

'I take a critical stance but I feel my role is about compliance': Academic development, criticality and compliance (0186)

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Background and context:

From its inception, academic development has been marked by tension: academic developers are often caught between ensuring compliance with institutional policy and mandates, on the one hand, and attempting to hold open a space for creative and contesting pedagogies on the other.

This paper will explore the challenges articulated by those working in academic development and consider how these align with broader struggles within the sector as we see a move (propelled by the recent White Paper) towards a more marketised HE system arguably concerned more with metrics and satisfaction than critique and exploration.

Drawing on the findings from a sector-wide, SEDA-funded study into identity construction and location of those working in academic development, we consider three areas in which academic development is characterised by contestation and struggle:

1. Contestation about the purpose and nature of academic development as perceived by institutions and individuals
2. Complex orientation of those who work in academic development to education policy and practice
3. Conflicting views on the significance of research and agency to the role of the academic developer

Methods:

This study involved quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Following a literature review, the authors conducted an online survey with 214 respondents. In phase 2, follow up interviews were undertaken with 14 participants. We attempted to ensure that our interview pool was varied according to institution type, location within the institution, role (academic developer, educational researcher, learning technologist, senior manager), gender and length of experience. The qualitative data from the survey and interviews was coded and analysed by two researchers and grouped into themes to reflect dominant and secondary trends. A subset of the findings which address respondents' conceptualisation of their role and its inherent tensions in relation to academic development, HE policy and educational research is discussed in this paper.

Findings and discussion:

1. Contestation about the purpose and nature of academic development as perceived by institutions and individuals

Academic development is frequently a site of struggle between quality enhancement and quality assurance; partly this is determined by where academic development is positioned within an institution. For example, if, as in a significant minority of institutions, it is co-located with HR or Quality Assurance (geographically as well as organisationally), there is a perception that its function is to do with compliance and regulation, and academic developers suggest that this framing makes it harder to emphasize the developmental aspect of the role (McKenna and Hughes, submitted). The conceptualisation of academic development by institutions was also explored via questions about the status of contracts (e.g. academic, professional services), scope of the role, and opportunities for career development and progression.

2. Orientation of those who work in academic development to HE policy and practice

Participants in our study overwhelmingly viewed their work as supporting change, but they also indicated that adopting a critical stance towards practice and policy was important to them. However, a prominent theme in the qualitative data was that a critical stance adopted by academic developers was not welcomed by senior managers: 'I'd say a critical stance towards both policy and practice were crucial. (This is why I've resigned!)' (R 25).

This paper will explore this site of tension drawing on this research project as well as work by Clegg (2009), Boud and Brew (2013), Handal (2008), Barnett and Napoli (2009), Gosling (2009), Rowland (2006) and Fraser and Ling (2013), all of whom consider aspects of the changing nature of academic development and identity construction in relation to policy and practice and the inherent tensions between contestation and compliance.

3. The cultivation of a professional identity in this area, esp. in relation to scholarship and agency

In this part of the study, we asked participants to distinguish between work that is a formal part of the role and work that they undertook informally. This distinction was particularly marked in relation to research, grant applications and publishing: engaging in research was a formal part of the role for under a third of participants; however, half of all respondents undertook research activities 'informally' – so outside their 'contracted' work. For many respondents, engaging in research was important to their credibility, professional identity and career development, yet they found themselves discouraged, explicitly or implicitly, from doing it. Engaging in research was viewed as a 'subversive act', something for 'spare time' and even 'officially prohibited' yet at the same time being an important form of identity work that underpinned 'credibility' and afforded '[external] recognition'. In this part of the paper, we will explore further the tensions around 'performing' research in relation to academic development and consider why engaging in research in this area is seen as unwarranted and even contentious in some institutional contexts.

Conclusion and implications:

Competing conceptions of the role of academic developers meant that while most respondents adopt an academic orientation towards their job and value critique, enquiry, creativity and intellectual freedom, their employers (and academic colleagues) frequently perceive and frame the role as more service-oriented and compliance-driven.

The findings in all three of the categories above, signal that Land's 'identity paradox' in which academic developers frequently find themselves engaging in both 'domestication and critique' (Land, 2004) still obtains, with critique, although valued by study participants, perceived as not being welcomed by senior managers. These findings also point to what Clegg (2009) has identified as a struggle for legitimacy of academic development.

We explore here the points of conflict as well as some of the 'pleasures' of the role and conclude with practical implications for both the sector and institutions surrounding career progression, the significance of networks (national and international) and the need for institutional recognition of work that is being carried out in a rigorous but *informal* manner. We also consider the need for spaces such as those which academic development can offer *within* institutions to enable a critical discourse in relation to higher education, particularly in the current climate.

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