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TEACHING GROUPS
AS CONTEXTS FOR
LEARNING ABOUT TEACHING
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF
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Abstract

This research proposes a new concept, called *teaching groups*, as approach to learning about teaching for academics in higher education. Teaching groups are defined at the outset of the research as groups of academics who have, based on their positions in their institutions, shared responsibilities in teaching. To build a theoretical foundation, the community-based approaches of communities of practice and (faculty) learning communities are investigated and links to teaching groups established. In an important departure from existing community-based approaches, the idea of voluntary participation is abandoned and, in contrast, membership in teaching groups is by default. The motivation for this step is to overcome the low participation rates in activities related to learning about teaching, ultimately aiming at participation of the vast majority of academics.

An exploratory mixed-methods research design was employed. The first, qualitative research phase was conducted using focus groups. The aim of this research phase was to explore how academics relate to the concept of teaching groups, what interactions take place in these groups and how engagement with teaching, and learning about teaching, might be facilitated in the groups. Based on the results of the focus group research, hypotheses and goals for investigation in the second, quantitative research phase were developed. A survey was conducted via a questionnaire, aiming at confirmation of key findings of the first research phase.

The findings across both research phases show that nearly all participants could identify and describe their teaching groups. Characteristics of teaching groups were determined and a classification into a scale from tight-knit to individualistic teaching groups was derived. The results show that tight-knit teaching groups provide academics with a community environment highly supportive of learning about teaching, whereas members of individualistic teaching groups miss out on valuable opportunities for learning from and with each other. About 40% of the teaching groups discussed in this research were classified as tight-knit,

indicating that the remaining majority of teaching groups would benefit from improvements.

Setting the findings in context to the situation of teaching in higher education, recommendations were made to strengthen line management with regard to teaching and to officially acknowledge the existence of teaching groups. The research comes to the conclusion that teaching groups form a promising concept for learning about teaching in higher education. Future research will need to investigate the reasons why teaching groups develop certain characteristics and what could be done to help teaching groups to move along the scale from individualistic to tight-knit teaching groups.

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