

PAPERS

Effectiveness of the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Programme: A Tracer Study Report

CHOEDA, UGYEN PEM, CHENGA DORJI AND LHAPCHU

Abstract

This paper reports the tracer study of graduates (from nine constituent colleges) under Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) who have graduated from Samtse College of Education (SCE) with Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PgDHE). PgDHE is a two-year part time programme with PgCHE (a nested programme, Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education) awarded as an intermediate award in the first year. Both are part-time programmes offered to the newly recruited lecturers in the colleges who have not obtained any professional teacher training prior to joining their college. The tracer study was done on the graduates with the aim of finding the relevancy and improving the contents of the programmes and to meet the needs and demands of a dynamic higher education system in the country. For data, a survey questionnaire was administered online via Google Apps. Focus group interview was also carried out to get in-depth views and opinions from the graduates. To enrich the qualitative responses, open ended questions were included in the questionnaire. The study revealed positive perceptions of the college management, who observed improvement in the graduates' knowledge and skills in their academic practices upon attending the PgCHE and PgDHE. The graduates shared their experiences of professional growth such as making them more effective and competent in teaching, and also improving their academic practices in the respective colleges as a result of these programmes.

Key words: PgCHE, PgDHE, tracer study, higher education, pedagogy, reflective skill

Background

Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PgDHE) was launched in December, 2013 with its nested programme or intermediate award, Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PgCHE). The PgCHE and the PgDHE (which is the final award) are both one year part-time programmes. Students completing PgCHE take on PgDHE as a continuous professional training. The programmes are offered to newly recruited college lecturers under the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) who do not have any formal professional teacher training. The students (College lecturers) enter the programme with their enrollment in PgCHE (taking four professional modules) and exit with PgDHE (taking additional modules). All together students will have taken eight professional modules by the time they graduate with PgDHE. The modules offered were designed to fulfil the needs of the university academic practices.

Lecturers from nine constituent colleges under RUB namely, Gedu College of Business Studies (GCBS), College of Language and Cultural Studies (CLCS), College of Natural Resource (CNR), College of Science and Technology (CST), Jigme Namgyel Engineering College (JNEC), National Institute of Traditional Medicine (NITM -presently Faculty of Traditional Medicine under Kheser Gyelpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan, KGUMBS), Sherubtse College (SC), Royal Institute of Health Sciences (RIHS- presently Faculty of Nursing and Public Health under KGUMBS) and Royal Thimphu College (RTC) have availed the PgCHE programme. However, only seven Colleges have availed the PgDHE programme (Figure 2). The figures on the top of the bars are the number of graduates from each college.

While three cohorts (with a total of 39 students) graduated with PgDHE, four cohorts (with a total of 107 students) graduated with PgCHE (Figure 1 and 2). Since three cohorts have completed taking both PgCHE and PgDHE, the college wanted to gather feedback (through tracer study) from the graduates to study how the programmes had benefited them in their teaching - learning practices or their professional development. As mandated by the Wheel of Academic Law, researchers carried out the study as a component to base the periodic review to evaluate quality, standard and relevance of the programme. Tereza et al (n. d.) often termed the study as 'graduate tracer study' besides other terms such as 'graduate survey', 'alumni study' and 'follow-up study' (p.7). The main aim of carrying out such a study is to assess the impacts of the programmes the graduates have gone through (Schomburg, 2003 as cited in Tereza et al). So carrying out tracer study is an important exercise for higher education institutions to avail invaluable information which will have direct implication for higher education institutes to make important decisions for the future.

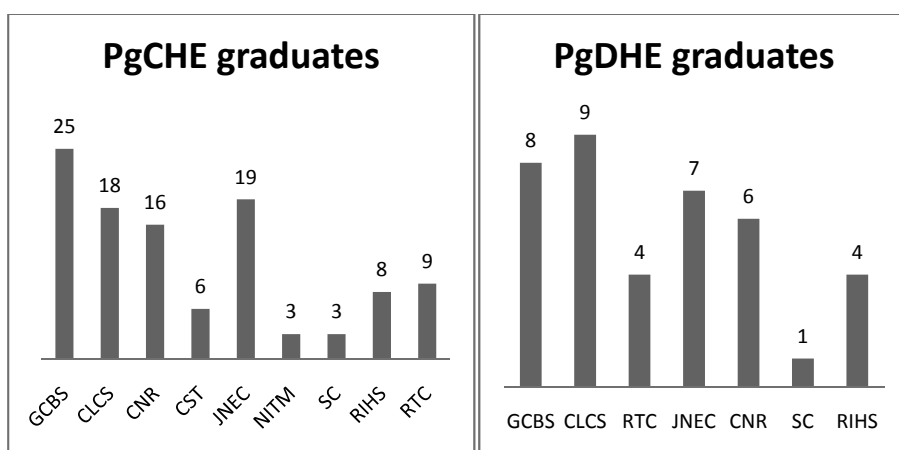


Figure 1: No. of PgCHE graduates

Figure 2: No. of PgDHE graduates

Objectives of the study

The tracer study was conducted to review the relevance, benefits and overall health of the programme. The impact of the graduates on their profession and work places needed to be studied so that improvement and modifications of the programmes could be done as necessary. Therefore, the following were the two main objectives set by the researchers for the study:

- a. to review the relevance of the programme with the professional development
- b. to identify gaps between the programme content and the needs in the real working situations

Literature Review

According to Schomburg (2016), a tracer study is a standardized survey of graduates done verbally or through written mode in an educational institution sometime after graduation of the students. Obando and Shisanya (2013) say, "Graduate tracer studies are important as a way of understanding the relevance and quality of programmes offered by the Universities" Paro College of Education carried out tracer study on the first B. Ed graduates in 2002 with a purpose of finding the needs of the schools to match with the B. Ed programme of the college (Wangchuk, 2002). Samtse College of Education also did a similar study on the teacher graduates of the four-year B. Ed programme in 2014. Aquino et al. (2015) carried out teacher education graduate tracer study in State University in Batangas in Philippines with an aim of evaluating the "educational efforts pertaining to its graduates, the labour market and employer" (p. 45) to further improve teacher education preparation and better employment opportunities. Further they also point out that:

Graduate tracer studies are one form of empirical study that can appropriately provide valuable information for evaluating the results of the education and training of a specific institution of higher education ... and the relevance of their educational background and skills required in their job. Graduate tracer study can also collect data on the relevance of the curriculum and graduates' level of satisfaction of their academic preparation. (2015, p. 46)

As per Rojas and Rojas (2016), the values are placed on opening doors of opportunities for future employment and sustainability of the graduates' career through higher education programmes. Since the university's academic practices and culture go on evolving, the programmes that are offered by higher education institutions also need to cater and fulfil the demands of the changes that happen. The lecturers who are provided with professional training by PgDHE should be updated

in terms of knowledge and skills of their specific profession and modules developed to help establish sustainable career. The colleges under RUB have already started developing new programmes to cater to the demands of the nation's development process. In line with the process of changes and development, college lecturers not only need to update their knowledge and skill but also foster positive attitudes through the delivery of different modules in higher education programmes. Ocampo, Bagano and Tan (2012) mention that tertiary education should develop, instill and foster "appropriate and relevant, knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable each individual to become a useful, productive and gainfully employed member of society" (p. 2). Further Aquino et al. (2015) stated that teacher education institutes should aim to produce "competent and highly qualified graduates employable [within the country] and abroad" (p. 45).

Graduates in general receive professional training before or after becoming teachers. There are situations when they are directly employed as teachers without having gone through proper or formal professional training. However, professional development of teachers is considered necessary for bringing effectiveness in teaching and learning in the classroom. According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), "Professional development is defined as activities that develop an individual's skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher" (2009, p. 49). The training can be done formally as well as informally and duration would vary from hours to days, weeks to months or for even longer duration. Some of the professional trainings are for in-service teachers as well. In a research conducted on secondary school teachers who underwent professional training through in-service mode, it was found that the training significantly improved teacher effectiveness (Udoh, 2014). It has also stated that in-service training helps employees acquire new skills and knowledge increasing their efficiency and productivity and in turn contribute to the development or progress of one's organization or institute. In the same note, PgDHE as a programme for in-service lecturers of the Royal University of Bhutan is expected that professional development occurs in the individuals and have positive impact to their colleges.

Methodology

The study adopted mixed methods approach. The quantitative data was collected through using Likert scale and qualitative data was garnered through focus group interview. The Likert scale survey through Google apps was administered online since the participants were based in the colleges, located in different parts of the country. In the Likert scale, the y-axis have been used to represent the number of respondents and x-axis to represent the rating starting from lowest point 0 meaning

not at all, 1 (poor), 2 (fair), 3 (good), 4 (very good), to highest point 5 (excellent). Refer to Figure 3.

Study Participants

The participants involved in the study included the Deans of Academic Affairs (DAA) and the lecturers of the nine constituent colleges of RUB, who graduated from Samtse College of Education with PgDHE and PgCHE.

Eleven individuals who carried out officiating responsibilities in the management in the capacity of Dean and Officiating Dean have participated in the survey questionnaire. Participants from the management were included in the study to get wider perspective of how the programme impacted the graduates. The Academic Deans in particular could share the transformation or professional growth and practices of the individual lecturers prior to enrolling in the PgDHE and the corresponding impact after the graduation. Therefore the Academic Deans of the colleges were considered belonging to the Management group since they form the core group in College Management. However, since some Deans were out of the college at the time of data collection, some officiating deans (even with designation of associate lecturer) took part in the survey questionnaire. The terms students (having been enrolled as students for the programme), lecturers (having already been recruited by colleges as lecturers) and graduates are used synonymously or interchangeably in the present study since they are the same people.

Sixty-one (57%) PgCHE and eight (21%) PgDHE graduates participated in the online survey. Nine PgCHE graduates participated in focus group interview during the residential school. For PgDHE, open-ended questions were included in the survey questionnaire to get qualitative responses. For analysis simple descriptive analysis was done using excel (creating graphs and charts) and content analysis was used for interview analysis. The interviewees (the graduates) were coded as P1, P 2 to hide their identity.

Results and Discussion

Upon analyzing the interviews (using content or thematic analysis), qualitative responses from the survey and quantitative data (using simple descriptive analysis), five major themes were drawn which are discussed below. Further, feedbacks that were gathered over three years (on each module) were also analyzed to study the views of the graduates regarding the contents of the programme, whether it needed changes.

1 Enhanced pedagogical knowledge

The PgCHE and PgDHE programmes offered at Samtse College of Education are viewed positively by both the management of the colleges and the graduates of these programmes. The study revealed the programmes as highly relevant to their teaching career. For example, the courses within these two programmes have helped to enhance the pedagogical knowledge of the participant graduates as shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5. The Figures 3, 4, and 5 reveal significantly higher agreement regarding the effectiveness of the two programmes with most of the ratings ranging from 3 to 5. Further the opinions as expressed in the interviews confirm the positive impact of the programme with regard to enhancing pedagogical knowledge. A participant graduate (P1) said,

I didn't have knowledge how teachings and assessment are done. After attending the PgCHE last year, I have lots of changes in my teaching styles and even I got feedback from my students saying that my teaching style has been improved and they are able to understand compared to previous teaching.

Another (P2) said that upon taking modules in PgCHE programme, he experienced the improvement in his professional practices and became confident in his teaching. As per the idea of Ocampo, Bagano and Tan (2012), the programmes have been found to have instilled and fostered appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes for participant graduates have rated on the higher side in their rating in the survey.

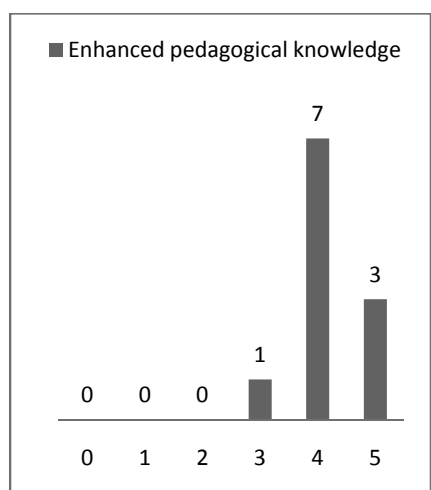


Figure 3: Deans (AA)

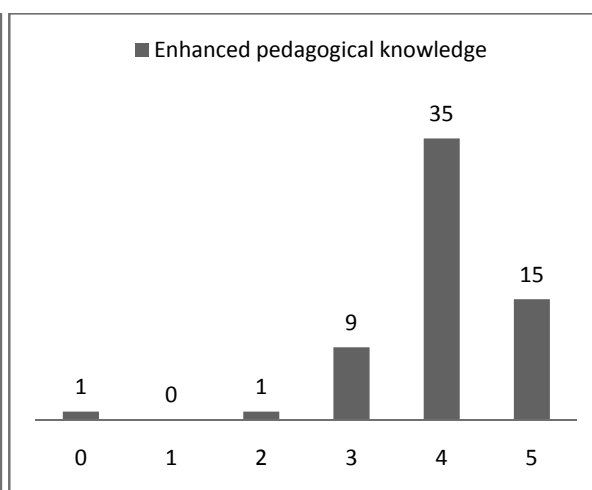


Figure 4: Lecturers (PgCHE Graduates)

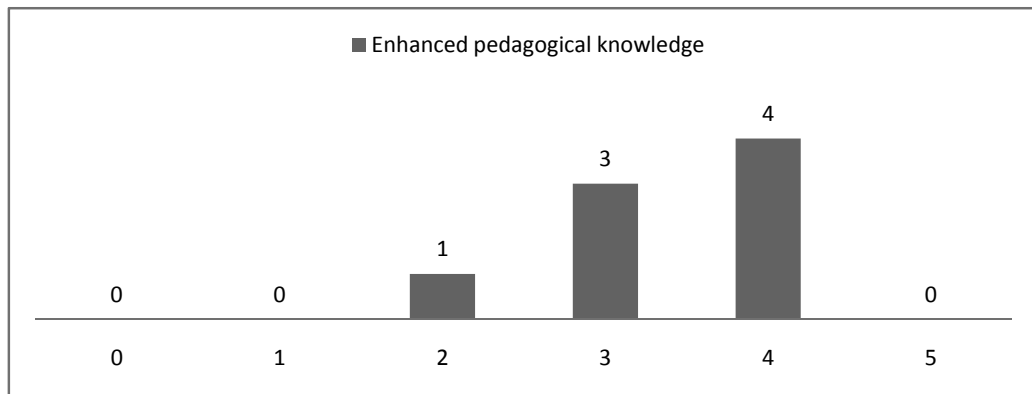


Figure 5: Lecturers (PgDHE graduates)

2 Improved reflective skills

Academic Deans (the management) also noticed improved reflective and research skills in those lecturers who took part in the programme as the response shows the higher rating ranging between 3 and 5 Likert scale. Almost 100% at managerial level and 96.8% of the graduates agree that the reflective skills of individual lecturers were enhanced which would ultimately contribute to better learning and teaching.

3 Improved research skills

Research skills were also a core graduate attribute of the programme as the 82% of management of the respondent colleges felt the programme graduates showed improved skills. Further, 70% of the lecturers enhanced their research skills (Refer to Figures 8 and 9). The graduates claim that the programme helped them develop research skills. They must have become more knowledgeable in using research approaches in their classroom performance though may not be explicitly visible to the Deans as expressed by a participant graduate with regard to research base strategy. A participant graduate (P3) pointed out about using the reflective based teaching strategy, in his teaching. He said, "I have learned that once I teach a lesson, I let students to reflect on it, what some of the lessons that they have understood are and what they did not. I asked them how they can attribute meaning to what they learnt. What values that they have learnt".

However, the Deans' observation did not match with the graduates' perception and display of research skills as evident in Figures 8 and 9. Almost all the Deans (excepting one who had rated excellent) have rated on the low scale (good, fair and

poor). Their views must have been influenced by their knowledge and observation to what extent the graduates were involved in research. In the similar line of thought, the Dean who had rated excellent could have been on the fact that a graduate in his college must have been actively involved in the research. However, this interpretation is based on the assumption of the researcher.

The Deans as well as the graduates have rated the improvement in reflective skills on the higher rating scale as shown by Figures 6 and 7. Aquino et al. (2015) pointed out that graduate tracer study should reveal to what extent the programme was relevant to the graduates in terms of the relevance and level of graduate's satisfaction. A participant graduates' (P3) opinion on his improvement in his teaching technique using reflective based strategy is evidence that the programme was relevant and that it had contributed to the improvement of graduates skills and knowledge as expected.

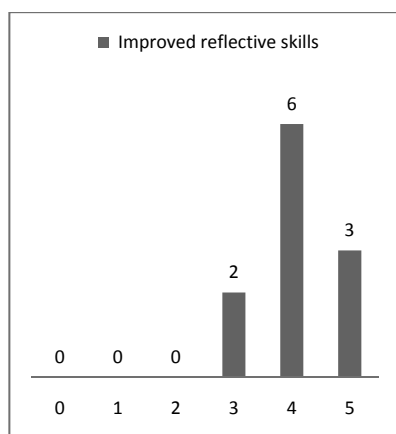


Figure 6: Deans (A A)

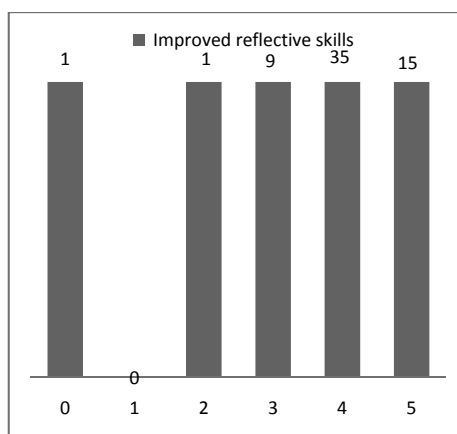


Figure 7: Lecturers (Graduates)

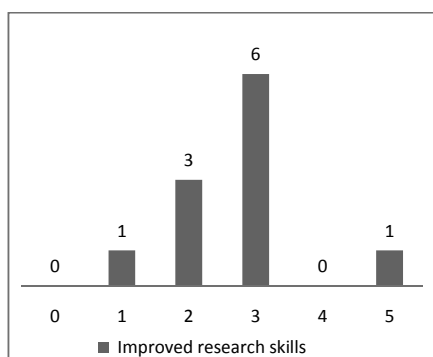


Figure 8: Deans (A A)

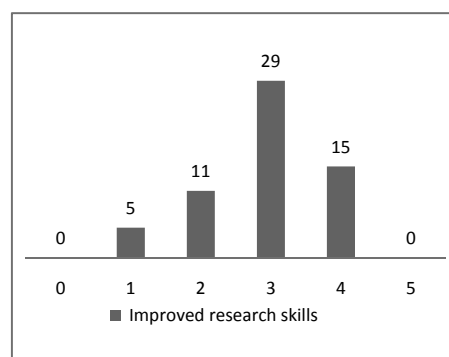


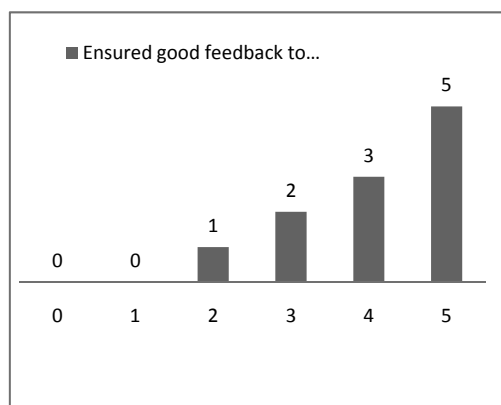
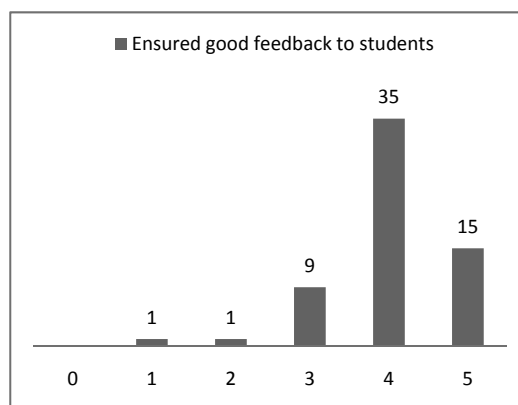
Figure 9 Lecturers (Graduates)

4 Improved communication and ICT skills

The study also showed improved learning efficiency, communication skills and also information technology skills as the result of the programmes. Even it helped to improve and enhance the leadership and social skills which would make lots of positive impact on the college. A lecturer (P 4) mentioned that the programmes enhanced his communications skills as the delivery of the modules was done through interactive approaches. The interactive lecture method that was learnt as a teaching pedagogy helped him bring communicative classroom when delivering lessons. He further pointed out that his teaching became two way communications – between teacher and students. He remarked, “Teaching is a two-way communication where teachers don’t feed the content, but the students are motivated to think beyond the box”. Thus the study revealed that the programme impacted positively on improving communication skills.

5 Improvement in the resourcefulness of the graduates

The respondents felt that the nested programme, PgCHE contributed to the enhancement of being resourceful in their teaching profession and making teaching learning very effective in their colleges. They were able to ensure effective student feedback and integrate research in their teaching learning processes. The graduates rated on the higher points with regard to improvement in system of providing student feedback (Figures 10 and 11). Now, research has become an integral part of teaching and learning which also includes giving effective feedback on student learning. The findings show that the programmes offered at SCE is a good opportunity for our RUB faculty members to enhance such knowledge and skills. Refer to the Figures 7 and 8 below. The Dean of GCBS remarked that the graduates have been resourceful in teaching their colleagues how to prepare assessment techniques particularly question preparation. It is evident from such example that teaching faculty in college derives benefits from the graduates through sharing of knowledge and skills. As Udoh (2014) stated that the training that one receives have positive impact benefiting one’s institute or organization, the new skills and knowledge gained though PgDHE have been seen affecting the college positively. The graduates are observed to be sharing their knowledge and skills with their colleagues.

*Figure 10: Deans (AA)**Figure 11: Lecturers (Graduates)*

Student feedback on the modules

To validate the views and survey report, researchers also analyzed the semester end feedback by students on individual module report. The feedbacks collected over three consecutive years show consistency in the opinions of the graduates with regard to the modules of the programme. Following are some of the feedbacks given students on the question, ‘What area of the module requires improvement?’:

In EDU505 (Introductions to University Learning and Teaching), a student commented that, “module contents are good enough, most of the lessons were good too” (Student feedback, 2015). Another said, “Module contents are fit, I have no comment”. Regarding EDU603 (Contemplative Education) a student mentioned “it was the most interesting module I have learnt. It is very relevant to our daily life”. Another commented the module to be “important for academicians”(Student Feedback, 2016). For EDU507 (Professional Ethics and Mentoring) a student mentioned that, “the course content was enriching and informative”. On the whole graduates expressed contentment with the contents of the modules and did not recommend changes.

Mode of delivery

Regarding the DAA’s opinion on the mode of delivery, although six out of the eleven DAA involved in this study preferred full time mode of study, the other five DAA showed preference for the part-time mode of study. Since the DAA are often involved in the working out of the workloads of individual lecturers, they have been able to evaluate whether it would be worthwhile exercise to try with full time mode. The six DAA must have been from the colleges where they have adequate or excess lecturers. However, it is important to note that the difference in numbers is not signifi-

cant. Majority of the participant graduates (41 out of 61) which is 67% preferred part time mode. They said that during full-time enrollment they might miss some short continuous professional development programmes and also might lead to shortage of faculty in their department in the colleges as they will have to be in SCE campus. A constituent college felt that relieving their lecturers on full-time mode will have lots of impact on the college. The following Figures 9 and 10 show the respondents preference of part-time and full-time mode of delivery.

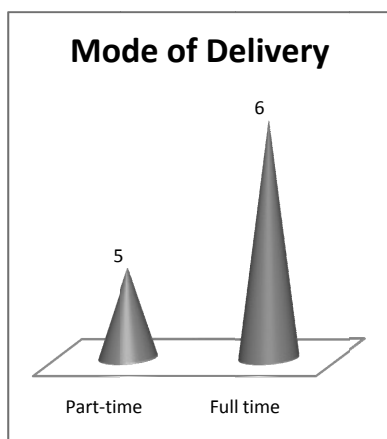


Figure 9: Deans (AA)

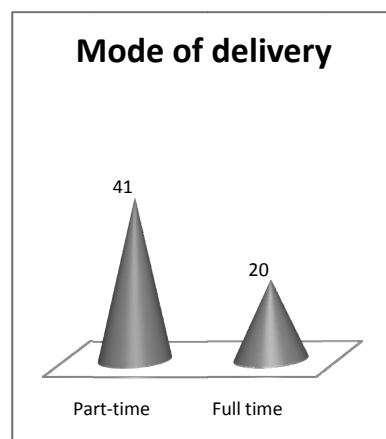


Figure 10: Lecturers (Graduates)

Conclusions

The tracer study participants (PgDHE and PgCHE) revealed positive perceptions on relevancy and usefulness of the contents delivered by the programmes. The study showed that the programmes enhanced the pedagogical skill, improved academic practices, fostered reflective and research based teaching and learning in college classrooms. The College Management, particularly the Deans (AA) reveal their positive outlook having observed changes and improvement in the professional practices of lecturers who underwent the programmes. Apart from enhancing the teaching learning practices of the graduates, improvement in the use of ICT based teaching, research skills and providing appropriate feedback and assessment too have been revealed by the tracer study. Further, the study also found that the programme had enabled graduates to become resourceful for they were observed to be sharing and helping their colleagues in designing assessments tools. In addition, graduates also revealed that their communicative competencies too have been enhanced. They expressed their view on how the classrooms became more communicative between them and their students. There is no conclusive opinion with regard to changing the

mode of delivery from part-time to regular. While the management has equal preference for part-time and regular mode of delivery, graduates have indicated their preference for the programme to continue as part-time. Overall, the contents of the programme were found relevant indicating SCE should continue offering the programme.

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