

**The evolving role of academic development in improving effective teaching:  
Reflections on teaching during COVID 19 lockdown.**

**Abstract**

Early in 2020, the onset of COVID-19 pandemic forced the higher education to online teaching and learning platforms. The opportunities and challenges that came along during this period point out to the importance of academic development playing a critical role for effective teaching. The professional practice of academic development itself shifted from being a centre that supports academics to making academics active in developing their knowledge and skills that make them effective teachers. A review of the literature shows that academic's role covers three broad areas, namely teaching, research and service. But these roles are interrelated and becoming complex in recent years with technology playing a bigger role. Hence, we propose that academic development is a necessity and leads to enhancing effective teaching. We examine the proposition through literature review and reflective practice from a teachers' perspective. As a result, we identified four themes: academic development, effective teaching, developing effective teaching, and university support. While the themes broadly matched the literature, an area of interest that emerged is the use of non-formal support structures by university academics in the context of online teaching due to COVID-19. Finally, we propose a conceptual framework and discuss the implications for continuous academic development.

**Keywords:** Academic development; scholarship of teaching and learning; effective teaching

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**1. Introduction**

Academic development has emerged as an important area of practice in higher education. Previously, its main purpose was to support academics become effective teachers. To this end, it took the form of an center to support academics. As the years passed by, the specific activities covered under the umbrella term of academic development, however, kept changing over time (Clegg, 2009; Geertsema, 2016). Therefore, academic roles become dynamic and adapt to the changing environment. Consequently, terms such as educational development, faculty development, staff development, professional development and continuing professional development indicate the ever-changing nature of the field. The need for academic development was highlighted when the higher education sector had to shift from classroom teaching to online teaching completely due to COVID-19 lockdown. Teaching online many challenges as teachers had to grapple with issues that they were not prepared for. Hence, it is useful to examine how academic development can enhance the effective teaching of academics in the higher education sector. The purpose of the paper is reflect on our teaching experience and point out to the critical role that academic development could play in ensuring effective teaching and quality higher education.

**2. Literature Review**

Even in the last century, research focused on how the higher education sector has responded to economic and social pressures (Anderson & Eaton, 1982a; 1982b; Brew & Boud, 1996). The main concern of these studies was about the quality of university teaching, accountability and academic performance. To address these issues, many universities set up centres for academic development to engage and help the academic staff in their roles (Havnes & Stensaker, 2006). Research scholars focused on investigating actual or ideal activities and the

outcomes of such efforts (Akerlind, 2005). Slowly, the focus shifted toward academics themselves to develop them appropriately through different types of professional development. But, the focus was mainly on the development of teaching. Academics like to focus on academic interests relating to intellectual freedom, academic autonomy, intellectual scholarship and exploration of ideas. Several factors influence teaching in the form of disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical tools, peer collaboration, revision of curricula. However, academics' responsibilities go beyond teaching and require an evidence-based approach. Within the domain of academic development, the topic of teaching and learning emerged as the primary area (Clegg, 2009). Simultaneously, there has been a growing scholarly approach to understanding academic development in the form of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), which can positively impact academic development (Geertsema, 2016). Boud and Brew (2013) point to the complexity of academic development work and the scholarly approach that is occurring in this space in the form of SoTL. Nevertheless, the teaching role is central to the purpose of higher education, where students are the beneficiaries of learning outcomes. While other roles are important, they interact with the role of teaching and enhance its effectiveness.

As mentioned, in general, teaching takes a primary place in the set of responsibilities that an academic has to discharge. To perform this role effectively, the teacher has to know the knowledge of the discipline and ability to present it well, pedagogically. Hence, Shulman (1986) proposed the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) model to highlight the need to formulate the subject content in a way that converts it into effective knowledge for teaching. The PCK model represents combining the content and pedagogy into a bundle of relevant topics to help learners of varying abilities and to increase the effectiveness of instruction and learning. Implicitly, Shulman's model takes cognisance of the learners' characteristics and contextual situation for improving the learning outcomes. As the role of technology and the

internet increased in education, Mishra and Koehler (2006) and Koehler, Mishra, & Cain (2013) proposed a new model called technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK). These authors particularly mention widely used web-based technologies such as blogs or podcasts and social networking sites. These frameworks and the discussion point out to the need for knowledge in a relevant discipline, understanding of the needs of students and the use of appropriate pedagogy to enhance the teaching effectiveness and increasing learning outcomes. These models have the ability to envelop the use of online technologies and cloud-based tools for teaching tech-savvy students.

Before examining how to enhance effective teaching, it will be useful to understand the meaning of the term effective teaching. Ding and Sherman (2006) point out that there is no clear definition. But, they point out the importance of ‘doing right things’ rather than ‘doing things right’ as they point out the difference between teaching effectiveness and teaching efficiency, respectively. According to McKeachie (1997), effective teaching is the degree to which one has facilitated student achievement of education goals (p. 385). Good, Wiley and Florez (2009) also take a similar stance and define effective teaching as the ability to improve student achievement. So, the focus is on helping students perform. That requires students to be independent thinkers and increase their metacognitive skills and problem-solving skills. Galbraith and Merrill (2012) support this notion by suggesting that achieving learning outcomes could be a measure of teaching effectiveness. However, learning outcomes and teaching effectiveness is a highly complex process requiring a personal process of evaluation of multiple variables. Hence, it would be useful to examine the antecedents and other contextual factors that impact teachers ‘ability’ to improve. Therefore Good et al. (2009) underscore different facets, including teachers knowledge (both about the subject and of students), teachers behaviour (warmth, civility and clarity) and teachers beliefs, etc. Nevertheless, these factors are not static, and the learning environment in higher education

changes continuously. Teachers' knowledge, personal characteristics, professionalism, teaching practices, classroom management style and the facilities available in the classroom or university could contribute to teaching effectiveness.

An important measure of teaching in general and teaching effectiveness, in particular, is how satisfied students are from their learning experience. In the contemporary world, where marketisation of education has become a norm with students viewed as customers, such perspective is hard to avoid. For example, students' positive assessment of teaching effectiveness can have multiple benefits. In addition to creating a positive learning environment, the feedback can be used to revise the curriculum content or pedagogy following models of Shulman (1986) and Koehler et al. (2013). That is why student feedback became an essential process for both academic development and teaching effectiveness. Carless and Boud (2018) point out that teachers could create a suitable curriculum environment for active learner participation. Appreciating the student feedback helps in making necessary judgement calls by teachers in enhancing teaching effectiveness (Floden, 2017). Therefore, receiving feedback from students has become a norm in the higher education sector, globally.

A related area to academic development and teaching practice is research as it helps academics in discharging their teaching responsibility (Akerlind, 2005; Boud & Brew, 2013). While there are different research strands in higher education, teaching role receives support from two major research areas: the disciplinary content and the pedagogy. Effective teachers need to be an academic who is abreast with the recent advances in the relevant field. Otherwise, the content will become obsolete over time. The second area is to do research and network with peers and academic practitioners to know appropriate pedagogical methods that could be used in class to increase teaching effectiveness. As the new teaching techniques and platforms emerge, their usage would give the course perception of contemporariness that

match practices in the industry. Such investigation can be embedded in the SoTL approach, which examines both sides of the learning process, and by including multiple disciplines into its fold (Boud & Brew, 2013; Poole, 2013).

It is essential to recognise that universities, in general, support academic development through a range of activities, particularly for teaching and research. While some barriers, such as lack of resources, exist (Brew, Boud, Lucas, & Crawford, 2020), individuals also take responsibility to benefit from the support structures available. There are professional bodies of academic development provide forum and resources to keep pace with contemporary developments. Examples would include the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the UK, and the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDASA). These bodies provide accreditation and fellowships to members by championing best practices and bringing together professional through conferences and other interactive forums. From the discussion above, we know that academic development is an enabling process in higher education. But the impact of COVID-19 teaching from the beginning of 2020 has clearly pointed out that the need for ongoing academic development to face new challenges, many of which, simply did not exist before. Bao (2020) mentioned the importance of changing the instructional design quickly to suit the new context.

### **3. Reflections on the need for academic development**

The COVID-19 context provided an excellent backdrop for us to appreciate the concept and practice of academic development. Far from being disconnected with the disciplinary role, it is found to be embedded in it. We come from different departments (business, education and health care) but have taught during the COVID-19 lockdown and have experience in shifting to online teaching at a short notice. Based on these reflections, we propose four independent themes that constitute the concept of academic development.

#### *3.1 Academic development*

Although seen as an independent theme, academic development appears to be over-arching one linked to many others. The word academic is further unpacked into different facets, namely, teaching role, research role and service role. First, the teaching role is crucial for academics, as it is a responsibility towards students. Teachers should know the needs of the students, motivate them, highlight academic values and make students active members of the learning community. Teaching is not just a transmission of knowledge but also involves co-creation of knowledge and empowering students. The teachers need relevant disciplinary knowledge, and appropriate tools – the combination of content and delivery. Secondly, academics need to be active in research in two complementing areas, namely the disciplinary knowledge and evolving teaching methods. The innovative teaching methods increases student engagement, which in turn, affects the learning outcomes positively. Hence, academics have to engage in research in both disciplinary field and teaching and learning area. Third, service role is another responsibility of academics – can support the department, university, or even society. Being an academic carries certain obligation towards contributing to the betterment of society. Specifically, academics can help their students by instilling academic integrity, ethical values, and provide pastoral care. Overall, academics need to be committed to making the world a better place. As they undertake innovative paths, they act and become risk-takers. Due to various roles involved, it is related to the concept of academic citizenship, which inherently refers to the existence of multiple facets of being an academic.

### *3.2 Effective teaching*

The term effective teaching has multiple components. It means responsibility towards students to make them learn, develop a sense of autonomy and self-determination. It requires knowledge and relevance to students learning, which points out to the appropriate choice of teaching methods. The use of online and hybrid teaching means teachers need to identify suitable contemporary teaching methods. The main purpose of teaching is to communicate

with students and ensure that they achieve the learning outcomes of the lesson or course.

Teaching should also be engaging and should exemplify honesty, transparency and dignity.

Creating such a learning environment makes a teacher authentic and helps in co-creating the knowledge with mutual respect between teachers and learners. Other stakeholders and processes can help in effective teaching - students' feedback – formative and summative, peers' observation – formal and non-formal, and even own reflection – during and after the teaching sessions.

### *3.3 Developing effective teaching*

Developing effectiveness in teaching can be formal and non-formal types. Formal ways to improve teaching could include completing a programme to gain a teaching qualification or attend workshops that are focused on teaching a particular skill or method. Examples of workshops could be on engaging a large class or running a flipped classroom or using a new online teaching tool. Monitoring the environment to identify the 'in-thing' would be helpful, i.e., knowing what is relevant to the current context. It would also be useful to collaborate with other peers across disciplines to learn teaching methods and tools. Regular feedback from peers, collaborative teaching, attending seminars and conferences, sharing experiences in a community of practice would help in developing effective teaching. An important part of being an effective teacher involves designing the curriculum in a way that is relevant and appropriately pitched. Gaining inputs from the stakeholders, including prospective employers, industry leaders, and former students, would be helpful.

### *3.4 University and other support sources*

Academic development needs support from various sources. The primary support comes from the university itself. The formal ways of support can be in the form of fees and time to complete a qualification. But, the support could also be in the form of a supporting manager, who creates an environment of collaboration and honest communications. The academic staff



could also join a disciplinary or professional body to attend conferences and network with their peers in other institutions. Further, several short-term workshops and presentations that take place in the university could be ‘learning opportunities.’ In many cases, individuals should take the initiative and attend these events to learn new tools or skills. In the current COVID-19 context, the online learning has become very popular. So academics learn from one another about what is working and what is not to make teaching effective or undertake collaborative research. Therefore, a supportive and enabling ecosystem in the university helps academics to improve their teaching effectiveness. It may be necessary to point out that sometimes, staff do feel a lack of support or empathy from their managers. In some cases, the frequent restructuring of the departments and universities do demotivate staff due to uncertainty and lack of clear direction.

#### **4. Proposing a conceptual diagram**

The four important themes presented in the preceding section resonate with the literature reviewed in this paper. Of the four, two main themes are academic development and effective teaching, the latter being a behavioural concept. The discussion shows that the knowledge and skills required for effective teaching can come through the process of academic development, which covers many other aspects that support an academic. The models of Shulman (1986) and Koehler et al. (2013) focusing on technology, pedagogy and knowledge in a way that meets learners needs finds support in the findings. Themes refer to disciplinary knowledge and teaching tools. Similarly, there is also support for the research role of being an academic. The discussion on the theme of academic development shows research supports both the disciplinary and pedagogy aspects of teaching. However, the themes are integrated with each other. Hence, based on literature review and the themes identified in this reflection, we propose the following conceptual map to show the linkages between the concepts.

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Figure 1 here

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While academic development is important for effective teaching, support from the university management and the resources available will make a significant difference in teaching outcomes. Further, proactive teachers do not necessarily wait to receive formal support from the university or management. Instead, they look for non-formal support and resources to improve their teaching. They include learning from peers and using personal networks, which could be an area for further research as many universities face resources crunch for the commitment of funds formally. As the use of online teaching has increased significantly due to COVID-19, scholars across the world are sharing their knowledge by virtual workshops, often making them freely available. Customising teaching to the needs of students is critical. Bao (2020) highlighted the importance of appropriate instructional design that is relevant for student learning, participation, and making contingency plans emergencies in online education. Therefore academics who focus on continuous education, either formally or informally, will be leading their peers in being effective teachers. The suggestion to undertake continuous development, as pointed out by Brew and Boud (1996), is still relevant. They observe, *Development is a concept concerned with the process of change. Change, in turn, generates new development needs* (Brew & Boud, 1996; p.20).

## **5. Conclusion**

The study explored the concept of academic development and how it can help enhancing effective teaching. The four themes identified in through our reflection are relevant, the concept as such is still evolving as seen by the new demands on higher education professionals who embarked on online teaching due to COVID-19 lockdown. Hence the need for researchers in SoTL in the management disciplines are called to investigate further and share practices that can contribute to effective teaching.

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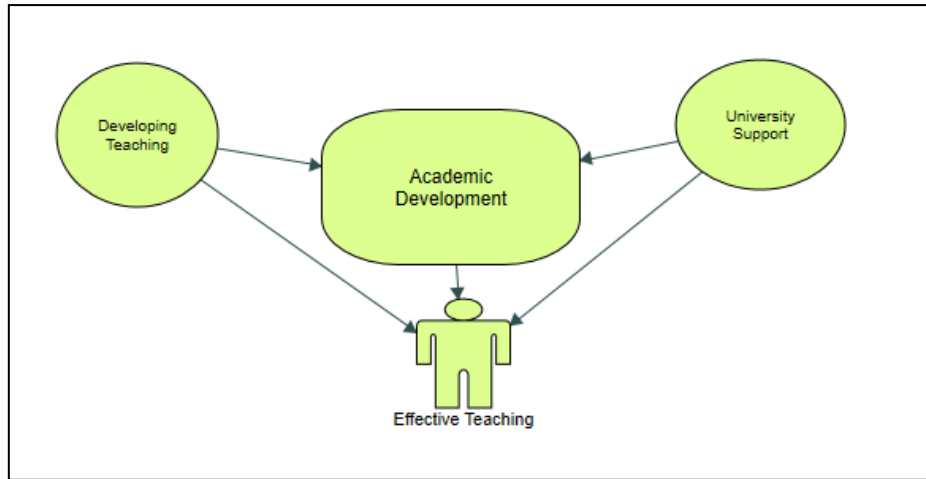


Figure 1: A proposed framework of academic development and teaching