

## **The Sixth *QHE* Seminar**

### **The End of Quality?**

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## **Quality Development: a new concept for higher education**

**David Gosling and Vaneeta D'Andrea**

**University of East London and City University**

### **Abstract**

Despite the enormous growth in national quality assurance processes in the UK, serious doubts remain about their effectiveness in achieving lasting quality improvement. This paper suggests that the quality of students' experience of higher education can more effectively be improved by combining educational development with quality assurance to create a more holistic approach. The concept, which we call 'quality development', is explained and four examples of how this approach can work are described.

### **Introduction**

There has been an enormous growth in quality assurance processes over the last ten years in higher education in the UK. This growth has been primarily generated by the demands of national agencies. External pressures have required institutions to develop elaborate and comprehensive internal procedures to audit the practice of academic and central departments. How far has this expansion of quality assurance processes produced improvements in students' experience of higher education? Has teaching improved as a result of the interventions of quality agencies? Has the expansion of ever more intrusive quality assurance procedures resulted in an equivalent enhancement of the quality of student outcomes? This paper will explore the relationship between the quality assurance agenda and the achievement of goals that contribute to educational development. It is argued that there needs to be a focus on quality improvement and that much of the current efforts required of academic staff are misplaced and do not necessarily produce enhancement of the student experience.

In many universities the issue is compounded by organisational divisions.

Typically, there are those charged with developmental change in universities and those responsible for ensuring the demands that quality assurance are addressed. These functions are typically located in separate offices, sometimes known as 'educational development' or 'learning and teaching' centres and quality assurance or 'standards' offices. Because they also have competing

improvement agendas based on often opposing values, the relationship between educational development and quality assurance is a complex one. The differences between these values are at the heart of the tensions occurring between them.

This tension will be explored and a proposal made for a quality-development model that suggests ways of overcoming the tensions and enabling quality assurance and educational development to work in partnership with each other to achieve some common goals. There are undoubtedly ways in which the kinds of improvements to learning and teaching with which educational development is centrally concerned will be, and should be, reflected in the criteria by which quality is assessed in higher education. Similarly, there are quality assurance mechanisms that can and should be part of an integrated process for improving the student's learning experience.

In this paper, we review the quality agenda in higher education in the United Kingdom and its impact on current practice. A quality development model is proposed and illustrated by a number of examples of how it can work in practice.

## **Higher Education Quality Assessment: current practice in the UK**

In recent years there has been increasing demands by so-called 'stakeholders' in higher education for institutions to be made more accountable. The demands have come primarily from governments who argue that the public investment in higher education justifies closer scrutiny of the outcomes achieved by publicly funded institutions and from students who expect to receive good quality teaching and sufficient learning resources to meet their needs. Such demands are also driven by fears that the expansion of higher education is threatening quality (Walden, 1996). As public funding declines, resulting in deterioration of student-staff<sup>1</sup> ratios, and as the participation rate increases, it is not unreasonable to ask the question: 'How can the public be reassured that the quality of higher education is being maintained following these changes?'

In response to these questions of quality assurance in Britain, there has been a considerable growth of quality-management processes both internally, normally through a 'quality' or 'standards' office within institutions, and externally through first, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC, 1993–97), and then the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).<sup>2</sup> The external processes have included departmental subject review, institutional audit, benchmarking, programme specification and performance indicators (Armstrong, 2000).

External quality assessment in British higher education, other than that undertaken by professional or regulatory bodies, is currently conducted through two processes carried out by the QAA: 'subject review' and 'institutional audit'. Subject review involves academic peers reviewing six aspects of provision — curriculum design, teaching learning and assessment, student progression and achievement, learning support, learning resources and quality management and enhancement. The process normally involves a four-day visit during which teaching is observed, student work is examined and documentation, of both the subject area and institutional quality assurance practices, is reviewed. The result is a numerical score for each aspect of provision on a four-point scale. A report of the outcomes of each institutional subject review is published and made available for public scrutiny.

Following the recommendations of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), the QAA is introducing further quality mechanisms into the subject review process. These include: subject specific 'benchmark statements' of the expected learning outcomes for any honours graduate within

subject areas (41 subjects have been identified for this purpose), 'programme specifications' that will require every programme of study to provide a statement of its learning outcomes, and a 'national qualifications framework' to standardise qualifications and degree awards across the sector.

Institutional audit is undertaken by a team of assessors who attempt to check the higher education institutions (HEIs) 'analytical account' of its practices, particularly the achievement and maintenance of standards against the evidence provided through face-to-face meetings with teams of staff and through review of all relevant documentation. The judgement arrived at by the team is for the institution as a whole not for a specific subject. Reports on the audit visits are also published for the benefit of public scrutiny and accountability.

## **Quality Industry and the Impact on Higher Education Institutions**

The growth of the 'quality industry' has generated a lively debate about what constitutes 'quality' (Ellis, 1993; Harvey and Green, 1993) and has impacted enormously on all academics. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has come under intense scrutiny and criticism. Peter de Vries (Radford *et al.*, 1997) has referred to the 'ideology' of quality management, which he argues is based on an inappropriate rationalistic and 'technologised' model of higher education. In this model it is managers who define the aims or 'mission' of the university, establish criteria and systems for monitoring and evaluating educational outcomes and then measure the extent to which the goals have been achieved. According to De Vries, the ideology is derived from managers' lack of trust of academics and requires increasing production of documentary evidence to demonstrate precisely what the institution's practices are in every aspect of its work. For Trow (1994), the origin of the quality industry is 'managerialism' which is a 'substitute for a relationship of trust between government and universities'. He sees the traditional values of the university under severe threat because of the need of the quality assessments to use measures which can be seen to be 'more objective' and more easily accepted outside the institution. According to Trow, the result of all the quality assurance is not better quality education:

The paradoxical result may well be that vigorous efforts by agencies of central government to assess the quality of university work lead to its decline as more and more energy is spent on bureaucratic reports and as universities begin to adapt to the simplifying tendencies of the quantification of outputs.' (1994, p. 20)

Barnett argued more than a decade ago that there were 'ominous signs' that the positive gains that higher education had achieved through self-criticism were 'coming under the severest threat' (Barnett, 1990, p. 104). Since the time of his observations the quality processes have far exceeded Barnett's fears in terms of their intrusiveness, external control, requirements on reporting, and external accountability. The increases in quality régimes coupled with under-funding of the sector has had, according to Rustin, a devastating impact on university life:

As standards have come under threat largely through the direct and indirect effects of the funding regime, governments have adopted ever more stringent forms of regulation in their supposed defence. The contradiction between a punitive insistence on the maintenance of standards and a funding regime which make this impossible are glaring. (Rustin, 2000, p. 86)

Rustin goes on to argue that coping with this 'contradiction' has had dire effects on staff morale.

When pressures to reduce budgets and meet external regulatory requirements become high, institutions can become scenes of anxiety and persecution, in which professional self-confidence and morale are undermined. (Rustin, 2000, p. 99)

Among those who have researched the impact of quality systems on the academic community, Trowler (1996) has provided a graphic account of the strategies adopted by academics to subvert managerial systems imposed on them with which they do not agree. Some of the academics studied by Trowler agreed with Trow that managerialism is 'at best an irrelevance and a distraction from the daily business of teaching and learning, and at worst a serious threat to already vulnerable institutions' (1996, p. 22). Interestingly, he also found some academics who thrived in the new environment. Although Martin (1999, p. 127) acknowledges that 'accountability can be a potent force both for and against learning', she cites how monolithic quality assurance processes that penalise staff who do not comply with their requirements, produces minimal compliance with bureaucratic procedures but 'has not even begun to address the improvement or maintenance of the quality of academic work'. Furthermore it has been argued that quality assurance régimes do not actually provide useful measures of quality.

One of the many ironic features of the current quality arrangements is that whilst we have a lot of comparative data about quality, we have relatively little which tells about quality generally, or about changes in quality.' (Brown 2000, p. 10).

The claims against current quality-management systems in higher education may be summarised as follows:

- the emphasis on documenting evidence is a time-consuming distraction from the real business of teaching and research;
- the measures utilised in making judgements about quality bear little relation to what is important in academic institutions. As a result, the judgements (in particular numerical scores) have little value, validity or reliability;
- quality processes impose a methodology that is based on assumptions that are not open to challenge or debate and are to that extent antithetical to the academic culture;
- the imposition of quality management derives from a lack of trust by the public, government and institutional managers that is damaging to the ethos of the university. Collegiality is being lost and replaced by excessive bureaucracy and 'proceduralism', resulting in reduced staff morale;
- there is little evidence that forcing conformity to quality procedures brings about any fundamental changes that improve the students' experience of higher education. Some would argue that the overall impact on students of intrusive quality procedures has been negative (Horsburgh, 1999).

If the current quality management systems in higher education do not contribute to the improvement or enhancement of the educational experience or positively impact on student learning, they are essentially an expensive exercise in futility, especially when in the UK only 0.1 per cent of review outcomes were assessed as having major shortcomings (HEFCE, Dec 2000b, p. 8). If the key issue is accountability to the taxpayer then it is difficult, in this context, to defend the value for money spent on the quality assurance process itself. Indeed, the recent report by PA Consulting for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) argues that 'the current regime represents poor value for money both for stakeholders and for institutions.' (HEFCE, 2000c, p. 7)

Furthermore, the bureaucratic demands of quality assurance are creating a compliance culture that dampens creativity, rewards conformity and slows down the responsiveness of the system to

a rapidly changing environment (Rustin, 2000; Cooper, 2000; Trow, 1994). This is especially problematic at a time when technological change is transforming the ways in which learning can be facilitated and even creating new ways of thinking and communicating (Batson and Bass, 1996; Brown J.S, 2000).

## **Moving to a Quality Development Model of Quality Assurance: Role of Educational Development in Quality Development**

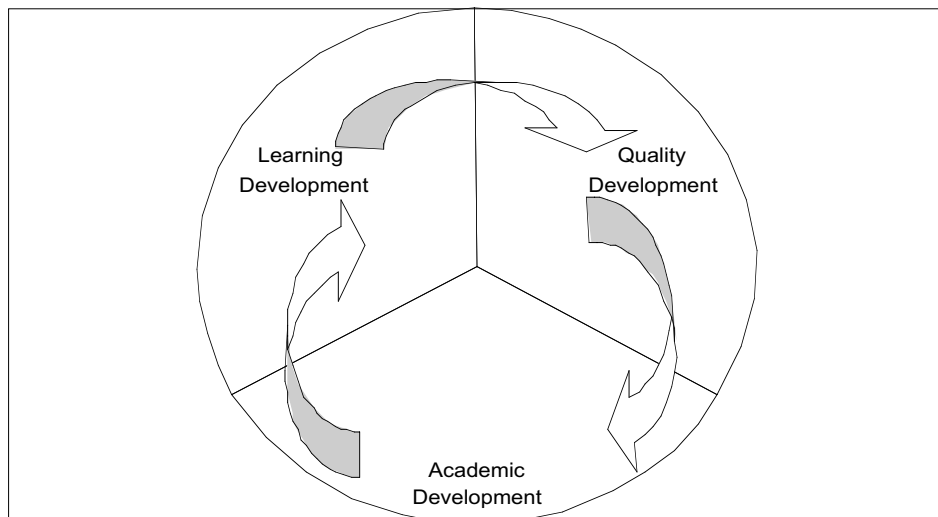
There appears to be a need for a quality system that not only performs a regulatory function but one that functions to improve the quality of the educational experience, one that provides a developmental function as well.

Many educational developers recognise the dilemma outlined above. This dilemma is also the cause of some tension in institutions between the offices responsible for quality assurance and educational development. Higher education institutions frequently expect Educational Development Offices or Centres to help subjects prepare for the QAA visits. This has brought quality and educational development into increased contact with each other and required greater collaboration between the two. The working agenda of each of these areas, as well as the underlying philosophy of the work, has often been at odds because quality assurance focuses on quality assessment and educational development focuses on quality enhancement.

By taking a more active role in the quality assurance process educational developers have been open to the challenge that they are implicated in carrying forward the quality management ideology. If they prepare subjects for the QAA review uncritically, and solely to produce acceptable scores for the institution, then there is reason for some academics to see educational development as party to the processes of managerialism and the 'policing' process. However, if in carrying out the institutional role to prepare subjects for the QAA review, educational developers assist subjects in taking a more pro-active and developmental approach to the visits, the role of educational developers can be seen more positively and the outcomes, in our view, are more useful to the institution. This shift in emphasis is linked to what we are calling a *quality development process*.

### **Quality Development: a new concept for higher education.**

The quality development approach is essentially an integrated educational development model that incorporates the enhancement of learning and teaching with the quality and standards monitoring processes in the university (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2001). The work of educational development in this model involves initiating and managing three major areas of work academic development, learning development and quality development. The linkages between these areas are as follows:



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**Figure 1. Holistic Educational Development**

In this model the range of activities of the educational development office would encompass what has been called the 'quality loop'. It would take the development, implementation and evaluation of the educational provision full circle by informing the process of curriculum development and validation<sup>3</sup> with knowledge of current pedagogical theory and practice. It would also provide the necessary professional development for teaching staff on teaching/learning strategies that would be most effective in meeting the educational aims and objectives of the curriculum developed.

Responsibility for curriculum development and for supporting students' learning, and for the quality assurance of both, are often separated so there is little linkage or dialogue between the offices responsible for these key areas (Harvey, 1998). An integrated educational development model creates the links between curriculum development and quality assurance by creating a collegial environment within which to design curriculum that provides advice and guidance on assuring the quality of the curriculum developed. In this way a positive and non-punitive, professional approach can be taken when the official approval occurs. Additionally, these processes can enhance support for students' learning-development needs as well. Too often, the approval of courses has focused on curriculum content without being informed by consideration of how students' learning skills are developed. By linking learning development with academic development and quality development, the process can take into account the expertise of each area and produce a more useful end result, thus, ensuring that the students are more sufficiently supported to achieve the very best results in their studies.

This integrated approach has a number of benefits for the institution, staff and most importantly students. It begins by addressing the tensions between quality assurance and educational development by providing wide-ranging support for teaching departments to enhance the educational experience of students. It also creates the opportunity for dialogue between quality-assurance staff and educational developers around the internal and external quality-assessment policies and procedures. Thus, there is less duplication of effort and a more holistic understanding of the relationship between quality assurance and learning enhancement. In addition, if the processes of quality assurance and quality enhancement are part of an integrated approach within an institution there can be more effective dissemination of educational policies and greater consistency in

standards across the range of institutional provision. Furthermore, meeting the expectations for both internal and external quality assurance via an enhancement model allows for a significantly increased student support system because it encourages greater reflective practice throughout the entire educational process.

This is a win-win model for the entire higher education sector because it satisfies the need for public accountability at the same time that it allows academics to do what they do best: develop, ensure, enhance and deliver educational programmes of study. Additionally, it gives students the opportunity to achieve their educational goals in a supportive learning community.

Many of the claims that have been made against quality management can be overcome by the proposed 'quality development model'. It is our view that, whilst recognising that some element of recording practice is useful and desirable, in this new model the emphasis is on practice and not on documentation. Unlike previous quality management approaches, the outcomes are not measurable scores but development of quality assurance skills and processes that have been determined by staff to be of educational value to their students. No methodology or ideology is imposed because the model derives from reflective practice by practitioners, who can decide for themselves appropriate processes for achieving their goals. Quality development replaces trust in academics to investigate and evaluate their practices and to find ways of improving quality. Potentially there is a route to achieve fundamental changes, although this does depend on building a consensus among communities of practitioners in favour of change.

### **Quality Development: four examples**

The concept of 'quality development' is illustrated by describing how it would influence the way in which four issues are approached, peer observation of teaching, student evaluations, curriculum design and student learning development (study skills). In each case, the approach to these topics, that has been exhibited within the conceptual framework of quality assurance, will be outlined and contrasted by a description of the approach implied by the concept of 'quality development'.

#### ***Peer Observation of Teaching***

There has been a history in the UK of hostility to the observation of teaching because it was associated with management processes to determine promotion and performance-related pay. Observation of teaching has also been incorporated into the QAA's Subject Review procedures. In this context the observations are conducted to achieve a summative judgement of the teaching observed, they involve no formative feedback by the subject reviewer, nor do they require any reflective practice on the part of the teacher observed. The focus of the observation is on the stated outcomes for the session and whether the observer judges that they have been achieved by the students. As well as being non-formative, the observations, depend on snap-shot data that looks at teaching at a single moment in time allowing for no other comparisons of the learning experience of the students. When all this is added to the distortion created by the stress of a stranger judging the lecturer's work, there is little redeeming educational value to the process (Barrow, 1999).

To reconceptualise the role and function of peer observation of teaching within a quality development model, it needs to be framed within the broader aims of assisting departments to provide a high-quality educational experience for its students and to encourage all staff to reflect on the

effectiveness of their own teaching and identify their development needs. This can only be achieved if there is an ethos of discussion about teaching and exchange of views about what is best practice. The first, and most important, principle governing the process within a developmental model is that

feedback to individual staff must be confidential. Second, it must be separated from other university processes such as those for probationary staff, for under-performance or promotion, or as part of an appraisal scheme<sup>4</sup>.

It is also important that all staff with teaching responsibilities, whatever their grade or status, participate in peer observation. To ensure that the process is carried out constructively and sensitively, it is essential that all observers learn appropriate methods of observation and how to provide feedback. The outcomes of the process should be the identification of the further developmental needs of the department as a whole (Gosling, 2000).

Research undertaken at the University of East London shows that, when using these principles, the objections to having teaching observed become much weaker and objections largely disappear (Kemp and Gosling, 2000). Although there is some evidence that the willingness of staff to be observed was related to the threat of external assessment, the way in which the observation has been built into departmentally-based development process creates a different view of the process.

### *Student Evaluations of Teaching*

Student evaluations have been increasingly used within quality assurance systems as a means by which individual lecturers are judged. The assumption underpinning the use of student evaluations in quality assurance is that since teaching is primarily undertaken to benefit students, they are best placed to judge its effectiveness. This approach has been most marked in the USA, where student evaluations have had a chequered history. In the 1960's, the student movement demanded that the student 'voice' be heard to improve the learning experience, redress the power balance between lecturer and student and bring about change in the curriculum. Students demanded that the curriculum should become 'more relevant' to their needs and believed that student evaluations would be a vehicle for bringing about change. However, student evaluations have become primarily used by managers to evaluate the performance of teaching staff and have become focused almost entirely on identifying poor teaching for remediation. In doing so, student evaluation has lost the power to bring about improvement.

Within a quality-development model, there is a need to return to the original aims of student evaluations and to take the process away from managerial purposes. The research evidence indicates analysis of student feedback on teaching has had little or no effect on identifying areas of change for individual staff (Cashin, 1995, Braskamp and Ory, 1994). Student views should not be sought to make judgements about the personal performance of staff but can be used as part of a dialogue to review the curriculum. It is essential that the analysis of student responses is as much about the students' engagement with the course and the success of their learning, as it is about the lecturer's role in teaching and supporting learning. Ramsden's 'course experience questionnaire' (CEQ) is a good example of a way in which student responses can be used to evaluate the outcomes of a programme rather than the performance of the lecturer (Ramsden, 1991). The analysis of such instruments provides valuable data to identify areas for improvement for the tutor(s) teaching the course. It can show both strengths and weaknesses of the course in promoting approaches to learning. However, in Australia the CEQ has been used by central government to publish league tables of university performance, which has coloured staff perceptions of its value.



## *Curriculum Design*

A third example relates to curriculum design. A common phenomenon of national quality and curriculum authorities in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa has been the adoption of a learning-outcomes model for curriculum design. The motivation for the requirement that curricula be framed in terms of outcomes has been primarily to facilitate the introduction of national qualification frameworks based on the award of credit at identified levels of learning. In the case of the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency expects learning outcomes at the level of each class observed. The aide-memoire to subject reviewers requires them to identify whether the learning outcomes of the class have been stated clearly. This clearly assumes that it is part of the quality judgement to determine whether outcomes have been both identified and announced to students.

The learning-outcomes model can be defended on a number of levels, not least as an integral part of a particular model of curriculum design (D'Andrea, 1999). The value of this model is the emphasis it places on achieving greater transparency for both teacher and learner as a tool for both planning teaching and achieving effective learning. However, it is not the only possible model of curriculum design, nor is it necessarily always the most appropriate for all types of learning and teaching. Academic staff require an introduction to the outcomes-based model as part of their repertoire of tools for planning student learning. They should also be able to defend an alternative model where it is appropriate to do so. When outcomes become viewed as a requirement of a quality system, they not only become viewed differently by staff, but the opportunity to engage in professional debate about different models of planning learning becomes effectively prevented. As Cooper (2000, p. 128) has argued, 'the methodologies and intellectual habits which constitute proceduralism, audit, quality assurance ...are notable for the doubly alienating manner in which they colonise both psychological and social space'. They replace the traditional dialogue about professional values and professional self-discipline with externally-determined criteria for assessing and evaluating practice. As a result, learning outcomes become an externally-imposed point of reference instead of one chosen for educationally-valid reasons.

## *Student Learning Development*

If one of the major reasons for adopting a quality assurance approach is to bring about improvement then it is important that its impact on student learning is taken into account. Yet there is little evidence that quality assurance processes improve students' learning experience (Horsburgh, 1999). Quality assurance processes tend to examine inputs, that is what systems are in place to support students' learning and outputs, as measured by indicators such as pass rates, retention and progression data, postgraduate employment and further study, but they are less successful in enabling an analysis of the factors that have been instrumental in influencing the data. Where institutions have different student profiles and different missions the significance attached to the indicators will vary considerably. Some efforts have been made to take this into account in recent revisions to performance indicators in the UK (HEFCE, 2000a) in recognition of different student profiles. However, the main purpose of these changes is to place higher education institutions in league tables of value-added performance, rather than to assist in finding ways of meeting student needs.

A quality-development approach focuses on each subject or department undertaking a self-analysis of the impact of the interaction between students and staff, the effectiveness of the learning materials available, the use students make of those materials, whether early diagnostic processes are in place and the extent to which they are successful in identifying students at risk

and the support systems that are in place to give advice and assistance to those identified as at risk. More difficult for departments to identify are the ways in which their teaching may be responsible for disadvantaging certain categories of students. There is evidence (Yorke, 1998; Seymour and Hewitt, 1997) that the traditions within subjects have a powerful influence on the styles of teaching adopted and these may be responsible for student failure and withdrawal. There are also qualitative considerations that are much harder to capture in any description that relate to issues such as the ways in which the curriculum and teaching methods have embedded assumptions relating to race and ethnicity, gender and class.

## Conclusion

It is only when students and staff are able to enquire into their practices through self-investigation and discussion, in an ethos that is not potentially punitive, that critical issues in learning and teaching can be fully acknowledged and addressed. Quality assurance with its emphasis on measurement, external accountability and regulatory control can identify issues and possibly shame departments into taking some actions to comply with the regulatory framework, but it cannot in itself bring improvements and does not necessarily engender an attitude among staff which is focused on improvement.

This paper has argued that there are ways of using peer review of teaching, student evaluations, curriculum development and analysis of learning support that will ultimately bring greater benefits to students and achieve quality improvement. This can best be accomplished through an integrated educational development model, in whatever form the institution finds to implement it whether devolved to schools or departments and supported by a central office or supported from a central office in co-operation with schools and departments. This is a model, which allows for continuous quality improvement, that effectively replaces a shame and blame approach with a name and claim ownership approach to quality development. This is proposed as a positive way forward for institutions, the higher education sector, and all the beneficiaries and stakeholders for whom a quality higher education system is important.

<sup>1</sup> The word 'staff' here refers primarily to teaching staff or faculty as they would be known in some other countries.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that prior to HEQC there was the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) that provided the quality assurance function for the former Polytechnics. See Brown (2000) for a discussion of the comparative histories of the CNAA and HEQC/QAA. [Editor: it should also be noted that many subject areas are subject to external scrutiny from professional or regulatory bodies. In the case of Initial Teacher Training provision, provision is inspected by the same body that inspects schools, viz OFSTED]

<sup>3</sup> Validation is the process of initial course approval undertaken by HEIs which affirms that the course meets the quality standards of the institution.

<sup>4</sup> 'Appraisal schemes' are annual evaluations of performance and identification of professional development needs undertaken by a supervisor.

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David Gosling  
Head of Educational Development Services  
University of East London  
Longbridge Road  
Essex RM8 2AS

Vaneeta D'Andrea  
Educational Development Centre  
City University  
10 Northampton Square  
London EC1 VOHB