

**Title:**                   **Using a soft systems approach in academic development: a case study of personal tutoring.**

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### **Session Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

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- Consider using a soft systems methodology ( Checkland and Poulter, 2006) to problematize a complex problem.
- Build a simple activity model for their own experience of personal tutoring.
- Make a basic evaluation of the use of SSM for academic development 'problematical situations'.

### **Session Outline**

- What is soft systems methodology (SSM)? : an outline of the steps involved.
- A case study of the use of SSM in considering the activity of 'personal tutoring' in a large metropolitan university.
- Consideration of academic developers as practitioners of SSM

### **Session Activities and Approximate Timings**

#### **90 minutes workshop**

**20 minutes:** introduction to the methodology and details of an applied case study in personal tutoring.

**1 hour:** Groups of 5 will be quickly established. Each group uses the 'problematical situation' (Checkland and Poulter, 2006) of 'personal tutoring' (if groups strongly wish to use another topic, they can, but time discussing this should be kept to a minimum). The topic 'personal tutoring' is something that most universities do to a greater or lesser extent. Its 'problematical' nature comes from disagreements around its purpose, efficacy, structure, personnel and so on. Each participant will have their own conceptualisation of the nature of this (so-called) 'problematical' situation and we will spend some time elaborating on the way that this methodology can help to focus and achieve clarity. For

example, a system of 'personal tutoring' may be considered to be the answer to an ill-defined or multi-faceted problem that requires more elaboration before solutions can be suggested.

Strict timings within the hour (10 mins per stage) to encourage groups of participants to go through all steps of the methodology. SSM is very flexible insofar as it can be done in an hour, or over years. Some handouts re: methodology will be provided to aid the process. We will aim to give the participants a concise flavour of how to use this methodology and hope to generate ideas about its future use.

**10 minutes plenary and conclusions:** here we will encourage participants to feedback on their views re: potential practicality and usefulness that they perceive in this methodology for use by academic developers. We will also consider the impact of this process at Manchester Met, including the 'political' and 'social' aspects as embraced by this methodology.

## References

***Checkland P., and Poulter, J. (2006) Learning for Action: A short definitive account of Soft Systems Methodology and its use for practitioners, teachers, and students. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.***