

Preparing future faculty, Oxford, 11th of April

I've got to be honest, I was completely unaware of the higher education academy and the associated Subject Centers, as I got up in the early hours for the drive to Oxford. At the forefront of my mind was food; having experienced other Oxford conferences, I was looking forward to a nice spread which would beat the normal budget food PhD students have to live on. The day though did sound intriguing, 'preparing future faculty'. As with most PhD students I tend to be so engrossed in my topic, the thought 'what are you going to do afterwards' is normally only raised by inquisitive family and friends.

The day was kicked off by David Pace from Indiana University. He discussed the 'preparing future faculty program' (PFF) which had been developed at Indiana University. The program was split into two main sections, research and teaching. The research aspect consisted of workshops and courses concerning all aspects of research such as methodologies, grant writing and publishing. The teaching aspect of the program was wide ranging. It included an introduction to pedagogic material, and workshops on different aspects of teaching, from planning a course to teaching in a religious college.

As the talk progressed it became apparent that this conference was much more relevant than I first realised. Although many of the research aspects of the program David was discussing were covered by similar courses at my own university, the training giving in teaching was at a completely different level. The next paper by Keith Trigwell from the Centre for Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice at the University of Oxford emphasised this thought further.

Keith explained that the centre was set up to support the quest for excellence in learning, teaching, and research at the University. This is achieved through a number of methods but primarily a 4 stage development process. Stage 1 (preparation for learning and teaching at Oxford) and stage 2 (development and teaching) are for graduate students and contract research staff with little teaching experience. The next two stages are for new academic staff; stage 3 (Developing Academic Practice at Oxford) and stage 4 (Postgraduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education). Currently, graduate students do not do stages 3 and 4, but might do so in the future. New members of academic staff are also given a mentor to help with their teaching.

Both opening papers emphasised that graduate students are leaving their universities not only with a PhD, but with a good level of knowledge and training in teaching their chosen subjects. Both also indicated that postgraduates with this level of training and experience in teaching, were finding it easier to find work after their PhDs, something I myself will have to be thinking about soon. Their papers made me realise that I not only required good research credentials if I wished to progress into an academic career, but I also required teaching experience and pedagogical knowledge.

After these well presented and thoughtful papers, the delegates split off into discussion groups for archaeology, history and classics. They were charged with discussing two main points:

- What would help postgraduate students in preparing for (and in the early years of) an academic career?
- To what extent does help, training and support need to be discipline-based?

Each group then reported back to the main body of the delegates after the lunch break. It is during these discussions that I realized how wide and varied postgraduate training was. Some received no training at all. Many delegates received research training in some form, but many received little or no training in teaching. A few got to take courses such as those discussed at the beginning. I was also struck that the wide variety applied to all institutions, whether FE colleges or traditional red brick universities. It was also of great relief to meet and hear from a number of postgraduate students and find they were having similar or worse problems regarding training.

The main comments received back from the discussion groups revolved around the first question posed. The suggestions given back were (and this is not an exhaustive list):

- Experience and training in teaching is of great importance (including, if possible, teaching in different institutions)
- Experience and training in developing a syllabus
- Training and experience of assessment setting and marking
- Experience in the organization of conferences which will help develop management skills
- Experience giving papers and involvement with the larger academic community
- The development of the Subject Centre web site as a resource for new academics, with reading lists, examples of syllabi, essay questions and advice from those who have gone through the process.

The second question, was in some ways harder to answer. The general consensus was that some training did require to be subject specific, and some didn't. For example, training in how to give a lecture, hold attention and deal with unruly students is not subject specific. But it was felt that other aspects of training such as syllabus development did require a subject specific approach.

From the group reports, four main themes developed:

- Careers
- Content and nature of PFF (preparing future faculty)

- Communications
- Departmental engagement

These four themes formed the discussion topics of the afternoon focus groups. The session I attended was a very lively and useful debate on departmental engagement, with a nice mix of post-graduate students, young lecturers and more experienced academics.

The first thing we discussed was that the real role of an academic involves administration, and not just teaching but the organization of syllabi, conferences, open days, setting and marking exams. But postgraduate students are often not integrated and the teaching they do is often ad hoc, with postgraduate students used when staff are ill/on leave/don't like the subject etc. They also often only teach their specialist subjects, whereas academics are often required to teach outside their field of expertise.

Shadowing was discussed as a method to better integrate postgraduate students into the department and to give experience of academic administration. The idea quickly moved on from shadowing an individual for a period of time (which I could see causing great annoyance to some academics) to shadowing a task, such as setting the syllabus and associated assessment to the end marking. Some concerns were raised about the suitability of some students to teach, which is why we felt training and familiarity with pedagogic literature should be a requirement before postgraduate students could engage with teaching. Again the variation between different institutions was striking.

After a tea break (with very nice biscuits) the delegates reconvened to hear the findings of the focus groups. As the day was concerned with training future academics, the reports were given by postgraduate students who had attended the focus groups, myself included.

The comments received from the focus groups were wide ranging, all indicated that more structure is required in how postgraduates are trained and what they are trained in. The key points raised (in no particular order) by the focus groups were:

- A postgraduate charter would help define what training is required by postgraduates
- Shadowing tasks could help develop postgraduate students as academics and give them valuable experience
- A culture change is required within universities so that postgraduate students are not just used ad hoc for teaching and get more teaching opportunities
- Training in publication

- Forums for postgraduate communities to communicate

Teaching was a big issue with many postgraduates, especially those from red brick universities who were bereft of teaching opportunities. Some academics present indicated that teaching experience and knowledge is often a deciding factor when hiring new academic staff. This started a general debate concerning teaching and marking.

The point was raised whether postgraduates should be teaching first year undergraduates, as it could be argued that an experienced academic is required to develop the students as learners and enthuse them. This was not widely agreed upon and debated for some time, some argued that postgraduates, being closer in age to undergraduates can relate to them more easily, and a number of delegates raised the point that postgraduates get very good comments back from undergraduates concerning their teaching. Some academics also expressed concern regarding postgraduates helping with marking, with one lady commenting she will never use a postgraduate because to follow her marking requirements required great experience. This seemed to me ironic, as we were asking for marking experience to help us develop as academics, but she was suggesting we couldn't help with marking as we didn't have enough experience!

Unfortunately, the discussion ran out of time. At this point the postgraduate students participated in postgraduate networking within their individual disciplines and planned future activities with the subject centre staff. Within the combined archaeology and classics discussion we raised a number of points. The subject centre could build on its current web site, by having links to jobs, but also having bibliographies of different career paths by individuals who have 'been there done that'. The subject centre could also organize, or aid in organizing, a careers day for postgraduates. One aspect that all were agreed upon is that meeting other postgraduates is of great benefit. To this end the archaeology section of the subject discussed holding 'TAGon', with the subject center holding an event for postgraduates, regarding PFF, at the first day of the annual TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group) conference.

All too soon the discussion had to draw to a close as the day was nearly over. I hadn't known what to expect from the day and I am mildly ashamed to say, I was surprised that I enjoyed it as much as I did. It was great to meet a wide variety of postgraduate students and to discuss the problems we all face. At my institution we are now working on implementing some of the ideas raised throughout the day. I had started the day knowing I wish to be an academic in the future, but now I know what tools I need to help achieve that goal.

There was a very good spread at lunch as well.

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