

**Para-professionals in further education: changing roles in vocational delivery.**

Exploring changing roles in teaching and learning through an account of the use of Trainers in vocational education, building on previous research into the development of para-professional roles in colleges in the East Midlands.

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### **Introduction**

Roles and structures within further education colleges seem to be in constant change and development; roles are becoming blurred, and lecturers are taking on more management tasks. Alongside this has been the development of para-professional roles, using non-lecturers to undertake teaching tasks. This can allow for the greater involvement of lecturers in the management and quality assurance aspects of the curriculum, leaving the delivery and assessment to others. This could be seen as a downgrading of the skills and expertise required in the classroom, in contrast to the drive to "professionalise" the Further Education lecturer role through the development of Qualified Teacher: Learning & Skills (QT:LS) status. This paper seeks to explore the potential benefits of the para-professional role for colleges, through data drawn from a regional survey, and focuses further upon findings from a case study investigation of the role within one college.

### **Para-professionals**

Para-professional staff, that is staff who are not employed on teacher or lecturer contracts but who are in charge of student learning and assessing, are a growing band in post 16 education. The people may have titles such as Trainer, Instructor, Demonstrator, Adviser or Assessor. They are usually employed in vocational areas, alongside, and sometimes in the place of

lecturers and teachers. FENTO identify that para-professional members of staff,

...provide instruction, support and advice as well as instruction and guidance to learners in the development of skills and knowledge.

(FENTO 2001:12)

The use of para-professional staff has been growing over the past few years. A survey for the AoC (Kedney 1999) identified that in 1996 854 of these posts had been introduced; in 1999 this figure had risen to 2,178. My research in 2000, based on a regional survey of all colleges in the East Midlands, which elicited fourteen replies, thirteen of which identified that they were using para-professional staff, and one in-depth college case study, showed that the use of these posts continues to rise and that in some colleges the para-professionals may be delivering up to 50% of the guided learning hours (Scott 2003).

### **Why employ para-professionals?**

The pressure on Further Education budgets since Incorporation has led to continuing efforts to reduce costs and increase outputs. The use of para-professional staff is often seen as part of this drive. In the research referred to above, reduction in cost was identified as the major driver to their introduction: 72% of the respondent colleges who had introduced para-professional roles did so to reduce costs. The perceived benefits to the college of these posts were seen as,

- no restrictions on class contact hours, weekly or annually,
- whole year working
- usually, lower rates of pay.

An accompanying drive was to increase flexibility through reductions in the limits placed on college working by lecturer contractual restraints. (Scott 2002)

The regional survey identified that the majority of colleges who had introduced para-professional roles had been satisfied with the result, with 27% reporting that the introduction of para-professional roles had been more successful than they had expected. The range of para-professional roles and the number employed continues to develop, 45% of respondent colleges stated that they intend to use more para-professional staff in the future. The respondents were either college Principals or Human resource Managers, and therefore the satisfaction measures were from a strategic staffing and resource point of view and may not always have reflected views elsewhere within the organisation.

In order to follow up this regional research on the spread of para-professional staff I have recently conducted in-depth interviews in three colleges which are utilising these posts to assess their spread, impact and the motivation behind them. These interviews have been with Principals, Deputy Principals and Human Resource managers. These interviews will be followed up by a

national survey to assess the use of para-professionals and how the role is developing.

### **Case study: para-professionals as trainers**

The second research project included, a small general college in a semi-rural setting is making extensive use of Trainers in its vocational education areas. These areas form the major part of the college provision and have increased in size considerably in the past few year, leading to a major expansion of college operations.

The impetus for the introduction of these roles came from two major sources in this case. The first was the amalgamation of a work based training provider with the college, increasing the amount of work based learning (WBL) the college was involved in, and second a poor inspection report, especially in the area of WBL. The poor grades in WBL impacted on the management grades for inspection, and on the whole profile of the college. This was seen as a wake up call regarding quality and management of WBL, and led to changes within this area of provision.

The major difficulties in the WBL area were based on the divisions of tasks where,

- lecturers were delivering underpinning knowledge to trainees
- para-professional Assessors were assessing trainees in the workplace
- Key Skills lecturers were delivering stand alone Key Skills sessions

This meant that the three key activities impacting on the student learning and achievement were being delivered independently by three different groups of staff, leading to difficulties in co-ordination and subsequent low achievement levels. In addition the activities, both college-based delivery and work-based assessment, were contained within the standard college maximum of 36 week delivery, leading to lengthy gaps in trainee progress and issues of retention. The college considered that better use could be made of facilities if they were utilised all year; this would aid retention by not breaking the routine of attendance, delivery and assessment during non-term times. It would also allow trainees to progress more quickly, as the learning and assessment could be continuous and not having to wait for specific times of year. Full utilisation of the estate, the rooms, equipment and ICT facilities, would also mean that more trainees could be catered for with the same level of physical resource.

The college team decided to act on the research evidence that Key Skills should be delivered through an integrated model (e.g. Hadlow and Hegarty 2004; Glover 2005), and in addition brought the knowledge and assessment aspects of the programme together. In order to do this, new Trainer posts were created, on a salary point mid-way between assessors and lecturers. Some lecturers transferred to these posts, and some new Trainers were recruited. The major staffing change was to the contracts and terms of conditions of the Trainers: they work a 44 week year, with no specified teaching hours, based on a caseload of trainees. This means that they are responsible for the whole experience of the trainee in their caseload, their

skills knowledge, key skills and assessment in the workplace. The structure of the week for the Trainers tends to be spending two days in college working with trainees on individual learning plans, two days in assessing the same group of trainees in the workplace, and one in administration and development of the programmes, materials and updating. This is very different to the classroom-based structure of a standard lecturer post.

The outcome of these structural and role changes has been an increase in the level of achievement to above the floor targets, that is the national achievement targets for the type of programme, in this case, WBL, and significantly higher than the national benchmarks for achievement in all areas of WBL.

Unlike the respondents in the regional survey, the majority of whom identified cost saving as a major driver for the introduction of para-professional roles, in the case study college the major impetus was the quality aspect. Year round working and Trainer accountability for outcomes were integral to this quality improvement. The caseloading approach, where a Trainer is allocated a number of trainees to supervise throughout their programme, was also central to the structuring of the teams and the levels of staffing required. This system means that the trainees have one point of contact, someone who has close contact with them in college, as well as in the workplace and assesses their work. The Trainer is responsible for the trainee's progress and achievement and pace of assessment is tracked centrally and regularly reviewed with the Trainer. Targets for levels of assessment are set and trainers are held

accountable for their achievement. It is also important to remember that increasing student achievement and creating year round working will have cost benefits to the college, as well as impacting on the personal learning experience and achievement of the trainee.

Within this college, the benefits from using Trainers in all vocational and WBL areas are now impacting on other areas, as the mechanisms for tracking student assessment and achievement are rolled-out across the whole college. Increased accountability for caseloads and student achievement has been pioneered through the Trainers in WBL, and the management team within the college are now seeking to introduce similar cultural changes into other areas, although it is recognised that the Trainer model is unlikely to fit with the more academic, classroom based style of other subject areas. This means that methods of working that were initially restricted to WBL and Trainers are being operated in traditional classroom based delivery, by lecturers, thereby changing the emphasis of the lecturer's role from teaching, to facilitating and tracking learning.

### **The status of para-professionals**

Across the sector, staff holding Trainer and other para-professional posts are professionals working within education. Students and trainees may not realise the staff they are working with have different status, but potentially, the introduction of these roles has major implications for curriculum design and delivery (Avis et al 2001). At a time of national emphasis on the need to raise



standards through required qualifications for lecturers, it may also have implications for the role of the professional lecturer in Further Education.

In the case study college, Trainers are expected to have at least level 3 qualifications in their vocational area, together with assessor awards. They are encouraged to obtain a full teaching qualification, and are rewarded for doing so. Pay rates are similar to lecturers, but terms and conditions remain different. The college sees the use of Trainers as a significant success for the organisation and the trainees, and will expand their use where appropriate.

Depending on your position and view, the introduction of para-professional staff into delivery teams can be seen as a useful development to aid flexibility, or as a strategy to reduce costs and weaken the power of the lecturer or teacher. Whichever way it is viewed, it is potentially a major change in staffing models and affects the roles and responsibilities of a whole range of staff in further education. In many ways, this development can be seen as creating a more homogenous staffing model across the learning and skills sector. It imports the staffing model used by skills and work based trainers, usually private training organisations, into colleges.

Para-professional staff can play an important role in vocational education. They usually bring direct relevant and up to date experience of the industry being studied. They have the qualifications recognised by the industry and they are able to relate to the students and their experience of working within the industry. They also usually have flexible timetables, that is they are not

restricted by lecturer contracts to annual, weekly or daily hours limits. They also work all year, with between 20-30 days holiday, but with no limit on "teaching weeks" or set term dates and therefore no time of the year when students are not in contact with the staff. The type of contact they have with students is not constrained by definitions of what constitutes teaching or assessing or supervision, thus allowing them to work with students in the workplace, drop-in workshops or the classroom.

In light of the developments in para-professional roles we need, as a sector, to examine what we expect now from our lecturers and para-professionals, what their relative status is and how this fits with QT:LS if we are not to create a two tier system, where lecturers are increasingly managers of the curriculum, and para-professionals are the deliverers, removed from the development opportunities and status intended by the drive for professionalism within the sector.

## References

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