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# EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

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## The Higher Education Debate: Implications for Educational Developers

James Wisdom, HE Consultant

### Introduction – Quality, standards and the media storm

In mid-2008 there was a 'media storm' about quality and standards in UK Higher Education. The highlight of this was the appearance of Peter Williams of the QAA in front of the Select Committee on 17 July 2008, where the MPs discussed Peter's description of the degree classification system as 'rotten'.

The QAA then decided to search through their audit reports for evidence to support the charges and counter-charges. This was published in April 2009 as *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England*.

At the same time the Select Committee opened a major enquiry into *Students and Universities*, which took evidence from January to May 2009. This reported on 1 August. The Government's reply to the Report was published on 14 October.

Also, the HEFCE commissioned a report on *Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience* from a sub-committee chaired by Colin Riordan. This was published in October 2009.

In the first part of this article I intend to explore some of the implications of the material within these four sources for the work of educational developers over the next few years. Then in the second part I will be considering the sequence of speeches given by Ministers, Shadow Ministers and leaders of higher education in 2009, to understand the development and direction of government policy leading to the publication of a new Framework for Higher Education and a National Skills Strategy. I will set out what I understand to be the implications for the work of educational developers.

### The QAA Thematic Enquiry report

The QAA looked at five issues:

- student workload and contact hours
- language requirements for the acceptance of international students
- recruitment and admission practices for international students
- use of external examiners
- assessment practices, including institutions' arrangements for setting the academic standards of their awards.

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All these issues were central to the *Students and Universities* enquiry, and while they all concern educational developers, the two most significant were contact hours and assessment practices.

Over the issue of contact hours, the QAA recognised variations both between similar courses at different universities and between the UK and European norms, but pointed to the importance of the 'student learning' culture in the UK compared to the 'staff teaching' culture implicit in the comparisons.

This is a sophisticated and important response, but it might be swept away by another development. It has now been accepted by all parties that students are entitled to much more information about how they will be taught, what sort of sessions they will attend, who will teach them, how they will get feedback and the forms of assessment they will experience, etc. This will be part of the new Framework for HE. The challenge for educational developers is how to help lecturers and institutions use this to engage their students in collaborative learning, rather than merely fall victim to a customer culture where students demand the universities 'keep to a deal'.

The second major issue was the quality of HE assessment practices and how well they are understood and operated by both staff and students. There is now very great pressure for a more transparent and open system, with well-argued pedagogical justifications for the choice of assessments and the measurement of standards.

### The Select Committee Report and the Government Response

The Select Committee was very challenging towards some of the vice-chancellors who appeared before it and their Report was very strongly worded. What they thought they had discovered was 'defensive complacency' in a system which responded too often with the claim of autonomy, in which the two companies set up by the vice-chancellors (the QAA and the HEA) had been insufficiently challenging and questioning. Although everybody kept repeating that the UK's HE was excellent, it was surprisingly hard to find good evidence to support the claim. The Committee was not convinced that the sector had a sufficient grasp of the issues around standards, grade inflation, comparability of degrees, external examiners and quality assurance processes to justify its insistence on autonomy. It made 109 recommendations, many of which have a bearing on the work of educational developers. Perhaps its core proposal was to reform the QAA as an independent body under a Royal Charter.

The immediate response from Peter Mandelson was that he did not recognise the HE sector in the report, but the considered written response was published on 14 October.

SEDA gave both written and oral evidence to the Select Committee, mainly about the need for lecturers to be professionally qualified to teach and assess. The Committee wanted the Government to agree a strategy which 'required' all mainstream teachers to be appropriately trained, and 'encouraged' them to take a professional qualification. Also, it said that the university's funding should be conditional on having a programme of support for teachers in place.

The Government welcomed the Committee's comments (a rare feature in the response!). It repeated its 2003 position that it expected all new teaching staff would take a qualification which meets the requirements of the Professional Standards Framework, and 'believes it is right that higher education institutions are responsible for ensuring their staff hold appropriate qualifications and have opportunities for development and training'. It said it will explore with HEFCE whether the HR strategies provide adequate information about each institution's approach to initial and continuing professional development. It noted that the QAA can pick this up in its audit process through the self-assessment document.

The Committee wanted to ensure that pedagogic research had a place in the Research Excellence Framework, and the Government's response was that it expects excellent research into pedagogy and teaching will be recognised, and its impact on practice will be valued.

The Government could not see any point in conducting further research into the relationship between research and teaching, stating that the evidence in either direction was not convincing, but that any link was clearly not an automatic one – universities have to work at it to get value from it.

While the Committee wanted a further review of the Higher Education Academy – it doubted that it was working effectively and it had been unable to produce much evidence of the sort the politicians needed – the Government rejected this but promised discussions with the major stakeholders to see how its strengths could be further developed, and noted that there was continuous monitoring and a process of performance enhancement which would be the subject of a report later this year.

The Government also welcomed the proposed HEA review (with UUK and Guild HE) of how the Professional Standards Framework is being used in the sector.

A very substantial part of the Government response to the Committee, over many issues which concern educational developers, was to note that the issue in question has always been part of the QAA's responsibilities – either in its audit process, or in its academic framework, or in its codes of practice. However, the current QAA audit process is coming to an end, and the Government has announced that the Review for the new process will start in December. This made it even easier for the Government to pass many of the challenging demands made by the Committee not just down to the QAA but specifically to the fact that it was going to conduct a review. This is where the educational development community now needs to turn its attention.

## Universities UK and the HEFCE

Universities UK responded immediately to the report, rejecting its proposals for a new quality and standards body, claiming it attempted to centralise while UUK favoured autonomy, and rejecting the claim of complacency.

On 10 September, at the UUK Conference, the President, Steve Smith, spoke extensively about the need for funding and the role of the sector in reviving the national economy, though he did acknowledge that they should lead on quality matters, that they should explain themselves better and should show they deserved their autonomy. He also announced the UUK's review into external examiners. In his response, David Lammy, Minister for HE said: 'Even if you aren't complacent, you sometimes appear to be.'

In October, HEFCE published its report of an enquiry into *Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience* led by Professor Riordan. This could be read as a shopping list of work for educational development. It claimed that it was not true that students who could not benefit from HE were being

accepted, but acknowledged that there were some language difficulties with some international students. Nor was it true that standards have fallen, but it agreed the classification system is flawed. Geoffrey Alderman's claim of a plague of plagiarism sweeping the sector was not true, but the work being done on plagiarism and cheating is not being publicised. It acknowledged that external examiners could not really make sector-wide comparisons, and that they were overburdened, but claimed that people outside the institutions don't really understand what they do and how valuable they are. It acknowledged there were difficulties with assessment and feedback (partly ascribed to the pressure of government and public demands on the institutions) and that there was more work to do here. It acknowledged that students should be able to find out how their time would be used, but it affirmed that teaching time does not equate to the quality of teaching and learning. And, finally, it acknowledged that the QAA's audit process had not been sufficiently flexible or responsive to keep up with the pace of change.

Phil Willis, the Chair of the Select Committee, said of the Riordan report that it proved the university sector's arrogance and refusal to accept independent criticism. He was quoted as saying: 'I find it enormously dissatisfactory that the agencies are utterly complacent about challenging standards, yet all agree there needs to be greater clarification and a renewal of the contract with students. They can't have it both ways.'

## The broader political context

The concern for quality, standards and the student experience is only a part of the main political discussion that has been going on since the Select Committee enquiry was held. Perhaps equally important to educational developers has been the debate leading up to the Higher Education Framework and the National Skills Strategy (both of which will have been published by the time this article is in print).

In many ways, the landscape of Higher Education is substantially the one outlined in the Dearing Report of 1997, though it now needs to be upgraded.

The report that dominates government thinking in the way Dearing used to is the Leitch Report of 2006, on the state of the UK's skills base and how to improve it for economic growth, productivity and social justice.

The proposal for a new Higher Education Framework can be tracked back to John Denham's speech at the Wellcome Collection in February 2008, when he called for a debate about the future of HE and commissioned around ten background studies (now on the Departmental web site – the commentary by Majorie Scardino of Pearsons is particularly interesting). The plan was for this Framework to be published before the expiry of the fees settlement in 2010, to enable the fees review to sit within a clear and agreed structure. At the Wellcome, Denham spoke about many things, but the main driver was 'employer engagement'.

When Denham's ministry (DIUS) was folded into the new Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Peter



Mandelson made two early decisions. He took over the work on the Framework (which was just about to be announced) and delayed its publication till the autumn. And he preserved Ministers of both Further and Higher Education in his initial appointments, which might have suggested he intended to maintain the traditional separation between these two domains. But I don't think it is turning out like that at all.

An early glimpse of the HE Framework and the National Skills Strategy appeared in *New Industry, New Jobs* (April 2009). It proposed a more sophisticated capacity to analyse labour market needs, a Skills Funding agency for rapid investment, faster capacity to develop qualifications and training, more power to employers to determine local provision, development of the capacity to enable people to move quickly into new areas of the economy, and the use of funding models to encourage universities to support areas of potential growth.

When Mandelson gave his first major speech on higher education to VCs (*Higher Education and Modern Life*, at Birkbeck, in July) he tackled his audience's fear that the formation of BIS might sell out academic values in favour of business. In discussing the economic role of the university, he said that (the development of a student's) character, historical awareness, critical thinking and the whole raft of soft skills 'come above all not from particular disciplines, but from the discipline of good teaching. And for me, that raises an important challenge for universities. We have become very good at developing criteria for assessing research excellence in universities, and for incentivising research excellence. We also need to look in my view for ways of incentivising excellence in academic teaching – which is not quite the same thing'.

He also focused on the role of higher education in the search for social justice. In this he went beyond the traditional debates about entry processes, and about the ease of exit into high-status professions. His targets were the obstacles faced by those whose education and training were based in vocational, craft and apprenticeship models and who had few, if any, routes into higher education at any stage in their careers. For example, he noted the massive growth in apprenticeships – 250,000 young people at the moment – and questioned what role the universities might play in their future education and professional development.

This theme was reinforced when David Lammy spoke to the VCs at their UUK conference in September. He outlined government thinking about the Framework – it will have an economic focus, it will support the development of high-level skills by expanding Foundation Degrees, employer co-funded qualifications, professional apprenticeships and better routes from vocational to university education. He particularly noted the paucity of UK students working in Europe, compared to the opposite flow (reminding his audience that Mandelson's previous post had been in Europe).

When Mandelson addressed the CBI in October, he described the two systems (vocational and academic) being as much the result of social prejudice as economic reality. He

now linked them in their aim for the same goals – building human capacity and higher skills. He saw the Framework as an attempt to tackle wider access, social mobility, and equity and social justice, and both he and David Lammy have been pleading for universities to develop new routes, such as foundation degrees, work-based learning, IT-supported learning, credit frameworks that incorporate apprenticeships, collaborations with employers etc. The new element in this discourse is the concept of contested funding – part of what used to be core funding will go to those universities which can show they can best use it.

David Willets followed him onto the platform at the CBI and outlined Tory policy. He challenged the CBI directly in their attempt to restrain numbers to preserve quality, noting the UK's slide down the international tables of participation. He attacked the contempt behind the words 'Mickey Mouse' courses, noting that Law and Medicine were the longest-established vocational training courses. He was enthusiastic about apprenticeships and believed their status would be enhanced if the route to HE were clearer, and he believed the sector would rightly become more differentiated in future. He noted the importance of proper funding for part-time students. He was also enthusiastic about students having more information, and did not rule out the use of social networking sites to discuss teaching quality, with rewards for good teaching. In an interview with the *Guardian*, in October 2009, Willets said that universities were badly failing students with unfit teaching and old-fashioned methods and will have to radically modernise lectures and facilities if they want to raise fees. So a change of government in May might not significantly alter the direction of development in the sector.

### Implications for educational development

It looks from this as though there are going to be two significant areas of work for the educational development community in the next few years. The first is the need to rapidly construct a significant new relationship between teacher and student. This may be around the concept of 'student engagement'. It is clear that students will be given much more information than before about the educational process, but the question is, what might this lead to? If it reinforces the model that 'the university and its staff deliver and the student receives', then this will be the institutional version of the surface approach to learning, backed up by the funders (parents, savers or lenders) taking an ever closer interest in the delivery of the contract. If the information is provided at module level, then it may become a validated straitjacket which makes it impossible for a professional and skilled lecturer to vary and develop their course, rather in the way that assessment reform is hampered by the need to engage with the protocols of minor (or even major) modifications for even relatively trivial enhancements. If it supports a closer and deeper engagement of students with their learning through a shared understanding of the processes (intended learning outcomes, assessment criteria, standards, the role of feedback etc.), then it may transform higher education. Many teachers will respond warmly to this approach, though the inflexibility of institutional

frameworks and processes (and some colleagues) might be insuperable obstacles in the time available.

The second is the re-modelling of parts of higher education to respond to the challenges of 'employer engagement'. This is not going to be easy. Look, for example, at the complexities and obstacles outlined in the CBI's report *Stepping Higher: workforce development through employer-higher education partnership* (October 2009). Or the literature review on *Employer Engagement with Higher Education* prepared by a Pathfinder Project based at HERDA-SW (the regional higher education association for the South West of England), published in November 2008. It feels as though anything which can be subsumed into a university's existing processes

stands a chance of succeeding, but so much of what is being asked for is beyond these. The educational developer will have to work with colleagues to respond to the challenge of applying high-quality pedagogic principles and practice to new and perhaps uncomfortable environments. Denham noted in 2008 that the market for higher-level workforce development was worth £5bn, of which universities secured no more than 6%. It is possible that, for some institutions, the motives of social justice and funding opportunity might pleasantly coincide.

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# Open Educational Resources: the implications for educational development

**David Cormier**, University of Prince Edward Island

I am not, in any sense, an opponent of openness. I think that an open sharing of ideas is healthy for the thinker and, perhaps more importantly, for the idea itself. In a world where what is known as new or current is increasingly difficult to pin down, a collaborative approach to learning, and particularly learning around technology, is critical to the survival of any practitioner (Cormier, 2008). I see open education as a method of confronting the challenges that face us as people working in the business of education. As open education and open educational resources are moving into their second decade, we are moving past the time for evangelism and towards – hopefully – something a bit more pragmatic.

The field of education is being confronted with the need to teach new ideas, new tools and new theories on a seemingly daily basis. The challenge is not, as it has been in the past, the finding of ways to teach these things. The challenge, rather, is in choosing what to teach and which information and content to rely upon in order to make that choice. And even when we do make the leap to understanding these new ideas, the work that we produce is increasingly not solely our own. As our thoughts, our ideas and our content – if it ever really made sense to think of ideas as 'ours' – move

more and more to the web, they will inevitably be seen, used and re-used by people far beyond the reach of reprimand or law.

There seem to be two alternative paths to follow when confronted with this mixture of the new and our own loss of control. We can give in to the openness or we can lock down on what we have and what we know. If we can't protect our work, we can embrace the change and decide to march along with our peers. We can open our work and share it with the world. Or, alternatively, we can take our work underground, hide it behind passwords and hope to protect our investment of time and effort. In the first, we can share in the learning of others, but not benefit directly from the content we produce. In the second, we might benefit from our content, but we lose the opportunity to work together.

Truth be told, we have been sharing our work for years, just on a different scale. We've been giving away our work for free at teaching conferences, workshops and water coolers since long before the internet revolution. The difference now is the reach that our work can have, the syndication with which good resources can spread around, and the lack of control over the distribution. We are not

sharing it with one person at the water cooler, 25 at a workshop or 200 at a conference. We can be, as in the case of Dr Michael Wesch of Kansas State University, sharing it with 10 million (mwesch, 2007). There is a sense, in some people's minds, that this reach is proof of the value of the content, and, because of this, the content should be monetised.

This latter alternative, protecting what is 'ours', pursuing legal cause with people who steal our 'copyright', is the alternative that has been chosen by many. Regulatory agencies are banding together to hunt down thieves as part of a multinational legal effort (as we are seeing in the music industry (Van Buskirk, 2009)) to preserve intellectual property. The critical difference between ourselves as teachers and some people in the music industry is that we are still, most of us, being paid the same for designing or teaching courses as we were before the revolution. Most of us were not receiving huge royalties on our ideas. There is no industry at risk. And we are still in demand.

Openness, and particularly in the form of Open Educational Resources (OER), seems to be the way many people are dealing with the new realities. But openness – the way that people speak about OERs in particular – is a much

more complicated matter than a simple confrontation with the realities of our era. OER can be, by turns, a branding operation by an educational institution, a path to grant-funding, a hardening of that link to the past of objects and known knowledge and, in the extreme, a potential new thread of nationalism. This article will try to step through some of these ideas in order to separate the value of openness for educational development from the ways in which openness is being used to support other agenda. It focuses on the difference between thinking of openness as either project or practice.

### What is openness?

Openness is not a panacea. It will not suddenly teach students or spread 'good' education, nor is it free of cultural baggage. There is a vast amount of money currently being spent on open education and some kind of return is expected, even if it is not to be the direct return of actual clients purchasing the content. Many of these projects also seem to exhibit a potentially different kind of openness, and suggest that there are different degrees and ways in which a given piece of content or educational experience can be considered as open. With the language of educational openness now reaching the national level, with major OER projects in the UK and Canada, the field appears to be moving into the mainstream.

The moniker of openness – like its much-maligned cousin 'free' – comes in many guises. With the word free, as in free software, we might call it free because the user (as in the case of gmail) does not need to spend any money to use the product. The software is free from inherent monetary charge, but it does have hidden costs in the permission given to Google to search your email data and the subliminal viewing of advertising – an activity that most corporations would have to pay money for. Free, in the sense that The Free Software Foundation uses the word, means that it is not owned by anyone and it is not bound by any licensing that restricts what someone would like to do with it. It is also, usually, free of charge. In common usage both are 'free', but in practice they are very different things.

Openness suffers from the same confusion. A thing can be open in the

sense that you may use or interact with the product of a process created by a university. This might be called OER as 'project'. This is the sense in which Open Educational Resources, such as OpenLearn and MIT's Open Course Ware (OCW), are open. Rebecca Attwood's article in the *Times Higher* (Attwood, 2009) mentions that the tuition at MIT costs \$36,000 a year and claims that this is the worth of the OCW project to its users. Elsewhere in the article she reports that MIT found 'it would be impossible to transfer the kind of education it provided on campus to an online environment'. This kind of openness bears a striking resemblance to the kind of software that you can get free of charge. You get access to the cold hard facts of the course, not its heart and soul.

Another kind of openness, OER as 'practice', opens up the learning process to the scrutiny of the watcher. It is transparent rather than free of charge. The work done by Alec Couros at the University of Regina (Couros, 2009), and the MOOCs that are being taught at the University of Manitoba, are excellent examples of these (Cormier, 2008b). In these cases, the classes are open for people not only to read the content and the syllabus, but also to be part of the learning process. The role of the institution becomes one of accreditation.

It is a story of two contrasting visions of what openness can do for education. On the one hand we see large 'knowledge infrastructure' projects, dominated by discussions of standards, intellectual property and massive amounts of cash. These are great projects for bringing money into institutions, for raising the bar for professors who maybe have not been putting the amount of work into their courses that they should have, or for raising the profile of an institution. On the other hand we have individual educators working to open their own classrooms, sharing their work with their colleagues and sharing their colleagues with their students. This is a great open method for learning, but using the internet can lead to disruptions of scale and frustrations from students and administrators with more traditional conceptions of learning.

### What is an Open Educational Resource?

By 'open educational resources', the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) – Open Educational Resources project means more than just 'content'. Their definition embraces:

- *Learning Content (full courses, courseware, content modules, learning objects, collections and journals)*
- *Tools (software to support the development, use, re-use and delivery of learning content including searching and organization of content, content and learning management systems, content development tools, and on-line learning communities)*
- *Implementation Resources (intellectual property licenses to promote open publishing of materials, design principles of best practice, and localization of content) (OECD, 2007)*

So our formal definition includes the content of individual items you may have produced, the best practices developed for a classroom and the software that might have been created to store and distribute these items.

The idea of resources of this quality and lineage being made available to the general public represents a cultural shift, a massive move from the inherent protection of content and the 'sale' of knowledge, to one where the content itself no longer has enough intrinsic value to be for sale. The simplicity of the technological part of the creation process and the avoidance of the associated costs of paper, make the creation of the resources a practical option whether one is inside or outside of academia. The value of the university as a place of experience and accreditation must necessarily take priority over content, as it seems that this can now be given away.

There is also a difference, one might say, between providing 'the' resource and providing 'a' resource. If you are creating a basket-weaving video with the primary intention of conforming to a branding plan from your university that forces you to contribute in a certain way with certain things to a central repository, then you are



probably part of an OER plan that intends to enable people to find your particular resource. An educator or a group of educators who make their weaving work public or, indeed, work in public for the reason that it makes their work better to have it interact with their peers or even to have their students interact with their peers, is providing 'a' resource.

This lack of 'monetary' value has often led to one of the primary criticisms of OERs: 'If the things that they were giving away were worth something, they wouldn't give them away.' There is some sense in this. If the universities had a viable, sustainable market for this content, they might not, indeed, be offering it for free. A university may be offering up its courseware to the world, but they are not (unless committed to it through government/NGO funding) offering up the intellectual property behind things like pharmaceuticals. Nor are they offering accreditation exams for free. The defenders of openness will see this as a redress for the way that the world should be, and say that the universities are releasing something that always should have been free. The actual connection of quality and cost, however, has long since been disproven by open-source, free projects such as the Apache server software (<http://apache.org>).

### So what does this mean for Educational Development?

We are, I think, constantly running the gauntlet between project and practice. There are times when the project serves us more often than we serve it. As we approach new projects and consider approaches to them, the distinction between project and practice can be helpful to keep scale under control. There are some things that simply live on the scale where they ought/need to be projects but others, I would argue most, are simply a matter of changing practice. A cautious educator or creator of resources might be well served keeping things as simple as possible and keeping a clear focus on curricular goals.

### Overhead – creating an OER

The first thing that strikes me about the OER movement is the massive amount of overhead that seems to

be implied in an 'OER Project'. The consensus view seems to be that in order to be open, you need to be organised and you need to have the investment of your institution. The list of existing OER projects often hails from well-heeled and well-established universities, with an organisational staff and 'professional' archival systems.

Being open need not be complicated, it doesn't need to be organised, nor does it even need to be funded. It has to respond to a need that exists. Simple solutions may require a 10% concession from the educator, but a small concession to sustainability can be important. Perhaps educators need to give up the idea of the content being interconnected, or only available to some people or, again, having professional quality video.

### Creating High Quality Resources – the video

Then again, what is 'professional' quality video in an era where the incredible staying power of the common craft videos (<http://www.commoncraft.com/>) and the introductions produced by people like Michael Wesch have contributed to the belief that video is something that people can just 'do'? When this inferred simplicity is combined with the desire for 'high quality' resources, the consultant (be they technical or educational or both) is called upon to easily and efficiently create a video that compares to the one-in-a-million that has filtered its way through the morass of YouTube.

If you've not seen the genius that is the common craft videos, they take very simple shapes and, with a clear delivery on an organised script, they explain complex technical concepts in transparent, understandable ways. The genius, however, is in the script. The 'quality' of the video is not very high, as it was being produced to be seen through the blurry windows of YouTube.

These videos were created, distributed and made the career of their creator without the benefit of massive underwriting or a university repository. The Wesch videos are the output of a brainwave of an educator pushed onto YouTube. They are not, however,

likely to be replicated by every person creating a learning object. One-in-a-million successes of this kind encourage the desire to create 'the' resource – a dangerous goal for any project. The creation of 'a' video that achieves a particular curricular goal is a far more practical undertaking, or, preferably, the discovery of an existing creation that fits the need.

### Legal issues

The copyright implications of an open approach cut in both directions. Many educators have materials that they have 'acquired' in their repertoire that are not, strictly, theirs. This leads to an understandable reluctance from many educators to make their work open. The reverse legal issue – 'what about my intellectual property?' – is manageable in two ways. In the creation of any object, the creator owns a copyright, but it is a copyright in name only. The cost of pursuing a copyright case is huge and not practical for most. This leaves you with two viable options – the use of Creative Commons or staying away from the internet.

### OER projects as new nationalism

The OER projects and the potential of significant uptake of programs like MIT open courseware offer another issue for consideration. How are local professors, debating the relative value of their curriculum against the standardising power of a major university, going to be able to forward their own ideas?

*'Imagine a course in ethics or social justice. You could argue, and some do, that this is the reason more people need to open their curriculum. I ask you... how will the majority of people be able to choose between the curriculum of a small town Nova Scotia university and Berkeley. Easy. They'll either choose the most famous or the one that they were already in agreement with.'* (Cormier, 2009)

Take that idea a step further, and imagine this kind of control as part of a national dialogue. There was a time when a national educational policy was about educating people within a nation. It had its benefit for



the country in the way in which it was able to live, work and compete, given the degree to which it had educated its people. The internet and OERs are opening a whole new venue for the 'national education policy'. A recent policy document (Cooke, 2009) talks about the English educational system as something that can be exported – indeed, something that should be exported (BIS press statement, 2009). It seems the call to OER is the call to arms of the 21st century, with knowledge as the new battlefield. Sadly, the knowledge that people will be fighting over will be of the shockingly 20th-century variety.

### Conclusion

Not all openness is created equal. There is a presumption in traditional learning design that a given trainer is somehow going to be able to divine the needs of a given group of learners before a course is started. Alongside this belief is the idea that there is some kind of 'best practice' or 'one way' of doing things that can be created, sliced up and dropped into place alongside others just like it, and these will serve as the core of what will be needed for

learning. These are the assumptions that underlie the idea of a resource repository. All the trainer needs is access to the knowledge, the trick, the video, and they will be that much further down the road to success.

The kind of openness presented in our second response to the inevitability of the sharing of our work, the openness of the process, produces no such easily transferable objects. It is, often, a clumsy and dirty process of people coming to know things, of people sharing information, of collaboration. It is remarkably human.

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# Enhancing Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Reflections from a VC

**R. Michael Pittilo**, Robert Gordon University

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the issues that staff face at different stages of their career in keeping up to date with learning and teaching developments and championing them within a higher education (HE) setting. It will also look at the impact of devolution and the different approaches that have been implemented at national level to support enhancement of teaching and learning. The reflections are largely based on my own experience, but I hope readers will resonate with them wherever they are in their career pathway.

### Institutional Commitment

Without institutional commitment to students receiving high-quality teaching, it is difficult for staff without managerial responsibilities to bring about change. Since publication of the White Paper (DfES, 2003) there has been widespread

acknowledgement that students deserve to receive a good learning experience and that all universities have a responsibility to deliver on this.

### Impact that staff at various levels can bring to enhance Institutional Change improving the quality of teaching

#### New and Experienced Lecturers

For a new lecturer, there is now, in most institutions, a strong level of support to enable them to develop their teaching skills. This includes postgraduate certificates, diplomas and often a master's degree. In some cases there are opportunities to progress to PhD degrees focused on pedagogic development. Not so many years ago, all of this was available but rarely mandatory. For a new lecturer there is often competing pressure to develop and perform well in

research and it was not unusual for this to take priority over the need to build expertise in teaching. Career progress was frequently seen as more likely through a commitment to research leading to readerships and professorships, without similar opportunities for those choosing to concentrate more on enhancing their own teaching as well as that of others. Recent years have seen a significant change here with research-intensive universities being included with modern universities in recognising the need to provide a high-quality learning environment. New lecturers with limited experience of teaching are usually very enthusiastic to look at how they can improve their own teaching, resulting in improved feedback, providing a better student experience and improved performance. Topics of interest invariably include effective assessment and the use of blended learning.

Often the original thinking of staff new to teaching leads to ideas that, if supported, will have institutional benefits. One example I had involvement with was partly driven by the need to provide students with a greater degree of written feedback on some forms of assessment. The use of objective testing with computer scoring of assessments was introduced, freeing staff to provide better feedback on other forms of assessment with significant advantages. A great deal of research went into demonstrating that well-designed multiple choice questions could also be effectively used to support the assessment of high-level cognitive skills.

As lecturers become more experienced and build their reputation, they engage with external activities, such as external examining and engagement with professional bodies (PBs) and statutory regulatory bodies (SRBs).

### **Heads of School**

At Head of School level, there is usually an expectancy upon them to demonstrate that a quality experience is being received by students and academic standards are being maintained or improved. They are also responsible for course organisation, the delivery of taught materials and their appropriateness, assessments and timely feedback, appropriate to the aims and objectives and learning outcomes of a particular course. Whilst student feedback is extremely important, providing significant information about the state of a course, it is important that we avoid moving towards the position that a number of American universities are in, where good feedback often depends on the level of high grades that are received. As Heads of School, individuals with a strong commitment to teaching quality enhancement are frequently engaged with external networks including the national enhancement agencies and those provided by SRBs and PBs and other associations. Heads of School are normally in a position to influence the quality of teaching within their departments in a positive way. For example, through peer networks, they will be well informed about recent developments across their subject area. They have managerial authority to make sure that these are, where appropriate, considered by teaching teams within their sphere of responsibility. They almost always

have direct access to external examiners' reports and are in a good position to take an objective view of quality and enhancement within their departments. Lastly, they will have to prepare for inspections by both PBs and SRBs to ensure that accreditations and approvals are maintained and, equally, to prepare for internal review of their subject areas. Both internally and externally, Heads of School invariably carry important responsibilities at both an institutional and national level within their areas of teaching expertise. These are gained by serving on and eventually chairing validation and approval panels and this experience in turn enables individuals at this level to contribute new ideas that will support enhancement.

Inevitably, there are pressures to support strong research and Heads have a heavy managerial load. It can be much more difficult for senior managers to retain enthusiasm for new developments compared with the time that they had to focus on those earlier on in their career.

### **Deans**

Deans have an extremely important role in promoting quality assurance and enhancement within their faculties and across the range of programmes and disciplines they have responsibility for. They have access to external examiner reports and are accountable for academic quality and standards within their faculty. Deans who have shown a commitment to pedagogic developments throughout their career are frequently in high demand from national agencies, PBs and SRBs for policy development and general contributions reflecting their knowledge and experience. As with other staff groups, networks exist where Deans can explore common issues. This inevitably includes issues around improving the quality of the taught experience of students.

### **Pro Vice-Chancellor**

As Pro Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for academic quality and enhancement, there is considerable opportunity to bring about widespread institutional change, hopefully to the benefit of students. The direct line-management responsibilities of Pro Vice-Chancellors for teams delivering academic programmes are often very limited, although normally they have responsibility for pedagogic support units. A Pro Vice-Chancellor frequently has to bring around change by influence whereby innovative new ideas have to be sold to the institutional head, deans, heads of school and the wider academic community, often involving considerable debate that usually enhances further the initiative being pursued. Pro Vice-Chancellors are inevitably very strongly networked with colleagues across the sector and there have been a number of groups established that facilitate good interaction and the dissemination of new ideas.

### **Vice-Chancellor**

Vice-Chancellors are in a strong position both to influence the national debate and policy initiatives and drive the culture of a commitment to non-negotiable high-quality

teaching within their universities. They have the opportunity to direct resources that will foster a culture of quality enhancement. They are also able to facilitate the creation of appropriate career paths for those individuals with talent who have the ability to make a genuine contribution to teaching quality through local initiatives, contributing to national and international work, and underpinning research. Again, Vice-Chancellors who have demonstrated throughout their careers an interest in this area tend to be in high demand for national or international initiatives.

### Policy drivers mandating HE to enhance the quality of teaching

Probably it was the White Paper on the Future of Higher Education (DfES, 2003) that drove a clear teaching quality enhancement agenda for higher education. There were, however, clear signs before that. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established in 1997. Prior to the publication of the White Paper, Estelle Morris addressed UUK on 22 October 2001. She spoke about the quality of teaching, the need to encourage new forms of teaching and learning, the need to incentivise excellence in teaching, in the same way as happens for research, and that university staff should be able to specialise in teaching. There was specific commitment to this in the letter to the Chair of HEFCE from the Secretary of State on 29 November 2001.

National initiatives to enhance teaching quality were also informed by the Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee that reported on 27 January 2003 (HEFCE, 2003). The link between research and teaching was challenged with evidence that high-quality teaching existed in institutions that were not research intensive.

Nationally, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) was created combining the Learning and Teaching Support Network and the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education on 30 April 2004. Within England, national initiatives also included the extension of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) and the creation of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), which at the top end carried

up to £4.5m for successful institutions. Funding was also available through the HEFCE teaching quality enhancement funding stream. One of the priority areas for this was to encourage institutional engagement with the HEA. All of these initiatives provided opportunities for academic staff within institutions at all levels of seniority to engage with a national agenda set by Government.

### Impact of Devolution

There are significant differences between Scotland and England, some of which might even threaten the brand of UK HE. Westminster and Holyrood could not have taken more opposing positions over the funding of HE. The introduction of variable top-up fees did not, and is unlikely to, happen within Scotland. The White Paper (DfES, 2003) had minimal impact in Scotland. With regard to the national initiatives that exist within England, there is no equivalent in Scotland for the NTFS, nor were there any CETLs. The QAA review process in Scotland is different from England's. Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) (QAA, 2008) replaces institutional audit. Even some benchmark statements are 'Scottish'-specific. Given that the role of the QAA in Scotland encompasses both the quality assurance and enhancement agenda, there have been some challenges in identifying a clear role for the HEA north of the border.

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*(Declaration of Interests: Member, QAA (Scotland) and QAA (UK) Boards; Convenor, Universities Scotland Learning and Teaching Committee.)*

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# One educational developer's role in managing and facilitating change: replacing peer observation of teaching with peer-assisted reflection

Claire Taylor, Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln

## Introduction

This article is a case study describing the processes undertaken during the early stages of replacing an established scheme for Peer Observation of Teaching with a new scheme for supporting more sustained reflection upon practice. Whilst much of the content is practical and procedural in nature, the processes form part of a wider agenda related to the educational developer's role in managing and facilitating change (both with individuals and, corporately, across the institution) in the area of reflection upon professional practice. I focus on my role in the management and facilitation of such change during the early stages of the project.

Currently, it is an expectation of all members of Academic Staff at Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln that at least one of their taught sessions will be observed during the course of each academic year by a colleague as part of the Peer Observation of Teaching scheme. The scheme has a developmental purpose and is intended to enhance standards of teaching and learning. In addition, observations and their outcome feed into staff review and so the process also has an evaluative aspect.

However, over the academic year 2007-2008, I had personally and professionally come to question this approach to enhancing standards. As a member of staff who participated in the scheme, I struggled to engage with a 'one off' observation of teaching, often arranged in haste, and often involving a friendly discussion rather than a critically developmental review. Such an approach was in tension with my own commitment to developing and

enhancing practice through an actively reflective approach (Moon, 1999), and I knew through contact with colleagues that others shared my views.

As Head of Learning and Teaching I saw an opportunity to effect change through rethinking our approach to Peer Observation of Teaching and introducing a new system that was more conducive to supporting a culture of embedded and sustainable reflection upon professional practice. However, I also recognised the need for an institutional mandate for the goal I had identified in order to support such a change process and bring it institutional and practitioner credibility – reflecting the process of moving 'from intuition to rigour' (Wisker, 2003: 24). To this effect a target was added to the Learning and Teaching Strategy Action Plan for 2008-2009 and subsequently monitored at Learning and Teaching Committee meetings, thus ensuring that the goal remained a central tenet of learning and teaching developments throughout the year.

With senior management and institutional support secured, I needed to attach further credibility to the goal by involving those colleagues who may be affected by such a change. Therefore an 'Advisory Group' of University College Teaching Fellows was established to undergo the crucial task of evaluating the current system and confirming that a review was indeed necessary. This was done through an appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the current system in order to establish a clear rationale for change and to confirm the central aim of developing a new system. It is important to remember that the

issues around Peer Observation of Teaching had not been identified as causes for concern by senior management, but rather had emerged from my own feelings that the system was inadequate. In my discussions with senior managers, committee members and teaching colleagues my own 'hunch' that things were not working as well as they could was acknowledged more widely. In this way, the identification of the development need became a shared activity. Involving the Advisory Group also established the precedent of a collaborative approach to identifying the processes that were required in order to achieve the goal (Wisker, 2003).

## Planning the processes towards achievement of the goal

My goal was 'to rethink the system of Peer Observation of Teaching and to introduce a new system that was more conducive to supporting a culture of embedded and sustainable reflection upon professional practice'. This was then divided into manageable steps in order to plan processes effectively, as follows:

- Step 1: Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the current system
- Step 2: Turn the weaknesses into prompts for identifying key principles that should underpin a new approach
- Step 3: Evaluate other HE practice related to peer review through searching for and reading comparable approaches
- Step 4: Develop a new system
- Step 5: Seek approval from Learning and Teaching Committee



- Step 6: Pilot the new system (2009-2010)
- Step 7: Evaluation of pilot and reworking of scheme as necessary (2009-2010)

Each step involved members of the Advisory Group and there was also an opportunity to give an interim briefing to all academic colleagues at our Spring Learning and Teaching Conference. This was important and valuable because the development work was being done by a small (but in my view representative) group and I was concerned that the wider group of stakeholders should at least be aware of the developments that were taking place in order to facilitate ownership of the process in the long run (Wisker, 2003).

Steps 1 and 2 provided an important platform for the Advisory group to identify the key principles that should underpin the new approach we were striving for. In this way, we were not advocating an instrumental approach to ‘getting the job done’, rather we were committed to a scheme that was founded upon a robust conceptual basis and that had key principles at its core. The principles were derived from a consideration of the weaknesses of the current system followed by recognition that the opposites of these weaknesses could become our positive features. The key principles for us were: *supported, assisted, evidence-based, reflective, dialogic, non-judgmental, shared process, mutually beneficial, non-threatening, collaborative, enhancing, empowering, reviewee-driven*. This also meant that, when looking at examples of practice from other HEIs (Step 3), we did not focus initially on processes but on principles, meaning we were not seduced by quick solutions but were focused instead on the underlying philosophy of the scheme in question.

Only when we were sure of key principles did we start to consider what such a scheme would look like (Step 4). This was the point at which the practicalities of schemes elsewhere were critically appraised in order to identify systems that may work for us. Of course, one size does not fit all, but we were able to use aspects of existing schemes to inform our work

and as a result developed ‘PARTners’, a framework for peer-assisted reflection upon professional practice that is a) reviewee-driven and b) peer-assisted. A comparison of the old Peer Observation of Teaching scheme and the proposed PARTners can be found in Figure 1 (full details of the scheme are available from me on request).

Seeking approval from the Learning and Teaching Committee (Step 5) meant that a draft scheme had to be presented, alongside a briefing paper outlining the development processes. This meeting also gave me the opportunity to paint a bigger picture (with a new group of colleagues) of where the initiative sat – i.e. as a tool to embed reflection upon

practice within the culture at Bishop Grosseteste.

### Facilitating the processes to achieve the agreed goal

I identified two roles for myself that were crucial if I were to effectively facilitate the processes needed to achieve the agreed goals: chairing the advisory group work; and acting as an agent of change in supporting the introduction of a culture of embedded and sustainable reflection upon practice.

### Chairing the advisory group work

It was important that the advisory group should be given space to

<i>Peer Observation of Teaching</i>	<i>Peer Assisted Reflection upon Professional Practice (PARTners)</i>
Covers the bare minimum – just teaching and just one session annually.	Designed to cover a range of activities related to professional practice. The focus will vary depending on the needs of the individual and should result in a more sustainable approach which could involve linking different developmental activities throughout a year.
The process is not reflective.	Reflection is at the heart of PARTners.
The purpose is unclear, but is linked to appraisal.	PARTners is clearly separated from appraisal and is linked explicitly to the participant’s self-selected development needs.
There is no follow up.	A cyclical approach underpins PARTners, with the outcomes at the end of an annual cycle feeding into the next year.
The peer observing could be drawn into making inappropriate judgements and assessments. In addition s/he does not always have the appropriate subject or pedagogical knowledge.	The process is peer-assisted. This means that peers: accept a supportive role (not an assessment role); take a non-judgemental approach; act in a non-threatening manner.
Overall, ‘lip service’ is paid to the process, because it is not ‘owned’ by individuals.	PARTners is reviewee-driven in order to enhance ownership of the process. This means that reviewees choose: the focus of the review; the colleague who will assist them in the review; the content and format of review outcomes.

Figure 1 A comparison between Peer Observation of Teaching and PARTners

actually advise, rather than just 'rubber stamp' ideas that I brought to the table. In chairing this group I quickly came to realise that there was a real danger that I would be tempted to intervene in the work of the group, rather than remain impartial in the group's discussions – a real tension, given my direct interest in the subject matter. Therefore I had to 'manage this contradiction' (McCaffrey, 2004:111) by conceiving my role as that of facilitator rather than chair, a distinction drawn by McCaffrey as outlined in Figure 2.

By taking a facilitative approach to working with the advisory group, I hoped to help them to own the educational development (Kahn, undated). The aim was 'to take into account a variety of perspectives, basing development work on the resulting insights rather than on an entirely pre-determined course of action' (Kahn, undated). This approach articulated with my broader aim of facilitating cultural change and was, in effect, a microcosm of how I hoped to work with the broader staff group in order to support a culture of embedded and sustainable reflection upon professional practice.

**Acting as an agent of change in supporting the introduction of a culture of embedded and sustainable reflection upon practice**

Roche defines transformative change as 'radical change that impacts on culture and practices in an organisation and involves individual and collective organisational learning' (Roche, 2003: 173). In this respect, a long-term by-product of the introduction of the new scheme is intended to be more embedded and sustained reflection upon practice by academic colleagues. In order to reflect upon the longer-term aspects of the process I have used Roche's 'ten essential keys to successful change' (Roche, 2003: 173-174) and used them as a checklist for my own approach.

1. 'Innovators and leaders need to have a long-term view about change.' This was embedded into my approach from the start, with the timescale for planning the introduction of a new scheme being a year, followed by a year-long pilot with evaluation. Following the pilot there will need to be a further stage of planning to take implementation further.

2. 'Change must be driven and owned by committed people with diverse input coming from inside and outside the organisation.' I do see my role as driving change, but also want to facilitate ownership amongst all academic staff (see also point 4 below). Therefore, it is planned to disseminate developments with the new scheme to all academic staff at learning and teaching conferences (three times a year) and to work closely with colleagues piloting the scheme in order to support commitment. Beyond the organisation I have 'tested' my ideas on colleagues within the SEDA and HEDG networks.
3. 'A supportive organisational culture is needed...' I have a key role in 'sustaining' stakeholders, through spending time with them on the detail of how they may engage with the PARTners pilot and in developing resources to support them (for example, through the VLE). Therefore this will be a key personal target for me in 2009-2010.
4. 'The change process is a collaborative, co-operative, shared learning experience...' Good communication will be key to showing that the experience is a shared one. This will be facilitated through my role at institution committees, through learning and teaching conferences, updates at departmental meetings and working alongside individuals.
5. 'Leaders/managers need to know and understand the constituency.' I have good knowledge and understanding of university systems, 'politics' and history, but this point also reflects the need for high-quality communication both to and from all stakeholders which I have a responsibility to safeguard.
6. 'Change comes from seeing possibilities, creating opportunities from mistakes and unexpected experiences.' I view learning as a process of change and as one inextricably linked to experience and reflection upon it. To this

<i>The chair system</i>	<i>The facilitator system</i>
Chair often has a direct and personal stake	Is impartial, looking only for a successful outcome
Relies on rules and procedures	Is rooted in common sense and courtesy
Identifies each idea with its owner	Uses teams and group dynamics
Calls for immediate valuation of input	Requires deferred judgement
Controls the flow of ideas and inputs	Ensures a free market for contributions
Is commonly rooted in mistrust	Is transparent, with no hidden agenda
Frequently is 'win-lose'	Aims for 'win-win' and consensus
Is open to manipulation	Ensures good behaviour, protects individuals
Underpins the 'sage-on-the-stage'	Offers a 'guide-by-the-side'

Figure 2 The difference between chairing and facilitating a meeting (from McCaffrey, 2004: 113)

effect, it is essential that my approach to managing change is prepared to use 'unexpected experiences' positively in order to move my learning, and therefore the change process, onwards. The pilot phase may well reveal 'unexpected experiences'.

7. *'Change is a pro-active, incremental and co-ordinated process that facilitates bottom-up stakeholder engagement from the start of the change process – all stages.'* It is my responsibility to ensure that the process is coordinated and includes all stakeholders.
8. *'There must be sponsors – champions with whom the university staff can identify...'* I and the University College Teaching Fellows (already part of the advisory group) will act as champions and advocates for the new system.
9. *'The change readiness period must be taken seriously...'* I am aware that 'denial, resistance and exploration' (Roche, 2003:174) are normal reactions to change and as such I have to be prepared to deal with such reactions and understand why such reactions may be occurring.
10. *'Necessary resources are provided to support all stages of the change.'* As the pilot develops, it is planned to develop a range of online resources to support the scheme. A vital resource will be myself – monitoring the ongoing effects of change and evaluating aspects of the scheme as it is piloted.

### Next steps

The new scheme will be piloted from September 2009 and therefore evaluation will be both formative (ongoing throughout the year) and summative (a final report about the scheme at the end of the academic year). For me, the formative element is particularly important because the PARTners scheme is concerned with implementing a new process. In this respect, a helpful suggestion is to simply ask the question 'how did that go?' (Baume, 2003: 77) at each stage of the process. Whilst useful,

this could become just a rhetorical, and perhaps quite introspective, exercise and therefore it is planned to implement a more in-depth approach to evaluation that focuses upon the stakeholders involved in the project, adapting Baume's (2003: 84-86) ten-step way to implementing evaluation processes.

The evaluation process will be crucial for identifying appropriate development activity beyond the implementation of PARTners. For example, I already expect there to be a need for ongoing support for colleagues taking the 'peer assister' role (developing listening skills, coaching and mentoring techniques etc.). Piloting PARTners will necessarily incorporate the development of some resources to support peer assisters, but it is anticipated that further priorities for support will emerge during the pilot. Close consultation with pilot scheme participants will ensure that follow-up activity is appropriate and sustainable – it is expected that the Virtual Learning Environment could be used in this respect. There may also need to be further support to facilitate the embedding of PARTners within practice. Also, there are the possibilities of offering different forms of follow-up development activity along 'the broadest of continuums: individual-collective development; professional-departmental development' in order to emulate the 'one size doesn't fit all' model (McCaffrey, 2004: 188). This is important in order to safeguard the key principles of valuing diversity and operating inclusively when delivering staff development activities.

### Last words

This case study has presented the initial stages of a project to introduce a new framework for peer-assisted reflection upon professional practice. However, although only covering the stages from identification of need through to conception of idea and suggestion for a pilot scheme, I hope that this paper has given food for thought in terms of how to manage and facilitate change when looking to implement a new educational development initiative. For this

particular project it has been crucially important to achieve the following during the early stages of the project:

1. Secure institutional (senior management and grassroots) support for the change
2. Work collaboratively with colleagues who will be practically affected by change
3. Plan the step-by-step processes needed in order to achieve change
4. Reflect upon and articulate the educational developer's role in facilitating and managing change
5. Early on, plan how to evaluate the outcome.

In achieving these elements, there is the potential for a sound foundation to be in place for piloting the new scheme and moving towards institutional change in embedding reflection upon professional practice.

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# Examining the Examiners

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In September this year Universities UK and the Guild HE, in conjunction with the QAA and the HEA, announced a review of external examining arrangements seeking to 'ensure the system remains robust'.

The Group will address various issues, including:

- *The need to develop Terms of Reference for the role, to support consistency*
- *Reinforcing the specific role of external examiners in ensuring appropriate and comparable standards*
- *Analysing the level of support given by institutions to external examining, both financial and professional*
- *Current and future challenges and changing practice (such as modularisation) and their implications for external examining*
- *Comparing the UK system with international practice.*

(<http://tinyurl.com/yhloaul>)

This in response to the outcomes of the recent Select Committee report into Students and Universities (see the article by James Wisdom in this edition of *Educational Developments*). Overall, in paragraphs 267-273 of the report, the Committee expressed clear concerns associated with the system. Based upon what appears to be anecdotal evidence the conclusions drawn included:

- *the remit and autonomy of external examiners is often unclear and may sometimes differ substantially across institutions in terms of operational practices*
- *the reports produced by external examiners are often insufficiently rigorous and critical*
- *the external examiner's report's recommendations are often not acted upon – partly because their remit is unclear*
- *the appointment of external examiners is generally not transparent.*

(UK Parliament, 2009)

The Committee was, however, in favour of a system of external examining, seeing it as 'fundamental to ensuring high and comparable standards across the sector', but in need of refurbishment:

*'The starting point for the repair of the external examiner system is the recommendation made by the Dearing Report to the Quality Assurance Agency "to work with universities and other degree-awarding institutions to create, within three years, a UK-wide pool of academic staff recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency, from which institutions must select external examiners". We conclude that the sector should now implement this recommendation. Drawing on the evidence we received we would add that the reformed QAA should be given the responsibility of ensuring that the system of external*

*examiners works and that, to enable comparability, the QAA should ensure that standards are applied consistently across institutions. We strongly support the development of a national "remit" for external examiners, clarifying, for example, what documents external examiners should be able to access, the extent to which they can amend marks – in our view, they should have wide discretion – and the matters on which they can comment. This should be underpinned with an enhanced system of training, which would allow examiners to develop the generic skills necessary for multi-disciplinary courses. We conclude that higher education institutions should only employ external examiners from the national pool. The system should also be transparent and we conclude that, to assist current and prospective students, external examiners' reports should be published without redaction, other than to remove material which could be used to identify an individual's mark or performance.'* (UK Parliament, 2009)

These conclusions are interesting and will be further explored in this article, which focuses upon SEDA's support for the external examining system in the UK. The Committee drew attention to the current and future role of the QAA in regard to the maintenance of the system. Indeed, as readers will be aware, section four of the QAA Code of Practice lays out fourteen precepts associated with quality assurance and standards. These are, however – as will be seen in the reflective commentaries provided below – rather more to do with procedural and administrative matters.

In 2005, SEDA's Professional Development Framework (PDF) developed a new named award in External Examining. An initial, online pilot programme was recognised (accredited) by the PDF committee and ran from February to July 2006. The participants were members of the PDF Committee who were also external examiners, and a further member who acted as the assessor. All PDF awards have three elements for recognising programmes: the SEDA Values, the four Core Development Outcomes, and a number of Specialist Outcomes specific to each award. The original Specialist Outcomes were:

1. Describe the role and responsibilities of the External Examiner
2. Apply to their external examining practice relevant national/local policy, strategy, disciplinary, professional, legal and regulatory considerations
3. Verify that assessment practices are rigorous, fair and maintain academic standards in relation to the specified award
4. Deliver cogent and constructive feedback, including reports addressing issues of academic standards, student achievement and assessment practice
5. Appraise their own professional practice development in relation to external examining drawing on a broad range of evaluative methods.



From the evaluation of the pilot programme (Bostock and Maynard, 2007, *Educational Developments*, 8.1, pp. 26-27), the Specialist Outcomes were modified (see below) and the award is now available as a national qualification. Institutional programmes wanting SEDA to recognise their programme for external examiners would need to show that its participants can develop and have demonstrated the following outcomes and values:

#### The SEDA Values

1. An understanding of how people learn
2. Scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice
3. Working in and developing learning communities
4. Working effectively with diversity and promoting inclusivity
5. Continuing reflection on professional practice
6. Developing people and processes.

#### The Core Development Outcomes

1. Identify their own professional development goals, directions or priorities
2. Plan for their initial and/or continuing professional development
3. Undertake appropriate development activities
4. Review their development and practice, and the relations between them.

#### The current Specialist Outcomes

1. Analyse the role and responsibilities of the External Examiner in terms of current issues and challenges for own professional development
2. Apply to their external examining practice relevant national/local policy, strategy, disciplinary, professional, legal and regulatory considerations
3. Verify that assessment practices are rigorous, fair and maintain academic standards in relation to the specified award
4. Deliver cogent and constructive feedback, including reports addressing issues of academic standards, student achievement and assessment practice
5. Appraise their own professional practice development in relation to external examining drawing on a broad range of evaluative methods.

Three of the participants on the pilot programme, who achieved the PDF award in external examining, provide their reflections on the experience, and the article concludes with a description of how the PDF award can support and deliver the recommendations made by the Select Committee.

### Stephen Bostock

Like most external examiners, I suspect, I had approached the role seriously but not systematically, and taking part in the pilot programme, Developing Practice in External Examining, prompted me to do that. At the time I was the external examiner of a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in HE. I was familiar, of course, with the institution's documents supporting its external examiners, but I had not systematically questioned whether I had exercised all my rights or fulfilled all my responsibilities to the letter. For example, I had been asked to comment on the teaching,

yet I had never seen any; in practice, the emphasis was on assessment standards and process.

I compared national and institutional documents on external examining. The QAA code of practice concentrates on academic standards and how institutions maintain them, and on assessment processes. The institutional guidance with which I was working had a more detailed version based on intended learning outcomes and their assessment, which bordered on using me as an assessor. The distinction between confirming or adjusting the marks of individual student work and making statements about overall standards is not clear cut. In a PG Certificate with rather few portfolios, I had read all the student work so there was no sampling issue. My statement that the standards being achieved were appropriate and the assessment process was fit for purpose amounts to saying that the individual marks are sound. To suggest that, while the assessment process has been sound, nonetheless a borderline fail is in fact a pass, is to suggest that the standard is a little high. Although my role was described in terms of standards, it inevitably entailed individual grades, passes and fails. These issues became clearer as I wrote my reflections addressing the first specialist outcomes.

My later contributions to the programme again required me to analyse the institutional practices in terms of standards, rigour and fairness. While fundamentally sound, there had been minor issues about handwriting of feedback and lack of standardisation in documentation. I returned to the annual reports I had written as an external examiner and found that one element not required in national or institutional guidance is that I had supported the programme in its institutional situation – it needed more resources! Happily, in the following year the situation improved and my external examiner position may have had some impact on the institution in the right direction. This was not a role described in the external examiner documentation, except in so far as securing standards.

I had been an external examiner on occasions at several institutions for some 15 years, and each situation had been rather different. Even though all the courses were postgraduate, the institutions and disciplines were different. Coming to terms with each institution, its regulations and processes, meeting new staff and learning to work productively with them, had created for me a series of rather different experiences. The Developing Practice programme made me consider the underlying principles and how they had worked out in practice in different circumstances. There are built-in tensions between the different roles of external examiners: bluntly, of auditor and of critical friend. How had I managed those tensions? Had I compromised assurance for maintaining a productive relationship, or even a cosy one? The programme allowed me to articulate these issues and personal concerns with the other participants in similar positions. The programme was the prompt and support for reassessing my position, enabling me, hopefully, to fulfil the role better in future.

### Anthony Brand

Writing this contribution enables me to reflect upon a number of aspects associated with the preparation of external

examiners. First as a participant in the pilot run of the SEDA PDF named award; next in regard to the general skills and attributes associated with the role of the examiner; and finally in regard to the outcomes of the Select Committee.

The purpose of running the award in a limited pilot form was twofold – to check the validity of the Specialist Outcomes and the functionality of its being available in a predominantly online format. As the participation unfolded over a five-month period, it became clear that aspects of the Specialist Outcomes would prove to be challenging for an aspiring or novice examiner. I came to the pilot with experience of being an external at six institutions over a period of ten years. This enabled me to enrich my portfolio submission with case study material including a critical incident. My overall sense was that, without these experiences, it would be very difficult to demonstrate the Specialist Outcomes with the original wording. The Outcomes made me look for applicable literature associated with examining – the main source, at the time, being in the form of the QAA precepts for external examining. These I found to be rather limited when placed against the real experiences of examining. Rather out of balance and too much associated with the institutional processes for running the system. As part of this I had attended a number of one-day induction sessions run by various institutions and had been exposed to rather similar sessions about processes, forms and undergraduate degree classification calculations – notwithstanding the fact that I was an external on postgraduate qualifications! While the award had started with an initial face-to-face session, the main event was completed entirely online through staged activities and submissions. The timescales were tight and it soon became clear that some of the original cohort were struggling to find enough time to participate – a seemingly not uncommon phenomenon with wholly online delivery. So, in summary, participation drew my attention to the paucity of real material available to directly inform and develop the skills and attributes of an examiner – these being examined in the next paragraph.

Axiomatically, I start with the assumption and assertion that an external is appointed on the basis of discipline expertise. However, this alone is insufficient to fully and properly fulfil the role. My case studies and critical incident demonstrated the need for high-level interpersonal and inter-professional skills. These highlighted in situations where there was a need to inform colleagues that the level of student achievement was not at an acceptable level equivalent to those found in other institutions. This then opens up the unstated role of the external in regard to collegial and academic development. Even so, in two of my previous appointments this was explicitly recognised by the course team with me being invited to attend and present at course development events. Based upon the written and oral evidence presented to the Select Committee and the associated concerns listed above, UUK and the Guild of HE have responded by establishing a Group to review external examining. An opportunity will be lost if the outcome is a narrow focus upon standards and quality. While these are clearly important and essential, as seen in my reflection upon past experiences, the role of an external is broader. Therefore, any real and meaningful

attempt at *training* externals need to encompass wider parameters.

### Ruth Pilkington

That SEDA should lead the way in developing an award for External Examining was extremely important, and I was consequently keen to be involved in the pilot. I also felt committed to the value of external examining for a number of reasons:

- I was convinced of the value of external examining as a means of engaging as peers in the wider enhancement of assessment and sharing of practice. I had always found the external input into my own subjects a valuable prompt to reflection and interrogation of assumptions
- I had undertaken my first external examiner role when lecturing in German. I saw it as a means to professionally develop my role as course and subject leader. The experience gave me insight into how the subject was delivered and assessed at other institutions, which I could incorporate into my own work
- Becoming involved in external examining enabled me to contribute to the standards and quality enhancement of my subject beyond my own institution, as well as internally, because I could draw on points of comparison about process and about students' performance. This I regard as a particular responsibility of a professional academic: namely contributing to the development of a community of practice
- Later, as Course Leader of a PG Certificate in Learning and Teaching in HE external examining provided opportunities for networking and sharing of practice between often isolated courses.

My external activity for the pilot award involved reflecting on five external roles, and external consultancy roles as a course recogniser and on course validation panels. I gained insights through this into how valuable my experience as an external had been in developing myself and my practice. In view of current debates therefore, I consider training courses such as this SEDA award essential to ensuring the role can enhance its impact and contribution to wider subject development.

External examining was more than assurance; in my experience, it was a role which could genuinely influence the resourcing and development of awards. This emerged on a number of occasions when, after consultation with teams and a thorough review of assessment and delivery, changes in assessment were implemented, delivery mechanisms were changed and additional resources given to a subject on the basis of external annual reports.

On the other hand, I also came across poor externalling activity where it had become a 'tick box' process for institutions. One concern has been seeing the way a quality assurance (QA) emphasis has reduced the influence and value of the role as a genuinely consultative and enhancement-orientated process. I reflected on how changes to university QA and monitoring proformas have meant that

important messages to course teams and discussion about the subject delivery now have to take place outside of the annual reports.

What emerged for me too as a result of undertaking the SEDA award is that the sector is right in identifying a genuine need for reviewing the training and nature of the external role. It is an extremely vital means through which both consideration of teaching, learning and assessment can be solidly positioned within the subject, and quality enhancement might be owned by those interested in developing the subject beyond their institution and local sphere of influence. At the same time, however, it is an area where an over-emphasis on quality assurance could undermine its potential.

### Where to from here?

Well, the SEDA-recognised programme at Keele, based on the pilot described above, is now being offered to the institution's external examiners and to Keele staff who externally examine elsewhere. It is run with an initial face-to-face meeting and then online text reflections and discussions from February to July, coinciding with most activity for most externals. Participants will contribute texts addressing the

specialist outcomes to a personal blog in the course space. An external assessor will moderate the assessment of the work as pass or referral, and those passing will receive a SEDA External Examining certificate.

On the national scene, we await with interest the review by the UUK and whatever role the HE Academy is to take in developing a national pool of external examiners. However this is to be done, the need for professional development for external examiners is as great as ever and the PDF award in external examining is available for any institution or organisation wanting to take it up. Contact the SEDA office!

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# Embedding sustainability into the curriculum: our greatest challenge or a subversive litany?

**Alison Britton**, London South Bank University

## Background

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) started in 2005. Are you aware of that? Have you considered whether it has relevance to you as an educational developer? This article highlights useful resources on ESD within higher education (HE) and outlines the activities of a small team of educational developers who have been challenging academic staff to embed sustainability into their teaching.

We started in late 2007 with ambitious plans which are not yet fully achieved but we have moved some way in our planned direction. Our overall strategy had three strands, aimed at different groups of academic staff. We planned to:

- offer a unit on 'embedding sustainability in the curriculum' on our MA in Post Compulsory Education. This unit is validated and, subject to sufficient enrolment, should run next spring
- increase the emphasis on sustainability issues on the PgCert course to show them to be as important as, and comparable to, equality and diversity concerns. We hope to develop a group of enthusiasts who can be catalysts in their departments and beyond. Our progress with this will be discussed further on
- establish workshops on embedding sustainability to be attended by all academic staff. There is a precedent for our university requiring staff to attend workshops (on diversity and on peer observations of teaching),

so we hope that this might happen. It will be easier to do if we can draw upon the support of the enthusiasts that we hope our second strand will develop.

We are a small team, all working part-time in our roles as educational developers. Only one of us had any background in ESD. We recognised that we needed first to make time to develop our knowledge and skills. Firstly, all five of us needed to be clear about what we wanted to do – this was not a foregone conclusion and we needed to air our varied thoughts. As in other areas of our work we will all have our own approaches, but we wanted to be sure we all had some core understanding and would not be contradicting each other when working with staff!

I have worked in educational development long enough (since the late 1980s) to remember when issues around equality could be brushed aside. When we ran workshops on 'Equal Opportunities', academic staff were reluctant to attend because they had 'read the policy and knew all about it'. Nowadays, with an accepted Widening Participation agenda, it would be unusual to encounter lecturers who would say that equality and diversity were irrelevant to their jobs. But there are definitely those who say, 'What's all this green stuff got to do with me?' They know about it – they put their recyclables out for collection, don't they? But what does that have to do with their students or the subjects that many of them teach?

I recognised traces of this same resistance that I'd encountered in the early days of embedding equality issues. The key is to find a way to help staff to understand the relevance of sustainability, rather than appear to raise politically-charged issues which some feel have no place on the HE agenda. It has been very helpful to direct staff to the wealth of available materials which underscore the rising importance of the sustainability agenda in HE. They can thus see that the issue is broader than a team of educational developers trying to sneak in their 'subversive litany' (Vare and Scott, 2007).

### Some recent literature

An agenda for ESD in HE has been around for 20 years (see for example, Blewitt and Cullingford, 2004, p. 4). But a realistic starting-point for web-accessible reports might be 2003, when the then Department for Education and Science (DfES) published an action plan, the first objective of which was that 'all learners will develop the skills, knowledge and value base to be active citizens in creating a more sustainable society' (DfES, 2003). Within that plan was the aim of developing, along with the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), a sustainability strategy for HE.

This was achieved in 2005 when HEFCE said the sector had a 'pivotal role in helping society to develop sustainability' (HEFCE, 2005). In the same year a government report described sustainability literacy as a 'core competency for professional graduates' (HM Government, 2005).

HEFCE's 2005 report has now been superseded by an updated and revised action plan, published last spring, which says very clearly:

*'It remains our view that the greatest contribution that universities and colleges can make to sustainable development is through the values, skills and knowledge that students learn and put into practice. The HEA's ESD project aims to help institutions and subject communities develop curricula and pedagogy that will give students the skills and knowledge to live and work sustainably.'* (HEFCE, 2009, p. 21)

Back in 2005, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) had recognised the need to create action-oriented, sustainability-literate graduates and also its own role in moving this agenda forward (Dawe, Jucker and Martin, 2005). Four years on, ESD has a higher profile on the HEA website and 17 subject centres have resources and links (HEA, 2009).

There has also been a steady flow of literature discussing sustainability issues in higher education. Much of this obviously pre-dates 2003. An arbitrary place to start could be in 2001, with Stephen Sterling's still challenging *Sustainable Education: re-visioning learning and change*. This small book (88 pages) is packed with stimulating ideas and shows how sustainable education (if properly implemented) could lead to transformative learning.

*'Whether the future holds breakdown or breakthrough scenarios . . . people will require flexibility, resilience, creativity, participative skills, competence,*

*material restraint, and a sense of responsibility and transpersonal ethics to handle transition and provide mutual support.'* (Sterling, 2001, p. 22)

Even those staff not (yet) convinced of the relevance of sustainability can find stimulating material in this book!

Clearly, if we are to encourage staff to support the development of their students' sustainability literacy skills then it is crucial that we all have a clear idea of what this means. A very useful paper which discusses the concept of sustainability literacy came from Forum for the Future (2004). In the best educational development tradition, the paper grew out of a workshop and offers the following definition:

*'A sustainability-literate person is viewed as someone who combines an understanding of the need for change with appropriate knowledge and skills, and is able to recognise and reward sustainable actions in others. Sustainability literacy is seen by its proponents as important for employability, effective professionalism, economic performance and social wellbeing.'* (Forum for the Future, 2004)

So, we are definitely not talking about filling heads with environmental facts and simply expecting action to follow. Research has shown that people won't change their behaviour merely because they are asked to – even when they have the necessary knowledge (McKenzie-Mohr *et al.*, 1995). For that matter, how many of us followed the behavioural leads set by our lecturers? So what is more important than delivering information or encouraging socially responsible behaviour is teaching in a way that encourages students to develop skills that prepare them for a complicated life in the twenty-first century.

To make things easier for us as educational developers, there



are some books exploring ways that sustainability literacy is being developed in different disciplinary contexts. An early book in this genre was edited by Blewitt and Cullingford (2004) and it remains an excellent resource. There are also two more recent useful resources: *Greener by Degrees* (Roberts and Roberts, 2007) resulting from staff development work at the University of Gloucestershire, and *The Handbook for Sustainability Literacy* (Stibbe, 2009), funded by the HEA's ESD project. This second book (which also has a multimedia version) is

*'intended to be a handbook in the sense of containing practical ideas that can be adapted and applied by a wide range of educators . . . (it aims) to open up a range of previously un-thought-of paths, some of which will no doubt be rejected, but some considered worthy of further exploration.'* (Stibbe, 2009, pp. 12-13)

There are a number of relevant journals, such as the *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* and the *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, which publish useful and thought-provoking articles. One such article is by Vare and Scott (2007), quoted in my title. While asking us to ponder whether sustainable development is in fact our greatest challenge or yet another subversive litany, it also introduces the useful concepts of ESD 1 and ESD 2. ESD 1 is about promoting/facilitating changes in what we do; and promoting (informed, skilled) behaviours and ways of thinking, where the need for this is clearly identified and agreed. This is learning for sustainable development. In contrast, ESD 2 is building capacity to think critically about (and beyond) what experts say and to test sustainable development ideas; and exploring the contradictions inherent in sustainable living. This is learning as sustainable development (pp. 193-4). They explain how the two complement each other and how ESD 2 makes ESD 1 meaningful:

*' . . . our long-term future will depend less on our compliance in being trained to do the "right" thing now, and more on our*

*capacity to analyse, to question alternatives and to negotiate our decisions.'*

(Vare and Scott, 2007, p. 194).

This article could provide a useful starting point for both educational developers and academic staff.

Finally, don't neglect the wealth of online resources. A comprehensive bibliography, updated August 2009, is provided by the Geography, Earth and Environmental Science (GEES) Subject Centre. The first page is rather GEES-specific but after that they mainly list generic resources.

### Reflections on what we have done on the PgCert

So, the first steps in supporting staff to embed sustainability might be to help them to understand the skills their students need to acquire and ways in which they can relate these to their own subject areas. Staff need to be introduced to a range of literature and/or to practical ideas about what others are doing. They need opportunities to debate. This is more important than having an encyclopedic knowledge of sustainability. Again I think back to earlier work, this time when I was evangelical about encouraging lecturers to embed key skills training into their teaching. One reason some did not was that they lacked confidence in their own knowledge and skills. Likewise some lecturers are frightened by the idea of teaching sustainability skills and fear they lack expertise in environmental matters.

In our work we have been anxious to dispel this myth. When we talk about sustainability we are not only talking about environmental issues, but also about the social, economic and ethical. The definition of sustainability which we adopted for the PgCert work is as follows:

*'Sustainability in HE recognises the need to promote social equity but also recognises that the resources of the planet are limited and precious. We should meet the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations.'*

We want to embrace all aspects of sustainability so that it becomes easier to see the links between sustainability and social justice and how it might be an essential part of any educational programme.

Reflecting on his experience of our input on sustainability, one colleague exemplified what we hoped might begin to happen:

*'My starting point . . . was that of a grumpy old man, muttering under his breath about being bullied by "eco-fascism". However, I found the session thought-provoking, specifically the idea that I would never think "diversity is not relevant to my teaching" whereas I would think that about sustainability . . . I can (now) start thinking about how I can support my students in their thinking.'* (PgCert course participant)

Although the PgCert in recent years had included limited input on ESD, the difference in our approach in 2008-2009 was twofold. We were more 'up-front' about addressing the issues (and more confident because of the time we'd spent skilling ourselves); and to increase their importance we gave more time to them and also required staff to produce written work. To support this, resources and links were available on the course VLE.

Staff were required to write 'a critique of ideas about what it means to develop a sustainability-literate graduate, and some initial thoughts about how you can develop these skills in your students'. The reflections which follow are based upon my reading of nineteen assignments. All quotes are from the written work of PgCert participants. We need to bear in mind that they knew they were being assessed and therefore might not be totally honest (although by the time the assignment was written most participants recognised that we prefer them to argue their own cases rather than to toe some imagined party-line).

Few had prior experience of addressing sustainability in their teaching: exceptions were the

engineers – ‘Teaching sustainability is more acceptable in this field compared to other fields’. For others the idea of introducing issues was totally new. Two teachers of accountancy followed up resources and found that their professional body considered that it was ‘no longer possible to justify exclusion of Sustainable Development issues from the professional syllabus’. Fired with enthusiasm they provided a workshop for their foundation students the very next week! Maybe a little more time to digest ideas would have been advisable, but they must be commended for their enthusiasm!

Some lecturers saw links with their subjects immediately, even if only small beginnings. ‘The first week’s lecture is about the basic assumptions of economics, one of them being resource scarcity. It is a really good topic to link with sustainability. In past years I did not do this.’ ‘I have been invited to write a new unit entitled “strategic real estate”. This title invites sustainability to be a core issue.’

A colleague teaching information literacy recognised how the skills she already taught overlapped closely with sustainability literacy skills, but recognised how links could be made more explicit through the topics chosen as research exercises. Those in health care were thoughtful in their responses. One, teaching social work, felt that being sustainability literate could empower his students and that would bring benefits to the wider community – a key aim of his discipline. Another, in mental health, commented on the literature that links the environment and mental health. She suggested that lecturers might learn from their Black and minority ethnic and non-native students. A lecturer in operating theatre practice admitted initially that she had not made sense of addressing sustainability or how it related to her. But she concluded with ideas for revising assessments on three different units making them totally focused on sustainability in relation to the operating theatre!

Challenges were recognised realistically. While a diverse student body could be an advantage, it

was recognised that one could risk causing offence and northern global views on sustainability might inadvertently appear insulting to those from the south (to a limited extent this happened in one small-group discussion on the PgCert itself). Others were concerned about the moral agenda issues but one recognised that ‘universities have always had their hidden and explicit moral agendas. This has been a major social role, whether in safeguarding privileges or in promoting social change’.

Others were concerned about the reliance on personal action without challenging corporate and government actions. She felt that an ‘educational agenda on sustainability could not be a bolt-on but that the whole focus of the educational system would need to change radically to embody sustainability’. A colleague echoed this when she wrote that ‘effecting global change is possible only if individuals, the education system and society as a whole are prepared to respond positively’.

A number of participants wrote enthusiastically about their new awareness of a need to develop their own knowledge and expertise to be able to teach sustainability adequately and/or to model good practice to their students. Happily, those prepared to say that they did not feel that any of this was their responsibility were a small minority. For example, only one person said to me (orally) that although he recycled ‘things’ at home he did not see it as his role to point out to students that they should put recyclables into the (new) recycling bins recently installed throughout the university. In contrast, another recognised that changes might indeed start on a small scale with those recycling bins. But all of them got the message that although this ‘green stuff’ was important, sustainability embraces a wider social agenda of equality that fits very easily into the values of a university with a diverse student (and staff) body.

Not everyone would agree with the following statement, but there were some who did: ‘One of the ways that societies fight exploitation is through

education, which is why educators must be involved in the battle to prevent the terminal exploitation of the planet.’

## My conclusions

I feel that the written assignment was a very valuable new exercise. It forced staff to read and to reflect on their practice. It was a challenge for most but a challenge that they rose to with a higher level of engagement than is shown for many topics.

So, we have made a start on encouraging staff to embed sustainability skills and have improved upon what we did formerly. We still need to work hard to practise what we preach and embed sustainability more clearly throughout the course (as we do for diversity and equality issues). We need to educate ourselves further and continue to discover and read the available materials so that we can direct staff to the most valuable resources for their own areas.

Progress so far re-enforces my strong belief that this is a vital area of work which is relevant to all staff and which educational developers ought to be engaging with. I hope some of you who have not yet done so will be encouraged to dip into the resources mentioned here and begin your own journey!

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# Improving University Teaching: navigating innovations in teaching and learning

**Fran Beaton**, University of Kent and **Bland Tomkinson**, Independent Educational Consultant

The first IUT Conference was organised in Heidelberg, Germany in 1975 by Ben Massey of the University of Maryland. Over time, the conference has grown both in delegate numbers and the number of nations represented. After an impressive 27 years with the conference, Massey retired and conference leadership was assumed by Co-Directors Jane Halonen of the University of West Florida and Peter Seldin of Pace University. Their five years of leadership brought about positive changes in the conference format, registration systems, and increased relationships with several universities around the globe. This year's conference, co-organised by Todd Zakrajsek (University of North Carolina) and his team, and hosted by Simon Fraser University near Vancouver, continues this impressive tradition.

The 34th IUT conference was a lively and welcoming four-day event combining plenary sessions, workshops, round tables, poster and digital sessions. Although many presenters and delegates were from Canada and North America, there was a strong international feel to the conference, and plenty of formal and informal opportunities to share ideas and experiences and have stimulating discussions about strategies for supporting university students and staff. The campus was a little remote from Vancouver itself, and the student accommodation somewhat spartan, but this all added to the conviviality of the event.

Conference sessions addressed one of four themes:

- *Advancing Active Learning* – What methods increase student engagement in the learning process?
- *Teaching Well with Technology* – Where can technology be integrated into the learning experience in a way that benefits the student and assists with the long-term retention of information?

- *Creating a Community of Learners* – How can we build relationships and interdependence among members of the learning community?
- *Promoting Cultural Attunement* – Moving beyond 'tolerance' and 'competency': how can we help learners to become more attuned to one another in a global society?

It is possible only to give a flavour of a conference on this scale and it seemed a long way to go to hear some colleagues from the UK (does Edge Hill have a Canadian campus?!). Ray Land opened up the topic of 'What are universities for?', but had to call a halt just as things were getting interesting. Some of the other highlights included: Elaine Decker's (Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Canada) pacy session on the use of comedy as a pedagogic tool – take humour seriously and use it to explore challenging issues; a session on the role of social activities in building teacher networks and encouraging debate about learning and teaching (Leslie Richardson and Elizabeth Yost Hammer, Xavier University, US); and Thomas Ollsen's account of Lund University's development of a scheme to recognise and reward teaching excellence. A team from the nearby UBC provided some insight into the way in which Carl Wieman's Science Education Initiative was impacting on teaching departments – with a number of schools having fully-funded Teaching Fellows, with experienced academic backgrounds, to assist with developments. Half-hour round-table discussions were extremely well attended and could have continued for much longer! One on Supporting Struggling Faculty was particularly helpful but a few others were very didactic (hardly 'round-table') and directed at pushing a particular product or technique. Equally less engaging were the (very few) sessions which were extremely context-specific or lacking in criticality, but these were definitely the exception. We certainly came away with plenty of ideas from this collegial and stimulating event and would recommend next



year's conference, probably to be held in Washington DC. IUT is not one of the larger conferences and its scale perhaps helps the very friendly feel. Most of the papers were made available on CD, which helped overcome some of the problems of wanting to be in two or three places at once, but you had to be there to experience it.

Todd Zakrajsek provided a splendid finale as well as co-organising the conference. Todd paid tribute to Patti Spaniola (University of West Florida), the conference co-ordinator, 'Most of the success of the conference is

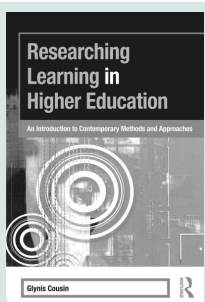
directly attributed to her. She put a ton of time into the conference, shown by [how] smoothly everything ran and the quality of the event'; and to Jim Wilkinson, his co-director, 'Jim was particularly instrumental in making mid-conference adjustments, which is the hallmark of a successful event.' Todd and his team deserve thanks for a great time in a truly stunning setting.

**Fran Beaton** is Senior Lecturer in HE and Academic Practice/PGCHE Programme Director at the University of Kent, and **Bland Tompkinson** is an independent educational consultant.

## Book Review

### Researching Learning in Higher Education

by Glynis Cousin



Unlike many reference books dealing with research methods, Cousin's formal/informal writing style blends theory and practice in very accessible language. Similarly, in contrast to other research texts, Cousin's book is mercifully free from the distractions of text boxes, diagrams, and flow charts.

Each section begins with a literature review that uses both classic and contemporary writings on the many and varied aspects and topics in research methods and methodology. Cousin's language of choice in these introductory sections is formal, yet not rigid and stuffy. These theoretical passages are followed by practical advice on how to carry out projects, often illustrated by anecdotes about Cousin's experience of conducting her own research projects. Here Cousin's language is much less formal, written in the first person and addressing the reader as 'you'. The result is a warm, friendly tone that gives the reader the impression that they are receiving direct, personal advice.

Along with sections dealing with familiar qualitative research methods, Cousin has included a section on Researching Threshold Concepts

under the heading of Transactional Curriculum Inquiry. The addition of the relatively new theory of Threshold Concepts as a research method marks this book as cutting edge. Used in the way that Cousin proposes, Threshold Concepts is an excellent tool for encouraging academics to engage with their subjects to identify those essential concepts that are so important to move students on from being people who study a subject to people whose identity is informed by the subject.

In addition, Cousin includes a section about Appreciative Inquiry, translating the technique from its natural home of Organisational Development (or, as Cousin explains, self-help books) to academia. AI involves four stages, discovery, dream, design, and destiny, which are essentially creative and positive ways of investigating and improving an organisation – and not very familiar to the academic world.

The only criticism I would make of the book is that, despite the subtitle of the book, *An Introduction to Contemporary Methods and Approaches*, Cousin focuses almost exclusively on qualitative methods and relegates quantitative methods to occasional references. Although Cousin is at pains to explain that neither method is better than the other, and that a triangulated approach is preferable in many cases, the absence of in-depth explorations of quantitative methods implies the contrary.

I found this book to be extremely easy to read and despite being familiar with the majority of research methods

included, I learned something new from every section. Cousin's writing style flows in a pleasing and supportive way, leading the reader through the often complex and challenging milieu of research methods. This is an excellent book which I recommend highly to all members of the research community, in particular to our University's Learning and Teaching Fellows, who are, by and large, research novices, and for whom this text will offer a stress-free entry route into the world of research.

**Mark Warnes** is Senior Researcher, INSPIRE, at Anglia Ruskin University.

## Information for Contributors

The Editorial Committee of *Educational Developments* welcomes contributions on any aspect of staff and educational development likely to be of interest to readers.

Submission of an article to *Educational Developments* implies that it has not been published elsewhere and that it is not currently being considered by any other publisher or editor.

For more information please contact the SEDA office via email: [office@seda.ac.uk](mailto:office@seda.ac.uk)



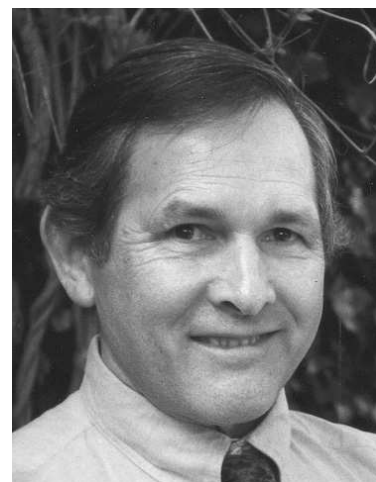
# Obituary – Brian Smith

Brian Smith – an important member of SEDA in its early days – died in May and a Memorial Service was held at Sussex University in October, which Jill Brookes and I attended on behalf of SEDA. Brian had been involved in staff development for some time before SEDA was formed in 1993 through his role as Academic Teaching and Learning Coordinator at Sussex, and he served on both the Publications Committee and the Executive for many years. He published and kept up to date 'The Smith Guide to Educational Development Units', which became the vital reference book for those actively growing this new profession. SEDA valued his work and advice so highly that it elected him to its Roll of Honour.

Sussex received its Royal Charter in 1961, and its first students were taught in houses in Brighton while the campus was being built. Brian was appointed to the Physics Department in 1962 and the Physics building opened in 1963! It is easy to imagine how exciting this time must have been for someone like Brian, and at the memorial service, Asa Briggs – who had been appointed Professor of History in 1961 and later became Vice-Chancellor after John Fulton – spoke warmly of Brian's involvement in building and forming the institution; and it was clear from the people at the Memorial Service just how extensive his contribution had been to the University over the main part of his working life. He had been trying to complete a history of the university, but the onset of Parkinson's Disease pushed this beyond his reach, even with his use of speech recognition software.

Brian was an innovator in teaching methods at Sussex, became an accreditor with the ILTHE, and a reviewer for the QAA – but in Management rather than Physics, as his

interests had moved from straight Physics to his 'Science with Management Studies' degree programme. He was also a magistrate for 30 years, and developed a lot of magistrate training in Sussex and London. Liz Shives, who worked with him as an ILT accreditor, said: 'He was a wonderful man to work with – fun, intuitive and deeply committed to moving the agenda forward. It was astonishing how he maintained the level of commitment and volume of work he did when he became ill. There are many lessons about life that I, and others fortunate to have worked with him, have learnt from Brian.' Ranald Macdonald said of him that he 'was a lovely, calm and wise man with an ever-present twinkle in his eye. It was a pleasure knowing and working with him'. I found him very calm and thoughtful, but also playful in the way he could accept risk – which was just what SEDA has always needed. SEDA has made a donation in his memory to the Parkinson's Disease Society.



Brian wrote an interesting piece about his life at Sussex for the *Times Higher* in August 2001 (<http://tinyurl.com/yhbvxlj>).

**James Wisdom**

## Learning and Teaching Fellowships within Communities of Practice: If we let them, will they grow?

**Jennie Jones**, University of Brighton

### Introduction

Like most HE institutions, the University of Brighton (UOB) has a strong commitment to improve the quality of learning and teaching. To help us achieve this aim, in 2007 we introduced a Learning and Teaching Fellowships scheme. A recent research project found that this scheme has helped to enhance learning and

teaching within the University. However, concerns have been raised within the academic community about the effectiveness of similar schemes at other institutions (Skelton, 2009). This article therefore explains how our Fellowship scheme may differ from some others in design and process. It also summarises findings from the research project.

### How is the UOB scheme different?

As with similar schemes at other universities, the purpose of UOB Fellowships is to promote and support developments in teaching, assessment and curriculum design, with the aim of enhancing the quality of student learning. Unlike some other fellowship schemes, the projects we support



A meeting of members of the University of Brighton Learning and Teaching Fellowship community

must also be underpinned by pedagogic research. There is an important strategic reason for the requirement of a research element in our projects. The post-1992 UOB has an increasingly successful research profile; and as a part of our policy, we are keen to encourage staff to engage in teaching which is research informed. In addition, all new Fellows automatically become members of a Fellowship Community of Practice, which regularly meets throughout the course of the Fellowship and continues to meet after the initial projects are finished. We believe that it is these elements of research-underpinned pedagogic development and collaboration that are vital to the success of individual projects and of the scheme itself.

### Fellowships are not just about funding

The amount of money awarded for successful Fellowships is relatively small, approximately £1000, and sometimes this is only enough to fund some aspects of projects. But in addition to their monetary value, Fellowship awards also confer esteem on those who receive them, acting as a token of the value that the University places on these important educational development ventures. As a result, Fellowships are considered to be prestigious by staff. To maintain the sense of prestige attached to the awards, we only fund projects that we judge to be outstanding – approximately 22 each year. All Fellowship proposals are evaluated in terms of innovation, research design and learning and teaching development outcomes. We also encourage Fellowship applicants to see their projects as long-term initiatives involving sustained development.

### How do we promote Fellowships?

Initially, we advertise Fellowships through emails and on the Centre for Learning and Teaching website to all academic staff at UOB three months before the deadline for application submissions. But as well as advertising, word of mouth has also proved to be an influential means of promotion. Some Fellows whose projects have been particularly successful have written articles about their Fellowships in two university publications: *Academic Practices* and *Channel*. Fellows are also invited to present their project outcomes within their own schools and at the University Learning and Teaching Conference which takes place at UOB every summer (<http://staffcentral.brighton.ac.uk/clt/events>).

### How do we know that our Fellowships enhance learning and teaching?

When Fellows talk or write about their individual projects in conferences and publications, the benefits of the scheme to them and their students are evident. However, we wanted to examine how the Fellowship scheme as a whole has enhanced learning and teaching at UOB; and how the Fellows' membership of a community of practice has played a part in this. We therefore conducted a small-scale qualitative research study to explore the impact of University of Brighton Fellowships in 2008. This builds on previous work which focused on Fellowships at Anglia Ruskin (Wisker and Constable, 2005). We adopted an Appreciative Inquiry approach (Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett, 2006), and

chose this methodology for the study because we wanted to find out what aspects of the Fellowships were most effective in enhancing learning and teaching. However, we adapted slightly the traditional Appreciative Inquiry interviewing techniques, as we also wanted to gain insights into any issues or problems encountered by Fellows that may have hindered their projects; and, at the same time, to identify possible ways of overcoming these obstacles in order to generate positive future change.

### How do the Fellowships enhance teaching?

Fellows described a variety of ways in which they said they had developed their teaching during the course of their Fellowships. However, it is notable that this was not generally related to teaching in the 'classroom'. Instead, important benefits that Fellows often talked about in terms of enhancing their practice included developing:

- greater reflectivity in teaching
- increasing awareness of student pastoral issues
- deeper pedagogic knowledge
- more engaging teaching resources.

### How do Fellows and their colleagues develop professionally?

Teaching and professional development occur side by side; and Fellows were able to talk about several aspects of their professional development which had taken place as a result of their projects. For instance, Fellows said that they had developed new research skills; innovative pedagogic research in their field, and a more scholarly identity. The Fellows we interviewed also said their Fellowship work gained recognition from colleagues, and had led to greater opportunities to present at conferences, or write articles. As a result Fellows became more confident as professionals.

The positive effects of the awards were not only limited to Fellows. They also helped to raise the self-esteem of colleagues within the School. Fellows described how their colleagues were becoming more aware of student issues as Fellows disseminated their research findings. Fellows also encouraged other staff to become involved in their projects, and to apply for Fellowships themselves. Some colleagues followed this advice and were as a

result successful in winning awards themselves.

### How do the Fellowships benefit students' learning?

Because this was not a longitudinal or quantitative research study, we are not in a position to know whether the Fellowships had a direct influence on student marks, student retention or on student satisfaction. This would require an additional study. But we can tell you that the Fellows said their work is, and will continue to be, highly beneficial for students' learning and wellbeing. Fellows talked about how their projects were beneficial for students in terms of:

- scaffolding their learning
- increasing their engagement in learning
- improving their communication with peers and lecturers
- encouraging their participation in projects.

### What role do Communities of Practice play?

Once applicants are successful in winning Fellowship awards, they then automatically become members of a Learning and Fellowship community, which meets twice a year and includes members of staff from the Centre for Learning and Teaching. On these occasions, which run for a morning or afternoon, there are separate meetings

for new and more established Fellows. In addition, there is an opportunity for all Fellows to meet and talk informally during lunch and coffee breaks. In the course of the meetings, the Centre for Learning and Teaching staff are able to provide practical advice on different aspects of Fellows' projects, including the design and conduct of research, ethics, and writing for academic publication. Learning and Teaching Fellowship meetings are also an opportunity for Fellows to share practice, offer each other constructive advice, reflect on their projects, and plan ahead. Fellows in the early stages of projects have the chance to meet those who are more experienced, to hear about their experiences and to learn from this process. Fellows who were interviewed often reported that they felt a sense of common ground at these meetings, and were able to collaborate with colleagues with similar interests. Support and advice from staff in the University's Centre for Learning and Teaching were also highly valued.

Figure 1 illustrates how varied Communities of Practice support the success of Learning and Teaching Fellowships at UOB.

### Less strategically formed Communities of Practice

Fellows described other less formally convened Communities of Practice that

support and are supported by their projects. These communities include:

- immediate Fellowship team colleagues
- Fellows' School
- University pedagogic community
- wider external community.

When Fellows worked within teams on projects, they described how they learned to work collaboratively, shared research skills, and benefited from group enthusiasm. The support Fellows received from their School community was also evident. Interviewees said that colleagues, including Heads of School, were motivated to provide this support by the kudos attached to the Fellowship awards. Important aspects of such support included encouragement and sufficient time to work on their projects. Fellows were also able to disseminate their project findings to colleagues. In some cases, as colleagues became more aware of student perspectives and concerns raised by this dissemination, they were prompted to consider changes in teaching programmes and school procedures. In addition, Fellows felt that greater recognition from the University pedagogic community resulted in help and advice being offered by colleagues across UOB. Many Fellows have also formed links with the wider external community, which has supported their projects' longer-term development, and led to opportunities to disseminate their research at conferences, or in publications, as described above.

### Snowball effect: Fellowships within communities of practice

Although Fellowships at UOB often begin as relatively small-scale projects, the research shows that many have grown as they have progressed. In the future they are likely to have a substantial positive impact on students, staff and processes within the University, and the wider external community. Some Fellowship projects may also lead to further internally or externally funded projects on a larger scale, such as the NTFS scheme. The various Communities of Practice described above are closely related in contributing to the success of Fellowships in all of these ways, and so play their part in contributing to

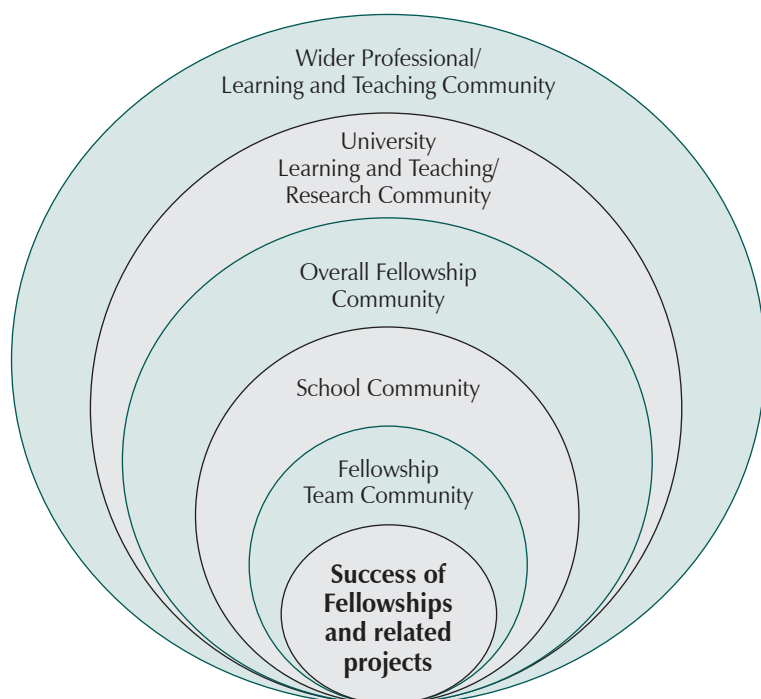


Figure 1 Learning and Teaching Fellowships within Communities of Practice



sustaining the future development of the projects.

### Factors which may hinder the development of Fellowships

We used Appreciative Inquiry questioning techniques in the research interviews, because we wanted to identify the most positive aspects of Fellows' experiences. But we also adapted slightly the traditional Appreciative Inquiry approach to create opportunities for interviewees to talk about any problems they had encountered. When Fellows did talk about problems, we asked them how they thought these might be resolved, either by themselves, by us (the Centre for Learning and Teaching), or by the University. Research participants did identify some factors that can undermine the Fellowship process, summarised below:

1. Money provided by the Fellowship scheme could not buy out sufficient amounts of Fellows' time from other professional responsibilities, unless they had extra support from heads of school or department managers
2. Some Fellows were obliged to work on Fellowships on top of other competing workloads and priorities. This was difficult, and could undermine the progress of their projects
3. Fellows sometimes found the institutional ethical clearance procedures frustrating. In some cases this slowed down their projects considerably.

Some Fellows felt that they had learnt from the ethical clearance procedure and would ensure their research design was more rigorous in the future. Some felt they needed more time in order to conduct their projects and complete them, but did not comment much on how that might be achieved. Perhaps this is closely related to wider concerns about workloads which need to be addressed at institutional level and across the HE sector as a whole.

### Conclusion: If we let them, they will grow

Fellowships schemes, such as ours, can be effective in enhancing learning and teaching. At present, we cannot be certain that students have increased

their assessment scores or that more students are staying on as a result of Fellowships. However, the Fellows are convinced that their projects have these beneficial effects and we will examine this in the next stage of our research project. What our current research shows is that our scheme has numerous benefits. In particular, a Learning and Teaching Fellowships scheme that is operated within a Communities of Practice context enhances:

- The teaching of Fellows
- The professional development of Fellows and their colleagues
- Student learning and wellbeing
- Collaboration and the sharing of good pedagogic practice
- The sustainability of projects and associated developments.

Local and external Communities of Practice play different roles in supporting the Fellowships. Local communities are particularly supportive at the beginning, and throughout the course of projects, and aid project dissemination within UOB. Wider communities play a crucial role in the professional development of staff: they support external research dissemination, networking, and lead to possible new projects. All communities help to sustain Fellowships and any associated developments which take place as a result.

The University of Brighton research shows how Communities of Practice can help to overcome challenges that may hinder the progress of Fellowship projects. One important aspect is the support provided by some Fellows' School colleagues in finding sufficient time for Fellows to carry out their work. But it is important to note that this support is not always offered, and the lack of time to conduct projects in some Schools is still an issue which needs addressing within our university and across the sector.

The question still remains: are Fellowship Schemes good value for money? The research described here provides strong evidence that research-underpinned Learning and Teaching Fellowships, which focus on pedagogic development, can be effective when they operate within a Communities of Practice context.

We propose that Learning and Teaching Fellowships of this kind are a good return on investment, since they are shown to be worthwhile in all the ways described in this article. In addition, the collaborative relationships between Fellowships and the informally convened Communities which support them often develop of their own accord, requiring little practical or financial support from the University. The projects can be seen as small seeds when they begin. With a small amount of nurturing from the University and us (the Centre for Learning and Teaching), they can grow and flourish to a level of sustainable pedagogic excellence.

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## Notice to Publishers

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# Editorial

This issue contains a number of key articles which focus upon the current state and future direction of higher education in the UK. In addition to providing an update on the wide range of scrutiny by various ministers, committees and bodies, the articles point to potential areas of activities which will need substantial input from us as educational developers. The early signs are that higher education will face challenging times as the UK comes out of recession. Indeed, as I write this editorial, the Department of Business, Innovations and Skills has issued 'Higher Ambitions – the future of universities in a knowledge economy' – see details of the associated SEDA event, on this page. Students and student bodies appear to have realised the effects of compounding interest on student loans and are actively lobbying for the scheme to be axed. The indicators are that this is extremely unlikely and that whoever is in power after the next election will allow an increase in fees. Even so, there will be a price to pay since, as can be seen in the Select Committee Report, there is a perception that students are not receiving value for money. In our lead article James Wisdom explores the likely consequences for educational developers.

SEDA is an organisation which is at the forefront of initiating and leading change in post-compulsory education across a range of institutions and organisations. Indeed, SEDA led the way, with the Teacher Accreditation Scheme, in establishing a framework for the initial formation of those teaching in higher education. Subsequently this was extended, to those loosely described as educational developers, through the Fellowships Scheme. As an organisation which values development through a process of evaluation and reflection, SEDA is one which embraces the change process. Over the last eighteen months the SEDA Executive Committee has been reviewing the internal structures related to our core community of developers. The community has significantly increased in size and range of work – so much so that many may not initially have appreciated that they are now part of this extended community. In order to support those working in educational development SEDA has, for many years, provided a highly valued and popular Summer School. More recently this was extended to include two qualification awards – Supporting Educational Change and Leading Educational Change – which, upon successful completion, give direct entry to Associate Fellowship.

The review has been broad in range and will ultimately lead to a new professional structure for those seeking recognition for their experience, work and continuing development. Now in the final stages of formulation, discussions are taking place across our community. The final structure of the revised Fellowship Scheme will be announced at the start of the next calendar year along with details about transition arrangements. The revised structure will be better aligned to our enlarged, enhanced and enriched community of practitioners and will include a new grade of Senior Fellow. The post-nominals Associate Fellow and Fellow will continue but with a revised set of criteria and qualification routes based upon a recognition of the changing basis of our community of practitioners.

The life achievements of Brian Smith are valued and recognised in the obituary published in this edition. Brian was a key figure within SEDA during the early stages of its formation, eventually putting significant effort into the organisation's achieving charitable status.

**Tony Brand**

## News from SEDA

### Professional Development Framework (SEDA-PDF)

Congratulations to the University of Windsor, Canada and Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine who have recently been recognised as providers of SEDA-PDF. We extend our congratulations to Barbara Workman, Middlesex University and Peter Lake, Sheffield Hallam University, who have recently passed the Leading Educational Change (Professional Qualification Course).

### SEDA Fellowships

SEDA wishes to congratulate Elaine Fisher, University of Bath and Barbara Newland, Bournemouth University, who have recently been awarded Associate Fellowship of SEDA.

### Forthcoming events

- **The Framework for Higher Education and the Review of Institutional Audit: implications for the educational development community**  
14 January 2010, London
- **SEDA Summer School 2010: Supporting Educational Change**  
20-22 July 2010, Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Great Park
- **Supporting and Leading Educational Change: courses and professional qualifications 2010**  
Dates of our 2010 courses are now confirmed:  
Supporting Educational Change (Introductory Online Course)  
19 April-28 May 2010  
Leading Educational Change (Introductory Online Course)  
17 February-26 March 2010  
Supporting Educational Change (Professional Qualification Course)  
10 May-2 August 2010  
Leading Educational Change (Professional Qualification Course)  
19 April-12 July 2010

See [www.seda.ac.uk](http://www.seda.ac.uk) for more information and a booking form.