

# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

## Introduction

This report summarises the key themes that were explored with a series of focus groups. They discussed the outputs from the *Professional Learning* roundtable discussion that took place at the CDN College Expo 2021. The focus groups were conducted in February 2022 and consisted of lecturers and those who support lecturers through their teaching qualifications and/or are involved in a role that includes a responsibility for supporting the professional learning for lecturers.

## 1. Professionalism

### QUESTION

**What does it mean to be a professional lecturer in the college sector in Scotland?**

### Professional Identity

The notion of professionalism holds deep and very individual meanings for each member of staff. Those newer to lecturing in the college sector subscribed to holding a dual identity, where dual expertise describes the lecturers' knowledge of their subject areas as well as learning and teaching (Orr and Simmons, 2010). However, those who had been lecturing for longer questioned whether it was accurate, possibly a little too simplistic, and whether it truly reflected today's contemporary and holistic world of college education.

### Professional Community

It was highlighted that having a community of lecturers helps to foster professionalism within its members

(Lave and Wenger, 1991). Having the time to regularly engage with others with similar roles, challenges, and ideals allows professional dialogue to flourish and depth of reflections to increase. This grows the potential for innovation within learning and teaching. Lecturers displayed palpable respect for the knowledge and skill of their peers as well as a curiosity around their classroom practice. There was clear frustration around the challenges of finding a common time when colleagues would be available to meet.

### Registration and Regulation

Registration has been seen as positive in terms of the public perception of professionalism within the college sector. However, there was the clear feeling that it has yet to be seen whether the adoption of the college sector by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) would enhance the feeling of being recognised as a professional for individual lecturers or within the sector.

### Promoted Posts

Tensions were identified around the promotion of staff members or the hiring of individuals who would lead teams of qualified lecturers but did not yet hold a teaching/lecturing qualification themselves. This was considered to be at odds with everything that entails being a professional with lecturing responsibilities.

### Going Forward

Many focus group participants commented that they historically hadn't given a lot of thought around what it meant to be a professional lecturer in a Scottish college, but had enjoyed and valued the opportunity to explore the issue. The question that now remains is: 'What can be done to grow the dialogue around professionalism between lecturers and help them develop their knowledge of the topic?'

## 2. Lecturer Qualifications

### QUESTION

**To what extent do the current lecturing qualifications fulfil the requirements of colleges and lecturers, and how could they be improved in the future?**

### College culture and learning to teach

One of the most influential elements for new lecturers when it comes to undertaking qualifications is the culture within the college around learning to teach. Each college has its own culture related to professional learning which constitutes much of new lecturers' interaction with staff outwith their departments. There were many examples of positive experiences of support given by specialist individuals to help lecturers transition into the sector which is highlighted by Boyd (2010). There was however, a clear view that there was not enough structured time spent with lecturers to formally help them learn about their new roles.

Many issues and barriers were identified in relation to cultural aspects, which included:

- Equity of access to lecturing qualifications differs throughout the sector
- Having to undertake teaching qualifications, other than TQFE, outside their working hours, compromising work/life balance
- Time spent working on non-TQFE qualifications would usually not be remunerated.

### Content of the lecturing qualifications

The inclusion of the following help lay the foundation for purposeful and positive teaching and learning experiences:

- Observing and reflecting on the teaching of both new and experienced lecturers
- Gaining knowledge and understanding about who college learners are
- Exploring aspects of educational theories and applying these in practical settings
- Learning about awarding bodies and their quality assurance requirements
- Discovering the wider college sector, who the stakeholders are, where support for departments and lecturers can be found, and how external networks are accessed.

Observations of learning and teaching for new, as well as experienced, lecturers were not only seen as being of great value, but should be a regular part of professional development. There was, however, apprehension about the length of time that inexperienced lecturers could be teaching classes without teaching qualifications or access to shadow/observe experienced lecturers.

### Achievement of lecturing qualifications

Building on the culture associated with learning to teach, it was highlighted that there is much to be done to allow equitable and fair access to all lecturing qualifications, including the TQFE. Anxiety and worry around the pressures and costs associated with longer-serving lecturers achieving qualifications was apparent. There are some who have been successfully lecturing for many years without having a requirement to undertake the TQFE. Now with GTCS being an important feature of progression and the TQFE, or equivalent, being the minimum criteria for registration, there was a feeling that there was an element of unfairness. Some experienced lecturers worry that their academic writing and ability to think critically will be tested; this is creating a fear of failure after being successful in their careers for many years.

### Current focus on TQFE

In the focus groups, there was clear emphasis on the TQFE being *the* qualification to achieve. Almost all discussions around qualifications moved to concentrate on the TQFE which mirrors the level of attention that the qualification commands across the sector. Irrespective of the reasons, it means that there is a real possibility other qualifications such as Teaching in Colleges Today, PDA Teaching in Scotland's Colleges, and L&D Awards being overlooked.

### Going forward

The content of lecturing qualifications was generally considered fit for purpose. Flexibility around local delivery and the timely ability to address college priorities were key features. Enabling wider access to qualifications was the common message repeated in focus groups, with the recognition that it had a direct impact on the students' experience of learning in colleges. The question that remains is – 'How can colleges transform their cultures around lecturing qualifications to improve equity of access and to effectively support new staff joining the sector?'

## 3. High Impact Professional Learning for Lecturers

### QUESTION

**Which professional learning opportunities are considered to have had the most impact for new and existing lecturers, and what are the reasons behind these?**

### Lecturing qualifications

These were regarded as foundational elements for lecturers and set the tone for further professional development (Husband, 2018). Some of the positive impacts gained when undertaking a lecturing qualification included:

- Growth in the theory and practice around teaching
- Greater understanding of the needs of learners
- Better lesson planning
- Increased confidence to teach well and decreased instances of imposter syndrome
- Refreshed and/or developed writing and critical thinking skills
- Greater confidence working with software for online delivery
- Deeper and wider understanding of the college sector

It was not only the early career lecturers who reported the value and positive impact of teaching qualifications, many experienced lecturers recalled these as being some of the most impactful learning they had ever undertaken. Furthermore, formal learning, post-TQFE was something desired by many lecturers. There was concern that their knowledge around educational theory and practice was becoming outdated as the shift to online learning in the last two years had highlighted. It was hoped that further training would also offer an opportunity to consider the shifting student demographic and their developing needs.

### Current industry knowledge

The currency of the information around the subject being taught is vital for college students. It provides them with up-to-date knowledge and understanding, which in turn delivers a smooth transition into employment or further avenues of study. There is added value when links to industry include meaningful placements for students; this can result in employers and colleges working more closely to provide a highly-skilled workforce for the region. However, concern was voiced around access to current industrial knowledge and experience without dedicated time or the ability to network effectively.

### Learning from colleagues

The sharing of knowledge and power of professional dialogue was regarded as sometimes being undervalued, but there was a consensus that there was much to be gained by discussing and analysing areas such as classroom practice with trusted colleagues. However, to do this meaningfully, dedicated time is essential. Over the last year, available time has been redirected towards online delivery, as well as being consumed by the pastoral care students required.

Many approaches have developed over the previous two years and prior in relation to how professional learning has been delivered within colleges and how to make this most effective. Some colleges identified that a weekly common time has been implemented across departments as well as parts of the wider college, which has been seen to have a positive impact. Other participants identified a shift to many more bitesize, online practice sharing sessions taking place which has helped to improve elements of practice, especially digital elements of teaching practice.

Participants who spoke particularly positively about their learning experiences, often referred to additional support that had been provided by

‘specialist staff / roles’ within their college such as mentors or even ‘coaches’ (Miles, 2017). New lecturers in particular, outlined that support provided was useful to help them to understand different functions of the lecturer role, how this could be undertaken and this often linked back to individual college approaches to the delivery of qualifications/training linked to new lecturers, but with a more operational focus on the day to day elements of the role.

As mentioned previously, being allocated time to observe other lecturers teaching was seen to be a positive and often inspiring method of professional learning (O’Leary and Savage, 2019). *Particularly powerful anecdotes were often based on interdisciplinary observations.* Cautionary tales were shared about implementing outdated observation models, based on performative or judgmental approaches. Lecturers however, believed that there was still scope to evolve practice in line with recent research. Professional curiosity being a primary driver and a preference for a coaching approach to reflective conversations post observation were highlighted. Conducting observations in this manner could further influence a positive culture around professional learning.

### Action research

Action research was regarded to be a valuable area of growth for lecturers. There have been pockets of research undertaken within the college sector that have been well received. They have allowed for a greater focus on reflective practice, often casting a critical lens on classroom practice (McNiff, 2013). Positive impacts of action research were a renewed interest in elements such as lesson planning, a feeling of autonomy, and encouragement to be creative, take risks, and learn from the process. With the need for feedback, students were often directly involved, learning more about the benefits of research.

## Professional learning external to the college

Professional learning that is external to college, attending workshops, courses, and conferences was highly regarded. Further gains were made when staff were asked to share knowledge at these events, through a feeling of being valued not only by their own colleges, but also by the wider sector. Additional benefits were highlighted around the networking opportunities and the projects and possibilities that could stem from these interactions.

## Going forward

There is lots to consider in relation to Professional Learning approaches and requirements with the workforce, especially following the experiences and learning that has taken place since March 2020. As the college sector is likely to see a significant return to campus based teaching and professional learning, a number of questions are presented:

- With time being identified as a significant barrier to undertaking effective professional learning, consideration to be applied as to how colleges can ensure the most effective use of time allocated to professional learning opportunities for staff, in addition to the effectiveness of the methods deployed.
- Opportunities to engage with lecturers both across college, as well as out with their own college to be highlighted, are explored further to ensure their effectiveness.
- Further action research to explore the process and impact of peer observation / developmental observation approaches for new, and existing lecturers could be undertaken, with a focus on identifying good practice and sharing this more broadly across the sector.

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