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The Impact of Continuing Professional Training in Teaching University Practice.

A study of its application into teaching practices.

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ABSTRACT

La presente comunicación expone los resultados obtenidos de una investigación sobre el impacto del Plan de Formación del Personal Docente e Investigador de la URV en la práctica docente. Se utilizaron técnicas de recolección de datos tanto cualitativos como cuantitativos para indagar la integración y adecuación de los conocimientos adquiridos y su aplicación a la enseñanza en el aula universitaria. Se tomaron medidas sobre la valoración general de los cursos, los beneficios percibidos por los participantes y su percepción sobre la posibilidad de aplicación de lo aprendido a la práctica del aula. Se realizaron posteriores contrastes teniendo en cuenta las variables de género, edad, categoría docente, antigüedad y área de conocimiento.

ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

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The paper draws upon the results of a research about the impact of the Continuing Training Program for university teachers into their teaching practice. Quantitative and qualitative data collection was used in order to look into the possibility of application in teaching practice what participants have learned during the training courses. Different aspects of the training courses were measured resulting in a general evaluation of each course. The impact of training courses in professional development was measured by several quantitative variables according to a pedagogical knowledge development dimension and an instrumental dimension. Perception of the possibility of application was analyzed by a qualitative measure. Group contrast analyses were applied according to gender, age, position, experience, and knowledge domain.

KEYWORDS: Continuing Professional Development, Impact Evaluation, University Teaching

FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE: Social and Legal Sciences

SUBJECT AREA: Evaluation and Institutional Quality

PRESENTATION CATEGORY: Oral Presentation

DEVELOPMENT:

Introduction

Lifelong learning for teaching staff

The implementation of the European convergence process in higher education has required Spanish universities to harmonize, transform and change almost all aspects of their structures and has defined a new model for universities. The main protagonists of this process of change are the teaching staff. In recent years, the quality of university education has been the focus of much discussion (Madrid Izquierdo, 2005; Valcarcel, 2003) and the need to improve teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge among teaching staff has been highlighted as a key issue for the future. The tasks performed by university

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lecturers are not static or stable, and are instead adapting to new changes and demands. Knowledge of teaching and learning in the university environment has increased rapidly in recent years, and has changed our understanding of these processes (Pickering, 2006).

In this context, training of university teaching staff is a key factor in the implementation of the universities' transformation. The professional performance of university teachers must meet certain requirements in terms of the quality of its results. This involves a substantial change in how the teaching and learning process is conceived, in professional profiles, in knowledge and in the way lifelong learning is understood.

At Spanish universities, unlike in other countries (Knight, Tait & Yorke; 2006, Weurlander & Stenfors-Hayes, 2008; Roxaa & Maartensson, 2008), there has been no institutional tradition or culture that considers teacher training as essential. It has been taken for granted that the professionalism of teaching staff is based on the lecturer's experience, which is gained either during his/her time as a student or while teaching. "Being a good professional" was enough to be considered a good teacher, a good communicator and transmitter of knowledge (Madrid Izquierdo, 2005). With the challenge presented by convergence, fresh debates and studies have focused on the training of university teaching staff and some training alternatives have been suggested in response to these changes (Valcarcel, 2003; Alías Sáez, 2005; Torra Bitlloch, 2011).

The current conditions define new scenarios in teacher training. Two benchmarks for consideration in teacher training are being created: the first is the context of university education, its mission and the new challenges it faces; the second is the professionalization of teaching as a means of

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improving the quality of teaching. Teaching is seen as a specialized activity, i.e. it has its own area of expertise and requires specific training to be undertaken successfully.

New challenges mean that teachers need to develop skills related to learning approaches based on new technologies, personal skills linked to the student's learning and teaching process, and new methodological approaches. The skills of teaching staff need to be renewed and updated by means of training plans, in order to ensure the quality standards of university education.

After recognising these challenges that Spanish universities face, most higher education institutions have implemented lifelong learning plans for their teaching staff. Numerous models and proposals for carrying out these training programmes have been suggested, as well as equally numerous questions that have arisen without yet being evaluated. Many authors acknowledge the lack of studies assessing the impact of teacher training programmes (Pineda, 2011; Flecknoe, 2002). It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that there has been limited assessment of training plans for teaching staff, and more in-depth studies are needed in order to improve these programmes. Assessment of the impact of continuous training programmes is a useful strategy for ascertaining their situation and the results obtained, to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to propose measures for improvement.

Assessment of the impact of lifelong learning programmes for professionals

The changes made as a result of the convergence process in European higher education support the need for lifelong learning and professional development for teaching staff. At the same time, no other training has been called into question as extensively as lifelong learning (in almost all contexts) due to the

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large sums of money invested in it and the meagre results obtained from it (Cervero, 1984, 1986; Coffey & Gibbs, 2000). Due to the trend towards the "*audit society*" (Blackmore, 2006), the field of lifelong learning is increasingly required to make the invisible visible, i.e. to show evidence of the results obtained from the training, at an individual level and also in terms of its impact on the organization. Presenting this type of evidence is one of the more complex demands faced by researchers and teaching professionals, since these phenomena are difficult to register and interpret (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Diez, 2010; Browne, et. al. 2008). On the other hand, the literature on assessment of the impact of teacher training is limited, and it suffers from the dichotomy of "*evaluation for improvement*" or "*assessment for accountability*" (Blackmore, 2006; Diez, 2010; Dede, et. al. 2009) and offers little explanation of the conditions that make a programme successful or otherwise, and why.

However, the specialized literature contains some studies with interesting results. Coffey & Gibbs (2000, 2004) present a study on the impact of training courses for lecturers based on a scale of the quality and orientation of teaching. These authors analyze the changes in the teachers' conception of education as a result of attending a training course, and the changes that took place in the students' learning. The authors present positive results in that the training increased the focus on learner-centred teaching, improved aspects of teaching such as the feeling of effectiveness and also led to an improvement in students' learning. The authors mentioned difficulties in identifying the conditions and characteristics of the training courses, making it difficult to identify the characteristics that lead to a course having some impact or otherwise. Weurlander & Stenfors (2008) present a study on teachers' perception of the impact of a training course. These authors report results that show changes in the habits and ways of thinking among the teachers studied after their participation in a training course. They emphasize the increased professional confidence among the teachers involved, and mention the opportunity for think about how they work and their skills as teachers as a positive factor. According to these authors, some

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methodological aspects of training which determine the impact on teaching are the length of the courses and the teacher's discipline, as well as the culture within the department. Longer courses have a positive impact in terms of the teachers' effectiveness. Meanwhile, the perception of the importance of teaching is influenced by the teacher's discipline and the culture of the department.

Objective

The aim of this study is to identify the perception of teachers participating in lifelong learning courses as regards the impact of training on their professional development, the perceived benefits in terms of improving their teaching skills, and the opportunities to apply what they learned during the training in the classroom, based on an exploratory study. We assume perception to be the process by which individuals give meaning and significance to objects and/or situations presented to them, emphasizing some essential features and inhibiting others, mediated by knowledge and previous experience (Luria, 1984).

In this regard, individuals with different profiles have differing perceptions of the impact of training on their professional development, depending on their experience and training needs. However, the lifelong learning programme studied was designed to meet the training needs of both new and experienced teachers, in all disciplines and knowledge areas, and from all teaching categories. Identification of those that are different would justify the introduction of some modifications in order to adapt the training to different teaching staff profiles.

Context and Methodology

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The continuous training programme for teaching staff

The Rovira i Virgili University Teaching Strategic Plan is based on an institutional commitment set out in the programme's objectives at government level as the need to transform the training space and process. The URV Strategic Teaching Plan falls within the context of the European Union and takes the guidelines of the European Higher Education Area as its benchmark. The Bologna Declaration (1998) defines a joint framework for the university's work and cooperation, from both the structural and organizational standpoint and the teaching model. This model is a clear shift from the teacher's perspective (teaching) to the student's perspective (learning) in order to define what graduates need to acquire in terms of learning objectives based on competencies as the core of the training process. At the URV, this takes place in two areas: the teacher training project, in which the professional and academic profile are defined, and the learning objectives for each qualification, taking their competencies and skills into account.

The implementation of a new training project based on student-centred learning requires a change in the way teaching is understood, and in the organization of its constituent parts for the process to succeed. A new teaching model requires a review and improvement of the teaching process. Teacher training therefore becomes a key component in the transformation of teaching, leading to the formulation of a Training Plan for Teaching and Research Staff at the URV.

Within the Strategic Teaching Plan, the Teaching and Research Training Plan (PROFID) is a tool providing care and support for teaching staff within their own training, and contributes to the achievement of a high quality university for all, appropriate to modern society.

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The PROFID has two basic lines of action; first, the Specific Training Programme, consisting of training courses requested by interested teachers and taught by institutions outside the university, which focus on meeting the specific needs of teaching staff; and second, the *General Training Programme*, consisting of training courses designed, managed and run by a specific administrative unit within the university itself. For this study, only questionnaires administered to participants in general training courses were taken into account. This decision was due to the fact that one of the objectives of this research is to assess the impact of this training on teaching, evaluate the results of the programme and suggest areas for improvement in teacher training.

The General Training Programme for teaching staff at this university, which is part of the Training Plan for Teaching and Research Staff, comprises a number of courses with varying themes, duration and methodologies. It consists of a programme of annual lifelong learning activities including courses, workshops, working seminars and specific training initiatives in centres, departments, and work and advice sessions for teaching staff. The subject areas that determine the areas of action in the training offered are: University teaching, Tools for teaching, the European Higher Education Area, Teaching and Research Development, Health and Occupational Hazards Prevention, University Management and Languages.

Data collection

The data were collected by administering a questionnaire to the participants in various continuous training courses within the PROFID. The questionnaire was administered after the end of each course, with a margin of 3 to 7 days after the end date of each training initiative.

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The questionnaire was designed on an ad hoc basis for this research. The questions were formulated according to the research objectives and the revised theoretical framework. Before the questionnaire was administered, it was validated by judges and a pilot test was carried out. After some changes were made, it was administered to participants in continuous training courses. The questionnaire was distributed electronically via e-mail. The questionnaires were answered anonymously and voluntarily. The rate of responses received was 59% of the total number of participants who completed the continuous training courses selected.

The questionnaire consists of four parts. The first includes demographic information on the participating subjects (age, gender, teaching category, knowledge area, course taken). The second part consists of 14 items with a 1-6 Likert scale, in which participants were asked to indicate their agreement-disagreement with various statements related to the evaluation of different aspects of the course (relevance of the topic, relevance of the content, quality of the activities offered, quality of materials used, appropriateness of the teaching methods, balance between theory and practice). The third part uses 6 items with a Likert scale of 1-6 (agree/disagree) to show the participants' perception of the impact of the training in terms of the acquisition of teaching knowledge and skills, the opportunity to carry out new activities in the classroom, an improved CV, sharing experiences with other colleagues, the acquisition of skills and strategies to apply in teaching and increased professional confidence. Finally, the fourth part uses an open question format to ascertain the justification of how the participant will put what they have learned during the training into practice in their teaching.

The individuals who answered the questionnaire were participants in various continuous training courses offered by the university as part of the PROFID during the 2010-2011 academic year. They were

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all university teaching staff from all categories and knowledge areas at the university. Their participation in these lifelong learning courses for teachers is voluntary, which means that the teachers register for these courses based on their own interests and needs.

Due to the large number of courses within the PROFID General Training Programme held throughout the year, we decided to choose those that had a direct relationship with the development and acquisition of teaching skills. The course duration was 5 to 21 hours of attendance, and the courses lasted between one day and three months (Table 1).

Table 1 Continuous training courses (PROFID) selected	N
Programming and development by competence of the subjects and/or modules	3
The puzzle technique as an assessment activity for large groups	5
Problem-based learning and project-based learning	5
Tutorials at university	19
The lecture	4
Cooperative learning workshop	7
Assessment of learning	11
Competencies assessment system using electronic tools	9
How to work on emotional intelligence	9
Public speaking	11
Gender mainstreaming in science and teaching	11
Writing doctoral theses	18
Applying Web 2.0 to teaching	17
Total responses received	129

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As regards the treatment of the data, we first performed a descriptive analysis of the sample (N=129), identifying the frequencies and distribution percentages of individuals according to the categories of age, gender, knowledge area, teaching category and length of service in teaching.

In order to study the impact of the training courses, overall assessment of the course was subsequently defined as a first variable. This is a dummy variable constructed from the average of 14 items in the questionnaire ($\alpha=0.93$), and aims to give an overall score for the course attended by the participants based on their assessment of its various aspects. A training course is assumed to have different aspects that can be assessed independently of each other, such as clarity of objectives, quality of presentations, activities, methodology, etc., in which some aspects may have been rated with high scores, while the scores for others may have been lower. However, they are all part of the same process, and contribute to the overall assessment.

In addition to the overall assessment of the course, which is a summary variable of the scores that participants give a course, a number of related variables within the theoretical concept of perceived benefits, i.e. the participants' perception of the benefits gained from having participated in a training course, were defined beforehand. The variables that were defined were: increased knowledge and skills for teaching, undertaking new activities in the classroom, increased knowledge of techniques and strategies for teaching, improved CV, sharing experiences with colleagues and increasing professional confidence.

These variables were subjected first to a descriptive analysis and then to an analysis of variance. We performed a correlation analysis for the variables collected in the theoretical category of *perceived benefits*, and subsequently performed an analysis of variance for each of the variables according to the

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demographic categories studied. Finally, because it was an open response, we applied a qualitative analysis, differentiating positive and negative statements, and abstract and concrete statements to the variable *justification for the possible application of what was learned to teaching*.

Results

Descriptive

Table 2 shows the distribution of the sample in our study according to the categories of age, gender, teaching category, knowledge area and length of service. Of the sample $N=129$, 32 people did not state the number of years that they have been working in teaching, so that in the category of length of service, the sample was reduced to $N=97$.

Some characteristics of the sample's distribution were very interesting. The first observable feature is the large difference in participation by teaching staff according to knowledge area. Approximately half of the participants came from the area of Social Sciences and Humanities (52.71%), while the rest were distributed between Engineering and Chemistry (27.90%) and Health Sciences (19.37%). When the sample is equal to $N=97$, the proportions are equal.

Another interesting feature of our sample is participation by gender; approximately three quarters of the sample are female and only a quarter are males. The same difference was apparent in participation



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by gender for the area of Social Sciences and Humanities, while the difference is much greater in Health Sciences, and only 8% of participants are male. The participation by men and women is the same in the area of Chemistry and Engineering. These differences in participation by gender in Social Sciences and Humanities and Health Sciences could be explained by the fact that they are areas with a predominance of women among their teaching staff, as opposed to Engineering and Chemistry, in which men still predominate, although this is a declining trend.

As for age, our results coincided with many other studies in that participation in training decreases as age increases. With regard to teaching category, the largest group in this sample are tenured lecturers and senior lecturers, i.e. individuals with a permanent position within the university's teaching staff who would be in a position to introduce changes in the teaching methods of teaching teams. This is interesting, because it shows some level of commitment and dedication to teaching among the leaders of teaching teams.

In terms of length of service in teaching, the groups most heavily represented in the sample are those who are new to teaching (between three months and less than three years, 36.08%) and those who have worked for a significant number of years in teaching (more than 10 years, 43.3%). This distribution could be explained by the various stages in the teaching career, so that in the first stage of continuous training is used to develop knowledge and skills not initially possessed, while in the middle of the career individuals use continuous training to recycle or update their knowledge and skills related to teaching.

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Table 2. Descriptive

	Social Sciences and Humanities	Engineering and Chemistry	Health Sciences	Total
<i>*Age</i>				
18-24	2.94	8.33	4.00	4.65
25-34	36.76	33.33	16.00	31.78
35-44	26.47	41.67	24.00	30.23
45-54	19.12	16.67	16.00	17.83
55-64	14.70	0	40.00	15.50
<i>* Gender</i>				
Female	76.47	50.00	92.00	72.09
Male	23.52	50.00	8.00	27.09
<i>* Teaching Category</i>				
Research and teaching staff in training	19.11	19.44	12.00	17.82
Assistant/Junior Lecturer	16.17	2.77	4.00	10.07
Adjunct lecturer	19.11	16.66	12.00	17.05
Tenured/Senior	45.58	61.11	72.00	55.03
<i>* Total</i>	52.71	27.9	19.37	1
<i>**Length of service</i>				
3 months - 3 years	41.17	33.33	26.32	36.08

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3 years - 5 years	11.76	7.41	5.26	9.28
5 years - 10 years	13.73	7.41	10.53	11.34
More than 10 years	33.33	51.85	57.89	43.3
**Total	52.58	27.83	19.59	1

*N 129
**N 97

General assessment of the course and perceived benefits

The second analysis of this study consisted of observing the overall assessment of the course by the participants (Table 3). The variable *overall assessment of the course* is the result of adding up 14 items related to various aspects of a course such as the clarity of objectives, suitability of methodology, quality of educational activities and materials, etc. We performed a scale reliability test for this index and obtained an $\alpha=0.93$. The arithmetic mean of the sample for this variable is 4.97 points, with a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 6 points, and a standard deviation of 1.01; this shows a distribution that is biased towards the right, i.e. there is a tendency towards positive scores. A comparative analysis of averages between the groups studied was then carried out, applying a one-tailed analysis of variance test for independent samples. Table 2 shows the statistics resulting from this analysis, which present no significant differences in the *general assessment of the courses* in any of the groups studied. No statistically significant differences were observed in the average scores for *general assessment of the courses* according to the different groups analysed.

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Table 3. General Assessment

	N	M	SD	Statistics
<i>Age*</i>				F= 0.376 (p 0.825)
18-24	6	5.28	0.45	
25-34	41	4.88	1.00	
35-44	39	5.06	0.93	
45-54	23	4.94	0.87	
55-64	20	5.07	1.18	
<i>Gender *</i>				t= -0.009 (p 0.993)
Female	93	4.99	1.04	
Male	36	4.91	0.91	
<i>Knowledge area*</i>				F= 0.763 (p 0.468)
Social Sciences and Humanities	68	4.99	0.98	
Engineering and Chemistry	36	4.84	1.04	
Health Sciences	25	5.10	1.04	
<i>Occupational Category *</i>				F= 0.654 (p 0.582)
Research and teaching staff in training	23	4.8	1.11	
Assistant/Junior Lecturer	13	4.9	0.9	
Tenured/Senior	71	5.1	0.9	

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Adjunct lecturer	22	4.9	1.05
<i>Length of service**</i>			F=0.238 (p 0.869)
3 months - 3 years	35	4.85	1.09
3 years - 5 years	9	5.16	0.62
5 years - 10 years	11	4.87	1.30
More than 10 years	42	4.99	1.09

*N=129

**N=97

The next step was to conduct a univariate correlation analysis between the variables defined within *perceived benefits* to see whether there was any underlying relationship between them (Table 4). The results obtained show that there is a correlation between three of them - those that are most closely linked with the development of teaching skills, i.e. between knowledge and skills, undertaking new activities and techniques and strategies ($r^2=0.779$; $r^2=0.572$; $r^2=0.62$). There are no correlations between the other three variables - improving the CV, sharing experiences with colleagues and professional confidence - which are the variables that could be defined as alternative benefits, or benefits not directly related to the development of teaching skills. In other words, they could be benefits that are secondary to those anticipated from the point of view of the main objectives of the training plan.

Table 4: Correlations Matrix *Perceived Benefits*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Knowledge and skills	1	0.883*	0.364*	0.288*	0.756*	0.54*
	<i>1</i>	<i>0.779</i>	<i>0.132</i>	<i>0.083</i>	<i>0.572</i>	<i>0.292</i>
2. Undertaking new activities		1	0.35*	0.338*	0.787*	0.521*
		<i>1</i>	<i>0.122</i>	<i>0.114</i>	<i>0.62</i>	<i>0.271</i>
3. Improve the CV			1	0.396*	0.277*	0.549*
			<i>1</i>	<i>0.157</i>	<i>0.077</i>	<i>0.301</i>
4. Share experiences with colleagues				1	0.332*	0.369*
				<i>1</i>	<i>0.11</i>	<i>0.136</i>

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5. Techniques and strategies	1	0.505*
	<i>1</i>	<i>0.255</i>
6. Professional confidence		1
		1

N=129 * p < .01

These variables were subjected to a one-tailed variance analysis test for independent samples and Tamhane contrast tests, with a significance level of 0.05. In the group of correlated variables, no significant differences were found when checking the means according to the factors of age, gender, teaching category, knowledge area and length of service. However, in some cases significant differences were found for the variables of *improve the CV*, *share experiences* and *professional confidence*, depending on the groups studied. For example, for the variable *improve the CV* there are significant differences in age, teaching category and length of service ($F=3.399$, $p < 0.01$; $F=2.975$, $p < 0.03$; $F=3.722$, $p < 0.01$), with an effect size of $\eta^2 0.1$, $\eta^2 0.06$ and $\eta^2 0.11$ respectively. In the age category, there are differences in the groups 35-44, 45-54 and 55-64; in the teaching category, there are differences in the groups of Research and teaching staff in Training and Adjunct lecturers; and depending on length of service, there are differences between the 3 months to three years group and the more than ten years group. For the variable *share experiences with colleagues*, there are significant differences for the category according to occupational category ($F=2.656$, $p < 0.05$) with an effect size of $\eta^2 0.06$; the differences were observed between groups of research and teaching staff in training and Assistant/Junior Lecturers. Finally, for the variable *professional confidence*, there are differences for the knowledge area category ($F=5.690$, $p < 0.01$) with an effect size of $\eta^2 0.082$; the differences are observed in the Health Sciences group.



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Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify the participants' perception of the training's impact on their professional development as university lecturers and the opportunities for applying what they had learned in the classroom, taking their professional profile into account. First, the results show a homogeneous overall assessment of the courses, i.e. there are no statistically significant differences between the different groups studied. This could be an indication that the courses are well accepted by the teaching staff, although this measure must be considered with a great deal of caution and further studies are required for confirmation.

The main objective of the PROFID training courses is to strengthen teachers' pedagogical knowledge, especially as regards active and student-centred teaching methodologies. In this regard, there were no significant differences between the groups in terms of the variables related to reinforcement of teaching skills. However, there are statistically significant differences in the variables related to the alternative benefits received. Age, teaching category and length of service are factors that have an effect on the perception of CV improvement, especially taking into account the promotion systems for teachers, in which although teacher training is not highly valued, does account for a percentage, albeit small, of the score. Teaching category is a factor that has an effect on the perceived opportunities to exchange experiences with other colleagues for the group of teaching staff in the initial stage of training. The training courses may be perceived as an ideal space for enrichment of the teaching experience as a result of contact with other more experienced colleagues, which would be particularly beneficial for new teachers. The knowledge area has an effect on the perception of increased professional confidence for the Health Sciences group. This result is particularly interesting and further research into this aspect would be worthwhile, since there are several studies that identify the discipline and culture of the department as

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factors that influence teachers' professional development and their approach to teaching (Lindblom-Y  nne, et al. 2007, Lueddeke, 2003).

Limitations

The work presented here has some limitations that must be taken into account when drawing conclusions. First, it is an exploratory study using data collected from self-administered questionnaires, which may contain a positive bias in their responses. The data also come from a single group - in this case teaching staff. It is therefore necessary to carry out more extensive studies, using multiple analysis measures of the impact, and gathering information from various groups, such as students and trainers. Notwithstanding these limitations, the conclusions may be used both to introduce improvements in the training programme analysed and for more in-depth study of the impact of training on the professional development of teaching staff.

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