theme suggests that further development opportunities are needed to support the mentors as they build their knowledge and experience.

Theme 4: Rewards of mentoring

While the mentors in the pilot project identified the challenges described above, they spoke positively about several aspects of mentoring within the institutional framework also, with one mentor describing the relationship with her mentee as a "positive interaction" and another stating: "I think it's worthwhile." They welcomed the opportunity mentoring provided to hear about good practice in learning and teaching:

I liked finding out how other people did their teaching, ...it gives you a better idea of what's going on in other places, especially in that case it was a different college.

Yeah, it's very interesting just even looking at other peoples' learning and teaching, what they're doing and then promoting it I think.

One mentor suggested that the mentees might benefit from this sharing of practice too:

Just talking about what they've done and what they think would make a good case study...it might help them recognise what they could use in their own teaching or give them ideas how they could adapt their teaching or ask the head of department if they could do x, y or z, that they are not doing right now.

Another positive aspect was the knowledge and skills the mentors felt they had developed through their mentoring role:

It's also good for keeping all the framework fresh in your mind, you forget it so easily but actually it is useful to think about that in your own context.

I was asked to be an early career development mentor as well, and when I was asked that I kind of felt a bit more confident to say yes because I was doing this... and I said, 'yeah, I can do that, I've had some experience of that'.

In addition to knowledge and skills, the participants in this study noted the contribution of mentoring to their professional development more generally. Several mentors had added the experience to their curriculum vitae and included it in performance review discussions. They were keen that this was recognised and valued by their managers. For example, one mentor had taken action to highlight the role to her manager: "I'll try and make something of it, you know, 'I'm doing this, isn't it wonderful'". However, there were mixed responses to this aspect as some observed that the role did not receive as much recognition as they would like, with one mentor explaining that the role would not be acknowledged in their workload.

Where this was the case, the participants expressed frustration about the lack of recognition. Previous research in another UK research-intensive institution (Willis & Davidson, 2017) has questioned the extent to which leading teaching is valued in an institution that is focused on research. At the institution in which this study was undertaken, there is a commitment to ensuring Senior Fellowship as well as other examples of leadership of learning and teaching are reflected in promotions criteria and recognised more widely. However, the study points to a need for this to be communicated more clearly in some contexts.

Nonetheless the emotion analysis uncovered positive feelings, including pleasure arising from working with colleagues:

I've enjoyed the talks I've had with people.

Seeing their engagement with their learning and teaching I think was really quite interesting.

I liked doing the [institutional fellowship]. I'm glad I can help other people try and get through it

In addition, one mentor expressed pride in the support they had been able to offer:

I feel that I've helped [A] with his reflective statement and also choosing his case studies and in terms of the reflecting on the teaching observation, I mean, I think that all went really well. And with [B] helping her realise that she needed to choose some particular case studies that showed leadership.

These quotes about the pleasures and professional rewards of mentoring support the findings of Botham's study of the impact of engagement with an institutional CPD scheme. The participants in her study showed "a willingness to support and advise colleagues" (Botham 2018a, p. 171) following their own achievement within the scheme, and they indicated they felt more able to support colleagues' development as one outcome of their participation. The participants in Botham's (2018a) study who had experienced successful engagement with the institutional scheme demonstrated increased confidence in talking with colleagues about learning and teaching. In the mentoring project this had developed into a championing of the framework for some:

So I think we're kind of almost like an ambassador really I think, if you're in this role, you feel you want to get people on board because you know the value of it, just having that time to take out that you reflect on your teaching practice.

Conclusions

This study was small in scale and exploratory in nature, with a focus on informing future developments beyond the pilot project. I was mindful as I undertook the research that I held joint roles as researcher and as coordinator of both institutional framework and the mentoring project. Although I emphasised to participants that I wished to hear their views, both positive and negative, these limitations should be borne in mind when drawing conclusions from the study.

Nevertheless, the two-stage analysis of interview data was helpful in exploring the mentors' experiences, while taking account of their emotions that provided "deep insight into the participants' perspectives, world views and life conditions" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 125). The study revealed challenges and rewards of the mentor role.

The findings from this research have informed lessons for practice that will be of interest to colleagues with a role in supporting academic staff development whether through institutional UK PSF aligned CPD frameworks or other opportunities in which mentoring might have a place. First, the study highlighted the pressures on staff of competing work priorities, which made it difficult for everyone involved to find time for mentoring and points to a need for practical support for mentors. One response in

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my context, was to make meeting space available to book on set days, making it easier to plan. In addition, it is now made clear at the outset that the mentor will initiate the first meeting to avoid confusion about this responsibility. While these minor adjustments cannot address the bigger issue of staff workload and lack of time highlighted by Botham (2018b), it is hoped they alleviate some of the mentors' practical concerns. However, on-campus mentoring was disrupted when all meetings moved online due to the circumstances of the current pandemic.

Next, the findings suggested the need for clarity about the mentor role, which I have addressed through the creation of an 'expectations' document that is issued to all mentees and mentors at the start of their collaboration. The document sets out guidelines for the roles and responsibilities of both mentors and mentees e.g., the number of meetings and the kind of support offered, as well as what can be expected in terms of feedback on draft applications. The document reinforces the responsibility of applicants to ensure their application meets the relevant UK PSF criteria. This is a point of reference that mentors can use in discussions with mentees about the nature and extent of the support they can provide.

This study highlighted the need for ongoing opportunities for mentors to build their confidence in the role, that I have addressed through mentors' meetings that facilitate sharing of practice. For some mentors, the chance to become a reviewer for the framework has provided an additional opportunity to build their knowledge and experience that they have welcomed. The aim here is to continue the increase in confidence that can be associated with professional recognition of learning and teaching identified by Botham (2018a), that has been confirmed by those mentors that have engaged in this way.

At the time of the study, the mentoring project was relatively recently established. The outcomes have informed its continued development by leading directly to project enhancements that colleagues might find useful to consider for their own contexts. For example, the study highlighted the importance of acknowledging the time pressures on academic staff and of building in administrative and practical support where possible. In addition, a clear description of the responsibilities of mentoring at the outset can be helpful for both mentors and mentees. Lastly, potential mentors might benefit from ongoing development opportunities to build confidence as they become established as mentors.

While challenges were identified by the mentors, they highlighted aspects of the role that suggest it can be a rewarding and worthwhile endeavour. Now more established, further research is needed to explore the extent to which the mentoring project has supported successful applications to the institutional CPD framework.

Biographies

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