

Gateway for the gifted

The original talented and gifted project at Warwick University was groundbreaking but now, with a new global remit, it is to become even more radical, as Robin Healey discovers

When, around 18 months ago I discovered that IGGY – the International Gateway for Gifted Youth at Warwick University – was looking for a new director, I didn't fully realise the direction in which this organisation for gifted children, which some older Mensans may know as NAGTY, was planning to move. When I recently arrived to interview its newly appointed Academic Director, Adam Boddison, I found that not only did IGGY have a new director, but that it had moved to a swanky new HQ in Senate House, at the heart of the campus, just across the road from the coffee shop and adjoining the well-known Arts Centre. When I arrived, my host was waiting to greet me, and after grabbing a coffee and walking back to Senate House, I hardly had time to take in my surroundings... but I did notice that there were no gifted youth to be seen and that the offices seemed full of files and computer equipment. Dr Boddison, who I knew was a mathematician with a strong record of developing innovative projects in schools, beamed in a way that academic mathematicians rarely, if ever, do. Also, I expected creased corduroy and steels specs, but instead got a sharp suit, hair cropped close to the scalp and a strong Midland accent. This academic looked more like a senior sales executive which, in some ways, he turns out to be.

So what was going on? Where were the classrooms? Boddison put me in the picture immediately. IGGY had changed radically, he announced. There were no summer schools planned here for gifted children from around the world – for now at least. In 2011 it had been decided that IGGY was to become a global online community. It was now an entirely online social network. I asked why the emphasis had changed so dramatically.

"I came away from a recent European Conference on High Ability with the overwhelming idea that researchers in the field were now looking at what is happening online. As we are a non-profit making organisation, going online it makes sense to us financially, but

the main reason for switching is that the reach is so much greater. With NAGTY you had these really bright students but these might be the only ones in their school, which perpetuates their feelings of isolation. You could arrange a few one-to-one meetings, but what was going to happen the rest of the time? The online approach, if it is done right, can be really powerful. A website is interactive. Students can log on and find friends. They can work in competition or in collaboration with one other. Because it is global it is accessible any time of day or night. I don't think there is anything like the new IGGY in the world."

The operation was launched on October 15 this year with the intention of recruiting 50,000 students by the end of 2015. And it's not a case of signing people up and leaving them to it, says Boddison. "It's important that there are active members, although it's really entirely up to the

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students. After all, when you move from school to university it's all about independent learning and critical thinking. We see IGGY as a sort of apprenticeship to the academic world. And I feel we have to give our students the autonomy that operates at University. But the subscription fee obviously encourages participation. And when people see the quality of what we are offering they will continue to engage.

"We are dealing with students aged 13 – 18. They nominate themselves with support from parents and teachers. We don't use an IQ test but instead potential members have to obtain the consent of their parents and then the application goes to the school who have to certify that the candidate has performed in the top five per cent of the class and will benefit from membership. I feel that teachers are always best placed to make the recommendation. Of course, there may be a

situation where the teacher has endorsed the application but when it comes to the crunch the student cannot cope with the programme because the academic level is too high. However, I feel that there is a sort of self-regulation whereby a student who cannot cope initially will not want to stay the course. Where a student appears to be gifted but doesn't demonstrate his giftedness at school for whatever reasons, we give him membership on a trial basis and this gives them a chance to show what they can do.

"If we are satisfied that they are interacting with fellow students on the same intellectual level, that's fine. If they don't we will have to review the situation."

I was curious as to why IGGY didn't select mainly on IQ. Boddison explained. "I am a bit sceptical about pronouncements that say that [anyone with an IQ of, say, 185, is ipso facto gifted. High performances in formal exams can be equally misleading. We've found that academic performance develops over time. If, at the admissions stage, a student is assessed in the top 15 per cent rather than the top five per cent they will tend to raise their game in class. So if you fail to get the required result in one year you are allowed to enter again the following year.

"We believe that giftedness can be grown. Students are not necessarily born with academic gifts. Having said that, where, for instance, there is a home student who has no teacher and the family cannot afford an educational psychologist, then we may ask the student to submit a portfolio of work which could include an IQ test.

"We do provide some guidance to parents as to what the gifted student may look like, which may include individual high performance on SATS, but none of these indicators of giftedness are sufficient indicators taken alone. There is always going to be a human element in the judgment, and this is where the teacher's role comes in.

"Also, we tend to differentiate between talents, which may include a talent for art or music, and academic gifts. I know Joan Freeman's argument regarding this dichotomy. She doesn't distinguish between these two classifications, but we do focus on the academically gifted.



“We may identify talents later on, but at the moment we are concentrating on academic performance, partly because we haven’t got the resources to do anything else.

“Although we have been up and going for a few weeks we are still in the process of signing up students, which is not a quick process, as there are safeguards that have to be observed. For instance, we need to verify the students’ identity. Are they who they say they are; are they really students aged 13 – 18 in particular schools. All this is important. I’d rather take time over this than bash out 100,000 members in a week and make mistakes.

“We are working with Kids OK online (KOKO), who are developing an advanced word filter which prevents any obscene or untoward material getting through.

“A community manager will be continuously watching what goes on in the forums. There are student mentors and moderators working actively in the online communities ensuring that the students are properly protected. We want this to be an independent network, otherwise we might as well do the whole project on an existing social network like Facebook, which wouldn’t, in any case, have the quality of academic content. Nor, of course would it be safe.”

I asked Boddison about the demographic make up of the student body. “Students are predominantly from the UK, because most of the pilot students are from this country as are those transferring from the old IGGY but we are working hard on increasing the numbers of students from overseas. Warwick University has a programme to go into African townships and identify gifted students.

“For example, we are actively targeting schools in Singapore and Brunei, and also Pakistan. We have a sales and marketing team which is placing information in key locations abroad – so if you were to ask me in six months time I would be able to give you a clearer idea of what percentage students come from overseas. When students leave the programme at 18 there are opportunities for them to take part, usually as mentors, and we welcome this involvement”

Did Boddison envisage any formal assessments for students?

"We are not planning to test our students, nor will we ask for reports, but if students wish to assemble portfolios of their work for examination we have the academics and peers who will assess these and award gold, bronze or silver awards, but the onus is entirely upon the student. The main aim is to get students to collaborate with students they might not otherwise encounter, but who have similar intellectual interests.

"For instance, there might be one student who would like to work with another on, say, a problem in nuclear physics; but equally that same student might wish to contact another who shares an interest in a philosophical problem.

"Students are free to provide as little or as much about themselves as they wish. They can submit a profile on which they can place photographs or information about themselves – it's up to them. They can make their work available to other students, or indeed to others outside the programme, or they can keep it all to themselves. The onus really is down to the student, but I believe the more they put in the more they will get out.

"As far as subjects go, with the various pilot schemes we are operating within schools we get information on what subjects students may wish to include in the programme, what level of interaction they want and what they require from academics and student mentors. At this very early stage in the development of the programme we are reasonably fluid. There are opportunities now to change aspects of the programme and as we progress we will find that the needs of students will change. We must react to that or we won't survive."

And what academic subjects were part of the programme?

"For the moment we are concentrating on Maths, Science, History, Politics and Creative Writing. Some subjects, like maths, are invariably popular with gifted students. Others, like politics, lend themselves particularly well to online discussion. And we felt that creative writing would offer an outlet for the students to express their creative ideas."

Academics were clearly an important part of the programme, but what was their role?

"Primarily they are content providers. These may be academic experts in their chosen field who can communicate their discipline to younger non-experts, or they may be from outside the academic world. So, for instance, if the subject was history someone from the British Museum may want to contribute content. If the field was science and one of the debates was the very topical energy debate, we would presume that



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Dr Adam Boddison, pictured

any bright student would be already aware of the various disadvantages of nuclear, fossil and wind energy. It would then be the academic's job to ask students what other sources might work better. Once the debate had begun this academic might ask students questions – have you thought of this, have you considered that, and so on.

"If the debate went off at a tangent from science towards say, ethics, the academic might ask students if they'd like to join another discussion group with an emphasis on philosophy. So a typical academic would have triple roles – as content provider, as an assessor of quality in debate and as guide to alternate debates. At the one end there will be matter which could be debated quickly, and at the other end more chunky content which will involve deeper commitment and longer, more detailed debate. But there would be no artificial glass ceiling on commitment to a debate.

"A student could leave it and return to it later if they chose. It's all above self-determination and of independent learning. It's about students being sufficiently interested in a subject to discuss it. If too many students leave the debate it's because of two things; the content is not good

enough and therefore needs to be modified or particular students want to abandon it for whatever reasons. But I feel that if we can get the content sufficiently engaging students won't want to leave."

So how much would all this cost a student? There is a subscription fee of £120 a year for UK students and £200 for those from overseas. "Membership is free to gifted children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We want to make the course affordable and we feel that £10 for a month is comparable to what someone might pay for a mobile phone contract. We hope that parents regard the fee as an investment into their child's education."

And how did Boddison see the future for IGGY?

"Much depends on our finance. IGGY is presently funded by the University, which will remain its main source of income up to the point when the number of students will be sufficient to support it. Remember, it's a not for profit organisation which nonetheless needs to be supported financially. In time we will bring in commercial organisations to support particular areas, but naturally these would be organisations with certain values.

"But as we see it, when companies see what we are achieving they will want to involve themselves in the future success of IGGY. For instance, in the field of mathematics, which is my special area, we hope to attract interest from a broad variety of sponsors, including individuals, some of whom may be gifted mathematicians themselves.

"I feel that if we don't help these gifted children to realise their full potential, then who are the people who are going to run the country and make the big breakthroughs in science, technology and the arts? I am not saying that all those movers and shakers will come from the gifted community, but I feel that a significant number will do. At the moment everything is at an early stage. We'd like you to come back to us in about six months time and we will have a clearer picture."

FURTHER INFORMATION

See the IGGY website at www.iggy.net/

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Is this a good way for talented and gifted students to work? Write to editor Brian Page with your views and experiences. E-mail him at B.Page@btinternet.com