What role do teaching mentors play in supporting new university lecturers to develop their teaching practices?

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Abstract

We examine the support mentors provide to new lecturers as part of a postgraduate programme designed to familiarise them with university teaching. Drawing on qualitative data collected from 13 new lecturers and nine mentors, we document the support new lecturers’ call upon to shape their practice. We identify important issues surrounding the significance of mentor choice, both in terms of a mentor’s experience, position and knowledge of their role, which determine the effectiveness of professional learning. Difficult issues were observed relating to prioritisation and workload for new lecturers and their mentors, and as a consequence the wider networks of colleagues and peers new lecturers drew upon were seen as an essential source of advice. Indeed, the extent of their use depending on assistance available from mentors. Our data indicate the need for careful framing of mentoring relationships in terms of professional development and teaching enhancement to ensure the benefits of these interactions are realised. Equally both parties need to be encouraged to use reflection to scaffold interactions to promote professional learning. Our data also identify the need for recognition for those performing mentoring roles, to ensure they can dedicate necessary time so that productive relationships are sustained for the duration over which support is required.

Keywords: Higher Education; Professional Development; Professional Learning; Informal learning, Reflection

Introduction
Internationally there has been a proliferation of courses that seek to professionalise the practice of being a university teacher (Kandlbinder and Peseta 2009). The primary focus of this provision is teaching and learning, preparing lecturers to address issues relating to student support, quality assurance, assessment, session and programme design as well as offering feedback on emerging practice (Parson et al., 2012). Studies of these programmes have identified common features including theoretical underpinnings (Kahn et al., 2008), intended outcomes (Bamber 2008) and participants’ experiences (Warhurst, 2006). These studies have demonstrated the role of these courses in supporting new lecturers to adapt to the role of being a university lecturer, as in addition to introducing theory and practice, they induct them into the practice of teaching and supporting student learning in their new institutional context, and integrate them into a community that works to support teaching and learning (Smith, 2010; Warhusrt, 2006).

One aspect of these programmes that has received limited attention has been the role of teaching mentors. These represent a named individual often located in the department or school in which a new lecturer is based who provides guidance around issues related to teaching. Mentors can contextualise the generic or theoretical aspects of teaching preparation programmes to the perspectives of participants’ discipline (Gosling, 2009; Knight & Trowler, 1999). They can also be a source of advice around daily practices and procedures, as well as offering feedback on teaching and other issues that may arise (Adcroft & Taylor, 2009). For new lecturers, having a named person to guide them is seen as an invaluable source of support as they adapt to a challenging and demanding role (Barkham, 2005). Therefore, in relation to the volume of research relating to teaching preparation programmes, it is perhaps surprising to note the limited attention teaching mentors have received. Contemporary research tends to concentrate on the perspectives of either the mentor or mentee (e.g. Adcroft and Taylor, 2009; Barkham, 2005; Donnelly and McSweeney, 2010) and they are often conducted with limited consideration of the wider support (e.g. colleagues, course peers) new lecturers may draw upon to frame their emerging practice.
In this paper we draw on data gathered as part of a study that followed 13 new
lecturers, and their mentors, through their first year of university teaching. We
provide insights into the role the mentor plays in supporting new lecturers. We also
reflect on the importance of the mentor’s experience in undertaking this role, and
highlight important issues regarding the support, preparation and recognition that
mentors receive.

Professionalising university teaching in England

Enhancing the practice of university teaching and supporting student learning is an
established feature of the landscape of higher education (HE). In the UK
organisations such as the Staff and Educational Development Association and the
Association of University Teachers championed the importance of professional
development for those involved in teaching and supporting students (Wisdom et al.,
2013). These organisations provided staff development, guidance and an accreditation
framework for those engaged in training courses to prepare for university teaching.
They were also instrumental in creating the UK Professional Standards Framework
(HEA, 2011) which is used to guide the practice of university teaching (Wisdom et al.,
2013).

Whilst driving forward a clear agenda to professionalise the practice of university
teaching, engagement with teaching preparation courses and staff development was
variable, depending often on the focus of institutions (i.e. the extent to which they
placed an emphasis on teaching and / or research) (Parson et al., 2012). Due to
significant changes in the funding of HE, diversification of the student populations
and increasing government intervention, teaching and learning has become highly
politicised (Gibbs, 2010). Through mechanisms such as the National Students Survey
students can publicly comment on the perceived quality of their university experience,
particularly rating their experiences of teaching, learning and assessment; the
results of this survey are perceived by some as instrumental in the decisions students
make in selecting their choice of university (Kovacs et al., 2010). Following the
Browne Review (2010) a focus was also placed upon the training providing to
university staff, with a requirement for universities to report on the number of staff possessing a teaching qualification that has prepared them for university teaching. This has resulted in a change in attitudes toward teaching preparation for new lecturers, with growing expectations for new lecturers to participate in some form of training as part of their probationary commitment (Gosling, 2010; Parsons et al., 2012).

Implicit in this drive is the assumption that by training new lecturers, and aligning their knowledge of teaching and learning to the UKPSF, will enhance the quality of teaching and learning, a concern of policymakers for a number of years (Turner et al., 2013; Gosling, 2009). This is not an assumption we will directly consider here, however, with respect to the wider framing of this study we feel it is an important position to acknowledge, as many of the participants on teaching preparation courses, as well as those working to promote university teaching, are aware of the contentious nature of this assumption and the implications it has on the expectations for university teaching (Gibbs, 2010; Quinn 2012). However, England is not alone in pushing forward an agenda for enhancing university teaching, similar moves towards providing training for new lecturers, professional development for established lectures and examining student feedback have taken place across Europe, North America, New Zealand and Australia (Kandlbinder and Peseta 2009; Parson et al., 2012).

Professional learning in the workplace

Entry into a new workplace stimulates a period of professional learning, which can take place through a series of formal and informal interactions (Eraut, 2004; 2007; Knight et al. 2006). Formal learning entails pre-determined outcomes and taught sessions; by contrast, informal learning is a hidden process that results from unstructured or opportunistic interactions and experiences, and is associated with tacit knowledge (Eraut, 2004; Knight et al., 2006). This aligns with the idea of the distributed apprenticeship element of professional learning, whereby a range of individuals (e.g. colleagues, peers, trainers) stimulate professional learning, through deliberative, reactive and implicit actions (Eraut, 2004). Much professional learning
is informal and occurs as a consequence of an individual performing their role and interacting with colleagues (Eraut, 2004). Therefore in many instances newcomers are not explicitly aware of learning about their role, rather they express a sense of feeling more comfortable in what they are doing or of growing in confidence (Eraut, 2004; Knight et al., 2006). This demonstrates the situated nature of professional learning, where activities such as conversations make significant contributions to newcomers’ understandings of the workplace (Haigh, 2005). In many instances such learning is unplanned and ad hoc, and the quality of professional learning that takes place is highly variable.

In relation to these informal mechanisms of professional learning, mentoring blurs the boundaries of formal and informal learning (Eraut, 2007). Mentoring is widely used to familiarise newcomers to the workplace and support them in developing technical, interpersonal and political skills and competences essential to their role (Hudson, 2013; Ehrich et al., 2004; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Researchers (e.g. Kram, 1983; Hobson et al., 2009; Noe, 1988) have identified mentors as having specific career development and psychosocial functions, as explored through Kram’s (1983) Mentor Role Theory. These career development functions involve actions such as sponsorship, advocacy, coaching, protection, providing challenging assignments and offering exposure (Kram, 1983). As a newcomer’s position in an organisation changes, and they realise their potential, the requirements on a mentor changes (Kram, 1983; Gehrke, 1988). An assumption underpinning the role of a mentor is that they themselves are in a role that allows them to perform these functions, and also have the knowledge, skills and experience on which to draw to support a junior colleague (Kram, 1983).

Mentoring may involve a structured programme of support through which goals are set, shaping interactions and monitoring progress, usually through a series of regular meetings (Donnelly and McSweeny 2010). In these instances the mentor usually gains recognition for the support they offer. Informal mentoring relationships are less structured with limited recognition of the process and outcomes (Ehrich et al., 2004; Ewing et al., 2008). Regardless of the approach, mentoring is recognised as having a
number of benefits for both the newcomer and the mentor (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). For the mentee, it can create a sense of collegiality and belonging that promotes understanding of a new workplace (Donnelly and McSweeney 2010). Studies of mentors’ experiences note that mentoring creates situations for reciprocal learning since, by supporting a new colleague, mentors can engage with self-reflection, stimulating their own professional learning (Barkham, 2005; Kamvounias et al., 2008). Overall, effective mentoring relationships have been identified as increasing staff retention, job satisfaction and career progression (Ehrich et al., 2004; Ragins and Cotton, 1999).

Research into professional learning and mentoring has led to the idea of ‘relationship constellations’ (e.g. Higgins and Kram, 2001: 264); these represent the range of individuals who may provide developmental support through an individual’s career, in addition to that traditionally provided by a mentor. This reflects the portfolio nature of individual careers and the shift in focus to development taking place on an on-going basis throughout an individual’s professional life (Higgins and Kram, 2001). Nowadays ‘mentoring’ may be provided through formal, e.g. organisational structures associated with induction or progression through the workplace, or informally, through support offered by colleagues to one-another. In these instances individuals stimulate or promote the professional learning of colleagues with a view to supporting their establishment, and or progression, in the workplace.

A portfolio career typifies the early career trajectory of academics, who usually gain a lecturing position after completing a period of research training and post doctoral work, therefore they commonly bring with them an established network of researchers and former colleagues (Archer, 2008). Through a teaching qualification they may be introduced to a new community of peers, as documented in studies by researchers such as Smith (2010) and Warhurst (2006), as well as provided with a teaching mentor. With respect to teaching qualifications for new lecturers, teaching mentors have an important role to play in contextualising the general, theoretical and practice-based principles of these programmes. Knight and Trowler (1999) highlighted the importance of mentors in providing an individualised experience, particularly when
they are located in the environment in which professional learning will occur (i.e.) new lecturers’ home departments. Mentors assist in decoding the systems and structures that underpin new lecturers’ roles (Adcroft and Taylor, 2009). From this perspective, mentoring assists in the management of the multiple demands placed on new lecturers and, therefore, it is reasonable to envisage mentors as integral in supporting them to adapt to their role.

The contribution that mentoring is perceived to make to taught programmes for new lecturers is less well documented. In relation to the highly organised nature of these programmes (Bamber, 2008), mentoring relationships appear to be less formalised and new lecturers’ experiences of mentoring are reported as variable (Kamvounias et al., 2008; Remmik et al., 2011). Combinations of formal and informal approaches are used, with a tendency for the informal approach to prevail. Whilst a mentor may be committed to supporting a new lecturer, they may receive limited recognition or time to do so; in such situations there is a danger that mentoring can be an additional burden, threatening to undermine the potential development that could be achieved.

Methodology

Research aims

Teaching is recognised as a context-specific profession (Trigwell and Prosser, 1996) shaped by the experiences and values a lecturer possesses; however, these are rarely acknowledged in the preparation that new lecturers receive on commencing their role. Nor does this preparation readily acknowledge the diverse professional and cultural profiles of the academic workforce. The research we report here is part of a wider study (Turner et al., 2012) that examined how lecturers negotiated their existing knowledge and experiences of teaching and learning / university life with those they were introduced to through the postgraduate teaching qualification and the wider University’s values and ethos around teaching and learning. Existing research on both professional learning (e.g. Eraut, 2004; Knight et al., 2006) and postgraduate teaching qualifications (e.g. Boud and Brew, 2012; Reintes and Kichin, 2014; Warhurst, 2006) identify the importance of mentors, departmental colleagues and
peers from established / new networks in supporting newcomers to develop the professional knowledge and confidence required to perform their role. Therefore, to examine how new lecturers reconciled or integrated their existing knowledge and experience with the requirements of their new role and workplace, we recognised the importance of considering the networks, both those initiated through the teaching qualification (e.g. mentors and tutors) and those drawn upon by the new lecturers (e.g. course peers, new colleagues and established networks) to support them in their first year of teaching. Here we present this aspect of the study, however, full details of the research methods are giving in order to contextualise the work that was undertaken.

**The research setting**

The research was based in a so-called ‘new’ (post-1992) university in the UK. Completion of a postgraduate certificate in teaching and learning is tied to probationary requirements; lecturers with less than three years full-time teaching experience are required to complete the programme. As noted above, compulsory professional development for new lecturers in increasingly commonplace, giving lecturers little opportunity to shape or direct the initial training they receive to prepare them for lecturing (Parsons et al., 2012). The course begins by providing a general introduction to the practices of teaching, supporting and assessing students. A series of elective modules provides space for greater consideration of agendas relevant to contemporary HE e.g. employability. The programme can be completed within 12 months, and following this lecturers are recognised as Fellows of the HEA.

During the programme lecturers are allocated a tutor from the course team, required to identify a mentor and encouraged to discuss their experiences with colleagues and peers. Course tutors and mentors have clearly defined roles; tutors observe the new lecturers and provide feedback, assess their written work and offer ‘generic’ advice on teaching, learning and supporting students. Teaching mentors are integral in supporting lecturers in contextualising pedagogic theory and practice to the disciplinary communities in which they operate. Therefore mentors can be drawn
from across the University. The mentor also undertakes a teaching review and offers local support on teaching related issues.

New lecturers select their mentor independently, although the course team recommend they choose someone who has either recently completed the programme or an advocate for teaching in their school. Mentors received guidance on their role which includes; meetings to discuss progress on the programme, sharing ideas and acting as a critical friend, undertaking a teaching observation, promoting participation in developmental events and integrating their mentee into their school. The teaching team allow the mentor and mentee to develop their own ways of working and, in this respect the model of mentoring promoted would be classed as informal (Donnelly and McSweeney, 2010). Although the teaching team advocate the importance of these mentoring relationships they are not in a position to offer recognition or reward to mentors. Based on the literature used to examine the role of mentoring in professional learning, there are potential limitations to newcomers selecting their mentor and taking an informal approach to the mentoring relationship (Adcroft and Taylor, 2009). The ability of a mentor to performing functions such as advocacy and protection, and ensuring time is dedicated to ensure a productive mentoring relationship develop is not explicitly considered in this approach. Indeed these are all issues pertinent to the outcomes of this work.

Recruitment

A purposeful sample of 13 participants was selected from those starting the programme in September 2011. Previous studies (e.g. Boyd and Harris, 2010; Green and Maytt, 2011) acknowledged the diverse professional profiles of new lecturers. As a result, the knowledge, experience and expectations they bring to university teaching can be varied. Participants were selected to encompass this diversity, with invitations made based on participants’ country of origin and professional / research backgrounds, and more widely to be representative of the cohort as a whole with respect to gender and disciplinary areas (see Table 1). In order to gain an insight into the context (e.g. department and disciplines) in which the new lecturers were working and also support
they received, their teaching mentors were invited to participate; nine agreed to
contribute with others declining due to commitments during the scheduled period of
data collection. Details of mentors are presented in Table 2.

[Place Table 1 here]

[Place Table 2 here]

Data collection

Qualitative data were collected using a combination of methods over the duration of
the whole research project, including the data reported here. Data from new lecturers
were collected at two points in the academic year; firstly following the induction
period of the taught programme then at the end of the teaching year. The initial phase
of data collection was split into a one-hour teaching observation, completed using a
semi-structured observation protocol, and an in-depth interview. This approach
captured espoused reflections on practice and actions taken in practice. The
observation protocol was informed by Kreber’s (1999) Scholarship of Teaching
model. Kreber (1999) states that in learning about teaching, individuals engage in
content, process and premise reflections in the three domains of teaching knowledge,
which are instructional, pedagogical and curricular. The protocol was designed to
capture actions which may be indicative of these domains of knowledge and forms of
reflection, as well as general information regarding the teaching session (e.g. format
of the teaching session, class size). A provisional analysis of the observation
protocols was used as the basis of a stimulated-recall interview (Calderhead, 1981).

At stage two the new lecturers were asked to bring a critical incident from the
reflective logs kept as part of the programme to be discussed during the second
interview. The use of critical incidents in this way was informed by Tripp (1993) and,
once again, sought to examine their knowledge of teaching. Following discussion of
the critical incident, questions were asked regarding their practice, support they
received, with prompts from stage one to stimulate reflections on how this had changed and developed.

Data were gathered from the mentors half way through the academic year. This timeframe was selected as it followed submission of the first assignment and was rationalised as to have been a time when mentors may have been called upon to support new lecturers in reaching this deadline. Through a semi-structured interview with mentors we gained further insights into the emerging practice of the new lecturers, a background to the teaching practices of participant’s schools, school support for participants and their experiences of mentoring. It is this data, along with the responses drawn from the new lecturers regarding the support they drew upon over the academic year, which we report here. Provisional findings from the wider study have been reported in Turner et al., (2012).

Data analysis

All interview data were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Content analysis was employed to “mak[e] inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969:14). The analysis heeded the research aims, however, in the context of support networks drawn upon and interactions with mentors, we paid particularly attention to the interactions that took place and how these evolved. We were also mindful of Kreber’s (1999) categories, specifically those relating to that ways in which individuals reflect on their teaching. These were considered when analysing the accounts of conversations around teaching and learning that took place between the mentors and mentees were examined (i.e. were they focused on discussing the content, process or premise relating to their practice). Following the analyses these themes emerged across both data sets:

- Mentor choice;
- Shaping expectations;
- Promoting professional learning through reflection;
- Pressures and tensions;
In the next section, we will examine each of these themes in turn to uncover the nature of the mentoring relationships, the support networks used and how these changed over the year.

Findings

Choosing a mentor

The new lecturers had been University employees for varying timescales. A few had arrived toward the end of the previous academic year; however, most had arrived immediately prior to the start of the taught programme. Therefore, the extent to which they knew their colleagues varied, with implications for their mentor choice. This was also shaped by the new lecturers’ intentions and aspirations for the mentoring relationship. Given the explicit links between the mentor and the teaching programme, most participants selected mentors in line with the role prescribed by the teaching team (i.e. someone who had either completed the course recently or were recognised as experienced teachers):

‘[…] he was the most recent appointment in the department and quite familiar with the process.’ Lecturer 3

‘I chose my mentor due to her academic and lecturing experience’. Lecturer 6

Two new lecturers were allocated a mentor by someone else, which may imply that the school recognised that they may need assistance in knowing from whom to seek support.

Although these rationales appear reasonable, each had implications for the mentoring relationships and patterns of interaction. Those who selected recent completers of the teaching programme tended to approach them to primarily seek advice on the module choice, assignments and programme-related concerns. In contrast those who
opted for established colleagues tended to engage in discussions around wider teaching practices and school procedures beginning to engage with what Kreber (1999) would identify as curricular knowledge (i.e. developing an awareness of how their teaching connected to the wider curriculum):

‘[…] my mentor has a lot of experience, so she’s got quite a good few connections […] for example I haven’t done a lot around marking assignments so she’s set up a session where we can go and learn a bit about that and observe some [names assessment format]’. Lecturer 6

Whilst these interactions addressed the concerns new lecturers experienced, the relationships that developed varied, which may be attributable to the differing roles the mentors performed. Recent completers perceived themselves familiar with the challenges of being a new lecturer and the teaching programme. They were keen to provide an empathic ear, but they were aware of their own limitations:

‘I’m a year and a half into my post here and I very much had to learn by doing and doing things wrong sometimes.’ Mentor 8

As this quotation suggests, the extent to which recent completers could socialise their mentee into their school depended on the level to which they themselves were integrated. But equally, as Eraut (2004) cautions, whilst established colleagues would be integrated, their working practices might have become habitual so they may no longer be aware of what a newcomer needed to know. This was evidenced by established mentors’ responses to questioning during interviews regarding the pedagogical theories and practice associated with their schools - many struggled to initially name any. Yet this appeared not to be a significant concern of their mentees, as they tended to use their mentors to inform their teaching practices more generally rather than to address queries relating to the teaching programme or seeking to stimulate reflections on their emerging practice that may connect to pedagogical or instructional knowledge (Kreber, 1999).

Shaping expectations
Findings suggest that both parties accepted their role uncritically, with mentors’ actions largely informed by their position (i.e. recent completer or established lecturer). It was not evident whether mentors and new lecturers discussed their role or established goals to structure their relationship. Instead an informal approach was adopted, in line with the recommendations of the teaching team, leading to variable mentoring relationships developing. They ranged from mentors and mentees working collaboratively in what they viewed as productive relationships, to those where the mentor was removed from the process with the implicit expectation that the mentee would be in touch if necessary:

‘I’ve been lucky enough to monitor what he’s been doing; I sat in and did a teaching observation for him. I was very pleased to see how he was dealing with his students – the kind of feedback he was giving, the kind of questions he was raising – and his interaction with the students seemed to be very positive.’ Mentor 1

‘Basically people are left to get on with it and I think intervention is taken if things start to go wrong and I think what you have to do is let people get on and do a good job.’ Mentor 9

Given the multiple pressures lecturers face (Smith, 2010), being ‘left to get on with it’ (Mentor 9), may not be unexpected, and indeed could be a consequence of the perceived responsibility mentors attributed to the taught programme for supporting new lecturers:

‘Any teaching education/philosophy/practice will be got from the teaching course; or perhaps any other articles they may have independently read. But they are not coming from a top-down direction in the School; that’s not how it works at all.’ Mentor 2

These perceptions could have implications for the quality of, and potential for, professional learning, particularly when these interactions are considered in light of the situated nature of academic development (Boud, 1999). For the new lecturer, connections need to be made between the formal learning of the taught programme and, more generally, through interactions with colleagues, students and the process of doing their job. Mentors are integral to formulating these connections and
contextualising learning to new lecturers’ disciplines and schools. However, the perceived value of mentoring held by mentors could constrain the extent to which meaningful learning occurs.

Comparing the established lecturers with the recent completers it appeared that initially it was the experienced lecturers who appeared to struggle with being mentors, tending to take a step back, perhaps concerned about the workload implications of supporting a colleague. This contrasts the position of the recent completers who were able to recall the extent to which they benefitted from the support of a mentor. As Mentor 1 indicates, once engaged in the process, established lecturers began to appreciate the benefits to the new lecturer and also began to consider how forums (e.g. working groups/programme meetings) to discuss teaching could represent informal learning opportunities for new lecturers:

’So I mean that I suppose in terms of pedagogy, we had a working party and we spent a lot of time thinking about it so I would say about half the department would be involved in it, so we did spend a lot of time thinking about how we might improve that first year for our students and of course [names mentee] been crucially involved in this process.’ Mentor 5

These examples provide an insight into the pedagogical workings of schools and demonstrate how informal opportunities for professional learning emerge which allows new lecturers to begin to integrate theoretical knowledge (instructional knowledge) with disciplinary-specific perspectives (instructional or curricular knowledge) (Trowler and Cooper, 2002). They also represent incidences where reflections were stimulated that allowed the new lecturers to explore or develop their pedagogical knowledge (Kreber, 1999). Such interactions have been noted by researchers (e.g. Remmik et al. 2011; Warhurst 2008) as representing valuable opportunities to share their own experiences and perspectives with their colleagues, further promoting the integration of new lecturers into their school as they gain a sense of making a contribution. As Mentor 5 indicates, these interactions were common-place, and therefore mentors need to be made aware of the regularity at which professional learning can occur as part of the preparation they are given prior to taking on this role.
Reflection is integral to the process of mentoring (Barkham, 2005; Gosling, 2009). School-based studies of mentoring have identified both the critical examination of a new teachers practice and their thinking about practice as essential in developing a sense of being an accomplished teacher (Hagger and MacIntyre, 2006). Mentors, who may be perceived as expert teachers, play a fundamental role in this process by assisting a new teacher comprehend what ‘good’ teaching represents (Gosling, 2009; Langdon, 2011). However, these studies have reported that mentors face challenges in supporting new teachers in undergoing this development and engaging with effective reflective practices (Langdon, 2011). If this is the situation in school-based teacher development, then it is perhaps not surprising in this study that we found the limited extent to which reflective practice underpinned mentoring interactions. With respect to the development of university-based teachers, Trowler and Cooper (2002) noted disciplinary differences in relation to an individual’s predisposition to reflection, with those from the sciences in particular struggling with this activity. Given that seven of our participants were drawn from these disciplines this could account for this situation. The primary source of reflection was the teaching observation mentors completed as part of the teaching programme. Commonly discussions between mentors and the new lecturers tended to be functional, concentrating either on effective practice (i.e. what works) or providing advice and information either deemed essential by the mentor or in response to a mentees request:

‘I was concerned about my accent, the local students would not be able to understand my accent, the feedbacks that I got from [my] mentor, said it’s fine, you can understand everything.’ Lecturer 4

‘I suppose the most important one of all is kind of informal discussions that we would have about our own practice and things that went wrong or things that worked well and so on, so I think that’s a big part that sometimes we don’t acknowledge the importance of that enough.’ Mentor 7

Whilst it is important for the mentee to be able to access information central to their practice, the emphasis from new lecturers requesting, and mentors providing,
functional information can lead to a focus on prescriptive rather than innovative practice. This has been observed as a limitation in the use of reflection to support the development of lecturers teaching practice (e.g. Gosling, 2009; Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2005). Such interactions are described as indicating a ‘reductive’ approach to mentoring resulting from its narrow conceptualisation (e.g. Achinstein and Athanases, 2006). In the context of our study, this approach may have also emerged due to the patterns of interactions between the new lecturer and the mentor, and a perceived lack of time in the department that lecturers can dedicate to reflection:

‘There’s not an awful lot of time for reflection […] We build meetings into the system – on Wednesday afternoons we’ll have this meeting, that meeting. I think it would be more useful if there was some more sort of structured reflection for teaching activities.’ Mentor 2

‘I can remember in the past when we decided to make changes in the programmes and spent a year talking about what the changes would be, everybody was involved in those discussions, everybody was passionate about carrying those changes forward. And I don’t know where that debate happens any longer, because there just isn’t the time for it.’ Mentor 1

As these mentors acknowledge, time is pressured. The new lecturers’ primary concerns were with doing a good job, completing the teaching programme, and surviving the year. They demonstrated limited capacity for reflecting on practice and therefore this is a role mentors should encourage, particularly in the early stages of the mentoring relationship when lecturers may be overwhelmed with the demands placed upon them. As advocated by Gosling (2009), mentors could request mentees bring ‘critical incidents’ or examples from their practice that could provide a stimulus for further discussion and reflection in their meetings. This may also serve to move the mentee beyond focusing solely on practical challenges or immediate concerns by encouraging a wider appreciation of the contribution that reflection can make to enhancing teaching practice.

Pressures and tensions
The first few years of lecturing are challenging and, although this is well-documented (e.g. Smith 2010), we feel it is important to reframe these challenges in relation to mentoring. The new lecturers documented the challenges they experienced (e.g. concerns with workload; designing modules; balancing research, teaching and institutional ways of working) and whilst these may have been the source of considerable personal frustration and pressure, they do represent the challenges experienced by all new lecturers (Smith, 2010; Warhurst, 2006). Mentors were acutely aware of, and empathised with, the challenges faced:

‘A fair teaching load, in order to settle into teaching do [names course], start establishing yourself as research active […] there’s just a lot and everything is urgent.’ Mentor 10

‘I think the main point I got from her was that she felt she was being pulled in lots of directions she wanted to continue her research and she had to think about her teaching.’ Mentor 8

However, there was a sense of powerlessness from mentors around the extent to which they could assist their mentees in resolving their challenges. This could partly be related to the role the mentors adopted, in that most saw themselves as primarily offering guidance relating to teaching and felt that it was beyond their remit to address wider concerns:

‘And I just thought new members of staff needed more support than that, but I wasn’t in a position to be able to say that shouldn’t happen because ultimately, the Head of School decides workloads.’ Mentor 2

This sense of powerlessness could also depend on the extent to which mentors were familiar with the working practices of their school and also their role power. Interestingly, two new lecturers selected mentors from outside their school. Whilst this may provide greater opportunities for networking, as with the recent completers, these mentors might have not have been in a position to respond to functional questions regarding procedures in their mentees’ school. Thus, proximity may also be a factor in mentor choice. Similarly, a mentor who is a recent completer or from another school may not be in a position to act as an advocate or support their mentee in reconciling challenges.
Either one, or a combination, of these positions could lead to the mentor experiencing a sense of powerlessness in relation to the support they could provide, with wider implications for how the role of a mentor is perceived. Mentors are required to possess skills such as the ability to be an advocate and act as a role model, demonstrating confidence and efficacy as a professional (Donnelly and McSweeney, 2010; Kram, 1983). However, if the mentor does not feel they can support their mentee through challenging times, or address practical concerns, it could undermine their relationship. If this happens at the formative stages of their relationship it may hinder potential for professional learning through mentoring, which would require new lecturers to seek alternative sources of support.

Gifts of mentoring

The mentors who developed a wider appreciation of issues relating to teaching and learning through the interactions with their mentees recognised what Kamvounias et al., (2008) referred to as the “gifts” of mentoring, indicating the mutually beneficial nature of mentoring relationships:

‘I’ve found it to be a really valuable experience too as a mentor, I’ve really enjoyed it and it’s nice to be able to help somebody in the way that you may or may not have been helped in the past. So that I think is quite useful.’ Mentor 5

There was a sense that such benefits were unanticipated, perhaps indicating a limited perception of mentoring as uni-directional, only of benefit to the newcomer (Donnelly and McSweeney, 2010). It could also imply the perception held by the mentor, mentee or both, that the mentoring aspect of the taught programme was an additional burden. Indeed, this was a position noted by a recent completer:

“Yes, I think a lot of people were happy for me to knock on their door and ask them very straightforward questions because I think they’d been there before, but it’s a burden on them and it’s a waste of their time.” Mentor 8
This is perhaps an unspoken concern of mentors and could have resulted in the tendency, whereby, if the new lecturer appeared to be coping, they were left to develop their practice independently.

‘Basically people are left to get on with it and I think intervention is taken if things start to go wrong, and I’ve no evidence at all that that’s the case, so I think it’s going fine and I think what you have to do is let people get on, if they’re doing a good job you need to let them get on and do a good job.’
Mentor 9

‘[Learning to teach] it’s immersive, it’s “Get in there,” it’s “Do it”, it’s “Contact people who are doing things that...” If you want to try and develop a new practical class, go and speak to this person who’s done something like that.’ Mentor 2

Equally, mentees were concerned about giving the impression that they were not coping or did not know what they were doing. These perspectives could limit the potential for learning and development, arguably leading mentoring relationships to stagnate or falter. However, the approaches suggested above by mentors to create learning opportunities for new lecturers through everyday practices and interactions at a school level could partly challenge this burdensome perception.

Developing sustainable mentoring relationships

Findings showed that mentoring relationships developed organically, due to factors such as individuals’ experience, school support, and the perceived benefits of mentoring. Given the connection between the taught programme and mentoring, mentors perceived it as their remit to support new lecturers to develop their teaching. Indeed, whilst one mentor recognised the importance of their role in respect of this programme, they made a distinction between the perceived contributions they could make to different aspects of a new lecturer’s role:

‘Having a mentor is I think quite crucial, I think you do need somebody to do some of the more sort of complex questions about approaches to teaching, you know, those bigger discussions that you can have with somebody and research
as well because that’s equally important. But also you do need a named person to go to for all the really dull and boring details that you do actually need to learn.’ Mentor 5

This mentor perceived their role as functional, primarily assisting their mentee in developing their teaching. This narrow conception meant that rather than supporting the new lecturer to holistically reflect on and develop their role, they concentrated solely on teaching. This is an interesting standpoint; it does not reflect the complexity of the lecturing role that encompasses a growing remit of research, teaching and administrative activities (Adcroft and Taylor, 2009; Smith, 2010). Instead it implies a perceived fragmentation in the different aspects of the role of being a university lecturer. Given that new lecturers are recognised as struggling to reconcile the breadth of their responsibilities this is not a useful position for a mentor to adopt.

The teaching programme lasted one academic year, with a mentor expected to support their mentee during this time. Explicit responsibilities were allocated to the mentor with respect to the first module of the course. As this coincides with the busiest period for most new lecturers in terms of adapting to their role, we observed the greatest number of mentor-mentee interactions occurred then. Further analysis indicated that interactions with mentors decreased over the academic year. This appeared to have implications on the use of alternate networks of support the new lecturers drew upon in their first year of teaching. Interactions with wider networks align with the idea of the distributed apprenticeship element of professional learning, the quality of which depends on the willingness of individuals to stimulate learning (Eraut, 2007; Knight et al., 2006). For instance, colleagues were seen as an essential network new lecturers actively sought to integrate with. The regularity of use was related to physical proximity (i.e. in the office next door) or perceptions that they possessed relevant knowledge:

‘There's a certain amount of things you need to know beforehand and you actually learn it when you get to the point where you need to use it and when you've got supportive colleagues around you, it's great because you realise you're a bit stuck and out of your depth and you can ask them and then they help you.’ Lecturer 8
In addition, new lecturers discussed their practice with peers, former colleagues and personal contacts. There was a sense in which discussing teaching with such individuals ‘low risk’ as they were not exposing a lack of knowledge to a colleague or mentor. These interactions were largely unplanned and, following Eraut (2007), would be perceived as information sharing. There is a risk that the resulting conversations (and the related advice) were accepted uncritically without examination of underpinning assumptions or implications for their practice (Haigh, 2005). In addition, there was often a sense that colleagues had limited time and, therefore, interactions were restricted to ‘snatched conversations’ (Lecturer 13). This creates the additional risk that new lecturers could spend considerable time trying to find information from a number of colleagues as initially (at least) they may not know who to contact for specific information (e.g. queries relating to timetabling, exams and course administration).

Mentoring relationships are recognised as time-limited (Ehrich et al., 2004) so it is unsurprising that interactions reduced. However, a premature end or reduction in mentor support could leave a mentee with either a false sense of professional confidence, or more likely, struggling to address new challenges as they arise. This is an important consideration with respect to the cycle through which university teaching operates. Initially teaching and student support is the focus of lecturers’ attention, followed by a period of examination and quality assurance. The second half of the teaching programme for new lecturers considers academic practice more widely. Reduced interactions may mean they have limited opportunity to contextualise and clarify this knowledge at the site at which it will be practiced. Although they may continue to discuss their changing practice with colleagues, peers or personal contacts, members of each of these groups can hold particular values, ideas or beliefs relating to teaching and learning which, due to the informal nature of the interactions with new lecturers, may not be examined in relation to the resulting advice and guidance (Eraut, 2007; Haigh, 2005).

Conclusions
Teaching development programmes are central to the professionalisation of university teaching, with mentors performing an essential role in assisting new lecturers to contextualise their practice. Although we report on a small-scale study based in one UK University, we provide insights into a relatively under-researched area within the field of academic development. Our study problematized the contribution mentors can make to the development of new lecturers and considered actions that may support new lecturers emerging practice.

Factors such as the choice of a mentor and mentor’s experience as a lecturer emerged as impacting mentoring relationships and in turn professional learning. The significance of mentor choice is somewhat underplayed, particularly with respect to the guidance new lecturers received in selecting a mentor. As our data demonstrates, who becomes a mentor impacts the support received, with factors such as the mentors' proximity, experience and knowledge of a schools’ practice and procedures determining the guidance they are able to provide. We have to question whether a recent completer of the teaching qualification would be able to fulfil actions such as advocacy or protection to the same extent as a more established colleague. Equally, an established lecturer from the same school in relation to one of similar experience but from a different school to the one in which the mentee is based. Therefore at a fundamental level the choice of mentor can have a clear impact on the success of a relationship and the level of professional learning that may take place.

Differing conceptions of mentoring were evident, with most mentors perceiving mentoring as uni-directional, representing an additional role to be accommodated alongside already busy workloads and needs of both mentor and mentee. These factors lead to the emergence of situations whereby either mentees wanted to convey a perception of coping or, alternatively, of mentors assuming that unless they had evidence to the contrary their mentee was successfully performing their role. This impacted on the quality of mentoring relationships, and could also lead to a reliance on other forms of support. This situation may be alleviated through formal recognition of the role the mentor is performing. Indeed, in studies where institutional recognition is forthcoming (e.g. through time allocations or connections
with mechanisms for continuing professional development) (e.g. Barkham, 2005) mentoring relationships were characterised by developmental milestones, regular meetings, and benefits regularly been reported for both parties. These mentoring relationships also appear to have lasted longer than those observed within this study, progressing through a number of clear stages (e.g. initiation, cultivation, separation and redefinition), with roles such as advocacy and protections performed, and professional benefits experienced by both parties (Kram, 1983; Barkham, 2005).

 Although such benefits were recorded, with mentoring cited as creating opportunities for local discussions around teaching and learning, these were noted in only a minority of cases. It is proposed that formal recognition both with respect to the process of mentoring, and also within individuals’ workloads, may result in more productive and longer-lasting mentoring relationships. In order to achieve this, support from university managers (e.g. head of schools / deans) would be essential, particularly with respect to formalising mentoring relationships. Such moves may be timely, given the moves within the UK through the UKPSF to further recognise and accredit the teaching experiences of more established lecturers, and provide a career trajectory for those with an explicit interest in teaching rather than disciplinary-based research (HEA, 2011).

Recognising mentoring relationships would ensure dedicated time is allocated for mentoring and situations for professional learning are fostered. It is not to say these were not present in the study university, rather it would have ensured parity. Interactions between the mentor and new lecturer also need to encourage critical interrogation and reflection on the practice of both parties to enhance individuals’ awareness of the values, beliefs and concepts that underpin practice (Kreber, 1999; Trowler and Cooper, 2002). These were actions that were observed to be challenging, with the tendency for functional or practical discussions to prevail. This is where the integration of critical incidents or raising awareness of Haigh’s (2005) idea of ‘learningful conversations’ may prove advantageous, as both could be used to support new lecturers to understand how actions taken in practice promote student learning.
Although wider support networks have an important role to play, the contribution made to professional learning needs to be framed in relation to the nature of the interactions that are taking place. They provide a valuable source of informal advice and guidance. Regular interactions within these wider networks also assist new lecturers to develop a sense of belonging (Warhurst, 2008). We need to enhance new lecturers awareness of using this wider networks to stimulate professional learning and provide mechanisms for meaningful engagement with them. To date, this is an area that although of growing prominence (e.g. Boud and Brew, 2012; Reintes and Kichin, 2014) has not been fully explored with respect to promoting academic development, which is an area worthy of further consideration to identify how they can be used to promote professional learning.

In this study, we have captured data on interactions between new lecturers, their mentors, and wider support networks over one academic year. Within the context of this study the majority of the mentoring relationships were coming to an end toward the end of the academic year. As we have noted, in business, schools and other settings where mentoring is a feature of professional development, mentoring relationships may be sustained until a natural end is reached (Kram, 1983; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). We recommend further research into mentoring relationships for those new to lecturing which examines more specifically the instigation, development and termination of these relationships. Such research also needs to consider more explicitly interactions with wider support networks, particularly with respect to the learning they promote. Likewise, it would need to heed the context in which many new lecturers are working, in that as well as undertaking a teaching qualification they will be balancing their research commitments and potentially other administrative roles. As mentoring may be specifically tied to the teaching qualification, the mechanisms of support for the wider aspects of a new lecturer’s role could provide valuable insights into how mentoring could be integrated more holistically into the professional development for new academics over the longer term.

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