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Geertsema, J.; Rijst, R.M. van der

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Johan Geertsema & Roeland van der Rijst

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Access and success: rethinking and widening the impact of academic development

The vexed issue of the ‘impact’ of academic work, and of academic development (AD) itself, remains a perennial challenge for our field (Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Chalmers & Gardiner, 2015; Moya, Turra, & Chalmers, 2019; Sutherland, 2015). A recent *IJAD* editorial (Sutherland & Hall, 2018) recognizes the importance of impact, while at the same time seeking to problematize or at least to question it. As Sutherland and Hall point out, ‘we declare in our “Aims and Scope” that our journal’s goal is to improve the quality of higher education internationally and it is important that we continually ask ourselves as scholars and practitioners of academic development if we are achieving this goal’ (p. 69). Measuring this impact by providing evidence of the difference that we make has been a concern since the early days of *IJAD* (for example, Kreber & Brook, 2001). While inference measures are weak, such as participant perception (or satisfaction) and participation numbers, in neoliberal times they in truth are still – and perhaps increasingly – valued institutionally to determine what the so-called ‘ROI’ (return on investment) of our services is, since these are indicators that are easily measured. But do such metrics enable us to measure what we value, or do they instead just allow us to measure what is easily measured? And do we then end up valuing what we (can) measure instead of measuring what we value (see Biesta, 2016)? To adapt a distinction from the student success literature (see, for example, Lipka, 2019), while *access* (and widening access) to AD is important, and while participant satisfaction and participation numbers certainly matter, to what extent do they indicate actual *success*?

Given these issues, a prior question when it comes to measuring impact must involve considering the ‘normative validity’ of our measurements: a separate concern from their ‘technical validity’, or whether we are measuring what we intend to measure. Normative validity is a question of *values* and educational *purposes* (Biesta, 2016), of reflecting on ‘what constitutes “impact”’ and how we ‘sustain’ what we value (Sutherland & Hall, 2018, p. 69) before designing interventions to measure it, and so it requires paying more attention to the question of what ‘impact’ looks like. What are we trying to achieve, and why? What do we value as academic developers, and where can we make a difference? How do we value the rich knowledge and deep expertise of academics in higher education, whether in research universities or other post-secondary settings? And how (if at all) do we as academic developers connect our work, which more often than not will be focused on academics’ teaching, with priorities and values oriented toward research and the discovery of new knowledge? In this time of great disruption for the world in general, and for higher education and AD in particular, how are we dealing with the manifold challenges resulting from the pandemic, technological changes, and the straitened finances of many universities?

These questions all ultimately concern not just how effective we are (technical validity) but whether what we do matters and why (normative validity), and they need to be posed

within the context of the contested and indeed arguably transitory or marginal character of much AD, as a set of initiatives and activities that vary greatly according to context, and that are practised by persons who come from many different backgrounds (Green & Little, 2016). These variations relate to, among others, ‘academic developers’ positioning in their institution, for example, whether they are appointed in academic roles; whether there are specific academic development units and roles at all; how the units are labelled; and whether the academic developer role is actually recognized in particular institutional and national contexts’ (Bolander Laksov & Huijser, 2020, p. 295). Indeed, given the huge range of contexts of AD, as Bolander Laksov & Huijser go on to note, it is important both to recognize and to interrogate this diversity as it is intertwined with, and may perhaps account for, the difficulties of our field to define as well as communicate who we are and what we care about. Multiple contexts make it hard to establish common ground conceptually on a global level, which then has serious and potentially negative consequences: if we do not theorize our practice, communicating its impact to others becomes hard, one reason for the well-known institutional vulnerability of AD units.

This first issue of 2021 consists of nine contributions, seven articles and two reflections, that focus on one or both of the two interrelated concerns of *access* and *success*. These contributions are by twenty-eight authors from five countries: there are three articles from Australia and one each from Germany, South Africa, the UK, and the US; the issue ends with two reflections on practice, one from Australia and one from the US. All of these papers focus on processes of change or transitions and their effects, and are in their own specific ways attempts at ‘rethinking’ AD: who we are, where we want to go, and how we can be more inclusive and widen our reach. They present empirical evidence, and theorization of that evidence, to work towards moving the field forward by widening and deepening participation in teacher professional development (access), and by evaluating AD initiatives (success).

The key focus of the contribution by Daumiller, Rinas, Olden, and Dresel (2021) is to understand how academics’ achievement goals, which are closely connected with their motivation to participate in AD, relate to their engagement in and gains from professional development (PD) courses (p. 11). They derive implications for academic developers to enhance the success of these courses by examining the impact of PD initiatives on these academics’ achievement goals, their learning engagement, and their learning gains. In a self-reported pre-test post-test design, the impact of a variety of full-day PD courses that focused on enhancing teaching skills were evaluated. In this study, the authors focus specifically on the mediating effects of academics’ achievement goals on their engagement and the learning gains resulting from the initiatives. Overall, ‘the learning goals of academics should be supported to allow for more successful experiences in PD courses, and work-avoidance goals should be reduced’ (p. 19), which may imply having to provide dedicated time to academics to complete these courses so they need not ‘worry about other work-related tasks’, and suggests the need to integrate AD with their other academic concerns.

Wheeler and Bach (2021) study the impact of AD initiatives on classroom instruction and student achievement in STEM undergraduate courses. While most studies that examine the impact of AD initiatives focus on academics’ engagement and learning, Wheeler and Bach dig deeper into the impact on classroom instruction and student learning. They suggest that student-centred instruction and active learning pedagogies, when well designed and executed

with care, have the potential to close the achievement gap of underrepresented student groups, which is an ongoing concern for all higher education institutions around the world. AD initiatives can assist academics in implementing these classroom instructional strategies, though the authors point out that using specific instructional approaches is not what makes a difference, but whether the teacher is using these approaches well. Accordingly, they suggest further research is needed ‘not only to explore whether active learning is used, but how it is implemented’ (p. 37) and for what purpose.

Matthews and Dobbins (2021) focus on the impact of their institutional Advance HE fellowship scheme, specifically how the assessment process affects assessors, and thereby the degree to which it fosters communities of practice by benefiting the CPD of the assessors themselves. Their findings indicate that academics involved in the assessment of fellowship applications value the process and recognize its benefits for their own teaching by providing a lens through which to examine their practice. However, more work needs to be done to create communities in which assessors discuss their own teaching and student success. Even so, this study shows that academics participating in the assessment of fellowship applications experience similar benefits as the applicants: ‘It offers opportunities for participants to learn about alternative approaches from different disciplines and participate in a professional learning community’ (p. 50).

In a fourth paper, Hendry, Georgiou, Lloyd, Tzioumis, Herkes, and Sharma (2021) evaluate the impact of a peer observation and review of teaching (PORT) program at a faculty of science and consider the changes participants made to their teaching practices. This initiative combines a process of collegial peer review with teaching observation since ‘effective peer review programs lead to benefits to the institution by improving the collegial culture . . . and disseminating effective teaching methods’ (p. 55). As the study demonstrates, participants’ positive experiences with peer review and observation lead to four key implications for AD practice: special attention needs to be paid to establishing a relationship of trust between the reviewer and participant, as this was found to be vitally important for the success of PORT. Secondly, exposure to specific new teaching practices is important, and these new practices need to be sustained. The final implication is that the different elements of a successful scheme need to be tied together by means of collegiality and the fostering of confidence.

Where the four contributions above focus in particular on the success of AD initiatives in the context of change, the next three are arguably more oriented towards access and inclusivity, in this case, expanding the reach of AD. While often and for good reasons AD tends to focus on early career academics, graduate teaching assistants, and CPD for ‘mainstream’ academics, it is important also to recognize and address the needs of casual academic staff, staff transitioning to other roles, and professors who have to adapt their approach and move outside of their field of expertise. These three contributions accordingly report on casual academic staff, second career academics, and academics transitioning to interdisciplinary education.

The study by Herman, Jose, Katiya, Kemp, le Roux, Swart-Jansen van Vuuren, and van der Merwe (2021) reports on a New Academics’ Transitions Regional Colloquium (NATRC), which was intended to foster a community of practice among newly appointed academics who have migrated into academe. Herman et al. focus on the experiences of a small group of health professionals as they transition into higher education as second career academics (SCAs), and of the educational developers who

worked with them. They attempt to answer the question of ‘how SCAs, as a specific group of newly appointed academics, make sense of identity challenges’ (p. 71) as their role expands from clinician to include that of academic, from being an expert in their previous role to being a novice in their new role as an academic, where they are ‘expert novices’ (p. 70). Academic developers’ role consisted of assisting the SCAs in a ‘holistic transition’ involving negotiation of a three-stage process: drawing on a previous identity, experiencing identity in turmoil, and redefining identity. Nurturing ‘care-full’ environments requires alignment of educational development programmes with the unique needs of participants through communities of practice that acknowledge their turmoil, and the creation of mentorship to help them develop agency, thereby establishing a culture of care.

In another small-scale study, Hayes and Cejnar (2021) likewise focus on the challenges and affordances of transition. However, in this case, the study is oriented specifically to the experience of moving from expertise in a particular discipline to becoming ‘interdisciplinary educators’. Using narrative inquiry, the authors reflect on the challenges they have experienced and they investigate their own PD needs. Academics transitioning to a new, unfamiliar role experience feelings of being ‘adrift and undisciplined’ (p. 92). Especially in those circumstances, AD is ‘more beneficial and meaningful if it is immersed in daily teaching practice’ (p. 82). Sharing these narratives and creating collegial dialogue is then one means of improving teaching practice as a whole.

The final paper in this group, by McComb, Eather, and Imig (2021), provides a critical overview of pressing issues surrounding the ever-increasing number of casual (or sessional, adjunct) academic staff, who are now responsible for the majority of the teaching that takes place in higher education. These are academics in roles that have been ‘casualized’. As a consequence, they are non-tenured, often with teaching-only contracts, and without the opportunity to advance in their careers. Casual staff are in a precarious and marginalized position, and there is a clear need to provide development opportunities for them. Following an overview of casual staff AD programs and a number of reports on casualization in higher education, McComb et al. call for ‘a fundamental shift in our approach to the development and support of casual academic staff’ (p. 101), and make a number of policy recommendations as well as actionable suggestions to ensure access to successful AD for casual staff, including provision of mentoring and closer involvement of such staff in the ‘development and delivery of academic development programs’ (p. 102).

The issue ends with two reflections on practice. Burnett (2021) focuses on the widely used framework of constructive alignment in his Pacific context and shows that it needs critical re-evaluation and re-interpretation, with possible implications also for the global contexts of AD. Our work needs critical reflection in order to decolonize AD practices, and to ensure access and respect for difference that can all too easily be elided by rigid frameworks such as constructive alignment. Martin (2021) provides an account of his transition into a faculty position from that of an administrator, and reflects on the challenges and opportunities of that transition. He provides insights to ease the way, which will be useful both for those of us who move from administrative to faculty roles, and for academic developers who need to plan and offer support.

All the contributions to this issue describe various ways of increasing access to, and evaluating the success of, our academic development initiatives. Continuous and deliberate

critical reflection on academic development practices is needed to stay abreast of the continuous changes at our institutions and beyond. Although all of these papers were written and accepted for publication before the current pandemic, each of the topics analyzed by the authors remains relevant during the pandemic, and will remain so afterwards. The current situation shows in clear and distinctive ways that the work of academic developers is crucial for the survival and thriving of academia, but that this work needs to be constantly mindful of the dual challenges of increased access and success.

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Johan Geertsema

University Scholars Programme, National University of Singapore, Singapore

 uspjgh@nus.edu.sg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6540-408X>

Roeland van der Rijst

Graduate School of Teaching (ICLON), Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

 rrijst@iclon.leidenuniv.nl  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6749-8283>