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Development Series

# ACADEMIC AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**RESEARCH, EVALUATION *and*  
CHANGING PRACTICE *in*  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Ronald Macdonald and James Wisdom**

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# **ACADEMIC AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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First published in 2002

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

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Kogan Page Limited  
120 Pentonville Road  
London N1 9JN  
UK

Stylus Publishing Inc.  
22883 Quicksilver Drive  
Sterling VA 20166-2012  
USA

© Individual contributors, 2002

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#### British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN 0-203-41704-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-44281-4 (Adobe eReader Format)  
ISBN 0 7494 3533 X (Print Edition)

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# Introduction





# **Educational development: research, evaluation and changing practice in higher education**

*Ranald Macdonald*

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

This book arose out of a conference organized by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) and the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) Educational Development Research Network in April 1999. The conference, entitled 'Research and Practice in Educational Development(s): Exploring the links', sought to enable participants to share experiences of practice, research and policy in all types of educational developments, encompassing a variety of techniques and technologies. The conference was aimed at, and attracted, teachers in higher education, learning support staff, educational developers, academics and managers with responsibility for teaching and learning policy developments, researchers, and independent educational consultants.

A subsequent call for chapters resulted in offers from a diverse range of contexts, though with the emphasis weighted towards funded projects. The decision was taken by the editors to reflect this emphasis, with some alternative, non project-based, examples of educational development to act as a contrast.

### **What educational development is**

Educational development is the term which has become most widely used in the UK, partly to distinguish it from staff ('faculty' in the US) development, but also to mean 'academic', 'professional' or other similar terms. What they all have in common is some notion of activities that are concerned with 'sustaining and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching within the institution' (Hounsell, 1994). Webb (1996a) chooses to use the term 'staff development', while acknowledging that 'staff development in tertiary

institutions such as universities has mostly been concerned with educational development: the development of teaching and learning’.

By contrast, Baume and Baume (1994) distinguish between staff development for pedagogy—‘a matter of training teachers in certain reasonably well-defined skills, attitudes and approaches’—and educational development—‘working with people to solve their educational problems, to meet their educational challenges’. They summarize, and acknowledge that they perhaps over-simplify in the process, that ‘staff development implies workshops and trainer-led content and, sometimes, client boredom or, hopefully, storage of ideas and techniques for future use. Educational development implies consultancy and client-led content, and, usually, client active participation and immediate use of what is learnt’.

In his review of the work of educational development units in the UK, Gosling (2001) summarizes a number of writers (including Moses, 1987; Hounsell, 1994; and Candy, 1996) who include all, or some combination of, the following:

1. Improvement of teaching and assessment practices, curriculum design, and learning support—including the place of information technology in learning and teaching.
2. Professional development of academic staff, or staff development.
3. Organizational and policy development within the context of higher education.
4. Learning development of students—supporting and improving effective student learning.

Gosling goes on to quote Badley (1998) and Webb (1996b) on the fact that this list offers no account of ‘development’, which in itself may be a contested notion and, secondly, that it offers no place for research or scholarship. So Gosling now extends his list of characteristics of educational development to include:

5. Informed debate about learning, teaching, assessment, curriculum design, and the goals of higher education.
6. Promotion of the scholarship of teaching and learning and research into higher education goals and practices.

D’Andrea and Gosling (2001) conclude that, for educational developers to be valued in their institution, they must offer something unique and that ‘this value resides in being the repository of knowledge about research into learning and teaching, and about the likely impact of strategies on student learning’. So while the pragmatic and *ad hoc* approaches, for example in response to

the quality agenda, are important, 'our contention is that they are not a substitute for strategic, proactive and holistic development across the institution'.

Land (2001) draws on his research to categorize the practice of educational/academic developers as a set of orientations. These 12 orientations—managerial, political strategist, entrepreneurial, romantic, vigilant opportunist, researcher, professional competence, reflective practitioner, internal consultant, modeller-broker, interpretive-hermeneutic and discipline-specific—need to be mapped against the organizational culture in which the developer is a practitioner. Land draws on the work of Becher to identify four main patterns of organizational behaviour: hierarchical, collegial, anarchical and political. These typologies were originally defined for an institutional context. It will require further research to see whether they transfer equally to a project-based context.

## RESPONSES TO A CHANGING CONTEXT

Many of the current activities of educational developers have come about as a response to a changing higher education environment at both an institutional and national level. In the UK this can be seen through the influence of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and its Learning and Teaching Strategy (see below); the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) through its subject and academic review process, codes of practice and other frameworks; and also as a result of the so-called Dearing Report: the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997).

A key recommendation of the Dearing Committee was the establishment of a professional Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILT). The functions of the Institute would be 'to accredit programmes of training for higher education teachers; to commission research and development in learning and teaching process; and to stimulate innovation'. Whilst the first aim is well under way leading to the professionalization of teaching within the UK, and the HEFCE is stimulating innovation in learning and teaching through its various initiatives, the commissioning of research has sadly been neglected through the ILT. The Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (ESRC-TLRP) has been widened somewhat to include higher education, though to only a limited extent so far.

Many educational developers have become involved in accreditation courses for teachers in higher education, often through programmes originally recognized by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), as well as supporting bids for innovation funding in learning and teaching.

## **Funded initiatives**

In recent years—and in particular during the latter years of the 20th and early years of the 21st centuries—the UK's higher education funding bodies have instituted various initiatives to 'promote and enhance high quality learning and teaching'. However, the precedent was set during the 1980s in response to employers' complaints that universities were not producing effective graduates equipped with the necessary skills to apply their knowledge in the workplace. The Secretary of State for Employment announced the launch of the Enterprise in Higher Education scheme late in 1987, which offered up to £1 million over five years to institutions of higher education to assist them 'to develop enterprising graduates in partnership with employers'.

Though the term 'enterprise' was met with a certain degree of suspicion and scepticism by many academics, in the financial climate of the time it did provide an incentive for many institutions to look at how to change teaching methods. The scheme was assisted by the fact that 'enterprise' could be interpreted quite widely (Sneddon and Kremer, 1994).

Enterprise in Higher Education, together with a separate discipline network funding established by the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), provided models of funding teaching and learning developments to be followed by, amongst others, the UK higher education funding councils' Teaching and Learning Technology Programme (TLTP) in 1992. The first two phases of TLTP spanned 1992–96 with £7.5 million a year for three years in the first phase and £3.5 million in the second, in addition to institutional contributions. The aim of the programmes was stated as being 'to make teaching and learning more productive and efficient by harnessing modern technology'. However, there was concern that the projects concentrated on production and, following an evaluation of the programme which identified the need 'to concentrate more on implementation and embedding or materials within institutions', TLTP Phase 3 made £3.5 million a year available over three years from 1998 to address these concerns.

A further initiative is the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) which was launched in 1995 by the English and Northern Ireland higher education funding councils 'to stimulate developments in teaching and learning; and to secure the widest possible involvement of institutions in the take-up and implementation of good teaching and learning practice'. Bids were only accepted from institutions which had achieved an excellent grade or a commendation in the funding council's Teaching Quality Assessment, with 15 units of assessments being eligible in Phase One and a further eight in Phase Two. An overall budget of just under £14 million was allocated to the first two phases over four years (44 projects and £8.5 million over three years in Phase One and 19 projects and £4.0 million in Phase Two, in addition to coordination costs), with additional amounts subsequently being released to cover accessibility issues, further transferability of the outcomes of the projects and some continuation activities. The projects are not allowed

to include further dissemination of existing funded initiatives such as TLTP or to fund research on teaching and learning.

Following an evaluation of FDTL, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) consolidated its learning and teaching strategy into three strands: institutional, subject and individual. The subject strand mainly concerns this book as it funded a Phase Three of FDTL—33 projects with a total of £6.8 million over three years—and established the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) with the specific aim of disseminating and embedding good practices.

The LTSN, which is funded by the four UK higher education funding bodies, consists of a network of 24 subject centres offering subject-specific expertise and information on learning and teaching and a Generic Centre which offers similar support across subject boundaries. Following a bidding round, the Subject Centres were established in 2000 and are based in higher education institutions throughout the UK.

### **The growth in educational developers and development**

The initiatives outlined in the previous section all served to increase the number of educational developers in the UK, though many of the individuals involved may not have described themselves by such a term, at least not in the first instance. Project staff in FDTL and TLTP projects, those in LTSN Subject Centres and the Generic Centre, together with those working on various projects which they fund or run themselves, have all led to a significant increase in people working on educational development activities. A range of other initiatives—including widening participation, increasing the use of technology and supporting students with disabilities—have also included in their teams those who might be thought of as educational developers.

The institutional strand of the English funding council's learning and teaching strategies provided funds to institutions to develop and implement their own strategies, and much of this has resulted both in increased numbers in educational development units (Gosling, 2001) and also in the growth of staff carrying out educational development activities in academic and other central departments. Many institutions have introduced Teaching Fellowship schemes which release staff time to engage in development activities within their departments, often with support from their educational development unit.

Recent conferences organized by the UK's Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), and its first Summer School for educational developers in July 2001 (SEDA, 2001), have seen a significant change in those participating, with the LTSN Subject Centres, in particular, becoming well represented. Greater collaboration between the LTSN, SEDA and other organizations involved in higher education is also resulting in a further widening of those engaged in educational development activities. The chapters

in this book reflect some of the widening involvement of those who would now describe themselves as ‘educational developers’, though it is still difficult to put a figure or scale on this as many have not yet, and may never, take up the use of the descriptor.

This growth in educational development and its accompanying practitioners is, to an extent, mirrored elsewhere in the English-speaking world and in Europe. Similar funding initiatives have been seen in some countries, as have moves to establish national educational development networks, as evidenced by the growing number of members of the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED).

## RESEARCH AND EVALUATION IN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Research in educational development

Research in educational development has a relatively short history, as distinct from specific research into teaching and learning, though the latter has often focused on compulsory education prior to students entering higher education. While other research into educational development has appeared over the years, the launch of the *International Journal for Academic Development* in 1996 sought to focus scholarly activity in this and closely related topics. In the journal’s first editorial, Baume (1996) wrote that the journal’s distinctive focus ‘will thus be the processes of helping institutions, departments, course teams and individual staff to research into, reflect on and develop policy and practice about teaching, learning and other activities in support of learning... The journal is intended to help define, develop and extend the practice of academic development in higher education worldwide’.

Much of the research is thus focused on practice and policy and providing the evidence for change in educational development, as part of the process of change or to judge the effectiveness of that change. The emphasis has largely, but not exclusively, been on qualitative research methods, largely borrowed from social science traditions. There has also been an emphasis in some areas on action research as a way of researching changing or developing practices. ‘Action research...may be defined as collaborative, critical enquiry by the academics themselves (rather than expert educational researchers) into their own teaching practice, into problems of student learning and into curriculum problems. It is professional development through academic course development, group reflection, action, evaluation and improved practice’ (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). Beaty, France and Gardiner (1997), in advocating action research for use by educational developers ‘because it involves an experiential learning cycle that fuses research, development and evaluation into a dynamic process’, describe ‘consultancy style action research—CSAR—as an appropriate variant because it is based on a triangular partnership

involving ‘the knowledge of the educational developer, the skills and time of a social researcher and the concerns and expertise of academic staff’.

There is an extensive and growing literature on educational research methods, as a glance along the appropriate library bookshelf will show. Some of the chapters in this book demonstrate a number of these research methods in action, but it is in the use of various methods of evaluation that many concentrate. However, it is not just the methods that differ—and in fact they may demonstrate methodologies equally as rigorous as much research—but also the intentions and outcomes expected. Scott and Usher (1999) note that ‘evaluators are more concerned with assessing the effectiveness, or describing the impact, of a deliberately engineered social intervention’. By contrast ‘researchers do not operate with such a close relationship between themselves and the initiators of those interventions, though they may still be dealing with the effects of policy interventions, since these are an abiding feature of educational systems’. In the context of educational development, it is to evaluation that we should now turn our attention as this has been a major focus, rather than research *per se*.

## Evaluation of educational development

While evaluation was once seen by many academics as a threat to academic autonomy, ‘it has now come to be seen not only as a necessary adjunct to accountability, but also as an integral part of good professional practice’ (Hounsell, 1999). So when developing a project or proposing an innovation in learning and teaching, the first question is often ‘how will you evaluate it?’

The National Co-ordination Team (NCT) for the FDTL and TLTP produced a Project Briefing (1999) in which it links monitoring with evaluation. The reasons for monitoring and evaluation are given as being: formative evaluation to influence the future direction of the project; accountability through summative evaluation to satisfy stakeholders; and learning about teaching and learning practice and about project process, to inform future development projects. The main emphasis is therefore on whether the evaluation is formative/developmental or summative. The briefing also summarizes an evaluation strategy adapted for educational development by Baume and Baume (1995) from Nevo (1986):

1. Decide what is or are to be evaluated, and when.
2. Identify stakeholders in the project.
3. Identify stakeholders’ questions and concerns.
4. Identify the criteria for judging answers to stakeholders’ questions.
5. Devise and pilot the evaluation method and instruments.



6. Carry out the evaluation.
7. Report to the stakeholders.
8. Change project practice as necessary.
9. Review evaluation methods from time to time.

Evaluation is thus a dynamic process and not just something that happens at the end of a project or developmental activity. The link to monitoring enables those involved with evaluation to see it as part of the project process. As a past member of the NCT I was always conscious that project staff initially expected the summative elements of monitoring and evaluation to dominate, whereas the reality was that, on most occasions, it was the formative or developmental aspects which came to the fore—perhaps reflecting the background of the NCT members as educational developers.

There is not the space here to go into detail about evaluation methods but a useful source is the *Evaluation Cookbook* (Harvey, 1998), which was produced as part of the Learning Technology Dissemination Initiative, funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. However, most of the examples contained in this book ask themselves, in one way or another, the following questions in relation to evaluation of an educational development: Why? For whom? Of what? How? When? From whom? By whom?

### **The relationship between research and evaluation**

Many educational researchers would question the use of both action research and evaluation as legitimate or suitably academic approaches to understanding educational developments. However, developing approaches to evaluation, partly in response to the demands of growing numbers of stakeholders for increased accountability for the spending of public funds, has meant that the line between research and evaluation has become somewhat blurred.

Chapters in this book will demonstrate a variety of approaches to evaluation, often linked to more covert research activities—the pressures of the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK are felt even within educational development projects—but still with the intention of assessing both the outcomes and process of those developments, both summatively and formatively.

### **CHANGES TO PRACTICE**

The practices being addressed by the developments in this book are a fair reflection of the concerns being experienced in higher education throughout the world. Reduced funding in real, if not money terms; calls for greater accountability from government and electorates; moves to drive up academic

standards through formalized quality assurance mechanisms; increases in participation rates in higher education with consequent entry of much more diverse students with their differing support needs; calls for much greater flexibility in provision—in terms of time, pace and place as well as the whole nature of the learning experience—to meet the needs of the more heterogeneous student population; a growing use of communications and information technology in learning, leading to the lowering of barriers between education, the commercial world and international boundaries. And all, or at least most, of these have been accompanied by the appropriate policies, strategies and/or funding initiatives.

So the changes described in the following chapters reflect a mixture of pragmatic or even opportunistic developments and more strategic approaches to change, though the latter have sometimes been with the benefit of hindsight. Change has been both internally and externally funded, has been research driven or evidence based, and the scale has varied from the local, though the institutional, to the national. In particular, the call from employers for more skilled graduates who can use their knowledge to solve problems in the real world has led to responses at many levels. Similarly, initiatives by funding bodies to encourage a more strategic approach to learning, teaching and assessment has resulted in most institutions following relatively similar approaches, though without any large scale sharing of the outcomes of these developments to date.

## **HOW THE CHAPTERS REFLECT THESE ELEMENTS**

The chapters in this book all reflect to varying degrees the various elements described above: research, evaluation and changing practice in higher education, with the emphasis on changes to the experience of students. Further, they almost all reflect the changing agenda in the UK where the funding councils have sought to bring about improvements in learning and teaching through funded initiatives. For this reason, we invited contributions from a range of TLTP and FDTL projects which we knew offered some contrasting approaches and outcomes.

The contributions also reflect the range of contexts in which change is taking place: at departmental, institutional and national level. They also describe different discipline or subject areas, including chemistry, languages, sociology, English, law, architecture and medical education.

By way of contrast, as well as to add an international dimension to the contributions, we invited Shona Little and Gina Hefferan to provide an example of a more traditional approach to educational development where the lecturer concerned, supported by an educational developer, seeks to improve the experience of learners in their classroom. This is more within the Angelo and Cross (1993) tradition of classroom assessment or of action research.