

# Academic Development in Research Focus

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**Introduction:** The editorial aims to revisit the field of academic development as it is being researched worldwide. The JLE editors analyse the notion, its origin, domains, and implementation trajectories in various countries.

**Overview of Global Research on Academic Development:** A short overview of the previously published research on academic development shows that most publications date between 2000 and 2020, with a focus on teaching and learning, trajectories in higher education, trends in practices of academic developers, and research as part of academic development. The authors also dwell upon the research competencies and support to the researchers that have become an integral part of academic development programmes in many countries.

**Survey:** To clarify the attitudes to academic development in the regions that took up academic development some ten years ago, a Survey on Perceptions of Academic Development was conducted among university staff in Russia. It found out the placement of academic development in higher education.

**Conclusion:** Summing up the key issues relating to academic development, the JLE editors outline the research agenda on academic development for potential authors.

**Keywords:** academic development, university, faculty, staff development, research, professional development, teaching, learning

## Introduction

Academic profession includes teaching, research and service. The University as an institution is being transformed, with new challenges arising with time. The concept “academic development”, as we know it now, came into being some forty years ago, spurred by spreading technologies in education. Though, some researchers consider twenty years as the period of the field development (Altbach, 2014). But already in the 1960s and 1970s there was an emphasis on teaching development in pursuit of the quality of education that was to a degree within modern perceptions of the academic development field. Thus, this aspect of academic development was promoted but in isolation to other aspects (Åkerlind, 2011). Before targeting research competencies, universities turned to meeting other non-core needs such as “development of leadership and management skills” (Åkerlind, 2011).

The different approaches to the period timing result

from different domains that researchers include into the field of academic development. By now, academic development has turned into a system incorporated in higher education of some countries and supporting staff at universities in satisfying their needs. In other countries, academic development exists de facto or is otherwise named.

At present, academic development forms an integral part of Anglophone educational systems and a nearly established research field. More countries are beginning to share the academic development discourse, though some of the related activities, policy tools, and realia have been there for years, though differently named.

The domains of well-established systems of academic development in Anglophone countries are based on national projects or any other nation-wide initiatives. This was the case in Australia, with its “Benchmarking Performance of Academic Development Units in Australian Universities”. The latter included strategy,

policy and governance at institution, quality of learning and teaching, scholarship of learning and teaching, professional development, credit-bearing programmes in higher education, learning and teaching development, engagement, academic development unit effectiveness (CADAD, 2011).

There is another complex approach to academic development within which “six qualitatively different ways of experiencing development” are outlined, including work productivity, academic standing, work quality, breadth of understanding, contribution to a field or community (Åkerlind, 2005). Some researchers categorise “academic development work as academic, professional, or a mix of the two” (Fraser & Ling, 2014).

In response to the new challenges, academic development as a system within universities has broadened to cover support to students’ learning and, to some point, research. The manifestation of higher education and growing international competition among universities have forced universities to invest more in research, becoming “research intensive” (Altbach, 2014).

A mixture of approaches to research as an essential part of academic development resulted from the role that research plays in the activities of university professors and lecturers. Whereas research is incorporated in the profession of university teachers at large, there are notable differences among the university requirements towards research and publications depending on academic positions and countries.

In Anglophone countries, a tenure-track professorship implies a teaching professor, who may be engaged in research. Moreover, though teaching and university service state the core of the activities of a tenure-track professor, a tenure is granted mainly based on research. Research professors are a separate category, and as such their research is funded in a different way. In non-Anglophone countries, professorships tend to focus on teaching with research as an essential, but incidental activity, with few exceptions.

The shift to research in academic development has become remarkable, with universities getting involved into university rankings. As most of the rankings are essentially based on university scholarly publications and their scientometrics, professors and lecturers have found themselves involuntarily bound to publish articles in highly reputed journals. Thus, research is formally incorporated into academic development systems at universities.

## An Overview of Global Research on Academic Development

As of February 26, 2022, there are as many as 2,058 Scopus-indexed publications with “academic development” as the key word. The first record in Scopus dates to 1961. In the period between 1961 and 2003, the database registered annually from 1 to 19 publications. During 2004-2011, there were 27-79 publications a year. Starting from 2012, the annual numbers were over 100, with 191 and 205 in 2020 and 2021 respectively. The statistics for 2022 are incomplete (26 publications as of February 26, 2022).

The selected publications represent Social Sciences (48.8%); Psychology (9.9%); Medicine (9.7%); Computer Science (6.3%); Arts and Humanities (4.9%); Engineering (4.5%); Business, Management and Accounting (3.2%), and others (with less than 2%).

The leading source by the number of publications is the *International Journal for Academic Development* (233 publications). The most proliferate authors include A. J. Martin (12 publications); T. Roxa (11 publications); B. Leibowitz (10 publications).

The search for “academic development” keyword brought 1,512 results (as of February 28, 2022). The results were recorded from 1981 to 2022, with over 150 annually from 2017 and under 50 before 2010.

The source ranking first by the number of publications is the *International Journal for Academic Development* (132 publications), the leading world source with the focus on academic development.

The patterns and trends in the publications indexed in the Web of Science are very much in compliance with those in Scopus, as the *International Journal for Academic Development* is indexed in the both databases.

The prevailing topics in the most cited articles and reviews cover general issues, including the field scope and research approaches (Clegg, 2012; Fraser & Ling, 2014; Greertsema, 2016; Fyffe, 2018); teaching and learning (Barrow & Grant, 2012; Van Schalkwyk, Lebowitz, Herman, & Farmer, 2015); trajectories in higher education (Matthews, Lodge, & Bosanquet, 2014); trends in practices of academic developers (Jones et al., 2017; Sugrue, Englund, Solbrekke, & Fossland, 2018); research as part of academic development (Boyd & Smith, 2016); teacher identity (Van Lankveld et al., 2017).

## A Survey on Perceptions of Academic Development

In 2013, Russia found itself among those countries that joined university rankings (QS). It spurred the universities in Russia to promote research and encourage their researchers to publish the results of their work more actively in international highly reputed journals. The researchers needed support in promoting their publishing activities. New mechanisms were introduced at the universities that reminded of academic development structures in the Anglophone countries.

To estimate what perceptions of academic development are prevailing among Russian educators, administration, faculty, and teaching staff at universities, we conducted a small-scale survey.

The survey aims are to find out:

- when the participants came across academic development for the first time;
- what academic development includes;
- what constitutes the difference, if any, between

academic and professional development;

- in what ways academic development is integrated into universities.

Participants: 110 participants from six universities located in Russia, including

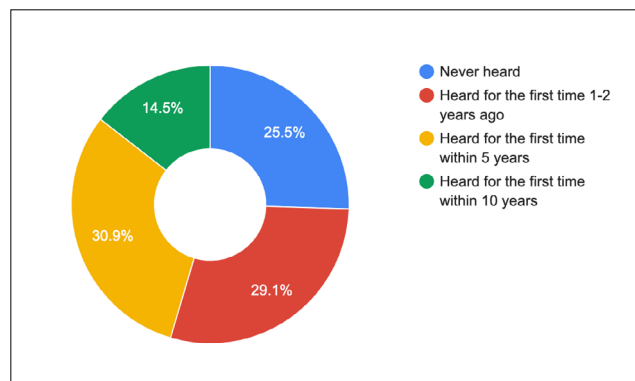
- 58 professors and lecturers (52.7%), 14 out of 58 are part-time administrators;
- 12 faculty staff (10.9%);
- 30 researchers with part-time teaching (27.3%);
- 10 teaching PhD students (9.1%).

The survey was anonymous and voluntary. All participants were informed of the survey aims and the further use of its results for research purposes. The survey was completed in February 2022.

25.5% of the respondents never heard of academic development. Only 14.5% came across the term within the previous 10 years. Another 30.9% learned about academic development within the last 5 years. The remaining 29.1% of the participant heard of the phenomenon some 1-2 years ago (see Diagram 1).

### Diagram 1

*The awareness of the educators, university faculty and teaching staff of academic development in the survey at Russian universities*



According to the respondents, the concept of academic development covers research competencies (45.5%); information competencies (12.8%); competencies relating to teaching and learning (10.9%); competencies relating to technologies in teaching and learning (10.9%); personal growth competencies (9.1%); academic writing (3.6%); other competencies, including professional development competencies (7.3%).

In the survey, there were judgements on academic development vs professional development that are rather common among university teaching staff in

many countries. They include the following observations (slightly abridged):

- Academic development is aimed at enhancing research competencies for teaching purposes;
- Academic development is a complex activity, including fostering research, teaching and information competences of academic staff;
- Professional development is limited to the professional activity. Academic development entails efforts relating to efficient teaching at university and educational technologies;
- Academic development boils down to teaching

- at university and educational technologies;
- Professional development is aimed at the higher quality of educational services in higher education by introducing new teaching techniques. Academic development targets university teachers' research directly or indirectly connected with the taught subjects;
- Academic development targets the educational institution on the whole;
- Academic development is linked to academia and research;
- Academic development is limited to research, scholarly writing, recognition in science;
- Academic development is a specially organised and directed activity for teaching and faculty staff to get engaged in educational

business, new services and programmes of life-long learning;

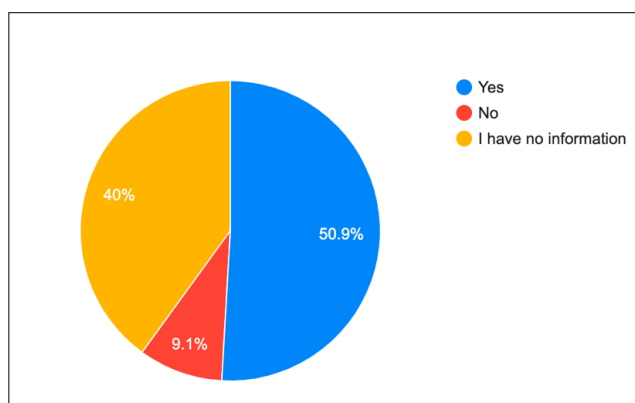
- Academic development implies development of teachers' personality, fostering new competencies, building a successful career.

A mixture of notions, contradictory statements, and the above definitions points to the fact that not all universities worldwide have similar approaches to academic development.

There were another two questions in the survey giving an insight into the situation and perceptions of academic development as well as the depth it is incorporated in higher education in Russia (see Diagram 2 and Diagram 3).

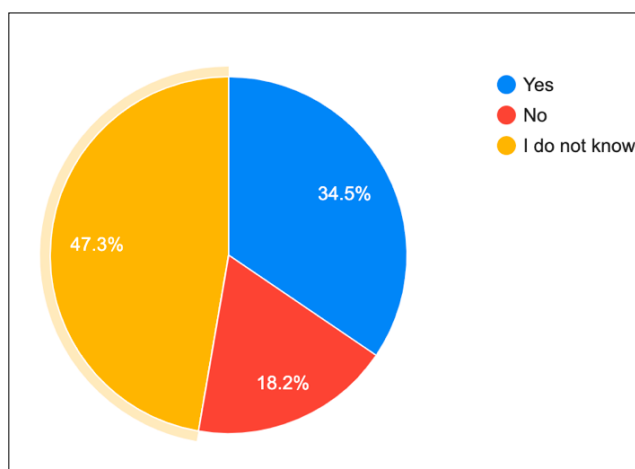
### Diagram 2

Survey Question 5. Is the term "academic development" used in any programme at your university?



### Diagram 3

Survey Question 5. Is the term "academic development" used in your university's internal communication and documentation?



Judging by the results of the survey, the participants included university teaching and faculty staff who

were unevenly aware of academic development. The contradictions in valuations and definitions reflected

insufficient or undue efforts to introduce academic development in the universities in Russia. Another explanation is that there might be various terminology used globally and locally. The comparable views are registered in other countries with similar conditions. Some additional research is necessary to get a more unbiased understanding of the situation.

## Conclusion

Academic development is a rapidly changing field. The research responds to the new challenges universities and academic profession are facing worldwide. The JLE is willing to give preference to manuscripts on themes within the academic development agenda as the editorial board sees the importance and prominence of the field issues for higher education.

The JLE potential authors might focus on the domains that academic development contains. We attach a particular interest to research as a component of academic development programmes, including support to researchers in determining their publishing trajectory.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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