

# How do Education doctoral students understand university teaching?

by Mike Mimirinis and Kristina Ahlberg

***Doctoral students often take teaching roles in their universities – what do these students believe about good practice in the sector and how can they be supported?***

Doctoral students in Education, enrolled on PhD or EdD programmes of study, are often expected or required to perform substantial teaching duties including lecturing, organising and conducting tutorials, supervision and marking. Limited attention, however, has been given to their development as university teachers, especially when compared with the emphasis on their development as researchers. In this article, we argue that it is essential to understand what doctoral students believe about university teaching and how this relates to their academic field, so that they are supported in their academic development as university teachers.



This is important since [it has been shown](#) that only approximately half of education doctoral students in the UK receive guidance and support on how to teach. At the same time, there has been a steady decline in the number of academic staff employed by higher education institutions to teach Education, mainly due to the reduction of government funding for teacher training. Increased monitoring of doctoral performance and degree completion rates has therefore been coupled with reduced opportunities for employment within a higher education institution.

## Conceptions of university teaching

Research has established a relationship between teachers' conceptions of teaching, how they go about teaching their subject, and the quality of these students' learning outcomes. Change in teaching is not likely without changes in the teacher's conception of teaching. Conceptions of teaching reflect personal theories derived from experience. Exposure to alternative conceptions of teaching is necessary to foster the development of more sophisticated conceptions. Subsequent studies have investigated university teaching from the teachers' perspective; core assumptions centred on the importance of understanding the meaning of teaching, and the intentional meanings through which teachers approach their teaching. [Some of the studies](#) directly explored the relationship between teachers' conceptions of teaching and the quality of student learning. Other researchers have proposed two broad orientations to teaching: 'teacher-centred/content-oriented' and 'student-centred/learning-oriented'. This foregrounded the significance of teachers' ingrained beliefs and how these cannot be regulated by university quality control mechanisms.

## Education doctoral students' conceptions of university teaching

Within this context, [our recently published study](#) aimed to explore how doctoral students experience and understand university teaching. We interviewed doctoral students in two departments of Education in Sweden and England, with the aim of exploring what are the qualitatively different ways in which doctoral students in education make sense of their teaching. [Phenomenographic analysis](#) has identified that Education doctoral students understood university teaching as a means of (A) transmitting knowledge, (B) presenting contrasting concepts of education, (C) communicating and engaging with students, (D) enabling students to apply knowledge and skills, (E) enabling students to interpret and compare concepts of education, and (F) promoting personal, professional and societal development and change.

The first two conceptions (A, B) are less sophisticated, and the students' awareness centres mostly on knowledge. Conceptions C, D and E represent a shift of focus: from *knowledge* to *students' learning* (communication and engagement, enabling the application of skills/knowledge, or enabling the creation of meaning). Finally, the last conception (F) is the most complete: the focus of doctoral students' awareness shifts from student learning to development and change – in the concepts taught, in the individual, in the profession, and in society. This most advanced conception subsumes the previous five and demonstrates the expansion of the focus of awareness from knowledge to student learning, and from there to development and change.

The findings are important because they offer a unique insight into how the subject of Education is understood by doctoral students who teach. Our study provided evidence of a continuum of approaches from the teacher-focused to the student-focused approach to teaching, and it enriches our understanding in the following areas:

- It supports the salience of an intermediate conception of teaching as an exchange and interaction between teacher and student.
- It delineates the subject matter of the field of education and identifies two key constituents: education as a set of skills, and education as a set of (often interrelated) concepts.
- It provides a detailed, subject-specific account of conceptions of teaching in the field of education.

## **Implications of the findings**

The existence of advanced conceptions of university teaching necessitates a reframing of the ways we think about the academic development of PhD and EdD students in education. Such reframing needs to consider two dimensions:

Firstly, it is important to introduce common frameworks of academic development for education academics and doctoral students. This contrasts with existing approaches where the level and quality of support offered to doctoral students is limited compared to provision for academic teachers. Examples of current provision are often reactive to sectoral and university-level initiatives, and result in tokenistic, compartmentalised approaches to their academic development, as exemplified in the award of sector-wide recognised “fellowships”.

Secondly, it is important to prioritise ways of representing and engaging with the structure of the subject, rather than the acquisition of teaching skills only. It is essential that teaching skills are supplemented by content knowledge. Therefore, academic development of Education doctoral students should enable an active, critical exploration of how the elements of the taught content relate to each other, and why/how these elements were chosen. This aspect is particularly relevant in the context of revisiting university curricula in response to wider developments, such as climate change, decolonising the curriculum, technological advancements etc.

We argue that meaningful teaching experiences for Education doctoral students involve engagement with the structure and nuances of the subject, awareness of the various pedagogies that can facilitate engagement with the subject, and an understanding of teaching as an interactive craft that can transform knowledge

in the field. Such a transformation might also extend to doctoral students themselves, as active agents in the university and beyond.

### Authored by:



**Mike Mimirinis** is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of West London where he leads the Doctorate of Education (EdD). His research broadly explores variation in the ways students and teachers experience teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. He has recently received a British Educational Research Association (BERA) grant to research variation in the way Black students understand academic support in their undergraduate studies. Twitter @mimirinis



**Kristina Ahlberg** is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.