

Title: Beginning a career in academia: Reflections of a novice sports science lecturer.

Introduction

The job of a university lecturer in sport and exercise science is diverse involving many commitments typically based around teaching, research and consultancy. This diversity makes it a challenging, stimulating and rewarding job. However, starting out can be daunting since you are expected to fill many roles. The purpose of this article is to highlight the likely demands of a new university lecturer and offer advice for the issues they are likely to face. This article is based on my personal experiences, as well as discussions with colleagues and students.

The overarching aim of a lecturer is to improve standards in sport and exercise sciences. This may take the form of improving the education of students, producing research to improve understanding of scientific phenomena or improving the quality of scientific support given to athletes. A new university lecturer may find it difficult to understand the main focus of their job, which can differ from one institution to another. The role of lecturer opens up many new possibilities and whilst it is important to be keen, enthusiastic and open to new ideas, be careful not to take on too much. Despite efforts to manage your time efficiently, there are simply not enough hours in the day to do everything and you can lose the focus of your work whereby your attention becomes diluted to the point where you have many goals but only achieve a small fraction them. Therefore it is essential to focus your efforts on a smaller number of key goals which you feel are achievable and of interest to you.

Professional responsibilities

A university lecturer has many demands placed on them during the start of their career. Whilst in many cases, teaching is the only aspect which is specified in terms of time commitments in your contract, career progression and academic standing is often more related to research and consultancy performance.

1) General commitments

Whatever you consider to be your main focus, there are going to be administration commitments associated with it. The main problem at the start of a new job is knowing who to contact for what you need. The most effective way I found to address this was through asking staff who had worked at my institution for a long period of time, since using any staff directory provided often sent me to the wrong people. You will be required to attend departmental meetings, usually around once a month. As a new member of staff, initially I had little input but these meetings are important chances for the department to discuss important issues. It was also a chance to learn various procedures from the more experienced staff that I needed to know to effectively perform my job. As I developed more responsibility I was called on to give information and express your views. You may also be required to attend academic boards of various forms. These include module boards, where grades for each module are confirmed, and programme or progression boards, where grades for each student are confirmed and progression to the next year or degree classification awarded is determined. Again, my input seemed minimal but it can be a good opportunity to monitor students overall performance. Other commitments you may be required to undertake include recruitment and admission of students, such as taking open day talks and interviewing students.

2) Teaching

There are many factors considered as being important for an effective teacher including, enthusiasm, approachability, humour, punctuality, ability to engage the class, subject knowledge, communication, organisation and planning (Dewar, 2002). Consider your skills and focus your teaching style on your strengths, as well as attempting to develop the skills you lack. The main issue with regard to teaching philosophy I have discussed with colleagues is whether to give all the information required to students in formalised teaching sessions or give less information to students but try to facilitate greater learning outside the classroom? As a novice lecturer I tended to focus on giving students all the information to ensure I covered the content required so that I didn't have the problem of students saying 'we haven't covered that in the lectures'. This, however, is not necessarily the best way of getting students to develop a deeper understanding of the subject being taught (Ramsden, 2003). That said, it is also important to ensure you give students enough guidance to ensure students understand what is expected of them to effectively complete an assessment. If you fail to do this, it can lead to confusion and creates more work in answering endless queries. Overall, I would suggest the amount of information you provide to students depends on your personal teaching style and the subject you are teaching.

In preparation for teaching, the first step should be to identify the most suitable resources available. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) provides very comprehensive resource guides for all disciplines in sport and exercise science (Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hlst/resources/guides/guides_sport). While developing your resources, you should also consider the methods of delivery. From my experiences, students

tend to respond better when you include sporting examples and practical activities to your teaching since this allows students to understand the practical implications of the theories they are being taught. The first lecture can be a daunting prospect, facing a large group of students with the task of keeping them engaged for between one and two hours. The most important thing is to ensure you have prepared accordingly, checked the teaching room and set everything up correctly so that there is little that can go wrong. There were very few sessions that I was fully satisfied with the first time through and I usually felt there were aspects I should change. The extent of the changes usually depended on the time I had given, or had available, to prepare the session, my knowledge of the topic and I found it difficult to gauge whether an activity was going to work effectively until I tried it out. This makes teaching a gradual process of improvement where changes are made and lectures are added to through using different resources that are discovered. When teaching a new group of students, developing a good rapport and making yourself approachable is important. This can be achieved through simple techniques such as making an effort to learn student names, making regular office hours, clearly giving students your contact details and when students do contact you respond in a timely and friendly manner. I found it useful to try to remember what it is like to be a student to help me understand what students expected from me and the motivations of the students. If you've gone into a career in lecturing, chances are you were a good, keen student which means it can be difficult to understand the motives of the students who show little effort. But remember to aim your teaching to the most motivated students, not the least motivated.

Preparing appropriate, challenging and fair assessments can be time consuming but is very important. Grading assessments can require some degree of subjectivity, but good marking criteria are vital to ensure consistency, provide students with good feedback and save time

when marking. When developing assessments, consider different methods, such as practicals, exams, presentations or written reports. Each has their own benefits and may suit the assessment of certain learning outcomes more easily than others but I suggest trying to ensure a variety. At the end of teaching a module you may be required to complete module evaluation forms, where you reflect on the success or failure of a module and consider improvements. You may also be required to gain students opinions of the effectiveness of a module and your teaching methods through student feedback questionnaires. I found these procedures very helpful, as it allowed me to identify strengths and weaknesses in my teaching.

In addition to scheduled teaching hours, new university lecturers are often required to complete some form of teaching training course, typically a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCert). Many new lecturers question the value of completing such a course and see it as an unnecessary extra demand on an already full workload. Whilst on some occasions I found myself considering whether my time could be spent more effectively, there are many positives that came out of it. These include understanding what makes a good teacher, appreciating student learning styles, identifying effective teaching and assessment methods, forming links with other departments within your university, gaining a formal qualification in teaching and allowing an opportunity to discuss experiences with fellow new lecturers. In addition, many of these teaching courses are accredited by the HEA, which means that successful completion makes you eligible to become a Fellow of the HEA. It should be noted however, there is often little practical advice offered for things such as maintaining class attention and techniques to prepare good lectures or practicals. In general, I would suggest that completing a PGCert is worth the time and I feel it has allowed me to develop as a lecturer.

3) Research

When taking up a lecturing position, to ensure you maintain research development whilst you have other commitments, it is worth scheduling time specifically for research. Even when you do this, however, do not necessarily expect to get your research ideas up and running within weeks, or even months. Having learnt how to use the university system for searching for resources, done the background reading, gone through a new ethics procedure and been trained to use new equipment, it can take well over a year to start collecting data. One way of developing your research interests is through the supervision of final year project students and postgraduate research supervision. The prospect of postgraduate supervision seemed daunting at first, knowing the level of supervision and all I learnt from my supervisor. However, second supervisor is a good way to learn the role and become part of a research team. Whilst waiting to get your own research started, there are many things you can do to develop as a researcher such as generating collaborative research links and working on your research skills (e.g. testing techniques, statistical methods and writing skills) (Kiewra, 2008). One final way to maintain research is through departmental research seminars and conferences where you can present preliminary reports and meet with other researchers which can stimulate ideas.

4) Consultancy

In some universities, there is a strong emphasis on generating money through consultancy. This might be running short courses in a particular specialism or offering scientific support to sports clubs or athletes. The main issues I found were thinking of ideas for a short course that enough people would be interested in attending and thinking of scientific support to offer that

clubs and athletes would be interested having you provide. In addition, having lost contacts that were gained during previous work it can be difficult to build those up again. To overcome these problems, offer your services to find out what scientific support coaches and athletes would be interested in and build on links that your colleagues have developed. Then, having developed the links, it is vital you provide a professional service.

Sources of support and development opportunities

There are many sources of support available to a novice sports science lecturer, but these can be difficult to identify. The main source of support I have relied on is colleagues who have faced similar problems and have the experience to help overcome these issues. Support is also available through training courses and conferences. These events offer the opportunity to learn new skills, develop your career and meet with other people who are in the same position as you. At the end of the academic year, it may seem like you have a long time until your next teaching commitments, but this time seems to pass very quickly. It can be useful to formally construct a plan highlighting goals to achieve (McCormack and Barnes, 2008). Some universities offer appraisals which allow you to identify areas in which you would like to develop so that the university can support you in achieving those aims. I found this process helpful to maintain my focus and not leave me wondering where the summer went once the students were back.

Summary

A university lecturing job is challenging since it involves many roles, the relative importance of each is likely to vary between institutions. Be aware of what your commitments are and

use your time effectively by focussing on areas of most interest. Reflect on your practice and set goals to ensure you continue to develop.

References

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