The Importance of Institutional Knowledge in Driving Change:

THE CASE OF ACADEMIC MENTORING

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Presentation outline

- Introduction

- Context & relevance of academic mentoring

- Our plan & our practice

- Lessons & challenges
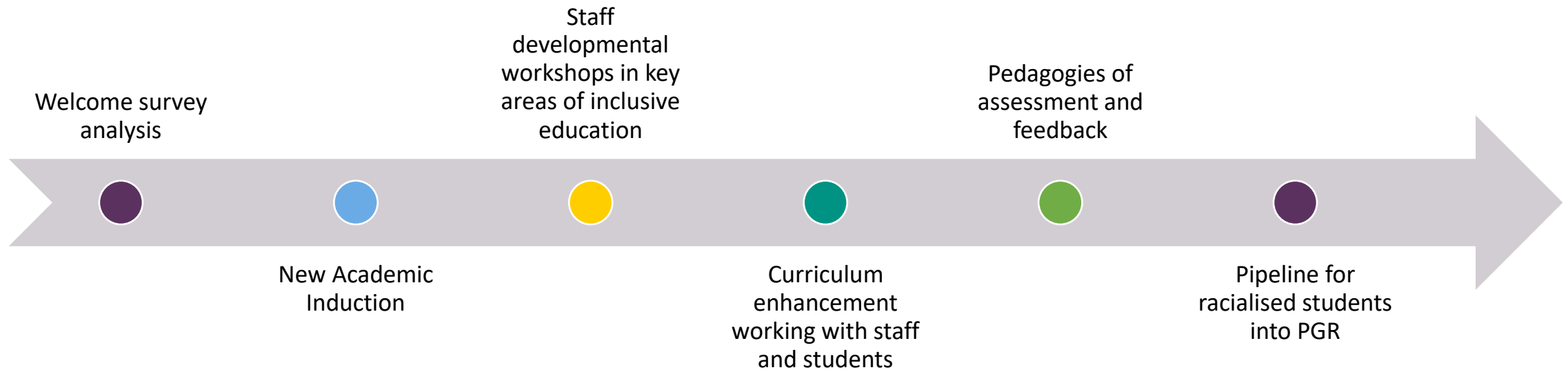
- Final reflections and questions

Introduction

The Inclusive Education Team develops research, training and resources across five areas of work:

1. Academic Mentoring
2. Curriculum Enhancement
3. Inclusive Pedagogies
4. Developing Higher Education Identities
5. Anti-Racism

We have developed a series of activities to **improve academic support** and **strengthen inclusive educational practices** within LSE.

We work across the student journey

Welcome survey analysis

New Academic Induction

Staff developmental workshops in key areas of inclusive education

Curriculum enhancement working with staff and students

Pedagogies of assessment and feedback

Pipeline for racialised students into PGR

Context and Relevance

Inclusive Education and Academic Mentoring*

Academic mentoring is an integral part of education at LSE and critical to building an inclusive scholarly community at the School for everyone. It is also part of the <u>LSE 2030 Strategy</u>, the <u>Inclusive Education Action Plan</u>, and the <u>Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework</u>.

* Academic Mentoring is also known as personal tutoring in other HEIs

For the Inclusive Education Team, **Academic Mentoring is** building scholarly partnerships based on shared purpose and understanding.

Relevance of the practice

1. Part of our **academic code** – institutional commitment.
2. Academic mentoring practices are part of the new **APP**.
3. Institutional experience as a Russel Group university having an increasingly diverse and international student body.

Relevance of academic mentoring in creating equitable outcomes and experiences for students:

- The practice of academic mentoring or personal tutoring has the potential to significantly enhance students' overall experience (Bernier, Larose, & Soucy, 2005).
- Academic mentoring can foster a sense of belonging within the institution and the discipline.
- Academic mentors play a crucial role in helping students acquire and build academic and social capital (Smith, 2007).
- Academic mentors also function as cultural guides and effective mediators.
- Academic mentors are expected to have a comprehensive understanding of students' educational journeys and to use that knowledge to improve their teaching practices.

Our challenge: An intricate *web of significance**

- There was a generalised sense that departments were not providing consistent support to all their students.
- Lack of understanding of the role from both academics and students.
- Resistance from some academics to engage or discuss issues related to students' personal and mental well-being.
- Lack of interest from students to engage with their academic mentors (Larose et al.,2009).
- Lack of data collection and feedback from departments, in tandem with no systems in place or School requirements to implement these actions.

*Tierney and Landford, 2018

Our Plan and Our Practice

Initial diagnosis

- Departments conduct informal evaluations of their practice and adjust it accordingly when they recognise the importance of mentoring.
- However, departments often lack the resources or the capacity to systematically and periodically evaluate their practices.
- Differences between what we claim to offer and what students actually experience during their studies, leading to institutional challenges.
- A data-driven approach can inform policymaking, bridge the knowledge gap and ensure equitable mentoring experiences.

Our approach

- Reviewing what had been produced before and determining what else we needed to know.
- Awareness of our resources – time, people, availability.
- Clarity on the issues we wanted to address and our position within the institution.
- Planning our strategy, considering possible future adjustments.

Our Framework: Institutional Research

- We understand institutional research as a set of activities that support institutional planning, policy formation, and decision-making (Saupe, 1990).

- Our goal was to gather sufficient institutional knowledge to better guide the practice of academic mentoring and offer effective support to academics, departments, and students.
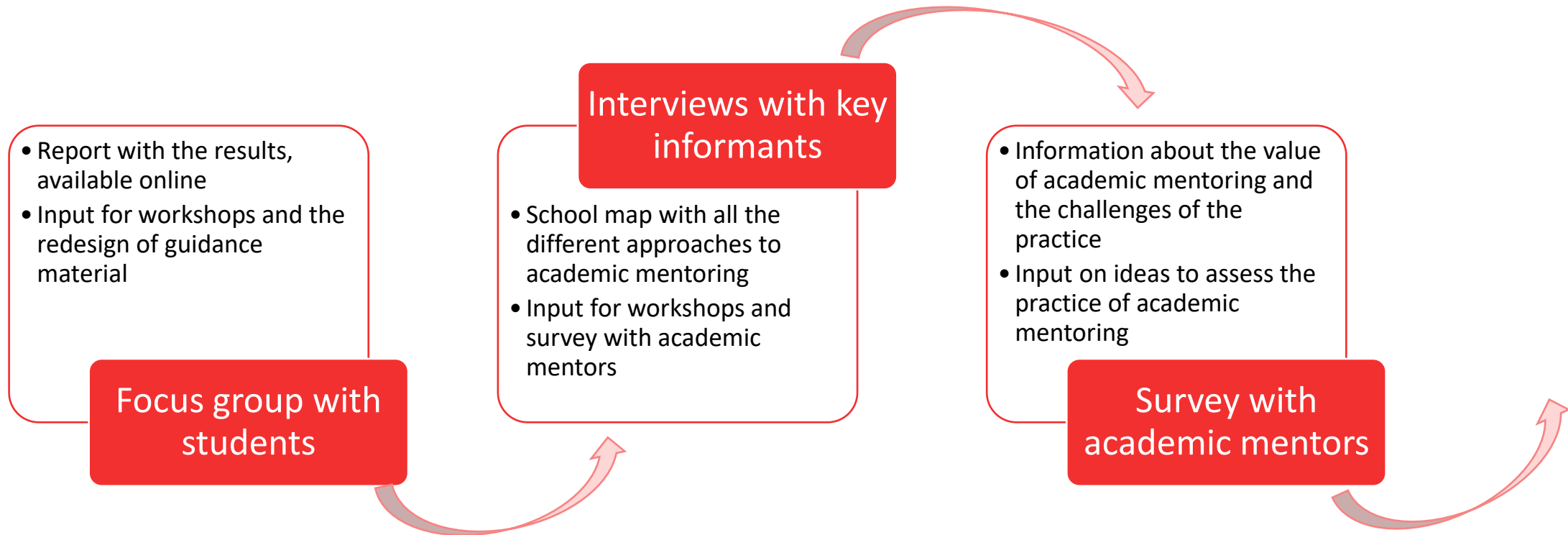
Why Institutional Research?

- To have an impact on institutional quality.
- To contribute to the effective attainment of purposes.
- To use resources efficiently.
- To promote systems of accountability to ensure students are receiving good quality academic mentoring.
- To provide evidence-based suggestions and solutions to drive institutional change (Delaney, 1997 and Volkwein, 2008).
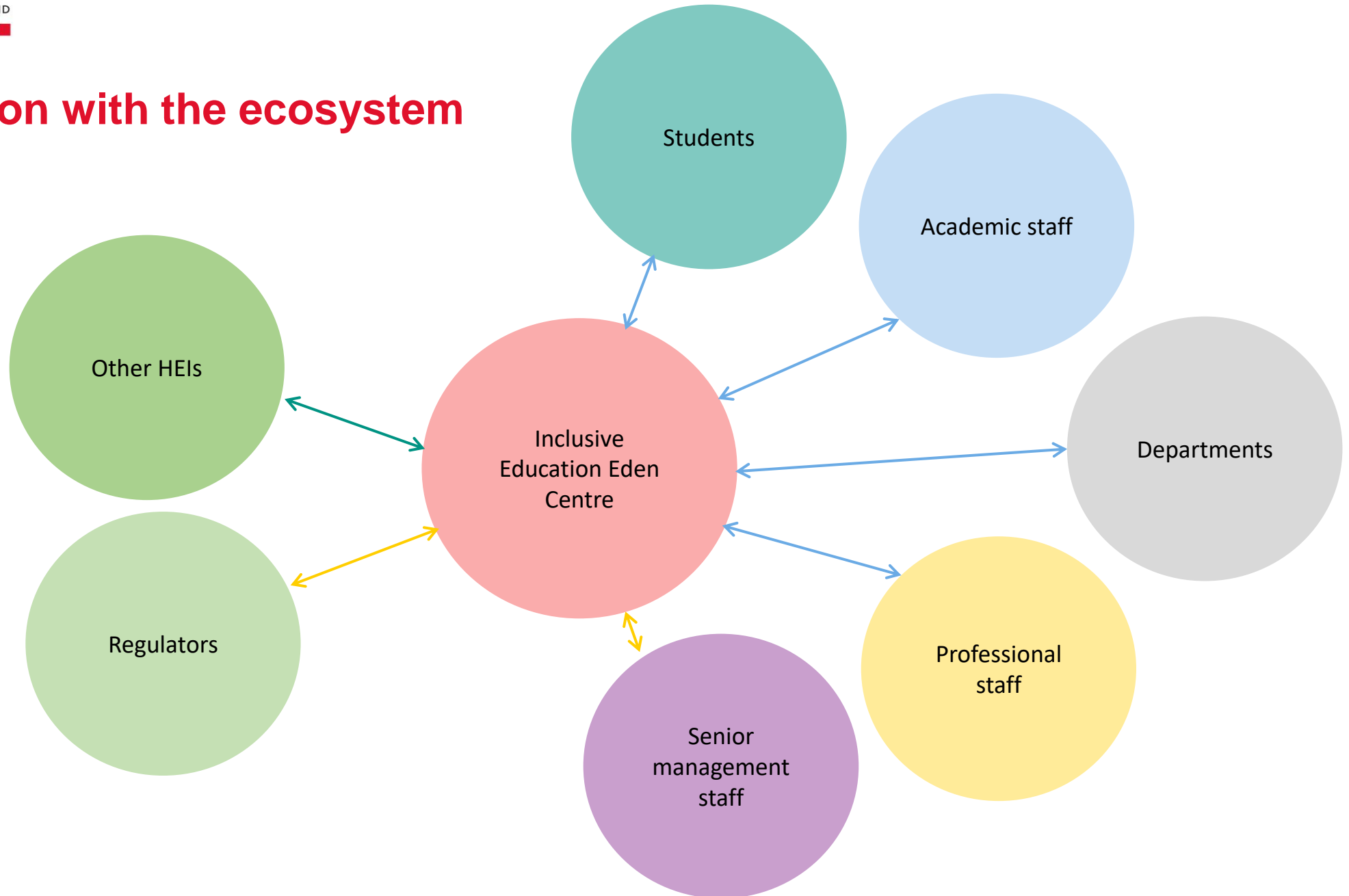
Our strategy

Data collection: Our aim was to inform the School's practices regarding the implementation of academic mentoring and understand the motivations and associations to the practice from different stakeholders.

Focus group with students
- Report with the results, available online
- Input for workshops and the redesign of guidance material

Interviews with key informants
- School map with all the different approaches to academic mentoring
- Input for workshops and survey with academic mentors

Survey with academic mentors
- Information about the value of academic mentoring and the challenges of the practice
- Input on ideas to assess the practice of academic mentoring

Articulation with the ecosystem

Our strategy

Actions taken

- Redesign of our workshops
- Strengthened our Community of Practice
- Generated more resources: audiovisual and written
- Joined UKAT to access expertise from the sector
- Established connections with other universities with similar profiles to LSE to generate resources and activities together.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Challenges

- Our role as a "third party" – authority and positionality.
- Going beyond a "service-model" approach due to the nature of our interlocutors.
- Producing robust data to drive institutional change via institutional research.
- Awareness of the resources available and the scope of our interventions and data collection.
- Development of strategies to effectively communicate our results to different audiences.
- Promotion of systems that consistently support an evidence-based approach.

Lessons learned

- To produce annual institutional research, we need institutional commitment from senior management.

- Some of the shifts we have activated can seem subtle but meaningful – community of practice, initiating conversations about academic mentoring with students and departments.

- We play a key role in promoting the importance of academic mentoring as an institutional strategy for student success.

- We need to be mindful of the following aspects:

  - Our hierarchical position within the institution and what can we promote, suggest, and monitor.

  - Our resources are key for planning and how ambitious we can be.

  - Our position as a third party overseeing academic mentoring rather than directly implementing it.

Final reflections

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- Importance of institutional research as a mechanism to inform practice and drive change.

- To effectively establish organisational intelligence, institutional researchers must be familiar with procedures, timings, organisational structures, access to institutional data, as well as technical and analytical expertise.

- Importance of shifting from reporting to researching and communicating the results to different audiences with different purposes. This enables the knowledge produced to generate actions promoted by leadership teams and embraced by different actors within the institution.

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