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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Academic development and educational developers: perspectives from different European higher education contexts

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Abstract

This paper reports research in five European universities, in four countries between 2004-08. The research explored and compared institutional contexts for academic development and the interpretations and reflections of a number of academic developers on the organizational position and role of academic development, and of ‘developers’. A nuanced notion of ‘service’, commitment to scholarship, (inter)disciplinary flexibility, a strong ethos of learner-centredness and care for and support of both students and academics, come to the fore, across national and institutional boundaries. Evident too is the idea of a diversified profession in development, emergence and consolidation.

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Introduction

Origins and purposes of the study

This paper reports on an unfunded research project (2004-08) in five European higher education institutions and four countries. Through case studies, the research explored and compared individual, institutional and, to an extent national, assumptions and interpretations of the organizational position and role of academic development, and ‘developers’.

The institutional case studies are from: Imperial College London; the Université catholique de Louvain (French speaking Belgium); the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Flemish speaking Belgium); the Universitat de Barcelona; and the Universität Dortmund. The focus was on reasonably centralized academic development units (ADUs).

We use the terms academic practice, academic development/ers and educational development/ers interchangeably. In our usage we are not seeking to make any distinctions between these terms nor convey overtones; no value-free, general descriptive term in English could be found (Webb, 1996; MacDonald, 2002).

The European, national and local contexts

The creation of the European Area of Higher Education is having impact on academic practice, ADUs and quality enhancement and assurance agendas. IJAD noted some of these changes in a special issue, in 2004. However, national and institutional histories, constitutional and statutory powers, governance and policy arrangements for higher education in the five entities in this study remain very different. This means that matters such as funding arrangements, autonomy, student admission policies, and the terms and conditions of staff employment differ markedly between the institutions. ADUs are located, regarded and funded in different ways, and integrate internal and external agendas into their work in varying manners.

Theoretical framework and influences

There has been an upsurge of interest in academic development as a field of practice and study over the last fifteen years. Academic development has emerged as both discourse and practice in its own right (Elvidge, 2004; Bath & Smith, 2004; Land, 2004; Rowland, 2006; Grant, 2007; Carew and al, 2008; Handal, 2008; Gosling, 2009; Saroyan & Frenay, 2009).

With ambiguous roles and identities, educational developers (EDs) are often categorized and regarded by others as ‘neither fish nor fowl’ in terms of the traditional academic/administrative divide in universities. Given this ambiguity, scholars have become increasingly interested in identifying specific traits that distinguish their work and identity (for example, Land, 2004; Handal, 2008). Our research falls into this line of enquiry, but from an international, comparative perspective.

The authors' central interest was in the interpretive frameworks EDs have of their roles and activities. In this sense, our research is broadly part of the hermeneutical tradition (Gadamer, 2004). In line with this, the research focuses on the interpretations EDs give of the interface between national and institutional structures, e.g. in terms of policies, official professional roles and tasks. By doing this, we have attempted to uncover what lies under the labels, to see how it comes 'alive' through the EDs' own interpretations.

Research questions and methodology

We investigated two broad questions: What is an educational developer in the five European contexts of our study? How do EDs interpret the contexts in which they work? Given the small and case study nature of the research, our aim was not to attempt generalizations across Europe, but to illuminate academic development practices in a comparative perspective.

The project adopted a qualitative approach, believing this would best enable the exploration of subtle differences in nuance and variation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell, 2007). English was the common language adopted for project transactions, unless indicated otherwise.

Data collection fell into two parts. The first period of data collection consisted of each institutional research team writing a case study of the national and institutional context of educational work. Information was gathered from public sources (mostly through the internet); consent was not required for this. As far as possible, common headings were used. The accounts were subsequently analyzed for similarities and differences in matters such as national and institutional drivers for academic development activity, the existence, funding and structural position of central ADUs, and their staffing.

The second stage of data collection consisted of an in-depth exploration of the interpretations and perceptions of working contexts, and employment histories of twenty EDs, four in each institution (the ADUs were of differing sizes so this represented varying proportions of staff). Purposive sampling was used to select participants (to include more and less recent developers, a mix of gender and background, and exclude research-only staff). Each participant completed a short questionnaire to provide biographical background information. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the local language by one of the research team who was not from the institution concerned, except in the case of Leuven where the interviews were by a colleague from the 'partner office'. Interview by a line manager was avoided. All interviewees consented to interview on the understanding that data would be anonymised. Interview recordings were transcribed in the home language and initial analysis conducted by the home researchers in liaison with the interviewer, as it was considered the former were likely to have the best understanding of the data. Initial analysis was inspired by a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). 'Emergent categories' were translated into English, shared and used to inform development of a common coding framework via discussion.

Further coding and translation enabled greater comparison between institutions. This second stage of analysis adopted an approach closer to content analysis. This output was further clarified, refined, triangulated and compared for common understanding.

The study data: structures, perceptions and interpretations

The case studies compiled during the first stage of the research and the pre-interview questionnaires yielded information about the organizational position and status of ADUs, employment patterns, and roles carried out by EDs. This aggregated information constitutes the background against which the interpretations and thoughts of the twenty interviewees can be understood.

Origins and organization of the ADUs

Findings from stage one of the study can be summarized as follows:

- The longest standing educational support unit in the study is that of HDZ (Hochschuldidaktischen Zentrum) in Dortmund, founded in 1975. The centre has changed over time but it is well established.
- DUO (Dienst Universitair Onderwijs – Centre for Educational Development) at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven was founded in 1977 and split into two offices (a pedagogic and a policy centre, working collaboratively) in 2004. It thus has longevity, but a recent re-structuring.
- At Louvain-La-Neuve, a centre for educational development (l'Institut de pédagogie universitaire et des multimédias or IPM) was created in 1995, while a specific Masters programme for lecturers and assistants was set up in 2002.
- The Imperial CED (Centre for Educational Development) was launched in 2000. A long history of academic development initiatives goes back to the eighties, though there was no centralization of policy or personnel at that time.
- In Barcelona, academic development is carried out by the Sección de Formación del Profesorado Universitario (section for the educational development of academic staff) that was founded in 1989 and enjoys the same status as a unit for the educational development of school teachers, within the ICE (Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación i.e. Institute of Educational Sciences).

At all institutions a key event or marker that acted as a spur to current activities was identified: in the four continental European partners, the Bologna process (1999); in the UK, the Dearing Report (1997).

The five units self-described themselves as centralised units offering a university-wide service. Each ADU has a broad role that includes professional development for staff at all levels, and other features, for example running grant schemes for pedagogic innovations. All units identify newly-appointed lecturers as an important, but not exclusive target of their workshops and consulting activities.

Employment profiles of EDs

The nature of the employment differs considerably between the units, as much as the original disciplinary affiliation of EDs (bioscience, geography, psychology, engineering, social sciences, biomedical sciences and education). This was often integrated by postgraduate studies in education.

At Barcelona, no interviewee was employed as a full time ED. All were permanent staff who have academic roles and duties outside their academic development work, which they pursue for a time limited period.

Employment was the least secure in Dortmund, where only one of the interviewees had an open ended, as opposed to a time limited, position. In the other units, all interviewees had an open ended/permanent contract, although not necessarily one that tied them to the ADU. In four out of five institutions, most interviewees regarded academic development as now being their career path; at Barcelona, this was not the case. There, developers would return to their original department and discipline.

Research duties and expectations also varied between the units. At two institutions (Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve), three out of four interviewees reported educational research forming an expected and reasonably substantial part of their job. However, in all units, developers were expected to engage in scholarship and most participated in at least a small amount of research.

Interpreting contexts

For the purpose of this article, two main themes are analyzed: a) how EDs perceived the institutional and national policies shaping their work; b) how they saw their roles.

According to the interviewees, national and/or international policies have played a role in terms of the enhancement of AD in their context. However, there are differences in the way such policies were regarded as change agents.

At the universities of Barcelona and Imperial, respondents considered such policies to be of direct importance in strengthening developmental activities. The English and Spanish cases may be explained in historical terms: the Imperial and Barcelona units were shaped more by external forces (Dearing and Bologna respectively). Thus, for Barcelona respondents, European convergence in educational matters was seen as an opportunity for enhancement activities in learning and teaching. In the words of one Spanish informant:

... [European convergence] presupposes a change of everything, a change of 'electronic chip'

The university, in interpreting European guidelines, has facilitated a change of attitude towards learning and teaching, encouraging both a learner-centred approach and enhancement of professional development for teaching. As another interviewee put it:

...indirectly,[it is] the university regulations, ..., that have paved the way for the evaluation of teaching, and sketched the professional profile of lecturers... [it has] also enhanced, perhaps, .. the general interest in teacher education and has indirectly encouraged a learner-centred approach to teaching...

At Imperial, interviewees considered that without national policies which, for example, have encouraged Master's level accredited certification in learning and teaching for academic staff, their unit might not have been created:

Certainly within the UK I would argue that in the late 1990s the Dearing Report, that became a legal government [directive] to think more carefully about learning and teaching... so I think quite a lot of the things that happened in the last 10 years could be traceable to that....

Respondents generally identified that they had to take some account of institutional policies. However, mostly, the interviewees considered they had some autonomy in the implementation of such policies. Curriculum development, for instance, had to take institutional guidance into account. There was a feeling of both contributing to and working within broad guidelines and the culture of the university:

I think my job and that of the Centre is to identify which parts of the College policies we have a role in developing and delivering.

This signals an important axis in the identity structure of academic developers, that running between personal beliefs and values, and institutional requirements (Lee and McWilliam, 2008).

Many factors may lay behind the nuanced differences in emphasis concerning the importance of a personal sense of agency in dealing with institutional policies. One important element, arguably, may be the different employment regimes. For example, the Imperial informants are employed by their university; those from Barcelona are 'funcionarios' (civil servants, on federal permanent contracts) who have only a temporary affiliation with the ADU, which may give more independence and freedom from allegiance to the ADU than elsewhere. It may be that the Spanish EDs feel less 'institutionalized' as EDs and therefore have more of a sense of personal agency than their colleagues elsewhere.

In Barcelona and Imperial, interviewees enjoy academic status, but the Imperial and Belgian developers have a sharper sense of 'service' to the institution than their Spanish counterparts, whose original disciplinary allegiance acts as an important catalyst for their work and beliefs about the nature and aims of academic life. Perhaps, too, the issue of opportunity to contribute to developing policy, affects allegiance to it, with the Spanish EDs having less influence on policy.

Louvain bears more resemblance to Imperial, in that respondents had a strong sense of service towards the institution and, overall, felt aligned with its policies. One interviewee expressed this sense of alignment very strongly:

...yes, I do adhere to it. Yes. I think that it refers to the quality, the care and concern about students. Yes, to that aim I totally adhere and as it may be implemented in a lot of different ways and means, I feel it can be adapted, and I do think that we are not caged in.

The institutional emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning was welcomed by all interviewees, with some expressing doubts that official policy is enough to engage academics in innovation. As a Louvain respondent put it:

...both in theory and practice, the institution tries to highlight the importance of learning and teaching. I really think that they make an effort in this sense, even if I don't think it is enough yet, it's not coherent enough. I do think that learning and teaching are not valued enough, if compared to other academic activities.

At Leuven, the ADU resulted from attempting to translate the findings of the growing research on learning and teaching in higher education into daily practice. This, and the growing importance of quality assurance, reflected by legal regulations, led to the concept of Guided Independent Learning (GIL) as an expression of what the university considered to be good university education. Interviewees here interpreted their work as halfway between 'service' and 'academic', with a slight slant towards the academic end of the spectrum. They felt aligned with GIL, which is meant to be implemented university-wide and has an influence on academic development initiatives. One interviewee said:

Yes, if you consider it well, it [GIL] is not a terribly difficult thing. What we do, ... it is just saying that we want good education. And in fact we explain how that is currently seen in the educational sciences.

Because of their personal adherence to GIL, EDs felt responsibility for its implementation. Nevertheless, they all emphasized the need to pay attention to the way in which they convey the principle to academic staff, as some of these oppose it. In the interviewees' view, such resistance might be attributed to a lack of ownership among the academic staff, who feel GIL is something imposed on to them from the top. In order to surmount this possible resistance, they keep the endpoint, 'good teaching', as their focus. Nonetheless, some Leuven interviewees considered they could not always persuade academic staff to fully translate the concept into practice.

In Germany, good quality teaching as well as the competence of academics to deliver it, are important national issues. However, there are no overall federal or state policies with which EDs have to align; there are only broad and not totally formed guidelines created by university management:

... there is a guiding view, it was created by the management... I believe that for several years an attempt was made to develop a guiding view for the university. But at a certain moment the process got stuck.

Such guidelines are a matter of negotiation and bargaining between the executive board and the different faculties, on the one hand, and the head of the ADU and its personnel, on the other. The Dortmund unit has a high degree of autonomy in this bargaining process. EDs thus act in a fluid and ambivalent context, and are sometimes responsible for policy making. This ambiguity is reflected in the way respondents saw themselves as being halfway between service and academic, showing, overall, a slight slant towards the service end of the spectrum, even though interviewees see the conduct of research as an integral part of their work, as it helps them keep their independence of thought and action. This was very clearly expressed by another interviewee:

... I find it very important to preserve our independence. That can only be achieved with competence and expertise... and that can only be done, so to speak, through research.

Perceptions of the educational development task

The research team compared ‘name tags’ for EDs in each vernacular; tags appear to have meanings that both differ and overlap (Webb, 1996; MacDonald, 2002):

- in English, the main terms used are ‘academic/educational developer’. The terms ‘developer’ and ‘development’ can imply doing something to someone else rather than collaborative working, but were not used in this sense by interviewees;
- in Spanish, there are two interlinked words to express the concept of ‘EDs’: ‘formador – asesor’: these conjure up a shaping, advisory and facilitative model;
- in French, ‘conseiller pédagogique’ brings to the mind a clearly advisory and facilitative framework;
- in Dutch, as in Spanish, interlinked words are used: ‘onderwijsondersteuner - medewerker beleidsondersteuning’ – these suggest a supportive model, both for teaching and policy making, thus introducing an extra dimension to the pedagogical role embraced by EDs;
- in German, ‘Hochschuldidaktiker’ embodies a proactive teaching model in pedagogical matters, being less facilitative than terms in Spanish, French or Dutch.

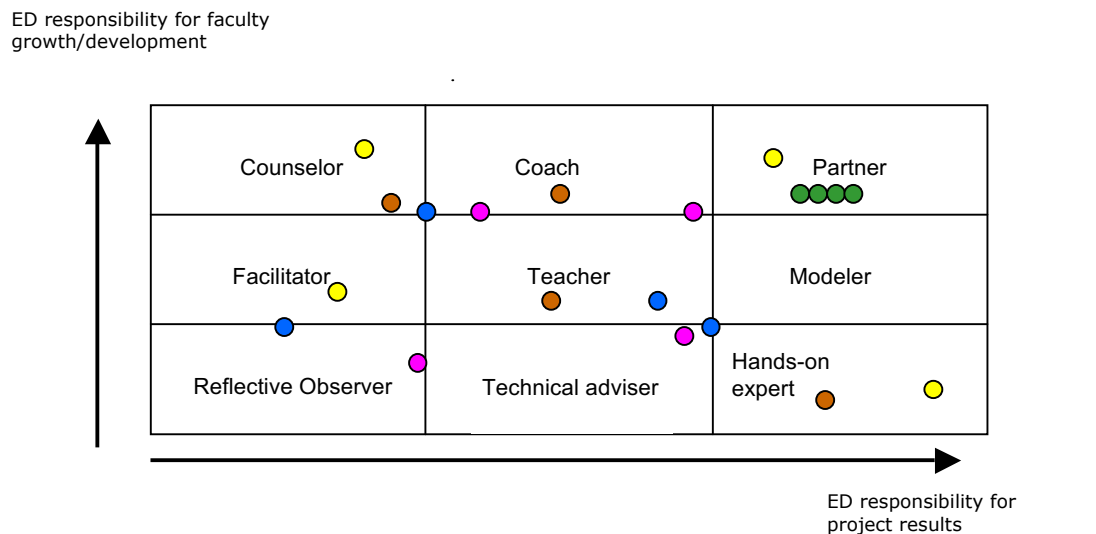
When these terms are compared with metaphors interviewees used to encapsulate their role, the degree of similarity of viewpoints between interviewees and across institutions is striking, with an adaptive and facilitative model generally being embraced. Areas of divergence may relate to the amount of agency informants felt (as mentioned above), or, in one case (Dortmund), perhaps to a more interventionist model:

- *‘You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink’; ‘chameleon’; ‘family doctor’; ‘translation’* (London)
- *‘A learner is not a glass to fill with our knowledge, but a fire to light’; ‘ADs are like the first oil drop’; ‘snowball effect’; ‘adding a small grain of sand’* (Barcelona)
- *‘The stake supports the young tree’; ‘building foundations’; ‘seeding’; ‘watering plants’* (Louvain)
- *‘Navigating’; ‘walking up the mountain towards the summit of good education’; ‘injection needle’; ‘a cog in a machine’* (Leuven)
- *‘Steam engine’; ‘developmental worker’; ‘fire fighting plane’; ‘frog in a butter tub’* (meaning there is a lot of paddling) (Dortmund)

Nuances in the degree of optimism can be discerned, but even the least ‘up-beat’ message (possibly ‘fire fighting plane’ or ‘adding a grain of sand’) still implies hope for enhancement of pedagogical matters. The metaphors also provide considerable insight about how the task is conceived in terms of support, facilitation, and time scale, meaning that the work of developers is one that is recursive, cumulative and

requires time and patience to be effective. Some metaphors relate more to the EDs' function and role, while others refer to AD in general.

To better understand the ways in which interviewees made sense of their role, we plotted their perceptions to enable comparison of how they carried out their role. We adopted Poumay's use of a grid (2006), based on that of Champion et al (1990). In this categorisation a 'hands-on expert', for example, is likely to use a relatively interventionist approach, be more of a provider of 'tips' and take a generally short term and 'quick-fix' view of things, while a facilitator or counselor, is more likely to be trying to empower the individual over the longer term, through bringing about understanding.



Key: Blue=Imperial; Pink=Barcelona; Yellow=Louvain; Brown= Leuven; Green = Dortmund

Figure 1. Modeling how interviewees describe their roles (after Champion et al., 1990)

As Figure 1 shows, the situation is complex: there is a wide variety of individual viewpoints, reflecting differences about degrees of intervention and instrumentality, but with an overall bias towards an advisory, facilitative and reflective model. This may indicate some overall subscription to a widespread ethos of peer-led work of the kind implied by Handal (2008), when he talks of academic developers as 'critical friends'.

Discussion: between convergences and divergences

Patterns of divergence and convergence can be identified that point towards a complex sense of collective identity *in fieri*, within an emerging profession (Ashworth et al., 2005; Lee & McWilliam, 2008).

There seems to be a firm presence, across the European contexts examined, of AD as a part of university life and as an emerging and solidifying discourse within higher education (Clement and McAlpine, 2008). However, our research also confirms, both

at a cross-national and national level, a variety of arrangements, a complex panoply of practices in terms of AD units and centres.

Different contexts dictate not only different forms of academic development but also different degrees of agency, on the part of EDs, in actively changing the institutional learning teaching cultures in depth. The problem of agency remains important, especially as ADUs are often perceived as ‘service’ and, as such, their role is seen as markedly operational in delivering institutional policies. In our research, it was interesting to see how respondents placed themselves along the service-academic spectrum, with Imperial and Louvain registering, overall, an adherence to the idea of ‘service’ by a greater number of developers than in Barcelona, where EDs see themselves as ‘traditional’ academics in their home discipline.

However, positioning is not the whole story; the interpretation of the word ‘service’ is paramount. Many interviewees were happy with the notion of ‘service’ if interpreted not so much towards the ‘institution’ *tout court* as such but to the idea of learner-centred teaching as espoused by the institution and which chimes with ED’s beliefs and values. This raises interesting questions, for further research, in relation to how policy gets translated into practice, with, usually, management looking for *success, effectiveness and impact* (Brew & Peseta, 2008), while developers try to promote a more complex cultural change rather than merely behavioural change. It is also interesting to note that virtually all our interviewees perceive academic ‘features’, such as scholarship and research, as important, if not fundamental, to their job, thus confirming the fact that EDs consider themselves to be academics and wish to be perceived as such by the outside world (Bath and Smith, 2004).

Overall, this signals, globally, a professional identity that is traversed by tensions between *compliance* and *resistance* that give this identity a ‘hybrid’ nature, where Eds considered themselves not as para-professionals but as meta-professionals, who are academic par excellence (Candy, 1996; MacDonald, 2009). The challenge is to see whether it is possible to preserve alignment between institutional views and the different modes of implementation promoted by EDs (Rowland, 2006).

The global professional identity of EDs is further complicated by marked variation in their original disciplinary specialisation. There is divergence between, on the one hand, institutions like Louvain and Leuven, where there is a tendency to select people who have education as their primary/sole disciplinary background, and Imperial, where the background of interviewed developers mirrors the disciplinary profile of the institution in which they work, i.e. science. This highlights the issue of ‘legitimacy’, often experienced by EDs, in relation to their audiences (Land, 2004), with some institutions finding it more helpful to have developers with a background akin to the latter, while others prefer to give sole weight to pedagogic scholarship and research as the basis for legitimizing academic development work.

However, beyond differences in original disciplinary allegiances, the data point to EDs making use of ‘Mode 2 Knowledge’ (Gibbons et al., 1994), that is a kind of professional knowledge that, within the thin outer shell of ‘education’, is context-adaptable, usable and inter/intra-disciplinary, and therefore fuzzy in nature. This, from a deficit angle, might seem as a lack of a strong common epistemological perspective on their work; however, fuzziness can be interpreted as richness and

epistemological elasticity, precisely because it allows a multi-perspective and multi-disciplinary approach which is fundamental for operating within complex higher education systems (Carew et al, 2008).

Finally, for all its complexity, what generally remains central in terms of the ED's collective identity is a specific *ethos* based around a strong commitment to the development of learning and teaching, along with a generally caring and supportive attitude towards academic staff. This common ethos points towards the possibility of understanding and collaboration, beyond national and institutional boundaries, among EDs (Taylor & Rege Colet, 2009).

Conclusions

This paper does not do full justice to the richness of the data gathered. However, it acts as a further element of reflection, based in empirical data, in the debates about the identities, roles and status of EDs. It highlights some of the tensions which are present in the profession, such as between 'service' and 'academic' work, as well as between 'compliance' and 'resistance' that so much characterises the work of EDs. Such tensions deserve further debate and research.

More specifically, there are many strands of our study that could be elaborated in future research, either with a narrow institutional focus or a broader national or international one. Among some of the matters more germane to the recognition of academic development as a distinct field of work are issues around the positioning, ranking and influence of EDs in institutional organizations. Other areas worthy of investigation are the scope of the role, its career prospects, and the routes by which individuals enter academic development work (McDonald & Stockley, 2008), including disciplinary background and the acquisition of the specific experiences (for example, a past record as teacher and supervisor in higher education) necessary for carrying out academic development work.

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