The importance of national and institutional context: implications for research on teaching development programmes

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Word count: 5,993 excluding references, 7,257 including references

The importance of national and institutional context: implications for research on teaching development programmes

This paper offers reflections on the role of context for teaching development programmes, stimulated by participating in European staff mobility. It is presented in two parts. Part 1 discusses the differences between the national and institutional contexts encountered during a UK-German partnership, as case studies of the varying contexts in which such programmes are situated. The following differences emerged as crucial: whether programmes were compulsory, credit-bearing, formally assessed, and located in a teaching or research-focused institutional environment. Part 2 uses selected publications as exemplars to explore the extremely variable ways in which context features in research on teaching development programmes. With reference to theorisations of context, it is concluded that future research should more explicitly consider the varying contexts of teaching development programmes and investigate a wider range of national and institutional contexts.

Keywords: teaching development, educational development, pedagogical training, context, mobility, ERASMUS+

Introduction

The authors of this article are educational developers whose roles focus on designing, coordinating and teaching programmes about learning and teaching in higher education (HE) for both early career and experienced academics in two European countries: Germany and the UK. This article is an attempt to capture our reflections following an international exchange made possible by the EU ERASMUS+ staff mobility scheme. The insights gained through the exchange provided us with novel perspectives, not only on our own practice, but also on empirical research about teaching development programmes. The thrust of our argument is that context is an important factor which, we suggest, has hitherto been neglected and should receive more attention than it currently does in the literature on such programmes. Our argument is presented in two parts. Part

1 discusses key differences between the national and institutional contexts which we encountered during the mobility and the impact they can have on teaching development programmes, as case studies of two specific contexts. Part 2 broadens this out by using selected studies located in different national contexts as exemplars, in order to explore the ways in which context features in research on teaching development programmes and the ways in which it has been theorised. To conclude, we consider the implications for research, highlighting the benefits of approaches which explicitly take account of context.

Quality and enhancement of university teaching have received increased attention (e.g. Biggs and Tang 2007; Land and Gordon 2013) as university students, managers and researchers alike stress the importance of engaging, student-centred learning environments which require academics to move away from an information transmission approach to teaching (Trigwell, Prosser, and Taylor 1994). The specific practices at the core of this article are programmes on learning and teaching in HE for academics which have become a standard feature across many countries in Europe and beyond (Simon and Pleschová 2013). While a range terms and overlapping concepts[1] have been used to refer to these programmes, the term 'teaching development programmes' will be employed for the purposes of this article. Such programmes are situated in the wider field of academic and, more specifically, educational development. Whether academic and educational development should be regarded as disciplines in their own right with an underpinning systematic knowledge base, grounded in theory and empirical research has been considered, for instance, by authors such as Clegg

[1] These include pedagogical training, educational, academic, faculty, instructional and teaching development programmes or courses.

(2009), Shay (2012) and Lee, Manathunga, and Kandlbinder (2010). However, this creates a need for a sound evidence base as a foundation for such development activities (Clegg 2009). Against the backdrop of our mobility experience, this article critically examines one specific area of this emerging knowledge base, i.e. research on teaching development programmes.

There is now a considerable literature which examines the development of academics in relation to their role as HE teachers (e.g. Pickering 2006; Sadler 2012), and an emerging strand of research which specifically focuses on the impact of teaching development programmes (e.g. Fendler, Seidel, and Johannes 2013; Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Ho, Watkins, and Kelly 2001, Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, and Nevgi 2008; Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, and Van Petegem 2010; Trautwein and Merkt 2013; Ulrich 2013; Wilson 2012; Parsons, Hill, Holland, and Willis 2012). It is noticeable that this research varies considerably in scope, with many publications focusing on one specific programme, frequently researched by the programme leaders themselves (Wilson, 2012).

In addition to research, continuing professional development activities for educational developers provide another kind of evidence base to enhance the quality of teaching development programmes. Peer observation and review are established methods of professional development in HE (e.g. Yiend, Weller, and Kinchin 2014) and lend themselves to being used by staff at all levels, including educational developers. They can also be applied across institutions and even across different educational systems. Blackwell and Blackmore (2003) for instance refer to international exchanges such as the European Rectors Conference which has supported the professional development of senior HE managers.

One way of engaging in continuous professional development of this kind is facilitated by the ERASMUS+ initiative of the European Union. ERASMUS+ is a well-established scheme whose aims are to facilitate internationalisation and modernisation of HE through cooperation and mobility between EU institutions, including both staff and students (Maiworm and Teichler 2002). Mobility is intended as personal and professional development as well as stimulating changes in home institutions through subsequent activities. Staff members are able to undertake short-term teaching or training mobility at an HE institution in another European country, and between 1997 and 2014 approximately 40,000 to 50,000 of such staff exchanges were supported each year (European Commission 2015; Maiworm 2002).

Experiencing context through participating in a European mobility programme

Over a period of two years, the authors of this article participated in an ERASMUS+ teaching staff mobility exchange with reciprocal visits of one week at each institution, once in Germany and twice in the UK. The institutions involved were Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany, and Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK. When initiating the exchange, we intended to achieve the following outcomes (see Bracht, Engel, Janson, Over, Schomburg, and Teichler 2006):

(1) Enhancement. Teaching on each other's programmes was expected to enhance the quality of the respective provision through integrating additional approaches and content. We also expected to gain insight into alternative approaches to teaching development through observation and reflection.

(2) International networking. We expected the exchange to expand our international network of educational developers and explore possibilities for shared practice development and research activities.
(3) Intercultural awareness and competence. We expected to benefit from the exchange in improved intercultural understanding and skills, relevant within a global HE and educational development community.

These aims were put into practice by teaching on each other's respective teaching development programmes, coupled with extensive observation and shadowing of on-going everyday educational development activities. This was complemented by reflective conversations during which the experiences were discussed. The methodology underpinning our approach to the mobility could be described as akin to autoethnography (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2015), since our personal experience generated insights which shed light on wider issues. We used the process of writing this article to make sense of the cultures in which we operate. Participating in the intercultural exchange was similar to becoming participant observers in our own and each other's national and institutional cultures, which brought the differences between them into view and heightened our awareness of context. By talking to each other and writing the story of our exchange, we generated descriptions of our own and each other's cultures, reviewed relevant literature to inform our analysis and used our 'personal stories as windows to the world' (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013, 18). Most notably, this resulted in new perspectives on publications we had already been familiar with, but now saw in a different light, and a subsequent critical review of this research on teaching development programmes.

The experience of the mobility resulted in two key insights:

(1) We noted the synergies in the content which our activities were based on. Our introductory programmes were to a large extent underpinned by identical theories, research and concepts such as approaches to learning (Prosser and Trigwell 1999) and constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang 2007), discussion and reflection on conceptions of (good) teaching and critical review of own practice. Similar findings, albeit on a wider scale, were generated in a study by Kandlbinder and Peseta (2009) who surveyed the leaders of comparable programmes in Australia, New Zealand and the UK about core concepts taught.

(2) In contrast, we were struck by the enormous differences in national and institutional contexts and policies which mediated our work. Much time was devoted to explaining these contexts to each other and highlighting the ways in which they involved constraints as well as affordances and the impact they had on our respective approaches.

Having to explain a wide range of contextual information to our counterparts, made explicit what was normally taken for granted. The mobility experience brought the significance of context to the fore, and this is why the remainder of this article will focus on these contextual differences and a discussion of their implications. In order to better understand the relevance of context, we will first compare and contrast the two national and institutional contexts we were confronted with during our mobility, as case studies of contextual difference. We will then examine selected research on teaching development programmes, focusing for instance on well know, frequently cited articles and authors, with the aim of exemplifying and critiquing the ways in which context has been considered to date. Finally, we will consider theorisations of context and draw conclusions for research on teaching development.

National contexts

The following sections briefly summarise aspects of the respective national contexts which appeared to be of particular significance to the programmes that we were involved in and led. While it is outside the scope of this article to provide a detailed comparative analysis of the two higher education systems, elements of this comparison are confirmed by policy focused publications such as Budd (2017). Detailed examinations of the national systems and the implications for academics can also be found in publications such as the one by Machado-Taylor, Soares, and Teichler (2017).

UK

In the UK, higher education has undergone rapid change driven in particular through a process of marketisation which positions students in the role of consumers. A key turning point was the Government White Paper 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System' (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/higher-education-students-at-the-heart-of-the-system) which paved the way for the introduction of student fees. This went hand in hand with a requirement to provide 'potential students with information about the educational provision their fees will purchase and using market forces to lever up quality' (Gibbs 2012, 12).

Prior to this, UK universities were already operating in a 'high fidelity' system characterised by a requirement to comply with externally determined accountability and quality policies and measures (Land and Gordon 2013). These have included a Quality Code (http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code) outlining expectations for programmes of study coupled with regular institutional audits conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency, annual National Student [satisfaction] Surveys (http://www.thestudentsurvey.com), assessment of research quality through the

Research Assessment Exercise (http://www.rae.ac.uk) and the Research Excellence Framework (http://www.ref.ac.uk).

Within this context, the assurance and enhancement of teaching quality have attracted considerable attention. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) was established in 2003 and originally funded by the government and university subscriptions. It defines its mission as 'improving learning outcomes by raising the status and quality of teaching in higher education' (https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/about-us) and was recently merged and rebranded as Advance-HE. The HEA led the development of the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education (UKPSF) (https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ukpsf) which is used to award four different categories of Fellowship. Staff either apply directly to the HEA or via their home institution if it has an HEA accredited scheme. Most universities now offer Postgraduate Certificates (PGCerts) in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education / Academic Practice, and new members of staff are increasingly required to either complete a PGCert (most of which are accredited by the HEA and therefore lead to Fellowship) or make a direct application for Fellowship as part of their probation. Details of implementation differ somewhat between institutions. An evaluation conducted by Turner, et al. (2013) suggests that at institutional level the UKPSF and HEA accredited schemes have had less impact in the prestigious research-intensive Russell Group universities.

Since 2014 data on teaching qualifications and HEA Fellowships have been collated by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. This has led a range of universities to introduce completion targets, not only to drive up teaching quality, but also in response to the potential significance of these data as metrics feeding into university league tables. Most recently the government has introduced a 'Teaching Excellence

Framework' (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/tef) to assess and monitor the quality of teaching in English universities, for which student satisfaction is one source of data. So-called higher apprenticeships at postgraduate level for 'academic professionals' (https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/academic-professional/) have recently been introduced and can now be offered to early career academics by their employing universities.

Germany

In the last decade, the importance of high quality university teaching has also increased in Germany as various national programmes for the enhancement of teaching (BMBF, 2017) illustrate; however, neither national standards nor compulsory teaching development programmes exist. Although virtually all German universities now offer programmes on learning and teaching in HE, teaching development is predominantly seen as an individual pursuit and only occasionally leads to improved career opportunities. However, an interesting trend is that participation in teaching development programmes is increasingly considered as evidence of teaching competence within professorial appointments and promotions, alongside evaluations of teaching and teaching portfolios. This is expected to grow and may result in teaching development being increasingly perceived as essential.

Compared to the UK, the German HE sector is not very stratified, although distinctions exist between conventional universities, whose remit is both teaching and research, and vocationally oriented universities of applied sciences which have a stronger focus on teaching. Further differences between the two countries arise from the fact that public universities in Germany do not charge tuition fees so that German students may have different expectations and perceptions of their rights as 'consumers'.

The existence or absence of tuition fees might be one possible influence on the importance universities attribute to teaching quality and the reason why a national student satisfaction survey comparable to the UK National Student Survey does not exist in Germany.

Institutional contexts

The following sections briefly describe the two institutions, with particular attention to the nature of programmes and other activities supporting the enhancement of learning and teaching.[2]

Northumbria University

Northumbria University is a large university in the North-East of England with around 32,000 students and 1,300 staff, offering a diverse range of courses e.g. History, Nursing, Engineering, Fashion, and Psychology. It is a post-1992 university and has recently developed its profile as research active. At the time the exchange took place, all early career academics joining the university with less than two years' full time teaching experience were required to complete a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice as a contractual requirement, and 137 members of staff were enrolled on it[3]. Two thirds of this credit-bearing programme were devoted to learning and teaching in

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[2] Since undertaking the mobility, provision in the German institution has remained constant, while provision at Northumbria University has already changed in response to the rapidly moving policy context outlined above.

[3] This programme was subsequently withdrawn and replaced by a direct application route to HEA Fellowship. Most recently a new programme aligned to the academic professional apprenticeship was introduced.

HE, one third to research, taught during a period of two years. Participants had to compile an e-portfolio with reflections, evaluations and evidence of their practice, underpinned by academic literature and relevant evidence. This was summatively assessed and discussed at a group viva. Approximately 50 participants per year completed the award which led to Fellowship of the HEA.

In addition, a shorter two-day course on learning and teaching was available to researchers and postgraduate students who teach, on a voluntary basis. The university also offered events focusing on learning and teaching, held both centrally and in the Faculties, and at the time experienced academics had the opportunity to study and research learning and teaching within the context of a Master's programme exclusively available to university staff. The university also encouraged staff to apply for Fellowship of the HEA by writing an individual application and developed an HEA accredited scheme which enabled the award of Fellowship internally. In the Faculties and departments staff occupied designated roles with generic or specific responsibilities for learning and teaching, e.g. for distance learning or employability. In addition, the university had developed several institutional policies with a focus on the enhancement and assurance of learning and teaching quality, e.g. policies on peer observation of teaching and on assessment and feedback. Staff could be promoted on the basis of their achievements in teaching.

Goethe University Frankfurt

Goethe University, founded in 1914, is the third largest university in Germany, with about 45,000 students and approximately 3,000 staff members in lecturing roles. Teaching development is provided by the "Interdisciplinary College for University Teaching & Learning", a centre which also conducts research on teaching and learning

in higher education. This dual function of research and educational development practice is relatively unique in Germany. The programme offered by the centre leads to a 'Certificate of Higher Education', but this is not a credit-bearing academic award. It consists of three modules (introductory module, specialisation module, individually supervised teaching project) which comprise generic or discipline-specific workshops, peer observations, peer support, preparation of a portfolio, development of a teaching project with expert observation and supervision (provided by centre staff). The structure of this programme is comparable to teaching development programmes at other German universities.

At the time of the exchange, approximately forty certificates per year were awarded to Goethe University staff, and the seventy workshops organised by the centre attracted approximately 550 participations. A typical workshop lasts one day, with an average of eight participants. Most participants of the certificate programme are either PhD students or post-doctoral fellows, who represent the majority of the lecturing staff at Goethe University. In addition to the certificate programme, the centre offers on-line courses on teaching and learning as well as 1-1 support for lecturing staff and for projects conducted by work groups, departments or faculties.

Key contextual differences

The national and institutional contexts described above result in key issues which, we suggest, have direct implications for the nature of the learning, engagement and impact which our respective teaching development programmes generated. Experiencing these contextual differences *in situ* did not only make us acutely aware of them, but also heighted our awareness for the role which is attributed to such contexts in research.

One key difference is whether the programmes are compulsory or undertaken in a voluntary capacity, and our reflections suggested that this affected motivation and

engagement of the programme participants. Since at Goethe University participation was voluntary, programme participants had made a personal commitment and tended to be motivated to develop as teachers, while some participants in the PGCert at Northumbria University merely seemed to comply with the requirement to take the programme or were even openly resistant. This considerably affected engagement of participants at Northumbria and was reflected in (some) negative responses to evaluation questions measuring the "reaction" level (Kirkpatrick 1994) of the programme.

Another key difference arose from the fact that the PGCert at Northumbria University was an academic award at postgraduate level, while the programmes at Goethe University exclusively attracted internal institutional certificates of attendance. The credit-bearing nature of the PGCert necessitated an academic assessment process carried out in accordance with standard regulations for academic awards. The fact that assessment drives learning, i.e. the backwash effect (Elton 1987), is widely known and we therefore assume that it affects what participants gain from a programme. What is important here is not only whether or not programmes are assessed, but also the nature of the assessment, since this differed considerably between the programmes, as outlined above.

A third key difference related to the status and focus of the respective university and academics' perceptions of their role within their institution. Some universities clearly prioritise excellence in research at the expense of teaching, and as explained above, the differences between research and teaching focused institutions are somewhat less pronounced in Germany than in the UK. Our reflections suggested that academics in teaching-focussed universities may be more prone to regarding themselves as teachers, which is likely to have consequences for their motivation to participate in

teaching development programmes, their ability and willingness to critically reflect upon their teaching practice, transform their thinking and adopt new approaches to teaching.

The role of context in the literature on teaching development programmes

Shay (2012) describes educational development as a field with established practices, but an 'arbitrary' and 'somewhat weak knowledge base' (314). Since the ERASMUS+ mobility had heightened our awareness of the contextual differences outlined above and their relevance for our respective work as educational developers, we decided to return to the relevant knowledge base. This involved revisiting publications which had influenced our respective practices and had been considered in our own research on teaching development programmes (e.g. Reimann 2018). While we did not conduct a systematic review, we specifically sought out examples of widely cited publications, such as Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, and Nevgi (2008)[4] and Ho, Watkins, and Kelly (2001)[5], studies investigating more than one site since this was likely to have implications for the way in which context might have been considered, such as Gibbs and Coffey (2004) and Hanbury, Prosser, and Rickinson (2008), and literature reviews such as Stes et al. (2010), Parsons et al. (2012) and Wilson (2012). The publications discussed below are a result of this process which clearly has limitations as the examples were specifically selected to illustrate our observations.

Kanuka, Holmes, and Cowley (2020) note that research on teaching development has been dominated by studies conducted in the United Kingdom and

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[4] Scopus metrics: 91 citations; field-weighted citation impact: 2.69. According to Scopus, a value greater than 1 implies that the article is cited more frequently than expected.

[5] Scopus metrics: 177 citations; field-weighted citation impact: 2.3.

Australia. Parsons et al.'s (2012) review describes studies of teaching development programmes as frequently small scale and focused on individual programmes at a specific point in time. However, when we re-examined the empirical research on teaching development programmes, we were struck by how rarely the contexts of the programmes under investigation were actively written about. In cases where context featured, we were equally surprised by the varied ways in which it was considered. This section will demonstrate this variation by using well known exemplars in order to identify how context is accounted for in this literature.

One example is Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, and Nevgi (2008) who provide considerable detail about the pedagogical training programmes investigated. The authors highlight that in Finland new HE teachers are encouraged, rather than required, to take programmes and that the programmes investigated were therefore taken in a voluntary capacity by highly motivated participants. Since the study considers the effect of varying amounts of pedagogical training, the various programmes available are described in considerable detail, outlining their aims and the ways in which peer observation and/or research are included. Since portfolios and European credit ratings are mentioned, it can be assumed that the programmes are formally assessed, although this is not explicitly stated. The article does not contain any additional information about the national or institutional context and any drivers which may have had an impact on participants' engagement with the programmes other than intrinsic interest.

Ho, Watkins, and Kelly's (2001) study is another interesting example in this respect. Due to the focus of their study, i.e. the conceptual change approach taken by the programme, its design is outlined in considerable detail, including design principles, detailed information about gender, nationality, discipline and teaching experience of the participants as well as other information, e.g. that the programme is non-award bearing,

open to all teaching staff on a voluntary basis and comprises four 3-hour sessions over four consecutive weeks. A control group aims to ensure that both groups were influenced by the same contextual factors such as 'institutional/departmental policies, differences in student intake' (Ho, Watkins, and Kelly 2001, 150). However, there is no discussion of the institutional drivers and policies nor of the Hong Kong context which, we would suggest, may considerably influence participants' engagement with the programme and thus its impact.

In addition to these relatively fine grained and localised studies, other researchers have attempted to get sight of the bigger picture, generating results intended to be generalizable across different institutions (Hanbury, Prosser, and Rickinson 2008), and in some instances countries (Gibbs and Coffey 2004). Hanbury, Prosser, and Rickinson (2008) specifically examined programmes within the UK context and devoted considerable attention to the factors that had shaped the UK HE landscape and the role of teaching development programmes within it. The study explicitly aims to illuminate the relationship between the courses and institutional missions/strategies and provides information about the types of participating institutions, although it remains unclear whether the relationship between the type of institution and the responses was considered in the analysis. The authors conclude that 'the multitude of different programmes make it impossible to meaningfully compare across programmes and conduct definitive evaluations of them' (Hanbury, Prosser, and Rickinson 2008, 482). However, this is what Gibbs and Coffey (2004) do in their much quoted study of the effectiveness of training programmes for university teachers conducted across 22

universities in eight countries.[6] They observe that such programmes are '*often* [our emphasis] compulsory' and '*sometimes* [our emphasis] linked to probation or tenure' (88) and they mention a range of additional contextual differences, such as the programmes' 'very varied goals, rationales and training processes' (90), whether or not they are credit-bearing postgraduate certificates, their length, types of participants etc. However, these differences are not considered systematically and there is no discussion of whether they might have a bearing on the impact of the programmes under consideration.

These selected examples of empirical studies demonstrate that the literature on teaching development programmes acknowledges context to a certain extent, but rarely considers and discusses it in any depth. This is confirmed by the systematic literature review by Stes et al. (2010), the literature review by Parsons et al. (2012), and the meta-study by Wilson (2012), which have brought together the available evidence on the impact of teaching development, with a view to proposing an agenda for future research as well as informing practice. Their reviews confirm the importance of context and the lack of attention it has received in the literature to date. Parsons et al.'s (2012) UK focused review draws attention to the fact that 'the policy context, and levers of change, are different in other countries' (14), while Stes et al. (2010) conclude that contextual differences correlate with differences in impact. Their analysis highlights the lack of information about and discussion of the exact nature of teaching development initiatives and considerable contextual variation in the literature they reviewed. In a similar vein

[6] The reader is not told which countries have been included in the study and the number of institutions from each country.

Parsons et al. (2012) criticise current research on teaching development programmes for its insufficient consideration of context:

> Researchers often provide limited evidence of important issues of context in what is being evaluated for impact (…). The reasons for this are unclear, but this represents a serious limitation to sharing knowledge from such studies, and critically appraising the impact messages. (Parsons et al. 2012, 36)

It is also interesting to take a closer look at which aspects of contextual variation have, and have not, received attention. Stes et al's (2010) review identified variation in teaching development activities in relation to duration (extended over time – one-time events), type (collective, course-like – alternative initiatives), target group (e.g. teaching assistants, new faculty) and discipline-specificity. In contrast, national and institutional policy contexts seem to be considered infrequently, and there is even less discussion of national, institutional and departmental cultures and the ways in which they may influence the impact of teaching development programmes. Stes et al.'s (2010) review stresses that more information is needed on the pedagogical approaches taken in teaching development programmes, and recent research by Jääskelä, Häkkinen and Rasku-Puttonen (2017) on teaching development concludes that its success depends on a multitude of factors, of which many arise from the specific context in which it is situated.

Theorisation of context

The argument made in this article is that context, in particular national and institutional context, significant shapes teaching development practice and needs to be taken into account when researching and judging its impact on academics and their teaching practice. Socio-cultural theorisations of context shed additional light on the issue, in particular the practice perspective proposed by Boud and Brew (2013). They argue that

professional learning is inherently bound up in context since it arises in the everyday interactions of practice. ‘Practice is necessarily contextualised; it cannot be discussed independently of the settings in which it occurs; it is embodied in those undertaking the practice’ (Boud and Brew 2013, 213). The situated practice contexts in which academics develop have been conceptualised and researched in different ways, for instance as significant networks (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009) or as workgroups (Trowler and Turner 2002). Boud and Brew (2013) highlight that the practice lens does not only apply to academic practice, but also to academic development as a practice in its own right. From this perspective, the programmes which this article focuses on are instances of situated professional practices through which developers enact their work. Similar to the way in which Mathieson (2012) has linked the local practices enacted by disciplinary workgroups to structural factors, the wider political and institutional structures that play out in the local practices of teaching development programmes became visible through our ERASMUS+ mobility experience. By making the familiar strange, the experience increased our awareness of the relationship between wider national and institutional contexts and our situated practices and led to the identification of contextual differences which would otherwise not have surfaced. We started to understand that these differences influenced the ways in which teaching development programmes were framed, perceived and experienced, and that programmes which, on the surface, appeared to be similar, actually varied significantly due to being situated in different national and institutional contexts.

Stensaker’s (2017) work is particularly relevant for theorising institutional context. Based on a discussion of global structural changes to the nature of universities, he examines the tensions which characterise institutional contexts. He emphasises the importance of local practices which are ‘crafted in ways that are quite unique to the

individual organization' (Stensaker 2017, 8) and advocates academic development as 'cultural work'. He suggests that developers' intimate understanding of institutional contexts equips them well to work productively within the complexities and conflicts that exist in a contemporary university. In this line of argument understanding of context is crucial for achieving impact, and Stensaker argues for research which captures and scrutinises the complex institutional structures which influence practice. This draws attention to the importance of foregrounding and investigating the uniqueness of teaching development programmes and their situatedness in local contexts, but without unnecessarily limiting research to small scale evaluations of local practices. In contrast, in the research exemplars reviewed above, context is not theorised and examined in this way. It could be argued that context almost 'gets in the way' of assessing the effectiveness and impact of programmes since contextual differences make them less comparable. However, through the lens of situated practice, impact can only be fully understood if context is regarded as an integral component of practice and therefore explicitly considered.

Conclusion

For the authors of this article, the experience of staff mobility has highlighted how significant context is for our endeavours as developers. However, the brief review of selected studies has also shown that the extent to which context explicitly features in research on teaching development programmes varies considerably. This makes it difficult to appraise the existing evidence base on the impact of such programmes, to draw conclusions and take research-informed approaches to teaching development practice.

There seem to be several ways forward. First of all, research on teaching development programmes should provide as much contextual information as possible,

including information about the wider institutional and national policy context. However, this alone cannot be sufficient as there appears to be a need for a closer examination and theorisation of what the notion of context entails as part of such research. Claims about the impact of teaching development programmes should not be made without also considering context and the way in which evidence of impact is influenced by context. For instance, when discussing our respective programmes, we highlighted that one of them was compulsory, while the other one was not. It is well known that ceiling effects, i.e. extremely positive ratings throughout, are more likely to occur in research when participants are self-selected. Studies investigating the impact of a teaching development programme would therefore need to take this into account by stating explicitly whether participants chose, or were required, to participate in the programme under investigation. Such information would enable transferability of results and adequate interpretations. This aspect could also be taken further by actively incorporating it into the design of the study, e.g. by specifically investigating participants' aims and motivations for engaging in the programme. In addition, caution would need to be taken when making claims about the impact of teaching development programmes more broadly on the basis of data from only one of such programmes.

Thus there is also a need for studies investigating a wider range of institutions and countries. Gibbs and Coffey (2004) and Hanbury, Prosser, and Rickinson (2008) have already made promising advances in this direction, but in this type of research much more explicit attention needs to be devoted to context. Future studies could specifically focus on context and examine the influence which contextual variation may have on the impact of teaching development, across national and institutional contexts. Writing in this journal, Kanuka, Holmes, and Cowley (2020) provide a recent example of the way in which contexts can be explicitly taken into account, theorised and

analysed. Another option would be to control for contextual factors, i.e. by designing larger international studies which investigate provision which is comparable across a range of aspects, such as the ones discussed above. Such cross-institutional and cross-cultural approaches would offer useful ways of progressing our understanding of the impact of teaching development programmes. They would also enable educational and academic development to establish themselves more firmly as a professional fields underpinned by a strong systematic knowledge base, as proposed by Shay (2012). According to Shay such knowledge needs to be built on an 'iterative movement from the particular to the general and then back to a re-conceptualized particular, from our context-rich understandings and experiences to generalizable principles that can speak across our varied contexts' (321). We suggest that this can only be achieved if the context of teaching development is explicitly considered, appropriately theorised and systematically investigated. Such approaches rely on support like that offered by the ERASMUS+ mobility programme which provided the experiences which enhanced our own exploration and understanding of context. However, recent developments such as Brexit increasingly threaten the opportunities for research collaborations which will progress this agenda. More broadly, our reflections have also highlighted the potential of international exchanges for raising awareness of the importance of context and the contribution they can make to the professional development of academic developers.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to peers reviewing earlier versions of this article and to Susan Mathieson in particular whose insightful comments helped us to progress theorisations of context.

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