

Professional development in a tertiary model – addressing the disconnect between further and higher education

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ABSTRACT

As governments internationally begin to move towards a 'tertiary' model of post-compulsory education with greater collaboration between – and alignment of – further (FE) and higher education (HE), there is a need to address the misalignment of professional development for learning and teaching across the tertiary sector. This paper argues that the regulatory models prevalent in the college sector across the UK, largely aligned with the systems for schools, are disconnected from a vision of tertiary provision and that there should be greater alignment and recognition of learning and teaching qualifications across colleges and universities.

Keywords: tertiary, further education, higher education, academic professional development, professional registration

Introduction

In alignment with policy direction internationally (Van Damme, 2023), the governments of the four nations of the UK, most notably those of Wales and Scotland, have initiated moves towards a more coherent 'tertiary' model of post-compulsory education with greater collaboration across further (FE) and higher education (HE). These moves have highlighted the misalignment of professional development for learning and teaching across the college and university sectors, where very different practices and regulatory obligations create a disconnect across the sector. Across the UK, despite their diverse provision, colleges tend to follow a model based on the system for schools, including professional registration, while university teaching development is much less regulated and, arguably, given lower priority.

Accredited professional development in the UK tertiary sector

The four nations of the UK have differing requirements for the professional development of lecturers in colleges. They all, however, include a system of professional registration that is aligned with the model for schools. In contrast, the UK university sector has a uniform academic professional development offering across the nations, but with no legislative requirement for participation or registration.

The college sector

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, college lecturers must register with the same registration body that oversees schools. Registration is gained through qualifications based on national professional standards (for example, General Teaching Council for Scotland [GTCS], 2021). For applicants gaining their

qualification in Scotland the only route to full registration is via the Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE) awarded by a Scottish university. Lecturers who do not have this qualification can apply for provisional registration but must move to full registration by completing TQFE within a period of five years. Both Wales and Northern Ireland recognise multiple qualifications as acceptable for registration, including those that support teaching at school level.

In England, although there are pathways to becoming registered as a Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills – a status similar to that required for schoolteachers – this is not compulsory. To gain this registration numerous qualifications are available, with each based around a framework developed from an occupational standard created by Skills England (Department for Education, 2025a). While some employers may stipulate the requirement to hold a teaching qualification it is not compulsory. In October 2025, following evidence from an inspection of FE initial teacher education (ITE) that showed “significant variability in the content of ITE programmes, particularly with respect to pedagogical content” (Department for Education, 2025b, p. 3), the UK Government opened a consultation on teacher training in the English FE sector.

The university sector

The main routes to accredited professional development in learning and teaching in universities across the UK are the four categories of fellowship recognised by Advance HE or a related post-graduate certificate in learning and teaching in HE. Based on their Professional Standards Framework (PSF), fellowship with Advance HE can be applied for by the submission of a supported, evidence-based account of practice aligned to the descriptor of the relevant fellowship category. Where universities hold accreditation from Advance HE, fellowship may also be awarded via completion of a postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching in HE. Although it is not mandatory, many institutions consider achievement of fellowship when appointing or promoting academic staff.

The registration of lecturers in the college sector is viewed by employers and lecturers’ representatives as a good thing, with the college lecturer’s union in Scotland believing that it is the most effective way of “maintaining and enhancing the quality of educational provision in the further education sector” (Educational Institute of Scotland [EIS], 2025). There is no similar requirement for registration in universities and there is little support for it. Data from 2024 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland shows that 59% of university teaching staff hold a teaching qualification (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], n.d.) and there is in some quarters a prevailing view that, in alignment with wider academic freedom, academics should practice “pedagogic self-governance, conveying the sense that academics have freedom in the selection of teaching methods and processes” (Macfarlane, 2021). Kernohan (2022) notes that “there are some very famous providers where less than a third of staff who are employed to teach are qualified to do so”, leading him to suggest that UK HE quality regimes “pay no regulatory attention to the quality of teaching in higher education and instead use proxy outcomes measures [...] that are at best only tangentially in the control of providers”.

Discussion

This paper contends that the disconnect between a highly regulated, school-aligned system of lecturer development in the college sector and the less regulated, more contested provision in the university sector

acts in opposition not only to aspirations to move towards a more coherent tertiary sector but also to the reality of college-based education today.

Acknowledging the range of provision supported in colleges, Skills England state that: “teaching can be delivered at a range of levels including essential skills generally up to Level 3 including academic, vocational and technical education, some teachers may deliver subjects up to post-graduate level” (Skills England, 2025). In Scotland, somewhat differently to the rest of the UK, HE (at ISCED levels 5 and 6) makes up 26% of college provision (Scottish Funding Council [SFC], 2024a) with 19% of all HE students studying in college (HESA, 2025; SFC, 2024b).

In policy terms, following the creation in 2024 of Medr, the funding and regulating body for tertiary education, Wales has been furthest ahead of the UK nations in developing an integrated tertiary sector. In England, the recent Government White Paper on Post-16 Education and Skills aims to “facilitate closer integration between colleges and universities” (HM Government, 2025, p. 42) and since the publication of the SFC’s (2020) *Review of coherent provision and sustainability* report, the declared direction of post-compulsory education in Scotland has been towards a more aligned and collaborative tertiary sector.

Despite the breadth of delivery in the college sector and a policy direction supporting greater tertiary integration, none of the UK nations recognise teaching qualifications offered to university lecturers as suitable for registration for teaching in the college sector. In Scotland, as noted above, only one qualification, offered by four universities, is recognised for registration as a college lecturer. Although there is some recognition of qualifications gained outside of Scotland, these do not typically include programmes for school-level teaching nor those for the university sector. In the latest reported data (SFC, 2025), there were 6408 teaching staff in Scotland’s colleges, 88.2% of whom have a recognised teaching qualification. This means that approximately 1400 teaching staff do not meet the requirements for professional registration. Given the capacity of the providers of the TQFE qualification it would take four to five years just to deal with this backlog, let alone support new entrants.

While some ambivalence is noted above about the position of university professional development for learning and teaching, in a study comparing the perceptions of college and university lecturers, Buckley and Husband (2020) found that for lecturers in both sectors “initial teaching qualifications and related experiences had a more profound and longitudinal impact on their professional identity and practices” (Buckley & Husband, 2020, p. 433) and that participants found the qualifications they undertook to be worthwhile: “For nearly all colleagues in both the FE and HE focused studies, there was a recognition that the time spent studying for the qualification had been worthwhile and that there were multiple benefits” (Buckley & Husband, 2020, p. 441) with one of these being “the increasing attention nationally to the importance of having such a qualification for career development; encouraging reflective thought and having the ability to be able to critique one’s own practice”. (Buckley & Husband, 2020, p. 441).

While there is not space here to consider fully the debate about academic freedom and the selection of teaching methods, in a review of international perspectives on professional development for lecturers in universities, Smith and Wyness (2024) discuss how it can increase self-efficacy and report that it has been found to support lecturers having “adequate knowledge to make informed pedagogical choices to enhance learning outcomes” (Smith & Wyness, 2024, p. 13). This echoes Finn’s (2018) view that as part of their exercising of academic freedom “teachers, as a matter of professional responsibility, should make efforts to stay well informed about educational research and to implement effective practices based on that research” (Finn, 2018, p. 122). Smith and Wyness (2024) also report that “those who had less teaching experience perceived the professional development to be most beneficial as it increased their feeling of

competency” (Smith & Wyness, 2024, p.13) suggesting an important role for initial teacher education in supporting informed practice among university lecturers.

Recommendations

Given the value of professional development across the tertiary sector outlined above, it is suggested here that institutions, policy makers and sector bodies consider the integration of learning and teaching qualifications and regulation across the tertiary sector, with a move away from an exclusively school-aligned model for colleges and a more robust regulatory approach to qualification and development in universities. As an interim step it is proposed that accreditation of learning and teaching in the university sector is recognised for registration in the college sector with a longer-term aim being the development of qualifications in ‘Learning and Teaching in Tertiary Education’ that span the post-compulsory sector and have pathways to both professional registration and fellowship. In addition, an evidence-based route to recognition in the college sector should be developed, including work being done to map alignments of the various national professional standards for college lecturers with the PSF. In the university sector consideration should be given to the formalisation of existing accreditation routes through a recognised tertiary teacher status that acknowledges professional expertise (and informed academic freedom), as is the case in all other sectors of education and, indeed, most professional occupations.

Conclusion

The disconnects in academic professional development highlighted here represent a challenge to the ambition of developing a coherent tertiary sector. While there are policy moves towards integration there remain legislative barriers to co-operation and coordination of the development of learning and teaching practice, particularly at the initial education stage. Through the proposals made above, this paper seeks to promote greater alignment in academic development across post-compulsory education with the aim of supporting high-quality, evidence-informed learning and teaching practice across the sector.

Biography

Derek J. Robertson is Director of Student Experience at City of Glasgow College where he leads teams that directly support learning, teaching and the student experience. He is interested in the implications of a tertiary model of post-compulsory education and particularly how it affects practice in Scotland’s college sector. Email: derek.robertson@cityofglasgowcollege.ac.uk.

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