

# ICED 2020 proceedings:

## Beyond teaching: Enabling holistic academic practice

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### **Abstract**

Competition for academic staff time to allocate to professional development occurs across an increasingly wide range of aspects of their roles. From learning to addressing areas of compliance with organisational activity, contextual knowledge and new skills and behaviours to enact their varied roles, academic staff are pulled in a range of directions. What if those with an interest in the development of staff in universities all worked together and put the individual academic at the heart of their own development trajectory? At Oxford Brookes University we have developed an holistic model of academic development for all career stages that considers the development needs of individuals as educators, researchers and leaders – the Brookes Academic Development Framework. This model is informed by research on aspects of academic development, particularly the work of Åkerlind (see Åkerlind 2004, 2008). Each of the three aspects are benchmarked to institutional and/or national frameworks for the development of academic staff. In this paper we introduce the framework, its purposes and underpinning philosophy; we show how we have gone from a “good idea” based on effective collaboration and a willingness to put the academic at the heart of their experience to the reality of delivering a coherent, flexible, fit for purpose professional development programme. With participants, we explore the competing expectations on academic staff in their institutions on entry, at different career points and on different career pathways. We map these and then support participants in building personal holistic frameworks that could meet those needs.

### **1 Introduction**

In 2015-16, colleagues in the staff and educational development unit the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD) worked with colleagues from the Researcher Development Team to create a model to underpin holistic, integrated academic support. It brought together values or principles of practice to underpin the delivery of academic staff development that would build individual academic staff knowledge, behaviours and attributes in the spheres of university teaching, research and being a leader. The result of the collaboration, the Brookes Academic Development Framework (available at <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/ocslid/your-development/career-development/academic-development-framework/>, accessed 16/08/2020; and also in Sharpe, 2017), was adopted by both teams as a breakthrough in how they could approach and develop staff holistically across their different areas. Some steps were taken to enhance the ways each of the areas presented their work to academic staff (such as considerations made to ensure each area did not schedule activities at the same time). However, it would be fair to say that the anticipated benefits of the model – as a developmental framework focused on individual academics’ needs across their career and diverse roles – were not realized.

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In 2019, with new staff in the OCSLD, new leadership in the University's senior team and discussions commencing to establish a new university vision and strategy for 2020 onwards, there was invigorated conversation to explore how the model could be brought to life in new ways that would capture the university's aspiration to actively show how teaching, research and leadership were equally valued spheres of academic endeavor. A vision team comprising the Pro Vice Chancellors for Research and Education, the Director of Human Resources, the Director of Researcher Development and the authors (the Head of the OCSLD and our lead for educational development) met regularly and worked at speed to determine what a new delivery model to operationalize the framework could look like, what features it would need to be successful and what co-dependencies there were with other areas of academic infrastructure that would need addressing. In November 2019, the senior leadership team of the university approved the further planning and development of our ideas for a new integrated continuing professional development framework called EXPLORE@Brookes, based closely on the model of the Brookes Academic Development Framework. This short paper describes key features of EXPLORE@Brookes and the work that has been completed to enable us to launch in October 2020.

## **2 A clear vision**

The early discussions among the vision team showed clearly that there was genuine desire to help academic colleagues navigate the competing, high pressure demands on their time and be successful in their varied roles. Fundamental to this desire was the acknowledgement that the new framework could not be focused on support only for those new in their roles (as had largely been the case with the previous practice in place). Instead, the vision team believed that the new framework needed to be accessible and accessed by academic staff to provide "career wide and career long" development. We were looking to change the culture surrounding continuing professional development (CPD), to move thinking on in some parts of the university from a belief that CPD was there to remedy a deficit in knowledge to a consideration that CPD was lifelong learning and is a fundamental and valued necessity if academics are to be able to innovate and thrive in any sphere of their work. For this reason, EXPLORE@Brookes comprises three distinctive elements:

1. An induction for new academic and research staff focused on developing their abilities as digital professionals (using the Virtual Learning Environment and other systems, tools and products that enable them to teach and work at Oxford Brookes)
2. An accredited, integrated academic development programme for academic staff joining Oxford Brookes – EXPLORE@Brookes programme. The structured programme lasts for two plus one year (or the duration of the staff member's fixed term contract if that is shorter). It supports the acquisition of competencies and knowledge to enable the staff member to fulfil the performance objectives established in their annual performance review with their line manager for any of the following: teaching delivery, teaching scholarship, leadership and/or research, knowledge exchange and innovation. There is an exit award after each year of engagement.
3. An open offer of academic role-related continuing professional development available to any member of academic staff

Reflecting on the current pandemic, the authors have certainly noted that the rapid requirement to learn new approaches to teaching practices that can work online has helped move thinking forward in line with our vision that we are all lifelong learners as we develop our academic practice.

### **3 Enabling infrastructure**

Early on in the work to develop EXPLORE@Brookes, we became aware that not only were we going to need to build something new and distinctive through collaboration with new partners; we were also going to need to unpick and dismantle some existing “ways of doing things”, protocols and policies that had supported the approaches that came before. One of the early wins (but by no means a quick or easy one) was to work with the Trades Unions, HR, senior staff and others to determine the appropriate recognition for the continuing professional development of academic staff within their workload allocations. We also worked closely with HR colleagues to map the academic lifecycle and adapt and adjust protocols and procedures to ensure coherence with our vision and new offer and the work HR or line managers were involved with in supporting staff during their careers.

### **4 “Participant-first” focus**

From vision to implementation of EXPLORE@Brookes, we have sought to put participants – our academic colleagues – and their wellbeing and success at the heart of the work we have completed. There is a frequently cited view that academics (and indeed universities) are resistant to change. However, as Devecchi and Potter (2020: 190) propose, “It is not the change per se which might be source of the problem, but rather the rationale, the process by which it is introduced.” We have certainly experienced nothing but support and encouragement for the vision and the more detailed approach and structures for holistic academic practice. Taking a participant-first focus has meant that we have ensured there is national accreditation through Advance HE aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework (Higher Education Academy, 2011); fair allocation of time to develop in role; transparent expectations on those joining the university; and an open offer of development, structured and presented throughout the year to maximize accessibility and choice.

### **5 Conclusions**

Academic staff need to continuously learn and adapt to change throughout their careers and in their varied roles. Understanding teaching and research development (see for example Åkerlind 2004, 2008) teaches us much about staff needs and their individual trajectories to develop expertise and identity; however, it does not necessarily lead us to offer a fragmented approach to academic staff development. At Oxford Brookes a whole-university, holistic academic practice model has been developed and launched to ensure that continuing professional development stays at the heart of both individual and institutional thinking about academic roles and careers.

### **Acknowledgements**

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