

Academic development in an academic community: warrant, legitimacy and assessing consequence

### *Proposal*

The catalysts for this project are familiar within UK higher education: a perceived gap between incoming students' educational experience during secondary school and the 'starting point' for undergraduate education<sup>1</sup>, and increased pressures on the time of teaching staff and on institutional resources. As a consequence of these two elements, and in anticipation of changing student expectations with the introduction of higher student fees from October 2012, senior members of the College wished to re-articulate the College's own conceptualisation of its teaching and learning environment and to engage both students and staff in an academic agenda predicated upon the principles of higher education as a shared endeavour, involving investigation, critique and intellectual creativity.

The project has drawn on evidence accrued through University-wide surveys of first-year undergraduates and their supervisors<sup>2</sup> to co-create, with students and with teaching staff, a programme of academic development which aims to be relevant to the academic cultures of the College. During the first three terms of the project, a combination of institutional surveys, semi-structured interviews, observation and pilot activities was used to:

- i. refine understanding of what students and staff identified as the major academic challenges experienced during the first year of undergraduate study (including both teaching and independent study);
- ii. develop hypotheses concerning effective and practicable modes of facilitating academic development with students and with teaching staff;
- iii. develop culturally relevant measures and processes with which to assess the need for and consequence of the academic development initiative.

The project was enabled through the appointment of two part-time (0.2) Fellows, initially for a period of three years (2011-14). The Fellows are members of the College's academic community, and work closely with the College's senior tutor (responsible for the academic welfare of the College) and with its Teaching and Learning Committee. In institutional terms, then, they are integrated into the College's academic environment. Their contributions are distinctive, however, in that neither teaches undergraduates or postgraduates.

Despite this integration, the project has experienced challenges familiar to those engaging in 'academic development', relating to identity, agency, and efficacy<sup>3</sup>: 'academic development is intertwined with the micro politics of the institution as well

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Irenka Suto, 'What are the impacts of qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds on higher education? A survey of 633 university lecturers', April 2012 – accessed (June 2012) at [http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/digitalAssets/202381\\_Cambridge\\_Assessment\\_HE\\_Research\\_Survey\\_of\\_lecturers\\_Executive\\_summary.pdf](http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/digitalAssets/202381_Cambridge_Assessment_HE_Research_Survey_of_lecturers_Executive_summary.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> University of Cambridge Undergraduate Learning Enhancement Survey (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Ray Land, *Educational Development: Discourse, Identity and Practice* (Open University Press, McGraw-Hill: Maidenhead, 2004); Stephen Rowland, *The Enquiring University: Compliance and Contestation in Higher Education* (SRHE & Open University Press: Maidenhead, 2006)

as the wider politics of higher education', including the extent to which academic development' is understood as 'merely an instrument of management' (Rowland, 2006, p. 73). Furthermore, at a time of diminished resources, the warrant for investing resources not in traditional teaching staff, but in an educational 'innovation', was challenged in some quarters, though strongly supported in others. A particular challenge for the project is constituted by the broad brief for the project, on the one hand, and the need for the project to demonstrate its legitimacy by delivering results on the other.

We have adopted an enquiry-based process<sup>4</sup> which owes much to the first principles of grounded theory<sup>5</sup> and which takes an ethnographic perspective<sup>6</sup>, in order to develop practices which are germane to the particular environment. We have adopted a model of engaging with both teaching staff and with students to explore conceptualisations and practices of teaching *and* learning, making the focus and structure of the project distinctive to the traditional models of 'study skills support', for students, and of staff development for teaching staff which focus on 'teaching practice' in isolation from 'student learning'<sup>7</sup>.

In practical terms, this translated initially into involving students and teaching staff in: evaluating the College's Freshers' Week programme; redesigning the College's termly teaching and learning feedback survey so that it gathers comment from students on fields identified as meaningful by both students and the College's 'directors of studies' (academic staff who co-ordinate subject teaching within the College and who guide students' academic progress); co-designing and piloting a range of 'teaching and learning review' models with individual members of teaching staff; and investigating the warrant for a set of extension activities during the second academic year.

Unsurprisingly, in an academic environment which is experimenting with an educational innovation, members of the College's fellowship have tended to reach for the most familiar measure of success: undergraduates' performance in end-of-year examinations. Given the number of variables which affect individual student performance in examinations, on the one hand, and the youth of the academic development initiative on the other, however, this is not a legitimate way of assessing the consequence of the initiative – though performance in examinations will affect the atmosphere in which it is conducted. (Results for the current academic year were not known at the time of writing this submission.)

Moreover, a summative approach of this kind would contradict the enquiry and engagement processes outlined above. Instead, drawing on Trigwell's 'relational model of academic development' and on Entwistle's proposition of 'ways of thinking and practising' as being a more meaningful way of thinking about the aims of higher education than 'learning outcomes'<sup>8</sup>, we propose a formative evaluation which includes observation and analysis of: changing conceptualisations of students and

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<sup>4</sup> Preskill and Torress, *Evaluative Inquiry for Learning in Organisations* (Sage: Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, 1999), Rowland, 2006, p. 85

<sup>5</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (Sage: Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, 2006)

<sup>6</sup> John W Cresswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, third edition (Sage: Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, 2009)

<sup>7</sup> See for example Trigwell, Keith, 'A Relational Approach Model for Academic Development', in Heather Eggins and Randal Macdonald (eds), *The Scholarship of Academic Development* (SRHE and Open University Press: Buckingham, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Noel Entwistle, *Teaching for Understanding at University: Deep Approaches and Distinctive Ways of Thinking* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2009), p. 58ff.

teaching staff of 'teaching' and 'learning; approaches to teaching being adopted; the learner's perceptions of his or her learning environment, and what constitutes the space of learning for any particular topic (Trigwell, p. 27).

### Discussion

Nonetheless, there is a clear pragmatic need for this project to justify the investment of resources in an innovation, particularly at a time of financial constraint. This pragmatic need poses a methodological and ethical challenge for the project. We seek to work with students and with staff, with an ethnographic perspective and using an enquiry-based process which owes much to the principles of grounded theory. How do we utilise these methods and also satisfy demands to 'show that you're making a difference'?

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