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A consideration of peer support and peer mentoring within the Professional Teaching Scheme (PTS) at the University of Bedfordshire

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The Professional Teaching Scheme (PTS) is the University of Bedfordshire's Higher Education Academy (HEA) accredited CPD Framework. The PTS is an evidence-based approach to

- a) demonstrating effective practice aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF);
- b) engaging in reflective practice related to student and peer feedback/support; and
- c) disseminating effective practice related to teaching and learning across an appropriate community, via a community activity.

The PTS requires academics to present a portfolio of evidence and a reflective narrative to a panel composed of internal peers, students, and an external reviewer. The PTS is designed, initially, to provide recognition and enhancement of HEA fellowship. However, in the longer term, the PTS is founded on principles of continuing professional development, fostering

and developing a community of practice related to teaching and learning, significantly enhancing the learner experience at the university, and supporting key university processes to enhance and develop teaching practice and standards. The PTS is also intended to be utilised as a review process, linked with annual appraisal, in a four-yearly cycle to support maintenance of good standing with the HEA.

One of the key processes embedded within the PTS is peer support. Historically, akin to what Monk and Purnell (2014) suggest, peer observation at the University of Bedfordshire has been a hierarchical process, carried out on an *ad hoc* basis, either as part of probation, or as an intervention when poor student feedback is received. There has been little evidence of encouraging 'reflective practice of teaching through collegial discussion in order to enhance professional development' (Purnell and Monk, 2012; Shortland 2004). The peer support process, embedded within the PTS, seems aligned to the Peer supported Development Scheme (PSDS) described by Monk and Purnell (2014). There is an expectation that peer supporters will demonstrate a range of skills essential to an effective professional dialogue, for example, a listening capacity and asking constructive questions. However, Monk and Purnell (2014) suggest PSDS supporters should also 'offer solutions' – phraseology that could be challenged – because a key principle of peer support within the PTS is solution-focused, enabling academics to construct, and therefore own, their own solutions (Clutterbuck and Lane, 2004). The expected outcomes of the peer support process for the PTS and PSDS would also seem to be aligned, that is, reflection on teaching in order to bring about improvement in practice for both the supported and supporter.

Monk and Purnell (2014) report that a 'variety of teaching and learning activity has been undertaken within their PSDS scheme including bid writing, marking and assessment, writing conference abstracts and journal articles, preparing audits', along with more classroom based activities such as 'engaging and sustaining student participation in class' and 'using e-learning technology'. Currently the peer support process embedded within the PTS has focused on teaching activity, most commonly, observation of a lecture, seminar or workshop with a written feedback form. This stems directly from the hierarchical process previously utilised at the University of Bedfordshire, peer observation. The PTS has some way to go to bring about a change in culture related to peer support, and it is clear that there needs to be a significant change in perception of the nature and purpose of peer support activities as part of the scheme, as well as significant sea change in how professional dialogue, in terms of developing teaching and learning activity, is supported and actioned as a meaningful part of the PTS.

The peer support process embedded in the PTS requires academics at the University of Bedfordshire to present **robust and reliable evidence** of engagement with the peer support process, reflection on practice, changes in practice, and evidence of the **impact on students' learning experience** resulting from engaging with the process. It is clear that, to ensure the process does support effective reflection, observable changes in practice and improvement in students' learning, both supported and supporter will require professional development around the peer support process itself. Monk and Purnell (2014) suggest the development of criteria and guidelines to enable effective structured dialogue. However, within the PTS, criteria and guidelines will not be enough to bring about the organisational and cultural

changes required to truly embed constructive, reflective, professional dialogue related to teaching and learning. I would argue that the skills required for these conversations cannot be learned by reading guidance, and are unlikely to be expressed either through intuition, or happy accident. Development of these skills will require a range of professional development activities including practical workshops, action sets, mentoring of mentees and critical engagement with theories related to peer support. These are all activities which will be rolled out as the PTS becomes embedded.

Arrand (2014) considers the nature of the interactions between a peer mentor and mentee, and while her study is focused on student peer tutoring schemes, there are clear correlations between this process, and the peer support process embedded within the PTS. A closer examination of her findings supplies an indication of the nature of the professional development needs that may be experienced by peer supporters engaged with the PTS. Arrand used narratives to identify six overarching themes as follows:

- Characteristics of 'The Perfect Mentor'
- Ethics
- Power/Control
- Personal Development
- Characteristics
- Empowerment

Several of these themes are of particular interest to the PTS in terms of developing peer supporters. For example, the identifying characteristics of 'perfect mentors' within Arrand's context suggest that personality traits, such as calmness, a supportive, caring persona, patience and confidence may be equally as important as the skills required to facilitate constructive professional dialogue.

Arrand (2014) discusses power and control within a particular mentoring relationship, and this is relevant also to the peer support processes within the PTS. The importance of awareness of this is particularly relevant given the historical hierarchical nature of peer observation within the University of Bedfordshire. Both supported and supporters will require development opportunities in which they can discuss and become aware of possible 'power' issues related to control, superiority, and even dominance.

Arrand's (2014) work reiterates the transformative nature of a peer mentoring relationship for both mentee and mentor, and the inclusion of a peer support element within the PTS is intended to maximise the potential benefits this transformation can bring. In particular, the PTS is designed to support transformation in practice related to teaching and learning. Arrand (2014) highlights other transformative benefits for peer mentors, such as development of confidence, skills, success, a sense of progression and achievement. Reflecting on Arrand's work has prompted the PTS evaluation and impact strategy to be extended to collect meaningful data related to these transformations, most likely in the form of narrative inquiry, as utilised by Arrand.

Monk and Purnell (2014) consider whether peer supported schemes such as PSDS should be tied into institutional processes. They question whether this devalues the voluntary nature and sense of inclusive community generated by such schemes. I would argue whether higher education institutions are sufficiently mature in terms of reflective practice to ensure that academics will, on the scale required for significant change in practice, voluntarily engage in peer support. Additionally, I would question whether the University of Bedfordshire has an inclusive community of practice related to teaching and learning activity. In fact, fostering and developing this community is a key intended outcome of the PTS. Voluntary participation and the spontaneous development of an inclusive community seem idealistic notions, and possibly do exist, but as Monk and Purnell's (2014) analysis seems to suggest, within teacher education departments, rather than institution-wide in the higher education context. Thus, the peer support component of the PTS at the University of Bedfordshire is embedded within institutional processes, but is intended to be appropriately supported, to effect actual organisational change in both culture and practice related to teaching and learning. A comprehensive, robust, research-based evaluation and impact strategy will seek to measure these outcomes in due course.

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Key Pedagogical Thinkers: Vivien Hodgson Uzair Shah, Management School, University of Lancaster

Vivien Hodgson is a Professor of Networked Management Learning in the Department of Management Learning and Leadership at Lancaster University Management School, UK. Her research interests are in networked learning and the learner's experience of learning. Also she explores the designing of learning opportunities from a critical pedagogy and constructionist perspective. Between 1995 and 1998 she was involved and responsible for the Open and Distance Learning (Socrates) Action within the Socrates programme of the European Commission in Brussels. Also she coordinated and participated in many e-learning research projects in Europe and Latin America.

She has researched and written much about collaborative learning, and on the importance of reflection and dialogue, along with research exploring the use of ICT and its impact on learning. Her research and ideas have also influenced and informed my teaching, and also research interests around pedagogy, learning technology, and networked learning.

Here I would like to briefly present my background as this may facilitate the reader in better understanding of how Vivien's research informed my thinking, teaching and research. Without mentioning the name of the university, my undergraduate teaching like in many other universities was quite a spectacle of instructional teaching – the teacher comes in,