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HERDSA President's Address

Are we there yet? A critical reflection on higher education academic development

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The changing nature of university work has increased the opportunities and need for academic developers. However, there is a shortage of people to undertake these roles, allied with some uncertainty as to how they are judged and valued. There are some clear tensions that need to be explored and addressed if the field of academic development is to meet the real needs of the sector. This address will explore some of those tensions, particularly with respect to defining what we mean by "academic" development, and how universities are structuring our development agencies. The address will explore the mechanisms by which we prepare academic developers (and academics) and will suggest that the need for more rigorous development of our developers and better clarity as to their functions is necessary.

Keywords: academic development; higher education development; career management; professional development

The last few years have seen a vast amount of progress in Australia and New Zealand as funds and focus has been directed toward academic development. In New Zealand, the establishment of the *Ako Aotearoa: National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence* (<http://www.nctte.co.nz/home.php>), consolidation of a national research assessment strategy and a very active teaching community have all contributed to increased recognition of the critical role that academics fill in higher and tertiary education. In Australia the focus has been more heavily influenced by the various activities of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (<http://www.carrickinstitute.edu.au/>). The recognition of outstanding teaching and learning scholars and practitioners, the enormous flurry of research projects stemming from Carrick grants and the growth in discussions of how people can share their knowledge all point to more concern for enabling teaching and learning more fully. At the same time, Australia is poised to integrate its research quality framework, which will recognise the collective efforts and impacts of researchers thereby adding another layer of complexity on the academic enterprise.

In tandem with these national agendas has come the pressure on universities to improve their teaching quality. In Australia this has been partially fuelled by the allocation of significant resources to universities based on the Teaching and Learning Performance Fund, which recognises universities that are performing well on teaching outcome measures. Government

concern for efficiency and effectiveness (particularly in Australia) is also evident in the policy and funding initiatives that are actively supported.

As both governments and universities review their strategies to promote effective academic work, it is timely to review how academic development is placed to assist these high priority areas, and how we might better enable further development of our university communities. Four issues are evident: first, the degree to which our concept of academic development is matching the evolving higher education context; second, the ways in which we are preparing academic developers, third, how universities are assisting the process of academic development, and finally, the ways in which we might commence the process of professionalisation of academic development.

Defining academic development

The concept of being an academic revolves around two complementary skill sets: the process of teaching and the process of researching. For some academics, one of these foci may be much further emphasised than the other, although for many academics, there is a necessity to balance the two pursuits. The growth in teaching and learning development has stemmed from the recognition that it is as important as research, and that academics require guidance in building their teaching and learning capabilities. The recognition of this critical facet of higher education process has generated considerable research and scholarship across the international community, resulting in a well-articulated teaching and learning framework on which academic development strongly draws.

Most universities now offer an introductory teaching development programme to guide academics toward a pedagogical framework and some practical instructional processes that enable a quality learning experience for their students. Their programmes of study may comprise one semester or several semesters of part-time study, with some universities offering a formal qualification while others see their support as an intensive orientation. There has been considerable focus on the design and presentation of these programmes. In Australia, for example, the annual meeting of the Foundations of Teaching and Learning developers has been highly successful and has now resulted in some funding from the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

In the case of research, most academics are prepared through their programme of postgraduate study where they acquire considerable in-depth research skills relating to research design, analysis and publication. The apprenticeship model which operates is well suited to these complex skills, although the US model which incorporates structured as well as individualised learning is gaining currency as time becomes more restrictive for those undertaking doctorates. Like the foundational teaching and learning programmes, doctoral programmes assist new academics to develop a basic understanding of the capabilities that will be applied in their work within university settings.

From these two different perspectives, it would be easy to argue that we have sufficiently framed our support for academics. After all, this framework has been employed across Australia and New Zealand for some years, and has generally been regarded as sufficient for most universities. In essence, it could be argued that we have settled for a definition that largely focuses on academic development as *preparatory support for academics who wish to develop their work-related skills and capabilities to enable successful entry into academic roles.*

While this has worked well for higher education to date, there are indications that this focus on career entry support is insufficient to meet the sector's challenges. It is time to redefine academic development.

Redefining academic development

There is increasing support for envisaging academic careers as transitional processes where new skills and capabilities must be acquired as new and more complex roles are assumed (Akerlind, 2005; Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1998). As academics move through their careers they assume many different roles and assume higher level responsibilities. Recent research suggests that academics experience at least three career phases: the early career academic period in which a range of work-related capabilities are acquired and applied (Brew & Boud, 1996); a mid-career component where the individual assumes greater responsibilities for project, curriculum (Toohey, 2002), team and organisational outcomes; and a senior leadership role in which the individual has responsibility for major complex portfolios, such as a discipline, department, programme of study or research centre. An early career academic therefore has very different development needs to someone who has moved into leadership roles or who manages large scale curriculum or research projects. At present academic development is primarily focused on that early career phase, that is, establishing foundational skills to enable successful entry into academic work. We see this operating in both teaching and research.

However, there is evidence of a growing realisation that academics need more support to meet the burgeoning expectations of students and the wider community (Gare, 2003). The Carrick Institute leadership research projects, for example, will be generating considerable knowledge about teaching leadership and the capabilities that those in senior roles need to acquire. This knowledge will add considerably to our existing understanding of academic leadership. The research will complement the well established general body of knowledge on leadership that has been accumulated. However, the process of linking these theoretical constructs to institutional strategy and academic career management still requires more consideration (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2003).

Similarly, the formative work that is being undertaken with respect to research leadership is also growing rapidly, both in Australia and abroad. In the UK the concept of academic leadership has already extended to incorporate research leadership, and in Australia many of the leading universities are rapidly focusing on researcher capacity building (e.g. Emerging research leaders' conference, 2006). The issues have been scoped and are being opened for more intensive debate as the stakes for research grow more challenging (Frazer, 2006).

Middlescence is an emerging dilemma across the world (Morison, Erickson & Dychtwald, 2006). Internationally there has been little focus as yet on the challenges for mid-career academics as they transition from individual teachers and researchers to managing portfolios relating to curriculum, teaching team or research project oversight. Academics may also experience the need to re-establish or renew their teaching or research repertoires (McGrail, Rickard & Jones, 2006; Moodie, 2004).

They are also encountering increased expectations with regard to their leadership of people and strategic projects, and management of resources, time, projects and outcomes. A particular feature of these more senior roles is the complexity of those responsibilities. For example, there can be high interdependency between the individual's work and that of others;

the paths of action may be highly influenced by sequential outcomes from earlier stages, and the solutions may require consultation, research and careful consideration of the organisational context and strategic directions. The assumption of more senior roles is contingent on the development of new skills, insights and capabilities and a capacity to make good judgements in complex and sometimes politicised settings. At the mid-career stage many academics may also perceive a need to review their career options and to reflect on their priorities and directions.

Academic development has the potential to make a major difference to newly employed academics (Trowler and Knight, 2000). The growing international focus on academic leadership, curriculum reform and researcher capabilities (Barnett, 2005; Brew, 1999) suggests that it is time to reconceptualise the scope of academic development to be more inclusive. A model of academic development that recognises the different career phases of academics and integrates more intensive support for their progressive needs better reflects our highly pressured academic contexts (Houston, Meyer & Paewai, 2006). It also needs to include a focus on both research and teaching – a more accurate reflection of the academic function. This expanded support could make a substantial difference to the effectiveness of academic staff and their understanding of the evolving context in which they work.

Enabling academic developers

If our expectations of academic development expand to include research, teaching and leadership and management, there will be a concomitant growth in expectations of our academic developers. This raises a very important question: are academic developers equipped to meet those challenges? And a second question is also evident: Where does the expertise in supporting this expanded suite of academic work exist within universities?

Let us think about the skill sets that academic developers currently bring to their role. In many cases universities are attracting people into their academic development units from existing academics who are passionate about teaching and learning. While the catchment can be highly beneficial in drawing in talented teachers, it may also mean that their professional grounding as *developers* is less fully developed with respect to how best to work with *colleagues* rather than students. An examination of the services in these agencies affirms that most are strongly focused on foundational teaching programmes and the encouragement of communities of practice (e.g. Booth & Anderberg, 2005). Academic developers may also come from a discipline background which is not related to higher education development. Fortunately, there is a sound teaching capability framework that guides developers in their work, although the more senior teaching leadership facets are still under construction.

Higher education communities are also growing more conscious of the need to assist their researcher development (Delamont & Atkinson, 2004). As yet, research leadership and management are less clearly defined as a set of capabilities, although a DEST funded Australian project is addressing this issue with respect to project, team and resource leadership and management. There is patchy evidence of programmes being offered, particularly in research-intensive universities, however the focus is quite varied and highly dependent on the personal influence of the developers. In many cases, these programmes are conducted through human resource areas or through other service areas. In many instances there are different agencies addressing different components of researcher development. Research service areas, for example, provide support relating to grantsmanship, while research supervision strategies may be assisted through the postgraduate student office and

human resource or academic development groups focus on broader research leadership capabilities.

Leadership and management is the third platform on which academic development will increasingly operate. Universities have devoted considerable resources and focus on encouraging leadership capabilities across staff who hold formal leadership roles. There is considerable development expertise – often within human resource departments – where an understanding of leadership principles, theory and practice has informed the professional roles of human resource developers. As our understanding of research and teaching leadership and management expands, it behoves us to explore how these spheres intersect and interact with each other.

Thus, academic development faces some new and exciting challenges as our understanding of higher education development evolves. The existing focus on foundational teaching and learning will need to more fully encompass the depth and breadth of academic work as we identify the relevant capabilities that should be nurtured and supported. A direct implication of this expanded focus relates to how we define academic development. Our previous definitions will come under increasing scrutiny as higher education teachers, researchers and leaders seek an expanded range of developmental support to meet the growing challenges of working in academe.

The redefinition of academic development to draw in research, teaching leadership and management also has other likely implications. For example, leadership and management programmes commonly draw on experiential learning, mentorship, shadowing, coaching, action learning and a myriad of very successful strategies. Are our academic developers sufficiently skilled in more sophisticated adult learning and facilitative strategies (Brockbank & Gill, 1998)? Are there different models of service provision which build a more consultative and collaborative client-centred focus (Van Note Chism, 2004)? Should academic development focus more intensively on just-in-time support for those in academic leadership roles (Brandenburg & Ellinger, 2003)? Do we yet have sufficient understanding of higher education development pedagogy and indicators of success (Bothell & Henderson, 2004; Milloy & Brooke, 2004)? How do we know that people successfully transfer their learning back into their academic practice?

We could move further into this exploration and review our role as community knowledge brokers. Knowledge management is gaining increasing recognition as a mechanism for enabling rapid growth through peer mentoring and learning (Debowski, 2006). However, in busy and pressured communities there is a need to facilitate the communities and build opportunities for social and professional interaction. Most academic developers contribute to the occasional intersection of like-minded colleagues, but could we do more (Booth & Anderberg, 2005)? Do we facilitate and nurture the networks and connections of academics across our communities? How do we enable ongoing knowledge sharing and interchange of best practice as a regular interaction (Tergan, Gruber, & de Jong, 2006)? Are we monitoring the typical barriers that may be evident (Collison, 2006; Wood, 2003)? Again, we can collaborate with other service disciplines to better support our academic communities. In order to do this, however, we need to think outside the traditional concepts. A consideration of issues like knowledge sharing opens up challenges for how universities operate and the ways in which collaboration might be encouraged.

Emerging Challenges for Academic Development

A review of how academic development is conceived of course brings up the related issue of professional development for those fulfilling this university role. Academic developers place great importance on their support for academics who wish to develop their expertise. But what are we doing to support the growth and development of our academic developers?

Conferences like HERDSA are particularly important in providing a forum to debate the content that might reasonably be covered in academic development programmes. We have also seen an increasing focus on both leadership and research in the papers being presented – a healthy sign that the sector is recognising the need to shift its focus. It is time, however, to consolidate the various insights that have been shared into a professional framework.

There are other aspects of the development skill set that remain little recognised. The commensurate soft skills of facilitation and development techniques also need to be more fully defined and understood. Our higher education development pedagogy is not yet at the point where we understand how we should or could develop our professional academic communities. There is considerable theoretical knowledge, research and strategy from human resource development that could transfer to academic development work (e.g. Delahaye, 2000; Lohman, 2002; Yang, 2004). The process of reforming academic practice is frequently insufficiently linked to systemic organisational and cultural change principles (Cummings & Worley, 2005; Torraco & Hoover, 2005). Recognition of the complexity of university culture and organisational diversity also needs to be integrated into any emerging comprehensive academic development pedagogy. However, we need to avoid reinventing knowledge that has already been established in other related disciplines. For example, considerable research into human research development inputs and outcomes can provide some adaptable tools and strategies that might assist in framing academic strategy (e.g. Bober & Bartlett, 2004; Ford, 1997).

Equally important is our consideration of how we then share that understanding and encourage the provision of professional education programmes for new academic developers. Understandably, current curricula for higher education development emphasise university teaching and learning theory and practice with considerably less focus on the growing field of research development which complements teaching and learning. The pedagogy of higher education development is evident in some cases, but again, could be further enhanced through ongoing professional debate and development.

Further, as our definition of academic development expands to reflect the growing recognition of all academic work, our current academic developers will also need to be provided with additional support and assistance to build new capabilities and strategies to work across a broader repertoire. At present, this is not well addressed through our professional networks.

The professionalisation of the discipline is likely to be an issue that will gain more attention over the coming years. SEDA, the UK equivalent of HERDSA, has moved toward a model where higher education staff gain recognition and qualifications (see <http://www.seda.ac.uk/pdf/index.htm>). This is one approach that might be explored as the demand for developers continues to escalate. The HERDSA Fellowship scheme is an important means of providing recognition for those who demonstrate the skills and reflective orientation that underpins sound professional practice. However, it could be argued that there is further need for standards, guidelines and additional theoretical frameworks. Certainly there is an emerging desire to build a pedagogy and instructional framework that encourages deeper

knowledge of the academic development discipline and its impacts. Ongoing professional education for academic developers as both online and face to face modules might be a strategy that has merit. Recognition of qualifications and registration of those who have completed a formal programme of study might also be a means of increasing the recognition and valuing of academic developers.

Interestingly, as President of HERDSA, I have received several emails from members who would like to see more rigour in the preparation and recognition of university teachers and the field of academic development.

Institutional issues

If the profession of academic development grows in the predicted manner, the implications for university practice are also significant. At present our universities evidence structural divides where research, teaching, human resource development, organisational development and postgraduate development are frequently segregated and may rarely interact.

This promotes silos and political preservation of territory – often at the expense of best practice for an institution. Is this a time to look again at successful models for academic development? Should we encourage universities to consider how the rich expertise of many different specialist practitioners might be drawn into a cohesive consortium that can work collaboratively for the good of the academics within the university? If these groups are amalgamated to enable a fully integrated service that encourages academic development support from early career to senior leader, there may be a need to also review how well the field contributes to university renewal and change management. Is the field sufficiently active in shaping university policy and strategy? In many cases, it would appear to be an area where academic development has lost traction.

Conclusion

This paper has very few answers. Instead, it poses many questions about Australasia's future directions in academic development. In particular, I have aimed to re-examine the terrain on which academic development operates, and to question the assumptions which inform our practice. I have suggested that it is timely for those working in the field to review the concepts and strategies which are employed. This address also argues for a more inclusive model where the knowledge from many different disciplines can be drawn together to enrich our understanding of academic development.

HERDSA has many potential roles to play in this discovery process. Certainly, it seeks to provide a forum where many of these issues may be debated. Our journal is a major source of stimulus where new and different practices can be shared. The conference is a very important avenue for sharing emergent research and practice. And our HERDSA Fellows demonstrate the value of that particular form of renewal. But perhaps we need to do more? Perhaps it is time to open up discussion as to where the profession of academic development should head and how it might be assisted? Perhaps recognition of programmes and the development of a professional framework or standards might assist? At the least, the opportunity to intensively explore emergent processes and share knowledge and strategies would be a useful contribution. And certainly, as the concept and enactment of academic development expands to match our community expectations, it will be most important to embrace and welcome other colleagues who contribute to the academic development enterprise.

Academic development is a very important service within universities. But we have considerable work to do before it can be fully recognised as a profession with a pedagogy, standards and codes of practice. Do we wish to go that far? That is a debate we perhaps should commence as we meld many of our disparate knowledge bases into a more effective academic development construct that serves our higher education communities.

Are we there yet? I would suggest we certainly are not. We may have ventured onto the road, but we have yet to discover the full road-map or the final route. We certainly have begun to envisage our final destination, but this is only the first step of a challenging journey as we move toward greater professionalisation and recognition of what academic development can offer to universities.

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