

The Education and Training Inspectorate

AN EVALUATION OF THE PILOT PREPARATION TO TEACH MODULE FOR PART-TIME LECTURERS IN FURTHER EDUCATION

(UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER)

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1. Introduction

1.1 The pilot Preparation to Teach in Further Education Module has been devised collaboratively between the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) and the University of Ulster (the University). The aim of the module is to equip those staff lecturing on a part-time¹ basis in the further education colleges, or those hoping to join the register of part-time lecturers in a college, with an appropriate range of basic teaching skills. It is appropriate that the Department is piloting this course to develop key teaching skills of the significant number of part-time lecturers working in the further education sector. It is intended that the module will form part of the Department's suite of teacher education programmes.

1.2 The module lasts for 13 weeks and the programme of learning covers a range of appropriate topics/themes, including: planning and managing learning; the skills of further education teaching; micro-skills for good practice; assessment of and for learning; and good practice strategies and skills to advance classroom management, pastoral care, the law, behaviour management, the integration of essential skills, and technology enhanced learning. In order to best meet the particular needs of part-time lecturers, the University has developed a blended learning model, with around one-half of the module content delivered through online tutoring and learning.

1.3 The part-time lecturers undertake a wide range of challenging assessment activities, consisting of: a series of e-Assessments²; a practical micro-teach; participation in blogging and the completion of a reflective diary leading to an overall reflective learning statement; and a written examination based upon a case study. The University awards credits to those participants who successfully complete the module; subject to meeting the entry criteria, those who are accredited are able to progress to the Certificate in Teaching qualification.

1.4 The University is well-placed to deliver the module. It has a long track record in the provision of tutor and lecturer education at this level to the further education sector and is able to underpin the module content with relevant, contemporary further education focused research. Importantly for this particular module, the University is able to apply considerable experience and expertise in the design and delivery of blended learning programmes. In addition, the University offers a seamless progression to the Certificate in Teaching qualification for those part-time lecturers who have sufficient prior qualifications and wish to progress.

1.5 A total of 177 part-time lecturers initially expressed an interest to participate in the module; 46 of them were interviewed. Of those who were successful at interview, 22 enrolled onto the module; the original target set by the Department was 30. Ten of the part-time lecturers were employed by the Southern Regional College, three by both the South Eastern Regional College and the Belfast Metropolitan College and two were employed by each of the remaining three further education colleges. All of the part-time lecturers completed the programme successfully. The University reports that 15 of them progressed to the Certificate in Teaching qualification.

1.6 It is clear that the further education sector relies significantly on part-time lecturers; it is estimated that around 1,800 of them are currently employed across the sector. Almost all of the part-time lecturers selected to participate in the module had allocated timetabled classes, delivering regulated qualifications at a range of levels. Many of them have been teaching in further education for a number of years.

¹ Part-time lecturer refers to those who are paid on an hourly basis

² An e-Assessment is an online knowledge (theory) and experience (practice) self assessment

1.7 The part-time lecturers are deployed by the colleges in a diverse range of professional and technical areas, including art and design, airport operations, childcare, construction, engineering, hairdressing, pharmacy, photography and sports science. While individual timetabled teaching hours varied considerably, it averaged 13 hours weekly; one-half of the part-time lecturers had 15 or more hours timetabled by their employing colleges and a minority of them had more than 20 timetabled hours each week. A number of the part-time lecturers also have additional responsibilities such as course co-ordination duties and several of them have tutorial group responsibilities.

2. The evaluation

2.1 Between September and December 2013, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out an evaluation of the pilot Preparation to Teach Module.

The focus of the evaluation was to assess the:

- appropriateness of the content of the module;
- overall quality of delivery by the University;
- impact of participation in the programme on the part-time lecturers' pedagogic practice;
- suitability of the module for a diverse range of part-time lecturers; and
- accessibility of the training.

2.2 The evaluation consisted of focus group discussions with the part-time lecturers, observations by inspectors of a sample of the face-to-face sessions held at the University and scrutiny of the course content and documentation. Discussions were held with the course co-ordinator and members of the course team. Inspectors also scrutinised the virtual learning environment underpinning the module, looked at a sample of the part-time lecturers' work and evaluated the online aspect of the module. During the latter few weeks of the module, inspectors visited just-over one-half of the part-time lecturers in their employing college and observed them teaching.

3. Summary of main findings

3.1 The high levels of motivation and enjoyment demonstrated by the part-time lecturers. They engage positively in face-to-face and online activities and most of them are committed to progress to and complete, at their own expense, the Certificate in Teaching qualification.

3.2 The course team has worked hard to establish a positive, caring and supportive ethos within the group. In addition, a few of the part-time lecturers benefited from very good individualised support, particularly with regard to writing for assessment purposes and the overall literacy demands of the module.

3.3 The exemplary leadership and management of the module by the course co-ordinator, as characterised by the high quality planning, high levels of pedagogic expertise and experience, high levels of individualised support, well developed online tutoring and mentoring skills, the relevant module content and an appropriate balance between online and face-to-face learning.

3.4 The very high levels of satisfaction reported by the part-time lecturers regarding their experiences and achievements on the module; most of them reported that it had significantly exceeded their expectations and enhanced their pedagogic skills and self-confidence.

3.5 The content of the module is focused sharply on the range of skills that effective lecturers in further education should deploy. These are well-referenced to educational theory and relevant to the needs of part-time lecturers working in the sector.

3.6 The effective use of a blended learning solution was a key feature of the module. This was underpinned by very good content hosted on a contemporary and fit-for-purpose virtual learning environment and which was valued by almost all of the part-time lecturers. The online learning aspect of the module was skilfully and effectively managed by the course co-ordinator. While the general literacy and specific writing demands of some aspects of the online learning were challenging for a minority of the part-time lecturers, they received effective support from the course team.

3.7 The mostly very good quality of the teaching and learning in the face-to-face sessions delivered in the University, which role-modelled good practice in many aspects of the course content, for example, assessment of and for learning and strategies to support active learning.

3.8 Although the assessment process is challenging and rigorous, the suitability of simulated micro-teaching should be reviewed for the majority of the part-time lecturers who have significant timetabled hours in their employing colleges, along with considerable prior teaching experience in the sector.

3.9 The University needs to continue to review and improve the planning and delivery of the micro-teaching element of the assessment process, in terms of more appropriate timing and sequencing of the session. There is also a need to upgrade the specialist technical resources to support this aspect of the module.

3.10 There is clear evidence that the module has helped develop the pedagogic practice of most of the part-time lecturers, in particular the quality of their planning, lesson sequencing, questioning approaches and variation in strategies to keep their learners engaged. They have also had the opportunity to experience well managed and effective online tutoring and learning.

3.11 There have been wider benefits to participation in the module, including the opportunity for the participants to interact with their peers to share ideas and good practice, develop increased confidence in their job roles, acquire an enhanced awareness of online learning techniques and an improvement in their capacity to be self-reflective of their own teaching practice.

3.12 The high levels of achievement of the part-time lecturers; all of them were retained and successfully achieved the module. It is noteworthy that around a majority of them intend to progress to the Certificate in Teaching qualification.

3.13 The evidence from this evaluation points to a range of processes by which part-time lecturers are inducted, deployed, developed and supported, within and across the further education colleges in which they are employed. There is wide variation in the arrangements for the mentoring and professional development of part-time lecturers.

3.14 In taking the module forward, it would be appropriate to make it an integral aspect of the oversight arrangements already in place for the existing suite of teacher education qualifications funded by the Department. This would ensure that all stakeholders are kept fully informed about the module, particularly the employing colleges with regard to their role in supporting and mentoring the part-time lecturers.

3.15 The good start made in developing the teaching skills of the part-time lecturers needs to be further built upon by them with support from the employing colleges. A short module of teacher education in itself will not address the continuing professional development needs of the large number of part-time lecturers in the further education sector.

4. The module content

4.1 The pilot Preparation to Teach Module is well-planned and the content and assessment methodology is appropriate for the aims of the course and the timescale involved. The content is focused sharply and appropriately on the necessary range of skills that effective lecturers in further education³ should deploy. The module content is well-referenced to educational theory and relevant to the needs of part-time lecturers working in the sector. These incorporate skills, strategies and techniques which include opening and closing a lesson, questioning for learning, stimulus variation, explanation demonstration, teacher presence and managing learning. The part-time lecturers are exposed to a wide range of active learning strategies and many opportunities, in the face-to-face and online work, are provided for them not only to apply some of these with learners, but also to reflect on their effectiveness and also to share their experiences with peers.

4.2 Good attention is paid to improving the part-time lecturers' knowledge and understanding of the essential skills, and on the importance of embedding these into the planning and delivery of vocational courses. They are provided with a very clear overview of the impact that poor literacy and numeracy skills can have on learners, along with recent research publications regarding the achievement by learners from Northern Ireland in literacy and numeracy and how this compares internationally. The part-time lecturers are encouraged to reflect on the overall strategies for the embedding and delivery of the essential skills in their employing colleges. They are given sound guidance on the planned development of opportunities for learners in their college-based teaching groups to apply essential skills in relevant vocational contexts.

4.3 The course team, in particular the course co-ordinator, have established an effective blended learning model of delivery of the module. This is underpinned by very good content hosted on a contemporary and fit-for-purpose virtual learning environment. Around one-half of the module content is delivered online. The online aspect was valued by almost all of the part-time lecturers, who appreciated: the flexibility of access to e-lectures and webinars⁴; access to the virtual learning environment through a downloadable App⁵ on mobile devices; the support offered through the tutor-led webinars; the online group collegiality that emerged as the module progressed; and the responsive, constructive feedback from the course co-ordinator to blogs, reflective diary comments and formal assessments. While a few of the part-time lecturers reported that they would have preferred more face-to-face contact time, the balance between online learning and face-to-face is appropriate and works well.

³ The Seven FE Teaching Skills, 2013, University of Ulster

⁴ A webinar is an online tutorial

⁵ Application software that is designed to run on mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets

4.4 The rigorous assessment process along with the strong online aspect of much of the learning proved challenging for a few of the part-time lecturers, in particular the general literacy and specific writing demands. While the University managed this effectively and sensitively, and provided good levels of additional support and guidance, the evidence shows that some of these lecturers were more reticent in their online blogging activities. During focus group discussions, a few of the part-time lecturers reported that they found the blogging a challenge. It will be important as the module is rolled out further that the part-time lecturers participating have, or are supported by the employing colleges to develop, the necessary literacy and specific writing skills to cope effectively with a fully blended model of learning such as this.

4.5 Almost all of the current group of part-time lecturers benefit from the opportunity to embed and further develop their pedagogic skills as they can apply much of the module content in their own lessons in college. The evidence from the sample of online blogs observed, for example, also shows that they use their ongoing teaching experiences to inform discussions, trial particular strategies and to reflect on and share practice with peers.

4.6 The assessment process is rigorous and varied. The part-time lecturers are required to complete three e-Assessments, undertake a simulated micro-teach and maintain an online presence through blogging and completion of a reflective diary. The final part of the assessment comprises a written class test. The arrangements for the initial assessment of the part-time lecturers are thorough and the tracking of their progress is systematic. The baseline assessment information is used to good effect to inform the tailored planning and also identify those who need additional support, which is sensitively and effectively provided. The part-time lecturers receive regular, detailed and encouraging feedback to promote improvement in their work and to challenge and extend their thinking.

5. The quality of delivery

5.1 The pilot group of part-time lecturers were highly motivated, enthusiastic and determined to improve their teaching competence, as evidenced by their positive engagement and participation in class and online activities. Most of them are committed to progress to and complete, at their own expense, the Certificate in Teaching qualification. While they are a diverse group of learners, the good levels of pastoral support and encouragement, underpinned by the stimulating teaching and learning strategies deployed by the course team, have resulted in a cohesive and collegial group emerging over the duration of the module. The collegiality was also evident in the online work with many good examples of discussions around, and sharing of, effective pedagogic practice.

5.2 The leadership and management of the module by the course co-ordinator is exemplary. It is characterised by: excellent oversight of all aspects of the module; high levels of drive and enthusiasm; high quality planning leading to an innovative approach to learning and a coherent, relevant curriculum offer bespoke to further education; the creation of a cohesive, well-supported group of learners; high levels of pedagogic expertise and experience; well developed and effective online tutoring and mentoring skills; and the excellent progress and outcomes achieved by the pilot group of part-time lecturers. While the leadership and management of the online aspect of the module was particularly skilful and effective, the vast majority of the online tutoring and mentoring was undertaken by the course co-ordinator and the capacity of the wider course team in online tutoring needs to be further developed given the blended nature of the module. The quality assurance arrangements are well managed and fit for purpose. The progress of individual learners is effectively tracked and monitored. Additional, tailored support is offered to the part-time lecturers on a one to one basis and to small groups online.

5.3 The quality of the face-to-face sessions in the University was mostly very good. The sessions were very well planned and structured, the pace was challenging but appropriate, and the tutors modelled good practice in important aspects of good quality teaching and learning such as effective questioning strategies, purposeful group work and effective planning for learning. There was good coherence across the sessions, most of them were varied and imaginative and engendered good levels of enthusiasm. The part-time lecturers were exposed to a good range of interactive software applications to support learning and also to the use of social media to enhance learning. They had access to several guest speakers, in particular for the technology enhanced learning part of the module, and this worked to good effect; it stimulated their thinking and enabled them to discuss and debate good practice. One of the expert speakers latterly followed up the guest lecture by facilitating a webinar, which was valued and enjoyed by the group.

5.4 Given that the module was conceived as being relevant to the needs of part-time lecturers already teaching in the further education sector, and those wishing to join the register of part-time lecturers, a central part of the assessment process is, appropriately, a simulated micro-teaching session. The part-time lecturers worked hard to plan and deliver a short, simulated micro-teach and the quality of feedback from the tutors, and their peers, was mostly incisive and improvement focused. The structure of the session needs to be reviewed by the course team, as the feedback was overly long and the lack of multiple camera angles reduced some of the learning opportunities and overall impact of the session. The predominance of the feedback was on teaching and more attention should be given to the impact of the teaching on learning and the need for their learners to be more involved. The suitability of simulated micro-teaching should be kept under review, particularly where significant numbers of the participants already have significant timetabled hours in their employing colleges, along with considerable prior teaching experience in the sector.

5.5 The blended learning approach worked well and was popular with almost all of the part-time lecturers. While their participation in the online environment varied considerably, a majority of them were active participants and there is clear evidence that an online community of learners was established and worked effectively. Around one-fifth of the part-time lecturers, however, demonstrated relatively low levels of activity in the online course. Many good examples were observed of insightful sharing of experiences, meaningful discussions, timely and expert tutor feedback and prompting, and intuitive peer feedback. Most of the assessments were submitted and marked in the online environment; the quality of the feedback from the co-ordinator was prompt, detailed and constructive.

5.6 Over time, an increasing maturity in the quality of the online work was evident. The extent of the commentaries in the reflective diary section of the online environment showed that many of the part-time lecturers were putting theories into practice with their own learners and reflecting on the outcomes. The good ethos established in the face-to-face sessions was also evident in the online work. The part-time lecturers were able to apply newly acquired skills and techniques with their learner groups in college and to share with, and learn from, their peers.

5.7 In taking the module forward, it would be appropriate to make it an integral aspect of the oversight arrangements already in place for the existing suite of teacher education qualifications funded by the Department. This would ensure that all stakeholders are kept fully informed about the module, particularly the employing colleges with regard to their role in supporting and mentoring the part-time lecturers.

6. Impact of the module on practice

6.1 The part-time lecturers have benefited noticeably from their participation in the module and are developing a broad range of contemporary pedagogic skills. In the sessions observed, there was a strong connect between the observed practice and many of the skills, strategies and techniques covered in the module. The evidence is clear that the module has had a positive impact on most of the part-time lecturers' pedagogic practice, in particular the quality of their planning for learning, lesson sequencing, questioning approaches and variation in strategies to keep learners engaged. The part-time lecturers have benefited from the ongoing advice and guidance, access to a role model of good practice and high quality, constructive feedback to inform their professional development.

6.2 There have also been wider benefits of participation to the part-time lecturers, including the opportunity to interact with their peers to share ideas, a reported reduction in their feelings of isolation within their employing college, increased confidence in their job roles, enhanced awareness of online learning techniques and an improvement in their capacity to be self-reflective of their own teaching practice. The development of the skill of self-reflection to identify own strengths and further development needs is a particular feature of the module. The part-time lecturers are encouraged, and most try to, undertake an evaluative and reflective review of their pedagogy; most of them have evolved to be discerning thinkers about what they see in their own practice. The opportunity to engage in regular peer learning is also well-embedded in the module. Most of them use educational terminology with confidence and there is good evidence of ongoing professional dialogue with peers.

6.3 The part-time lecturers reported very high levels of satisfaction regarding their experiences and achievements on the module; most reported that it had significantly exceeded their expectations and enhanced their pedagogic skills and self-confidence. More specifically, they appreciated: the high levels of expertise of the course co-ordinator and wider team; the caring pastoral support and ethos; the strong, consistent focus on effective pedagogy; the opportunity to apply new techniques and practices with their learner groups in college; the excellent, prompt feedback to online blogs and reflections and to formal assessments; the challenging but well-planned and relevant assessment arrangements; and the flexibility afforded by online learning along with the opportunity it provided to engage in professional dialogue with peers and to share practice and experiences.

6.4 Most of the pilot group of part-time lecturers have considerable teaching loads in their employing colleges, ranging from a few to more than 20 hours weekly class contact time; a few have course co-ordination and tutorial group responsibilities. Almost all of them are teaching groups undertaking regulated professional and technical qualifications. This highlights a significant reliance by the further education sector on part-time lecturers to deliver their mainstream curriculum offer, across all levels. It also underpins clearly the need for more professionalisation of the workforce through appropriate programmes of development such as this module.

6.5 The evidence from the evaluation points to a range of processes by which part-time lecturers are inducted, deployed, developed and supported within and across the further education colleges. There is a wide variation in the arrangements for the mentoring or professional development of part-time lecturers.

6.6 While all of the colleges report that they run induction programmes for part-time lecturers, it is clear that attendance by them is variable and mostly low. Only a few of the part-time lecturers report that they have been observed in college and received discerning feedback on their teaching skills and competence. A common and recurring theme across the discussions with the part-time lecturers was that, prior to participation on the module, they lacked sufficient knowledge and confidence about whether they were performing effectively.

6.7 Through the module, the part-time lecturers have been provided with a strong foundation in the basics of good practice in pedagogy and they have been exposed to contemporary theories, thinking and research in this area. They have also had the opportunity to experience well managed and delivered online tutoring and learning. It will take time for them to embed some of the wider and more complex skills into their practice, such as planning for and dealing effectively with diverse groups of learners, effective assessment for learning and enhancing learning through the use of information and learning technology (ILT). It needs to be recognised that participation in a short module of teacher education in itself will not address the continuing professional development needs of the large number of part-time lecturers in the further education sector. The good start made by the University in developing their skills and raising their awareness of good practice in teaching and learning needs to be built upon by them with support from their employing colleges.

7. Conclusion

7.1 This evaluation confirms that the pilot Preparation to Teach Module delivered by the University of Ulster is very good. A coherent module bespoke to the further education sector has been devised and established, with an appropriate balance between online and face-to-face learning. It has the potential to meet well many of the pedagogic needs of part-time lecturers working in the sector.

Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

Performance levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) use the following performance levels in reports:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

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