

Resource Development for Novice Educators: The Story of a New Zealand Interinstitutional Collaboration

Judith Honeyfield and Cath Fraser
Bay of Plenty Polytechnic

Increasingly, many of our higher education teaching staff hail from diverse backgrounds with cultures that are often dissimilar to the world of academia. Drawn to education as a second career, or courted from industry for real world verisimilitude, their experience and external sector knowledge can be invaluable to an institution, but of little practical assistance to the individual in front of his or her first lecture theatre. Between 2008 and 2010, staff developers from five New Zealand higher education providers used an action research framework to investigate and address the needs of these novice teachers. This paper uses the four-phase cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting to describe the development and evaluation of Signposts, a professional development resource for new post-secondary educators. Learnings from the project affirm the value of collaborative projects and underscore the need for educational leaders to model reflective and critical practice. Several identified aspects of good practice in resource development are transferable beyond the single action research cycle described here.

The New Educator Profile and Professional Development Options

Newly recruited educators who walk into the classroom for the first time with no higher education teaching experience are becoming a growing phenomenon in New Zealand's non-compulsory sector landscape. Although primary and secondary teachers are required to successfully complete programs in educational theory and practice, tertiary teachers have no such legal requirement, the only constraints being an organization's policies and procedures. New educators frequently enter the profession with a wealth of subject-matter expertise but little or no background in lesson planning, classroom management, or other pedagogical knowledge.

A meta-analysis of research literature relating to the interface between academic development and student learning outcomes conducted by Prebble et al. (2005) culminated in two principal propositions: "Good teaching has positive impacts on student outcomes; and teachers can be assisted to improve the quality of their teaching through a variety of academic interventions" (p. 91). Should these interventions fail to be provided in a timely and accessible manner, note Barlow and Antoniou (2007), and "if their early experiences in their first academic appointment do not provide a good grounding in these new orientations, [novice educators] are likely to use their own experiences of being taught as the template for their own work" (p. 70-71). In a best-case scenario, this creates a pattern of replication, which is reactive and about "getting by"—clearly a long way from the ideal of a transformative and empowering learning experience for both educator and student (Smit, 2000). In a worst-case outcome, lack of appropriate practitioner training can lead to high staff

turn-over, which is detrimental to students, educators, and the institution (Bassi, 2000).

This leaves many higher education institutes in a predicament: staff are hired based on their subject-matter expertise, yet the institutes must value quality teaching. Therefore, many providers have set up internal professional development programs for their educators. The problem is how to ensure that newcomers receive knowledge and skills to improve their teaching in an easily accessible format before they step into the classroom or lecture theatre. Typically, institutes use a series of tools: inductions; workshops; and certificate/degree programs.

For the new teacher, such a menu may still have significant gaps. Inductions, for example, are often not available to staff before they actually start teaching. The University of Auckland's (2008) program for new academics is a prime illustration, as it is scheduled only once annually. Usually this is in June, after the first semester has concluded. Similarly, the University of Technology Sydney (2008) requires that new academic staff complete a personal professional development plan which may include workshops (e.g., Dimensions of Academic Work and Careers), but these workshops are also scheduled for mid-year. In other organizations such as our own, inductions concentrate more on institutional culture and requirements, such as vision and mission statements, biculturalism, and technology than they do on how to talk to a class. Professional development workshops and seminars are also problematic because they are scheduled throughout the year when frontline delivery staff may not be able to get release time to attend (Baume, Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2005). And clearly, studying for education qualifications is a longer-term commitment to a teaching career.

Enthusiasts of e-learning would doubtless argue that this is a good opportunity to introduce online modules, and certainly there are plenty of examples, such as West Kentucky's Basic Skills for College Teaching program (Western Kentucky University Faculty Center for Excellence in teaching, 2008), the University of Technology Sydney's (2008) Survival Guide for New Academics, and NorthTec's (2008) CD with basic information on teaching skills, sent to staff before they start. Of course, one issue of online material is accessibility. Some staff may not be aware of the availability of online resources. Also it may be inconvenient to access online material when it is urgently needed as a "just in time" tool. In a report on tertiary dissemination of best practices, McKenzie, Alexander, Harper, and Anderson (2005) report that of people adopting changes, "[v]ery few adopters described becoming aware of projects or other teaching ideas through specific project websites" (p. 140). There is also ample evidence that many learners resist e-learning options until at a more advanced stage, and they continue to value the relationships and sense of community that are more readily built through face-to-face delivery (Senn, 2008). For most staff developers, therefore, online teacher training resources need to complement, not replace, a personalized introduction to the art of teaching.

The Role of Ako Aotearoa

Improving the quality of teaching has become a high priority, both on an institutional and a national level. New Zealand's Ministry of Education established a specialist body in 2007 to do just this: Ako Aotearoa, the National Center for Tertiary Teaching and Learning Excellence. Initial funding allocated was NZ\$20 million over a five-year period, and Ako Aotearoa has in a few short years, become highly active and visible in their sponsorship of education events, such as conferences and seminars, and resulting publications; in managing the national teaching awards, scholarships and Academy program; in providing grants for publishing on good practice initiatives; and in funding research related to teaching and learning. In this latter area, their aims include building upon existing research, knowledge, and contexts; providing examples of good practice; further developing practical action-orientated suggestions for enhancing effectiveness in relation to beginning teaching and collaborative professional development; and delivering sustainable improvements to tertiary teaching (see <http://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/>). Its work traverses all parts of the higher education sector (e.g., adult and community education, institutes of technology and polytechnics, industry training organizations, private education providers, universities, wānanga [Maori universities], and workplace learning),

and it facilitates the sharing of ideas and newly acquired knowledge across the breadth of the sector.

The action research project described in this paper received two funding grants from Ako Aotearoa: first to conduct a needs analysis for novice teachers, review existing options and develop the Signposts resource; and second, one year later, to conduct a national evaluation of the resource, assessing its usefulness and current applications, and identifying strategies for its expansion and improvement. The team had also noted in conversations with Ako Aotearoa management that thus far, few of the resources available through the website had been subjected to any formal evaluation process. Therefore, an added benefit of this project was to provide a methodology which might be of interest to other teams involved in teaching and learning resource evaluation.

The Project and Project Team

The resource Signposts was developed as part of an action research cycle which encompassed two consecutive projects, described more fully in the Methodology section of this paper. Signposts comprises 10 one-page "primers" designed to support novice educators in their first few months in front of a class. Topics are therefore kept deliberately practical and "hands-on," with tips and techniques described in unambiguous language and guidelines rendered as concisely as possible. Although some links to additional resources are provided, these are supportive rather than exhaustive. Both in its first version and in the second edition produced following the evaluation, Signposts is intended to be just one tool, supplemented with articles and organization specific processes and information, and introduced as part of a professional dialogue with a manager/mentor/coach or buddy. The intention of the resource is to offer newcomers to higher education a tested and effective framework with which to begin a teaching and learning career. Contents include:

- planning to teach,
- how to get going with your class,
- engaging your students in their learning,
- classroom management,
- delivering the goods,
- the language of assessment,
- reflecting on teaching,
- knowing about and responding to difference,
- being professional, and
- literacy integration.

Signposts is freely available through Ako Aotearoa's website under a Creative Commons license (<http://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/signposts>).

A second strand to the Signposts project was an analysis of the inter-institutional collaborative process itself. The intention was not only to inform the team's own on-going collaboration during the resource development, but also to offer insights to colleagues embarking on similar projects with others outside their workplace. This parallel focus on "genuine partnerships, characterized by respectful and critical dialogue" (Gewirtz, Shapiro, Maguire, Mahony, & Cribb, 2009, p. 567) as a key criterion of a successful action research project recognizes the need to make outcomes meaningful and productive for all participants.

The authors' own organization has belonged for a number of years to the Tertiary Education Alliance (TEA), more recently the Tertiary Accord of New Zealand. Membership includes a number of similar polytechnics and institutes of technology which provide vocational training programs as well as certificates, diplomas and some degrees, providing pathways for students into university study. Historically, professional development staff developers from member institutions have worked together and shared resources and programs, albeit in an ad hoc manner. In 2008 a more structured partnership was established to develop an inter-institutional proposal for Ako Aotearoa funding. Despite different geographic locations, programs and student demographics, there was a clear common need: assisting new academic staff to meet the demands and challenges they are likely to experience during their first one to two months, particularly those incoming educators who have no previous formal teaching experience. The collegial partnership began with eight team members from three institutions, but by the evaluation phase of the project, other colleagues had expressed an interest in participating. As a consequence, the project team expanded to include staff development representatives of five institutions: Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, NorthTec, Wintec, Manukau Institute of Technology, and Waiariki. Further changes occurred as one of the original team members retired, another's job was disestablished, and a third changed roles, so the new team consisted of four members from the original project and five new members. All nine were staff developers charged with improving teaching and learning outcomes for their various institutions; five were managers of their teaching and learning centers. For most of us, conducting externally funded research and collaborating formally with colleagues from outside organizations was a very new experience.

Method

When the Signposts project was first envisaged, the project team deliberately selected an action research inquiry framework, since we wanted to be able to

monitor, scrutinize and adjust our collaboration as the project was underway. We wanted particularly to be able to respond and change direction if need be in the light of insights that emerged as we reviewed literature and reflected on data.

Action research is increasingly used by learning organizations as it becomes recognized as an approach through which teachers and teacher trainers can learn more about, and improve, their own practice (Ellis, Armstrong, & Groundwater-Smith, 2010; Piggot-Irvine, 2009). A useful and frequently cited description is offered by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), who explain that:

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. (p. 5)

Schwenger (2010) notes another strength. All too often, she says, research-informed academic development initiatives can seem unrelated to what is happening in the day-to-day work, whereas, "Action research and enquiry processes can be the vital connector between research, academic development and practices in the classroom" (p. 564).

The action research process is usually described as a cycle which allows practitioners to test ideas and concepts as they provide opportunity for feedback. There is some variation within the literature regarding terminology and the number of phases: for example, Locke and Riley (2009) discuss "problem definition, data collection, reflective analysis and planning, monitored action, [and] reflection, leading to a phase of redefinition that restarts the cycle" (p. 492), but more usually these same elements are incorporated into a simplified model, with the four phases of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Ellis et al., 2010). Each of these requires conscious, explicit, deliberate, systematic, and rigorous actions as well as careful documentation (Piggot-Irvine, 2009).

Phase One: Planning

Ethics approval was sought at each represented institution, prior to submitting a proposal to Ako Aotearoa to sponsor the research. Once this was secured, a first face-to-face meeting of the project team discussed and agreed on an overall research purpose and approach while concurrently planning for the collaboration by drawing up a set of guidelines from literature and prior experience to guide the process. There was a conscious commitment, then, to chronicle

the collaboration experience itself, alongside the research and resource development to support new tertiary teachers.

The team began with a focus on learning and teaching, the content of tertiary education, student profiles, teaching roles, teacher- and student-centered perspectives, and the attributes and skills of good teachers. Resources and readings were shared electronically and a sense of common ground established.

Next, a literature review of studies related to development, content and utilization of adult and tertiary education new tutor professional development was undertaken. In addition, more than 40 organizational websites were reviewed, followed by the elimination of guides that were specific to one topic or department (e.g., Faculty Survival Guide for BlackBoard, Your Guide to the Library). Finally, 15 were selected for inclusion in a comparison chart as part of our milestone reporting of this phase of the project. Overall, our conclusion was that tertiary institutes vary widely in the support they provide new teachers, not only in topics offered, but also in depth of information, type of support (from theory to practical), approach (e.g., workshops, CDs, online, workbooks, individual), and accessibility and timing (i.e., immediately available versus once a year). Some organizations proactively approach the teachers, while others wait for teachers to approach them. Three key findings were:

- Few institutions provide workshops or programs to new teachers before classes start.
- Few institutions provide in-depth or comprehensive information on sound pedagogical practice.
- The information which is provided is typically presented in a format that does not allow for fast retrieval or quick review.

Based on these conclusions, the team agreed that a gap in provision existed, and that a new tool was needed for beginning tertiary teachers which could provide just-in-time, concise information to support teachers in their first few months of teaching. Key topics were identified, and the format of one page, conversation-style resources was agreed.

Phase Two: Acting

The 10 topics were allocated to team members to write, with each identifying their own areas of expertise and interest. Layout, use of every-day language, and approximate length were negotiated and a timeline was set. A Moodle-based project area on the TEA website was established to post draft resources and news items,

as well as for members to participate in forums regarding feedback on each monograph. An early consensus reached through this medium was that we would focus on developing a print-based resource and that alternate delivery, such as web-based, could be revisited in an additional and subsequent project. It was also through this forum that the project team decided on a name for the resource: Signposts.

During this phase of the project, three further face-to-face meetings were held to finalize the resource itself, to complete reporting requirements for Ako Aotearoa, and to document the collaborative process. The concept of working across institutions invokes a number of potential barriers well documented in the literature, including the demands of professional roles taking precedence over the project, discrepancy in levels of management support, the logistics of geographic location, technology platforms, incompatibility of organizational structures and administrative processes, and maintaining commitment and motivation while working in isolation (Moran, 1990). The Signposts team, having identified such barriers encountered in previous studies, consciously and overtly addressed these issues in round table discussions to foster an overarching awareness of not just what we were working together to achieve, but how.

Drawing on the strength of one team member in the role of facilitator, team members completed the Wilders Collaboration Factors Inventory, a practical tool developed by a non-profit health and human services foundation to assess the success of a collaboration (Mattessich, Monsey, & Murray-Close, 2001). This inventory provides 20 indices by which to gauge participants' engagement in the collaboration. Feedback from the team indicated that responses to the inventory were helpful in terms of confirming subjective views about strengths, limitations, and future improvements. The team reviewed the mean rating for each factor and agreed with the highest rating which identified the importance of "seeing the collaboration as in their self-interest." We believe the overall success of our collaboration was captured by the 11 mean rating scores of 4 out of 5 and above. However, we also concluded that a lack of consensus over the definition of "community" (e.g., was it the collective organizations involved in the collaboration, or the staff developers' community?) impacted negatively on three factors, so that otherwise our combined score might have been even higher. The ranking relating to "cross section of members" was also considered problematic in terms of definition. In summary, the factors appeared to provide an affirmation of the important aspects of our successful collaboration, so that we felt, with a provision about the minor language issues related above, that the Wilders Collaboration Factors Inventory

constitutes an important tool in analyzing the likely success of similar collaborations within our sector. It is noteworthy, though, that we only formally tested ourselves and our collaboration on this one occasion: critical reflection on any research process is likely to suggest alternative or improved practices in some areas, and in this project, further insights might have been gleaned on how collaboration factors evolve during coalition formation and subsequent phases had we completed the inventory perhaps before, during, and after the project's lifespan.

In August 2008, final reviews of the Signposts resource were completed by Ako Aotearoa, and it was formally launched on their website for national use across the tertiary sector, publicized through the TANZ network and a presentation at an international conference. In addition, our final report contained a series of guides for future inter-institutional collaborations, also available through the Ako Aotearoa website, including

- a bibliography of literature on collaboration,
- review of the literature,
- a checklist for collaborative project planning and decision-making,
- a list of success factors for collaborative projects,
- a list of potential challenges for collaborative projects, and
- the project team's own insights and reflections.

Phase Three: Observing

Over the next year, feedback from the Ako Aotearoa website's administrator indicated that the Signposts resource had become the most downloaded document of any on the site. Informal feedback from staff developer colleagues suggested that the resource was filling the need for immediate teaching and learning tools experienced by staff new to a higher education environment. Posted comments from the website also included suggestions for further enhancements and alternative deliveries. In response to this feedback, and to formalize these observations, the team conceived the follow up project of a national evaluation of Signposts. The objective was to evaluate its usefulness and current applications, as well as identify strategies for its expansion and improvement. Since no rigorous evaluation of any resources developed under the auspices of Ako Aotearoa had so far occurred, the new project would also offer a template for critique and review.

A new project team was convened, with the number of institutions represented moving from three to

five, as described earlier. The first meeting took place in August 2009 and resulted in agreement on guidelines, format, and process of the Signposts evaluation, while reviewing the principles of collaborative good practice developed and field-tested during development of the Signposts resource. The agreed goal was to develop an e-evaluation tool for Signposts which would be available on the Ako Aotearoa website and promoted to all registered contacts as well as through direct contact with national tertiary education networks. An online survey was an expedient choice for a national survey of a relatively small community of tertiary staff developers, and through them, new tertiary teachers. As Wright (2005) notes, advantages of online survey research include "access to individuals in distant locations, the ability to reach difficult to contact participants, and the convenience of having automated data collection, which reduces researcher time and effort" (p. 2).

Members communicated electronically to develop an anonymous and confidential e-questionnaire using Survey Monkey software which would provide valid data and allow respondents to record meaningful contributions. It was piloted with three new staff and checked within each institution for usability and refinement. Following final adjustments it was made available via a link from the front page of the Ako Aotearoa website. The site administrator then attached a live link to the next two Ako Aotearoa bulletins circulated to an extensive national mailing list.

This was perhaps the most problematic phase of the entire research cycle: first, initial responses were low, although this was partly addressed through team members personally contacting other members of a national professional community of staff developers. New Zealand has eight universities and 20 polytechnics and institutes of technology, with an average of three or four staff developers each. Extending our contacts to staff developers from wānanga and private training providers adds a few more individuals, but nevertheless, we are talking about a nationwide group of between 100 and 120 members, many of whom are only part-time in this role; the active membership is probably closer to fifty. As this group represents the primary users of Signposts, members were asked to participate in the survey, as well as to raise awareness of the evaluation project within their own institutions, particularly to new staff who were the secondary target group in this evaluation. Secondly, our timing was unfortunate as it coincided with a busy period of assessment and final teaching toward the end of the semester, and data collection proved slower than had been anticipated. Then the link to the survey was inadvertently removed from the front page of Ako Aotearoa's website, but it was replaced on request. The deadline for completing the questionnaire was extended

with reminder notices issued, and by early November 2009, 40 responses had been received – more than three-quarters (31 respondents) were from polytechnics or institutes of technology. Six replies were from private training providers, two from universities, and one from an industry training organization. Given our small pool of primary contacts, the project team decided at this point that they had a sufficient sample to provide the qualitative and quantitative feedback sought.

Phase Four: Reflecting

The project team scheduled another face-to-face meeting to reflect on the survey results, once data collation, analysis and coding had been completed. Key findings included:

- Just over one-third of the respondents (37%; 14 respondents) were teaching staff, the remainder were either staff developers, managers, or people who held an associated role – resource developer, course developer, quality assurance manager, literacy and numeracy coordinator. The significance of these results to the project team lies in the verification that staff developers, or those working to assist new staff develop an effective teaching practice, are most likely to actively seek out resources which will be of use to others. It means that while the Signposts topics are designed for new educators, staff developers remain the primary target group for dissemination.
- This conclusion is further substantiated by the responses to a question about where respondents first heard about Signposts. Only five (13%) found it through the Ako Aotearoa website, confirming McKenzie et al.'s (2005) premise described earlier, but all others (39%) were introduced to the resource through staff development promotion, knowing colleagues involved in the development, from a manager, from hearing about it at a conference, or from receiving a copy in an induction pack.
- Three-quarters of participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statements that Signposts met their needs, was pitched at the right level, and had useful content for their role. However, it scored lower in its visual appeal which the team felt might indicate that some users were mistaking the idea of Signposts: that it was a concise series of tips and techniques designed to be printed off as single page guidelines rather than read from beginning to end as a single document.

- Responses to the 10 Signposts topics according to usefulness of content was positive overall, with two topics, The Language of Assessment and Literacy Integration, drawing most suggestions, including adding reference to plagiarism, copyright, diagnostic assessment, feed forward, and assessment, which is not unit standard based. TEC had launched a new Literacy Embedding Strategy since the original Signposts were developed and this needed to be highlighted. Other useful comments addressed areas of cultural interaction, lesson plans, time management, reflection and building relationships. Further suggestions included: a list of links to additional resources; examples of good teaching such as video clips; a complementary resource for teachers who have the base knowledge, but need a refresher, or extension; a new topic about e-learning and e-teaching; and a new topic about effective use of ICT (e.g., PowerPoint, YouTube, podcasts).
- Signposts was being used in a wide range of applications: as part of an initiation/induction package; in formal teacher training programs; for discussion/coaching with a manager/mentor/coach/buddy; for peer evaluation; a check-list for self-review; professional conversations in team meetings or workshops; a refresher for longer term staff; a reminder of good practice for all staff; and, in a modified form, a resource for individual organizational contexts (e.g. Christian and industry training organizations).
- Most participants wanted to see the print-medium maintained, although more than a third also liked the idea of a web-based resource with interactive and self-access exercises, podcasts, media clips and good practice exemplars.

In response, the project team drew up a schedule to identify both immediate changes and additions which could be made to the resource to widen applicability and ensure currency, as well as longer term recommendations which would require more extensive project development and/or resourcing. Following our own guidelines for successful collaborative initiatives, tasks were allocated to members according to personal preferences and professional strengths, and a timeline was agreed.

By the end of the project, the following outputs had been achieved:

- Signposts was revised and a second edition published on Ako Aotearoa's website;

- Signposts is now available in two formats: a PDF for new teachers, and a Word document to allow contextualization to each institute;
- a list of links to websites and online resources for staff developers and new teachers is now attached as an appendix;
- a new staff developer guide exists for customization and suggestions for use;
- a review of the collaboration process is available; and
- recommendations for possible future actions are provided.

Conclusion

The reporting of the two Signposts projects, that is, the resource development and its evaluation, has been arranged here under headings which indicate the four steps of the action research cycle. This format was adopted to exemplify the research method and illustrate one successful implementation. However, it must be noted that the division into four discrete phases offers a somewhat tidier picture of the process than it appeared to the project team at times during the actual process! Research in busy educational organizations is often constrained through work demands, logistics, member availability, and technology challenges, to name but a few. The commitment to an external funding body also figured in driving momentum. Inevitably there were times when the division between the phases of the research was blurred, or when some team members were working a little ahead of their colleagues. Such challenges were comparatively minor, however, and overall as a team, we felt that the research process had been a satisfying and professionally enriching experience.

The evaluation results, while not a large sample size, offered rich and relevant data which allowed us to make immediate amendments to the resource, as well as plan for future development. New suggestions, some repeated by a number of respondents, and others which were “one-offs” showing a strong bias towards a particular delivery or stance, demonstrated the importance of recognizing and questioning our own assumptions of users’ needs. Another item that the research team learned had to do with our communication with potential participant communities. The evaluation affirmed the value and contribution of Signposts as a staff development tool to support novice teachers. It is being used by staff developers and found to be useful. However, we did not manage to elicit many replies from the new teachers themselves, our survey’s second target group. This is likely because their use of Signposts is exactly as intended: a just-in-time quick guide to coping in the classroom. Wider reading and engagement in online forums promoting teaching and learning pedagogy is

probably not a priority for this group, and perhaps we needed to have canvassed their participation differently.

As a team we felt the project had enhanced our capacity and capability as staff developers. It extended our understanding of fundamental preparation for higher education teaching through sharing “tried and true” good practice resources from the literature and our own experiences. This growing confidence in skill development through working together has encouraged the team to want to continue collaborating beyond the life of this project and to set new goals for the ongoing development of Signposts as an essential resource for the sector.

A key objective of the project was to develop conceptual frameworks that could assist others involved in interinstitutional professional development initiatives in planning and decision-making. The team felt that being able to document the collaboration process alongside the resource development has meant that the success factors for collaboration identified in the process, and shared through the Ako Aotearoa network, is a key outcome of the project.

Above all, we hope that we have highlighted the need for systematic, scheduled evaluations and review of all tools like Signposts to ensure they remain useful and current. Although less than a year old, Signposts did not reflect the current/emerging practice in literacy and numeracy. The efficacy of resources or recommended practice needs to be tested in the field and adjusted to reflect feedback wherever practicable and appropriate. The project team believes that evaluation of resources and programs developed with the assistance of funding from Ako Aotearoa, and all such similar national bodies, should become expected practice. We hope that the action research cycle of resource development described here will offer one way forward to other project groups who wish to examine the usefulness and usability of their own outputs.

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JUDITH HONEYFIELD is the Academic Staff Development Advisor at Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, responsible for building professional skills and managing all aspects of staff development including induction, lecture series and seminars, and higher qualifications. Coming from a nursing background, Judith has been involved in projects with the development of midwifery courses in a Beijing University Hospital, and continues to visit and speak to forums about the success of this international collaboration. Judith also leads initiatives in staff development across New Zealand's higher education sector, such as the Signposts project described in this paper. Judith can be contacted at judith.honeyfield@boppoly.ac.nz

CATH FRASER is an educational consultant, working with a number of different organizations in New Zealand's tertiary sector. Current projects include contracted research, teaching and learning resource development, and programme documentation and review. Prior to 2012, Cath worked at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic (BoPP) in Tauranga as a Senior Academic Staff Member in Student and Staff Support Services. Her roles included initiatives to grow students' study skills, assisting staff as a Research Leader, editing in-house publications for staff writing, and co-facilitating the annual academic writing retreat. Cath's own research interests include coaching and mentoring, collaborative and interdisciplinary research, and internationalisation. Cath's e-mail is fraser.cath@gmail.com