STUDENT-FOCUSED TEACHING APPROACH DEVELOPMENT IN A HIGHER EDUCATION TRAINING COURSE FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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Abstract: Postgraduate students are increasingly recruited to teach in higher education (HE) as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), with similar increase in GTA training courses to provide relevant training. Constraints on training resources can limit their depth and length and, thus, their effectiveness is a recurring concern. Based on literature that the approach adopted in teaching influences learning effectiveness in students, we discuss a mandatory training course for GTAs where changes to their teaching approach were analysed. We utilize the concepts of student-focused (SF) or teacher-focused (TF) teaching approaches and report on results of the Approaches to Teaching Inventory (ATI) questionnaire, comparing the pre and post-course teaching approaches and changes that trainee GTAs adopted. An increase in SF (decrease in TF) teaching has been previously linked with a greater likelihood in facilitating deeper learning. An overall gain in the SF teaching approach was recorded in 55% of the participants (n=137) in this short training course incorporating a 24-hour face to face training component. When the students were further categorized according to STEM (nSTEM = 61) and non-STEM groups (nNON-STEM=76), we found the greatest shift towards SF teaching occurring with non-STEM groups. Factor analysis has been performed and internal reliability has been measured to confirm the validity of our data using the framework proposed in the ATI. Despite 78% of GTAs having indicated preferences for SF teaching at the end of the course, demonstration of SF teaching during in-course classroom observations was not consistent, especially with GTAs from STEM fields. Impediments experienced for SF teaching included lack of cooperation from students, previous TF role models, lack of preparation time, time management, knowledge and skills. We share strategies to overcome pedagogical obstructions that are widely encountered by first-time HE teachers to engage in SF teaching, which would be useful to GTAs and their trainers.