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# 'On the edge of glory and hanging on a moment of truth': PgCAP in a rapidly changing and uncertain world

**Fiona Kennedy, Tom Cunningham, Tracy Galvin**
**Glasgow Caledonian University**

ABSTRACT

The last three years have seen rapid changes to learning, teaching and assessment in Higher Education. This paper shares our experiences of leading, teaching and re-accrediting a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PgCAP) during this time. As tutors we have, much like the staff enrolled on the course, had to adapt, innovate, and experiment to meet the various challenges during this time. This has included an unplanned move online, followed by a planned online approach, and through to our current blended by design delivery method. Throughout we have sought to model best practice with the risks and rewards this brings. Our revised PgCAP was approved internally in 2022 and subsequently successfully re-accredited with Advance HE against the Professional Standards Framework (PSF). Some of this process was exciting: we felt at the forefront of changes to learning and teaching, to be charting new developments in technology and interaction which our learners could then use in their own teaching. But part of this process was also daunting, feeling we were one moment away from crashing and failing. We tried to learn from those failures and become comfortable working on the edge, with an ever-changing set of priorities and expectations (from ourselves, our learners, and our institution). Our case study firstly reflects on the challenges, pressures and opportunities associated with PgCAP programmes to model best practice (even in times of crisis); secondly, it shares how our blended by design approach came about, how it works, and the feedback we have received from participants; and thirdly, it demonstrates how we refreshed our content, intended learning outcomes, and assessments to map to the PSF 2023.

Keywords: PgCAP, accreditation, professional development, academic development, blended learning

## Introduction and context

The last three years have witnessed rapid and far-reaching changes in learning, teaching, and assessment in Higher Education. The initial so-called 'pivot' (Nordmann et al., 2020; Salmon, 2020) to online learning at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic was followed by significant staff development and training for a predominately online academic year in 2020/21 (Hodges et al., 2020). Moves to blended and hybrid learning models followed, with the latest research pointing to what comes next, given that now all learning is potentially blended; something labelled a 'beyond blended' future (Kushnir & Spowart, 2021; MacNeill & Beetham, 2023). The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCAP) at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) mirrored this journey: an emergency move online was followed by a planned online delivery during academic years 20/21 and 21/22. This was modified to a blended approach for academic year 22/23. A redesign of the PgCAP was completed during 2022, for both internal reapproval and re-accreditation with Advance HE, to launch a new blended by design approach from September 2023.

The PgCAP at GCU is for staff who are new to teaching and/or supporting student learning in Higher Education (typically with less than three years' experience). Like similar programmes at other institutions in

the UK, the PgCAP is a master's level programme which supports staff develop and contextualise their approaches to learning and teaching in a scholarly-informed, evidence based, environment. The programme is accredited by Advance HE for individual professional recognition as Associate Fellow or Fellow depending on the exit point. The authors are all experienced tutors and academic developers, having taught on this and similar programmes in other institutions.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, we summarise some of the existing literature on the role and impact of PgCAPs in the sector, placing our programme in this context. Second, we share our story of adapting, crafting and (re)designing the PgCAP at GCU through and beyond the pandemic, including our revised blended by design approach and re-accreditation by Advance HE, 2023 against the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) 2023. Third, we reflect on the impact of this process - for us as academic developers and our key partners - exploring the challenges, pressures and opportunities associated with PgCAP programmes to model best practice, even in times of crisis. Throughout we felt we were working on the edge or limit of what was possible for such programmes.

## Postgraduate certificates in academic practice

UK universities increasingly expect staff with responsibilities for teaching and/or supporting student learning to gain recognition for their practice. Such professional recognition often comes in the form of fellowships of Advance HE, who manage the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) on behalf of the sector. One common route to recognition is an accredited PgCAP. These courses are delivered by institutions for their teaching staff, with the aim of introducing staff to university teaching, including session planning, content delivery, course design and assessment.

It has been argued (Kushnir & Spowart, 2021) that there is a 'dearth of research' on the value and impact to academic staff of PgCAP programmes, in particular, whether such programmes develop individual teaching practices. This is perhaps an overstatement; research into this topic is limited but can be found. Hibbert and Semler (2016, p.587) for example, neatly summarise some of the scepticism about the impact of PgCAP programmes: "the need for and effectiveness of formal programmes and qualifications has long been contested." They wonder whether the institutional climate of higher education might be problematic, given that formal qualifications for teaching are established and accepted in other sectors like high schools and further education. More positively, Butcher and Stoncel (2012) found that the single PgCAP they researched resulted in more confident teaching approaches, learner-centred conceptualisations, enhanced reflection on practice, and recognition of dialogue as an enabler for change. This chimes with Davis and Aleksiev (2020) who claim that the PgCAP programme they evaluated resulted in an increased self-awareness for staff, a shift towards student-centred practice, greater implementation of active learning in teaching, and increased confidence overall in the practice of teaching. They go on to argue that completing such programmes increases the likelihood of staff making significant changes to teaching practice. Mulholland et al. (2023) claim that the PgCAP programme they researched helped participants in meeting the challenges of imposter phenomenon.

Research into professional recognition in learning and teaching in higher education more generally is also limited but growing. Spowart et al. (2019) used interviews with staff at different institutions to explore the impact of professional recognition, including the PSF. Participants raised questions about the extent to which professional recognition is a 'tick-box' exercise, about the utility as a marketing tool of percentages of staff with fellowship, and whether achieving recognition was yet more workload for staff: "There is an expectation in institutions (linked to credentialism and league table positions) that staff will engage but the extent to which this is actually valued and developmental is largely assumed" (p.1309). Van Der Sluis (2023, p.425) has recently argued that professional recognition makes little difference to teaching quality, on the grounds that "no significant positive or negative association was found between the growing number of […] Fellowships and the NSS [National Student Survey] scores indicating teaching quality over the same period". More positively, in their detailed study (across 6 institutions and over 1300 respondents), Cathcart

et al. (2023) found that community and peer support surrounding fellowship applications was of real value to participants:

> The developmental potential of engaging in this largely self-reflective exercise is augmented when the impact is understood as inextricably linked to relationships with others, and as a platform for ongoing collegial networks and development (Cathcart et al. 2023, p.329).

This is supported by the earlier findings of Thornton (2014), which found that professional recognition of teaching is most effective when embedded as part of a culture of professional development, led from a senior institutional level.

The limited research into the impact of professional recognition, and the PgCAP in particular, is made even more pressing given the rapid and sudden changes caused by the pandemic, the pivot to emergency online teaching, and the subsequent moves to blended and hybrid learning. In her thought-provoking paper, using podcasting to explore potential utopian and dystopian visions of the 'post-coronial' future, (Eringfeld, 2021) argues that blended approaches to learning were the most desirable ones for research participants, where she highlighted:

> These blended approaches will need to pay specific attention to education as an embodied and communal experience, given that disembodiment and loss of community and belonging emerged as the most pressing concerns amongst both students and faculty academics (p.155).

Kushnir and Spowart (2021, p.167) have called for more research into how PgCAPs have incorporated the challenges and opportunities associated with the move online "to assist new university teachers in adapting to the online or blended approach". One example of this is that shared by OKeeffe et al. (2021), of a programme taken fully online because of the pandemic. A 'pedagogy of care' approach was adopted; focussing on care before curriculum aimed to give participants confidence to design similar activities for their students. They argue that a PgCAP could be delivered effectively as blended or fully online, although "further evaluation" (p.2) is required.

Our paper aims to provide more evaluation of and reflection on the impact of PgCAP programmes, in the online and blended context, by sharing the experience of one such programme at GCU. Each institutional context is different, but we hope our case study resonates with others with similar experiences who worked as part of the team on a PgCAP during the pandemic and continue to navigate that change.

## The PgCAP at GCU

Our PgCAP is designed for staff across the university who are new to teaching and/or supporting student learning.  This includes staff based at our Glasgow and London campuses and staff based at our international partner institution, the African Leadership College (ALC). The programme is hosted by the Academic Development and Student Learning (ADSL) department. This is a central department which performs a key role in supporting the professional development and recognition for all those who teach and/or support student learning at GCU.

The PgCAP, when last reviewed in 2018, was designed to be delivered in a traditional format; with on campus teaching sessions supported by additional learning resources housed in the virtual learning environment (VLE). In March 2020, all on campus teaching ceased in response to the pandemic and first national lockdown. At this time, PgCAP learners were faced with the enormity of designing and delivering fully online learning, managing the impact of the global pandemic on their personal lives and teaching practice, whilst simultaneously engaging with their own PgCAP modules. Consideration of this pressure and

the potential impact on learner well-being led the programme team to take the decision to suspend PgCAP teaching, recommencing in the following academic trimester.

The restrictions put in place during periods of national lockdown also necessitated a rapid re-design of the PgCAP modules. Learning outcomes and assessments remained unchanged, but module content and delivery was adapted to provide a fully online programme, and this was put in place from May 2020 and continued through until August 2022. The pandemic, whilst bringing many challenges to the programme team and to PgCAP participants, also afforded the opportunity to re-imagine opportunities for learning, sharing, and networking between participants based in a variety of locations. This included (in addition to the use of fully online classes) a virtual PgCAP café created in Microsoft Teams to offer an informal space for socialisation and support purposes. Participant feedback noted that the PgCAP café had provided a positive forum for informal support during the initial months of the pandemic although actual engagement with the café was mostly limited to a small number of individuals. As the return to campus ensued, engagement with the café decreased as learners reverted to water cooler conversations to provide the main source of collegial support. At the point where it was being used sporadically, we took the decision to close the virtual café doors. Somewhat frustratingly, evaluation of the café had indicated that most students were appreciative of the resource and its availability, even though only a proportionately small number of individuals engaged with it. Our reflections revealed that we felt we had perched on the edge of glory with the creation of the PgCAP café but that the innovation had not fully taken flight. In this case, the limited longevity of the co-curricular activity cast a shadow over the positive feedback received.

In September 2022, aligned with a university wide return to campus and a refreshed focus on maximising the on-campus student experience, the PgCAP moved to a blended design of on campus and online (synchronous) learning experiences, with asynchronous learning activities used to support pre and post session learning. This refreshed blend of learning activities afforded opportunities to enhance socialisation opportunities across PgCAP cohorts and as such, the programme team introduced co-curricular activities including an online REAL (Reading Evidence And Literature) group. A further example of co-curricular activity introduced by the programme team at the point of returning to campus-based activities, was a series of bespoke continuing professional development events to support teaching in person skills (TIPS) sessions. Designed to support PgCAP participants who had little (or no) experience of engaging with learners in the on campus learning environment, TIPS sessions introduced participants to topics including classroom dynamics, small group working, active learning in the on-campus setting, and face to face feedback. TIPS sessions were made available to the wider learning and teaching community, including participants on the PgCAP. Evaluation of the sessions commended the structure and flow of the sessions, with participants identifying the relevance and applicability to their practice. Feedback from participants was positive with comments describing the co-curricular activities as interesting, informative, and enjoyable.

Whilst the evaluation of these co-curricular activities was positive, the number of PgCAP students engaging with TIPS sessions was limited. Of a 30 strong cohort, only six to eight PgCAP students participated in individual sessions. In a similar vein to the longevity of the PgCAP café, TIPS sessions were discontinued at the point where the return to campus superseded the need for this co-curricular activity. However, in contrast to the perceived limited 'success' of the PgCAP café, TIPS sessions were regarded as an initiative that had impact. Our reflection on TIPS sessions encouraged us to revisit the balance of skills, knowledge and values that infused the PgCAP curriculum, and this was used to inform and enhance the design of our new programme.

**Internal review and reapproval**

GCU operates a cyclical approach to programme review, compliant with the Scottish Funding Council Guidance to Higher Education Institutions on Quality (2017-22) (Scottish Funding Council, 2017). The PgCAP was initially approved in 2008 then reviewed and re-approved in 2015 and 2018. The 2018 PgCAP, accredited by Advance HE, was a part time, work-based programme. Four Scottish Credit & Qualification Framework (SCQF) master's level (level 11), 15 credit modules were delivered over a two-year period. Successful completion of all four modules led to the final exit award of PgCAP and professional recognition as a Fellow of Advance HE. There was also an exit award of a Post Experience Certificate (PEC) in Student Engagement, following the successful completion of the first two modules. Successful completion of the two modules also led to professional recognition as an Associate Fellow of Advance HE.

For the 2022 internal reapproval a Programme Development Team (PDT) was convened with a range of key partners. Led by the PgCAP Programme Leader, PDT membership included:

- ADSL team members
- Academic Librarian
- Academic Schools and Departments representatives
- Partner organisation (ALC) representative
- PgCAP graduates.

The PDT critically reflected upon the effectiveness of the PgCAP, considering the philosophy, viability, structure, flexibility, student support and exit awards associated with the programme, in addition to reviewing proposed curriculum developments at programme and modular levels. The PDT reported to a Programme Board - convened once per academic trimester with the responsibility for overall monitoring and maintenance of academic standards of the programme, allowing an audit trail of the critical review process. Throughout the process of internal programme review (and subsequent Advance HE re-accreditation) the programme team consulted with the PgCAP External Examiners, who acted as critical friends offering valuable comments and insights at each stage of the process.

The PDT proposed to form two distinct programmes: a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCAP) and a Post Experience Certificate in Supporting Student Learning (PEC). This decision was informed by several considerations, one of which was the aim of giving the PEC a distinct identity; one that could be specifically promoted to colleagues in non-traditional teaching and student support roles across the university community such as learning technologists, academic librarians, student disability team, and Student Association full time officers. Whilst the 2018 PgCAP exit award facilitated access, participants leaving after the first two modules were recorded as exiting early from the PgCAP, leaving both participants and programme team dissatisfied that the final award was not recorded as a specific and deliberate achievement. The proposed delineation between the PEC and PgCAP as distinct programmes would enable more accurate reporting of progression and achievement rates of participants as part of monitoring and evaluation, allowing a transparent audit of meeting the University's progression targets.

The PgCAP programme team also engaged with a bespoke consultancy project ('Flexible Design at GCU') delivered by Advance HE related to the development of flexible and inclusive curriculum design through use of the Active Digital Design (ADD) model (Advance HE, 2022). The aim of this practice-based project was to work with a project team from GCU over a period of 6 weeks to design and implement a flexible model of learning that aligned with the mission, vision, and values of GCU as articulated in the University's Strategy for Learning 2030. The review and re-approval of the PgCAP offered a timely opportunity for the project group to apply the principles of flexible design to the refreshed programmes. Membership of the Flexible by Design project team included representation from:

- ADSL team members
- Academic Schools and Departments

- PgCAP students/graduates.

Engagement with key partners through the work of the PDT, Flexible by Design project group, PgCAP programme board, and discussions with external examiners all contributed to the review. The review process provided the programme team with the opportunity to refresh and enhance the content and delivery of the programmes, which we will now explore in more detail.

### Explicit commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education

The PgCAP and PEC programmes were reviewed with the intention of making the commitment to widening participation explicit through design and delivery, and this started at the point of entry to the programme. As a CPD programme for staff on academic and non-academic contracts, the PEC was deliberately designed to include colleagues from departments across the university, creating opportunities for rich and diverse cohorts. The approach was intended to not only enable participants to engage in a programme of study that could support their role within supporting student learning, but afforded learning opportunities for participants to learn with and from peers engaged in a range of roles that support the holistic student experience.

The PEC and PgCAP programmes were also explicitly committed to inclusivity, with the adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to reduce inequalities and to support learner variability and diversity through a set of guidelines to support educators or those who support learning (CAST, 2018). The UDL framework is where educators intentionally design with firm goals through flexible means and draws from three guiding principles as developed by (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014) to support learners through:

(1) multiple means of engagement, through building community, creating inclusive learning environments, and building a sense of belonging, to tap into learner's interests and culturally relevant contexts and self-evaluation, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation by collaborating with others;
(2) multiple means of representation, to give diverse learners options for acquiring information and knowledge through clear navigation of the programmes, welcome event, weekly check-ins and updates, opportunities to attend additional CPD sessions, scaffold learning and draw from different cultures and background knowledge, transcripts, and captions on recordings;
(3) multiple means of action and expression, to provide learners with options for demonstrating what they know by including choice, and a variety of appropriate instructional technologies and multiple media for learners to engage and communicate.

The importance of equality of participation was also a key feature of the PEC and PgCAP module content. Threaded through all modules, participants would be asked to consider and evaluate their own practice in terms of fostering an engaging and inclusive experience for their own learners. For example, the first module of both programmes was designed to ask participants to reflect upon their own experiences of designing and delivering a learning activity, and to identify how the needs of all learners would be both respected and accommodated within their practice. Similarly, the third module of the PgCAP was designed to introduce participants to self-evaluative equality and diversity audits of their practice with a view to identifying areas of good practice, and specific actions that could be taken forward to enhance the learning experience of their students.

Engaging learners with a commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was also an explicit part of the fourth and final module of the PgCAP. Formative learning opportunities were designed to include peer support activities, professional discussions and making a 'pledge to action' in relation to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD is one of the targets of the SDGs 4.7 and is considered a driver of achievement of all 17 SDGs with (UNESCO, 2020) ESD roadmap recognising its importance in

teaching,

> By 2030 ensure all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

There were many opportunities through ESD to reinforce institutional priorities such as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), internationalisation, employability, and enterprise and civic engagement. In this respect ESD offered an opportunity to frame curricula, harmonise such activities and modalities of delivery, and provide the context in which institutional priorities could find expression (as promoted in the QAA and Advance HE 2021 report), and for the learners to embed ESD within their own work-based context. This was also aligned with development work in consultation with key partners across the institution, which included an ESD Curriculum Pack to support staff. This contained an EDI in the curriculum Toolkit and a Departmental EDI self-evaluation and action plan to support Heads of Department in the quality assurance and enhancement process. The pack was underpinned by the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework.

We have already seen the impact of these changes in the new programme. For example, we included a digital artefact activity for participants: to design a student-facing assessment brief, ensuring it was digitally accessible. While initial panic erupted in class, besides the outputs achieved, it was the discussions around inclusion, technology, accessibility, and why these things are important where the real magic happened. The willingness to learn, share resources, guide one another and be aware of what areas needed further development showcased a commitment to learning and a deeper understanding of how students feel in similar situations in different learning contexts.

**Blended mode of programme delivery**

The PgCAP was made available as a fully online programme in response to the global pandemic offering an authentic opportunity for participants to experience active learning in the online environment. Whilst positively received, participants also expressed apprehension and concern about the prospect of engaging with their students in an on campus setting as the safe return to campus was introduced. Consequently, the need for a balance of on campus and online learning experiences became apparent and the programme team used these insights alongside the learning gained from engaging with the Advance HE consultancy project ('Flexible Design at GCU') to inform the review of the PgCAP and PEC. Learning modalities were carefully considered to identify the specific value that on campus, synchronous online and asynchronous activities would provide for learners, and the pedagogical approach taken to the use of the digital environment was underpinned by the ADD (Active Digital Design) model.

Both programmes were underpinned by UDL and all modules were designed to incorporate a blend of delivery modes of participation in different learning environments (MacNeill & Beetham, 2023; Singleton et al., 2019). Learning capture would be used to record the essence of tutorials, with key learning points recorded using various formats including written and audio summaries, and images. The learning capture content would be generated by participants and the programme team, facilitating learning experiences informed by the concept of co-creation.

As a team, we were able to offer a robust defence of our decision to design a deliberately blended learning experience, informed by pedagogy and fuelled by the critical discussion and debate that we had as a programme team. We agreed that the inclusion of face-to-face teaching would allow learners to engage with practical skills development and localised networking therefore the inclusion of on campus sessions

was unanimously supported. This chimed with university-level delivery principles, which emphasised our place as a campus-based university. The rationale for including synchronous online sessions was also agreed, with the programme team noting the benefits of bringing together learners from the various campus bases in Glasgow, London and Mauritius. However, amid our discussions, we tussled with the idea of incorporating hyflex teaching into our programme design where we would offer the opportunity for learners to join sessions either on campus or online. We acknowledged the benefits of hyflex as a flexible and inclusive approach, but we noted concerns in relation to students 'opting out' of face-to-face learning experiences or diluting the benefits of coming together face-to-face for protected PgCAP time. Whilst our discussions went back and forth, we concluded that we should incorporate a limited use of hyflex for the induction sessions in each module and in doing so, we could model best practice for staff.

## Enhancements to the assessment strategy

The primary enhancement made to the assessment strategy for the PEC and PgCAP was the inclusion of greater choice for learners. Assessments within both the PEC and the PgCAP require participants to contextualise their learning to their own specific work-based role and environment therefore learners would be afforded a degree of choice to select relevant topics to explore. Designed to encourage participants to adopt an enhancement-led approach to their academic practice, assessments would enable participants to use the assessment process to identify and critically reflect on aspects of good practice, in addition to investigating areas that they may find challenging, with the intention for learners to possibly include such inclusive and authentic assessment types into their own practice to develop key competencies and employability skills (Sokhanvar et al., 2021; Tai et al., 2023). Additionally, summative assessments offer participants the option to negotiate with the module leaders as to the format for their assessment product; for example, participants can opt to submit a reflective piece as a written report, digital artefact, digital story, etc.. The aim of this enhancement was to motivate participants to engage fully with the assessment process as a source of learning while role modelling a strategy that could promote greater learner agency.

Our approach to assessment and the authentic learning opportunities offered by the diverse range of assessments across the programme was commended by the review panel during the University led re-approval process. However, one of our assessments drew more attention than any other; the use of a group assessment weighted at 100% of the overall module grade. Located within a module where collaboration was a key focus, the use of a group-based assessment was considered logical, authentic and aligned to the intended learning outcomes of the module. To support this group assessment, we designed an individual piece of work (marked as pass/fail) that would require students to reflect on their individual contributions to the group and their experience of collaborating with others. Whilst the design of the assessment itself was not questioned, the programme review panel asked the team to revisit the weighting of the group assessment with a view to ensuring that the assessment tool would ensure fair and equitable grading in relation to individual contributions of group members. Whilst we had viewed our assessment design to be innovative and forward thinking, the review panel perceived this as being a risky strategy and something that could impact upon the accurate measurement of student performance. As a programme team, we discussed this at length and agreed to change the weighting of the group assessment and the individual coursework, giving both 50% weighting. However, the decision was not reached easily with our discussions going back and forth between the desire to push the boundaries of innovation, and the need to work within the limits of quality standards and regulations. Whilst the quality of the learning experience guided us to our eventual decision to make changes to our assessment strategy, we felt disappointed not to have had the opportunity to take our creativity to the next level.

## Enhancement of peer observation activities

Development of peer observation as a component of both the PEC and PgCAP was highlighted as an enhancement of the reviewed programmes. Previously, peer observation activities had been focused on the PgCAP participant being observed and had been incorporated into the fourth and final module of the PgCAP. Feedback from participants highlighted the value of engaging with both types of observation activities (being observed in practice and observing the practice of an experienced colleague) and the programme team subsequently developed this by embedding a variety of peer observation activities into two modules; the first module of the PEC and PgCAP, and then again in the final module of the PgCAP. In addition to creating equal opportunities for all PEC and PgCAP learners to engage with peer observation as a developmental activity, the embedded nature of this activity across the longevity of the PgCAP was used to role model the inclusion of peer support activities as a naturally occurring component of academic practice.

As a programme team, we shared the view that we wanted to be involved in peer observation experiences with our learners. However, the number of students engaged with the PgCAP prohibited this on a practical basis. Our desire to engage in this developmental opportunity was hampered by our capacity to support the growing number of students across the programme and this acted as a frustration to us. Not having the opportunity to engage deeply and authentically with the practice of our learners was a concern for us and limited our options for using peer observation as a formal means of authentication of practice, as required for professional recognition. However, we agreed to adopt a pragmatic approach and enlist the support of experienced colleagues across the University, including our Senior Fellow community. Whilst this addressed the logistics of ensuring that each PgCAP student could engage with peer observation activities, we felt disappointed that this was a learning activity that we could not support from within the programme team. Indeed, this continues to be something that we continue to discuss as we move forward, ever hopeful that we can identify a solution that facilitates our full engagement with peer observation activities.

## Reflections on experience

The discussion above demonstrates the extent of enhancements made to our PgCAP through a period of rapid changes to learning and teaching. In this section we pause to reflect on the move to online teaching, followed by our on campus, blended approach; as well as drawing from a range of different perspectives on decision making for the re-accreditation, challenges faced and the importance of collaboration to include our key partners and our own individual reflections.

### Feedback from key partners

Throughout the design, delivery, and re-design of the PgCAP, the programme team drew heavily on their relationships with key partners to evaluate and inform the health and effectiveness of the programme. PgCAP students and graduates, external examiners, and members of the programme development team were pivotal partners, providing contributions and feedback related to the programmes and the learning experience of participants.

To inform the programme review, feedback from PgCAP students was collected through several mechanisms including Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQs), mid-module pause for feedback, and informally through class discussions. The feedback represented views that spanned the multitude of changes that had occurred including the move to a completely online programme, then the re-design to adopt a blended approach. Quantitative and qualitative data taken from these feedback sources indicated that satisfaction remained consistently high across all modules, with module evaluation questionnaires returning overall satisfaction rates from 86 -100%. Response rates to module evaluations were known to fluctuate ranging from 27% to 56% of total cohort numbers, therefore some caution was taken with the

interpretation of these scores. Qualitative comments received from participants included commendations in relation to the following areas.

- Relevance and value of module material and content
- Style of teaching delivery and modelling of good teaching practice
- Helpful feedback
- Support received by the programme team (with specific mention to support during Covid and responsiveness to mid module feedback)
- High quality experience of online learning
- Usefulness of peer observation activities

Areas for enhancement noted by participants included,

- More protected time for engagement with the PgCAP
- Ability to manage workload demands alongside time for PgCAP study
- A review of timing of module assessments
- Additional peer learning and networking opportunities

Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive for the programme team with specific reference made to the support received from the team, in particular the empathetic actions taken to temporarily suspend the programme to support learner well-being during the national lockdown. External examiners supported this and went further to acknowledge the modelling of practice from the programme team, the high level of compassion and support extended to PgCAP students, and the cohesiveness of the programme team. In relation to the learner experience of a blended programme design from Autumn 2022 onwards, student feedback indicated that there was a high level of perceived satisfaction with the design and delivery of the programme. Feedback commended the balance of learning modalities adopted, including the use of asynchronous learning resources. In the aftermath of the global pandemic, learners also praised the inclusion of on campus classes, acknowledging the value of networking and interacting with peers and the teaching team.

**Programme leader reflections**

The global pandemic necessitated the rapid shift to online learning and teaching and an accelerated re-design of the curriculum. As staff looked towards the Academic Development team for guidance, support and leadership, my feelings of imposter phenomenon took a firmer than usual hold. I was not an expert in online learning and teaching but being programme Leader of the PgCAP led to the expectation that I would role model how to design and deliver a fully online programme. Held up as programme modelling best practice, the PgCAP needed to provide an active, engaging online learning experience delivered across multiple campus bases that would not only facilitate high quality learner experiences but also act as a blueprint for PgCAP students to adopt and adapt for their own use; a double challenge and something that acted as the conceptual tightrope that I was about to walk.

There were times when the learning curve seemed enormous but being part of a supportive team helped to manage the anxiety associated with having so much to learn oneself, whilst simultaneously leading others through example and demonstrating 'best practice'. Strategies used to address the challenges and expectations associated with role modelling in a time of rapid change and uncertainty came in several different guises. Regular team meetings and informal catch-ups were conducted online, and these allowed a safe space to experiment with technology and digital tools, providing continuing professional development (CPD) 'by the back door' that would later prove to be invaluable. Sector wide CPD events were plentiful throughout the global pandemic and engagement with these acted as a valuable means of gaining pedagogical insights, sharing creative learning and teaching strategies, and engaging with scholarly

practice. As a personal strategy, I also maintained a diary that allowed me to explore my response to learning and teaching amidst the context of the global pandemic. Each diary entry ended with a WILT (What I Learned Today) statement. Reflecting on those entries illuminated the challenges experienced in relation to my own learning and teaching practice, my identity as a teacher, and the physical and emotional impact of learning, working, and living in the restricted context imposed by a national lockdown.

The idea of role modelling was not of course limited to the redesign and delivery of the PgCAP in the midst of a global pandemic. Working through the internal quality assurance review processes, the programme team were portrayed as keepers of the university 'gold standard' by colleagues. Whilst this was considered positive feedback and indicative of a team who upheld high quality assurance and enhancement standards, the expectation to deliver 'flawless' engagement with the review process was an additional pressure. The programme review process provided the team with an opportunity to refresh the proposed design, content and delivery of the PgCAP and the PEC. As a team, we embraced the opportunity to think laterally about the programmes and used the review process to introduce creative approaches to assessment, particularly the notion of empowering learners with greater choice and control over their assessment products. Whilst this idea is not new and indeed epitomises the concept of inclusive curriculum design, the responses of learners to this element of choice was an unknown, and something that we explored through rich and collegiate discussion with our programme review panel. Whilst it was agreed as a risk worth taking, we are mindful that colleagues are interested to see how this plays out in practice, and so our role modelling journey continues.

## Module leader reflections

I joined GCU in 2021, having been the programme leader for a similar programme at my previous institution. Given this, I recognise and emphasise with some of the challenges already mentioned in relation to the emergency move online. I also felt right on the limit of my expertise and knowledge in terms of knowing how the technology could and should be used to support effective online learning, and the pressure to demonstrate to colleagues that it could 'be done'. It was also exciting to be part of these challenges, through pushing the boundaries of what might or might not be possible. The context of change, and that our participants understood not everything would work as intended made for useful and constructive conversations in the PgCAP sessions. Finding out what worked in breakout rooms, how best to share content, and how to support student engagement (which perhaps seem obvious, writing now in 2023) were novel and new to me at the time, and not something I always got right.

The move towards a more blended and considered approach to the PgCAP in 22/23 was, perhaps, more stressful for me. I felt some leniency (or perhaps understanding) was given to tutors in the initial stages of the pandemic. But we had now had the opportunity to plan for a blended approach; one which took the benefits of online learning, of flexibility and learner choice, but maximised the benefits of in person, on campus sessions. I'm not convinced we (as a sector) have got persuasive answers to how flexible 'flexible learning' should be or finding the right balance in blended learning. But I certainly felt that we, as academic developers, should be as well-placed as anyone to provide an example of this in action. The work we did to create genuine flow between the online and on-campus sessions was therefore fascinating to me, and how we managed this across the different campuses. The bespoke consultancy work we undertook with Advance HE was particularly helpful in this regard.

I led the process of re-accrediting our programme with Advance HE in early 2023 – both for the PgCAP and our Accelerate framework for more experienced staff. GCU was one of the first two institutions to re-accredit our provision against the PSF 2023. This, again, felt like I was working on the edges of what was known, yet within touching distance of something of value. I, along with my colleagues, had engaged in the consultation process around the new PSF so had some idea of what the changes would be. This meant that we could plan for elements of the new PSF, such as the professional value of collaborating with others and

the concept of sustainability, during our internal review process. It was reassuring, therefore, to receive several commendations in relation to the PgCAP. This included recognition that we, as with the PSF, emphasised the importance of the Professional Values as underpinning individual practice, informed by our institutional values of integrity, creativity, responsibility, and confidence. We were also commended for our changes to assessment, providing flexible and appropriate assessment for learning. The commitment to the SDGs and how these are embedded in the PgCAP were also praised.

## Module tutor reflections

I joined GCU in 2022, having been involved in delivering some sessions previously on a PgCAP, as well as being an honorary lecturer as a module lead to two modules where the PgCAP was fully online. Given these two different perspectives from two different institutions, I recognise the value and challenges of blended learning, especially to engage an international audience located globally on different time zones, where English is not a first language, where the focus is often on the UK context because of the PSF alignment and for those with none or limited experience of teaching or the UK approach to teaching and learning. While many online strategies and possibilities were not necessarily novel to me during the move to online, by the time I arrived in GCU the PgCAP was well established with a long-standing reputation and seen as a worthwhile and supportive programme. There is no surprise that the biggest challenge for any staff member taking on such a commitment of CPD, was being on edge regarding time, or indeed the amount it took to be fully engaged and often overwhelmed with other commitments and responsibilities taking priority. This challenge was supported by the varying approaches of blended learning with several opportunities for learners to engage through on-campus sessions, on-line recorded synchronous sessions and varying technologies, resources and activities incorporated to scaffold learning, build communities of practice, a sense of belonging and self-directed learning. Moreover, what really stood out was the space for learners to interact, reflect, and engage through dialogue, as well as the lifelong friendships that resulted in being part of such a journey.

It was evident that the programme team were truly committed to ensuring the re-accreditation was inclusive, accessible and drew from the lessons learned before, during and after the pandemic through a partnership approach, by consulting with key partners across the institution, as well as the alumni. There is a conscious commitment toward modelling best practice, incorporating care pedagogy and loyalty not only toward learners, but to the common good of the university and wider priorities, to enhance the student experience. Just as our students face many barriers, so do our staff. Therefore, to minimise barriers, include flexible approaches, draw from learner variability and to strive toward equity of experience during the re-accreditation, the programme drew from the UDL framework. UDL is not something that can be learned in a day as it is an expansive inclusive mindset that takes time to embed across teaching, learning and assessment practices, as well as the hidden curriculum. Nonetheless, it has been such a rewarding experience to do a deep dive into how the PgCAP learners can gain the most following the review, from modelling best practice through the active learning methods and strategies, resources, guidance and technologies, and representation, as well as more inclusive and authentic assessments. Fostering the uniqueness of individuals, sharing of resources, and modelling best practice was becoming evident as the learners were incorporating elements of UDL in their own reflections, activities, and action plans in their assessments, as well as inclusive teaching methods.

## Conclusion

This case study has shared our experiences of, and perspectives on, the PgCAP at GCU during a period of rapid change and uncertainty. Our reflections demonstrate our feeling of working on the edge at times, feeling the heat of pressure and expectation that comes with teaching on these programmes, whilst also enjoying the glory when things went well. The changes made, with successes in both internal reapproval and external re-accreditation, carried risks in terms of delivery, access and assessment practices.

We hope that sharing this case study helps contribute to the growing research on the impact and effectiveness of PgCAP programmes more broadly. This is but one example, and each institution is different, but the pace and depth of change is significant and (we expect) something which resonates with other similar programmes across the sector.

As our PgCAP moves forward, we will be watching and evaluating the changes that we have made. Our own reflections will continue to inform us, as will our students' voices. Already, we are making sense of some of the enhancements that we introduced such as our blended programme design. Student feedback indicates that the blend of learning modalities allows learners to gain an authentic and balanced experience of learning environments and is offering the degree of flexibility that we were striving to achieve. However, students also note that the value of face-to-face learning extends beyond practical skills development and networking opportunities; they describe the 'protection' offered by being together in a physical space that is uninterrupted by their colleagues, emails, phone calls and students looking for support, and they are asking for more of these experiences. This is something that we will explore further as the roll out of our new programme progresses.

Just like the staff we support in their professional development and career progression, we as academic developers have faced considerable uncertainty during this period and were often expected to be the experts during such rapid change. The expectation to model best practice and that we understand the nuances of effective online and blended learning placed us in stressful, albeit sometimes exciting, positions. Throughout, we have drawn from one another's knowledge and experiences, to support and encourage, even when our individual impostor thoughts (Cunningham et al., 2023) were making us question ourselves. We have had to dance through the flames and yet strive to continue to build community and know that we belong to something, even if working on the limit.

## Biographies

*Fiona Kennedy* is a senior lecturer in Academic Development and Student Learning (ADSL) at Glasgow Caledonian University. She is programme leader for the PgCAP and PEC. Fiona also leads the Graduate Teaching Assistants Learning and Teaching Skills development Series. Fiona has specific interests in creative approaches to learning and teaching, quality assurance and enhancement of learning and teaching, and supporting staff new to learning and teaching with CPD. Fiona.kennedy2@gcu.ac.uk

*Tom Cunningham* is a senior lecturer in Academic Development and Student Learning (ADSL) at Glasgow Caledonian University. He is the Programme Leader for the Accelerate Programme, and a module leader and tutor on the PgCAP. He has interests in assessment and feedback, storytelling, and the role of Academic Development. Tom.cunningham@gcu.ac.uk

*Tracy Galvin* is a senior lecturer in Academic Development and Student Learning (ADSL) at Glasgow Caledonian University. She is a tutor on the PgCAP for the module Curriculum Design Development and a module leader as an honorary lecturer at the University of Liverpool online PgCAP. Tracy leads on several projects across the university that includes Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the Curriculum, Education for Sustainable Development, Digital Accessibility and Universal Design for Learning. Tracy.galvin@gcu.ac.uk

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