

Chapter 5

Educational Development Units: The Challenge of Quality Enhancement in a Changing Environment.

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Introduction

Educational development units (EDUs) sometimes referred to as ‘academic development units’ can be defined as departments within universities that have been given a specific responsibility for improving the quality of learning and teaching in their host university. In recent years, since 2000, they have largely been funded through the provision of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF), which has had two distinct effects. First, it has led to a rather pragmatic focus on the social, economic and institutional values that underpin educational policy rather than the more educational issues of academic freedom, professional autonomy and the search for knowledge noted by Bell and Stevenson, in Chapter 1 of this book. Second, as the TQEF is temporary and due to end in 2010, it has also put units under some pressure to search for a stronger intellectual basis for educational development, in order to ensure their own survival. It is argued here that this is linked to the notion of ‘teaching quality enhancement’. The nature of exactly what constitutes ‘teaching quality enhancement’ is not entirely clear however, and in fact there appear to be considerable differences in the roles that educational development units perform in different institutions.

Commonly, EDUs are involved in providing continuing professional development for academic staff, but they may also be implementing national initiatives such as the

implementation of personal development planning into the curriculum, or managing technological innovations, ranging from the management of an institutional VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) to providing advice on the use of a specific product, for example the Turnitin Plagiarism Detection Service. This extremely superficial summary hints at the complexity of the task EDUs face. The meaning of concepts such as 'teaching', 'learning' and 'quality' is still subject to some debate, and as Crawford points out in Chapter 6 of this volume, different academic disciplines take different approaches to teaching and learning. It follows that there are also likely to be different conceptions of what constitutes 'quality'. Additionally, there is an external discourse of quality control, which argues that it is possible to measure the amount of development that takes place. In the sense that one can count the number of workshops delivered, the number of interactions between staff of the unit and academic staff, this is true. However that 'truth' rests on the simplistic implication that teaching is characterized as the transmission of knowledge from one mind to another, which contrasts with the conception of learning as occurring when students participate in and reflect on activities that promote learning, as for example, described in the work of Biggs (2003) and Laurillard (2002).

The author is currently conducting research into EDU staffs' perceptions of their role, and how far these relate to the structural and functional models of the university that can be found in the literature. Although this research is in its early stages it has involved visiting educational development units and interviewing the staff working in them; this chapter uses some of these findings and personal experience of working in an educational development unit to discuss the how EDUs, given their relatively small size, might set about effecting significant change in a potentially risk-averse higher

education environment. Lack of space precludes an extensive discussion of the relevance of the different models of the university, but the authors of other chapters have drawn attention to influences on higher education, for example Karran's discussion of the influence of the Humboldtian model of a research intensive university and Neary and Winn's discussion of the 'research-informed teaching' university will both be influential in informing the debate within and around educational development units. This chapter concentrates on the practical difficulties facing EDUs in what is currently a rather instrumental environment.

The complexity of the task facing EDUs is illustrated by the diversity of the units themselves. Gosling (2001) shows that there is a remarkable range of titles, organisational positions and to a lesser extent size of units. The titles of the units are quite revealing. The words 'learning and teaching' are included in the names of 43 per cent of the units surveyed. In the pre-1992 universities there was a high occurrence of the phrases 'staff development', 'quality enhancement' and 'academic development' or 'academic practice'. In a recently published update to his study, Gosling (2008) shows that this diversity has, if anything, increased. The title 'academic practice' is of interest because it clearly incorporates a focus on wider aspects of academic work than simply teaching. For example, as Blackmore and Blackwell (2006) pointed out, research and administration are usually regarded as an important part of the work of a university academic, yet are not often accorded the same attention as teaching by the research literature.

The type of university appears to have a strong influence over where in the institution EDUs are situated. In new universities, created after the Higher Education Act of

1992, they tend to be centrally located, perhaps being seen as an integral part of a more corporate management style. In pre-1992 universities, they tend to form part of larger administrative units, such as quality offices, staff development or Human Resources departments. Although it is less usual, in the 2008 survey Gosling indicated that about 10 per cent of EDUs were attached to faculties. He also reported that heads of EDUs in the new universities were more likely to regard themselves as senior managers. This may be a reflection of the principal research method he chose to employ: a survey of heads of educational development units in the UK. In fact, he notes that relatively few of these heads chaired any major university committee. The perception of the educational development unit as belonging to the 'centre', that is the administrative centre of the university, rather than being associated with the more academic side of the University such as faculties, may have an important effect on its interaction with colleagues, and this issue is examined in some detail below.

If educational development units have anything in common with each other, it is that they tend to be small, although there are exceptions. Gosling (2001) reported that they typically had between one and eight staff, both academic and administrative. There also appear to be a high number of staff employed on fixed term contracts, often related to project funding and a heavy dependence on part time staff. Having said that, this kind of employment pattern is quite common in Higher Education generally Sanders (2004), so it may not be reasonable to characterize it as typical of educational development units. Another factor in common is that they are often seen as a locus of technological innovation, although very few have any technical staff, in the sense of those with computer programming skills, or developers of educational technology. Indeed, as Watling notes in Chapter 7, Internet developers are outstripping the support

that institutions are able to provide and this places an obligation on EDUs, not only to keep up to date with the technology but also to attempt to influence the pedagogical processes which the technology is designed to support. It is easy to conceive how units might become involved in innovations that use technology, but are not in themselves technological. An example of this is the use of the Turnitin Plagiarism Detection Service. Here the development aim is to persuade colleagues to use the service to teach students about plagiarism by incorporating submission to Turnitin as part of the assessment regime, as opposed to simply using it post facto to catch malefactors. For further details of this approach see Carroll and Appleton (2001).

Contested Ideas of the University

It is not only educational development units that are diverse. The idea of the university itself is contested, and this inevitably affects how EDUs are perceived both by themselves and by others. Views range from a rather pessimistic economic instrumentalism (Evans 2004) through ideas about training the mind (Newman 1998) and the Humboldtian 'research orientation' (UNESCO 2000) to Barnett's post modern 'supercomplex' institution (Barnett 2000); such diversity can challenge whether the university remains in any meaningful sense. Barnett points out that the university traditionally stood above the community it served, and as a result enjoyed a freedom not extended to other bodies in the wider society; this allowed it to explore universal themes of truth, knowledge, criticality and learning. However post modern and post structuralist philosophies suggest that no ontological position whatsoever can be taken with any credible authority, although as Barnett acknowledges, this kind of relativism is itself a position. The result is a world of 'proliferating and even mutually contesting frameworks, a world of supercomplexity' (Barnett 2005: 789). In fact, although

Barnett's analysis is valuable, one does need to acknowledge that the activities of the university are marked by certain dominant discourses, for example, gender, the world of work (and a very specific, corporate-oriented type of work at that), and disciplinary hegemony (Becher and Trowler 2001).

The concept of the university as an instrument of national economic development has gained some wider currency. Evidence for this can be seen in the growth of an increasing discourse of consumerism in higher education. At one end of the scale students increasingly see themselves as paying for a service, and they are less likely to accept either what they see as poorly delivered lectures in lecture rooms which are too small, equipped (if at all) with unreliable equipment, or problems in accessing tutors, library and computing services. At the other end of the scale, government ministers holding a very narrow view of what higher education is for. The following quotation from Charles Clarke, a former Secretary of State for Education is revealing:

What I have said on a number of occasions ... is that the mediaeval concept of the university as a community of scholars is only a very limited justification for the state to fund the apparatus of universities. It is the wider social and economic role of universities that justifies more significant state financial support. (quoted in Evans 2004: 43)

Thus the university is seen, from one perspective at least, as having a clear function with regard to the wider economic environment in which it operates. The purpose of higher education is to provide skilled graduates who will work to promote the

economic well-being of the nation. The implication for the educational development unit is that it should be developing teachers who are best placed to teach to that end.

This places the educational development unit in a difficult position. It is not usually a significant income generator in itself, which can put it under pressure to justify the funding that it receives. There is a need to do more than promote a debate about what constitutes good practice, or efficient teaching. In short, the EDU needs to provide evidence of its activity, and demonstrate that such activity is effective and of value both to the university and to the wider higher education community. An EDU cannot ignore external demands for accountability. The challenge is to balance the normative external pressures on the institution from policy makers, fund holders and other stakeholders with the need to encourage a reflective, exploratory ethos that will engage teaching colleagues, and in so doing so make a convincing case for its continuing existence. To some extent, this depends on the context in which the EDU is operating.

The Complexity of University Teaching and the 'fit' of the EDU

An important concern of EDUs, perhaps the most important, is the 'improvement of practices related to teaching'. Teaching however is underpinned by many different values and, as Bell and Stevenson note in Chapter 1, these values are just as often economic, social, and institutional as they are educational. This diversity, along with the multiplicity of conceptions of the university, is reflected in many different approaches to teaching. As Scott (2005) puts it, the concept of teaching is becoming somewhat disjointed. First there is a proliferation of new courses and disciplines emerging. Second, there is an increase in the diversity of delivery methods, a growth

in part time, flexible and on-line learning. Third, there has been a growth in the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) and other applications that make use of technology. Finally, there has been a shift from teaching to learning, meaning that the teacher is less important in the totality of the student's learning experience. Libraries, databases and pastoral support all play an increasingly important role. Clearly Scott's arguments render the model of teaching as transmission unsustainable, but in some respects he doesn't go far enough. As Westera (2004) reminds us:

Technological innovation is often seen as a straightforward process of improvement – actually it is a diverse and complex field of action. It concerns a mix of new developments in pedagogy and technology, it implies changes at organisational level and it touches on fundamental concepts like progress, change, control, functionality, anticipation, mediation, acceptance etc.
(Westera 2004: 502)

EDUs, then, need to do far more than simply concentrate on improving teaching. Technology in particular is associated with a range of normative requirements (in many polities often mandated by legislation) such as usability, intellectual property rights management, and data protection. The implication for an educational development unit is that it needs to develop its own philosophy around what constitutes 'good teaching' which may not, indeed probably does not, match the philosophy of teaching held within the different departments. In parallel (it is implied) the EDU needs to develop a rather deontic model of appropriate professional practice, especially around technology.

The implication of the existence of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund is that there exists a normative set of rules about what constitutes good teaching, and that educational development units are the logical repository of some form of privileged access to those rules. Faculties appear to want to distance themselves from that idea, possibly because they represent a threat to what they see as their freedom to teach in the most appropriate way. Clegg (2003) for example, in her case study of a single institution, draws attention to the attitude of an interviewee:

He designated the [Learning Teaching and Assessment] co-ordinator role (i.e. his own) as being the [Learning and Teaching Institute] (the central educational development unit) person in order to distance it from his own School identity. (Clegg 2003: 809)

This seems to be a very revealing observation showing that for many teaching staff, even if they have a formal educational development role, the EDU is still not seen as part of the major academic enterprise. Essentially it is part of the 'centre', and as such is still seen as external to the work of the individual departments.

The idea of the pragmatic emerged through a series of dualities, all of which asserted the significance of local practical wisdom as against policy and theoretical knowledge in the centre. (Clegg 2003: 810)

Clegg's case study was not about educational development units as such, but those who work in EDUs will have little difficulty in recognising the dualities to which she refers. On the one hand there is the disciplinary knowledge which is, for the most

part, what attracted academic staff to the profession in the first place and on the other there is the encompassing regulatory framework, whose importance is recognized by academic staff, but which they do not always prioritize.

Tight (2003) has convincingly demonstrated that academic staff are highly educated professionals with a great deal of independence who can display considerable ingenuity in continuing to work to their preferred style, while superficially accepting change. Sharpe (2004) draws on generic notions of professional development to argue that while there may be a set of basic competences involved in university teaching a large proportion of what higher educationa professionals do is implicit – in other words, they find it very difficult to describe their work. Here there is an echo of the reflective practitioner (Schön1995), ' but although Sharpe concedes that reflection is a valuable learning activity, she suggests that it is not adequate to explain professional development. Theories of personal reflection do not sit easily with, for example, concepts of social learning and the need to articulate, in Schön's phrase, the 'professional artistry' of university teachers, neither is reflection particularly helpful in making that artistry available to others.

There is some truth in this, but it seems to underplay the value of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is valuable precisely because it is tacit and so can be adapted to different situations. If tacit knowledge is articulated there is a strong risk of it being converted into a more or less rigid set of rules which, if not discouraging reflection entirely, lessens the likelihood that it will occur. This is not an argument that academics should not attempt to articulate their tacit knowledge in their teaching. Clearly education would be a challenging business if no one articulated what they

knew! Rather it is an argument that the ability to respond to different situations is a requirement for anyone who works in the modern university. An EDU that sees its primary role as simply 'training', or the application of what are sometimes called 'technical-rational' solutions, is unlikely to succeed in engaging with colleagues who will not recognize the experience of others, or any proposed solutions, as being relevant to their own practice unless there is a properly critical debate about the problem.

Gosling (2001) was clear that the role of the EDU is predominantly to encourage reflection. He states that the purpose of these units is:

to create an environment in which debate can flourish about what constitutes good practice and how that may vary across different contexts and for different types of students. Learning is not simply more or less effective and teaching is not simply more or less efficient, nor can good practice simply be disseminated. (Gosling 2001: 75)

While this is unlikely to appeal to those who view the university as an instrument of national economic development and seek to measure its performance in meeting that end, it does support the argument that educational development needs to take greater account of the situated nature of learning. The argument here is that learning can indeed be more effective, teaching can be more efficient, and good practice can be disseminated: educational development is based on these precepts, while acknowledging that the task is both difficult and complex

Given this complexity, it is not entirely surprising to discover that EDUs adopt a variety of strategies to bring about the objective of enhancing the quality of teaching in their host universities. What is emerging from the case studies collected in the course of the current research is a clear emphasis on the development of academic staff, rather than a concern for the development of learning materials or the production of normative guidelines about, for example, how technology should be used to meet the needs of specific groups of students.

Educational Development Unit practices

Given the multiplicity of demands placed upon them and the relative lack of clarity about what is expected of them, it is not perhaps surprising to find that EDUs offer a wide variety of services. These might include provision of a staff development programme, the provision and administration of awards for teaching the evaluation of new technologies, the provision of accredited programmes such as postgraduate diplomas in higher education, masters or doctoral courses, help-desk type services for virtual learning environments, the writing of bids for external funding, or the implementation of specific incentives, such as the introduction of personal development planning into the curriculum. There is no space here for a full discussion of these, but the use of new technologies to promote learning is discussed in more detail, because it is something that most EDUs appear to be involved in.

The promotion of technological tools to enhance learning is sometimes criticized as making no significant difference to teaching and learning, but there is a counter argument is that teachers are not, in general, using technology to do anything significantly different in terms of the pedagogical approach they are taking. For

example, there is little difference in pedagogical terms between writing on a blackboard, using overhead projector slides, or using PowerPoint software. Garrison and Anderson (2003) for example argue for the use of asynchronous discussion groups to allow the teacher to engage more directly with the different experiences that students bring to the learning sessions, broaden the coverage of a teaching session and increase student engagement. As a respondent in one of the author's case studies put it:

You have to go into a discussion group, post a comment, or something. For example, there's one where you have to read two or three pieces of literature which you find and review them and post them on line with a comment about why people should look at it, and then you have to go to somebody else's and look at what they've said and post a response to them, and then somebody posts a response to you, and you post a response to that, and you have to do that online. You can't do it otherwise. (Case Study 1, Respondent 2)

The implication here is that technology is necessary for this particular EDU to successfully deliver quality enhancement. The unit's students (who are really teachers) appear not to relish discussing the 'two or three pieces of literature' in the more conventional way that they might expect their own undergraduates to – that is, by participating in a tutorial where people are physically present. Instead the technology of the asynchronous discussion group is needed to get them to communicate across the whole group. Even if the members of a seminar group are present in the same room, it is rare for the traditional model to allow time for the full consideration to what each member of the group has said. There is no sense here that

the EDU is prescribing a teaching technique, but it is not unreasonable that teachers exposed to this type of development may begin to explore this kind of approach with their own undergraduate students. The fact that this is described by the participant as ‘some kind of assessment task’, does however, rather imply that this is something that is not undertaken voluntarily by developing teachers and that its value is not immediately apparent to those participating in it.

Implicit in the previous paragraph is that EDUs may actually be more effective if they bring about enhancement surreptitiously. This is related to the argument about the value of tacit knowledge above. There is an acknowledgement of the constructivist idea that learners bring unique experience to the learning situation and the educational developer’s job is not to tell learners what to do but to help them develop constructs, or ways of understanding or interacting with the world, that will fit into their own practice. Yet while surreptitiousness may be effective, it is not always of value in a target driven organisation, where accountability is regarded as particularly valuable.

There is however a second aspect to technological innovation more closely related to Sharpe’s (2004) notion of competences. Before one can innovate with technology, one has to be able to use it. It is difficult to be specific about what it is reasonable to expect people to be able to do with technology in order to function effectively as a university teacher. While it appears rare for EDUs to offer entry level courses in technology, it is more common for them to offer workshops on those technologies that claim to have been designed for the support of teaching and learning: most obviously VLEs such as Blackboard, Web CT and Moodle. The University of Lincoln, for example, is in the process of switching to Blackboard from a long established system

which staff were very familiar with. Here, the role of EDU staff was not primarily to deliver orientation workshops, which is largely being done by an external consultant, but to manage pilot programmes by offering one to one 'help desk' type support for those involved in these programmes and conducting evaluations of them. EDU staff were also heavily involved in the project planning for the wider roll out of Blackboard across the university.

The focus on these technologies in the EDUs studied is very much on pedagogical rather than technological innovation. Staff in EDUs already seem to expect their academic colleagues to possess basic competences in using information technology. There is some justification for this, as technology has become almost ubiquitous in the modern workplace, but it may not be entirely warranted. There do remain staff who find technology slightly intimidating and this raises the question of how far an EDU should endeavour to raise the technical competency level of colleagues. It can of course be argued that this competence will come about through the process of engaging at a higher level with technology. Certainly, a constructivist pedagogical philosophy would hold that staff would develop their own individual ways of dealing with the practical requirements of technology, through reflection on their experiences of using it.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to begin to explore the question of whether educational development units could realistically meet demands for enhanced teaching quality with the requirements of a rather instrumentalist higher education environment. The argument has been made that it is essential that educational developers work with the

faculties, which means that they cannot realistically present themselves as loci of ‘teaching expertise’. Even if teaching practices within faculties occasionally leave something to be desired, practitioners are unlikely to respond well to corrective measures that originate outside their own disciplines, no matter how much academic theory informs those initiatives.

Having said that, the world is changing, most notably through rapid advances in technology and continuing government initiatives; these changes will happen whether those in universities like them or not. It can be argued that the variety of demands that are made on EDUs does render those working in them particularly well placed to handle these changes, through the adoption a more reflective approach to teaching development. Essentially this can be summarized as a belief that professionals (including university teachers) are able, through detailed and continuous scrutiny of their daily practice, to recognize what they are doing well, and why they are doing it well. Equally, they can recognize and develop what needs to be enhanced. This argues for a model of educational development of staff through a process of reward and recognition, such as using teaching portfolios to assess suitability for promotion, combined with the judicious use of funding to promote small innovative project work that delivers objectives that staff want to bring about in their teaching. While one cannot reasonably make large scale generalisations from small scale case studies there is no evidence that EDUs are attempting to impose a normative model of ‘good teaching’ on academic colleagues.

As far as the technological enhancement of learning is concerned, it is possible to accuse EDUs of being rather reactive. There appears to be a focus on delivering

workshops on technologies that staff are going to need in their work, for example in response to the roll-out of an institutional VLE. A more proactive approach might be to anticipate what technologies staff will need to use and provide support for that. This strategy does run the considerable risk that a lot of effort will be devoted to something that may never be needed, and which in any case will reach very few staff, as they will not attend workshops that they see as being of little value to their professional practice. All of this points to a conclusion that an EDU is apt to be far more successful if it works with academic colleagues to help them enhance their skills of reflection in the context of their own practice, rather than attempting to impose a set of externally derived quality criteria on them.

This has been a limited investigation into the role of the educational development unit in the modern university. There is a need for more research into the different aspects of its practice. Surveys of the extent to which academic staff engage with the services of units, and into the understandings that they hold of the EDU would be of great assistance in helping units to focus their services on the needs of teaching colleagues. A series of international case studies to compare the approaches taken to pedagogical innovation in different regulatory environments would also be of value. There is also a need for research into matters that space has precluded here, in particular collaboration between EDUs in different universities, the extent to which units produce learning materials for colleagues in the disciplines, what roles the EDU might play in bidding for funding for external projects, how the EDU relates to academic support services such as library, student welfare and computer services departments, and finally, into the emerging profession of 'educational developer'.

For the moment, the evidence from the case studies supports the argument that a successful EDU will be one that concentrates on building a learning environment appropriate to its host university, and which is pragmatic about helping staff to progress their careers in that university, rather than one which pays a disproportionate amount of attention to externally imposed targets. That is not to say that such targets should be ignored. Rather, the unit needs to seek agreement on how those targets should be interpreted in the context of its own university, and seek to meet them in a way that matches the range of working patterns in that institution. In fact, to do otherwise may well run the risk of failing to meet such targets. In short the educational development unit needs to be as much about research, especially into its own institution, as it is about development. Attempts to impose any prescriptive formula based on one idea of ‘good teaching’, even if that is based on sound pedagogical research, seem unlikely to succeed. In fact, given the wide variety of demands placed upon them, staff working in educational development units seem particularly well placed to handle the rapidly changing environment that is likely to characterize the twenty-first century higher education environment, provided of course that they follow their own advice and reflect extensively on their own practice.

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