Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education ISSN: 1759-667X
Issue 33 Third Space in HE January 2025

The third way: the contribution of academic quality assurance third spacers to ‘pedagogical partnership’

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Abstract

This case study uses a ‘lived experience’ account of a pivot from a conventional academic quality and standards approach to a progressive pedagogic partnership in a small Cathedrals Group university. We first contextualise our pivot within the recent history of academic quality assurance in the sector. We consider the evolution of ourselves as *third spacers* in informing and shaping the practice of academic colleagues through our third-space knowledge and experience (Whitchurch, 2012) in conjunction with the introduction of V5, ‘collaborate with others to enhance practice’, in the UK Professional Standards Framework 2023 (AdvanceHE, 2023). We explore how quality is used to leverage the advancement of positive student experiences and outcomes from a new perspective, and how we are seeking to resolve tensions between the characteristics of convention and progression (and positive disruption) to develop learning points for success.

Keywords: ‘lived experience’; higher education; third spacer; pedagogic partnership; quality assurance.

Introduction

The University of Chichester is a smaller Cathedrals Group university, located on the south coast of England. We have 5,000 students, and a further 2,700 studying at academic partner providers. Academic quality assurance is managed by a team of 5.4 FTE. Our remit extends across taught provision, including academic partnerships and apprenticeships, and we have a range of experience and skills. Some team members have

longevity of knowledge in academic quality; others bring experience from other university professional functions, teaching, and industry. We are known as the Academic Quality and Standards Service but are embarking on redesignation as the Educational Policy and Quality Office.

This redesignation on one level declares how we have and can respond to local needs. Although the university has Principal Lecturers in Learning and Teaching who promote best practice (who are also practising academics within departments), we have no centralised learning and teaching unit or educational development team in the way that many universities in England do. For example, within the Cathedrals Group, Winchester has a Learning and Teaching Development team; Canterbury Christ Church has a Learning and Teaching Enhancement team; York St John has a Learning and Teaching Support and Staff Development team; St Mary’s has a Centre for Teaching Excellence and Student Success team. With no centralised resource, we have needed to carefully manage a dual role as coach and referee within academic quality assurance to create a new identity as a ‘pedagogic partner’ (Graham, 2012; Graham and Regan, 2016), leveraging quality management policies and processes to influence and inform approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment. The centralisation of this through academic quality assurance allows for consistency across the university; whereas delegating such to academic areas may have fostered inconsistency in approaches across different disciplines, detrimentally impacting the students’ academic experience.

Our pivot towards pedagogic partnership is also impelled by what we see as fundamental and ‘once-in-a-generation' changes in the meaning and understanding of quality within the higher education sector, which we in turn see as a catalyst for reconceptualising our professional identities as quality practitioners. In our casting of regulatory challenge as opportunity for renewal, we take our cue from Veles and Carter’s succinct summary of the implications of Whitchurch’s prominent work on third-space identities:

> Whitchurch (2008) has implied that the future belongs to the third-space professionals who ‘create their own identities, reformulate their roles according to the needs of the project and in collaboration with academic and other professional colleagues, acquire the skills that they may be currently lacking to bring maximum benefit to the project and extend their own professionalism through workplace collaboration and workplace real-life learning’ (Veles and Carter, 2016, p.525).

Here we first sketch the characteristics of the previous quality regime in higher education, before contrasting these with the approach now taken by the Office for Students (OfS), and then describing some of the ways in which we are using pedagogic partnership as a framework to negotiate these changes. The learning points we outline below demand that quality professionals reformulate their third-space identities and refresh their skillsets. This, we suggest, is both challenging and liberating for the quality professional.

Then

The Higher Education and Research Act (2017), which created the OfS as a new regulatory body for providers of higher education in England, also created a novel approach to regulation in our experience as quality practitioners — one predicated on outcomes (rather than inputs or process). Prior to incorporation of the OfS, providers of higher education in England had worked to the expectations of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) from 1992, as HEFCE held a statutory responsibility (Further and Higher Education Act, 1992) for the quality assessment of provision which it funded. Initially, this was achieved through the work of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), whose mission was to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of quality at all levels in institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom, with services covering quality assurance and quality enhancement.

Teaching Quality Assessment morphed into subject review during the 1990s, where initially (under TQA) providers were required to submit a self-assessment declaring their teaching quality to be excellent or satisfactory. However, under the aegis of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), visits became universal and providers did not assess themselves but were assessed by the visiting reviewers, with scores out of 24 given to providers to reflect the quality of their provision. Subject reviews ended abruptly in 2001, when John Randall, the Chief Executive of the QAA, resigned due to a disagreement about the future form of review activity. Institutional audit was introduced in England in 2002 and was designed to test institutions' current and future management of the quality of their programmes and the academic standards of their awards. Institutional audit was replaced some ten years later with institutional review, which, rather than focusing on the *management* of quality and standards, confirmed whether such met UK expectations for threshold standards and UK expectations for the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Now

Contrast this with the approach of the OfS which, while requiring all registered higher education providers’ courses to meet a minimum set of requirements or conditions that relate to quality and standards, also commissions and publishes ‘quality assessment reports’ relating to the quality of specific courses at selected higher education providers. The reports focus on quality rather than standards, which opens a door for traditional quality and standards services to concentrate more on the quality of students’ academic experience than might have been done previously.

In 2022, the OfS published changes to the conditions of registration for quality and standards, known as the ‘B’ conditions. Condition B1, which is specifically focused on academic experience, has a bearing on the future orientation of the quality function. It requires providers to ensure that students registered on each higher education course receive a high-quality academic experience. This includes (but is not limited to) ensuring that each programme: is up to date, provides educational challenge, is coherent, is effectively delivered, and (as appropriate to the subject matter of the course) requires students to develop relevant skills. Condition B1 is thus about curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy. Whilst traditional quality and standards services have long held responsibility for testing intended learning outcomes, curricula, and assessment, pedagogy is new. It is this which, we believe, encourages conventional quality and standards services to develop into something else. Alongside this, quality enhancement is — arguably — ‘old guard’ and is shifting, again through the focus of the OfS on transforming student outcomes and experience.

Measuring student outcomes is increasingly gaining status in England. This is particularly due to the work of the OfS, whereby institutional performance is measured primarily through data provided to institutions from the Graduate Outcomes survey, using the Office for National Statistics’ Standard Occupational Classification Category 3, Associate Professional and Technical Occupations to determine whether an outcome is graduate. In October 2022, Condition B3 (student outcomes) was brought into effect and student outcomes now contribute significantly to the OfS’s Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and whether an institution is awarded Gold, Silver, or Bronze. We provided the text on educational gain for our TEF submission, gaining Gold.

Quality can be modelled as a continuum from control, through assurance and into enhancement, with different conditions and cultures influencing the approach (Stott, 2022). The multifarious nature of quality makes it a rewarding discipline to work within, and the obverse is that what quality practitioners are doing — or can contribute — is all too often opaque to others. Now, as the continuum extends to include student outcomes, it is all the more important to enunciate our identities and capabilities to colleagues and stakeholders.

The future: pedagogic partnership in action

The regulatory changes have profound implications for the positioning of quality practitioners within the third space. Whitchurch’s (2008) original model of third-space identities — also a continuum — characterised quality as ‘niche’ and quality practitioners as ‘bounded professionals’ typically entering the third space for time-bound and delimited projects and activities. This was reasonable in the context of functional orientation towards standards and process. Whitchurch’s model also allowed positions to shift according to circumstance. This is why we see our pivot in support of student experience and outcomes as inseparable from our development and de-invisibilisation (Akerman, 2020) as third spacers.

Why do we see our de-invisibilisation as best mediated through ‘partnership’, rather than the ‘collaboration’ referenced in V5 of the 2023 Professional Standards Framework (PSF): ‘collaborate with others to enhance practice’ (AdvanceHE, 2023)? ‘Collaborate’ is a new feature of the PSF; but our sense is that ‘partnership’ is perhaps more formalised through policies and processes than collaboration, whereas the latter is perhaps less formalised and, therefore, less structured. The former is about policies, processes, and people, whereas the latter is more singularly about people. Formality allows for actions to happen intentionally, while informality means actions may (or may not) happen.

Although staff on non-academic contracts comprised around 40% of the higher education workforce in 2022−2023 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024), their contribution to improving student outcomes is comparatively underexplored in academic literature. Graham and Regan’s work is a significant exception (Graham 2010, 2013; Regan, Dollard and Banks, 2014; Graham and Regan, 2016) and we have indicated the resonance which their definition of ‘pedagogic partnership’ holds for us: ‘a partnership between all higher

education staff to collaborate for the purpose of supporting successful student outcomes' (Graham and Regan, 2016, p.605). We note the syntactical stroke making partnership a *prerequisite* of effective collaboration so that reskilling for partnership must be a precondition of performing to the standards set by the PSF. Graham and Regan's definition also sits within understandings of partnership as being higher order than collaboration because it presupposes mutuality (whereas collaboration may involve hierarchy) (Veles, Graham and Ovaska, 2023).

Case studies of institutional impact on student outcomes also emphasise the importance of partnerships to effective interventions (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016; Marthers and Rosowsky, 2021). We said that partnership is about policies, processes, and people; our approach evolved conversely through people, processes, and policy. There is also more we can do in a more structured sense rather than perhaps a more organic pivot experienced to date. Drawing upon the work of West (2024), who considers student services in relation to purpose, organisation, and impact, we might better identify how we best structure support for our pedagogical partnership approach through consideration of our purpose, how we are organised, and what our intended impact is. This reflection forms part of that.

People

In response to the needs of our institution, Chichester has supported its quality and standards team in growing into a pedagogic partnership team through engagement with AdvanceHE Fellowship. This started with the Director of Quality and Standards successfully seeking PFHEA in 2016 and then supporting individual members of AQSS to seek Fellowship in accordance with their role, reflecting Veles and Carter's (2016) proposal of the four key elements of professionalism: organisational knowledge, relevant experience and expertise as evidenced through qualifications and training, professional networks and associations, formalised status and decision-making autonomy. Our pivot has required role reformulation in relation to quality management morphing into the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and experience in relation to pedagogic partnership.

Participating in Fellowship has also enabled us to become 'positive disruptors', which we define as individuals who are agile, think laterally, challenge convention, have an ability to act as change agents — but humanely. This has allowed academic quality assurance staff

to become more confident in their consideration of learning, teaching, and assessment, but there is more we can do, for example, in developing approaches to the use (or not) of artificial intelligence in assessment practices. We cannot do this in isolation and work in partnership with academic colleagues to achieve success.

We participate in the university’s Learning and Teaching programmes on the same footing as academic staff to gain Fellowship of AdvanceHE, and the Director of Quality and Standards, now also the University Lead for Learning and Teaching, delivers sessions and is a mentor and assessor. Three members of the team — so far — have participated, two of whom have achieved recognition as Associate Fellows of the Higher Education Academy. While the acquisition of credentials gives us credibility, it also gives us authenticity in our ability to relate to the associated advantages and challenges for our colleagues. It allows us to speak to matters of pedagogy within our institutional structures, enabling a more effective and efficient continuum for academic quality assurance and its regulatory policies and processes and curriculum design and development.

This is also relevant for our response to OfS Condition of Registration B2, which requires that staff who design and deliver higher education courses have ‘appropriate’ qualifications or training. Academic staff development is now in the remit of quality professionals, with the obvious risk that we are seen as bureaucratic agents, as McKay and Robson (2023) found was the case for some professional staff involved in the TEF. We were in fact dissatisfied that initial exploration of an audit-led approach was positively received for the wrong reason, in that it reduced the need for departments to engage. We needed to reposition ourselves alongside our academic colleagues within Graham’s (2014) matrix model of all higher education professional identities, with a shared focus on teaching and learning development. We next trialled working as a ‘skilled process consultant’ (Winter, 2009) with heads of academic departments, helping them prepare for conversations with their academic staff. However, whereas a consultant might draw credibility from externality, our own focus on CPD enabled us to stress our identities as partners in a shared enterprise. Now we are looking at how we marry dialogue and efficiency by embedding check points in the right quality processes, that is in those processes which will keep the conversation open.

Process

We sought to reinvigorate process review and development with a partnership approach, revising the composition of approval and review panels to bring in colleagues from our Careers and Employability team, as well as industry advisers. We have recently taken this further by working with the Careers and Employability team to embed the University of Chichester’s newly developed graduate attributes into our programme approval documentation, facilitating pedagogic partnership on programme development between academic staff and third spacers. Initially, we sought to embed the university’s graduate attributes into each individual module descriptor, but this met with resistance from our academic colleagues. In response, we now seek to embed these within our programme descriptors.

More broadly, we are reconceptualising programme and module descriptors as not just the definitive outputs of quality processes but as documents which, in early iterations, are prompts for cross-boundary conversations about approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment, with specific foci on experience and outcomes. Early signs are that our approach is bearing fruit. The Guardian University Guide shows that for graduate outcomes in 2018/2019, 69.2% of students entered highly skilled work, and then in 2020/2021 this increased to 77.4%. We have developed conversations with academic areas through programme approval to embed employability within the curriculum, with an emphasis on real-world practice, through developing greater engagement with local and regional employers to enable access to placements, for example. The work on authentic assessment is confirmed by our TEF panel statement, which notes that external examiners comment ‘positively on the embedding of employability within programmes, linked with PSRBs which benefit approx. 28% UG students’ (Office for Students, 2023, p.9).

This also means, for example, discussions at programme approval and review are about *what* the assessment strategy is rather than simply whether an assessment strategy exists. As a very specific example, we led on a project to reduce the number of formal examinations within the curricula (and worked closely with academic colleagues on the concept of ‘authentic assessment’) to address awarding gaps. This had a positive outcome — prior to the reduction of formal examinations, the pass rate for Asian students in 2021/2022 was 70% and in 2022/2023 this was 89%. The pass rate for Black and minority ethnic students in 2021/2022 was 79% and in 2022/2023 it was 83%. Our project was based upon University College London’s BAME Awarding Gap Project (2021). Limitations

are recognised in the UCL work, which has led us to continue to consider intersectionality; for example, Black students are more likely to have studied for a BTEC rather than for A Levels prior to university. This means that, as with UCL’s study, we are not clear on whether it is the content or process of an examination causing a gap, and we continue to consider optionality in assessment. We have used this work, undertaken with academic areas, to frame our Access and Participation Plan, continuing our efforts on compassionate assessment, optionality in assessment, and Universal Design for Learning, to lead academic areas on best practice in assessment.

Policies

The university has amalgamated what were two separate academic governance committees (an Academic Standards Committee and a Learning and Teaching Committee) into a single Education Committee with a remit across learning, teaching, and assessment and academic quality. Its composition includes academic and professional services colleagues from departments including Quality and Standards, Student Support, Global Outreach, Technology Enhanced Learning, and Registry, together with student members. The Education Committee provides a structure for generative conversations (Winter, 2009) across quality and teaching and learning, to progress further transformation of student outcomes and the student experience. This has been achieved through our promotion of a specific agenda item on supporting student success, which collates together many potentially disparate initiatives (employability, module evaluation, and educational gain, for example) into a themed discussion. This enabled us to respond with some ease to the ‘wicked problem’ of educational gain for our TEF submission, utilising the combined expertise of academic staff and third spacers. We worked in pedagogic partnership with our academic colleagues to secure examples with evidence for the TEF submission.

Marthers and Rosowsky find that structure is a precondition of student success because it aligns functions around a shared mission and objectives (2021). Reflecting on our on-the-ground experience of academic governance, it has been perhaps more ‘chicken and egg’ than this, with our willingness to reskill as partners cultivating the trust necessary for shared decision-making. We have cascaded the model through subcommittees working on, for example, annual monitoring and educational gain, embedding our influence as both members and secretaries within decision-making structures. The willingness of colleagues to become involved is a positive indicator, and as the new structures mature we are now

finding our way through trade-offs between a partnership culture and governance standards, such as achieving optimal compositions for decision making.

Conclusion

The reorientation of the OfS conditions of registration for quality towards academic experience challenges quality teams to rethink in real time their approach to supporting positive outcomes from learning and teaching. We draw three key learning points from our experience so far:

1. Prioritising our continuing professional development in learning and teaching is enabling our team to become a pedagogic partner for the benefit of the student experience and outcomes.
2. Seeking proactive involvement in academic governance, influencing, and participating in decision-making structures has enabled us to model and foster pedagogic partnership across our institution.
3. Embedding a partnership approach in process review and development enables us to continuously assess whether we are drawing on the full range of expertise and insight, particularly in terms of ‘positive disruption’.

While we do not underestimate the challenge, which demands creativity, resilience, and investment in reskilling, we commend this opportunity for quality practitioners to develop and articulate their identities as third spacers.

Acknowledgements

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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