



PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: The Role of the Programme Director in Taught Postgraduate Programmes

Project type (delete as appropriate):

A Research Project (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

Principal Investigator: Gill Aitken

Schools/department: Edinburgh Medical School

Team members (including Schools and Departments):

Jenna Fyfe – Biomedical Sciences

Sarah Henderson – Clinical Sciences

Ruth McQuillan – Molecular Genetics and Population Health Sciences.

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Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project.

Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters) should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

Report (maximum 1500 words)

What did you do?

We wished to better understand the work undertaken by Programme Directors of taught postgraduate programmes (PGT) and the scope of their responsibilities; this included online and on-campus programmes. A PhD intern (Sinead O'Carroll) was employed by the PTAS funding to undertake the work.

Moray House ethics committee granted ethical permission to undertake the study and all those employed in this role at the University of Edinburgh were invited to participate. Those agreeing to be interviewed about their experiences all gave informed consent. Twenty-three PDs were interviewed individually, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The first interview was a pilot and not included in the analysis as the respondent was not working as a PD in this institution at the time. The transcripts were thematically analysed and the results were written up and have been submitted for publication.

What did you find out?

There was clear agreement amongst those interviewed regarding the diversity of the role and the high levels of autonomy required to undertake it successfully. There was a strong perception that the role was under-valued and not well understood or supported.



We conceptualise results as circus acts, chosen to illustrate the complexity and diversity of activities undertaken by the PDs. Those roles include clairvoyant, conjurer, tightrope walker, trapeze-artist, contortionist and the seasoned performer.

PDs academic identity was considered to be fluid and permeable, largely related to PGT programmes often being situated on the boundary between academic and professional organisations, leading to many boundary-spanning behaviours. All cited teaching and student contact as the most rewarding aspect of their role, albeit with a strong sense that these senior teaching roles were less valued than research posts.

In the absence of obvious support structures, a clear sense of trust and academic citizenship was reported in the provision of mutual support from others in the same position. There is a need to mobilise this nascent community to establish a strong coherent voice for this academic role to inform planning both for the support of postgraduate students and for those delivering the teaching.

Given the diverse nature of the role and the fact that those undertaking it tend to have considerable professional experience to draw on it is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all training programme will be effective. Considerable expertise was apparent within those interviewed and this will be useful to draw on in the mentoring and development of those new to the role.

How did you disseminate your findings?

Paper submitted to Higher Education Research and Development (attached and under review). Plan to share more widely within the institution; this will be discussed more formally with colleagues in IAD re appropriate channels. The work will also be submitted for an upcoming educational conference.

What have been the benefits to student learning?

PDs are generally experienced professionals, often coming late to an academic career. They are committed and enthusiastic teachers and see student contact as the key facet of their role and the one they find most rewarding. Often coming from the profession that they now teach they have a unique insight into the needs of PGT students. Given the excellent PTES scores enjoyed by most PGT programmes this group have a positive and largely unrecognised impact on student learning. These results highlight this role and illuminate its impact on student learning.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

Those interviewed were equally split between MVM and CAHSS, no PD from CSE volunteered to participate, however the wide spread agreement amongst those interviewed suggests the picture is similar throughout the university
