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Exploring the Complex Interplay of National Learning and Teaching Policy and Academic Development Practice

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Notes on contributors

Karen Smith is a Principal Lecturer in Collaborative Research and Development. Her research is centred around how higher education policies and practices impact on those who work and study within universities. Her work has focused specifically on transnational educators, international students, academic developers and innovative practitioners and has demonstrated how their experience of university is shaped by its policies, procedures and initiatives.

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Exploring the Complex Interplay of National Learning and Teaching Policy and Academic Development Practice

Academic developers are important interpreters of policy, yet little research has focussed on the interplay of policy and academic development practice. Using methods from Critical Discourse Analysis, this article analyses a national learning and teaching policy, charts its development, and explores its interpretation by the academic development community. The findings suggest that while developers played a strategic role in the policy's development nationally, their influence on and use of policy institutionally was more limited. The article calls on developers to take a more overt leadership role in an area of higher education practice where they clearly have (often unharnessed) expertise.

Keywords: academic development; critical discourse analysis, learning and teaching; policy; quality assurance

Introduction

Academic development is a relatively young field of practice (Grant, Lee, Clegg, Manathunga, Barrow, Kindlebinder & Hicks, 2009), yet in the forty years of its existence, its role and nature has changed substantially (Gibbs, 2013). At its inception, academic development aimed to enhance the student experience by working with academic staff (Clegg, 2009; Grant et al., 2009). Over time, there has been a shift in its focus from people to more strategic change management (Clegg, 2009). As academic development work has become increasingly strategic, developers have found themselves authoring, contributing and responding to institutional and national policy priorities (Clement, McAlpine, & Waeytens, 2004; Gosling, 2009; Handal, Hofgaard Lycke, Mårtensson, Roxå, Skodvin & Dyrdal Solbrekke, 2014; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2008; Trowler, 2004).

With a focus on strategy, academic developers have become: 'more securely embedded in senior management' (Gosling, 2009,p.9). These closer strategic alignments can be problematic for academic developers (Steffani, 2011), who often find themselves 'positioned precariously between senior management and academic staff' (Clegg, 2009,p.408). They act as 'mediator between institutional policy makers and

teaching departments' (Gosling, 2009, p.11) and become 'acceptable interpreters and framers working with both senior management and frontline academics' (Steffani 2011, p.3). This has been a position of power for some academic developers, facilitating their ability to lead change. For others, however, such an 'unhomely' positioning (Manathunga, 2007) between academics and managers is uncomfortable and a source of real personal tension and academic developers can discover that their values are at odds with what their institution requires them to do (Gosling 2009; Knight & Wilcox, 1998; Handal et al 2014).

One such area of tension is the impact that the accountability agenda and the requirements for institutions to engage in quality assurance procedures have had on academic development work (Land, 2004, p.6). Engagement in quality assurance and quality enhancement agendas undoubtedly offer academic developers opportunities to broaden both the scope of their work and their institutional influence (Gordon, 2011, p.38), yet 'a blurring of notions of quality enhancement with quality assurance, also complicates the operational practice of developers, merging the monitoring of standards with the development of good practice' (Land, 2004, p.6). Academic developers can find themselves too focussed on policing quality rather than enhancing it. This is a role that many developers are not comfortable to take on (Land, 2004, p.7). These blurrings of role can exacerbate the identity challenges that developers already face as 'academic migrants', who have often moved into academic development from other disciplines (Green & Little, 2013) and struggle for credibility and legitimacy amongst their discipline-based academic colleagues (Clegg, 2009; Harland & Staniforth, 2008).

Given movements within academic development towards more policy-driven, strategic, quality management and organisational change roles (Debowski, 2011; Gosling, 2009), this article seeks to explore, through critical discourse analysis, the impact of academic developers' engagement with national quality assurance policy on their practice. In so doing, I investigate the subtle influence such engagement with policy

can have on academic developers' relationship with policy, its development, and its use in their academic development practice.

The article will focus specifically on academic developers' responses to a major UK policy relating to learning and teaching, the Learning and Teaching Chapter (henceforth the Chapter) (QAA, 2012) from the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Quality Code (henceforth the Code). The Code comprehensively sets out the expectations for quality that all UK higher education providers are required to meet and plays a key role in the UK's higher education quality assurance mechanism. While the Code is not mandatory, it does provide Indicators of Sound Practice that education providers can use to develop 'regulations, procedures and practices' (QAA, 2012, p.1). The QAA reviews institutions to check that they are meeting the expectations of the sector. As well as providing guidelines for the future of higher education provision, the Code also has the potential to shape academic development work, through academic developers' involvement in its development, their interpretation and subsequent implementation of the policy messages that it carries. An analysis of the Learning and Teaching Chapter, which was a new chapter for the Code and was developed in 2012, is highly appropriate in the context of academic development practice. The Chapter has clear implications for students' educational experiences and its policy messages sit well within the remit of academic development work, for, as Clegg (2009, p.403) notes: 'academic development is a primary site through which the "subject" of "teaching and learning in higher education" has come into being'.

While the article focuses specifically on a UK national policy and UK-based academic developers, this research has relevance beyond the UK. The shifts in the role and nature of academic development practice, as described in this article, have been experienced in other contexts (see, for example, Australia, Gray & Radloff, 2006, Lee, Manathunga, & Kandlbinder, 2010; USA, Green & Little, 2013; Sweden, Roxå & Mårtensson, 2008; Europe, Clement et al., 2004); the article, then, is likely to resonate outside the UK context.

Approach to the study

The research reported in this article takes as its starting point Ball's (1990, p.20) contention that 'policies are, pre-eminently, statements about practice [...] which rest upon, derive from, statements about the world'.

Policies are worthy of investigation because they (re)define current thinking, are widely circulated, and bring together voices, ideas and agendas (Woodside-Jiron 2004, p.177). Through the analysis of policy texts, it is possible to ground 'claims about social structures, relations and processes' (Fairclough 1995, p.209). Textual analysis alone cannot capture how people interpret texts nor explain what happens during the policy-making process; other approaches to analysis are needed to do this. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers a powerful approach for exploring not only the policy text, but also its development and interpretation. While research in the field of higher education using CDA has increased over the last decade, it has largely been limited to research around the composition of texts and not on their production or reception (Smith 2013). The research reported here seeks to address this criticism through a study analysing the policy text, as well as addressing both academic developer involvement in its development and their reception of it.

In CDA, language is seen as a means of social construction and researchers are interested not solely in the language (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.4); text and talk cannot be analysed in isolation but within their specific social and cultural processes and structures. In this study I drew specifically on Fairclough's dimensions of discourse and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) in carrying out this research. According to Fairclough (2010), discourse has three dimensions: text, discourse practice, and socio-cultural practice. Each of these discourses requires a different approach to analysis.

The key text in this study is the Chapter. The text was initially analysed via word frequency counts, concordances, transitivity, and modality. This systematic approach to textual analysis enables analysis to move beyond commentary and helps to show the messages that are often implied in a text's structure, organisation and vocabulary (Fairclough, 2010, p.10). Such close analysis of the composition of a text cannot

shed light on the meanings intended by the text’s author(s). Neither is it possible to ascertain text receivers’ understandings of and responses to a particular text. For this reason, a second phase of the research focused on processing analysis. Here both the production and the reception of the text were explored.

In terms of the production of the Chapter, five members of the Chapter’s Advisory Group (a group involved in the development and writing of the Chapter) were randomly selected from the published list of twenty-three advisory group member in the Chapter. These empirical data were supplemented by the analysis of QAA documentation relating to the development process and the outcomes of national consultation events. With regards to the interpretation of the Chapter, a sample academic developers was interviewed. Academic developers were seen as key group given the close alignment of their work with the remit of the Chapter. Ten semi-structured interviews were carried out. The interviewees were chosen to represent: a range of UK institutional type, experience and seniority, gender, and location. The data are summarised in Table 1.

Textual Data	
Chapter B3, Learning and Teaching Chapter of the Quality Code	‘The Chapter’ within the text QAA (2012) when referenced
Consultation Event Feedback Report	QAA1
Protocol for Revisions to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education	QAA2
Protocol for Developing the UK Quality Code for Higher Education	QAA3
UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B3, Learning and Teaching – Consultation Events	QAA4
Changes to the Academic Infrastructure: Final Report	QAA5
Interview Data	
5 Advisory Group Interviews	Unnumbered – to maintain anonymity
10 Academic Developer Interviews	Numbered 1-10

Table 1: Data Sources

The interview data and the supporting QAA documents (not the Chapter) were analysed inductively (Thomas, 2006) to identify the key themes that arose for both groups, and the Advisory Group data chronologically to chart the development of the Chapter. For the purposes of this article, I focus specifically on the themes that relate specifically to the interplay of academic development and national policy.

Throughout the analysis, the socio-cultural conditions that govern the process of text production, reception and implementation were considered by situating the policy text (and its development and interpretation) within the wider social context. These considerations can be seen in the discussions that accompany the findings set out below.

Findings and Discussion

Academic developers' relationship with learning and teaching policy generally

The academic developers in this study did not define themselves in terms of policy, but rather by their practice, referring to themselves as: expert facilitators (5), problem solvers (4, 9) and listening friends (9). When the academic developers did talk in terms of policy, their specific role was in the translation and interpretation of policy:

I guess it's senior management's role to read this document [the Chapter] and identify where the document should be re-expressed within institutional policy frameworks [...] I would see it as the role of educational developers and academic developers to take what's in here and re-contextualise that for the academic staff going through their programmes and make sure they understand, at least at a practical level, what's expected (1).

I interpret it [policy] so that if I said they had to do it because it's a top-down initiative, nobody would do it. So I sell it from 'this is important for you' (3).

Their policy role was primarily translating and making more palatable the policy messages that their senior managers wanted to implement, acting as, to draw on Manthunga's metaphor, 'university management's learning and teaching foot soldiers' (2007, p.26). This uncomfortable siting between senior management and academic staff is an institutional positioning, that has been well described in the literature (e.g.: Clegg, 2009; Manathunga 2007; Green & Little 2013); one often leaves academic developers vulnerable to the 'vagaries of strategic managers' (Clegg, 2009, p.408).

This discontent with their institutional positioning and an ensuing sense of powerlessness came through in the academic developers' interviews. They spoke, quite despondently, of their 'service' (8) and 'support' (9) roles that overshadowed their academic and researcher identities: 'they think of us as delivering the service. They don't think of us as being part of the academic community' (8). This apparent de-valuing of the expertise of academic developers was felt particularly in the area of policy.

While academic developers are critical in facilitating the translation of national policy intentions into practice (Debowski 2014) and such an interpretation role was clearly important and necessary, some interviewees felt it was a missed opportunity that academic developers were not more involved in policy development at a local level, given their expertise in learning and teaching.

It's just recognising that we can bring something to the table. I think that we, some of us, not all of us, have a lot of experience of different types of institutions, and that there's research in this area. You know a lot of decisions are made on feelings that people have about teaching and learning, rather than on the evidence and that really frustrates me. And so the people whose job it should be to know this stuff, like educational developers, are not in the conversation (9)

This was particularly frustrating for this interviewee, who recognised that the Chapter did speak clearly to the academic development community, but that, on the whole, it was impotent to bring about change through it: 'educational developers can read it, but they are probably not the people who are going to act on it' (9).

Sited between senior management and academic practitioners, academic developers demonstrated limited power in terms of policy. They were there to take the policy leads identified by management and translate them into practice through their academic development work with academic staff. This was not at all the role they played in the development of national policy however, as is discussed below.

Academic developers' involvement in a specific national learning and teaching policy

Academic developers played a central role in the development of the Chapter. Their involvement was seen in: responses to the public consultation on a draft of the Chapter: 'I could use parts of this in staff development discussions' (QAA1: 8); interviews with academic developers: 'I commented on it when it was a draft' (3), 'we took part in the consultation on this Chapter' (10); and through the Advisory Group interviews, which pointed to targeted interactions with academic developers: 'we did some specific workshops with particular groups, so the SEDA [Staff and Educational Development Association] conference'.

Their greatest influence, however, came through their involvement in the Chapter's Advisory Group. In order to guide the development process, the QAA called on the higher education sector 'to nominate experts on the topics of the Chapters/parts of the Quality Code, from whom members of the Advisory Groups may be drawn' (QAA 3, p.1). The Advisory Group met three times to work on the Chapter's development. These meetings were supplemented by 'rich' email discussions, where Group members commented on drafts and responded to consultations. The academic development community was well represented on this Chapter's Advisory Group. Of the twenty-three members, seven had job titles that suggested academic development activity: for example, Head of Educational Development; Director, Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching; Director of Learning and Teaching. A 'specialist writer', and former Director of a Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, was contracted by the QAA to write the Chapter and he worked closely with the QAA throughout the development process. Through their involvement in this group, academic developers were able to influence the content of the Chapter.

The academic developers interviewed could recognise the academic developer input in the Chapter: 'it's written by people who work in the field of education, a lot of them in the field of educational development' (9). The language, in particular, was accessible to them: 'I love the language in it [...] I mean I say that as a learning and teaching specialist, so have to sort of take that into consideration, but I can't see any jargon in there' (8). Textual analysis of the Chapter shows clearly that this document speaks to academic

developers. In terms of the words within the Chapter, a frequency analysis shows that if common words (such as ‘a’, ‘the’, ‘of’ etc.) are removed from analysis, the most frequently occurring words are: learning (n=281); education (n=158); higher (n=153); teaching (n=103); students or student (n=88 and n=72); providers (n=83) and staff (n=67). Its keywords and concepts, with emphasis on scholarship, reflection, and continuing professional development, broadly support the work of many developers and the content reflected what the academic developers expected to see in a Chapter on learning and teaching:

Nothing in here is a surprise, nothing in here is something I have not thought about or don’t think is relevant to the student experience (5).

It’s a document about learning and teaching, isn’t it? And it does address what many people, probably including myself, would see as the most important aspects of learning and teaching (7)

This was picked up by one of the advisory group members:

Educational developers, they will look at that and they will say ‘yeah, fine, so what?’ Because I suspect most of it is just bread and butter. I can’t imagine that there will be many people with real interest in learning that will have significant problems with any of the indicators.

The form and content of the Chapter were deemed ‘inoffensive’ (4), ‘bland’ (1), ‘commonsensical (6), and ‘not unreasonable’ (7). The message was perhaps not an exciting one for the academic development community, but it did not undermine their role either. In fact, the opposite was true. More subtle academic development influence was exacted during the Advisory Group meetings to actively secure the academic development role, as described by one Advisory Group interviewee:

I think it [the Chapter] strengthens, it strengthens our, I think the word was used from time to time, was used or implied, but not actually said, was the job security of the people in the room who do educational development. The idea that we built in the importance of educational development into the Code. We were aware that we had an interest in doing so.

The academic developers on the Advisory Group then were able to exert their influence and support for academic development through their involvement in the Chapter's development process. The next section explores what this looked like in the published version of the policy text.

Academic developers' (in)visibility in a national policy

The Chapter's key stakeholders are clearly 'higher education providers' (referred to n=33 times) and the Chapter is directed at them as active subjects, or actors, causing the action of the verb to happen within the policy text. While there was discussion during development of the Chapter about where specific responsibilities lay, the Advisory Group was clear that: 'ultimately, we're accrediting institutions, so the institutions are responsible for this and how they do it is their business.'

In contrast, the academic development community is not a key stakeholder and this can clearly be seen in the text itself where the phrases: 'staff developer', 'educational developer' and 'academic developer' do not appear in the policy nor do the terms 'academic development' or 'educational development'.

The Chapter makes one reference to 'staff development', but clearly states that it is higher education providers' responsibility to assure 'themselves of the effectiveness of their approach to staff development and support' (QAA, 2012, p.15). The Chapter provides indications as to how they might do this:

Aspects considered may include any or all of the following: working with staff development teams; having online continuing professional development resources and modules for staff; and ensuring the availability of sufficient administrative support (QAA, 2012, p.14)

While this suggests that institutions should have staff development teams that can support staff to enhance learning and teaching; equally higher education providers could choose to rely on off-the-shelf online materials to support that enhancement. It is at the higher education provider's discretion as to how staff development will be supported.

The term 'professional development' features and most frequently in combination with 'continuing'.

Staff are expected to engage in professional development opportunities:

Staff are encouraged to value their own and others' skills, to recognise that they have a responsibility to identify their own development needs, and to engage in initial and continuing professional development activities (QAA, 2012, p.14)

And the higher education provider is expected to ensure that sufficient opportunities for professional development are offered:

Higher education providers make opportunities available for all those involved in teaching and supporting student learning to inform each other's practice and professional development (QAA, 2012, p.14)

The expectation for both staff development and professional development sit well within the remit of academic development work, yet this function is not mentioned explicitly. The Chapter clearly reflects the practice of academic development; it speaks to and of the academic development community, yet does so without overtly referencing it. This is particularly surprising given the role that academic developers played in the development of the Chapter.

In the final section, the impact of the absence of explicit reference to the academic development function will be explored in more detail through analysis of academic developers' discussions about how they felt they would be able to work with this specific learning and teaching policy.

The uses of policy in academic development practice

For some interviewees, lack of reference to academic development within the policy text was unproblematic. They could see where academic developers' presence was implied and wrote themselves back into the text, enjoying the freedom and flexibility that being unnamed offered. In terms of using the Chapter, academic developers' intentions were overwhelmingly individually strategic and justificatory. The Chapter

represented an external driver that removed the responsibility of introducing unpopular change from academic developer shoulders and offered them much needed external recognition, which they envisaged using strategically to make their job easier.

The Chapter was seen as a way to help them justify their expertise in learning and teaching through the mapping of their own practice against its Indicators:

As people who are teaching, and teaching recognised university courses, we need to behave in a way which puts this document into practice. [...] We need to be seen to be doing that [...] Everyone knows the policy is there, or should do, and therefore we should be leading by example in terms of how it informs our practice (1)

This requirement for developers to be exemplary has been recognised elsewhere (Bath & Smith, 2004).

Many of the developers were involved in the design and delivery of institutional postgraduate certificates in higher education. The Chapter provided a useful resource for that teaching that they could examine, discuss and critique. They also envisaged using the Chapter to stimulate conversations with academic staff around different aspects of learning and teaching; and particularly to support staff in preparation for validation and revalidation events:

I would use the Quality Code as a launch pad. And I'm doing some validations in the next few weeks that I'm chairing. So I know I'm able to convey to partners in very simple language 'this is what we are looking for' (4)

Finally, the Chapter was seen as a way to foreground important areas of work and identify new avenues of academic development practice. The Chapter provided legitimacy for a number of initiatives that academic developers wanted to drive forwards: 'I thought there were lots of bits of it I could use for institutionally arguing the case for some developments that I want to push forward in the institution' (8)

This sense of legitimisation, endorsement and justification was the most frequently cited use of the Chapter. The Chapter gave 'licence', 'grunt', and reinforcement for what the academic developers were trying to do. It was there to provide external recognition for the academic development role and the direction it was taking.

Yet for one interviewee, the lack of explicit mention of academic development left them feeling vulnerable, unsupported, undervalued and frequently underutilised. The 'safeness' of the Chapter could potentially close down good academic development work as their institutions could argue that the Chapter's expectations were already being met and additional enhancement work was unnecessary:

I'm unsure how to respond. I really am. Apart from thinking that in some ways it would stop what we do, or hinder us, because it's got a sense that we already do it [...] I can see it being more limiting in my role in our institution. I can see it being more limiting than opening (9)

For this interviewee, rather than being enabling and supportive, the Chapter had the potential to impact negatively on what they were trying to achieve within their institutions. They felt let down by the policy developers who were, for the most part, members of their own academic development community.

Concluding Remarks

This article has sought to explore academic developers' engagement with a UK national policy relating to quality assurance and enhancement. Through critical discourse analysis, the research explored not only the text of the policy and the references to academic developers and their function within it, but also set out to better understand the involvement of academic developers in its development and academic developers' interpretation, implementation and use of the policy. The power of the chosen method has been to reveal not only the construction of social reality as depicted in the policy text itself, but also how that policy text is interpreted and acted upon through academic development practice, and how the background work of

academic developers shaped the policy during the development phase.

The findings show the complex relationship that academic developers have with policy. In terms of national policy, it was clear that academic developers played a key role in the developing a policy that will impact on learning and teaching (and consequently their own roles) throughout the UK. This provides evidence of a strategic leadership learning and teaching role at a national level. What was interesting was their decision to keep reference to that academic development work implicit, rather than stating the need for academic development more openly. This could well be a strategic move by the developers in the Advisory Group. Such implicit reference maintains a distance between academic development and quality assurance. In general academics have an uncomfortable relationship with quality processes (e.g. Anderson, 2006; Cartwright, 2007; Newton, 2000) and in the UK with the QAA specifically (e.g. Lomas, 2007). Coupling academic development and quality assurance might not have furthered the cause of academic developers in ways they found helpful; a more subtle reference to the role could instead provide distance from the focus on monitoring and standards associated with quality assurance (Land, 2004), allowing developers to concentrate on the enhancement opportunities the Chapter affords.

While academic developers had been involved in the development of Chapter at a national level and were often tasked by senior management to implement aspects of learning and teaching policy, their role in the development of institutional policy emanating from national policy and the associated quality processes and procedures was more tenuous. This reflects Debowksi's (2011, p.19) observation that changes in the remit of academic development units have led to some focussing more strongly on implementation over strategy and policy formation. This was a real source of frustration to some developers as there was the sense that their expertise in learning and teaching was not being harnessed effectively in order to lead strategic learning and teaching change within their institutions through policy development. This sense of devaluing of expertise was coupled with ongoing struggles with institutional labelling, perceptions, and disparate role descriptions to

be seen as credible academics amongst their peers. The research adds to the picture that this is a community that is still struggling to assert and establish itself (Shay, 2012), and, specifically here, how they relate and contribute to the strategic development of learning and teaching within their institutions. The academic developers' insecurity was seen quite clearly in how they envisaged using this policy. The examples of use they provided were individually strategic: a means of protecting themselves, their role and ultimately their jobs. In a field that has been defined by academic development unit 're-design' (Debowski, 2011, p.18), such a need for external legitimisation is perhaps unsurprising.

In summary, the academic developers interviewed in this study were not, on the whole, involved in strategy and policy development. Many felt, however, that they could and should have more input and influence in learning and teaching policy development and the associated quality processes. Such influence was shown, through subtle and subversive means, in the development of policy at a national level, but less evident at an institutional level. Institutionally, academic developers clearly have the expertise to make valuable contributions in the area of learning and teaching. It is perhaps time to take up Lee and McWilliam's call to imagine 'a new leaderly disposition in the field' and to be 'players' rather than 'pawns' in the 'higher education board game' (Lee & McWilliam, 2008, p.75). In order to be policy 'players', academic developers need to have a more leading role, both nationally and institutionally, in not only the interpretation of policy, but also its development, implementation and evaluation.

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