Title: **What's the point of probation?**

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Abstract:

Most universities have policies relating to initial professional development for new academics, but this proposal demonstrates how such policies are enacted in a less than systematic way, possibly side-lining academic values and often frustrating all concerned.

SEDA Values

Indicate which SEDA Values may be relevant to your proposal:

An understanding of how people learn		Scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice	✔
Working and developing learning communities		Working effectively with diversity and promoting inclusivity	
Continuing reflection on professional practice	✔	Developing people and processes	✔

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:
- Understand three purposes of the academic probation period;
- Discuss the locus of control in their institutions of each of these purposes;
- Consider what might be changing in light of recent policy changes.

Session Outline

The most commonly articulated demand of the academic probationary period in many universities is the need to acquire a teaching qualification (Gosling, 2010). Policies are often in place – for probation and promotion purposes – that give value to teaching well, but it is not always clear how such institutional rhetoric is enacted, or why it exists. In this discussion paper, three conflicting purposes for academic probation will be outlined: the credentialing argument; the enculturation argument; and the performative argument. In the first and third of these positions at least, explicit compliance with institutional norms could be expected, and these may sometimes be felt to run counter to certain academic values (Skelton, 2012).

Evidence from probationers, however, suggests that whilst the official rhetoric exists, enactment *within* institutions is variable (variation between institutions would, of course, be expected). An unproblematised conflation of all three purposes appears to be at work, and

establishing responsibility is not clear cut. For example, in a credentialing approach to probation, ownership of the teaching qualification would logically fall to the educational development unit; many educational developers focus on the development of professional values with their new colleagues. The locus of control for the other two purposes is somewhat more opaque. SEDA's value of 'developing people and processes' clearly implies that all should be treated fairly but findings from this research leads to two key questions for educational developers: to what extent are we aware of the variable purposes and practices within our institutions? How much of this process can we contribute to or control?

Archer's (1995) morphogenetic cycle provides a useful lens on why the conflicting purposes of academic probation continue (in contrast with now more formalised student experience arrangements). This situation impacts on probationers as they seek to establish effective academic identities, and such friction may entail compromise in individuals' value positions (Skelton, 2012). As HESA (2012) now begins to collect data on teaching qualifications, and the new fees regime takes hold in England, a further discussion point will focus on what *could*, and what *should*, change regarding probation and PGCerts.

Session Activities

This session will be highly interactive. Initially, the audience will be asked to problematise the session topic via the prompt:

- How is probation enacted within your institution?

I will outline the three conflicting purposes of probation drawn from recent research, and present briefly Archer's model of cultural change/stasis. Two further prompts will govern the discussion activity that will form the bulk of the session:

- How much of the probation process are we aware of, and what is the role of the PGCert within this process?
- What can, and what should, change to support equitable probationary processes and the development of sound values within new lecturers?

A final plenary section will highlight good practices that support the SEDA values, and/or provide action points for the audience to consider in relation to their roles and institutions.

References

Archer, M. (1995). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gosling, D. (2010). Is your Pg Cert compulsory for new staff? A summary of responses from the SEDA JISCMail list.   Retrieved 8 February 2010, from http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/SEDA.html

HESA (2012). Academic teaching qualification. Available from http://www.hesa.ac.uk/component/option,com_studrec/task,show_file/Itemid,233/mnl,12025/href,a%5E_%5Eactchqual.html/ [accessed 15 July 2012].

Skelton, A. (2012). Value conflicts in higher education teaching. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17 (3), 257-268.