## Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

**Title**: Students becoming staff – overcoming challenges for postgraduates who teach

**Transition(s) the practice supports**: Moving from being a research postgraduate student to teaching (either tutoring or lab demonstrating) – postgraduate transition / transition to professional practice

**Abstract**: Many research postgraduate students will do some form of teaching during the course of their degree programme, for valuable experience prior to entering academia, through financial necessity, or perhaps both.  At the University of St Andrews we seek to provide comprehensive and ongoing support to postgraduates to help them transition into and manage the potentially challenging dual identity of acting as a member of teaching staff whilst also pursuing their own studies and research.

**Description**:

*Mandatory courses:*

Every School within the University employs postgraduate research students (PGRs) in some form of teaching, ranging from small group tutorials, lab demonstrating, supporting problem/programming classes, marking (coursework and sometimes exams), and (rarely) guest lecturing.  Before they are allowed to do any form of teaching, PGRs must first attend two mandatory, face-to-face workshops delivered by Dr Heather McKiggan-Fee (the *Educational and Postgraduate Researcher Developer* in the Centre for Academic, Professional and Organisational Development (CAPOD)), in collaboration with academic and student support staff from around the university.  The workshops are tailored by Faculty (Arts/Divinity and Science/Medicine), and run before the start of each semester.  PGRs must also complete two online courses, one on the University's Good Academic Practice policy, and the other an external online course on Diversity in the Workplace.

The face-to-face workshops are each 4 hours long.  The first is on Tutoring (and Demonstrating for the Sciences).  After some details on how to set up their contracts and what a Scottish undergraduate degree comprises (we have a very international cohort of PGRs; most have done their UG education in another country), the session introduces key concepts such as approaches to learning and motivation, then focuses on practical advice on how to establish effective group dynamics.  The session is highly interactive, and includes a Q&A session with experienced PGR tutors/demonstrators on how to deal with challenging situations (as chosen by the workshop participants).  We finish with a presentation from Student Services staff outlining the range of support available from Student Services for all students and the particular support available to PGRs in their role as teaching staff. This covers issues such as the expectations of the staff role and confidentiality versus duty of care.

The second workshop is on Assessment and Academic Misconduct, covering key issues of policy and procedure in assessment, and how to give good feedback.  This is jointly delivered with an academic colleague, and includes hands-on exercises where participants mark student work and discuss the outcomes, both in terms of awarding grades and detecting plagiarism.

*Ongoing support from CAPOD:*

The workshops are supported by a Moodle course which gives participants access to all of the materials as well as links to additional resources.

PGRs who teach have the option of signing up for Tutor/Demonstrators networking lunches that run over the course of each semester.  These are facilitated by Dr McKiggan-Fee and allow PGRs to come together in a safe and supportive environment to share good practice and any concerns they have about teaching.  This is particularly helpful if they have concerns about particular practices within their School; in this case Dr McKiggan-Fee will pursue the matter with the School and the PGR can remain anonymous. Attendees of these lunches have reported finding them extremely helpful.

Dr McKiggan-Fee also runs two optional, 10-credit Masters-level *Introduction to University Teaching* modules: one on Supporting Student Learning, the other on Curriculum Design and Assessment.  These were designed particularly for PGRs who teach, although they are open to all teaching staff. These are each accredited by the Higher Education Academy at D1 and therefore lead to an award of Associate Fellow of the HEA. Participants have reported that these courses have significantly improved their confidence in teaching and their understanding of pedagogical theory and practice.

Information for staff and PGRs on the support offered by CAPOD is outlined at:
http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/staff/policy/students-postgraduate/postgraduateresearcherswhoteach/

*Ongoing support within the Schools:*

It is University policy that Schools should offer subject-specific training and support to complement the two-day CAPOD course.  This usually includes running marking fairs or co-ordinating marking pairs, generally matching a new tutor with a staff member or experienced postgraduate; teaching observation of a new tutor by a staff member; and, in some but not all courses, the provision of extensive teaching materials. Inductions can range from School-wide sessions to module-specific meetings, and some Schools have encouraged peer-led training. For example, the School of History funded a 'peer lunch' in which experienced postgraduate tutors spoke candidly with incoming tutors for the 2015/2016 AY about their teaching experiences, and their best advice for those teaching for the first time.

However, the nature of School-level support varies across (and sometimes within) Schools. In response to concerns raised by some graduate representatives, the University has recently issued new guidance regarding School-specific support, and has established a working group to look at how the School-based support can be further developed and made more consistent across Schools.

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