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Strategic Approaches to Academic Development: Relationship to Learning and Teaching

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Most universities in Australia have established at least one organizational unit with a responsibility for academic development. While 'academic' could embrace all aspects of the role of academics, including research, innovation, and contributions to community and professional bodies, the expectation is that the focus will be on learning and teaching. In this paper, I address the extent to which – and the sense in which – this is true. I use the results of several surveys conducted in Australia in 2007 and information emerging from a forum of Australian university personnel associated with the development of academics. These sources show that academic development units often perform a range of functions that go beyond the development of learning and teaching. Reviewing the available data, I conclude that the current role of academic developers is very much influenced by strategic pursuits of universities. In this climate, the potential for academic development to operate with the integrity of a practice informed by the disciplined study of learning and teaching is more limited than it was during periods where the understanding of learning and teaching drove the enterprise.

The Question Addressed

How does academic development relate to teaching? This paper references surveys conducted by David Gosling in the UK and in South Africa on academic development in Australia to provide a basis for international comparison. While many parties in a university contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching, in most universities at least one organizational unit is established. The generic term for the enterprise can be said to be an 'academic development centre' (ADC) – the body representing the heads of organizational units in Australia is the Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD). The data referred to in this paper indicates that, while 'academic' could embrace all aspects of the role of academics, including research, innovation, and contributions to community and professional bodies, the focus will be on learning and teaching.

Purpose of Curriculum Mapping

In the English and Australian context, three broad approaches to academic development have been distinguished. They emerged in a chronological sequence, but now they co-exist. They have been classed as teaching-oriented, learning-oriented, and strategically-oriented (Table 1; Ling, 2005).

<p style="text-align:center">Table 1</p>

<p style="text-align:center">Approaches to Academic Development</p>

Approach	Focus of academic development activities
Teaching-oriented	Teaching strategies/teaching tips
Learning-oriented	How students learn and what students learn
Strategic-oriented	Strategies to assure institutional objectives are met

Teaching-oriented approaches focus on teaching techniques underpinned in Australia by the HERD-SA *Green Guides* series that includes booklets like *Conducting Tutorials* (Lublin, 1987) and *Lecturing* (Cannon, 1992). In the UK, there are books like *53 Interesting Things to do In Your Lectures* (Gibbs, Habeshaw, & Habeshaw, 1987) and similar publications of Bristol, Technical, and Educational Services, later surpassed by *2000 Tips for Lecturers* (Race, 1999). The learning-oriented approach, on the other hand, is epitomized by the UK Staff and Education Development Association (SEDA) publication, *Nevermind the Teaching, Feel the Learning* (Race, 1993), and by the writing of John Biggs (1999), which focuses on what the learner does rather than what the teacher does. Learning-oriented approaches have been informed by research into learning in higher education, such as those based on phenomenography, associated with the work of Ference Marton (Svensson, 1997). With this conceptual underpinning, academic development could be said to be a discipline in its own right.

In the current context, academic development is also influenced by strategic concerns in universities as they come to operate in a competitive environment (Marginson & Considine, 2000). In appealing to the clientele of universities and to their prospective employers, strategic approaches may address aspects of the learning environment ranging from online and library facilities to student support and the management of learning resources, including the management of staff. They are likely to involve quality assurance and improvement measures.

Methodology

In this paper, I take an interpretative, descriptive approach using literature and available data derived from surveys, expert input, and focus groups. The survey data includes:

- Data from a survey of directors of academic development in Australia. The survey was conducted by David Gosling (2008) and is largely based on previous surveys he conducted with directors of educational development units in the UK.

- Data collected from CADAD members by Sharon Parry and Yoni Ryan on the Roles and Responsibilities of Academic Development Units in Australia, November 2006.

- Data from a September 2007 survey of Australian academic developers on their roles in the development of academics as teachers and the strategies they employ. The survey was undertaken by the project team for the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project, the Development of Academics and Higher Education Futures (DAHEF) (Ling and Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development, in press). Support for the original work was provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations.

Expert opinion and focus group reflections are derived from records of a forum on academic development representatives of all universities in Australia involving academic developers and other key players in the development of academics. The forum was an element of the DAHEF project.

Data

Key components of the survey data informing the findings relate to the actual activities of academic development units placed against the importance given to possible functions of units.

Data for Australian directors of academic development derived from David Gosling's survey are provided in Table 2 (data is given in percentage of responses). The table compares the extent of the provision with the importance directors attribute to activities. Responses given are those at the upper end of a five-point scale classified as provided to 'a great extent' and 'moderate extent' against those rated as 'very' or 'moderately important.'

Data for Australian academic developers derived from the DAHEF project survey is provided in Table 3 (data is given in percentage of responses). The table compares the extent of the provision with the importance academic developers attribute to activities.

Data from other questions in the surveys and from the forum also inform the findings below.

Findings

Academic development in Australia is a complex business. ADCs engage in functions such as provision of formal and informal professional development programs on learning and teaching, curriculum development, and support of individual or team learning and teaching initiatives. Some engage in educational research. They may also be responsible for: learning resources' design and production; provision of educational media services and online learning management system support; study skills and student support; support of graduate attribute initiatives; and leadership and management development.

ADCs then have a strong but not exclusive focus on learning and teaching. Gosling's (2008) survey of Australian directors of ADCs and the CADAD survey of its members indicate that the organizational units involved include the terms learning and teaching in their unit names in about a quarter of the cases reported. Just as many have titles that refer to professional development or staff development. Fewer have the label 'academic development.' Some have titles that indicate a wider charter being associ-

TABLE 2
Survey of Directors on Academic Development (n=19)

Activity	Provided	Important
Promote scholarship of teaching and learning	84	84
Assist in planning and policy development	74	90
Advice on learning and teaching in higher education	68	79
Promote research in learning and teaching in higher education	63	79
Training in use of ICT/e-learning	63	79
Design of online learning materials	53	58
Post-grad course in learning and teaching in higher education	53	79
Engage in planning and policy development	53	90
Administer student feedback on teaching units	37	63

Table 3
Survey of Academic Developers (n=53)

Activity	Provided	Important
Promote scholarship of teaching and learning	81	92
Assist in planning and policy development	70	85
Advice on learning and teaching in higher education	88	91
Promote research in learning and teaching in higher education	73	95
Training in use of ICT/elearning	-	-
Design of online learning materials	51	54
Post grad course in learning and teaching in higher education	40	82
Engage in planning and policy development	63	88
Administer student feedback on teaching units	11	55

ated either with flexible or distance education or with research. The nature of their engagement with learning and teaching appears more aligned to the 'strategic' category, referred to in the section above, than to the 'learning' or 'teaching' categories. Their goals or mission statements indicate an orientation to the strategic approach. Most relate to assisting the university in fulfilling its strategic plan or goals relating to learning and teaching. Few of the units cite missions independent of their university's central plan or strategy. Gosling (2008) reported:

> Managers [of universities] often look to ADCs to produce policies because they are themselves under pressure from external (regional or federal) policies. These external pressures increasingly require ADCs to behave in ways that fit institutional priorities. The core elements expressed in the mission of the majority of centres whose directors responded to the survey were:

- supporting the institutions' strategic goals;
- providing professional development of staff. Under this heading are included in provision of courses, mentoring, staff induction. A few mission statements specifically included man-

agement and leadership development; and
- facilitating learning and teaching initiatives to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

An alternative approach to determining ADC performance is to use external measures of success. External measures – such as university performance on the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, the number of ALTC awards, citations, or grants received by members of the university, or new learning technologies – were cited by ADC directors as having a very high impact on their work. Few use internal measures such as the completion of professional development sessions or participation in graduate certificate programs in university teaching conducted by the centre.

While the ADC directors and academic developers report that publications on learning and teaching have the most influence on them, other topics that rate highly include staff development and organizational change. Many state journals relating to academic development generally influence them. These cover a range of issues in the development of higher education (Gosling, 2008).

Distinctions between what both ADC directors and academic developers rate as important, and the activities they actually engage in, suggest some

disjunction between the priorities of academic development professionals and institutional practices. ADC directors and academic developers are generally not opposed to taking a strategic approach (and they rate the current external and internal environments, which support a strategic approach as favourable), but they would like to have more input in determining priorities. They also think that it is important to emphasize the professional development of academic staff, evaluation and review activities, curriculum development, and research and scholarship than is currently the case. The data in table 4 indicates that ADC directors see that matters relating more directly to the development of academics as teachers and to curriculum development are underprovided against matters relating to institutional strategic interests.

Table 4 represents the number of respondents who rated the activity as very or moderately important against the number who said the activity was provided to a great or moderate extent.

This is not to say that a strategic approach to academic development has led to a diminished focus on learning and teaching in universities. On the contrary, learning and teaching performance and/or involvement in the scholarship of learning and teaching are now likely to be explicitly valued in academic promotion policies and in performance review proce-

dures. In addition, most ADC directors and academic developers are engaged as academics rather than as general staff, indicating recognition of this area as academic. The issue is the extent to which these developments are driven by an informed concern with development of learning and teaching rather than a concern with strategic positioning of institutions.

Conclusion

The question I addressed in this paper was how does academic development relate to teaching? A functional answer and a qualitative answer are proffered.

On the functional side, the data available suggests that organizational units associated with academic development often perform a range of functions that go beyond the development of learning and teaching. Activities in which they also engage include: educational media production and support; provision of student study skills programs; leadership and management development; preparation for external teaching awards; student evaluation of teaching and working with quality assurance measures; and contributing to the broad policy environment of a university and to its strategic directions.

On the qualitative side, I return to the differ-

Table 4

Discrepancies in Ranking of Provision of Activities and Importance

Activity	Difference
Professional development for postgraduates who teach	13
Support for staff identified as having difficulties with their teaching	10
Map and embed graduate attributes/generic skills across curricula	9
Peer observation and review of teaching	9
Assist with course/program and/or unit/subject reviews	8
Assist in development and design of new courses	8
Administer learning and teaching in higher education resource collection	8
Project-manage curriculum development projects	8
Produce/contribute to good practice newsletter	8

ences between teaching-oriented, learning-oriented, and strategically-oriented approaches to academic development (Table 1). The categories are not exclusive but information supplied by ADC directors and academic developers through surveys and focus groups suggests that the current orientation of academic development in Australia is, in the main, strategic. While the input of academic developers to universities may be informed by their understanding of learning and teaching in higher education, the agenda and measures of success are determined by institutional priorities – an area in which ADC directors would like to have a greater say than they currently do. In that sense, the potential for academic development to operate with the integrity of a practice informed by a disciplined study of learning and teaching is more limited than it was during periods where understandings of learning and teaching drove the enterprise. The current approach is instrumental and geared to performance measures rather than to the enhancement of learning per se.

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Biography

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