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Professional discourse, quality assurance and a practice integrated pre-service teacher course: The Open University PGCE

Abstract

The Open University (UK) Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme is a distance learning pre-service course in teacher education which integrates learning in the practice setting with university-based learning. This programme, which has flexible start and finish points and either training or assessment only routes, uses a web-based Needs Analysis process to reflect on prior experience and to determine individualized university and practice-based curriculum and assessment and is set in the context of an external regulatory framework which demands that teacher education courses in England fulfil certain national requirements and that student-teachers meet identified standards or competences. These requirements and standards are inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) and the outcomes of inspection lead to a 'Quality Grade' which determines government funding.

This PGCE course, therefore, presents a radically flexible, practice integrated programme which faces both internal, University based quality assurance processes and procedures and 'high stakes' external inspection. This paper reflects on the tensions between quality compliance and quality assurance in practice integrated learning and suggests that quality assurance processes which open up a discourse of personal and professional development and which might support the exploration of dissonance between and within practices can improve, rather than merely maintain, programme quality.

Introduction

The Open University's pre-service teacher education course in the UK is a complex one and one which extends the notion of flexibility to lengths previously unheard of in this distance learning Higher Education Institution. With flexible start and finish points, with individualized routes determined by a Needs Analysis process, full and part-time options and the requirement to offer an 'assessment only' route to qualification, this course presents significant problems for quality assurance.

This brief paper is in three sections. Firstly, I sketch out an overview of the structure of the OU PGCE course. The second section of the paper presents the quality assurance context in which a pre-service course in teacher education operates in the UK; both locally in terms of the need to comply with internal, university-based quality assurance processes and at a distance, with a need to comply with governmental inspection. The third section of the paper attempts to identify some of the issues which emerge for programme improvement as a result of external high-stakes assessment.

Firstly, a brief overview of the OU PGCE. For a more fulsome introduction to this course, see Hutchinson (2006).

An overview of the Open University (UK) PGCE

The Open University, UK (OUUK) first became involved in initial teacher education in 1992 and since that time over 6000 teachers have entered the teaching profession through this flexible route into teaching. For around 50% of students, this is the only route that they consider: in many parts of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the OU's blend of distance learning material backed by local tutor support in near-by partner schools is the only way to achieve a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

Flexible Provision

In February of 1999, The Secretary of State for Education asked the body responsible for initial teacher education in England, the Teacher Training Agency, to develop 'proposals for the structure, coverage and introduction of new modular postgraduate teacher training' in response to a Green Paper (DfEE, 1998). The new courses should address the need to increase social diversity within the teaching profession and make an important contribution to teacher recruitment.

The modular specification that resulted from this request contained the following elements:

- A Needs Analysis;
- An individual training plan;
- Self-standing modules with clearly defined outcomes in relation to the QTS standards [...] with associated assessment.
- Flexibility for trainees to combine modules in different orders;
- Flexible start and finish and assessment times with full and part time options;
- Training closely linked to school experience;
- Guidance and support in relation to progress against the training plan and towards the QTS standards;
- A final synoptic assessment.

Individualized programmes, resulting from a Needs Analysis process should recognise prior learning and use this in order to identify the amount of training needed to gain qualified teacher status.

The Open University flexible PGCE course

The Open University PGCE course was one which arose from these requirements. It has a modular structure with flexible entry and exit points meaning that student teachers can adopt variable study patterns throughout the course as appropriate; sometimes full-time – sometimes part-time. Within a total time limit of 36 months student teachers, together with their Open University tutor and school-based mentor, negotiate study patterns that meet their own personal

circumstances and which enable them to satisfy existing personal, domestic and professional commitments.

The OU PGCE course is structured around six thematic strands and three levels:

Strands:

- Strand A – Your subject;
- Strand B – Pupils;
- Strand C – Planning;
- Strand D – Teaching;
- Strand E – Assessment;
- Strand F – Wider professional role.

Levels:

- Level 1 – Familiarization;
- Level 2 – Consolidation;
- Level 3 – Autonomy.

Figure 1: Open University PGCE overview

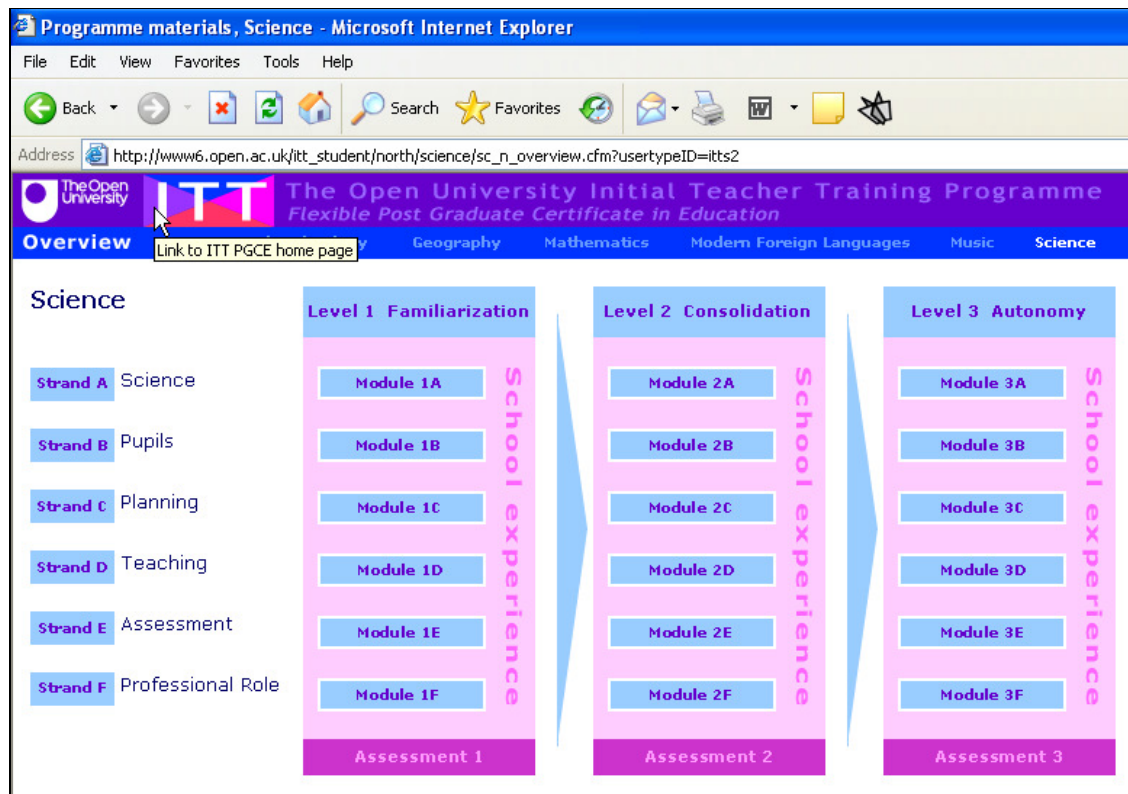


Figure 1 shows how this course structure is presented to student teachers. This web-page has links to the modules, to School Experience Guides for each level (which contain school based activities linked to the modules) and to Assessment Guides for each level.

Course modules

Each of the course strands are revisited at each level of the course in the form of free standing modules located on the web. The modules are linked to conventional print course readers, set books and video and to audio material, gathered from schools throughout England, which engage student teachers with the main ideas underpinning a course in initial teacher education.

Critically important, is the way that the Key Issues in each module are then developed by 'in-school' activities, written in the *School Experience Guide*. Each Level of the course is linked with a period of school experience:

- Level 1: 4 weeks in Secondary School A which can be taken flexibly, on a daily basis, where necessary. At the end of this school experience successful students will be able to plan, teach and evaluate a single lesson;
- Level 2: 7 weeks in a Secondary School A and 1 week in a linked primary school. Three of these weeks can be taken flexibly and successful students will be able to plan teach and evaluate a sequence of lessons at the end of this experience;
- Level 3: 10 weeks in Secondary School B. Two of these weeks can be taken flexibly and at the end of this Level, successful students will be able to plan, teach and evaluate extended sequences of lessons to the full age and attainment group.

In these activities themes and ideas are located in the school or department setting and student teachers are asked to use the experience of the setting to reflect on course ideas and to use course ideas to reflect on the setting. The close interplay between the course materials and the school placements is a key principle underpinning the course structure.

At the end of each Level of the course, student teachers produce an assessment portfolio, with detailed activities set out in the *Assessment Guide* for each level.

Students starting the course.

Students apply to the PGCE course all year round and as long as there is a local partner school which can support them they can start the course. There are six course start points every year. Mentors are briefed and trained at the point of

registration on a one-to-one basis by the student's personal OU tutor, who also assesses students in school and through the portfolio, and the Needs Analysis process starts immediately.

The results of the Needs Analysis, which are linked to outcome standards for each level of the course, are contained in an Individual Training Plan (the ITP). This stipulates the amount of the course that each student must complete in order to present for summative assessment at the end of the programme. Developed in the context of a two-week placement, the ITP details:

- The modules that a student teacher must complete;
- The formative assessments that a student teacher must complete;
- The number of weeks that a student teacher must spend in school;
- The number of schools in which the student teacher must have placements;
- The amount of personal subject knowledge for teaching which must be covered.

Many students (48%) complete the full course, but a small minority (5%) have extensive prior experience and can complete the course on an 'Assessment Only' basis.

'Local' Quality Assurance processes

These high levels of individualization, compounded with a distributed student teacher population, throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland present considerable difficulties for quality assurance at a local level (HE and programme systems to assure quality) and at a national level (governmental inspection by the Office for Standards in Education [OfSTED]).

Mayes and Banks (1998) set out a series of 'local' quality assurance principles which informed the development of the OU PGCE:

- Explicit outcomes
- Prescribed common frameworks
- Triangulated evidence
- Systematic monitoring – indirect, direct and in response to structural 'triggers'.

Explicit outcomes

Each level of the course is linked to the outcome standards for the award of qualified teacher status (DfES, 2002) which allows for explicit supported self audit against the outcomes for each level of the course. These standards also form the basis for self-assessment, formative and summative assessment and feedback throughout the course and also inform the university and school-based curricula.

Prescribed common frameworks

The OU PGCE is offered in six subjects and is presented in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Each course follows the same broad structure and attends to the same or similar standards (or competences) at the same point during the course. The common framework applies to training and development for subject tutors; mentor development through face to face and distance learning material support, a web-based reporting framework, school-based activities and school-based assessment and a common framework for assessment through student teacher portfolio submission.

Course production is also subject to OU local QA practice: with the PGCE developed as a team process with feedback and critique applied to each stage of materials development; with materials reviewed by external assessors; student, tutor, and school colleague feedback to inform course development; and external examiner and subject and regional advisory groups informing course development.

Ongoing quality assurance is reported on an annual basis through a Quality Assurance Report which compares outputs from the PGCE with previous cohorts and which compares the OU PGCE with other similar HE institutions providing initial teacher education. Each quality assurance report then identifies key programme, subject and nation specific areas for development and sets these as targets for the following year's work.

Triangulated evidence

Formative and summative assessment activity is undertaken by students, their tutor, their mentor, and a senior member of school staff and, in cases where there are specific student progress problems, assessment by the OU subject leader. A sample of formative and all summative assessment is included as a required part of portfolio submission at each level of the course.

Systematic monitoring

The work of students and the work of tutors are monitored both directly and indirectly by senior members of university staff: directly through personal observation of their teaching and indirectly through scrutiny of their assessed work or reports.

Issues which arise from this level of monitoring 'trigger' additional action.

Quality Assurance at a Distance

By 'distance' I'm referring to quality assurance processes which are carried out by external agencies. In initial teacher education in England this role is carried out by OfSTED (the Office for Standards in Education.) Each provider of initial teacher education is regularly given a quality grade by OfSTED and the result is

used to determine the numbers of trainees (including none) which the provider is allowed to train in future.

The OfSTED process in England is therefore a high-stakes assessment of the provision and takes into consideration and assessment of the programme's Management and Quality Assurance, the training which takes place in schools and in the HE Institution and the standards of the student teachers at the end of the course. The OfSTED Handbook (OfSTED, 2002) and associated documentation sets out the inspection and grading process in detail.

Discussion

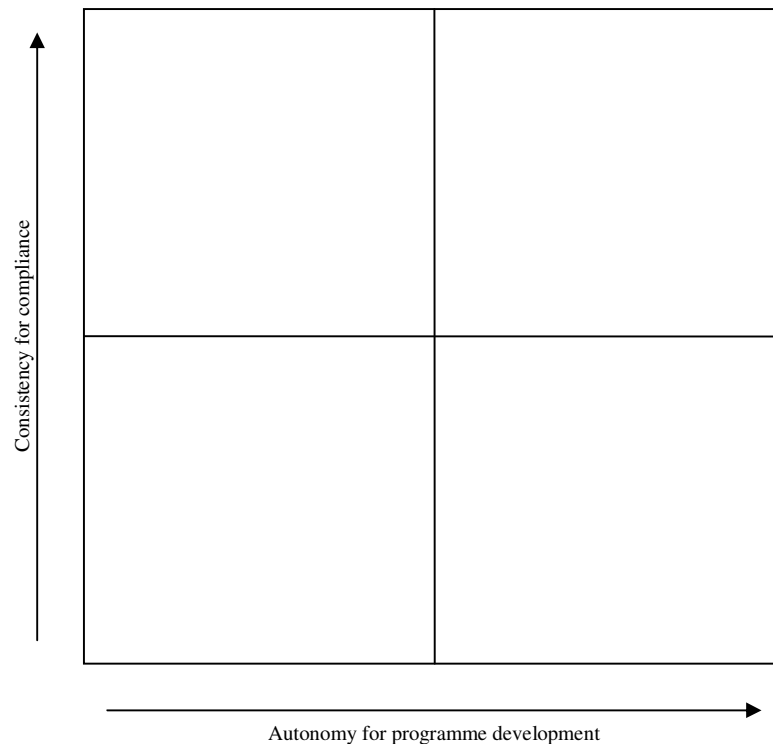
The OU PGCE, therefore, represents an extreme example of flexibility in practice-integrated learning, and faces, with high-stakes external inspection, significant punishment if the course fails to achieve adequate (in OfSTED's terms) standards of Management and Quality Assurance, tuition and student outcome.

How to maintain course improvement (which is dependent on individuals responding creatively to unique sets of circumstances) while achieving consistency (which is dependent on individuals doing more or less the same thing in similar circumstances) has been a significant question for the PGCE team over the last decade and one which is especially important given the inspectorate's obsession with consistency.

Mayes and Banks (1998), in setting out the quality assurance principles detailed above, also link quality assurance with consistency of materials development, assessment and approach. And, while these principles are essential for course development and processes and most importantly compliance, they fail to capture the professional autonomy required for course improvement and to move beyond compliance. Most importantly these principles fail to capture the local dissonance which exists between the university as practice and teaching as practice and which, if properly explored, can lead to enhanced learning.

The following table (*Figure 1*) illustrates the tension between consistency (which is coterminous with compliance in the UK system) and autonomy (which I argue is needed for programme improvement).

Figure 1



Low levels of autonomy and low levels of compliance

Practice-integrated courses which fall into this category have participants with low levels of personal autonomy exhibiting low levels of consistency. This could result from HEI or other quality assurance procedures which are carried out but which are not acted upon. Results which show inconsistencies in approach or marking, for example, might be ignored, failing to assure internal or external consistency for compliance.

High levels of autonomy and low levels of compliance

Practice-integrated courses which fall into this category may have quality assurance procedures but they fail to provide the consistency needed for compliance. Individuals have high levels of personal autonomy needed for programme development but are likely to adopt solutions which are highly individualistic and which might fail to provide the assurance that students are meeting minimum levels of competence.

High levels of consistency for compliance and low levels of autonomy

Practice-integrated courses which fall into this domain, exhibit high levels of internal quality assurance and are able to deliver high levels of consistency for compliance. Quality assurance procedures are likely to be well documented and

data gathered from a variety of sources to ensure compliance. Participants in the programme, at the extreme left, are likely to be disempowered by these processes and while offering high levels of consistency, feel unable to respond to local need.

High Levels of consistency for compliance and high levels of autonomy

In this domain, practice integrated courses assure quality through the rigorous application of quality assurance processes but individuals, in local settings, can adapt a student's experience and bring their own understanding to bear in ways which do not compromise consistency or compliance.

Most teacher education courses would now appear, at least by OfSTED's criteria to be offering 'good' to 'very good' levels of management and quality assurance leading to compliance. Given the draconian punishments which might ensue, it's inevitable that providers should seek to develop systems and approaches which minimise exposure to adverse inspection judgements. Mayes and Banks' (1998) principles for quality assurance focus on the need to deliver consistency for compliance and less on the processes for staff development which supported these principles.

Complementary principles for quality assurance

Looking back over the programme's recent history, however, it's possible to draw out several new complementary principles which lead to programme improvement and individual autonomy.

- Quality assurance through transparency
- Quality assurance through professional development (open and professional discussion)
- Quality assurance through empowerment (seen as the ability to develop and share tools which reflect tutor skill and knowledge and which draw on their skills and expertise to inform each other.)
- In summary: quality assurance through professional discourse (the ability for all participants to engage in a discourse about programme improvement and to make creative responses for improvement which enhances, rather than reduces, programme consistency.

Transparency

The principle of transparency includes: reports which are submitted about student teachers and which are submitted on-line, the monitoring of school placements which are shared with mentors and the monitoring of subject tutors. It also applies to the open publication of the quality assurance report.

Professional development

The principle of professional development provides a focus for all monitoring activity.

Empowerment

Tutors and mentors are supported in their development of tools and approaches to meet local needs, within agreed limits to protect consistency and equity.

Professional discourse

This principle encompasses the three previous principles.

While the Open University course sometimes feels a long way from achieving its ultimate goal of full professional autonomy alongside complete consistency for compliance, it has taken substantial steps to improve programme quality and student experience through professional discourse with tutors and with mentors. The movement from compliance (when this is seen as consistency) to professional autonomy, encouraged through professional discourse seems likely to be able to deliver programme improvement as well as compliance.

The approaches needed to operate in both worlds (the compliant and the self-improving) are different and require distinctive approaches. Although they are not mutually exclusive, this is a problematic line to take. Participants in the self-improving world need to recognise that differences, between university practice and the practice of practice are inevitable, just as they are inevitable between different work practices. These boundaries between practices are critically important areas for learning and a standardised approach, and one which privileges consistency and disregards autonomy, is unlikely to be able respond fluidly to the opportunities which such dissonance presents.

This paper, then, ends with a plea for greater recognition of the role of dissonance between and within practices supported by quality assurance processes that recognise the need for overall consistency but within an environment where those who work on the programme are encouraged to exercise greater professional autonomy through professional discourse.

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