

Is There an 'Ideal' Approach for Academic Development?

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***Abstract:** In the pursuit of the “university of quality”, institutions have focused some of their attention on academic development. Some institutions favour a top down approach, where department heads are responsible for ensuring the quality of their unit through some form of department development program. Other institutions have established centralised units mostly responsible for the production of generic workshops and formal developmental programs. Yet other institutions favour the ripple effect that focuses on using interested department members to mentor others. In this paper, I explore another model. This model offers support for all levels of the academic community, making use of the individual professional experiences of the academic developer, academic research that supports quality in teaching, learning and research, and the universities’ and faculties’ strategic plans and directions. This paper explores the current climate of academic development in Australia and takes the view that real changes in the quality of academic work cannot take place unless an integrated conceptual change model is supported by individual institutions.*

***Key words:** Orientations for academic development, disciplinary differences, conceptual change.*

Introduction

Universities in Australia are currently under pressure to demonstrate and develop quality at various levels (such as the Australian Universities Quality Audit). This paper explores one aspect of quality development, namely academic development. Although this is a nice crisp term, the idea of enhancing academic development has implications for students, individual academics, departments, curriculum, faculties and the policy of the whole university. Academic development cannot be tackled at only a single level, for instance, by providing workshops for individual academics, but must be tackled holistically by addressing the different needs and requirements of all levels of the academic community.

The academic community is assaulted by a variety pressures that each make significant demands. In his 3P model of academic leadership, Ramsden describes this simply as ‘external forces on higher education’ (1998, p105). Academics’ perceptions of these external forces, and their expectations for dealing with them, can produce a huge amount of pressure on individuals and academic departments. Universities acknowledge these forces and often incorporate them into their strategic plans, which then filter down to the ‘ordinary’ academic as an increase in their workload. Examples of this sort of external pressure that have become part of some universities’ strategic planning have been technological developments (resulting in the development of e-learning environments), internationalisation (also leading to the production of e-learning environments, curriculum changes to integrate diverse cultural perspectives, off-shore teaching, inclusive curriculum, student support systems), work-based

learning (which challenges the primacy of formal educational systems and rightly recognises that learning takes place in a variety of environments), student demand (demonstrated by potential students first choice of course and institution, and by the results of student evaluation and satisfaction surveys), and managerialism (which focuses on resourcing and competitive allocation of funds).

Given these sorts of pressures, it is no wonder that there is an impetus for universities to support the idea of academic development. Since each university has a different set of priorities, it follows that the sorts of models for academic development may also differ. This leaves us with a question: Is there an ideal approach to academic development?

This paper explores the question by looking at the nature of the debate and rhetoric surrounding academic development in Australia in the previous decade. It then looks at the observations of an academic developer and the way that the flavour of academic development has changed. Next it explores various models of academic development and suggests ways of considering academic development as part of a total learning environment which focuses on conceptual change and development. Finally some organisational implications are drawn.

The current climate of Academic Development

In the early nineties, the focus of academic development was on the improvement of the quality of student learning. The evidence for this statement lies in the constitution of a plethora of academic development units that focused their attention on two key aspects: providing academic staff with the opportunity to undertake formal units in higher education as part of a postgraduate course or as a series of workshops, and the development of student evaluation systems. Both of these initiatives found their theory in the seminal work of Ramsden (1992) *'Learning to teach in higher education'*. This book influenced the development of courses in higher education by pulling together research about the relations between student workload, assessment, activity, perception and learning. It was essentially a practical book that encouraged academics to shift their focus from their own teaching activities to their students' learning. This period was characterised by developmental activities that were centrally organised and focused on what we now call 'generic' issues such as assessment, evaluation, curriculum development, teaching in small groups. The academic development unit was a well known one-stop shop for the business of helping teachers.

The mid-nineties saw a subtle shift. The quality reviews of this period stimulated interest in trying to document and prove the quality of teaching and learning within institutions. By way of contrast with his 1992 book, Ramsden's more recent book, *'Learning to lead in higher education'* (1998), indicates that academic development is no longer the domain of centralised units with a specific mandate but should be the responsibility of every faculty, department and unit. In this sense, Ramsden's second book focuses on the quality of organisation leadership, organisational structures that develop quality, scholarship that includes the ideas of reflection, informed critique, evaluation and development. He describes a cycle of reflection and action for change. He squarely places the responsibility for academic development onto academic leaders:

"There can be no doubt that academic people can distinguish good leadership from bad, and that the process of leadership influences the outcomes of their work. At best, academic leadership can inspire lecturers to achieve more than they ever thought they could." (p.104)

The implication of this is to move towards a broader institutional view of academic development, where the focus on individual teachers as agents of change for the quality of student learning shifts towards developing the qualities of leadership within organisations.

A view of the current position of academic development, which supports the broader institutional focus suggested by Ramsden, can be found in the work of Biggs (1999). He applies the SOLO taxonomy to the quality of teaching institutions. He looks at what institutions and teachers *produce* in terms of the quality of student learning outcome, the quality of research, the coherence of department programs and curriculum, and the quality of university documents. He suggests that there are factors that can be related to the relative success of institutions and individuals. Naturally, these closely resemble the uni-structural outcomes right through to the relational extended abstract outcomes. The most important message to come from the book is that teaching must be ‘aligned’. In this sense, what teachers do with their students needs to be aligned with what they expect their students’ learning outcomes to be. It is a process that involves planning ahead, putting the plan into a workable process and then evaluating the product. Kreber (2000) acknowledges that there is a relation between the process and the product of academic development:

“When people advance or develop a scholarship of teaching, they engage in a learning process involving various kinds of reflection or research –based and experience-based knowledge about teaching... This process of acquiring knowledge should be rewarded in addition to the resulting product.” (p.64, my emphasis)

Kreber suggests that the outcomes of academic development (scholarly teaching) should be seen not simply as the product (ie publications, student results, curriculum documents etc), but as the scholarly process through which the product is developed. Indeed Bowden and Marton (1998) say that *‘ways of seeing have to be found, revealed, discovered, and doing so is well on a par with any research achievement. It is in fact a major research achievement and also the key to better learning’* (p.282).

This brings us back to our initial question: ‘Is there an ideal approach to academic development?’ The critical texts of Ramsden (1998), Biggs (1999), and Bowden & Marton (1998) suggest several strategies (for instance, aligning teaching, student focus, developing leadership) that all share a fluidity of application. At this stage the answer to the question can only be, ‘No, there is no *ideal* approach to academic development, but many approaches.’ The section that follows expands the debate about the nature of academic development and suggests that it should be situated within existing academic cultures and focus on conceptual change.

Debate on the nature of Academic Development

There are three key aspects that contribute to understanding the nature of academic staff development. These are the culture in which academics find themselves, the way they experience and understand their work and how they then work in their environment. For some, the nature of academic work is set within a perception of a negative culture. It is important that the academic developer understands that this perception of work exists, as it can affect the ways in which academics will allow themselves to be assisted. Knight and Trowler (2000, p71) suggest that there are five critical and negative elements that characterise higher education. They suggest that there has been a move towards ‘intensification’, resulting in longer hours, more managing, pressure to publish and ultimately ‘work degradation’. They indicate that there is a notion of ‘hard managerialism’, where academics feel the need to

account for activities, keep meticulous records and documentation. With this perception of the environment, academics focus on what the institution requires rather than the quality of student learning, resulting in a focus on 'delivering the curriculum'. A 'loss of collegiality' and 'greedy institutions' lead academics to alienation and stress. Finally, Knight and Trowler suggest that the academic community is characterised by 'aging, malaise and marginality' (p.71). This very negative list fails to take into account flexible work patterns, emerging support for minority, marginalised or 'new' groups, and a current focus on quality.

This negativity is also reported by Fletcher and Patrick (1998, 39-46). They describe academic culture in terms of teacher-related activities (as opposed to student-related activities). They indicate that a focus on 'learning new technologies', 'revising curriculum', 'multi-disciplinary teaching/learning', a large amount of 'student contact' and 'integrating research with teaching' leave teachers with very little time for other activities. Each of these elements on its own could lead to the development of positive learning environments, but when they are imposed, they are perceived to be an unrealistic increase in workload. Fletcher and Patrick (pp.39-46) suggest that changing academic culture would involve a move away from these activities with academic development focused on:

- faculty developers as change agents (*Ramsden, 98; Biggs, 99; Prosser & Trigwell, 99*).
- research on the impact of teaching strategies for student learning (*Boyer, 90*).
- collaboration with other units (*Boud, 99; McAlpine & Harris, 99*).
- interdisciplinary collaboration.

Interestingly, this more positive list can be supported by the activities and ideas suggested by the authors that I have appended in italics.

However, this positive list implies *action* by someone. This action needs to be informed by an understanding of how academics experience their job - in particular, teaching and learning. Phenomenographic research studies (reported in Ramsden 92, and Prosser and Trigwell, 99, for example) indicate that teaching and learning strategies are related to conceptions of teaching and learning. This has an impact on the nature of an academic developer's work: "*Recent studies into lecturers' conceptions of teaching have raised staff developers' awareness of the role conception of teaching plays in the quality of teaching and learning. More and more educationalists begin to advocate that staff development activities should embrace designs for bringing about conceptual change.*" (Ho, 1998, p25.)

Prosser and Trigwell (1999) suggest that there are relations between aspects of the teacher's situation which include the teacher's prior experience, the teacher's perceptions of the situation, the teacher's approaches to teaching and the teaching outcomes (p21). They say: "*The more complete conceptions of teaching are thought to be related to an awareness of more aspects of teaching*", and "*Teachers need to become aware of the way they conceive of learning and teaching within the subjects they are teaching. Teachers need to examine carefully the context in which they are teaching and to become aware of how that context relates to or affects the way they teach. Teachers need to be aware of and seek to understand the way their students perceive the learning and teaching situation. Teachers need to be continually revising, adjusting and developing their teaching in the light of this developing awareness.*" (p173)

This advice for teachers is heartening, given the relations found between conception of teaching and learning and what teachers actually do. It also moves once again towards an answer to our initial question. It seems that an ideal approach to academic development would be one where teachers are helped to explore their conceptions of learning and teaching and

their related strategies. It does not indicate however *how* this should be done, or what may be the most effect strategies to use. This problem may be solved by developing systems where teachers' awareness of their environment and understanding of the environment could be challenged. Bowden and Marton (1998) indicate that the key is 'discernment, simultaneity and variation'. They suggest that in order to understand and anticipate future events, teachers must be able to discern the 'patterns from the past' by seeking the essential aspects of variation found in their previous experiences. The notion of 'simultaneity' provides a way of holding understanding of the past in current awareness in order to discern the shape of its variation from the current/future.

The descriptions of the academic environment so far have not touched on the affective domain of teaching. Andreson (2000) makes it clear that teaching involves a certain amount of personal and intellectual 'care' for students and self. He describes 'intellectual caring' (p.25) where scholarly teaching moves beyond scholarly research as its intention is to enable another person to understand the relevance of the field.

"In moral terms, teachers are distinguished from researchers by having a non-reciprocal moral obligation to their students' welfare as learners, in addition to an interest in their own personal welfare as intellectuals." and *"The teacher must comprehensively know, appreciate the significance of, actively remain in touch with, and develop ways of aggregating and making maximally comprehensible to learners, the best and most interesting of available research within his or her field of interest. Whilst that is not at all the same as being a researcher, it remains an intellectually honourable and scholarly task"* (p.26).

Andreson's comments also touch on the nature of 'scholarship' in teaching as well as the (scholarship) found in research. There has been a great deal of debate (especially on promotion panels!) that teaching is in some way a less rigorous affair than research. Boyer's definition of various forms of scholarship (1990) has helped move the idea of teaching from something that is essential to universities, but that just happens, to an idea that it is a rigorous and scholarly endeavour. Andreson suggests that the scholarly nature of teaching can also be applied to the discipline of the academic developer:

"Developers' scholarship lies in the qualities of mind and hand, and the intellectual and oral integrity, that they bring to their own study... I am arguing that there is nothing intrinsically about teaching development that excludes it from being a site of scholarly practice and its cultivation, and that there is an enormous amount about it that gives opportunity for scholarship to be cultivated and expressed. Development practice differs not at all from teaching and research in this respect." (p 28 –29)

Reflection on the idea of 'scholarship' in Academic Development – An example from design

Boyer (1990) described four scholarships: discovery, integration, application and teaching. The ideas discussed in this paper have been underpinned by the notion of scholarship of teaching. This is evident in the debate that surrounds teaching as a scholarly activity and the need for academic developers to have a critical understanding of the broad nature of academic work. Fraser (1999) reports on the wide variation in the background of academic developers in Australia and indicates that academic development is a field into which people come having established an interest in teaching and learning in their first discipline.

My own experience follows this trend. When I started as an academic developer, I had an idea of what 'good teaching' may mean in my own original discipline and related this idea to my

perception of my students' learning. Becoming an academic developer had its own unique field of discourse, and I soon found that I developed an understanding of specialist areas such as 'assessment', 'curriculum design', 'evaluation'. These areas of expertise were in line with the context of my own academic development unit which at that stage followed the 'one-stop shop' model. It was in that context that I began to perceive that the academics with whom I worked were still 'learners' and 'researchers' of their own practice. More recently, changes to the unit and the university's strategic directions engendered a change in our professional practice to working with departmental teams. Our focus on teams was in support of our own, the university's and departments' strategic plans. We also changed the nature of our formal teaching program to be more work-based and relevant to the needs of individual academics.

Such experience of working within faculties with teams of academics has only recently been reported in the literature relating to academic development (Hicks, 1999; Boud, 1999). Essentially, we focused on:

- individual teacher's conceptual change
- teaching teams to support departmental and learning change
- flexible learning (especially in the areas of leadership and management of learning, internationalisation, environmental sustainability, and e-learning environments)
- our 'formal' learning units leading to academic credit
- reflective practice to support a scholarly, research based approach to learning development
- linking assessment with learning
- academic evaluation for improvement linked with the university's strategic directions *and* the departments' interpretations of that plan.

The focus on teams within specific departments enhanced the process of development, as academics worked on problems that were relevant to their own teaching situations. In my case (and I believe this to be common in other institutions) I was determined to use research to inform my work with the department groups. I was aware that I was a catalyst for change within the departments, that my areas of expertise were complementary to those in the departments, and that there was a need to address the current ideas of flexible learning and internationalisation.

The implications and actions related to these plans suggest a way of working that adopts an 'integrated' model of academic development (Hicks, 1999). In the following discussion, I describe the role of an academic developer within a department of Design. The department has some interesting characteristics. One of significance is that the discipline of 'design' is largely undefined and 'scholarship' and 'research' are equally nebulous. The student learning outcomes are often artistic artefacts, creating problems for assessment. Also, academic research output is largely not considered, as it is rarely published in refereed journals.

Using research to inform department specific activities

The work of Prosser and Trigwell (1999) and Ho (1998) imply that it is important to focus academic development programs around conceptual change. Conceptions of learning and teaching in design have recently been examined by Davies and Reid (2000) as part of an international research project. Work in progress, on how teachers and students in design experience teaching and learning, provided the theoretical framework for developmental activities within the department. The development program was integrated with a specific

departmental problem, the quality of learning in first-year design courses and the relevance first-year experiences have to the work of a designer.

This problem led to an interactive and integrative approach to staff development with academics involved with the first-year program. The teachers had previous experience of a variety of different educational models. Some were full time academics in the department and understood the current university climate, others were professional designers involved with only one or two university subjects. This latter group was considered to have a better understanding of the work of the design professional. Discussion amongst the group and outcomes from the research project suggested there was a relation between their understanding of the nature of work in design and what they could be doing with their students. The teachers decided that the quality of the first-year experience could be improved by collaborative group work which focused on 'real' problems thereby simulating 'real' design practice.

The outcome was the development of a first-year program which combined design students from different specialisations into group learning projects. The idea of group projects was easily recognised as a characteristic of design work. But how is group work in design developed, assessed and evaluated? We met regularly over a two-year period to support the teachers' understanding and use of group work and developed the academics' and students' understanding of 'group'.

The project had several important outcomes for the application of professional development within the department. It was the first time that many of the part-time teachers had contact with developmental activities which had been based on a conceptual model provided by research (Davies and Reid, 2000). The research model used was based on their own, and a parallel department in the UK, situation. The issue of quality learning and teaching in design became part of the ordinary discourse of the department. It was then easy to follow through with more generic developmental concepts. For instance, the project provided a way to help academics see the importance of documenting their teaching for their personal academic development, for accounting for their practices to senior staff, to provide evidence of teaching quality and to provide a record of important changes made to the course. This one group of academics covered the areas of understanding teaching and learning in design, small group learning and teaching, team teaching, on-line debate, flexible learning, evaluation and change for individuals, quality assessment and evaluation.

A short time into the project, every academic in this area had participated in some developmental activity supported by our academic development unit. Following this experience, many of the teachers enrolled in the more 'formal' learning units supplied by our unit.

In conjunction with the initiative stated above, the design department recognised the need to change perceptions about their work. This was supported by the development of personal academic portfolios, course portfolios, flexible learning and assessment, consideration of student perceptions, relevance to work, relevance to individuals, and flexible administrative structures. The changes in climate also recognised the importance of the development of electronic learning environments. The teachers were keenly aware that the new environment for learning was very different to the traditional one, and went to great lengths to develop materials that allowed students choice, interaction, access to the teachers, opportunity for collaborative work that was culturally sensitive. This in turn generated changes in the

curriculum to one which was more inclusive, that met multiple expectations, could be used off-shore and integrated world-wide communities of learning.

Using research on our own students' and teachers' learning to inform department specific activities and changing institutional climates needs to be supported as part of the total learning environment. Different forms of support are needed – for individuals at all levels, for teams of people, for learning how to use new technologies as they emerge for *quality learning* (Reid & Petocz, 2001).

The role of the academic developer in this rather complex system is one of facilitative support. Recognition of the strengths of other teachers enables specific academics to develop mentoring and leadership roles. This means that divisions can become self-sustaining. This approach to development recognises the diversity within the academic group in terms of teaching experience, experience of learning, learning at and from work, cultural expectations, and understanding of the university environment.

In this example of applying conceptual change strategies within a single departmental group, one is able to see the devolvement of responsibility for change devolved to the department whilst still receiving support from a central unit. This example demonstrates the integration of central and department-based development in a way that suits a specific group within the university.

Models for the future

At this point we must return once again to the central question: is there an ideal approach to academic development? The discussion above would suggest that there seem to be many different and effective approaches but that a focus on conceptual change related to teaching and learning within a specific discipline context, whatever the approach, is important.

Boud (1999) indicates that the most effective *location* for academic development is within the department:

“Most academic development takes place in locations where academics spend most of their time; departments, professional settings and research sites. It takes the form of exchanges with colleagues, interacting with students, working on problems, writing and associated activities. It is informal and not normally viewed as development.”

This view focuses on the reciprocal nature of peer learning. Hicks (1999) provides four models for the 'delivery' of academic development. The 'central model' is 'traditional', strong and based around centralised activity with some local activity. The 'dispersed model' is a form of departmentally organised professional development (this is the model Boud is referring to). The 'mixed model' relies on central generic activities and discipline-specific activities, has the potential for duplication and suffers from lack of coordination. Finally the 'integrated model' suggests that developers' and academics' work is interrelated and fed into one another through a collaborative process. Hicks suggests that these models have implications for access to programs or development activities, resourcing, ownership, impact and scholarship (p.48-49).

I would suggest that an integrative model, based on a theory of conceptual change, would be appropriate in the current higher educational context. There is a place for centralised units where academics have subject knowledge of higher education. These academics can facilitate and enhance the quality of department-specific developmental programs. The 'formal'

learning units and workshops still need to provide access to ‘generic’ topics, but the aims of these sessions would still be conceptual change, reflection on experience and providing opportunities for cross-disciplinary interactions. The work of the academic developer within departments needs to be focused on the essential needs of the department as well as on encouraging the development of individuals. The role of an academic developer (and the academic development unit!) needs to be characterised by flexibility and an awareness of different levels of support. This flexible focus would need to be applied:

- at departmental level for restructuring, curriculum change, quality development, evaluation, fulfilling institutional requirements, helping departments explore the implications of strategic directions.
- in consultation with the department leaders such as Deans, Heads of School, Program directors, and full-time and fractional academics at all levels.
- through an awareness of the developmental needs of each of these groups. For instance, support for Deans would be through discussion of their departments’ needs to determine the direction for academic support for the year; support at institutional level through appropriate committees that focus on the quality of teaching and learning; working with program directors for whole program development; working with teams of teachers on specific projects; working with academics through participation in ‘formal’ professional development activities; helping departments set up internal academic support structures.

Organisational implications for the enhancement of Academic Development

Obviously, moving towards a conceptual-change, department-focused program will need the ongoing support. Resources would need to be made available not only for the ongoing work of the development unit, but also to provide support for department members who take on developmental roles. The scholarly nature of the work involved in developing quality in teaching and learning needs to be recognised as legitimate academic work within the department and university. This recognition could be at department level, and also at institution level in promotion, tenure and research applications. In some departments, research on teaching and learning would need to be recognised as important and meaningful. Evaluation of quality in teaching and learning would need to be developed and maintained in order to document, inform and enhance change.

An ideal approach to academic development, then, would be one based on a conceptual change model, one that is firmly integrated with specific department directions and needs, that is consultative and recognises the different developmental focuses of all levels of the academic community, and finally, one that leads to the continuing development of quality learning and teaching.

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