

# Chapter 13

## Transformative Academic Development: Complexity and Convergence

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### ABSTRACT

*In a dynamically changing higher education environment, a deep understanding and facilitation of relevant and flexible academic development is vitally important organisationally. A qualitative case study methodology was employed to analyse the organisational positioning and design of academic development as a means of gaining insights into the needs, challenges and evolutionary trends occurring at one university. A non-linear organisational-level data analysis based on triangulation from document study, direct observation, and experiential and reflective knowledge, provided theoretical and practical insights into how academic development is embodied institutionally. A design perspective revealed the characterisation of an expanded remit, as complex, contradictory and complementary. The study concluded that new configurations in the practice of academic development are convergent in nature, integrating a transformative agenda representational of professional learning trends globally. An important implication this study raises is the mounting influence the application of smart technologies can play in the area of training and development within business organisations.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For nearly five decades academic development like many other features of university activity has been characterised by phenomenal change. An examination of these shifts provides insights into how the discipline has expanded as it has matured, making visible the variety of ways in which institutions have responded to national and global developments. The current wave of educational transformation establishes academic development as a dynamic area of university activity globally, due to an expanded and rapidly evolving scope of practice. Senior managers and academic developers are challenged to reconfigure organisational structures to reposition academic development and generate adaptive models and

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innovative designs to operate effectively within internationalised higher education systems. This suggests an interesting relationship between educational transformation, complexity in the positioning and design of academic development, and how the field is evolving. This relationship is explored by linking to the literature variously referred to as educational development, faculty development, instructional development, professional development and academic development (Gosling, 2001), to analyse design and emerging practices contextually, using a case study approach.

Academic development is presented in scholarly literature from many perspectives, including as a profession, a sphere of activity, a leitmotif, a concern, and as an organisational structure. Regardless of perspective, academic development “at best remains elastic and flexible, and at worst, elusive and murky,” according to Lebowitz (2014, p. 73). The expanding scope and nature of the field is represented in various definitions, for example, Candy (1996) who suggested it referred to “practices designed to enhance the academic performance of an institution of higher education” (p. 17). Whilst this still holds true many noted scholars have since contributed to this conversation (e.g., Boud, 1999; Boud & Brew, 2013; Gibbs, 2013; Gosling, 2001, 2009) bringing refinement in thinking with consideration of the evolutionary developments and examples that illuminate the variation of activities in terms of target, type, and mode of analysis. This chapter makes a further contribution to that conversation through scholarly analysis of the maturation of academic development at one institution as it has responded to organisational, national and global challenges. This analysis further reinforces the variable nature of academic development activities as it seeks to classify various strategies through the lens of different frameworks representing this sphere of activity as a combination of “old habits” and “disruptive practice” (Mårtensson, 2015, p. 303). Through the analysis of one university context, the author shall demonstrate that this combination of traditional and disruptive techniques presents a complex and converging system characteristic of the conditions in which academics work and live in today.

In a higher education environment characterised by dynamic change, a deep understanding and facilitation of timely, relevant and flexible academic development is vitally important. In this chapter the author addresses this issue by characterising the positioning and design of academic development with supporting case examples. First, a structuralist lens is cast to analyse how academic development is embodied institutionally. Second, a design lens is employed to gain insight into the expanded and multifaceted remit contemporary academic development fulfils. Third, an evolutionary lens is adopted to make sense of ways in which academic development is changing in response to global trends. The implications the case raises are then discussed, followed by suggested areas for further research. Finally, speculative conclusions are drawn considering the relative insights gained about an emergent model of academic development.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

Recognising that systems and practices differ from one country to another the issue of consistency in terminology deserves clarification. In this chapter, the term ‘academic development’ is used to refer to the actions planned and undertaken by those working with teaching academics to facilitate their acquisition of new skills and knowledge that can be applied to their teaching, improved performance and development, and in the promotion of scholarship (AITSL, 2014; Gosling, 2001). The term ‘higher education’ is used to refer to what is otherwise commonly referred to in the literature as tertiary education, post compulsory education and university education. The term ‘teacher’ is used to refer to academics with

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