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| Institution: University of the Highlands and Islands | | |
| Unit of Assessment: Education | | |
| Title of case study: Influencing and impacting rural teacher education: researching and reconfiguring digital approaches, professional identity and agency in responding to a national need for teachers in rural and geographically dispersed communities | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2016 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g., job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Dr Helen Coker | Lecturer in Education | Pre-2013-April 2018 |
| Professor Morag Redford | Head of Teacher Education | September 2014-present |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N | | |
| 1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) | | |
| <p>Teacher Education programmes (PGDE in Primary and Secondary Education for those seeking a teaching qualification, MEd Critical Enquiry for those already qualified seeking to enhance their practice) at UHI have been designed to meet a national need for teachers in rural areas of Scotland. This case study outlines how research undertaken by staff members on these programmes has informed the programmes' development in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage dialogue between students as a means of developing understanding and professional identity • Harness the value of the relationship between student teacher and placement mentor • Ensure student teachers embed the skills of reflection and enquiry within their professional practice and identity <p>This has had subsequent impact on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas • Preparedness of programme graduates for teaching practice within a rural setting • Digital preparedness of rural teachers with an increased likelihood that teachers will access professional learning opportunities online to enhance their practice • Creating a strong sense of professional identity and agency within rural teachers • Creating an active community of practice with dialogue and collaboration between teachers post qualification | | |
| 2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) | | |
| <p>Teacher Education programmes at UHI are delivered using online and distance learning (ODL) with the teaching designed to be place-based, to support students who currently reside in rural areas to become or remain teachers within their existing community (Redford, 2020; 3.1). Research into the experience of students on these programmes (Coker 2015 and 2017: 3.2 and 3.3 below), and into the experiences of rural teachers (Coker, 2019: 3.4 below) has yielded insights into which methods of teaching and delivery are likely to have a positive impact on the development of teacher agency (construed as active participation in</p> | | |

own learning) and professional identity, including entry to, and membership of a professional community.

Coker (2015) (3.2) outlined an ethnographic study in which student teacher's participation in the virtual learning environment (VLE) was observed by examining data concerning the number and nature of individual student's interactions with this online space. There were two key findings from this study:

- A correlation between time spent within the VLE (particularly repeated and prolonged use of discussion boards, and a high ratio between access to course content and access to discussion boards) and student achievement in assessment, independent of students' prior qualifications
- The level of engagement with discussion board tasks was influenced by the way that task was described and presented to students: Tasks that explicitly valued dialogue and collaboration were most engaged with whereas tasks that did not value interaction or dialogue had a lower number of postings.

Conclusions from this study were that successful students accessed the knowledge of their peers more effectively as well as deepening their own understanding by both authoring discussion board posts and reflecting on what they, and others had written (metacognition). This social aspect of learning is particularly relevant within teacher education where student teachers are developing their identity (*becoming* teachers in addition to learning how and what to teach) gaining entry to a professional community of practice which will influence what kinds of teachers they become.

Coker (2017) (3.3) uses qualitative data from 53 students to examine the notion of 'agency' (active participation in their own learning) of student teachers. Key findings from these studies were that:

- Mentors and peers are considered most influential in supporting teacher development.
- Student teachers had not embedded key aspects of teacher identity that were integral to the learning outcomes of the programme, namely reflection and enquiry

Conclusions were that agency within student teachers is tied to the notion of becoming a teacher (as explored in 3.2) and that validation from a mentor, someone who is already a member of the professional community of practice, is of particular importance. Secondly, that student teachers have a short-term focus on entry to the professional community rather than aspiring to distinct roles within the community. Finally, that agency involves actively aligning one's previous experiences with the professional values and beliefs of the professional community.

Coker (2019) (3.4) examined how rural teachers experience professional learning. Acknowledging that rurality is likely to be a barrier to participation in face-to-face events, the role of technology-mediated professional learning was explored via interviews with 18 rural teachers. It was found that technology can assist rural teachers in accessing professional learning, but that opportunities for professional dialogue with peers are limited due to the small numbers of teaching staff at rural schools. Technology can also enable access to professional networks but requires teachers to have the requisite skills and be confident in their use of technology (including social media) in order to reap the benefits of these dispersed networks.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1 Redford, M (2020) 'Online teacher preparation'. In Shanks, R. (ed.) *Teacher Preparation in Scotland*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, pp.125-135.

Hard copy also submitted with Outputs for Unit of Assessment.

3.2 Coker, H (2015) 'Using Data to See what Students are Doing: A Critically Enquiring Approach'. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 3(1): 11-23.

<https://jpaap.napier.ac.uk/index.php/JPAAP/article/view/146/pdf>

3.3 Coker, H (2017) 'Developing understanding of student-teacher agency: implications for programme development'. *Teacher Education Advancement Network Journal (TEAN)*, 9(2): 51-63.

http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/3881/1/Coker_DevelopingUnderstanding.pdf

3.4 Coker, H. (2019) 'Mediating the flow of Professional Capital: The Potential of Technology for Rural Teachers Professional Learning in Scotland'. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 29(3), 39-55.

<https://www.journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/234>

Please note author institutional attribution for the above is Inverness College, University of the Highlands and Islands, within the link to article above. On article PDF itself contact institution is different as the author had moved to a new institution at point of final publication. Acknowledgement in article indicates this is a UHI research project.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

4.1 Pathway to impact: Changes to the design and delivery of the Teacher Education programmes

The research outlined in section 3 has directly impacted the design and delivery of the Teacher Education programmes, with the following specific changes:

- Addition of online seminar sessions within the VLE and discussion board tasks with explicit reference to collaboration, discussion and dialogue- activities the research showed to be beneficial for student attainment.
- Reconfiguration of the online environment into one single space (formerly divided into modules) with content organised thematically using the General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS) Standards for Preliminary Registration (SPR) and addition of reflective tasks- to encourage engagement with aspects of teacher identity and professional development beyond initial qualification that were shown to be absent by the research
- Building in structured reflective activities into the programmes, and connecting these with students' previous experiences in order to develop agency- shown to be absent by the research

4.2 Recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas

Student numbers on the PGDE programmes are controlled and allocated by the General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTC Scotland). Success of the PGDE Primary programme has led from an initial allocation of 20 places on the programme in 2013/14 to an allocation of 90 places in 2019/20 and 85 places in 2020/21. The suite of programmes has seen a total of 487 graduates since 2013/14 (329 for PGDE Primary, 92 for PGDE Secondary, 66 for MEd Critical Enquiry). Whilst they were engaged in their studies, the graduates were residents within the University Local Authority partnership (Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Highland, Moray, Orkney, and Shetland). Although the University and GTC Scotland do not record teachers' location post-qualification, a recent survey (5.1) revealed that 85% of graduates remained within the University Local Authority partnership area after qualification and induction. This evidences a very high and healthy retention of newly qualified teachers in the Highlands and Islands region, allowing us to meet the overall objective of providing more teachers in our rural and geographically dispersed communities.

GTC Scotland recognise how the research outlined within this case study informed the development of the PGDE programmes as these were referenced heavily during the programmes' revalidation in 2019-20. They acknowledge the impact of the programmes on the recruitment and retention of rural teachers, and how the sound evidence base provided by this research has contributed to preparing teachers for digital practice within a rural context (5.2). These sentiments are echoed by the local Authorities that the programmes serve, with testimonials from Argyll and Bute Council (5.3) and Highland Council (5.4, p.1) acknowledging the impact of the suite of programmes on the recruitment of teachers from the local area, subsequently providing teachers for the local area.

4.3 Preparedness of programme graduates for teaching practice

Underpinned by the body of research that informed the design and delivery of the programmes, the newly qualified teachers that are now in place are well-positioned to teach in pedagogically effective ways that align with the delivery of digitally enabled school education in rural contexts.

A recent survey of the graduates (5.1) is evidence of the programmes' positive impact on graduates' attitudes to and engagement with professional learning and enquiry; key to sustaining an upskilled workforce which has a positive impact on student learning. Over 80% of respondents agreed that the programme had given them the skills to engage in professional enquiry and encouraged them to undertake professional learning. The majority of respondents reported undertaking professional learning on a monthly basis. As the ability to attend face to face events is much reduced for rural teachers, it is vital that they have the skills to engage in virtual networks and collaborating online within the PGDE programmes prepare graduates for this kind of engagement when they move into professional teaching, as highlighted by one survey respondent: "(Studying the PGDE) definitely enhanced the skills I had in working within a professional network due to the nature of the VC/collaboration elements" (5.1, p.6). The testimonial from Highland Council (5.4) provides further evidence of how this has been deeply embedded with teachers' professional practices with their own survey data evidencing widespread commitment to professional learning and enquiry (5.4, p.2, line 9).

The programmes have also effectively fostered reflection as a skill within graduates (identified as key to teacher agency within the research (3.3)). The survey of graduates showed that 88% agreed that studying on the programmes had given them the skills to reflect on and improve their teaching practice (5.1, p.5). Redford and Nicol (forthcoming, 5.5) detail through activity systems analysis how the programme content and structure develops teacher agency including a commitment to professional enquiry, teacher identity within a rural setting, and a community of practice through collaborative activities.

The testimonial from Highland Council (5.4) provides some specific examples of the impact of this practice: a graduate from the secondary programme was selected as Highlands Probationer of the Year based on their embedding practical enquiry during their very first year of teaching (5.4, p.2, line 15. NQT = Newly Qualified Teacher) and a Leadership and Empowerment workstream being established within the Highland Council to continue the "expectation of teacher agency and empowerment" (5.4, p.2, line 24) that has been established and embedded by the programmes at UHI.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1 Survey data from PGDE programme graduates (December 2020)

5.2 Letter of support from Kenneth Muir
Chief Executive and Registrar, GTCS (General Teaching Council for Scotland), referencing
the impact of the research

5.3 Letter of support from Anne Patterson, Chief Education Officer of Argyll and Bute
Council, referencing the impact of the research

5.4 Letter of support from Aileen Mackay, Headteacher of Smithton Primary School and
Leadership and Empowerment Workstream Officer, Highland Council and Highland Council
link officer for the UHI Education Partnership, referencing the impact of the research

5.5 Publication: Redford, M. and Nicol, L. (2021- in press) 'Knowing myself as a teacher:
transforming the place of rurality in Scottish Initial Teacher Education' in White, S. and
Downes, J (eds) *Rural Education Across the World: Models of Innovative Practice and
Impact*. Singapore: Springer