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The new SEDA Fellowships scheme

Stephen Bostock, Keele University

What are SEDA Fellowships?

In 1992, SEDA developed the teacher accreditation scheme for university programmes for new teaching staff, thus providing a national teaching qualification for the participants. This raised the question, if SEDA was providing a qualification for university teachers, what qualification did those accrediting the programmes for SEDA have? There was a need for a qualification for staff and educational developers and the SEDA fellowship scheme was launched in 1994. There are currently 33 full fellowship holders (FSEDAs), with 40 registered for the scheme. From the start it was available internationally and there have been a significant number of fellowship holders from outside the UK. It remains the only professional qualification available to educational/academic developers.

As an early Handbook states (Castley, 1997), a SEDA fellowship is:

- The professional qualification most relevant to the work of staff and educational developers
- A qualification based on achieving specific Objectives central to the work
- A qualification based on demonstrating adherence to SEDA's professional Values
- An indication of ongoing professional development.

When someone registered for the scheme, he or she was given an existing fellowship holder as a mentor and proceeded to develop a portfolio that was then assessed by two other fellowship holders, who conducted an interview. While every fellowship holder that I know found it hard work, and the interview was inevitably stressful to a degree, it was also a hugely developmental process: not merely collecting or generating the evidence for the portfolio but reflecting on it in writing, in the mentoring, and in the interview.

> *'The Fellowship is not merely an assertion of professional competence. To undertake it is to "practise what we preach". Reflective practice is at the heart of the values of staff and educational development.'* (Beaty, 2003)

The fellowship award is a 'best practice' scheme, not a 'minimum competence' scheme. It is not a long-service medal, or automatic by the accumulation of experience. It is also not a one-off certificate: good standing is maintained by submitting annual reports on one's professional development, and an annual continuing professional development event is held before the annual conference. Fellows have a commitment to mentor or assess later fellowship registrants.

Associate Fellowships

However, while the numbers in the scheme in the 1990s were healthy, the process of gaining a fellowship (FSEDA) was daunting and, in some cases, prolonged. The

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scheme was clearly not going to encompass a significant proportion of SEDA' s membership. The fellowship was intended to be a community, but it would be a small one. In contrast, the population of academic developers was growing and becoming more diverse, and the original fellowship did not seem relevant to, or achievable by, many of them.

To widen the scope of the fellowship, the associate fellowship (AFSEDA) was developed in 1997. This required a reduced number of examples of evidence for many of the scheme's required Outcomes, and did not require a demonstration of two of the Outcomes (initiating advances in theory or practice, and being an advocate for staff or educational development). Unfortunately, this 'subset' AFSEDA scheme did not attract its intended audience and it only awarded two associate fellowships.

The fellowship scheme was clearly important and it did not ossify. In 2002, with Helen King as its chair, the Fellowships Committee undertook a review of the whole scheme. As a result, the requirements were simplified but the essentials of the process remained – individual mentoring, portfolio production and assessment with an interview. The revised version was approved in June 2003 by the SEDA Executive and has been in place until December 2009.

The Professional Development Framework

Meanwhile, the 'teacher accreditation' scheme had been replaced by the Professional Development Framework (PDF). When it was formed, the Institute for Learning and Teaching in HE, and then its successor the HE Academy, were given the remit for national accreditation of initial teacher development programmes. SEDA's activity in teacher accreditation thus declined but, responding to the growing need for initial and continuing professional development beyond initial teacher development, SEDA created a new, generic framework – the PDF. Within this, SEDA could, and did, develop and operate a number of national accreditation schemes for a wide range of roles. By 2008, the PDF Committee had developed 16 'named awards' (Pilkington, 2007), each one operating in an analogous manner to the earlier teacher accreditation scheme. Examples of named awards are Embedding Learning Technologies, Action Research, External Examining, and Enhancing Research Practice. Each named award can be used to accredit different programmes (or processes or pathways) in many institutions. There are currently 71 such programmes accredited (or 'recognised') in 26 institutions, with many more registered for the process.

The requirements for each named award are the SEDA professional Values, plus four 'Core Outcomes' of reflection on one's professional development (Table 1), plus a number of Specialist Outcomes particular to that named award. To be recognised by SEDA, a programme must show that its participants will be able to demonstrate all of these. Unsurprisingly, the fellowships scheme also required demonstration of the same SEDA Values and the Core Outcomes (in a different wording), but at the time fellowships were not part of the PDF.

SEDA Values
A) An understanding of how people learn
B) Scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice
C) Working in and developing learning communities
D) Working effectively with diversity and promoting inclusivity
E) Continuing reflection on professional practice
F) Developing people and processes
Core Outcomes
1. Identify your own professional development goals, directions or priorities
2. Plan for your initial and/or continuing professional development
3. Undertake appropriate development activities
4. Review your development and practice, and the relations between them

Table 1 Values and Core Outcomes of all PDF named awards

When participants pass these PDF-recognised programmes, they each receive from SEDA a certificate for that named award – a professional qualification. Each year SEDA issues around 600 such certificates.

The institutional programmes or pathways recognised by SEDA PDF do not need to be courses; they can be collections of activities or schemes of internal accreditation. If they are courses, there is no requirement for them to provide academic credits. This makes recognition using the PDF very flexible, making it simple to recognise SEDA's own courses for an award, including ones that give entry to the fellowship, as we shall see.

As the PDF Committee developed named awards for different roles, it became clear that one or more named awards were needed to provide qualifications for staff and educational (or academic) developers, and that the first and possibly only programme provider would be SEDA itself. Two named awards were developed with funding from the HE Academy: Staff and Educational Development; and Leading Staff and Educational Development. A SEDA Professional Development Course (SEDA, 2009) was developed for each named award, aimed at a national audience. The courses were recognised by the PDF Committee, with the SEDA Fellowships Committee being the 'institutional' provider. The significant point here is that, as well as providing a PDF Certificate (PDF-SED or PDF-LSED) to successful participants since 2003, these courses also gave entrance to the fellowship, replacing the AFSEDA scheme by portfolio, described earlier. These two Professional Development Courses have been successful, running six times in total, with 47 participants of whom 21 have become AFSEDAs. This was one stimulus for the current revision of the scheme for full fellowship, described next.

Fellowships for the new context

In the years since the fellowships scheme began, much has changed in UK higher education. Educational developers are more numerous, varied and (sometimes) influential. There is now even more need for a professional qualification for academic developers, but it needs to be attractive to a larger and more diverse audience than the current scheme is proving. Also, in the spirit of the initial fellowship scheme, it should not be simply an awarded certificate but a membership of a professional community committed to continuing development. A revision of the fellowship is needed to address the new context while retaining the status and developmental nature of the original scheme.

Following earlier discussions led by the SEDA Co-chairs, an Awards and Courses group met prior to the June 2009 Executive Committee, which approved the group's recommendations and set up another working group to develop the fellowship scheme further. This met in the summer and its recommendations for a new scheme were largely accepted by the September Executive Committee. The 2009 annual fellowship CPD event was a discussion of the new scheme, led jointly by the chairs of the PDF Committee (myself) and the Fellowships Committee (Clare Pickles). A workshop at the November conference, led by myself and Ruth Pilkington, also discussed the scheme. At both events the response to the outline scheme was positive. The December 2009 Executive Committee made decisions on the process of developing the new scheme and on transition arrangements to support registrants on the old scheme.

In outline, there are to be three types of fellowship – associate fellow, fellow and senior fellow:

- A new associate fellowship award will be developed, to be attractive to and simple for many SEDA members to undertake. It is aimed at early career developers or those in a part-role involving academic development such as departmental learning and teaching co-ordinators
- The current associate fellowship award will be relabelled as the fellowship award; SEDA's current PDF-recognised Professional Qualification Courses will continue but will in future thus provide the FSEDA award rather than the AFSEDA award
- The current full fellowship award (FSEDA) will be redeveloped as a new, senior fellowship SFSEDA based on revised Specialist Outcomes. All three fellowship awards will use the SEDA Values and the PDF Core Outcomes.

As all three awards will be recognised using the PDF, the quality assurance of these programmes will be managed by the PDF Committee rather than by the Fellowships Committee, which has closed. The PDF named awards to be used to recognise these fellowship programmes/pathways provide the Specialist Outcomes that participants will need to demonstrate to gain the fellowship awards (Table 2), together with the Values and Core Outcomes (Table 1). In the PDF recognition of programmes (or pathways) in other organisations, the programme outcomes need to be mapped convincingly to the named award Specialist Outcomes. In the case of SEDA's own programmes/pathways for fellowship awards, they are the same as the named award Specialist Outcomes (and Values and Core Outcomes) – a perfect mapping.

While the outcomes to be demonstrated to gain each of the fellowship awards are, therefore, now decided, many other details of support and assessment need to be developed for the new AFSEDA and the SFSEDA before they are ready for PDF recognition and then use. On the other hand, the two existing PDF named awards (Staff and Educational Development, and Leading Staff and Educational Development) and the current professional qualification courses recognised under them, remain essentially unchanged, except that they will award FSEDA instead of AFSEDA. These will be the normal routes to full fellowship in future. An additional individual assessment route to (new) FSEDA will be possible where appropriate.

Professor Ranald Macdonald FSEDA was asked by the December Executive Committee to lead the detailed development of the new AFSEDA and SFSEDA schemes, with a view to launch by the 2010 annual conference. The new AFSEDA scheme will be a process rather than a programme, with a short submission to an assessment panel, addressing the new AFSEDA award Specialist and Core Outcomes, and Values (Tables 1 and 2).

For the new senior fellowship there is a paramount need to retain the spirit and status of the original fellowship award,

Old fellowship	New fellowship
Fellow, FSEDA Outcomes 1. Adopt an appropriate approach to the planning, design, delivery and evaluation of a range of staff and educational development activities 2. Demonstrate expertise in three specialist topics 3. Have a critical and scholarly approach to your own professional practice and development 4. Demonstrate a commitment to the underpinning SEDA Values 5. Have actively promoted staff and educational development	**Senior Fellow, SFSEDA** PDF specialist outcomes a) Reflect critically on your practice and attainments in staff and educational development in multiple contexts b) Contribute to the improvement of education through staff and educational development c) Give service to the community of developers d) Contribute to the body of professional knowledge and practice
Associate Fellow, AFSEDA Current specialist outcomes for PDF-Staff and Educational Development (those for Leading SED are similar): a) Identify goals for staff and educational development processes b) Plan staff and educational development processes towards achievement of these goals c) Facilitate processes to achieve the agreed goals d) Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and the acceptability of the development processes e) With the client, identify appropriate follow-up development activity	**Fellow, FSEDA** Unchanged apart from the fellowship name
None exists	**Associate Fellow, AFSEDA** a) Implement a staff or educational development activity b) Evaluate the activity and its implications for your continuing professional development

Table 2 The Specialist Outcomes of the PDF named awards leading to the new fellowships

while developing an effective new process that addresses the assessment of the new SFSEDA Specialist Outcomes, the Core Outcomes and the Values, along with support for registrants. Their claim for their achievements against the Core and Specialist Outcomes, and the Values, will be submitted to an assessment panel. The fellowships external examiner role will be retained.

Existing fellowship holders and registrants

What are arrangements for existing fellowship holders? Existing AFSEDAs will be allowed an automatic change of award to the new FSEDA, because that scheme's outcomes have not changed. Existing FSEDAs will not have an automatic change to SFSEDA but will be provided with a 'fast-track' process to address the new SFSEDA Specialist Outcomes. Details will be provided later this year.

Existing registrants for a fellowship will not be disadvantaged. Until the end of 2011, they can complete their current fellowship scheme, now being managed by Peter Kahn FSEDA. Alternatively, they have the option of switching to one of the new schemes.

For all fellowships there will remain a requirement for sharing annual reflections on our continuing professional development, but the current process will be reviewed. While retaining the principle of peer review within a community of fellowship holders, if the new AFSEDA does indeed attract large numbers, then an online medium for collecting and sharing reports seems likely.

SEDA Fellowships in the new UK landscape

If you work in the UK HE sector, the new scheme will seem familiar – resembling the HE Academy's fellowships based on the three levels of the UK Professional Standards Framework for university teachers. Indeed, the two existing PDF awards (SED and LSED) for courses leading to the new FSEDA, have already been mapped against level 2 of the UKPSF (Pilkington, 2007). However, teaching and academic development have important differences as well as similarities. Furthermore, the UKPSF is currently being reviewed. SEDA's new fellowship has been developed to recognise best practice in academic development. While the new scheme has some parallels with that for university teachers, it is being designed by SEDA for the benefit of our members, and of the national and international academic development community.

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Acknowledgements: this is an account of work by many members of the SEDA Executive and the PDF Committee; it has been improved by comments from Ranald Macdonald, Tony Brand and James Wisdom.

Dr Stephen Bostock FSEDA NTF is Head of the Learning Development Unit at Keele University and currently Chair of the PDF Committee. *(This account follows Executive Committee on 25 February 2010.)*

Enabling learning and teaching research to inform strategic development and decision-making: institutional research in practice!

Alison Halstead, Aston University

Introduction

This article highlights some of the challenges for senior management in the next few years and stresses the importance of the management information they receive to ensure that they are able to make strong and robust decisions. It then presents some of the key changes that Aston's new Strategic Plan and Learning and Teaching Strategy brought about, and through three examples illustrates how the new structures are enabling staff and students to feed into strategic planning through evaluation and research. The article concludes with some of the ongoing challenges for management.

Context

After a decade or more of well-funded higher education we are all aware that the landscape is changing. The recent white paper 'Higher Ambitions' (BIS, 2009) made it clear that there will be further challenges: a major push to genuinely widen participation, to provide lifelong learning, to provide greater support for the local business community whilst maintaining our first-class research in a climate of less funding! There is no question that we are about to enter an era when some institutions will decline and perhaps even close, some will merge and others will continue to grow stronger.

So what are the critical factors that determine these outcomes and what can we do to influence the situation? Keys to success are to ensure that the morale of the staff and the quality of their experience are maintained or enhanced during this period, and that those who want to are proactively involved in finding solutions. How can this be achieved? Clearly the situation is complex, but I believe one of the most important factors is the strength, cohesion and confidence of the senior teams, both at University and School or Faculty level. As senior managers we are responsible for the strategic planning and decision-making. In the next few years we will need to be taking big decisions about what we are good at and should do more of, and what we need to stop doing. We will need market research to identify the areas best suited for expansion. As senior leaders we will need to be extremely strategic in all aspects of our work and, if we are not, it will become very apparent in the morale of our staff and hence the student experience and ultimately the performance of our institutions.

However, we can only be strategic and successful in our decision-making if the management information that we are receiving is accurate, thoroughly analysed and any recommendations are fully informed.

Higher Education Statistic Agency plus!

All Higher Education Institutions have rich sources of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Quality Assurance Agency about the whole student life cycle, from statistics about outreach, recruitment, retention, progression, achievement and graduation, to module reviews, course reviews and peer reviews. Individually this is often supplemented by in-house data that is brought together into one office, but more often data resides in a range of locations and its use in strategic planning can be quite variable. HESA data is good, but always two years out of date and trends can change over this period. Senior management needs the most relevant and reliable data.

Quantitative data alone is insufficient and for senior teams to have a complete and well-informed picture, it is important to fully understand why the changes are happening and what options are available. Specific internal research projects can gather much more qualitative data through focus groups and targeted questionnaires. These provide a greater insight into the reality, from the staff and students, of the institution and along with the data, the senior team then has a much more complete view against which strategic decisions can be made.

This is where Institutional Research (IR) comes into its own and for the foreseeable future in Higher Education in the UK, I believe it has become crucial to strategic planning and successful decision-making. The benefits and importance of having robust IR is not at all new and the USA have a well-established process in place, but it has only recently started to be developed in the UK. There have been two recent national conferences on the topic (Southampton Solent, 2008, and Sheffield Hallam, 2009), with another one due to take place in Dublin this year. The aim of these meetings has been to share practice and develop an IR framework.

It is clear that a lot of excellent work is happening. I particularly liked the paper presented at the Southampton Solent conference by Tansy Jessop (2008) from the University of Winchester – 'From the "right stuff" to the "real stuff"' – in which she wrote about how pedagogic research can deepen the way staff approach learning and teaching. Winchester University has managed to move its Learning and Teaching Committee from a 'paper receiving' to an 'action centred' one. This is very similar to the way in which I have structured and operate the committee at Aston.

There is extensive scope for IR to inform all aspects of a University Strategic plan, but as the Executive Leader for Learning and Teaching Innovation at Aston University, I will focus in this article on how we have started to involve the staff and students in evaluation and pedagogic research to inform practice, learning and teaching planning and decision-making in this area. I will also comment a little on the structures and processes that are in place to ensure that the right information comes to an appropriate place.

Aston University: The Strategic Plan

It is important that there is clear vision and mission within an Institution. *Aston 2012* provides this and a clearly articulated direction (Aston University, 2008). We are also fortunate in being small (less than 10,000 students) with only four faculties, all focused on business, industry and the professions. Currently thirteenth in the league tables, we excel at widening participation with nearly 40% of our intake coming from the lowest socioeconomic groups. *Aston 2012* puts staff and students at the centre of our aim to be an inspirational place and to be a top-ten institution. These opening sentences from the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Julia King, make this very clear:

> *'Higher education is a highly competitive, international marketplace and over the next five years all universities will face some significant challenges. Aston is well placed to respond to these developments. We have real strength in our high quality staff and students. Our programmes are well aligned to the needs of the 21st Century and our research strengths address priority areas for business and society. We are also hugely proud of our track record in widening participation.'*
> (Aston University, 2008)

Implementation of the Learning and Teaching aspects of the Plan

At the heart of the learning and teaching objectives of the Plan is the creation of a new centre to lead the research and development of innovative practice in learning and teaching. One of its main objectives is to raise the national and international profile of the excellent student learning experience at Aston. The centre is to achieve this in partnership with staff and students by supporting research, external dissemination and pedagogic publications across the University. It provides the academic leadership for the learning and teaching programme for staff new to Aston, which has a research module that requires a short publishable output, and it has developed a work-based MRes in pedagogical research leading to doctoral opportunities.

An additional key role is in the dissemination of internal practice, at Aston and partner institutions. It is tasked with understanding student performance issues and implementing solutions. I lead the Centre with the three Heads – Curriculum and Learner Development, Media and Learning Technologies and Research all reporting directly to me. Meeting as a collegiate group on a regular basis enables ideas, progress and challenges to be discussed in an open and productive way.

Responsibility for the development and evaluation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy resides with the Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC). It oversees the operational effectiveness of the new Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice (CLIPP), all University learning and teaching initiatives, the development and effective use of the virtual learning environment and the other emerging technologies that support flexible and independent learning, as well as developments in effective assessment and feedback.

Meetings discuss issues and challenges arising, and decide on action. Paperwork is received and commented on through our virtual learning environment. If there are consultation papers, I will draft them and place them in the VLE to allow input from colleagues over a few weeks. As the Chair, I am able to take matters arising from the committee straight to the Executive leadership for decisions. For effective strategic planning it is a basic requirement to have clear systems and processes. When there are not clear lines of communications and decision-making upwards, it can be extremely frustrating for all involved.

The CLIPP Heads chair the Curriculum and Learner and Learning Technology working groups. Membership of both the committee and working groups is composed of representatives across all departments and faculties and the Student Guild.

Following approval of the Strategy by Senate, the Vice-Chancellor appointed a researcher to work for the senior team. The occupant of this post resides in CLIPP and works with the Learning and Teaching research team. She evaluates and monitors the key performance indicators, analyses the results from the National Student Survey (NSS) before providing them to School Learning and Teaching Committees. She similarly evaluates the results from the Postgraduate Research Experience survey (PRES) and is contributing to the development of the organisation. When first appointed she was located with finance and quite isolated from other colleagues engaged with similar issues. Her relocation has provided mutual benefits.

You might be asking yourself, what is the evidence of success? Attendance at the meetings is consistently high. For a 30-strong committee the LTC typically has over 90% attendance. My aim is to empower the committee and the working groups so that they are able to bring forward issues, ideas and challenges from the learning community. All members are given the opportunity at the end of each meeting to put any issue on the table. Now that we have a clear direction and helpful systems and processes, how do they enable strategic planning to be informed by evaluation and pedagogic research?

How does it work in practice?

In this section I will share three examples to illustrate the operation of the system and processes that are in place, to demonstrate how by having clear processes and procedures it can enable the learning community to be directly involved in the decision-making.

Selecting a University-wide personal learning system

For such a small university it is financially and strategically imperative that we agree about the main technology platforms such as the Virtual Learning Environment and personal learning systems. This enables staff both to share their practice across the University and for the service to be supported. In 2008-2009, Schools were experimenting with e-portfolios for a variety of purposes, from e-entry, personal development planning, placements and professional development. These ideas came forward to LTC in September 2008 through the work plan of the Learning Technologies group. LTC gave support but requested that the pilots should be evaluated and for the group to agree on a preferred system by the next meeting in February 2009. This decision could then feed directly into budget and strategic planning, which starts in March for the budget to found and the necessary support to be put in place. That is exactly what was achieved and in September 2009 a University-wide system was adopted and made available for all students.

Retention

My second example is about understanding retention data fully and this arose at the November 2009 LTC meeting, where the strategic advisor for widening participation, based in the research section of CLIPP, presented the latest Widening Participation report. The HESA data for 2005-2006 to 2006-2007 showed a slight decline in retention rate from 95.2% to 93.6%, which may have passed through unnoticed but for the additional internal data for 2007-2008, which revealed a further drop to 90.5%. This indicated that non-continuation has almost doubled in three years and, although non-continuation rates are within the benchmark for young students, this increase is of concern. Non-continuation rates for mature students and students from low participation neighbourhoods are not within the benchmarks. Following an interesting and wide-ranging discussion about possible causes and solutions, the outcome was the commissioning of the Learning and Teaching research group to set up a small research project to provide the committee with a greater insight into the issues and an analysis of exactly who is withdrawing. Why? And from which courses? This in turn will enable us to make informed decisions about our local outreach work, entry grades, the pre- and post-enrolment support that is available, and the way in which the courses are delivered, assessed or supported. If the outcomes are available for February 2010, the LTC can have a further discussion and any decisions taken can be considered during the 2010-2011 strategic and budget planning cycle.

Creating an inspirational learning community

The overall aim of the *Aston 2012* strategy is to make the University an inspirational place that staff and students want to come back to. The Learning and Teaching Strategy that was developed for 2008-2012 was 'creating an inspirational learning community'. As I mentioned earlier, an objective for CLIPP was to encourage staff working in the organisation to engage in learning and teaching research via a Master's by Research in Pedagogical Practice or a Doctorate route. Since September 2008, when the group came together, there have been four enrolments for PhDs from staff within the University and our partner organisations – on Peer Mentoring, Plagiarism, 14-19 Engineering Education, Leadership in the Academies – and we are having discussions with five more individuals. All want to research topics within the learning and teaching experience at Aston and all will be a source of data which will enrich the information that is available to assist our planning and decision-making.

What are the messages and what are the challenges?

I think that central learning and teaching academic units play a crucial role in building a learning community, and in leading and participating in pedagogical research on key learning and teaching issues that will keep senior managers abreast and informed about the wisdom coming from current research, development and practice. It shocks and saddens me to see the numbers of these centres that are starting to be culled as the Teaching Quality Enhancement and Centres of Excellence funding expires. It reminds me of the way in which Industry was once known for cutting research and development in times of difficulty! To me, there has never been a better time to invest in centres that are clear about their academic role, are proactive and accountable for building the learning community, and lead the cross-university pedagogical research 'with purpose for practice' alongside staff and students. I believe staff in such centres must teach, supervise PhD students and provide academic leadership in their area of specialism. They should encourage staff to take risks, and teach and research alongside them. The ultimate aim is to assist in the creation of the best staff and hence student experience of higher education in the 21st century.

I am not quite sure what model of centre David Gosling (2009) would say this aligns with in his recent paper reviewing the evolution of educational and academic development centres. I think it is a blended managerial and academic model that has a clear vision, mission and leadership. It is enabled to make a difference, but with that comes accountability and a need to be able to demonstrate the impact of the centre on the staff and student experience.

Finally, what do I see as the key challenges for me in enabling the University to create an inspirational learning community by 2012?

1) Making staff in the whole institution aware of the changes that have taken place and the benefits to them.
2) Ensuring that the pedagogical research outputs are communicated to staff in subject-discipline helpful ways to answer the questions 'What will it do for me? What will this do for my students?'
3) Ensuring that the pedagogical outputs are communicated to my Executive colleagues to enable them to see the strategic impact on the long-term success of the Institution.

4) To make sure that as a senior leader I continue to walk the talk, listen and most importantly hear what staff and students are saying.
5) Continuing to lead the Centre confidently, robustly and supportively ensuring that our work is all with purpose for practice.

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SEDA Seminar – The Framework for HE and the QAA Institutional Review

James Wisdom, HE Consultant, and **Julie Hall,** Roehampton University

This seminar was held on 14 January 2010 at the Institute of Education, London, with the kind support of the Centre for Higher Education Studies. Thirty people attended, representing a range of institutions. It was set up in response to the outcomes of the public debate on HE in 2009 – the Select Committee Report into Students and Universities and the Government's response, 'Higher Ambitions' (Peter Mandelson's framework for HE in the next 15 years) and the forthcoming review into the quality assurance process for England.

Stephen Marston, Director General, Universities and Skills, BIS, opened the session by focusing on those aspects of 'Higher Ambitions' which were especially relevant to educational developers. He explained that the delay in publication had been in part because Peter Mandelson takes a close personal interest in the higher education responsibilities of his department. Mandelson is especially interested in two aspects – promoting fair access and widening participation, and the relations between higher education and a knowledge-based, high value-added economy. The former supports the document's emphasis on broadening and diversifying the range of types and modes of qualifications (as does the Grant Letter to HEFCE on 22 December 2009). The stress on the importance of information for students about their studies is also part of this approach.

Stephen used the phrase 'characteristics, capabilities and skills' when considering the personal development and employability of students when they graduate, and what expectations the business community might be entitled to have, and BIS was asking HEFCE to consider what funding incentives might drive this – for postgraduates as much as for undergraduates.

The push for more information to students arose from a concern that students did not appear to know what to expect, and some (especially in the Humanities) found themselves with lower contact hours than they had anticipated. The Department was genuinely interested in uncovering what characterises a high-quality student experience.

Key points from the subsequent discussion were:

- That the push for the provision of information might rigidify the system at just the time when we need it to be at its most flexible. Already many lecturers see quality frameworks as intractable – adding more detailed information, against a culture of customers and implied contracts, would cause development and enhancement to seize up
- That some students need to be helped away from reliance on being taught to learning for themselves
- That the flow of information to students at the moment is fragmented and complex
- That universities know they have a lot of work to do with their staff to achieve the employability and skills reforms
- That each university must decide what is distinctive about its character and its student experience – contested funding will mean that not every place will offer every thing
- That the current 'reputation' lists might not match the reality of the strongest employer links and employability; but while prestige drives the system, all institutions strive to be like the prestigious
- That 'employers' are not an homogeneous group; their diversity should influence HE in diverse ways.

The rest of the seminar was divided into three sections. What follows is a selection of the issues that were discussed around each theme.

Student Engagement

What kind of information might be provided?

- While accepting the principle that students deserved as much information as possible about what they were letting themselves in for and how they could benefit from the experience, there was general discomfort with how this might be achieved without major, adverse unexpected consequences
- Concern for the possibility of creating what were in effect detailed contracts which might be hard to vary
- The level for which information might be provided – For every module? For the year's course? For the whole programme? For the Department?
- What would most help students? Fine-grained detail, or general principles?
- There is little evidence that students use effectively what information is already provided – why might much more make any difference? Students often choose for wholly other reasons – love, sport, convenience *etc*.

What might be the implications?

- There will be pressure for much more detailed feedback. 'I have done everything in this contract – explain why my marks are not higher'
- How to move from 'what can I expect?' to 'what can I contribute?'
- 'If this course has, on average, 15 hours contact a week, and this has 25, which is better?' 'On which course will I have to work the hardest?'
- For some students (part-time, employed, running families *etc.*) detailed information matters much more than for 18-year-olds living on the campus
- Employers will see the data – what will they prefer? The importance of the Personal Development Portfolio will increase
- What will be the role of current and past students? Web sites carrying critical and testimonial material will matter more in the future.

Educational Development implications:

- There is a huge educational development job to help course teams establish appropriate relationships (of engagement, understanding and collaboration with the course, rather then mere receivers of it)
- Learning to Learn will become more important (again?).

Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

Possible changes to QA procedures:

- The debate last year about comparability of courses and standards revealed most clearly that all the national framework can do is establish a common minimum. Onto that base, each programme has to build its distinctive character and quality, and conceptions of excellence
- Despite the demand for an Ofsted for HE, it is vital that the review supports enhancement as much as assurance
- Other countries do not use external examiners. Should we not be studying different approaches, some of which seem to do very well?

Educational Development implications:

- That we already have a quality framework of levels and standards which is used more as a check list than a driver for enhancement. It is an educational development job to animate it more effectively
- That the focus is going to be much more on modes and standards of assessment, and the work for this represents a major challenge to educational development units, both at institutional and at local level with departments.

Employer Engagement

- University processes, such as validation, are too slow to meet employer requirements – we may have to move to departmental accreditation, or the accreditation of CPD frameworks into which individual and company requirements might be fitted. 'Shell' modules, already accredited, may be another approach
- Employers find approaching universities complex and difficult – 'front of house' arrangements are poor. Perhaps collaborations to generate an agency or clearing house would be more efficient
- How might we best reach those working-class men and women who left education at the first opportunity but who now (perhaps in their late 20s, early 30s) have jobs, families and responsibilities and who would seize the chance to gain appropriate education and qualifications?

Educational Development implications:

- Educational developers have a large agenda if they are to support the development of non-traditional teaching in their institutions. They may need professional development for themselves (one college offers a PGCert in the facilitation of WBL)
- The CPD for, and the professionalisation of, academics (other than in subject enhancement) are poor, which may in part explain their lack of interest in employer CPD
- It looks as though the principles of UEL's School of Independent Study might be coming back on the agenda.

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The Challenge Fund: an initiative supported through TQEF

Fran Beaton, University of Kent

Background

In 2006 the University of Kent published its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2006-2009) and at the same time launched a new initiative to support it: The Challenge Fund. This provided small grants to support teaching initiatives around the university. The rationale for linking the two was to encourage teaching staff – lecturers, postgraduates and postdocs with teaching responsibilities, hourly paid and sessional tutors – to engage with the strategy. The Strategy itself was broadly framed to support and encourage a diverse set of applications linked to local objectives within Schools.

There were five main objectives in the Strategy:

(1) Provide accessible, flexible and diverse learning opportunities that develop student skills, attributes and knowledge which will enhance their employment prospects and engagement with lifelong learning

(2) Enhance systems of student support and guidance that improve student engagement with their studies, ensure student progression and retention and respond effectively to student learning needs

(3) Foster excellence in teaching, and promote the recognition and reward of teaching and learning support roles by enhancing the professional development opportunities for staff

(4) Support continuous improvement in learning, teaching and assessment by reviewing formal quality assurance processes to promote strategic enhancement of the student learning experience

(5) Maintain and develop opportunities for academic collaboration with HE and FE partners to support regional, national and international developments.

The process

A general announcement was made both through the University staff portal and at Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees. Staff seeking advice on draft proposals were also provided with a named contact in the Academic Practice Team (a team of lecturers and senior lecturers responsible both for the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education and co-ordinating academic CPD) based in Kent's central EDU, the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. Staff were asked to complete a short form explaining what they intended to do, the educational rationale and how it articulated with the current Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, an indicative timescale and intended outcomes. A further condition of funding was that projects should be disseminated both within the 'home' School and centrally though a programme of academic CPD events.

In the first year of the Challenge Fund, small grants of between £500 and £1000 were awarded to support projects and initiatives within academic Schools. There were 12 successful applications in 2007-2008, some made by individuals and others by small teams. The low number of successful applications was probably due to several factors:

- The money available was relatively modest compared to other external funding, for example through Subject Centres
- A number of applications were rejected because they were essentially requests to buy equipment/fund travel
- There was no bank of previously successful applications to reflect on, so applicants were uncertain what was expected.

By the end of the first six months of Challenge Fund the Academic Practice Team had built up a modest resource bank of successful projects and had run a number of dissemination events for participants to talk about their work. These were run as part of the Academic Practice Forum, a series of weekly seminars run throughout the academic year. These events were well attended and the materials subsequently posted on the Challenge Fund website. A digest of successful applications was also distributed to Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees, and scope for successful applications to be acknowledged was built into the University's recognition and reward criteria. We also publicised the Challenge Fund to our PGCHE students, many of whom were already engaged in teaching-related projects as part of the course and who welcomed the opportunity of getting funding to take these further. A sizeable minority of the early applicants were Graduate Teaching Assistants who were not in a position to apply for external funding.

The second phase of Challenge Fund ran from Spring 2008–Spring 2009 and successful applications increased to 35. We attribute this increase to:

- Academic Practice staff had been active in promoting the existence of the Fund, raising awareness of existing projects and encouraging individuals and small teams to bid for funding.

We also offered practical support for people who wished to use their project as a basis for bidding for university prizes or for recognition by the relevant Subject Centre
- The scope for individual funding continued, but we also awarded larger grants of up to £5000 for teams of staff, which was attractive to many Schools
- There was a bank of successful projects to draw on from the first round so that people were clearer about the types of projects being supported
- First-round project applicants won University teaching prizes for their work, which raised the profile of recognition.

The projects

Challenge Fund initiatives are, by their nature, diverse and this section aims to give a flavour of this. The School of Law, the School of European Culture and Languages and the School of History have all developed projects to support the development of subject-specific writing skills at undergraduate level. There are projects focusing on: work-based learning, employer engagement and placement learning; a 'Shortcuts' grammar guide for language learners; the learning, teaching and research opportunities offered by the campus kitchen garden, which is now part of the University's Creative Campus initiative. Other projects have developed further; for example, one which explored the experience of dyslexic students in the School of English, once disseminated, resulted in the development of a resource to support Humanities staff.

A growing number of projects focused on educational applications of technology and the advice of Faculty Learning Technologists was critical when evaluating these. Projects include: the development of Digicrits in Architecture; teaching undergraduate philosophy through Second Life; e-portfolios for students on work-based programmes; and the development of e-learning resources for Business French.

Case Study 1: Developing student writing in the disciplines

Concerns over student writing quality and guidance expressed separately by the teaching faculty on the one hand, and undergraduates on the other, have led to the creation of a series of writing workshops aimed at providing students with a technical understanding of essay structure and style, and more generally, a forum for explicitly discussing the purpose of an essay at the undergraduate level of study.

Workshops were divided into three categories: 1) general essay writing skills; 2) referencing and plagiarism; and 3) how to improve your essay.

Each category of workshop was 60 minutes in duration with a maximum of ten students per session. Students were asked to register in advance by email.

Each category of workshop was offered in three different slots over one week: general essay writing (week 17), referencing and plagiarism (week 18), and how to improve your essay (week 21).

Resource material included handouts, Powerpoint presentations, and Hackett's *Nuts and Bolts of College Writing,* made possible by the Challenge Fund grant.

Case Study 2: Acquisition and digitalisation of Primary Sources to use in teaching

In April 2008, I was awarded £1000 from the Challenge Fund to help acquire and digitise primary sources for teaching. The funds helped me cover for research assistance in Peru and Argentina where the relevant material was obtained. These were all audiovisual primary sources related to the abuses of human rights perpetrated by the state and by the insurgencies in these two countries between the 1970s and the 1990s. My two assistants worked under my supervision during a departmentally funded field trip carried out in late April and early May 2008. During the autumn term I spent extra time incorporating these resources into my final-year module *Terror and State Terror in Latin America,* and I covered for this extra time with an honorarium from this award.

Successful Challenge Fund holders offered seminars on their projects in 2009-2010 and will make a substantial contribution to our next Learning and Teaching Conference to be held in March 2010.

What we have learnt from the experience

First and foremost, getting the Challenge Fund to be visible to academic staff was the most difficult part. Teams in UELT – including the Academic Practice Team and the Faculty Learning Technologists – played a key role in publicising this through formal routes (such as Faculty and School committees) and through offering practical support to individuals and small teams. The individual ongoing support was key, especially since the launch of the Challenge Fund coincided with preparations for both the RAE and Institutional Audit. The active support of Deans and Heads of School was equally critical. A combination of these and our general strategy of gentle persuasion, talking to individuals and teams about putting together bids, and the development of a critical mass of interesting projects, certainly paid dividends over time.

We also learned that it is crucial to have an agreed timescale for projects to be completed and disseminated and to stick to it, something which appeared to surprise some recipients of the first tranche of Challenge funding when their requests for more money were turned down.

And the verdict? The Challenge Fund has produced a wealth of interesting and sometimes quirky projects. The impact of the projects has been felt at a number of levels: individually, within teaching teams, across a whole department and at strategic and policy level. For some individuals, it offered an opportunity to initiate and evaluate the impact of a change in their immediate practice. A number of individual projects, such as the project on developing academic writing in the disciplines, originated in a single module or programme and have subsequently been taken up more widely in their home School, or adopted by other Schools. A number of successful Challenge Fund applicants were shortlisted for University Teaching Prizes; three were among the five winners in 2008-2009. At institutional level the proliferation of projects involving e-learning has had a direct impact on the development of the E-Learning Strategy, thus ensuring there is a clear link between this and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. All the projects are available as an open resource for others to draw on as they wish.

> *'I am thrilled by the applicability of the software and am going to use it further. Thanks to you and the Challenge Fund for allowing me to do this.'* (Archaeology)

> *'The overall experience showed us that it is possible, through a short research project, to get a grasp of some core gender issues affecting our students within the Department... The Challenge Fund support also enabled the team to pursue other sources of funding. Nuffield Small Grants were investigated but ultimately rejected in favour of an application to C-SAP.'* (Politics)

> *'Our experiences and the student feedback support the idea of doing more formative assessment using an automated approach... From a pedagogical point of view, this project has opened a number of directions for future work: to develop material for other modules, to develop the level of feedback offered to a higher level than simply providing the correct answer.'* (Mathematics)

> *'The support of the Challenge Fund enabled me to pursue a project, complete it successfully...leading to conference presentations and a publication and helping me further my career in education research.'* (Biosciences)

And the future? In one sense it is uncertain in that a final decision has yet to be made at University level about whether the end of TQEF funding signals also the end of the Challenge Fund. We strongly feel that so much of value has arisen from this work that it should continue to be supported. A key ingredient of the Challenge Fund has been the flexibility for academic staff, programme teams and Schools to respond to, or initiate, change in their subject area. This sense of ownership is central to the success of the scheme. For that reason we hope to maintain the balance of individual and team applications, rather than follow a model of team-bidding in principle. The next twelve months will see the dissemination of projects begun in the last academic year and we hope that the final repository will act as a resource which others can draw on or adapt for their own purposes.

Resources:

University of Kent, Academic Practice Forum (http://tinyurl.com/yfdfnqy)

University of Kent, Challenge Fund (http://tinyurl.com/ygk2bok)

University of Kent, Creative Campus Initiative (http://tinyurl.com/yf7gs5m)

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CETL 'networks': a personal reflection

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I am a recent recipient of a SEDA research and development grant which enabled me to step back and reflect on the creation and impact of the two CETL networks I have been involved with. It also afforded me an opportunity to consider the nature of networks and their relationship to communities of practice as defined in the literature. This article discusses some of the issues encountered and evaluates the impact of the 'networks'.

Networks within the CETL programme

When HEFCE funded the 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, there was an expectation that these CETLs would engage in and with pedagogic research and evaluation, in order to provide evidence for the efficacy of what they proposed to do, to demonstrate impact and to add to the body of pedagogic knowledge. In order to do this, most CETLs created the post of pedagogic researcher or specified staff that would be responsible for pedagogic research and evaluation, supplemented with outside consultants and critical friends. The people appointed had varying levels of expertise and found themselves working either with colleagues from different discipline cultures or in this new disciplinary area (Canning, 2007). They were charged with framing and leading on pedagogic research and evaluation within their CETLs and had varying degrees of autonomy to conduct this research.

Conversations at various events set up to bring people in CETLs together, in order to share practice and experiences, indicated that a large number of pedagogic researchers and evaluators felt isolated and unsupported in their roles within larger CETL teams. They would benefit from cross-CETL connections and forums in which to discuss their work-related concerns, to develop understanding and to aid the discovery of possible solutions. Two of the networks created were the East Midlands CETLs Pedagogic Research and

Evaluation Network (EMCETL-PREN, www.eastmidlandscetls.ac.uk/pren) and the national Internal (to distinguish it from the external programme evaluators) Pedagogic Research and Evaluation Network (CETL-IPREN, http://tinyurl.com/y8lswqd).

Network or community of practice?

While there is a tendency nowadays to describe groupings such as ours as a community of practice, I would hesitate to do so. Although we do seem to have many of the features of a distributed community of practice in that we have shared interests, we share information and knowledge, participation is voluntary, we employ effective means of communication (Daniel, Schwier and McCalla, 2003; Lave and Wenger, 1991), and we seek to develop the shared vocabulary and community objects (joint publications and funded research projects), we have yet to achieve the necessary shared repertoire and reification (Wenger, 1998). The requirements of our day jobs, serving the needs of our CETLs or departments, and the time-limited nature of the CETL programme, appear to inhibit our ability to focus on a common enterprise through which these can be developed. In fact, those of us who founded or instigated these collaborative ventures initially used the term network (and it remained) because we were and are 'a group of people who [aimed to] exchange information *etc.* for professional... purposes' (OED, Thompson, 1996). This seemed to be a suitable word to label our loose grouping of people who were connected through the nature of their work; we could not claim to have any shared understanding or wider purpose other than employment within CETLs and engagement with pedagogic research and evaluation within the programme.

Measuring impact

Actually measuring the impact of a network is a difficult thing to do as not only is there no agreement on the definition and types of networks (Horelli, 2009), but many of the measures used rely on mapping and counting the interactions between nodes (or people) in the network, particularly when dealing with social networks (Dawson, 2008) such as our self-selecting group of pedagogic researchers and evaluators. While this may tell us about collaborations and connections within the network and consequently who the most influential or active member is, it tells us little about impact, especially when, as in our case, a network is comprised of disparate individuals who act independently, contribute in different ways, and draw a variety of benefits from membership dependent on their original motivations for engagement and needs at a particular time.

Both networks conducted short surveys of potential members' needs on their inception, a summary document was compiled and sent to members by the CETL-IPREN co-ordinator, and a spreadsheet of self-identified needs was circulated to those contributing in EMCETL-PREN. These original surveys made it possible to look back at the reasons those working within individual CETLs and responsible for pedagogic research and evaluation gave for a need for a national network of evaluators (later widened to include pedagogic researchers) and a regional grouping. They both indicated a requirement for knowledge-sharing activities to improve understanding about pedagogic research and evaluation including appropriate research methods, both qualitative and quantitative. The networks were seen by those involved as a resource for members in this respect and a route to collaboration. The focus was on sharing expertise and some colleagues on the IPREN committee in particular used the term 'brokerage' to describe the mission of our network: there was a definite push from the HE Academy for us to play a role in capacity-building for the wider CETL community.

CETL-IPREN	EMCETL-PREN
Number of CETLS = 74	= 8
Number of members = 102 (JISCmail), 41 (SAKAI VRE)	= 13
Multiplicity of subject areas and approaches	Dominated by science and engineering
Created as a capacity-building network for the national CETL programme	Created as part of the regional CETL network to support pedagogic researchers and evaluators working within East Midlands regional CETLs
http://tinyurl.com/y8lswqd	www.eastmidlandscetls.ac.uk/pren

Table 1 CETL networks

What was missing, however, was evidence that demonstrated whether or not people had actually gained from their involvement with the networks. Anecdotally, we know they have because of individual feedback received after various events, thanks following successful applications, interviews or project solutions and from committee member comments that particular sessions have helped them in some way. I began by reviewing the numbers of people signed up to use various communications tools employed to facilitate network building and the original intentions behind the creation of the networks (see Table 1). Finally, a short online survey was administered to members of both the CETL-IPREN and EMCETL-PREN networks (questions outlined in Table 2), in order to investigate the ways in which members thought they had benefited from involvement with the various CETL networks, a likely indicator of impact for individuals.

1. What CETL networks have you been involved with?
2. What motivated you to become involved?
3. What is your relationship to the CETL programme?
4. How have you been involved with CETL networks?
5. How have you benefited from involvement with CETL networks?

Table 2 CETL networks survey

The online survey had a very low return rate (N=20, CETL-IPREN N=17, EMCETL-PREN N=8, people could join both networks); a summary of two groups of responses is shown below (see Table 3 and Table 4). There are many possible reasons for low returns including attrition in respect of the people signed up to the lists, *i.e.* changed mail addresses and movement away from CETL work, as well as the usual reasons for low response rates to online surveys. For this article I have chosen to focus on what respondents said were their motivations for involvement (Table 3) and the benefits they claim have accrued from involvement with the networks (Table 4).

The motivations for involvement allowed for a free response, while with respect to benefits people were given possible choices from a list (that related to what people said were the needs for our networks), with an option to add any other reasons. In this way I hoped to see if respondents got what they needed from the networks. The responses appear to show that those completing the survey did on the whole get what they needed, although it may be that those who didn't respond were the dissatisfied. More encouragingly, a large proportion of respondents did feel that involvement improved their own ability to conduct pedagogic research and evaluation, one of the identified needs in our original needs analyses.

- Wanting to find out what is happening in other CETLs/ sharing good practice
- Find out more about evaluation/pedagogic research/ advice on projects
- Sharing experience/reduce isolation/link with peers/self-help group/seeking support for CETL role
- Finding collaborative partners
- Regional links/networking with others
- Advocacy: a collective voice/strength in numbers

Table 3 Motivations for involvement

- Enabled me to keep in touch with colleagues working in CETLs (13/20)
- Helped me to improve my understanding of pedagogic research and evaluation (9/20)
- + 'links to other expertise...and people with more experience...has been very valuable'
- Helped me find confidential support and share experiences (4/20)
- Helped me disseminate my work (4/20)
- I have found collaborative partners for bids/papers/ conferences (3/20)
- Facilitated collection of data (1/20)
- Joint events (1/19)
- Better overall view of CETL programme (1/19)
- NULL 2/19 (+ one dissatisfied customer)

Table 4 Benefits from involvement

What has occurred has been a quite loose association of interested parties and varied engagement, what Brown and Duguid (2001) would call a loose epistemic group, in which not everyone will know or come across each other and where there are networks within networks – for example, the IPREN committee, regional groupings, writing partnerships and groups of researchers working in CETLs with similar or overlapping themes. The success stories are the number of strong connections evident within the networks, not least those among the main committee members and those members who have regularly attended and hosted workshops and events that served to share practice and produce outputs, principally for CETL-IPREN. In addition, the regional grouping of EMCETL-PREN attracted a larger number of people to its workshops in relation to the group size, maybe indicating that close regional proximity or the focused nature of the events has a greater impact.

However, it has become increasingly difficult to get people together as the CETL programme draws to a close, and only a small proportion of those signed up to the network communications tools ever attended face-to-face events, typically between a fifth and a third out of 104 IPREN JISCmail members; and, in addition, responses to group emails are low. A lack of agency created by pressure of work, the imperative to sacrifice personal interest, and perhaps development, to the needs of individual CETL projects, as well as the distributed nature of our relationships, appeared to be a barrier to the evolution of a stronger community of practice. The interim evaluation of the CETL programme indicated that there was some way to go in expanding the nature of the pedagogic research conducted within CETLs, with the majority of examples being small-scale individual studies (Saunders *et al.,* 2008), which may also indicate the limited impact of our capacity-building aim as much as it tells us about the ability of these time-limited, short-term fixes to change culture.

The importance of the network facilitator/coordinator role to the success of the network should not be underestimated. Jones and Esnault (2004) use the term 'animator' to encompass the facilitator/moderator role critical to the success of a network; this role tends to be undertaken by particular individuals (either willingly or by default). Discussion about this role, both at ISSoTL 2008 (Morón-García, 2008) and the SEDA Spring Conference 2009 (Morón-García, 2009), led to agreement about the key but wearing nature of it and elicited approval of the term from those who alternatively felt like a 'nag' or that they were forced into the role of someone who 'cossets', soothing egos and encouraging engagement.

Jones and Esnault also write about the importance of reciprocity; it is true that CETL network members do seem to take what they need and give what they can. There has been a hard core of 'frequent flyers' who seem to gain succour from meeting up and others who drop in and out, but there is also a sense of urgency to prove value and a necessary focus on personal survival (whether this be at CETL or individual researcher level), created by the time-limited nature of the CETL programme that pulled people away from the idea of a joint, collaborative project. The need for sustaining activity to encourage continued involvement and interaction, without which 'networks become moribund' (Jones and Esnault, 2004 p. 5), may be obvious, but when the focus is overwhelmingly set on meeting programme evaluation requirements, this can get lost. In theory, our virtual community of mailing lists and the research environment should enable us to keep things going during the times when it is impossible to meet up and allow people to drop in and out when workload dictates; however, take-up and participation are low not least because some participants find the technology cumbersome (the virtual research environment), and mass emails (from the mailing list) are easy to delete.

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Development of a Community of Learning: A Feasibility Study

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Educational Institutions have a range of staff engaged in pedagogic inquiry. Evidence suggests, however, that their activities may exist in isolation with few forums for sharing best practice, provision for mentoring or developing synergistic benefits. Establishing and nurturing 'Communities of Learning' (also referred to as 'Communities of Practice' or 'Learning Networks') offer the potential to overcome these isolation issues and contribute to educational development and the practice of teaching and learning. This article explores this potential and draws on the work of a Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund project at Southampton Solent University (SSU): Solent Community of Pedagogic Practice Feasibility Study.

SSU is a post-1992 institution with around 10,000 FTE students on two campuses. In 2006, it introduced a new annual system for recording all staff research and scholarship outputs. Analysis of the Academic Audit revealed small pockets of very active pedagogic researchers across the four faculties. The interest in developing a university-wide community of learning arose from a desire to build on this foundation by nurturing multiple communities or networks of staff with similar interests.

The Community of Learning Approach

The central tenet of the community of learning approach is that it facilitates networks of members of staff who have common interests and aims. It is through these communities, both informal and formal, that staff are able to interact, communicate, learn from one another, solve problems and create new knowledge (Hildreth *et al.,* 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Communities of Learning – Key Characteristics

- Voluntary membership
- Shared interest and expertise binding people together
- Creation of new, often tacit, knowledge, in social context
- Fostering new approaches to problems

- Members value their collective abilities, learn from each other, help each other and share information
- Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) where newcomers learn from 'old timers' and, in time, newcomers progress from peripheral to full participation in the community.

Learning communities can be organic, spontaneous and informal. Although fluid in nature, core drivers of the community are located at its centre. Citing the analogy of a spark and fire, Cambell and Uys (2007) suggest that it is the core membership that is critical to its survival, as it instigates and drives the community and continues to burn, encouraging participation from members and steering them toward achieving their goals.

It is argued that membership of learning communities cannot be made mandatory; however, this is not to preclude formal groups operating as effective communities. It is the organisation's role to bring the right people together and provide an infrastructure that supports the community's operation (Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

The advancement of technology and the internet, and the growth in the use of information communication technologies and computer-mediated communications, offer the potential to create virtual or online communities of learning. Virtual communities share similar characteristics to traditional communities, but communication is supported through media such as telephone, teleconferencing, email, video conferencing, newsgroups, databases, web sites and intranets. Virtual communities afford the possibility of bringing people together who are geographically remote, and they also offer a quicker platform through which to build communities. However, they can be more transitory than more traditional communities and may develop without any central management or control. The effectiveness of virtual communities rests upon a number of factors (Gannon-Leary and Fountainha, 2007):

- the technological provision and the skills of members to use the technology
- the ability of the technologies to facilitate interaction between members
- the need for members to feel a sense of belonging
- the ability of members to identify others with similar interests and aims
- longevity of the community is needed to create trust, rapport and a true sense of 'community'.

In summary, the community of learning approach seeks to create opportunities for the sharing and development of best practice in teaching and learning and pedagogic inquiry by fostering multiple and overlapping communities of interested parties within the institution, whether that be through traditional communities, virtual communities or a combination of both – see Table 1. The successful development of learning communities is dependent on the design of effective platforms through which staff with similar interests can develop ideas. They need to be supported with relevant infrastructure and systems.

- Enhance teaching and learning practices
- Foster generic research skills
- Tap into synergies
- Share best practice/expertise
- Improve academic profile
- Encourage links between faculties/schools

Table 1 Benefits of the Community of Learning Approach

The Solent Project

The central aim of the feasibility study was to identify the main issues that would influence the design and development of a Community of Learning within SSU.

Figure 1 illustrates the work completed by the project team. The study started with a detailed review of the literature. Four leading practice Higher Education Institutions, with recently launched and/or established communities of learning, were identified. Interviews with key members of staff from these institutions were used to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences in developing and maintaining communities of learning.

Figure 1 The Solent Project

Internal stakeholder research at SSU was also completed. This included one-to-one interviews with key stakeholders responsible for research and scholarship, staff development and learning and teaching. An online survey was administered in order to establish current and future pedagogic learning preferences of all academic and support staff. Finally, the technological assessment sought to evaluate the potential of the university intranet to provide online space to support the development of a community of practice.

Developing a Community of Learning – Experience of Leading Practice Institutions

It is fundamentally important to acquire powerful institutional backers from the initial design stage. Those seeking to develop such a community must have a convincing rationale for devoting resources to the further development of pedagogic practices. The benefits to the institution should be clearly articulated. Ensuring that the community of learning aligns with institutional priorities, and presenting the concept as a problem-solver for the institution, are also helpful in acquiring senior management 'buy-in' (for example, achieving improved NSS results, enhancing employability, improving student feedback processes).

Inadequate commitment by senior management and/or funding may mean that any community of learning falters in the early stages. Funding should be sought for both the launch and the ongoing costs. In an environment of tightening budgets, achieving a realistic amount of finance is challenging. The community of learning needs to be firmly embedded within the institutional processes, practices and structures, with clear benefits to staff, including promotional routes identified for staff as a tangible incentive to participate. This is particularly important when attempting to gain staff support and involvement in the community and crucial in achieving any cultural shift needed in terms of the perceived 'value' of pedagogic inquiry.

It is important to establish a strong identity for the community; one that should clearly contribute to the wider academic identity of the institution. Thought needs to be given to the best design for the community – the most advantageous location for central resources and the relationship between this centre and other hubs of activity within the network. The development of the VLE offers further opportunities to engage staff in the community. The challenge here is to align interests and resources to support activities. Evidence suggests that whilst a VLE can be a key innovation, staff still prefer face-to-face interaction rather than online communication; so online provision is likely to be supplementary. The strategic relationship between direct and online provision needs to be addressed in the initial design. Further challenges include: high staff workloads making it difficult to find time to participate in activities; staff concerns about Intellectual Property issues; and maintaining the momentum of the community once it is established.

Key issues to address at the design stage

- Potential available resources including funding, physical space, staff to form a core team (in order to coordinate activities) and VLE platforms.
- Potential drivers for the community: possibilities here cover tapping into existing staff development activities and the annual appraisal process, linking to Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Master's and Doctorate in Education programmes and also any Teaching Fellowships.
- A clear strategy timeline, goals and methods of evaluation should be formulated. Effective evaluation processes can be helpful in demonstrating and justifying the value that a community of learning can bring to the institution.
- A clear identity for the community.
- Coherent communication strategy to support each stage of the implementation strategy. The strategy needs to identify the key messages, audience and communication tools and a timeline for delivery.

Tactics and Tips to Engage Staff in the Community of Learning

All the leading practice institutions stressed the need to utilise a wide range of tactics in order to involve staff and build capacity. Table 2 highlights some examples of activities that could be employed. It is important to research staff/student/institutional agenda and 'plug' into these. A useful tactic is to align activities with the institutional quality enhancement agenda. For example, blended learning, improving formative assessment and the internationalisation of the curriculum are currently areas of focus. Ensuring that activities support staff in their teaching and learning, curriculum development and involvement with institutional processes in a timely fashion, is also an effective tactic. An example might be using the VLE and new Web 2.0 technologies to enrich the student learning experience and supporting staff involved with course design, validation and other review events.

- Workshops and e-workshops
- Invited speakers
- Annual Teaching and Learning Conferences
- Seminars on aspects of pedagogic practice
- Writing residentials
- Publications e.g. working paper series
- Mentoring programme

Table 2 Community of Learning – Ideas for Activities

Identifying small-scale research projects to involve staff has been used effectively to 'pump prime' the community and can be particularly effective if such projects are cross-school/faculty. Offering some form of status and/or remission for staff involvement is useful, as well as identifying 'champions' for projects and activities at school/faculty level.

In order to maximise the opportunity for staff to attend events such as seminars, workshops and reading groups, consider varying the time/day of the events (lunchtime, late afternoon, breakfast meetings *etc.*).

Holding regular teaching and learning forums/conferences can be a useful tool to share best practice, showcase projects and expand staff involvement in the community. They are also a good opportunity to invite external guest speakers and staff from other HE institutions.

Developing a publication strategy has the combined effect of raising the profile of both the community and its individual members. Newsletters, e-newsletters, journals and working paper series are all useful tools. The experience of submitting work for in-house journals and working-paper series can be a very valuable developmental experience for staff new to pedagogic research.

Staff Preferences for a Community of Learning at SSU

The online survey aimed at identifying the current and future pedagogic learning preferences of all academic and support staff was completed in June 2009. A total of 154 staff completed it (119 academic staff and 35 support staff). It covered the following areas:

- Respondents' current and future likely teaching and learning activities and research interests
- Teaching and Learning activities that respondents would like support with
- The skills that respondents could offer to a learning community
- The preferences respondents have regarding the format and timing of the community's teaching and learning activities.

Five areas of teaching and learning/ research with the highest indication of staff interest:

ACADEMIC STAFF	SUPPORT STAFF
• Encouraging student participation in learning	• Encouraging student participation in learning
• Activity-based learning	• Flexible learning
• Student experience	• Learning support
• Student feedback	• Student feedback
• Subject-specific discipline	• Independent learning

Three areas of teaching and learning activities that respondents most want support with:

ACADEMIC STAFF	SUPPORT STAFF
• Finding research partners	• Finding research partners
• Establishing research teams	• Poster/ workshop presentations
• Collaborative learning	• Collaborative learning

The skills that respondents could offer to a learning community:

Analysis of this qualitative question revealed strong support for the development of a community of learning with staff, and indicated a wide range of knowledge and skills that they could personally contribute (e.g. mentoring, bid writing, writing for publication, expertise in learning technologies, distance and blended learning, problem-based learning).

Respondents' preferences for format and timing for the community's teaching and learning activities:

Face-to-face meetings, workshops and seminars were the most preferred format for activities; however, online activities and information were also rated fairly highly. Staff indicated a preference for monthly activities scheduled in working hours.

Solent Community of Learning – Conclusion and Future Work

The feasibility study findings have been received with a great deal of interest at Solent and the team are pleased to have secured more funding to initiate a community of learning for the year 2009-2010, using face-to-face events supported by online technologies. The technology assessment found that the current VLE is perceived by staff as a vehicle for communication with students rather than between staff. We are currently looking at new Web 2.0 technologies which could be used to support the community (similar to Facebook). The planned community of learning activities have been derived from the experience and best practice identified from the leading practice institutions as well as the findings arising from the survey at Solent University, and include:

- A monthly series of lunchtime workshop sessions
- An online presence supporting staff interactivity
- The use of mentors to support staff inexperienced in pedagogic research
- A database to allow staff to share their research interests and identify opportunities for collaboration
- A pedagogic research journal, initially with articles published online
- Opportunities for researchers to present work in progress and receive feedback on their work (a series of conferences and forums)
- Reading and peer support groups, for example staff studying for Doctorate of Education (EdD).

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Learning and Teaching Support – is it all about the timing?

Gary Heywood-Everett and **Dawn Harrison,** University of Central Lancashire

Introduction

Ours is a large new university in the north of England serving 33,000 students. We have a range of staff development programmes including a Teaching Toolkit, and Postgraduate Certificates in 'Learning and Teaching in Higher Education', 'Health and Social Care Education' and 'Research Student Supervision'. Although administratively based in the School of Education and Social Science, the academic staff who manage these programmes are drawn from across the university, finding an accommodating venue in the Learning Development Unit.

Whilst our programmes are successful and – particularly in the case of the Teaching Toolkit – recruit well, we are ever questioning our processes in their form, their effectiveness and, in the case here, their timing.

The Teaching Toolkit Course

The workshops for the Teaching Toolkit are delivered in a one-week block. The programme was introduced to support new lecturers, research students and staff and other staff members developing skills in relation to student support. It first ran in September 2002, with two weeks of workshops, the first following year 4 and the next year 6. By the end of 2008-2009 there had been 32 courses with 613 attendees.

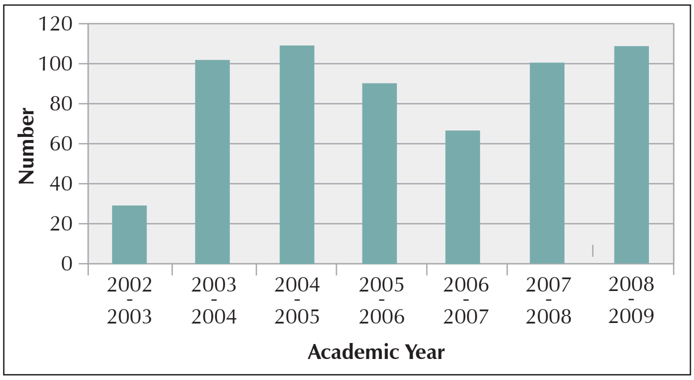

Figure 1 Participation by Year

The timetable for the week covers topics of learning, assessment, feedback, curriculum, student support and working with small and large groups. It also has sessions on CPD, exploiting resources including learning technologies, learning and teaching focus in university strategies, personal survival tactics and a more physical workshop on 'protecting and projecting your voice'. The session which consistently gets the highest rating is 'micro-teaching', where participants receive peer feedback on a practice session. The positive response may well reflect the ethos of the week, which is supportive, participative and encourages interaction amongst the participants.

Around ten facilitators contribute to the week, including four Teaching and Learning Co-ordinators from across the university. Alongside the PGCert Course Leader the other facilitators are specialists and/or enthusiasts for their particular area. University colleagues have consistently been keen to support this initiative and report that they find their involvement rewarding.

The moment at which a staff member attends a Teaching Toolkit week has been variable, due to the pragmatics of school need or simply the fact that any one session may have been over-subscribed. Typically, demand has outstripped supply. This has meant that some applicants have had to wait up to seven months in order to join, and the team which constitutes the university management of the programme wondered whether this period of waiting was too long. Without data there was no way of knowing, nor of knowing whether those coming onto the Toolkit within days of arrival at the university felt that attendance was too early.

Related research

An initial search of the literature revealed very little material which addresses the question of when might be the best time to undertake staff development in learning and teaching, although there are texts which are related. These include how much time is spent engaged in staff development (Wray, 2001), or concern the lack of teacher time for staff development (Tanner *et al.,* 1995). Others, notably NATFHE (2006), discuss the nature of staff development and highlight its resourcing. NATFHE, also, as part of its 'Checklist', notes that Induction should be made available close to the time of appointment and should be facilitated by relief from timetabled/teaching duties. However, this is neither developed from a research base nor discussed. Taking the broad view, and amongst other suggestions, Pontz (2003, p. 165) writes that 'if training is to be effective and reasonably successful, it must at the very least be motivating, set goals that can actually be attained by individuals, require the individual to draw upon knowledge s/he has already acquired, give the individual choice in training and take place over a sufficient period of time,' although Pontz does not speculate as to what this time period may be and, more importantly for this article, does not address the issue of the best moment for induction training.

Similarly wide-ranging, others (Diaz Maggioli, 2004; Sparks, 2002) indicate that the best conditions for continuing professional development involve horizontal decision-making, where programmes would involve participants in its planning, organisation, management, delivery and evaluation and an emphasis on personal as well as professional development.

However, there is little about when staff development should take place or concerning the chronology of an individual's development in terms of their employment.

Setting up a small-scale piece of research seemed to be the obvious thing to do and so we contacted 30 staff members who had attended the Toolkit to ask them three simple questions:

- How long were you in post before attending the Teaching Toolkit?
- What do you believe is the optimum point at which new staff should attend the Toolkit?
- What are the advantages of attending at that optimum time?

We asked staff from across the university – from each of the faculties – in order to avoid the skew of subject difference and we received over twenty responses, enough, we felt, to draw some tentative conclusions.

Initial findings

In simplistic terms the average time in post was 8.33 months and the mean recommendation was 5.25 months. However Figure 2 reveals a much more complex picture.

The 'time in post when attending the Teaching Toolkit' ranged from one week to almost two and a half years. This variation can be explained by different schools within the university having variable pressures on priorities of their staff. It is not foreseen that this situation will change given the processes, practices, not to mention the tensions determined by subject and discipline characteristics. However, a number of points were raised in interview which complement this data.

Time to settle in

A number of respondents felt that the Toolkit could only be beneficial if a staff member had already become familiar with aspects of their work. They felt that there would be a 'better understanding of some of the issues' having been given enough time to 'settle in' to their new role. Some made especial claim to this familiarisation by referring to teaching and that they should 'have some teaching experience to be able to reflect upon' and 'it would give me a better understanding of the issues on the course' having had familiarisation time before it. This ties in to Pontz' idea of training drawing on existing knowledge (2003, p.165). One respondent said that you should have enough time [before the Toolkit] to have 'found your way around the university and your own department'.

Teacher development or induction?

An interesting theme to come from the data was that some felt that there was a clear and necessary distinction between being inducted into the university and being fully 'integrated into the teaching modules'. One respondent suggested that she could have been given more 'time to orientate myself to the university' but also to 'get my head around teaching and facilitating', and that should be the order. Another felt that there were two aspects to deal with early in a new post: 'the overall working of the university' and 'an opportunity to take part in teaching activity', although there was no indication, in this case, as to priority.

What's new ?

One respondent made an important distinction between those new to teaching and those continuing teaching but at a university new to them. It was felt that beginning teachers would benefit from an early Toolkit as they are 'open to developing new practices' and 'open to the idea of reviewing teaching skills'. Similarly, but for different reasons, this respondent suggested that those transferring to a new teaching post from another university needed an early Toolkit simply to be 'introduced to the university's standards and regulations'.

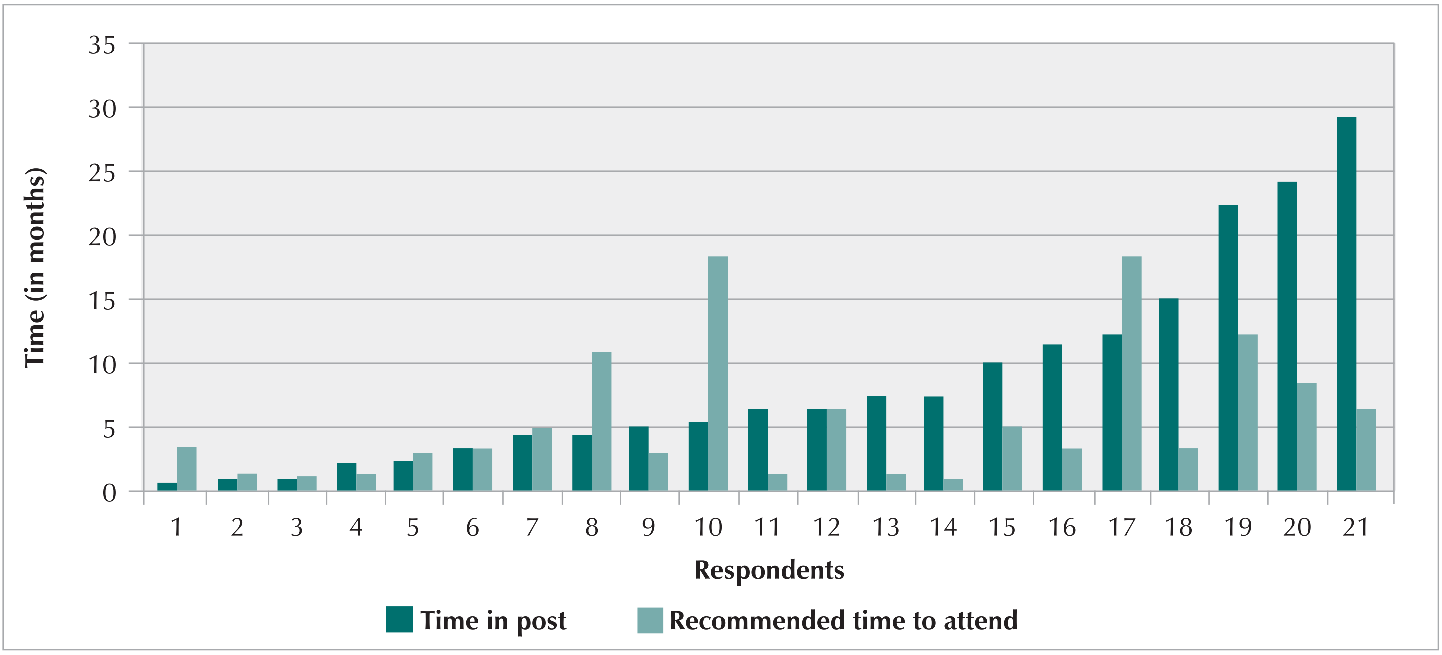

Figure 2 Time in post and recommended time for attendance at Teaching Toolkit

Understanding a new role
In one case a respondent made clear reference to 'developing new materials' as part of her new role and that her early Toolkit saved 'wasting much effort and time'. Another respondent felt that those new to teaching in a HEI would need to know about learning outcomes, assessment and student support and 'the sooner the better'. However, a different view was that staff needed 'to know something about their new role – particularly the characteristics of the students' prior to the Toolkit experience. This enabled them to feel 'informed enough to be able to relate Toolkit issues' to practice.

Departmental induction
The sense expressed here was that there should be home (departmental) induction before knowledge and understanding of learning and teaching. However, one respondent did feel that the Toolkit itself provided a valuable early induction by 'giving general information about the university and its functions' which complemented that given by the Department and by Human Resources. There was a sense, though, that HR and Departmental induction were different from the Toolkit which helped you to become 'fully integrated into teaching modules'.

Having something to reflect upon
A number of respondents felt that not only would a staff member have had the time to settle in but also there would be 'teaching experience to reflect upon', or 'time to orientate myself to the university as an organisation and get my head around teaching and facilitating'. One respondent felt that applying skills from the Toolkit was easier 'having had some experience in the classroom', another saying that they can then 'think of examples from their teaching sessions' to bring to the Toolkit workshops. Another respondent agreed with this, feeling that they needed 'time to get into role, understand the housekeeping, identify general strengths and weaknesses' before attending the Toolkit so that they could 'apply the lessons and think of examples for the sessions'. A supportive comment was that 'staff should have already got a feel for the type of student they have' and have 'identified a lecturing style that works with these students' in order to fully appreciate the Toolkit.

Open to learning
However, two respondents felt that by attending the Toolkit early in-post, staff members would avoid establishing unfortunate patterns and habits in professional practice – 'people get stuck in their ways' and then 'it's difficult to change anything'. In addition, it was felt that new to post you may be 'fresh' and 'open to new ideas and suggestions'.

Emerging issues
A number of issues emerged from this data:

Too soon, too late or just right?
The data in the graph and, to a certain extent through the qualitative feedback, suggests that there is a difference of perception between those attending the Toolkit at an early point in-post and those having had years of experience. The difference is that those who had the Toolkit very early would have liked it later and those who had to wait for Toolkit would have liked it earlier. Whilst there may be a tendency to perceive that others' experiences are preferable to your own, staff members did suggest rationales for this perception. Those attending after some time felt that they 'wished that they had known that earlier', referring to teaching and learning issues and not simply to university regulations. Others – those attending the Toolkit very early (after only a week or two) – felt that new staff should be given time enough to settle into role before attending. On the Goldilocks principle, there would be those who felt that their experience was 'just right' in terms of their time in-post. These members of staff ranged between two and three months, thereby suggesting from this data that this would be an optimum time for attendance. One of these encapsulates the feeling: 'I'd been in the job long enough to gather what was expected of me, but not so long that I didn't have lots to learn'. This respondent had been at the university for three months when she attended the Toolkit and felt this arrangement to be ideal.

Training or induction?
The issue of familiarisation as distinct from development was a clear point to arise from the data and suggests staged and different phases of induction and staff engagement which reflect these requirements. Settling into an environment means a number of things: identifying prerequisite aspects of life in the institution (contracts, regulations, understanding standards and practices); acclimatising to life in the department (colleagues, students, modules, fire drills, new role); understanding and individually adapting to the post (teaching methods, student needs, available resources). That there are different new staff needs is clear and they are currently met by differing agencies. However, it is clear from the data that these phases overlap significantly, so that understanding regulations only comes about when there is some engagement with the student group – for example, module familiarisation cannot be separated from university regulations or resource availability. This would seem, then, to be a call for a more inclusive induction process and the integration of human resource, departmental support and staff development services. The point at which this integration happens is therefore critical for the success of each one.

The philosophy of CPD
The results of the survey may require us to question our own assumptions behind the call for the survey in the first place. Does a desire to establish the 'optimum time' carry assumptions of 'fitness for purpose' or 'licence to practise'? If we replace this assumption with the accepted thinking before the Dearing Report (1997), namely that people qualified within their discipline can teach, then the idea of the Teaching Toolkit takes on a stronger identity of CPD and the 'timeliness' appears less significant. Aligned with constructivist ideas of learning, similar issues can be addressed at different levels, dependent on the experience of the participant. In that context it could be expected that people would gain different things from the programme dependent upon their level of experience.

A: New to organisation, experienced in role	B: New to organisation and role
e.g. First post at this university, but lectured for a number of years within HE or FE	e.g. First lecturing post. This can include colleagues completing their PhD (so immersed in education culture) and those bringing industry experience who may not have studied or been employed in education for a number of years
C: Familiar with organisation and role	D: New to role, familiar with organisation
e.g. Including colleagues who have worked part-time at this university for a number of years	e.g. Colleagues who have worked within the institution for a substantial time, but whose role has developed to incorporate the facilitation of learning

Table 1 Variables of experience: role and institution

Diversity and academic staff
Perhaps we are guilty of assuming that lecturers (and researchers) are a homogeneous group (only distinct by their discipline), whereas they are the most mixed of mixed-ability groups, coming with different levels of teaching experience, skill and confidence. It is interesting that whilst we acknowledge student diversity within the massification of higher education, perhaps the 'bear on the rug' is the diversity of academic staff.

Table 1 seeks to represent two continua that have a significant bearing on the most appropriate timing: time in teaching and time at the institution. Participants on the Teaching Toolkit could populate any of these quartiles. New to the organisation but experienced in role would include colleagues from partner colleges whose teaching load was increasingly operating at HE level. A number of participants on the programme would fit into quartile B, as the Teaching Toolkit has welcomed colleagues who have come directly from industry including the police force, nursing and journalism. Colleagues whose role has developed to give more of a focus to student learning (quartile D) have mainly come from student support and the library.

Induction to what?
If they are joining the organisation, what organisation are they joining? Is it, as Becher and Trowler (2001) suggest, the joining of an academic tribe, or is it the wider (university) organisation that they are joining? In response (through regular evaluation forms) to the question concerning the value of the Teaching Toolkit, attendees consistently recognise issues of induction within a deeper focal range than a simple subject identity would suggest.

Conclusions
Our innocent question, as with so many innocent questions, seems to have generated more questions. In particular, it has revealed inherent assumptions such as the homogeneous nature of the participants and highlighted the tension within the programme between induction and training. Induction carries an assumption of no prior knowledge or experience, whereas training, as outlined by Pontz (2003, p. 165), requires that individuals draw on knowledge already acquired.

The purpose of the Teaching Toolkit also has implications for timing. If it is seen as training to make staff 'fit to practise' then timing is crucial. However, if the programme is seen as providing support for 'continuing personal development', then participants with different levels of experience will take different things from it.

However, there are responses here which serve to illuminate what has been an under-researched area, so that further enquiry is made possible – perhaps looking at subject differences and staff development pressures, or the nature of differing staff development activities.

We intend to go on, further clarifying, asking more questions so that our rationale, principles and timing for the Teaching Toolkit become sharper in focus and realisable in practice.

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Apology
In *Educational Developments* 10.4, the photograph accompanying the article 'Learning and Teaching Fellowships within Communities of Practice: If we let them, will they grow?' should have been credited to Lynda Marshall, Publications Co-ordinator and Editor, CLT Publications, University of Brighton.

Core and/or periphery: Where's the warmth coming from in graduate student support?

Ian Brailsford and **Susan Carter,** University of Auckland

Robert Hutchins, University of Chicago president, commented that a university, in reality, was a 'collection of departments held together by a common heating system' (Rhode, 2006: 88). This mid-twentieth-century aphorism strikes a chord with us as academic and learning advisors charged with providing centralised university support services. We generate lots of heat at the centre through generic skills workshops, seminars, induction days, and the like, for graduate students, but how much filters out through the pipes to departments? Might warmth be more homely from a single heater in a cosy departmental common room?

Our investigation delved into the connection between generic *versus* embedded provision of academic support. Interest in this often hidden system has a long history. For example, at our own institution, a questionnaire sent out by the newly established Higher Education Research Office in the mid 1970s asked staff about their attitudes towards professional development activities organised by the new central service provider. Forty-five lecturers indicated a preference for faculty- or department-specific activities, 20 wanted sessions with colleagues from across the university, while 99 saw a need for both specific and generic workshops (HERO, 1975). Of course, this presents a dilemma for people like us (Ian an academic advisor and Susan a learning advisor for doctoral students) at the Centre for Academic Development (CAD): how can we provide targeted workshops when there are eight faculties with over 2600 doctoral and master's students on four campuses comprising approximately 100 individual departments and only a handful of dedicated academic support staff at the centre? Although e-learning modules are possible, our gut feeling is that face-to-face workshops are more effective than distance packages in circulating hot air. But we cannot take Mohammed to all the mountains.

Periphery/core bridging: the departmental graduate advisors (DGAs)

This research focuses on the efforts of departmental graduate advisors (DGAs) to provide induction, orientation and support for dissertation and thesis students under their sphere of influence. These people are ideally placed to bridge the gap between core and periphery, functioning between the individual supervisor and the wider institution. In 2008 we surveyed, via a questionnaire, all the known DGAs at our institution. DGAs have no fixed job description. Generally they are middle-ranking lecturers completing two or three years in the role falling under the contractual umbrella of academic service. CAD offers an annual three-hour training workshop for new DGAs and occasional forums to discuss specific aspects of graduate advising. However, attendance is voluntary and patchy. Most of the 'training', we suspect, takes the form of the predecessor handing over the files to the new incumbent and providing a month-to-month list of key tasks and deadlines.

A major part of a DGA's responsibility involves the enrolment, monitoring and examination overview of postgraduate work. But they also have a remit to advise would-be students thinking about graduate study, to circulate messages and information sent out by people like us at the centre, and – most importantly for this research – to provide induction and workshops (academic and social) for new and existing graduate students. Using Bruce Macfarlane's (2007) concept of 'academic citizenship', there is scope for DGAs, if they so wish, to create a vibrant community for emerging researchers in their department either on their own or in collaboration with centralised academic support units like ours.

Postal survey of departmental graduate advisors (DGAs)

Responding to student evaluations that asked for more discipline specificity than found in the generic courses, we surveyed the DGAs to establish what was provided in departments and whether there was a perceived need for more links between our core and their peripheral support of postgraduate students. We were hoping that perhaps we could support DGAs in providing discipline-specific courses by contributing our generic insights. Our questionnaire yielded 52 responses, which we think is about half the target audience. Ethics approval meant that we could not identify the respondents (who remained anonymous), so were unable to discern patterns of reply by discipline. Nonetheless, several DGAs signed their names, requesting we contact them to discuss what was on offer centrally for graduate students. In addition, the responses to open-ended questions made reference to events or activities strongly implying the department or faculty. Thus we feel confident that our sample includes DGAs from a wide range of academic disciplines at the University of Auckland.

We wanted to find out what currently happens at departmental level, and where the gaps in provision might be from a DGA perspective. We surveyed:

1. To find out what typically happens in departments regarding induction of doctoral and graduate students: the extent to which departments are currently providing inductions for graduate students; whether departments provide separate support sessions for master's and doctoral students; whether established students attend; whether there is food and drink; and how much time is invested in departmental induction
2. To find out what other events are currently provided for

graduate students, and whether there are some DGAs who would like to provide more than they currently do

3. To find out what sort of events or sessions DGAs might like to do if they were given some help in doing so
4. To find out if there is further material than what is already provided by CAD in the DGA inductions that CAD usefully put together for DGAs.

Although the silence of the non-respondents is difficult to read, we presume that there may be several reasons why they would discard our questionnaire: they already have everything running perfectly and know that we cannot be of any help to them; they would like help but they feel too busy to extend what they currently do; they associate the survey with bureaucratic interference; they have ceased being a DGA; they do not value the current CAD workshops but believe that all support should be embedded; and the individuals are not fully engaged with the role of DGA, one that is often allotted to staff members rather than being chosen by the incumbent.

First we wanted to know what happens at the moment: what communities exist within departments for graduate students? It is not new to notice the importance of departmental collegiality and the role it plays in enabling graduate students find their place in an academic community (Lovitts, 2001). Given that departmental support is still more 'ad hoc' than formal thesis supervision or generic support at our institution, how functional might it be?

We asked about induction, something of a bottom line for postgraduate student support. Results established that about two-thirds of departments represented (32 of 52) have a postgraduate induction, and 18 of these had separate inductions for doctoral students and master's students. In terms of time, two-thirds lasted one to two hours, had established students there and food and drink – for the most part inductions are currently collegial and social orientations. The longer sessions (one-third) ranged between half a day (four) and two days (only one), suggesting more academic content. Thus departmental induction varies considerably from nothing at all to a quite protracted affair. The majority provide a one- to two-hour social event with drinks and established student attendance, so there is a sense of continuity and overlap between annual cohorts.

Then we asked whether there were other events. An interesting list of what departments did for research students emerged, and if this exercise does nothing else, it has provided a good suggestion list for what is possible. A list is likely to be included in the CAD training workshop for new DGAs so they can see what currently goes on. The bold number after each item tells how many departments do this activity; no number means that only one gave this response:

- Social events **18** (lunch mentioned by 5, picnics with staff by 1)
- Seminar series **13**
- Party **4**
- Conference day **3**
- Weekly seminars **3**
- Presentations **3**
- Lunches and dinners with major employer firms **2**
- Information sessions **2**
- PhD reading group **2**
- Research speed-dating event **2**
- PhD student forum/day **2**
- Dissertation workshop
- Graduate workshop (one-day annual event)
- PhD writing group
- PG students organise activities
- Professional developmental workshops
- Visiting speakers
- Celebrations for finishing students
- Ethics workshop
- Monthly troubleshooting group

Speed dating sounds like a brisk – quick and dirty perhaps – way to ensure that staff and graduate students have an idea of the research work being done in the department. A monthly troubleshooting group would be a very helpful writing development practice, since those involved would learn from each other. Is it possible to gauge the levels of collegiality and community from this information? We presume that any and all events contribute significantly to the culture of the research community, and that more probably is more.

The last section sought to know what DGAs would like if the existing CAD graduate support programme were to put together a package of materials for them to use within their departments. We asked the DGAs to number the suggestions below in order of preference where 1) is what they would most like, 2) second best *etc.*, and to add other suggestions:

- A literature review session
- Writing the research proposal
- How to set up peer review writing groups for the department's graduate students
- How to set up research reading groups
- Methodology
- Methods
- Applying for grants
- How to get to conferences
- Help setting up a web contact site for postgraduate students.

Some respondents numbered one to nine in order of preference; others just picked a couple, one and two, and some gave several ones and a couple of two's and three's, presumably to imply that they regarded several sessions as equally preferred. By giving an inverse value where 1 (most highly preferred) = 9 (highest numerical value) and so on, down to 9 (least preferred) = 1 (lowest numerical value) and 0 = 0 (unwanted = no numerical value), it was possible to add the numbers to see which sessions were most preferred (see Figure 1).

The DGA responses allow us to contrast their collective sense of what graduate students might benefit from with the assistance of CAD in the cosy common room against actual attendance at centralised workshops. Over the last 30 months the ten most popular CAD workshops for doctoral students were (total attendance in brackets):

1. Literature review (235)
2. Research proposals (205)
3. Starting to write (127)
4. Citing and avoiding plagiarism (72)
5. Conferences (65)
6. Structure, style and voice (61)
7. Presentation (59)
8. Applying for ethics (47)
9. Oral examination (44)
10. Planning a career (43).

Sessions on research methods have been poorly attended (27 over 30 months), falling below the top ten.

The DGA survey and our central data point to a problem with developing research method workshops at either departmental or central level. Candidates are keen to avail themselves of skills to help them complete the thesis as a project (they have to do a literature review, they have to submit a full research proposal, they have to undergo an oral exam *etc.*), but are less willing to attend sessions that strike at the heart of their intellectual endeavours, including research methods, identifying the core of their argument and thesis genres. A vexed question remains about research methods/methodology. Clearly, several DGAs think there is a place for such support but how best to do this is uncertain.

In theory all of our centralised offerings could be done in-house (if there were willing volunteers to teach and facilitate these). The response to the package of materials suggests that literature reviews and research proposals are the 'big two' issues – students voting with their feet coming to our sessions proves this.

Collegial support in areas of nurturing writing and reading groups that probably would work best in a cosy departmental common room provides an opportunity for CAD to fire these up and then rely on DGAs to keep them warm. Grant-writing is important in many disciplines and having DGAs organise sessions where staff can pass on their wisdom is probably more effective than generic sessions. Many departments encourage (or possibly coerce) students to present their work in progress to their peers, which again makes sense in a departmental setting.

Discussion: what we learned

The open-ended comments revealed DGAs as volunteer graduate event organisers experiencing some of the same frustrations as those of us for whom this is our day job: graduate students being too busy to turn up for workshops; running events on a shoe-string; and wanting students to take more initiative in building their own support networks. Some were quite hostile to the whole idea of generic support: 'I do not believe that a generic pack on any of these topics would be worth the paper they were printed on for our students.' Another DGA commented that generic materials provided by CAD on literature reviews and research methods were 'problematic' in their discipline and best taught within the department, but there were not enough staff to do this adequately.

Our intervention confirmed that on the whole our centralised offering is on the right track in terms of topics. Much more happens on the periphery than we realised and we will think about adapting ideas such as speed-dating sessions and troubleshooting clinics in the centralised offerings. We have also realised that it does not have to be an either/or situation when it comes to graduate support. DGAs are potentially wonderful resources to both complement and supplement our efforts at the centre. It was heartening that the survey itself generated new contacts and made some DGAs realise our existence at the centre. Moreover, we learned that some larger departments and schools had multiple DGAs with responsibilities for different aspects of graduate study.

But DGAs come and go: once they have served their tour of duty the responsibilities pass on to the next incumbent. Also, not all departments are the same, some have very few graduate students to sustain a graduate community while others are so large that expecting DGAs to be going beyond the call of duty (even as exemplary academic citizens) when CAD offers workshops anyhow is unrealistic. One DGA in a department where plenty is already offered responded to the survey question about whether they would consider doing more: 'Possibly. Not too much more as these [workshops] can be time consuming to organise.' Another noted that while they would like to do more 'professional skills', the existing calendar was already packed. Some departments had large numbers of international students requiring targeted support while others had a dispersed graduate community making face-to-face sessions problematic. We also saw a reflection of our status in their eyes as colleagues. For example, one DGA saw our advising roles as providing 'information on why students succeed – summarising education literature I don't have time to read!' We had not thought of ourselves in this way before but on reflection it was not an unreasonable expectation.

To paraphrase Robert Hutchins, graduate academic support is a collection of formal and informal sessions connected by pizza and drinks. Graduate students at our institution are generally well served (if our sample is representative) with assistance in navigating themselves around the bewildering architecture of their host departments and more widely as members of the university's graduate community. However, there

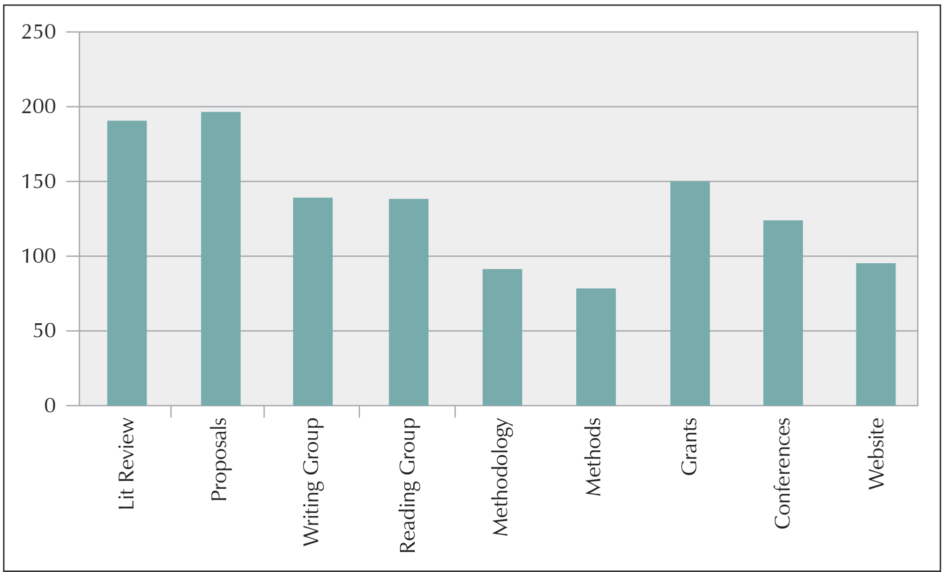

Figure 1 DGAs' ranking of sessions they might want to see in their departments

are varying levels of ongoing support. In addition, there is a great deal of overlap. From conducting our survey we realised that a recently arrived international doctoral student might encounter in the space of a few weeks induction at a forum for students new to New Zealand, a departmental induction, a faculty one and finally a mandatory university one. That's a lot of pizza! There are dangers of over-induction – too much information too soon and possibly conflicting messages from different hosts. Nonetheless, having a Byzantine system may well suit the peculiarities of a university. Taking Hutchins's metaphor to a conclusion we can now see our advising roles akin to heating engineers in departments as much as boiler-houses at the centre.

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Ethnicity and Degree Attainment

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When the Higher Education Academy (HEA)/Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) published their Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment report in January 2008, they made it clear that students from minority ethnic backgrounds were structurally disadvantaged with regard to their outcomes from study. The research was sound and

> *'showed that even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors, being from a minority ethnic group (except the* Other Black, Mixed *and* Other *groups) was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment.'* (HEA/ECU, 2008: 2)

Our attendance at the associated HEA/ECU conference in January 2008 prompted the instigation of a project at our University to determine the nature and extent of the differences in attainment between the ethnic groups in our student population. Analysis of our HESA return for the 2006-2007 academic year showed categorically that students in the White British majority ethnic group outperformed almost all of the other groups. White British students achieved proportionately more Firsts and 2.1's, for example. Despite this, we found it hard to accept that ethnicity was the sole underlying cause for the differences in degree classification. If this was true, then we had to accept that our University was institutionally racist, a conclusion that (as with all HEIs) we strongly resist. Institutional racism is defined as:

> *'The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.'* (MacPherson, 1999, paragraph 6.34)

We looked again at the ethnic categories and realised that it was the way in which they were constructed that was the root of the problem. The HESA categories, drawn from the 2001 Census, conflate disparate groups resulting in meaningless collections of people for whom the only shared characteristic is skin colour, and it was these categorisations, rather than our University, that were, in fact, racist (*cf.* Fanon, 2008; Gillborn, 2008; Cousin, 2008).

The *Other White* category at our University, for example, contains students with 78 different nationalities. It is impossible to believe that such a diverse group could share any common characteristics (including ethnicity) other than the colour of their skin. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups are similarly conflated, even more so, in fact, when the 'or… British' dimension is factored in. A student stating their ethnicity as Black or Black British-African, for instance, might either be a second generation British resident or might be newly arrived from their home country. The former will have grown up with British culture and passed through the British education system, which will have prepared them (to a greater or lesser extent) for engagement with the British higher education system. The latter will not have had the same educational or cultural experiences. While Black British-African students may have experienced institutional racism in primary, secondary and further education (and we are not suggesting that they will have), this is less likely to be the experience of African students schooled in Africa, whose relative disadvantage in the British HE system seems most logically to stem from unfamiliarity and lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). To place these two students with very different experiences into one overarching group is to ignore the differences between them and equate two distinct forms of potential disadvantage (if any exists).

Furthermore, Africa is a continent comprised of 53 countries with widely diverse economies, languages, religions, and cultures, yet the category of Black or Black British-African distils these differences into one homogeneous group, suggesting that all Africans share a common background. Students from the Indian subcontinent fare slightly better in terms of national differentiation within the Asian categories in that a distinction is made between people from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. India is the second most highly populated country after China, both of which have populations in excess of one billion, while Pakistan and Bangladesh each have populations below 200 million, thus making direct comparison between the experiences of the inhabitants of these countries pointless. In addition, once again, a distinction between British-born Asians and those from the home countries is absent.

The above argument illustrates the problems associated with categorisations of ethnicity which conflate disparate nationalities. However, the following two case studies illustrate the heterogeneity, in terms of ethnicity, of nationality itself.

At our Trinidad campus (n=1605) 98.8% of our students declared Trinidad and Tobago as their nationality, yet the campus is ethnically diverse with less than one-third (30.2%) describing their ethnicity as 'Black or Black British-Caribbean'. The other large ethnic groups at the Trinidad campus are 'Other Mixed background' (20%), 'Other Ethnic background' (15.1%), and 'Asian or Asian British-Indian' (9.4%). A further fifth of the student body (18.9%) refused to state their ethnicity (see Table 1).

	Count	%
Black or Black British - Caribbean	484	30.2
Other Mixed background	321	20.0
Information refused	303	18.9
Other Ethnic background	242	15.1
Asian or Asian British - Indian	150	9.4
Black or Black British - African	41	2.6
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	35	2.2
Other Asian background	9	0.6
Other Black background	8	0.5
Other White background	5	0.3
Chinese	2	0.1
Mixed White and Asian	2	0.1
White - British	1	0.1
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	1	0.1
Uncoded	1	0.1
Total	**1605**	

Table 1 Ethnic composition of students at the Trinidad campus

In the second case, 210 of the 212 students who in 2006 declared their nationality as Filipino, placed themselves in 'Other' groups (see Table 2).

	Count	%
Other White background	1	0.5
Other Black background	27	12.9
Other Asian background	163	77.6
Other Ethnic background	19	9.0
Total	**210**	

Table 2 Ethnic composition of students with Filipino nationality

These observations drew us to the conclusion that the HESA/Census categorisations of ethnicity are based primarily on skin colour and not on any other shared characteristics and cannot, therefore, explain any differences in degree attainment between students.

We believe that research based on traditional categorisations of ethnicity form a tautological fallacy in that differences are observed between White and BME students and ethnicity is therefore assumed to be the cause of these differences. This mantra has been repeated so frequently, without challenge, that it has become accepted wisdom and as such it feeds into the discourse of Whiteness. This is equally true for BME proponents of equality as they are also operating within the White discourse (*cf.* Fanon, 2008; Gillborn, 2008; Cousin, 2008). An underlying assumption of the White discourse is that White is 'normal' and all non-White groups are 'othered' in a deficit model. This model results in an audit approach which seeks to calculate the nature and extent of difference in order to determine effective interventions to make BME groups 'normal' like the White majority ethnic group.

Whiteness, we suggest, is a threshold concept (Meyer and Land, 2003) in ethnicity. The notion of ethnicity can only be redefined when 'White' is fully perceived as just another (albeit majority) ethnic group. Indeed, it is only then that currently accepted classifications of ethnicity can be seen as racial (and therefore racist) rather than categorisations of ethnicity, and which should be replaced with more meaningful and relevant definitions.

Ethnicity cannot be inferred from skin colour and arbitrary national divisions and, in its present form, should not be used as a mechanism for stereotyping groups of people, particularly as an explanatory device for academic achievement. We note with interest the Office for National Statistics (ONS) publications concerning the development of questions regarding 'ethnic group' for the 2011 census. The ONS use a suite of questions in what they describe as the 'ethnicity, [national] identity, language and religion (EILR) topics' (ONS, 2008, p. 4).

While we acknowledge the ONS position on ethnicity and the sophistication it is developing, we remain sceptical of the 'fitness for purpose' of the census categories in the HE context when comparing degree attainment. Whilst there may be merit in setting targets for local services to reflect the ethnic make-up of their local population, using such heterogeneous categories to determine ethnicity-related targets for Universities, which are likely to have a much wider representation of ethnic and national groups than their local population, is more complex.

We are continuing our research into the reasons for differences in degree achievement between students. In the process we will be looking for ways of operationalising ethnicity that are more meaningful to our students than the census categories, and which reflect their notions of identity and their self-descriptions of ethnicity. Until then, the outcomes of statistical analysis of attainment against the census categories of ethnicity remain meaningless.

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