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A Personalised Approach to Initial Professional Development: The Needs Analysis at UWE Bristol

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'Being talked through what academic development opportunities are available was really helpful in terms of understanding what would be most useful for me. There are lots of different opportunities at UWE, but they can be difficult to find, or it can be difficult to know what is suitable for me in my role just from reading a web page. I really liked that it felt quite proactive (compared to just using an online form or reading a page on the intranet). … I got signposted to some training opportunities which I think will be very useful and I probably wouldn't have gone for them without them. The meeting also gave me the impression that UWE, as an organisation, is committed to academic development and quality in teaching and learning, which gives me confidence and motivation to develop my academic practice (compared to other institutions I've worked in which comparatively weren't bothered).'

Needs Analysis participant feedback, September 2022

Overview

The Needs Analysis was a personalised initial professional development intervention developed in 2022 by the Academic Practice Directorate (APD) at the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol). It was designed especially for new academic staff at UWE, principally probationary lecturers and senior lecturers. It centred on each participant having a 30-minute one-to-one meeting with a facilitator from the APD. They discussed the participant's academic practice to date and looked to the new colleague's development over approximately the next year. Meetings included bespoke signposting to professional development activities relevant to that individual's needs and interests, including the most appropriate pathway through UWE's Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. New academics were encouraged to attend a meeting as soon as possible after starting employment.

It was a remarkably successful intervention which far exceeded our expectations. We ran 98 meetings across September 2022 to February 2023. 95% of participants agreed that the meeting was helpful, and 95% also thought that the meeting would influence their professional development (see Table 1). The highly positive comment which opened this article is remarkably pithy, but it aligns to common themes in participant feedback.

Table 1: Quantitative feedback from anonymous feedback forms completed by participants after Needs Analysis meetings. There was a 38% response rate (37 responses from 98 meetings).

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

I found this meeting helpful	76% (28)	19% (7)	3% (1)	-	3% (1)
I think this meeting will influence my professional development	59% (22)	35% (13)	3% (1)	-	3% (1)
This meeting was well organised	81% (30)	16% (6)	-	-	3% (1)

Context: After the Apprenticeship

The Needs Analysis intervention was conceptualised soon after UWE decided to stop delivering the Academic Professional Apprenticeship for its new academics. We had launched this apprenticeship programme with an embedded PGCert in 2019, and had enrolled almost 400 participant up until 2021. The process of designing and delivering this large-scale apprenticeship had been one of valuable learning, and we have written on this previously in *Educational Developments* (O'Leary, Mudd & King, 2019). The change of direction away from the apprenticeship (reverting back to a stand-alone PGCert) provided another valuable opportunity for reflection; to consider which elements to retain.

We especially valued our apprenticeship's Initial Needs Analysis. This process was conducted prior to a participant starting learning on the programme. It was principally designed to check whether the participant was eligible for apprenticeship levy funding, and to recognise prior learning/experience and adjust study accordingly (ESFA, 2022). We also checked their initial confidence and competence against all of the knowledge, skills and behaviours in the Academic Professional apprenticeship standard (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2022), and used this also to inform a plan of learning.

There were three main aspects of this process which we identified as of significant value:

- The focus this gave to personalising initial professional development to the individual and their circumstances. Colleagues could be directed to specific academic development opportunities. Some could be signposted to different routes through the PGCert (including accredited learning where appropriate). We valued especially how this support was available for every new academic, and not merely the more proactive and persistent colleagues.
- Those situations where we had engaged in deeper conversation with a new colleague. Much information was gathered by form due to the large numbers of participants and the mechanical nature of many of these checks for the apprenticeship. But some situations necessitated sustained discussion. These opened a dialogue to think through prior experience and what was most supportive and appropriate for that individual.
- Information feeding into our academic development interventions. By reviewing the situation of all new academics starting at UWE soon after they had started employment, we had a detailed and timely understanding of the needs of new starters. For instance, some questions gave us quantitative data on digital confidence and we could then prioritise our support accordingly.

Proposing the Needs Analysis

We therefore proposed to retain an enhanced Needs Analysis post apprenticeship. We would of course remove the now unnecessary elements which focused on apprenticeship requirements, and focus even more deeply on the individual's development needs. We also aimed to trial having these as synchronous one-to-one conversations with a facilitator, as this aligned to what most valuable under the apprenticeship.

A pivotal argument to secure senior management support was that it aligned strategically. UWE's Strategy 2023 and the linked People Strategy aims to put 'people at the centre' through 'personalised, inclusive and transformative' support (UWE Bristol, 2023b). A one-to-one Needs Analysis meeting for each new academic undeniably promotes a more personalised experience.

A common hesitation voiced at an early stage was the resource required. Various colleagues remarked that short one-to-one meetings with every new academic would require significant staff resource which we did not have. I have also heard similar comments from educational developers from other institutions who were interested in this project. However, our hypothesis was twofold:

- It was not in fact a large amount of time, providing everything was well designed and streamlined. From the facilitator's point of view, all of the discussion for each participant was usually completed within each person's 30-minute meeting slot. The admin was largely automated. We also ensured that the process was streamlined and efficient from the participant's point of view (see Table 1 with 97% agreeing that the meeting was well organised).
- This could be a time efficiency. We estimated that prior to the Needs Analysis, the 'average' new academic took up at least this amount of time from the APD team across their first year in-post, if not more, through various enquiries which could have been pre-empted by efficient signposting and timely information.

An example of this is regarding the more experienced new academics and their engagement in the PGCert. Across all Needs Analysis meetings, only around half of new lecturers and senior lecturers were signposted to complete the full PGCert (see Table 2). The other half had circumstances which were explored in detail in a Needs Analysis meeting, leading to a more personalised recommendation other than the 'default' of the full PGCert. Without a process like the Needs Analysis, it is likely that many of these colleagues would have been confused; they may have launched multiple enquiries with different teams and may initially have started on a less appropriate route through the PGCert.

Table 2: One aim of the Needs Analysis meeting was to help identify the most appropriate route through which each colleague could engage with UWE's PGCert (a requirement of academic probation), or similar. The below table shows the percentage of participants signposted to each route. (Note: this discussion did not form part of all 98 meetings; it was included in all meetings for those on academic probation, but was omitted for some who were not.)

PGCert recommendation	Number of participants
Engage in the full PGCert (comprising Modules 1 and 2)	45 (48%)
Engage in only Module 1 of the PGCert (usually for staff on certain part-time or fixed-term contracts)	14 (15%)

Explore accredited learning against Module 1 of the PGCert, and engage with PGCert Module 2 (for staff who have done part of a similar PGCert, or have significant HE experience)	18 (19%)
Exemption from the PGCert (for staff who already hold a comparable PGCert, Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy [FHEA], or similar)	14 (15%)
Gain FHEA via UWE's experiential fellowship scheme (for highly experienced staff who cannot qualify for exemption)	2 (2%)
Total	**93**

To facilitate these meetings, the APD team put aside two hours per week of staff time, with different facilitators taking turns over different weeks. This small outlay of time created c.200 meeting slots per year. This provided around double the expected demand, given that UWE typically recruited around 100 new academic staff in a 'normal' year.

Mapping Forms

Prior to a meeting, the participant was asked to map their confidence and competence against a simplified version of the Academic Professional Apprenticeship standard (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2022) using an online form. They provided a rank from 1-4 for each criterion. After ranking each criterion, the participant was then asked to reflect on their mapping and write briefly on 1) their main areas of strength in their academic practice, and 2) areas where they need to prioritise development. This helped to phrase the meeting constructively by directing the participant to think reflectively across the breadth of academic practice. The form was reviewed by the meeting facilitator before the meeting and was often used to help direct the meeting.

These forms also generated quantitative data on (predominantly) new academic staff across UWE, to give an insight into their areas of strength and development needs across the institution at that moment. There were 108 original responses (which exceeds the 98 meetings conducted, due to factors such as cancellations which were not rescheduled). The average (mean) result across all rankings was 2.8. The criteria which had the highest average were:

- Be enthusiastic, self-confident and self-reflective to operate effectively as an academic professional (3.4)
- [Research Specialist] The use of current theories, models, developments and issues in relevant areas of research literature (3.1)
- Communicate effectively to create interest, understanding and engagement among intended learner and/or academic professional audiences (3.1)
- Value and champion equality, diversity and inclusion (3.1)

The criteria which had a lowest average were:

- Relevant higher education regulatory, administrative and quality procedures and how they relate to their academic role (2.2)
- [Research Specialist] Major funding streams and programmes in relevant research fields (2.3)
- [Research Specialist] Develop and sustain links with industry and other external organisations to grow collaborations and develop opportunities to access funding (2.3)

This suggests that most new academics during this period felt more confident and self-reflective in their practice, strong in communication, and dedicated to equality, diversity and inclusion. Whereas they felt least confident regarding the administrative, regulatory and quality landscape.

Due to the teaching-focused nature of UWE, all participants were asked on Teaching Specialist Knowledge and Skills; but the Research Specialist Knowledge and Skills were only asked to colleagues who identified their role had a significant research focus. These results therefore suggest that UWE's new researchers were more confident regarding theories and developments in their discipline. Whereas they felt less confident regarding research funding and regarding links to industry and external organisations.

Meetings and Signposting

The meetings were conducted either online or in person according to the participant's preference. It was suggested that the participant could invite any other colleagues to support them in this meeting; for instance their line manager and/or probation mentor. Facilitators also made notes on a meeting form, and a copy of this was automatically sent to the participant along with a suggestion that they share this with their line manager and probation mentor to help inform parallel conversations. Participant, mentor and manager feedback was unanimously positive in respect to how smoothly and supportively this worked. Managers especially appreciated the exploration of personalised pathways with respect to the PGCert, and the signposting of a range of wider professional development opportunities.

Each 30-minute meeting focused on four topics:

1. The participant's background. Especially: their HE teaching experience, teaching qualifications and accreditation (including Higher Education Academy fellowships), research.
2. Their work at UWE. Especially: their employment, probation, responsibilities over the next year.
3. Their professional development over the next year (see below).
4. UWE's PGCert. Especially: their recommended engagement route (see table 2, above), answering any queries.

Topic 3, on their professional development, varied significantly from participant to participant. The mapping form was used to identify interests and priorities. The participant and facilitator (and mentor and/or manager if present) then worked together to signpost activities which may work towards these.

This was aided by a 'Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Signposting Sheet', an online resource which listed and linked to 49 formal CPD activities offered by UWE (UWE Bristol, 2023a). Each activity was of relevance to aspects of academic practice; they ranged in subject from learning and teaching to leadership and management, and ranged in format from workshops to online guides. Opportunities beyond UWE and ideas for informal CPD activities were additionally signposted. By compiling this in one place, CPD Signposting Sheet responded to frequent comments from UWE staff that it was difficult to navigate the various systems used by different teams to identify what CPD opportunities existed, and prioritise which were most useful to them (note for instance the quote at the start of this article). It also helped facilitators to stay up to date with UWE's CPD offerings, made signposting quicker and easier, and also meant that the participants (who were often new colleagues) could more legitimately contribute to this conversation.

As the signposting for each participant was entered into their meeting form, this also provided data on which CPD activities were most commonly signposted; which could perhaps imply demand (see Table 3).

Table 3: The Initial Needs Analysis meetings signposted to professional development activities beyond the PGCert. The most frequent activities signposted are below.

Common CPD recommendations	Percentage of participants signposted
UWE's Introduction to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education programme	48%
UWE's Programme and Module Leader Development programme	45%
UWE's Improvisational Skills for Teaching programme	31%
UWE's experiential Higher Education Academy (HEA) Fellowship scheme	13%
UWE's internal research funding schemes	12%
UWE's annual Festival of Learning	12%
Higher Education newsletters and magazines (e.g. Times Higher Education, Wonkhe, etc.)	11%
UWE's Higher Education Pedagogies, Policy and Practice Research Network	11%
UWE's Researcher Development programme	7%
UWE's leadership and management programmes, courses and schemes	7%

Feedback

There was an unexpectedly large demand for these meetings. In the first 3 months, we held 75 meetings. This was significantly more than the 50 we had intended to schedule during this period, and we still had a waiting list. When we released and announced new dates, these dates were usually fully booked within 24 hours.

Where we had capacity, the Needs Analysis meetings were also open to all other staff at UWE. Of the 98 meetings, 83 (85%) were from our core audience of probationary academic staff. The remaining 15 (15%) were from either longer-established academic staff or professional services colleagues whose work included elements of academic practice. As we rarely had spare capacity, our hypothesis is that there was even greater demand from these non-core groups.

Themes from the participants' qualitative feedback suggest several main strengths (see Table 1 on the quantitative feedback). Each are listed below with examples of feedback:

- The Needs Analysis made UWE seem like a friendly, caring and supportive employer: [In response to 'what worked well in this meeting?'] '[The facilitator's] detailed insight regarding my professional development and the genuine empathy and care [they] showed in this meeting.'
- Building participant confidence: 'Firstly, having my words reflected back helped build my confidence in my existing abilities. Secondly, the advice received regarding how I can move forward in my teaching career was considered, detailed and persuasive.'

- Identifying useful development activities: '[The facilitator] showed me a more simple way to access CPD modules which I had no idea about. Truthfully I had been finding navigating the learning modules very difficult, so this was an 'instant win'.'
- Comments frequently included explicit mention of the CPD Signposting Sheet: '[The facilitator] has been particularly helpful and his guidance has been precise and to the point. I have also been offered a single webpage where key CPD matters could be addressed and resolved. I am thankful to this colleague for providing me with such high standard guidance in my new academic environment.'
- Aiding with clarity, direction, decision making: 'It was very helpful and a clear trajectory has been outlined. I highly recommend these meetings as they are hugely beneficial. [The facilitator] was fantastic at explaining and very accommodating.'
- Feeding into conversations with managers, to help development: 'I have particular points I can give feedback to my manager to support my pathway to a permanent role.'
- The one-to-one format and flexible structure was frequently praised: [In response to 'what worked well in this meeting?'] 'The one to one nature. The host really listened and tailored their guidance.'

Themes from participant feedback suggests the following developments would be most appreciated:

- More time for the meetings
- More useful to schedule these closer to the start of employment
- Follow-up meetings with the Needs Analysis team

Final Reflections

One of the most useful, but least tangible, aspects of the Needs Analysis was how it helped to promote a culture of professional development across the institution. As educational developers, we often hear comments such as 'I don't have time for my own development'. The Needs Analysis worked to combat this. When it worked at its best, a new starter came to meet our educational development unit soon after starting in post and made this useful connection with someone who could continue to support them. We listened to their background and their reflections on what support they needed to do their current role and to develop further. Their manager and mentor were engaged in the process, explicitly prioritising their development from the early days of their role. As with the quote which opened this article, it could motivate a new colleague to prioritise their development and introduce them to a culture where reflection and development is the norm.

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