Using Blended Learning to Support Teacher Training with University Teaching: Core Skills at Brunel University London

Background

Since 1966, Brunel University London has championed innovation and advancement, giving students the academic education and professional and personal skills they need to succeed in their future. Brunel runs a significant range of initiatives to support applicants, students, and graduates, during their entire lifecycle of study with the University.

The Academic Professional Development Unit (APDU) at Brunel supports the professional development of academic and professional staff, doctoral and post-doctoral researchers in relation to learning and teaching. Within the provision of the APDU, the training for researchers who are involved in teaching is partially delivered via Epigeum’s University Teaching: Core Skills programme - a flexible and comprehensive resource to ensure all members of teaching and learning support staff have access to consistent training. University Teaching: Core Skills is used across different cohorts at Brunel, from new academics undertaking professional development training to researchers who wish to pursue an academic career. In total, over 130 users are currently studying the programme via an online portal, and new users are being enrolled each term.

Implementation

As part of Brunel’s commitment to enhancing teaching quality, Sarah Wolfenden and Dr. Senthila Quirke oversee the implementation of University Teaching: Core Skills into several programmes which support academic professional development. Sarah Wolfenden, Senior Lecturer in Academic Professional Development, runs the Academic Professional Programme. Senthila Quirke, Senior Lecturer in Academic Professional Development, leads The Higher Education Teaching and Learning (HETL) programme, which is aimed at Doctoral Researchers who wish to develop their knowledge and skills in learning and teaching, in line with the UK Professional Standards Framework. As part of the HETL programme, researchers are given free access to Epigeum’s University Teaching: Core Skills online programme. The HETL programme is offered via a blended learning format which requires researchers to independently complete Epigeum’s University Teaching: Core Skills programme and participate in synchronous follow-up workshops which are delivered by Senthila and also will incorporate guest speakers in the future. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these workshops are currently held online, enabling researchers to critically engage with what they have learnt and reflect how it ties in with their practice. The workshops are mapped to each of the five strands of University Teaching: Core Skills, which has saved Senthila valuable planning time. ‘University Teaching: Core Skills has got everything we need in one place. Because it’s designed for self-study, the programme enables researchers to find content and examples that are particularly relevant to them and their fields of teaching, which they can refer to at any time.’

Senthila has found the accompanying Instructor’s Manual particularly helpful for developing the blended learning format of the HETL programme, as it ensures consistency in the presentation of content. The manual’s learning outcomes provide clear direction for each of the sessions, enabling alignment between the online programme and the virtual workshops. This ensures that researchers are well-prepared with the knowledge and skills they need.
The programme has been particularly helpful for Doctoral Researchers who are new to teaching and therefore are unsure of how to apply their subject knowledge to teaching in higher education. The online programme combined with the workshops ensure researchers develop a good foundation of ideas and best practices to take forward into their teaching.

'It was a very helpful and great opportunity to discover different aspects of teaching and I really learned a lot.' Doctoral Researcher in Film Studies

Outlook

Brunel will be reviewing the blended learning approach of the HETL programme at the end of the summer term and will also evaluate the usage of Epigeum's University Teaching: Core Skills. Based on the feedback from researchers who have completed this course as part of a blended learning approach, Senthila thinks a similar blended programme, rather than pure self-study, could also benefit academic staff. There have already been requests to keep some of the HETL programme workshops online, allowing for greater accessibility and flexibility for researchers who are abroad, or those who may want to take the course alongside other work commitments. 'The aim is to avoid any barriers for participation in the HETL programme, regardless of location or other commitments, so online workshops will likely remain a key delivery method, alongside the online programme.'
The Academic Professional Programme

Sarah Wolfenden, Senior Lecturer in Academic Professional Development, runs the Academic Professional Programme at Brunel University London. It has been designed to support new academic staff with fewer than two years’ teaching experience to become ‘fully rounded’ academic professionals. Participants receive Advance HE Fellowship upon successful completion of the programme.

The 18-month programme covers 8 core taught sessions on topics such as the nature of the higher education sector, curriculum design, and assessment and feedback. The 35 current participants blend these with self-directed shadowing opportunities, observations, mentor meetings and reflective practice.

Alongside this, participants work their way separately through the UK Professional Standards Framework aligned Epigeum University Teaching: Core Skills modules, including the additional portfolio activities. Sarah has found the range of material covered, the flexibility, and the alignment with the UKPSF particularly beneficial when supporting the programme participants. Going forwards, and as part of the overall review referred to by Senthí, she would like to embed and integrate it more deeply and seamlessly into the programme.

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