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Citation: Reimann, Nicola and Allin, Linda (2018) Engaging the wider academic community in a postgraduate certificate in Academic Practice : the issue of standards. International Journal for Academic Development, 23 (4). pp. 286-297. ISSN 1360-144X

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2017.1381966>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2017.1381966>>

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**Engaging the wider academic community in a Postgraduate Certificate  
in Academic Practice: the issue of standards**

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## **Abstract**

This paper critically reflects on the challenges associated with academic standards in a postgraduate certificate in academic practice which involved the wider academic community of the institution. It is underpinned by a socio-cultural constructivist view which suggests that standards do not exist independently of assessors, but are co-constructed by participation in communities of practice through the process of making assessment judgements. Following an outline of the programme design, the discussion focuses on the uncertainties around standards arising from the fragility and fragmentation of a nascent community of practice which comprised a multiplicity of personal standards frameworks and disciplinary perspectives.

Keywords: academic development; assessment; standards; course

## **Introduction**

The argument presented in this paper arose from experiences gained through a postgraduate certificate in academic practice (PGCert) which involved staff from all academic Faculties in supporting and, in particular, assessing the course. The issues this raised go beyond this particular programme and, we argue, apply to other forms of academic development, including for example institutional professional recognition schemes which equally involve making judgements about standards. Our thoughts have been influenced by empirical studies on marking, moderation, assessment criteria and the accompanying theorisations and debates about academic standards. We use these theoretical lenses to examine the issues encountered in our dual roles as academic developers and assessors. By doing so we adopt a 'practice frame' for academic development, moving away from a focus on individuals to 'the embodied, contextualised activities academics engage in with others' (Boud & Brew, 2013: p.214). We suggest that critically reflecting on the social practice of assessment within a university-wide programme such as the PGCert can highlight the issues and

assumptions underlying standards and provide both conceptual and practical insights around the maintenance of standards. We start with a discussion of assessment as social practice and the notion of standards.

### **Assessment and standards as social practice**

Sadler (2013) defines a standard as a 'definite degree of academic achievement established by authority, custom, or consensus and used as a fixed reference point for reporting a student's level of attainment' (p.13). The achievement of particular standards is usually expressed in 'grades' or 'marks' against a written set of referenced criteria, rubrics or outcomes. In the UK standards are codified through the Quality Assurance Agency, and several mechanisms are routinely used to ensure consistency. These include internal moderation processes and the well-established system of external examiners who are expected to verify that the standards applied in one institution are equivalent to standards elsewhere (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b>). However, recent research on external examining has demonstrated that the system is flawed (Bloxham, Hudson, den Outer, Price, Rust, & Stoakes, 2015), and it can be argued that most of the issues identified are due to flaws in assumptions around standards.

In various conceptual and empirical papers, Bloxham and associates have examined the concept of academic standards. Bloxham and Boyd (2012) distinguish between two broad models of standards. In the first, positivist techno-rational model, standards are regarded as externally existing benchmarks, i.e. knowledge which exists independently from the person using it. From this perspective it is assumed that in order to achieve consistent judgements, knowledge about standards purely needs to be made explicit. This is typically done through reference to written criteria, statements or benchmarks and a common assumption in many quality assurance processes. As Sadler

(2009) recognises, this model is behind institutional support for the development of written criteria and ‘standards’ which markers can clearly mark against to award appropriate grades and which can be accessed by both assessor and student. One problem is that the existence of criteria alone does not guarantee consistency of judgements due to the complexity of making judgements about complex assessment tasks (Bloxham, den-Outer, Hudson & Price, 2016).

In contrast, the socio-cultural constructivist model regards standards as co-constructed through active participation in communities of practice (CoPs). In this model standards are viewed as created locally and learnt informally through the very activities involved in making assessment judgements. Standards are not ‘applied’ to making judgements, they emerge from participating in the process of making judgements itself. Such conceptualisation of standards emphasises that they are predominantly tacit, open to interpretation and subject to change, rather than clear-cut as the techno-rational model suggests. Within this model knowledge of standards is socially situated and therefore cannot be established independently from the individuals using it. Since this view suggests that standards are therefore also inextricably linked to cultures, they are affected by the power structures and values operating in these cultures. In practice this means that standards may be operationalised or understood differently by staff in different department or faculty contexts. An example which illustrates the importance of assessment cultures is a study by Beenstock and Feldman (2016). They found that when the same students’ work was marked in different departments, the standards varied considerably, with academics awarding much higher marks in one department than the other.

Sadler (1989) stresses that making judgements about the quality of complex performance requires considerable expertise or ‘connoisseurship’ which is achieved

through experiencing and judging multiple student responses to assessed tasks. That is, the development of a clear understanding of standards requires practice in the process of making those judgements. Competent assessors therefore come to hold ‘a concept of quality appropriate to the task’ (Sadler, 1989, p.121) which enables them to make sound and trustworthy professional judgements similar to those of other academics (Sadler 2013). Sadler (2013) stresses the importance of practice for making proficient and consistent judgements, both with multiple cases and with variety, and of sharing the reasons for these judgements inter-subjectively between assessors. According to Lave and Wenger (1991) newcomers learn through ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ in a CoP. In relation to assessment and standards, it can therefore be argued that novice assessors come to understand the local and disciplinary standards by participating peripherally in module or programme teams i.e. communities of assessment practice which comprise both more and less experienced assessors. The joint pursuit of assessing student work and informal conversations about it, second marking, moderation, exam boards etc. gradually provide novices with experience of variation in quality and opportunities to negotiate the meaning of standards with more experienced assessors. As Wenger (1998) highlights, this also involves negotiation of identity, in this case their identity as assessors.

In recent years, standards *in use*, i.e. in relation to marking as a routine activity which academics undertake, have been increasingly researched (Bloxham and Boyd 2012, Jawitz 2007, Shay 2005, Handley, den Outer, & Price, 2013). Based on Shay (2005) and as a result of studies investigating lecturers’ grading practices (Ashworth, Bloxham, & Pearce, 2010; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012), Bloxham and colleagues have proposed that markers hold a ‘personal standards framework’ which serves as a lens through which student work is read and judged. This is a personalised, internalised

understanding of standards and criteria, constructed and reconstructed over time and only loosely linked to the more formalised expressions of standards, criteria and learning outcomes available in textual documents. In Bloxham and Boyd's (2012) study lecturers who were less certain about their own standard frameworks appeared more likely to refer to artefacts such as written assessment criteria which were also more frequently consulted in the case of borderline judgments.

Shay's (2005) work and the notion of CoP demonstrate the way in which examining assessment as social practice can advance our understanding of assessment and, by implication, of standards. By applying Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus, Shay proposes that the assessment of complex tasks is a socially situated interpretive act made possible due to the community of academics and their disciplinary sub-fields sharing a common perceptual framework. 'Only those with common points of reference can hold one another accountable for, or can contest, the legitimacy of these reference points' (p.668). Such framework is collectively produced and reproduced by the field and the CoP, and the judgement of the individual assessor is therefore constituted both objectively and subjectively at the same time. The field and the CoP 'are objective because they are to a large extent independent of the individual assessor; they are conditions which apply as a result of being a member of the field and sub-disciplinary fields. At the same time these interpretations are constituted by the particular context of the assessment event. This is a highly subjective terrain; that is, it is significantly dependent on the assessor.' (Shay, 2005, p.669). Shay (2008) also stresses the importance of disciplinary knowledge for these standards frameworks. Using the example of history and business she draws attention to the fact that codified standards in different disciplines can sound surprisingly similar since this type of discourse is devoid

of references to disciplinary knowledge. However, Shay argues that judgements about academic standards are deeply rooted in disciplinary forms of knowledge.

### **The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice**

In the UK PG Certs in either learning and teaching in higher education (HE) or academic practice are a common feature of initial professional development provision for early career academics. It is not uncommon that their completion is compulsory and linked to probation. Such PG Certs tend to be accredited as part of institutional continuing professional development (CPD) schemes by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) against the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education (UKPSF)

([https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/ukpsf\\_2011\\_english.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/ukpsf_2011_english.pdf)), enabling staff who have successfully completed a PG Cert to gain Fellowship of the HEA. In addition to initial professional development, institutions have increasingly developed HEA accredited CPD/recognition schemes which involve structured opportunities for experienced staff to develop and have their professional expertise formally recognised against the UKPSF by submitting an application. In November 2016 124 institutional schemes were accredited by the HEA.

There is a considerable literature on courses about learning and teaching in HE, referred to respectively as academic, instructional, pedagogical or (continuing) professional development courses or training (see, for instance, Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007; Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2010; Parsons, Hill, Holland, & Willis, 2012; De Rijdt, Stes, Van der Vleuten, & Dochy, 2013; Hughes, McKenna, Kneale, Winter, Turner, Spowart, & Muneer, 2016). However, apart from very few notable exceptions (e.g. Ho, Watkins, & Kelly, 2001), the literature offers relatively little evidence and discussion of the ways in

which these courses are designed, taught and assessed. In their review of the literature Hughes et al. (2016) refer to a handful of studies which specifically consider the location of professional development and suggest very tentatively that what is called ‘on the job’ or ‘teacher-driven’ professional development may have more impact than de-contextualised provision. A recent issue of the *International Journal for Academic Development* examines the impact of social networks and informal learning on academic development, with authors such as Thomson (2015) suggesting that relationships between informal and formal learning can be actively forged. Both Parsons et al.’s (2012) and Hughes et al.’s (2016) reviews consider whether the effectiveness of courses depends on a disciplinary or a generic focus, but research on the disciplinary dimensions of such courses is too limited to enable definitive conclusions. To our knowledge, there are no publications which specifically examine assessment and standards in relation to such courses.

The PGCert we are reflecting upon in this paper was steered by and developed in close consultation with the University Executive, Deans and Human Resources, aimed at creating a programme which was explicitly aligned with corporate goals and aspirations. This resulted in a design which combined pathways through the programme tailored to individuals, a workshop-based approach to teaching, and in particular active involvement of the Faculties in teaching, assessment and support of its participants. By doing so, the university responded to the Browne Review (Browne, 2010) which stipulated that HE teachers needed to be qualified, but rather than putting academic developers in sole charge of the course, expertise and ownership were seen to lie locally in communities in which early career staff were working, and learning was expected to be predominantly ‘work-based’. There was a view that a centralised academic development provision with a focus on educational theory alone would not address the

demands of departments and faculties that had to respond to the pressures arising from students as consumers, quality assurance and performance management regimes. At the same time this also afforded a focus on discipline and situated practices, which resonates with current thinking in academic development theory and research (e.g. Boud & Brew, 2013; Becher & Trowler, 2001; Kreber, 2009). The following paragraphs outline the key principles of the way in which the programme was designed before we provide a critical analysis of the challenges faced in the practical operation of the PGCert, with particular reference to the process of assessment and agreement on standards.

### ***Programme design and involvement of the wider university community***

The course, which took an academic practice approach, consisted of two modules, one 40-credit module on learning and teaching in HE, and one 20-credit researcher development module, focusing on issues such as getting published, project management and research ethics relevant to the development of participants' disciplinary research. These modules could be studied either in parallel or one after the other over a period of two years. The programme deliberately involved the wider institutional and departmental communities and their expertise through a 'hub and spokes' model, i.e. whilst there was central provision and leadership, the programme was also supported by Faculty Coordinators (FCs) and local Workplace Advisors (WPAs) who had different roles and responsibilities for the programme and its participants.

### ***Programme leader***

The Programme Leader (PL), who had an academic development background, served as the central hub. Information to participants about the programme and the central provision came from the PL who had overall responsibility for its operation,

administration, quality and standards. The PL designed, co-ordinated and to a large extent taught a series of central workshops, which addressed, for instance, teaching, assessment, module and programme design, student support, getting published, grant applications, as well as workshops focusing on constructing and reviewing the summatively assessed portfolio. Faculty-based staff with relevant expertise led workshops or contributed where appropriate. A needs analysis (see below) determined which workshops were to be attended as they were not compulsory. The PL also ran induction sessions for WPAs, which were complemented by an extensive handbook.

#### *Faculty Coordinators*

FCs were appointed to support and keep track of the many participants from different departments and disciplines in their respective faculty and to create and maintain a local culture supportive of the PGCert. They were also expected to liaise with colleagues or line managers in setting up WPAs for new participants. An important part of the FC role was to be involved in assessment and to support WPAs. As key faculty members of the programme team, with a background in teaching excellence and/or academic development, FCs were based in a department and were also involved in meetings, contributed to central workshops and offered faculty-based events and support sessions.

#### *Workplace Advisors*

WPAs were appointed as mentors to help participants achieve the learning outcomes of the programme, based on local, discipline-specific experience and knowledge. Each course participant was allocated one or two WPA (one for research, one for teaching) who were expected to be inducted and therefore *au fait* with the course, its requirements and standards. At the beginning of their studies course participants were asked to conduct a detailed needs analysis with their WPA. This formed the basis of an

individual learning plan agreed by both and tailored to each participant's prior experience, work requirements and commitments to ensure it was relevant to their individual situation and aligned with the programme learning outcomes. In addition to the central PGCert workshops, the WPA was expected to direct the participant to other staff development opportunities (in the department, faculty or externally). The WPA role also included formative feedback and occasional contributions to the summative assessment, including that of participants from outside their own discipline, department and faculty.

### *Summative assessment*

Achievement of the learning outcomes was demonstrated through a portfolio complemented by a viva. Participants were required to submit a written reflective account of their practice in relation to the outcomes, using the electronic portfolio tool Pebblepad. The submission included links to evidence supporting their written claims, including examples such as documents, lesson plans, student feedback, slides and other relevant information. The viva was held subsequent to the submission and provided an opportunity to discuss questions and aspects of the portfolio where assessors identified gaps or further clarification was required. Vivas were designed to be supportive and were held in groups of two to four comprising participants and assessors from different disciplines to encourage sharing professional practice and to develop consistency of judgements. The outcome was pass/fail, i.e. not graded, something which is common in UK PGcerts of this kind.

The PL, FCs and WPAs were all involved in the assessment of portfolios and the viva process, hence the assessment of the PGCert very much involved the wider academic community. Whilst the hub and spokes model and the principle of involving WPAs and FCs in supporting and assessing participants had great benefit, both in order

to meet assessment demands and in terms of developing faculty-based CoPs, this model and its operation raised particular challenges in terms of negotiating and being consistent in relation to academic standards. These challenges are discussed below and related to the theoretical arguments presented in the introduction to this paper.

### **Critical reflection on the challenges encountered**

The theoretical perspective taken in this paper is that standards are not external to assessors, but co-constructed and negotiated within CoPs engaged in the social practice of assessing. In other words, standards are intricately linked to a particular community. When the PGCert was originally proposed, there appeared to be an implicit assumption that a CoP existed and no recognition that one may need to be established and nurtured first. Our experiences, however, draw attention to the instability and fragmentation of an, at best, nascent community and we reflect upon the consequences this had for making assessment judgements. A key challenge in this PGCert was that the CoP only emerged very gradually and was extremely broad, ill-defined and therefore fragile. We have already discussed that in any assessment community, assessors have their own personal standards frameworks which do not necessarily converge with those of other assessors. In this particular emerging community of assessment practice the multiplicity of personal standards frameworks seemed greater than usual. This was due to several reasons.

The standards literature assumes that there is a disciplinary community from which the assessors derive and that there arises a sense of shared, tacit understanding of the standards within the discipline built up over time through joint engagement in assessment processes and judgements. One fundamental problem with the PGCert therefore was that the shared disciplinary community basis was not clear and that as a newly developed programme, assessors did not have a common history of involvement

in the assessment of academic practice. Assessors came from a range of disciplines with very different traditions (e.g. sciences and arts), and this could result in different viewpoints in terms of what would constitute, for instance, appropriate reflection, understanding of pedagogic concepts, or critical evaluation of own teaching. The departments and faculties which assessors came from had also adopted PGCert specific practices which were not necessarily aligned with each other. It was also difficult to ascertain whether the community was the broader academic community of the entire university or a smaller PGCert specific 'academic development' community.

This raised the question which role discipline actually played within this programme and which discipline or disciplines this involved. The researcher development module made reference to participants' own areas of research in their home disciplines as well as diverse subjects such as research ethics and project management. The learning and teaching module was informed by the discipline of education. Although assessors had engaged in varying practices relevant to the modules (e.g. managing a funded research project, designing a module), they were not necessarily familiar with the concepts and conceptual frameworks taught in the workshops. When the programme was initiated, it was assumed, although never explicitly stated, that academics with considerable teaching and/or research experience, in particular those with a reputation or award for excellence, had developed relevant skills and understanding which automatically acquainted them with the standards of the PGCert. However, it soon became evident when high stakes assessment judgements had to be made how problematic this assumption had been. Some assessors had completed a PGCert, others had not. The latter may have developed tacit knowledge but this did not translate easily into the explicit knowledge taught and assessed as part of a formal programme. In addition, the aspiration to offer a programme relevant to

disciplinary practices implied that participants should also learn about relevant discipline-specific knowledge, e.g. about pedagogy and derived from pedagogic research and scholarship. However, it soon emerged that FCs and WPAs were not always familiar with such codified knowledge and that decisions about standards were therefore made without awareness of and reference to such knowledge base.

The module had explicit learning outcomes and assessment criteria as well as being aligned to UKPSF Descriptor 2, which all assessors had access to. According to the techno-rational model of standards it might be expected that portfolios and performance in the viva could fairly easily be compared against these artefacts. For example, one learning outcome stated that ‘participants will demonstrate capability in the development of teaching strategies and learning communities based on an understanding of how students learn’. It soon became clear that interpretations of ‘capability’ and whether or not submissions demonstrated sufficient ‘understanding of how students learn’ differed considerably across multiple assessors, evidenced for instance in the importance that was attributed to engagement with relevant research and theory. Sadler (1989) emphasises the importance of the experience of making evaluative judgements. In this PGCert assessors often came together for the first time for the summative assessment, with only the academic developers having prior experience in marking and moderating on similar PGCerts. In contrast, in the context of other programmes lecturers are more likely to engage with each other informally by discussing teaching or formative work while modules unfold.

Each academic involved in the PGCert could legitimately consider themselves an expert assessor due to their experience of assessing student work within the context of their own modules or programmes. Yet it became clear that some assessors were confident in their identity as assessors of this PGCert, while others perceived

themselves as novices who voiced their uncertainties and anxieties about the rigour of their judgements in relation to a subject area in which they had no prior experience. This resulted in assessors often deferring to the programme leader for final judgements on whether a submission should pass. This cast her in an uncomfortable arbiter role, attributing considerable power to her, e.g. by asking her to make decisions when two assessors differed in their judgements, rather than negotiating and co-creating. It can be argued that this reflected a techno-rational view of standards, expecting the programme leader to know the 'correct' standard and make the 'right' decision. This is reminiscent of Handley et al. (2013) who found that newcomers rarely questioned their programme leaders and deferred to their assessment judgements. The occurrence in the PGCert may have reflected insecurity about academic standards or may simply have been part of the evolutionary process in creating and establishing a community of practice where none existed before. Shay (2005), for example, highlights the way in which validation of assessment standards occurs in a shared, ongoing, subjective process of community rather than being achieved at a moment in time. It was therefore interesting to observe that for those assessors who were involved more frequently and consistently, the common points of reference and shared perceptual framework discussed by Shay gradually started to emerge, while this was not necessarily the case for assessors who only contributed occasionally. On the other hand, it was noticeable that reference to the postgraduate nature of the work seemed to offer a useful overarching concept which brought the standard required for the PGCert into view and seemed to bridge the gap between the new subject of academic practice and the assessors' home disciplines. Many of the assessors had experience of teaching postgraduate programmes and thus a tacit understanding of postgraduate standards, albeit in different disciplines.

Within the context of the programme, the role of the WPA and their involvement in assessment was pivotal, but also particularly problematic. We have already highlighted the multiplicity of personal standards frameworks involved in this programme. What was troublesome in relation to WPAs was the lack of joint enterprise and opportunity for dialogue about their own personal standards framework and that of others. WPAs predominantly participated through a 1-1 relationship with a mentee, which involved limited contact with others, in particular other PGCert assessors, since their CoPs were situated in their own departments and programme teams. Since the PGCert had over 100 participants, WPA numbers were equally large and distributed across the entire institution. When there were opportunities for discussion, such as during the WPA induction sessions, participants tended to focus on expectations and role requirements rather than standards. Handley et al. (2013) also found that newcomers learned more through informal conversations and marking meetings than they did through either induction sessions or short meetings to agree or moderate marks. Their work highlights the importance of participation in the CoP and learning from exemplars as key to developing a shared knowledge base and sense of identity and standards (Sadler, 2009). However, this was difficult to achieve within the context of the PGCert. Whilst workplace advisors were expected to be 'trained' initially through the induction session and had access to the marking criteria, some actively took advantage of opportunities for ongoing engagement, whilst others took more of a 'hands off' approach. Due to being distributed across the institution, few opportunities for formal meetings and conversations existed, and induction and additional support sessions for WPAs which included activities around marking and exemplars were poorly attended. A very small number of WPAs regularly contributed to teaching sessions, but others were only sporadically involved at crux assessment points and

predominantly through email contact. Engagement by WPAs in the broader assessment community was also difficult due to organisational structures, issues of time, commitment and workload. Smaller CoPs sometimes self-generated in departments; however, this also presented its own problems and potential intra-community conflict, as smaller groups would begin to develop some sense of standards, while this sense was only partially shared within the larger community. Within such a large, institutional and organisational context, opportunities for acculturation into standards were limited. Critical incidents brought the problems this generated to the fore. For instance, one participant whose work was failed reported that their WPA had encouraged them to submit. Incidents like this prompted additional workshops in which participants could share and discuss portfolios with each other and core members of the programme team, effectively circumventing WPAs, but also efforts to involve WPAs more systematically in summative assessment.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion has highlighted that implementing an academic development programme which involves the wider academic community in teaching, supporting and, in particular, assessing early career academics can be problematic since it casts doubt on the consistency of the standards which are applied when assessment judgements are made. We have tried to show that within the context of this PGCert, there were more uncertainties than in conventional programmes as there was less reliance on common processes, tacit understandings and shared points of reference which are a feature of programmes which operate within more established disciplinary communities. However, these challenges were neither unique nor fundamentally different to those that can emerge within the context of more conventional programmes, but they were amplified due to the complexities involved. The PGCert under consideration was

operating in a complex social, disciplinary and organisational environment which routine quality assurance processes based on a techno-rational understanding of standards are unable to capture and control. Our reflections have demonstrated the usefulness of considering the challenges through a socio-cultural constructivist lens.

The issues we have highlighted in relation to this PGCert have implications for other programmes which include assessors drawn from the wider academic community. We would argue that this particularly applies to HEA accredited schemes which now exist in many UK HE institutions and increasingly in other countries, e.g. Australia. Like this PGCert, recognition decisions against the UKPSF rely on judgements made by assessors with a multiplicity of personal standards frameworks who, depending on the way in which the institutional scheme operates, may have few opportunities for making them explicit and negotiating them with others. Our experiences suggest that this may equally lead to uncertainties about standards and inconsistencies of judgements due to the fact that a CoP does not (yet) exist. For schemes and programmes of this kind, the first priority for ensuring consistent standards must lie in establishing the respective CoPs and ensuring that there are ample opportunities for engaging in ongoing discussion, negotiation and reflection on standards through joint enterprise. This can be done through exemplars, discussion of formative work as well as summative assessment, including regular sharing across smaller CoPs which may develop organically. This will enable individuals to examine and review their own personal standards frameworks relevant to the respective context and the external reference markers. A particular focus should be on bringing in those at the periphery of the CoP to develop a shared sense of identity and expertise. However, it is recognised that the organisational structures, the power relations and the complexity of large institutions means that many of these recommendations are not easy, maybe impossible to achieve.

It is likely that the social construction of standards for large cross university programmes such as the one discussed in this paper will remain an ongoing project, with time and a sense of joint enterprise between members of the academic and academic development communities a key factor in determining progress and success.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to acknowledge Joanne Smailes, Linda Spencer and Alan White from Northumbria University who contributed to a conference paper from which this article developed.

### **Biographies**

Nicola is an academic developer in the Centre for Academic Practice at Durham University where she teaches on the PGCert in Academic Practice. Her research focuses on assessment and academic development.

Linda is Director of Learning and Teaching in the Department of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation at Northumbria University. She has published pedagogic work in assessment, feedback and student collaboration.

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