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Spowart, Lucy; Turner, Rebecca; Shenton, Deborah; Kneale, Pauline

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‘But I’ve been teaching for 20 years...’: encouraging teaching accreditation for experienced staff working in higher education

Lucy Spowart*, Rebecca Turner, Deborah Shenton and Pauline Kneale

Pedagogic Research Institute and Observatory, Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK

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The status of teaching and learning is an issue those providing and supporting higher education grapple with. The UK Higher Education Academy offers accreditation aligned to the professional standards framework (PSF). The PSF contextualises the role of teaching and supporting learning, and offers a mechanism for individuals’ commitment to be recognised. Here, we present a case-study of 19 established academics who reflected on their experiences of gaining recognition through their university’s accreditation scheme. Respondents prioritised institutional structures and outcomes such as student recruitment, job security, and status as drivers for engagement. Institutional leadership was significant in driving the accreditation agenda.

Keywords: professional development; reward and recognition; teaching accreditation; teaching enhancement

The emphasis on teaching enhancement, and the recognition of lecturers, teaching experience in the UK, has led to universities introducing nationally-accredited, Masters-level programs to develop the teaching competencies of academics (Smith, 2010). Gosling (2010, p. 1) reported that 80.5% of universities require ‘staff to pass all or some part of a Postgraduate Certificate or equivalent. Although similar courses are also found in Australia, New Zealand, and many European countries, the UK is seen as a leader with respect to growing expectations for those new to lecturing to engage with training to prepare them for their role (Parsons, Hill, Holland, & Willis, 2012). These programmes typically focus on those with less than three years full-time teaching experience (Smith, 2010). Therefore, whilst most universities support the development of new academics, the on-going professional development of established lecturers, particularly with respect to teaching enhancement, has been somewhat overlooked (Parsons et al., 2012). This paper reports on a case-study of 19 established academics who were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of gaining HEA recognition through their university’s accreditation scheme. We consider specifically individuals’ motivations for applying for accreditation, as well as the perceived impact of accreditation on individuals’ teaching development.

Whilst the study has a UK focus, this study extends the body of work that examines moves towards the professionalisation of teaching (e.g. Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009; Parsons et al., 2012) and questions how institutions recognise and reward individuals’ commitment to teaching and learning. Whilst recognising that

*Corresponding author. Email: Lucy.spowart@plymouth.ac.uk

professionalisation can take on many and contested meanings (e.g. Evans, 2008), we use the term deliberately to signal the increasing drive for academics to engage in teaching scholarship (Galvin, 1996; Shulman, 2000) and to become qualified (or accredited) as a teacher, as well as being an expert within their own discipline.

The development of the UK professional standards framework

The accreditation of university teachers is not new. In the early 1990s the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) introduced an accreditation framework against which university teachers could accredit their skills, knowledge, and values (Wisdom, Lea, & Parker, 2013). This framework underpinned the early courses designed to introduce new lecturers to teaching. Although SEDA's remit was to support those providing staff and educational development, they worked alongside the Institute for Learning and Teaching in HE (ILTHE) and the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LSTN) who centred their work on supporting front line teachers (Wisdom et al., 2013). Following the recommendations of the Booth Committee, a national framework for accrediting the teaching expertise of university lecturers was introduced and managed by the ITLHE. After the merger of the ILTHE and LSTN, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) was formed and became the custodian of the Professional Standards Framework (Wisdom et al., 2013). The UKPSF provides a description of the range of activities, knowledge, and values expected to be demonstrated by someone teaching and supporting learning, and 'gives an external indication that a standard has been met' (Turner et al., 2013, p. 6). It has been argued such standards may improve quality and consistency, and provide 'a shared language [...] that can inform institutional policies and planning' (Purcell, 2012).

In 2011, a revised version of the UKPSF was launched defining four levels of fellowship: Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow, and Principal Fellow (HEA, 2011). In extending the levels at which fellowship could be awarded it addressed the need for further recognition of those making a sustained commitment to teaching and learning (HEA, 2011). Inherent to this move was the opportunity for institutions to develop their own accreditation schemes that map to the UKPSF and are accredited by the HEA. These schemes are managed and run within a university. So, whilst the UKPSF provides the framework, each institution has the authority to make judgements about whether the criteria have been met.

Placing a focus on established academics resulted from the Browne (2010), which requested greater clarity regarding the training of university-based teachers. In an era of high student fees, it is likely that the qualifications of teaching staff will become a factor influencing student choice (Browne, 2010). That teaching qualifications will be made public, as announced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency in 2014, is not something universities can ignore. This has resulted in growing numbers of institutional accreditation schemes (HEA, 2012b). Within this move, there is an implicit assumption that gaining accreditation leads to improvement in teacher performance, and therefore on the students' experience of learning. Although implied by policymakers (e.g. BIS, 2011), there is a dearth of research to examine this, and no definition of what 'good teaching' actually looks like (Gibbs, 2010). Commonly researchers have examined connections between teaching development programmes and the impact on teachers' practices (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007). As these programmes are usually targeted at new academics, little is

known of the impact of development targeted at experienced academics. More significantly, although studies (e.g. Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Postareff et al., 2007) document positive impacts on conceptions of teaching and gradual changes in attitudes towards teaching resulting from teaching preparation programmes, in the majority of cases the impact was often incremental and took considerable time to change practice (Parsons et al., 2012). This position has to be considered alongside the contested nature of the professionalisation of teaching, which, whilst welcomed by many, 'is regarded with deep suspicion by some' (Quinn, 2012, p. 70). We were aware of these debates in undertaking this work as they have relevance to the conclusions drawn.

Recognising, rewarding, and accrediting excellent teaching is a strategic priority of the HEA, (2012a); Turner et al. (2013) sought to provide evidence of institutional uses and awareness of the UKPSF. Their report provides insight into the sectors' views of the UKPSF, identifying a number of successes and challenges. Opportunities for mid-career and senior academics to engage with the UKPSF were recommended as well as provision for part-time staff and graduate teaching assistants. They also identify difficulties in aligning the framework with career progression structures (Turner et al., 2013). Our research complements this work by exploring the experiences of academics from each of these categories (e.g. part-time staff to university managers) in one UK University who were applying for, or have obtained, one of the four levels of Fellowship.

The case study

In 2012, the university gained HEA accreditation for its recognition scheme. Following accreditation, the unit with responsibility for teaching enhancement recruited an experienced academic developer to manage the scheme. To obtain accreditation, staff prepare an application in which they align their experiences in teaching and supporting student learning to the areas of activity, core knowledge, and professional values of the UKPSF. This involves them producing a series of case studies where examples of practice are discussed, along with obtaining a peer review of current practice and supporting references from individuals familiar with the applicants' practice. Completed applications are submitted for peer review by members of the University community with expertise in teaching and learning. Regular panel meetings, which include representatives from senior management at the university, use these different sources of evidence to determine whether fellowship is awarded.

The manager also organised a programme of support. Introductory workshops provided an overview of the scheme and 'triaged' applicants to the appropriate level of fellowship. Guidance was also offered on 'evidence' on which applicants may build their case, as well as literature to stimulate reflections on practice. Individuals then returned to their departments to work on their applications. The manager maintained contact, offering formative feedback on drafts. Most staff took several months to complete their application, and required a minimum of five hours of support to reach this stage.

Since 2012, over 300 staff, from technicians to senior managers, have commenced work towards recognition. There is no mandate to engage, but there is a feeling amongst senior managers that those involved in teaching should be able to demonstrate the core values of the UKPSF. Those seeking promotion are encouraged to consider whether achieving Senior or Principal Fellowship might be advantageous.

In parallel, probationary procedures have been revised such that academic appointees are required to achieve Fellowship, through a postgraduate teaching qualification or in-house accreditation. Whilst this has been an expectation for new lecturers for some time, those with ‘substantial teaching experience’ were exempt from this training. This marks a change in how the institution views teaching accreditation. Whilst there are clearly institutional agendas ‘at play’, whether supportive or critical of the accreditation agenda, staff motivation to be involved is a significant issue.

Methodology

Theoretical framing

A socio-cultural approach was adopted, drawing in particular on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and on the concepts of activity theory (AT) (Crawford, 2008; Engeström, 2001; Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006). This lens encouraged foregrounding of the individual subject and the influences of the society in which they operate, thus providing a powerful tool when considering the ‘relationship between the micro and macro level of analysis’ (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 8). Specifically, AT provides a framework for describing the interactions between people, the tools (or resources available), and the rules (whether formal or informal) within complex systems. AT is regarded as valuable when applied to dynamic situations (Hashim & Jones, 2007), which given the current drivers around the professionalization of teaching, the varied motivations for engaging in CPD (Crawford, 2008; Greenfield, Pawsey, & Braithwaite, 2011), and the idiosyncrasies of the disciplinary communities (Knight & Trowler, 2000), aligns with the context of this study.

The unit of analysis in AT is the activity system (AS) (Engeström, 2001) which is most frequently depicted as a triangle. Central to an AS is the subject endeavouring to bring about change (the object) in order to achieve a specific goal or outcome. Conflict may arise when there are two simultaneous, mutually influencing activities. Third generation activity theory (Engeström, 2001) allows you to consider the commonalities and contradictions that arise when activities are positioned opposite each other (Figure 1).

In the AS depicted in Figure 1, we outline Engeström and Miettinen’s (1999) six mediating factors to conceptualise the association between the individual and their discipline, the broader context of the University and UK HE. These factors include:

- (1) The ‘object’ or purpose of the activity.
- (2) The ‘subject’, person or people involved in the activity.
- (3) The ‘community’ which surround the subject.
- (4) The ‘division of labour’ involved in achieving the object.
- (5) The ‘tools and artefacts’ which form the resources available.
- (6) The ‘rules’, either formal or informal, which exist in relation to the object.

The ‘subject’ in the left triangle is a member of staff, whose ‘object’ is to gain accreditation. The triangle on the right depicts the organisational perspective. There is a potential contradiction here between the developmental intentions of engaging with the UKPSF, and the policy drive to meet the imperative of gaining teaching accreditation. In other words, the ‘object’ of the organisation and the individual may be at cross-purposes.

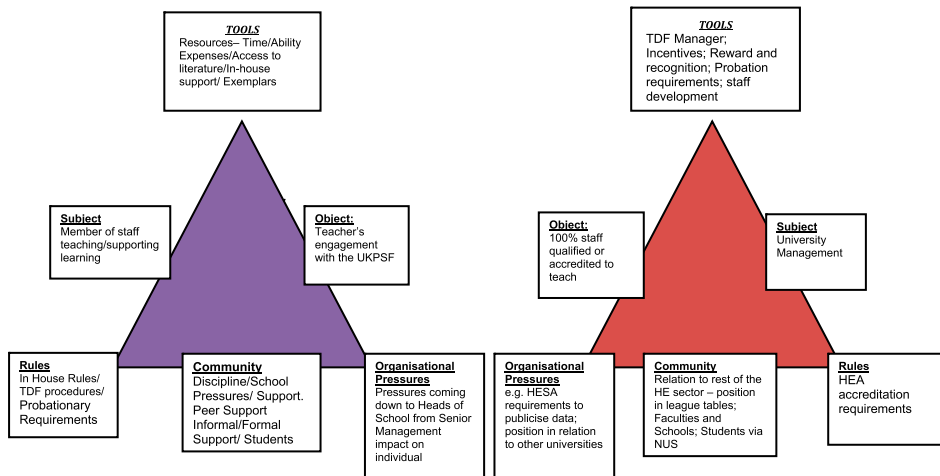


Figure 1. Third generation AS adapted from Engeström (2001).

Notes: Triangle on the left AS of an individual seeking accreditation. Triangle on the right AS of the university management striving for all staff to be accredited and/or qualified to teach.

It is also implied that by engaging with the reflection required to gain Fellowship, teaching will be improved and student learning enhanced. We recognise this is a problematic assumption; indeed, the extent to which this outcome can be achieved through teaching development for new lecturers is debated (e.g. Parsons et al., 2012). Yet the move toward accreditation schemes as providing CPD for established lecturers means that is an assumption underpinning CPD across the sector. Whilst obtaining accreditation may stimulate reflection and change in some, we were mindful that depending on individuals' motivation for engagement, available 'tools' (e.g. time/support) and the 'community' (e.g. culture of the department), this outcome may never be realised. Indeed, De Rijdt, Stes, van der Vleuten, and Dochy (2013) identified a participant's motivation as determining whether the intended outcomes of a CPD initiative are realised. Therefore, mismatches within the AS can be associated with underperformance and an outcome not being fulfilled (Engeström, 2001). AT can help us to identify contradictions in the complex situation of teaching accreditation. Within the timeframe of this research we did not consider the impact of obtaining accreditation on participants' practice, as primarily we were interested in respondents' experiences of gaining accreditation, and we felt that it was too soon for the potential impacts of reflecting on their practice or examining the scholarly literature to have begun to have changed practice (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004).

Data collection

An online questionnaire was administered to those engaged with the scheme in the 2012–2013 academic year. This captured demographic information (e.g. role, discipline) and initial reflections on motivations and experiences. Thematic analysis was undertaken on the qualitative responses with the resulting themes informing the interview schedule. Twenty staff were purposefully selected to be interviewed by an

research assistant not involved with implementation of the scheme. Nineteen agreed to participate, all of whom were in the process of applying for, or had achieved, accreditation. Summary characteristics of respondents are outlined in Table 1. Like all research, we acknowledge that this research is value-laden and culture-bound and as such can only ever be a partial (re)presentation, ‘no more outside the power/knowledge nexus than any other human creation’ (Lather, 1992, p. 91). More widely we feel it is important to note the context of the research team, all of whom, with the exception of the research assistant, had some involvement with the accreditation scheme. We openly embrace this involvement, which infuses all aspects of the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Participants were asked to reflect on their role, their motivation for seeking accreditation, their departments’ view of the process, personal insights into the process, and their perceptions of their colleagues’ views on the process. The interviews developed as a conversation (Burgess, 1984) enabling related topics to be explored depending on personal experience and meaning. This study was framed as exploratory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), with the intention that the perceptions and experiences of early applicants would inform the future development of the scheme.

Data analysis

The analysis was informed by Engeström and Miettinen’s (1999) mediating factors; these were applied during an initial round of coding, at which time other emergent themes were also identified. Following this, each transcript was reviewed to ensure that new codes identified in later transcripts were also considered throughout. Two of the four authors were involved in this process. Through this the following themes emerged:

- (1) awareness of the broader political agendas to enhance teaching;
- (2) the importance of local recognition; and
- (3) championing accreditation.

Table 1. Summary characteristics of respondents.

Respondent number	Role with respect to Teaching and learning	Gender	Motivation for engagement (contractual/volunteered)	Level of fellowship obtained
3, 8	Supporting	F	Volunteered	AF
9	Supporting	F	Volunteered	F
5	Teaching	F	Contractual	F
15	Teaching	F	Volunteered	F
7	Teaching	M	Contractual	F
10, 16, 19	Managing	F	Volunteered	SF
4, 13, 17	Teaching	M	Volunteered	SF
12	Teaching	M	Contractual	SF
1, 11, 14	Managing	F	Volunteered	PF
2, 6, 18	Managing	M	Volunteered	PF

Key: PF – Principal Fellow, SF – Senior Fellow, F – Fellow, AF – Associate Fellow

Awareness of the broader political agenda to enhance teaching

Reasons for engagement varied; most respondents had engaged voluntarily (Table 1), but many were aware of institutional and departmental priorities (the informal rules) to increase the number of accredited staff. Others were looking externally to their position in the marketplace (their community), so we may question the extent to which they were ‘truly’ volunteering. There was a sense that having a teaching ‘qualification’ was unavoidable:

certainly if I was looking to have my children go to university, I’d be more inclined to send them somewhere staff have teaching qualifications. (Respondent 3)

Implicit in this account is the unproblematised assumption that teaching qualifications infer a certain level of quality, an assumption critiqued above. Note too, how the word qualification is used. A qualification was regarded as an asset in attracting students. This viewpoint was shared by a number of respondents, particularly those applying for accreditation at senior levels:

I have thought for some time it wouldn’t be too far...for league tables to begin to include whether staff were trained and/or more detailed than that, whether they were fellows of the HEA. (Respondent 13)

These extracts demonstrate the trend towards the marketisation of HE (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009) and the presupposition that the value of teaching qualifications will increase. Connected to this, accreditation was also considered important in raising the status of teaching and demonstrating credibility. As Respondent 12 noted ‘passengers would not fly on an aircraft without the knowledge that the pilot was suitably qualified and trained’, therefore teaching accreditation should be a minimum requirement. Whilst recognising that we were interviewing those who had obtained accreditation, we noted a lack of critique and a lack of resistance to the notion of teaching accreditation per se.

Several respondents did demonstrate a sense of the limitations to accreditation as a form of CPD. Whilst all respondents felt lecturers should reflect on their practices and try to enhance their teaching, the presumption of policymakers, that accreditation somehow correlated to enhanced quality, was not universally accepted. Several respondents indicated concern over this simplistic assumption:

What you want to avoid is that it becomes a tick box exercise that people feel that they’ve got to go through and they don’t do it with much heart or enthusiasm. (Respondent 9)

I think that I’m suspicious of some of the discourse...if you’re accredited it’s ok, [it’s] a kind of crude measure of quality and value. (Respondent 15)

This was not wholly unanticipated, as researchers (e.g. Knight et al., 2006; Quinn, 2012) have discussed the challenges of embedding learning from CPD activities and more widely there has been growing recognition of the limitations of provision targeted at new lecturers with respect to ‘enhancing’ student learning (Parsons et al., 2012).

Respondents working within disciplines aligned to a professional body, valued the recognition afforded by their own professional body above that of the HEA:

there is still an ambiguity to how relevant an HEA badge is to your performance as a lecturer. (Respondent 7)

Although a number of organisations have had a role in promoting the professional development of university teachers, it seems their work is yet to have a significant impact on those with a focus on their disciplines, particularly in terms of shaping individual CPD. This is where we began to witness a mismatch in AS, between the one created as a consequence of seeking accreditation, and those with which participants regularly engaged. The HEA is a relatively 'new' organisation and the UKPSF was only introduced in 2006, and therefore may not register in the consciousness of many established academics. This ambiguity, along with mixed motivators for seeking accreditation, may limit the extent to which the UKPSF has the potential to enhance teaching and learning.

The importance of local recognition

There was an impression that accreditation raised individuals' profiles within 'the community', as a respondent applying for Associate Fellow considered:

I've been doing quite innovative stuff; [accreditation] was a really good way to demonstrate and bring it all together. (Respondent 5)

This participant exemplifies the perception of a several respondents who felt aspects of their work went unnoticed:

Accreditation recognises and rewards the experiences and the work I've done over my career, cos sometimes I think you can be pigeonholed slightly on what you're doing currently; people aren't always aware of your background or your history and I think just by having those letters after your name people know that you are at a certain level. (Respondent 10)

This sense of gaining accreditation resulting in institutional recognition was an intentional act by the university. This is evident through the extent to which accreditation cut across institutional structures within the AS. All applicants received individual feedback from the Panel Chair, the Pro Vice-Chancellor Teaching and Learning. This was followed up by emails of congratulations from Heads of School, and a card of congratulations from the Vice-Chancellor. These small measures had a significant impact for the Associate Fellows and Fellows in particular:

I felt very honoured that those senior people had taken time from their busy schedules to actually give some kind words. You realised that they appreciated what you, that you'd achieved something. (Respondent 11)

I think the university saw it quite highly because they seem to sort of value it so I wasn't expecting that, I got an email from the head of faculty saying congratulations I got it, which I mean I've only met him once so yeah I have no personal contact with him, so that was obviously some sort of strategy they had. (Respondent 5)

Respondent 5 was an experienced staff member who had previously taught overseas. Being new to the university, they had achievement of Fellowship as a probationary requirement. Whilst recognising the strategic priority for the institution, they commented:

In context of the school it's important, but me personally, I mean it doesn't really affect what I'm doing, it doesn't really make any change, it's just a sort of a rubber stamp I suppose, and something I needed to pass my probation.

Despite being prompted to talk about how they felt accreditation was perceived within their own disciplines, respondents emphasised strategic and pragmatic reasons for engagement, and rarely discussed how this might have any impact on others within their departments. For many, accreditation was regarded as important for job security and career advancement. The security of permanent employment has become a thing of the past and academia is no exception to this (Bryson, 2004). Job security was a particular concern of the Associate Fellows and Fellows; indeed Respondent 8, on a fixed-term contract, commented that accreditation ‘may just prompt people to give [me] a bit more work’.

Championing HE academy accreditation

Within the context of our AS, it is the championing and role modelling approach adopted across ‘the community’ that had a significant impact. Respondents seeking Principal Fellowship perceived their engagement as important for ‘role modelling’, particularly with respect to demonstrating a commitment to teaching and learning:

I did it primarily because I think that senior staff at the University, if they’re going to actually encourage other staff to become fellows of the HEA and to improve teaching, have to set the standard, so it’s very much about a role model approach to [teaching] that this is your core business; you have to improve yourself all the time, and we try to get that message across. (Respondent 6)

That senior staff were presenting accreditation in such a positive way had an impact upon others. The meanings attributed to activities such as CPD have a relational character, ‘generated in the interaction between agents and activity systems’, and the ‘same’ activities in different contexts can take on very different significance (Knight & Trowler, 2000, p. 72). Who promotes the scheme can matter:

Our head of school sent an email to all the staff...we were encouraged in that email that this was something that we should do. (Respondent 15)

A deliberate strategy was adopted to promote engagement with the scheme; senior managers were encouraged to discuss the process at school meetings, raising the profile within schools from the outset. Managers with responsibility for teaching and learning were encouraged to apply themselves, whether or not they had recognised teaching credentials. This attempted to counter resistance associated with academic development delivered through centralised units (Houston, 2010; Quinn, 2012). Whilst training, advice, and support was delivered centrally, advocates were based within schools, and therefore attuned to the sociocultural contexts of their staff. When reviewing the workshop attendance figures by School, there was a clear connection between staff engagement and support from figure-heads within the School. This echoes the standpoint of Knight and Trowler (2000), who argue that to create a culture receptive to promoting good teaching local leadership is necessary. However, whilst this ‘leading by example’ approach could be viewed as important, if senior staff do not genuinely value the developmental possibilities or the status of the accreditation itself, this could be detrimental.

Conclusion

Based on our AT analysis, we distinguished two different activities that can provide insight into how academics perceive and value HEA accreditation. Firstly, there has been a political steer to support university teachers to gain either formal qualifications or obtain accreditation. Early career academics and research students may have engaged with the UKPSF as part of institutional training, but their engagement rarely progressed to the higher levels. The UKPSF provides a scaffolding of reflection points, which, following the introduction of accreditation schemes has provided a pathway for those with a commitment to teaching and learning to gain recognition. These schemes can be attractive to established lecturers who entered HE before training courses became commonplace.

Indeed, it was this strategic thinking that motivated many of the respondents. To obtain recognition, respondents attended workshops, engaged with pedagogic literature, and reflected on their teaching in a scholarly manner. Although these are activities central to maintaining currency and triggering development, none of the respondents indicated professional development as their primary role for engagement. This reflects previous research in this area, where CPD in teaching is regarded as as a peripheral activity (Parsons et al., 2012).

Secondly, there has been a shift in the value of teaching in relation to promotion. Historically, academic promotions were contingent upon research success (Chalmers, 2011). Whilst this is still largely the case, at a growing number of institutions staff need to demonstrate excellence in their teaching and research for promotion, even at the more senior levels (Macfarlane, 2012). Whilst it is too early to determine the impact on respondents' career development, teaching accreditation was perceived to add value, and points to a shift in the status of teaching.

Considered collectively, respondents prioritised 'the community', including institutional structures and outcomes such as student recruitment, programme marketing, job security, career enhancement, and status as their drivers for seeking accreditation. There was limited emphasis on using this opportunity to improve teaching, and thus an anticipated goal of the AS was not fully realised. Whilst these findings cannot be used to make large-scale generalisations, our findings echo those of Quinn (2012) who found that strategic or pragmatic motivations for academic staff development predominated. This is not surprising given that many of the respondents were looking for accreditation of their extant activities, and were responding to an institutional agenda. In addition, we know that transfer to practice takes time (De Rijdt et al., 2013).

AT highlights the significance of the cultural context and the process of social transformation. The involvement of senior leaders was pivotal (Greenfield et al., 2011), championing the accreditation process, shaping the norms and attitudes of their colleagues in a positive way, and supporting more junior staff. That said, the 'object' of the two activity systems (that is, the object of the individual applicant AND the line manager) are not always aligned. Contradictions therefore emerge, creating tensions and sometimes cynicism about the value of accreditation.

This work represents an initial examination of the experiences of those engaged in the process of obtaining accreditation from one institution. Data were collected within a few months of the respondents gaining accreditation and focused specifically on the motivations for engagement, and their experiences of applying. The scheme was in its first year when this research was undertaken. Nevertheless, we

feel it offers insights that will have relevance to the wider academic development community, and in particular to those institutions embarking upon the process of setting up their own in-house recognition scheme. Continued critical interrogation of the process of accreditation is essential to ensure that engaging in the process adds value in terms of enhancing teaching quality. Further research which tracks the impact of accreditation longitudinally, would enhance our understanding.

In developing the scheme further, and ensuring its sustainability, we now work more closely within academic departments, utilising the expertise of successful applicants to share their experiences and mentor their colleagues. Two years on, current applicants have the benefit of discipline-specific exemplars, access to colleagues who have been through the process, and a wider understanding of the UKPSF across the institution. We envisage that the departments now have a greater emphasis on the local teaching communities. This is the focus of our future work, in order to consider the impact of the departments in which applicants are embedded.

Notes on contributors

Lucy Spowart is an educational developer and manager of the Teaching Development Framework at Plymouth University. Her research interests include teacher development, peer mentoring, community engagement, and lone parents' experiences of Higher Education.

Rebecca Turner is an educational developer at Plymouth University, where she supports research students and new lecturers to develop their teaching and learning. Her research interests primarily relate to issues affecting the practice styles, identities, and research activities of lecturers working in a number of HE settings.

Deborah Shenton was a research assistant at the Pedagogic Research Institute and Observatory, Plymouth University.

Pauline Kneale is the pro vice-chancellor, Teaching and Learning and Head of the Pedagogic Research Institute and Observatory, Plymouth University. Her research interests include Higher Education pedagogies, inclusive learning and teaching, and Master's level teaching.

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