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# From scientist to academic developer: a story

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When I started in Higher Education [HE] as a Lecturer in Biomedicine in 2002, I thought a good teacher was someone who could present their subject in an interesting manner in a PowerPoint presentation for an hour. My approach to assessment was based on the academic essays and examinations I had struggled with as a student. Through the parallel processes of being a Course Director and taking a Postgraduate Certificate [PGCert] in HE, I realised that this approach was not only far from true, but the tip of a very complex iceberg. The way I thought about students, their development, their assessment, and the support they needed to reach their potential was transformed through an inspiring developer and conversations with my peers. Collectively, we were passionate about making a difference to students at our University, and although the size of the iceberg was daunting, we were determined to chip away at it and make a difference.

The opportunity for me to move into academic development arose in 2010. Having acted as Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning in my Faculty, I knew that the opinions and abilities regarding student support among the colleagues with whom I worked covered a broad range. Some were naturals at engaging with students and getting the best from them; others could not see past the 'delivery' (and some were not even very good at that!). I felt I had a real opportunity to revolutionise practice at my University.

The challenges were greater than I had imagined. I inherited the PGCert in HE that had not really evolved since I had completed it. Staff had a poor opinion of it due to a low completion rate. They also perceived that the PGCert did not really serve the needs of a research-intensive institution where a very large proportion of academic staff rarely taught a group of students and was only interested in supervision. Any other development was viewed as 'training' and was seen as a necessary evil, almost a tick box exercise rather than a vehicle to share practice and drive enhancement. I encountered a lot of, 'We have always done it this way'. One time, when I was talking to a colleague about Intended Learning Outcomes, they told me, 'The objective for my lecture is that students know more about my subject when they leave the lecture room than when they came in!'. About 13% of academic staff had a teaching qualification or professional recognition for teaching.

These views, coupled with perspectives from staff originating from all over the world, were both challenging and intriguing. I realised that one useful quality I brought to Academic development was a love of talking to different people and 'selling' them what I was passionate about – improving teaching so those who did it enjoyed it, and improving learning so that our students could reach their maximum potential. This,

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coupled with a pragmatic redesign of the PGCert, its assessment, and other continuing professional development opportunities gradually increased engagement with academic development, and as a result, bought the number of academic staff with professional recognition to over 50%, which I consider a good outcome for a research-intensive institution!

There is still much to do. The work of an academic developer has no end. It evolves with the times and with the needs of students, staff, and the wider world. However, I like to think that, having started my career wanting to make a difference through science, I help make a difference to people in a wide range of disciplines and careers by making their learning experience with us a little bit better. I consider that to be a privilege. That's what academic development means to me.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Tracey Bailey* is Academic Practice Lead at Cranfield University, leading their Advance HE accredited programmes.



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