The Role of the Critical Friend in Approval and Review

In October 2010, the university's Learning and Quality Committee endorsed a proposal to adopt a critical friend model to support new Quality Assurance regulations governing programme approval and review.

What is a critical friend?

The critical friend encourages interactions combining unconditional support with unconditional critique. Critical friends are independent, experienced and informed in the area of the work. They are well networked and generous in sharing contacts and information, and able to help programme teams think strategically about meeting their aims with a view to achieving success and sustainability.

How can the EDU Critical Friend help you?

When preparing for approval (new programme) or review (existing programme), you and your team may have specific developmental needs. For example, significant changes in programme leadership and composition, and experience of the staff teams involved may have occurred since the previous review. Alternatively, you may be preparing to work with a new or inexperienced team in the design of a new approved programme. Furthermore, following the launch of the Greenwich Graduate Initiative, programme designs are now required to consider new opportunities to develop specific graduate attributes. The Educational Development Unit (EDU) are here to help.

The role of the critical friend is to act as the link facilitator to support you, and your team, in friendly critical analysis and reflection. They will help you to think honestly about the development process, the roles that each team will need, what CPD is required and, where possible, supply the necessary resources. A critical friend is not there to formally evaluate or report, and teams should aim for high degrees of confidentiality. The programme team and the critical friend share a common goal – producing an excellent programme and this is best achieved through trust and mutual respect. To help you succeed, the critical friend may offer advice and suggestions about designs, and enhanced procedures, but they are not there to take decisions. Ultimately, the programme team will have to defend their design and take credit, or otherwise, for the result. The effectiveness of a critical friend is measured by their influence on the developmental process not the final outcome.

Critical friends will:
• Support programme development by balancing an informal approach, with a critical eye;
• Facilitate friendly, honest and critical analysis amongst the project team;
• Maintain confidentiality, frankness, sensitivity and independence;
• Provide advice and practical suggestions and set up developmental opportunities.
Critical friends do not:
• Evaluate, mentor or act as a consultant;
• Make decisions for the project team;
• Report formally to project/programme stakeholders;
• Negotiate on behalf of the project or mediate where differences of opinion occur.

References:

(1) Costa, A. and Kallick, B.(1993) "Through the Lens of a Critical Friend". Educational Leadership 51(2) 49-51. (2) Van der Velden, G., Jameson, J., Hartley, P., Chatterton, P (2009), Critical Friends Effective Practice Guidelines , JISC Users and Innovation Programme.