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STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN CONVENTIONAL INSTITUTIONS MOVING TOWARDS OPEN LEARNING

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Many 'conventional' educational institutions are now seeking to implement open learning because pressures in their current environments require them to widen student access and increase students' responsibility for their own learning. In this process, changes will be required in the ways in which providers operate:

·   in the development of the curriculum;
·   in the application of technology;
·   in the use of learning materials; and not at least
·   in defining and supporting the role of the student.

These changes require staff to operate in new ways, yet this is at a time of relatively low morale. Institutional managers have to empower staff and create a situation in which energy and imagination are released. Stiff development has an important role in this, but can be only one part of a multifaceted strategy.

The challenges

The challenges facing education are well known and documented. Hence this introductory section offers only the briefest of overviews. Higher education in the UK is used as the example, but the points made throughout this chapter also apply, with relevant modification, to other levels of educational provision, such as schools and further education, and to other countries. These challenges which many in the UK higher education see as imposed - include:

·   maintaining standards of quality with increasing student numbers (in the UK numbers in higher education grew by 44 per cent between 1988-89 and 1992-93), on campuses that are often already over-crowded and underresourced;
·   offering guidance to, and subsequent support for, increasingly diverse students - diverse in terms of social, cultural and educational backgrounds, age and aspirations;
·   meeting the expectations of the students and other stakeholders (for example employers) that the educational service will operate flexibly in terms of time and place, supporting student's as they learn in the home, workplace and community;
·   helping students to acquire not only subject-specific skills but also the capabilities needed for employment (for example, communication skills and working in teams); this

imperative is reinforced by student expectations, as they increasingly have to finance their university studies through concurrent and subsequent earnings; and

·   responding to all of the above in the context of declining state funding (in the UK funding per higher education student declined by 20 per cent between 1989-90 and 1993-94, and by a further 10 per cent between 1994-95 and 1996-97).

In such circumstances, 'the need to review the nature of the delivery of teaching and learning is clear' (Davies 1994: not numbered). In the UK, some commentators are looking for 'massive innovation' using new technology and ideas, paralleling the creation of the Open University in the 1960s and 1970s (Williams and Fry 1994: 39).
These pressures translate into challenging criteria for a new learning environment - one which must meet the needs of mass education cost-effectively, provide learning experiences of perceived quality for a disparate student group, develop generic skills as well as subject-specific knowledge, and foster a culture of lifelong learning.

Responses to the challenge

These challenges can be met by following two major strategies: increasing access to education, and helping students to assume greater responsibility for their own learning. These will be familiar to readers as the two main thrusts of open learning.

Increasing access to education
The first strategy - increasing access to education - is often perceived as largely a question of creating opportunities for students who would otherwise be debarred from study by geographical distance or time constraint. The oft-repeated dictum is of opening up time, place and pace. Open universities and correspondence colleges have succeeded in widening options in these ways for countless students over the years, using packaged materials and flexible delivery methods. Related to this has been the freeing up of fixed curriculum structures. The curriculum has been broken into shorter chunks, often self-contained and credit-rated, making it easier for students to accommodate formal learning within their lives. In the UK, this was an early achievement of the Open University. In another arena, the system of national vocational qualifications has created comparable flexibility.
But physical access to learning is only part of the requirement. Access also has a psychological dimension. Education providers thus have to attend to such matters as

·   the attractiveness of the curriculum and its delivery;
·   the clarity of the curriculum, especially in terms of its intended outcomes and the methods by which these will be assessed; and
·   the quality of support for the students.

The extent of psychological access is related to the choices available to students once they have gained physical access to learning. The attractiveness of the learning environment to students is likely to depend on the number of areas in which choice is available, and the extent of choice in each area. Some providers put all their energies into enabling physical access, but once in, the students then experience a closed curriculum. Choices may thus be needed not

only in the time and place of study but also in regard to the available learning methods, media, assessment, content and tutors.

Helping students assume greater responsibility for their own learning
The second strategy - helping students to assume greater responsibility for their own learning - is often espoused by open learning providers. The link with the earlier discussion is student choice. It is through exercising choice, assessing the consequences, and choosing accordingly next time, that we become more responsible, not only for out learning, but also for other aspects of out lives.

There are at least three good reasons for stressing the importance of choice. These relate directly to the challenges set out at the start of this chapter. First, if education is to meet the requirements placed on it by society, it must become ever more cost-effective. The reasons for this are set out elsewhere (Daniel 1996). Technology is often advocated as a way of achieving cost-effectiveness, but another major consideration is that the more self-directed and self-reliant students become, the more selective and strategic will be their demands on the tutors and facilities. Thus more independent learning makes excellent economic sense.

But the economic argument is by no means the only one. The second thrust behind increased student responsibility is educational. The argument that good educational provision frees students to go on to learn independently is scarcely new. Teachers have always expressed the hope that their students will acquire a love of learning and capacities to study independently, outside and beyond formal provision. Thus the economic argument is supported by a strong and respectable educational rationale, one which has recently gained far greater prominence. Implicit in this is the third reason for increasing student responsibility; namely, that through exercising choice students become better equipped, not only to go on learning, but also to face the challenges of other life rotes in the twenty-first century. Individuals are now required to make choices-over all aspects of their lives, to an extent that would not have been predicted even twenty years ago. To survive as a patent, an employee, or a member of a local community now demands the capacities of the lifetime learner.

Changes to the learning environment

Increased access and development of greater student independence will involve changes in the learning environment:

·   in the development of the curriculum;
·   in the application of technology;
·   in the use of learning materials; and not least
·   in defining and supporting the role of the student.

Development of the curriculum
The importance of this Dimension was highlighted in a project on Quality in Higher Education, carried out in the UK. Key quality criteria were identified across eight groups of stakeholders (Harvey 1994). Eight of the ten items related to curriculum development:

·	programme explicitness (two items);
·	assessment and feedback (four items);
·	transferable skills/independent learning (two items).

The other two items related to the adequate provision of physical and human resources. Although the structures of the curriculum may have been relaxed, much has still to be achieved in the three areas listed above, and particularly in regard to

·	balancing subject content with skills development;
·	harmonising learning outcomes, assessment methods and learning methods;
·	designing appropriate assessment methods; and
·	generating full, frequent and regular feedback to students on their performance.

Application of technology
Technology is frequently advanced as the means by which education will meet current challenges. But a recent survey suggests that progress in this area has been patchy to date (Lewis and Merton 1996). Daniel (1996) also subjects the claims of technology to scrutiny. lf it is to be used to widen access and develop greater student independence, technology has to be used strategically within institutions, and systematically across all learning functions. Lewis and Merton (1996) summarise some of the main ways in which technology can support students. It can provide:

·	information on -the curriculum;
·	recognition for existing achievement and advice on appropriate learning routes;
·	flexible access to resources, facilities, and programme content;
·	tutorial guidance, including assessment and feedback; and
·	opportunities to practise and apply learning.

Particularly important will be uses of technology to maintain contact between students and tutors who may be geographically dispersed or otherwise remote from each other (even on campus).
Technology can thus help teachers manage an environment that is adapted to individual needs, and perceived by students as attractive. But this can only be achieved through the vision, energy and expertise of staff.

The use of learning materials
Learning Materials help educators achieve the dual objectives of access and independence. They open up choice over the learning process - for example, by providing explicit statements of outcomes; facilities whereby students can check their understanding and apply their learning; feedback on students' responses; clarity, attractiveness and consistency in the presentation of content; and a transparent structure, with good signposting. Such features make it possible for the student to learn without constant recourse to a tutor; the tutor is, to some extent, present within the Materials
Materials can help providers respond to the pressures identified earlier in this chapter. One can, for example, envisage a situation in which many disparate student groups, on and off

campus, learn a particular discipline through an identical set of core Materials customised as necessary by additional components such as study and assessment guides, and supported by tutors in a variety of ways: face-to-face, telephonically and/or electronically.

Sharing of learning Materials between institutions is advocated by the MacFarlane Report (Committee of Scottish University Principals 1992: 42); this is increasingly likely to occur on an international basis.

Defining and supporting the role of the student

In this environment, students will need the three capabilities of the independent learner: motivation, self-management and the ability to reflect on their learning (Lewis and Allan 1996). Many will not find this easy. As the MacFarlane Report points out: 'it will be essential that students are carefully prepared for that independence. Many students are unsure how to handle the amount of freedom they are given in higher education' (Committee of Scottish University Principals 1992: 10). Several recent accounts show that students resist the challenge of taking decisions about their learning (Lisewski 1994; Wade *et al.* 1994; Harris and Stoney 1996). In the new environment, students are required to be 'more than customers'; they should become active participants, 'members of the team that "produces" their learning system' (Elton 1994: 11), a line of argument which is also developed in Fitzgerald (1996). Elton points out that students traditionally play active roles in shaping their social and sporting activities, but not in designing their learning environments. McDowell (1994) argues that this is largely because of the ways in which students are disempowered by current arrangements: poor feedback, vagueness over outcomes, lack of choice, lack of lecturer interest in learning, and undervaluing of experiences outside the institution (McDowell 1994).

The need for strategic change

Changes have been made in all of these regards, but the approach has been piecemeal. For example, the use of open learning Materials in conventional institutions tends to be confined to special groups such as MBA students, whose high fees are paid by their employers but whose work routines preclude attendance on a traditional campus. Or such Materials are used only to enrich conventional delivery, which proceeds unchanged.

A step change is needed. As Heseltine (1994- v) says: 'We are still trying to map these changes onto the old landscape of teaching.... We need to construct a new teaching and learning environment. That must be the starting point, not the question of how to adapt what we have now to a higher level of demand.'

Staff roles and staff development

These changes require a major adjustment in the roles of staff. The traditional role of the teacher consists of:

· transmitting subject content;

- managing a group learning environment (the lecture theatre or the classroom); and
- assessing students.

In this, each teacher acts largely alone, rather than as a member of a team.
Various initiatives have shifted the focus, for example towards giving detailed feedback to students, using technology, and helping students learn from one another. Examples in the UK are the Enterprise in Higher Education programme, and (in schools) the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative.
In the learning environment described above, the 'teaching' rote will continue to shift towards supporting individual students as they acquire independence. Staff will help individuals to manage their learning, formulate objectives, monitor their own progress, and chart their paths through an increasingly complex curriculum. Greater specialisation is also likely to occur. Different staff will develop particular aspects of the leaming environment, engaging in, for example:

- curriculum design and development;
- the adaptation and creation of learning materials;
- the development of new technological applications;
- networking with industry and other stakeholders;
- action research;
- policy-making and developing improved procedures; and
- the design and management of learning environments.

Williams and Fry (1994: 48) describe other likely developments: a smaller group of core staff supported by networks of part-time staff, more flexible terms and conditions of employment; greater mobility; more shared posts with industry; and a further erosion of the distinction between 'academic' and other staff.

Change in the current climate
In some ways, the current climate is a difficult one in which to seek such changes. In 1994, one UK university consulted on its future learning environment with a wide range of its staff. More than 320 staff took part in the thirty-eight hours of discussion. Although the concept of a student-centred learning environment was attractive to some staff, many reservations were expressed. The report arising from this consultation exercise describes 'a generally lukewarm and cautionary approach to the use of technology ... a lack of enthusiasm for the topic ... (and) little awareness of how technology is regularly used in open and distance learning' (Lewis 1995a: 8). The motivation for change was questioned: was this merely an attempt to save money, especially at the expense of staff jobs? A proportion of those consulted predicted 'a (second-class) distance system, in which students are isolated and unsupported ... an imposed, prescriptive and standardised approach, driven by formulae, stifling innovation and leading to a reduction in the range of available learning methods'. Instead of identifying the positive aspects of their likely future rotes, the staff feared the removal of 'the skilled teacher from the centre of a university education' (1 995a: 4).
The major challenge to institutional managers is thus to bring about change in an environment currently characterised by low trust and low energy. For the key resource in energising students towards greater independence is undoubtedly staff, especially given the suspicion that

many students feel towards uses of learning methods with which they are unfamiliar. Mandated change cannot create a new learning environment. Staff energies and imagination will be released only if they are working towards a future to which they too aspire. For this reason, a number of institutions are now systematically involving staff in 'envisioning workshops', wherein compelling and detailed pictures are built of the learning environment which different areas wish to create (Healey 1995).

Staff development
It is tempting to turn to staff development as an answer. In education, this has the status of panacea or totem. But, in achieving change, staff development can be only one strand of a strategy. We must, for example, remember the importance of the non-people elements: systems, equipment, buildings and IT networks. Some of these have been mentioned earlier in this chapter. When it comes to staff, the context includes not only their development but also

·   agreement on roles and responsibilities - who will do what in the new learning environment?
·   recruitment;
·   appraisal/feedback on performance;
·   recognition and rewards; and
·   arrangements for career development. (A fuller list is given in Lewis 1995b.)

Staff development fits into this more complex picture but it makes sense only when a clear need has been identified. Staff development can stem, for example, from

·   the acceptance of a new appointment;
·   the acceptance of a newly defined or redefined post (the boundaries between 'academic' and 'library and learning resource' staff are particularly volatile at the time of writing);
·   feedback on performance via appraisal, leading to agreement on a personal and/or professional development plan;
·   preparation for a likely future responsibility and/or career development; and
·   preparation for redundancy or retirement.

Much has still to be achieved in managing these processes in our schools, colleges and universities. The education sector has, for many years, chosen to leave important issues undebated. Many practices have operated with tacit agreement, and, given resource constraints and the rapidity of change, the resulting problems are becoming apparent. Staff development opportunities, for example, have often been unrelated to need and staff development has sometimes been perceived as a perk, a reward for long service, or time spent away in more comfortable surroundings. It has rarely been linked to any organisational strategy. Boundaries between different staff groups have been ill defined, leading to the exploitation of vulnerable groups of staff - for example, those working in support roles or as junior academics. Staff could teach for years without seeking any information on their performance - perhaps comfortable in the belief that, as professionals, they had no need for feedback from their managers, colleagues or students.
This situation has changed in some institutions - but not necessarily for the better. With the insensitive importation of practices from industry have come target-setting or appraisal

systems that fail to respect the educational context. Some of these appraisal processes have become so complex that staff are still denied the benefits of shared clarity over their roles, detailed and timely feedback on their performance, and opportunities to plan for an agreed future.

Staff development needs to be embedded in the broader strategic approach outlined earlier. Only then are we likely to create an environment in which ´personal purpose' is seen as 'the route to organisational change' (Fullan 1993: 14, original emphasis). Without this, we shall end up, not with a new learning environment but with the familiar 'continual stream of fragmented surface, ephemeral innovations' (Fullan 1993) described so well by Gibbs (1995). What is needed is not adaptive but generative learning, and this occurs only when people are striving to achieve something that matters deeply to them (Senge 1990).

This returns us to the starting point. If students are to take charge of their own learning environment, then so too must their teachers. The learning organisation offers this opportunity to both. Successful organisations will energise their students and staff to work collaboratively to this end.

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