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
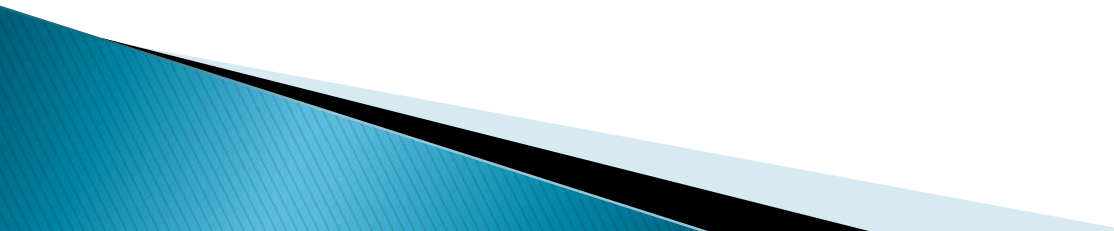
Talent Development Centre (TDC) Helpdesk

- 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

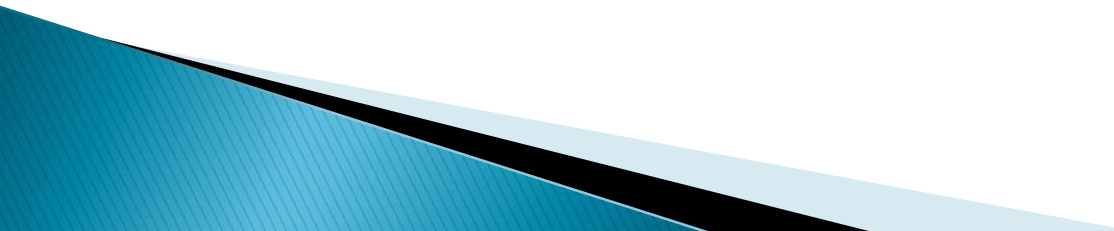- Frontrunner assumptions/misconceptions

- Student assumptions/expectations

Perceived rewards

'every minute of the experience' … 'really wonderful'

- Implementing the advising approach

- Building confidence

- Developing understanding of student difficulties

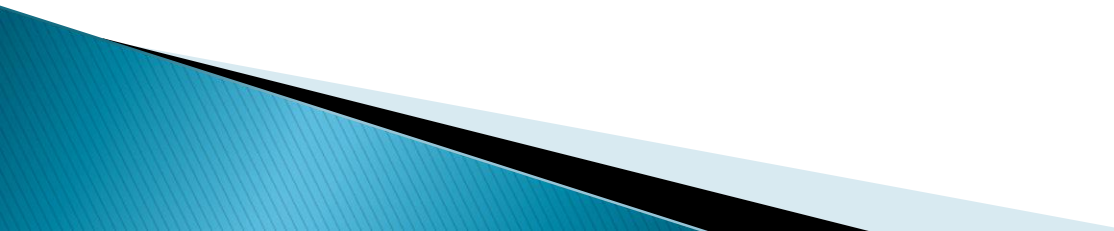- Developing own skills

- Facilitating student learning

Views on training provision

'collective learning'… 'treated as equals'… 'matched our needs' … 'flexibility'

- Formal training workshops

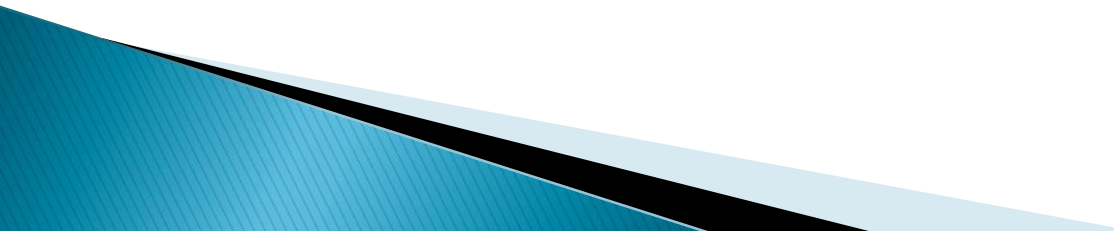- Regular meetings with 'supervisor'

- 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
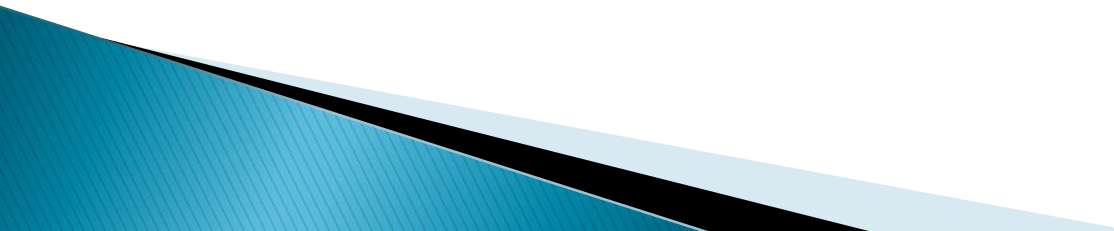
- Sensitivity to worries and concerns

Impact on professional development
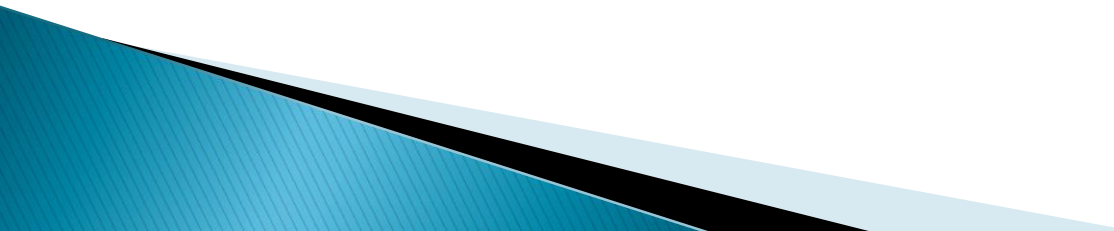
'It made me so much better than I would have been'

- Confidence

- Transferable skills

- CV and job applications

Impact on personal development

'What would I tell myself if I were in one of those sessions?'
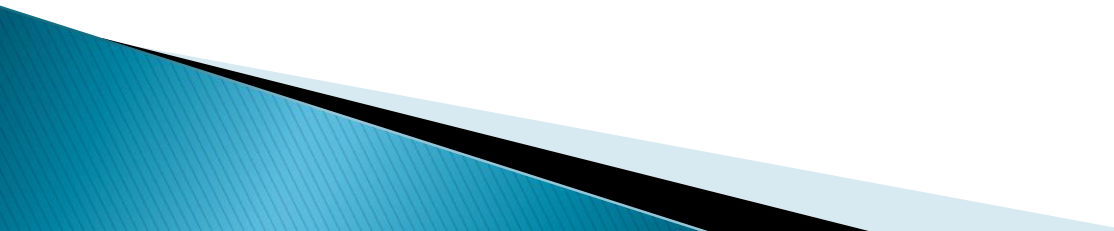
- Acquiring good practices for own PhD studies

- Overcoming shyness

- Discovering love of teaching/facilitating learning

Who benefits?

- Frontrunners

- Students

- The university

- The academic community
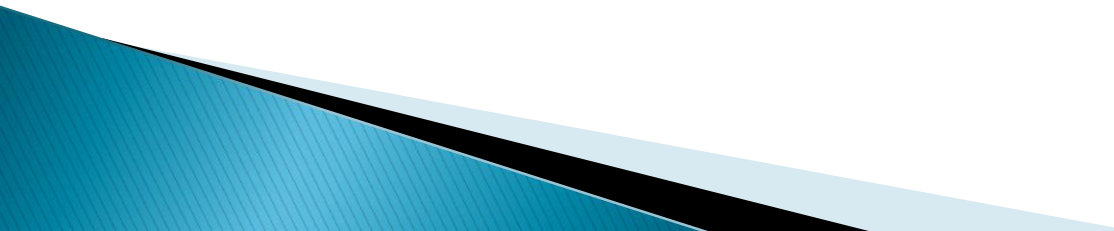
Who benefits? – Frontrunners

'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'
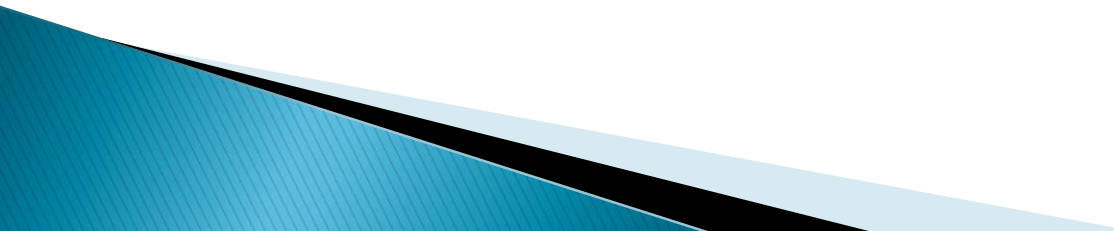
- Increased, cost-effective provision of support tutors

- 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

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