Collaborating with postgraduates on providing 1:1 academic support: Who benefits and how?

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Background

- Widening participation + reduced funding
  - Expansion in use of Graduate Teaching Assistants (e.g. Fairbrother, 2012)

- Directives to develop students’ employability alongside academic potential (e.g. Zepke & Leach, 2010)
  - Work experience / placements

- Frontrunner scheme (Essex)
  - Paid work experience (approx 6 mths)
  - On-the-job training and support
  - Skills developed through placement role
Talent Development Centre (TDC) Helpdesk

- Provision of 1:1 support for all
  - London PIM March 2016 (Kavanagh, Gadsby & Mason)

- TDC approach to advising:
  - Generic – not discipline-specific; any issue, not just academic writing
  - Active listening and questioning
  - Signposting role
The Study

- 7 participants (Frontrunner advisers)
  - range of disciplines and L1s

- Interview procedure
  - prompts provided in advance
  - recorded interviews (20–30 mins)

- Data focus
  - perceptions of their experiences as academic advisers
Perceived challenges

‘the wide backgrounds of students and academic settings’

- Diverse nature of students and their needs
- Frontrunner lack of confidence
- Frontrunner assumptions/misconceptions
- Student assumptions/expectations
Perceived rewards

‘every minute of the experience’ … ‘really wonderful’

- Implementing the advising approach
- Building confidence
- Developing understanding of student difficulties
- Developing own skills
- Facilitating student learning
Views on training provision

‘collective learning’… ‘treated as equals’…
‘matched our needs’… ‘flexibility’

- Formal training workshops
- Regular meetings with ‘supervisor’
- Working alongside others
Impact on teaching duties

‘learnt a lot about giving feedback’

- Adopting/adapting to approach
- Classroom and office hours
- Ability to decipher students’ needs
- Sensitivity to worries and concerns
Impact on professional development

‘It made me so much better than I would have been’

- Confidence
- Transferable skills
- CV and job applications
Impact on personal development

“What would I tell myself if I were in one of those sessions?”

- Acquiring good practices for own PhD studies
- Overcoming shyness
- Discovering love of teaching/facilitating learning
Who benefits?

- Frontrunners
- Students
- The university
- The academic community
Who benefits? – Frontrunners

‘Me, of course …’

- Interaction with students – awareness of needs
- Professional, supportive environment to develop own style by learning from the team
- Being paid to become better at what they are doing
- Springboard into employment
Who benefits? – Students

‘... and the students’

- During placement and beyond
- Focus on developing students’ academic skills
- Frontrunners
  - perceived as closer to the students
  - narrow the gap
Who benefits? – The university

‘It’s really good for the university’

- Increased, cost-effective provision of support tutors
- Cross-fertilisation between students and university staff
Who benefits? – The academic community

‘Those placements – and the TDC itself – is, in a way, what creates this academic community, because we’re not talking about disciplines, but you as a student have the opportunity to learn about academic skills, how to become an academic

… the university is a little bit segregated in terms of disciplines

… when you learn how to teach and how to communicate academic skills, you are building up an academic community. Everyone benefits.’
Implications

- **The TDC**
  - Insightful reflections to feed into forward planning
  - Greater attention to shared learning environment
  - Facilitating stronger links between tutor and frontrunner advisers

- **The university**
  - Model of good practice in responding to student needs and gaps in knowledge of the HE academic context

- **The wider academic community**
  - Scope for comparison with provision at other institutions?
References and further reading

- Park, C. (2002) Neither fish nor fowl? The perceived benefits and problems of using Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to teach undergraduate students, *Higher Education Review*