



Building trustful relationships through intrapreneurship in academic development

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Abstract

Trust between people who develop academics (Academic Developers) and academics is not always straightforward, and where trust does exist, it can often be limited to the individuals involved in the interaction, rather than extending to the wider institutional culture. This lack of trust can be attributed to a variety of factors, one of which is the perception that Academic Developers are merely a management tool focused on performance metrics rather than upholding quality standards. Academic Developers' cognitive authority can also be challenged by institutional and administrative authority, affecting trust between academics and developers. This reflection aims to explore barriers to the development of trust between Academic Developers and academics before proposing changes in practice to bridge the trust gap. The main focus of this reflection is to scale trust beyond individual relationships and promote a culture of trust within the institution. By doing so, we advocate for an approach that works towards building a more trusting environment in HE that fosters collaboration, creativity, and success, given that Academic Developers' role as a 'broker' between the institution and colleagues is becoming more prevalent. We argue, however, that efforts to achieve more robustly trustful relationships between Academic Developers and the communities they serve require investment, buy-in and championing by senior executive teams to ensure Academic Developers are themselves appropriately developed to fulfil their potential. As such, we propose a framework for building trust through integrating intrapreneurship in Academic Developer CPD activity.

Keywords: trust; intrapreneurship; academic development; collaboration.

Introduction

If trust issues are characterised by avoidance, doubt and the withholding of information, trust itself can be defined as a quality that is developed when ‘one agent, through their interactions, convinces the other of their capabilities, honesty, and benevolence’ (Simon and Pleschová, 2021, p.281). More specifically, trust is:

a psychological state of an actor (the trustor) who is willing to accept vulnerability to another individual (the trustee) based on positive expectations regarding the intentions and the behaviour of the trustee ... The decision to trust results from a combined judgement about another person’s likeability and ... ability, integrity, and benevolence (Simon and Pleschová, 2021, p.281).

Trust is therefore an essential component for effective collaboration and knowledge sharing, both in initiating and sustaining these activities. In a recent study on trust in the university, Gibbs and Kharouf (2022) found that, along with mutual reciprocity, trust was also an important driver in supporting and developing effective relationships between academics and professional services, as part of the process of co-creating value. Yet despite this centrality of trust to learning and teaching relationships and practices (Stocks and Trevitt, 2016; Boschman et al., 2021), it remains an under-researched topic in higher education (HE) (Tierney, 2006; Hagenauer and Volet, 2014; Felten, Forsyth and Sutherland, 2023). It may also not be as pervasive as its importance suggests; trust deficits specific to the academic development space are widely acknowledged by practitioners (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2017).

Looking at academic development specifically, a recent special issue of the *International Journal of Academic Development* entitled ‘Conversations on Learning and Teaching: Changing Conceptions and Practice’ collated many articles that noted the centrality of trust for academic development conversations and relationships (e.g., Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Iqbal and Vigna, 2021; Simon and Pleschová, 2021), while other researchers have also considered trustworthiness as a key component of Academic Developers’ credibility (Little and Green, 2022). Notwithstanding these contributions, our literature-searching efforts using compound search terms such as ‘Faculty/trust/in higher education’, and ‘trustful/staff to staff/relationships/higher education’ have found that definitions and conceptualisations of trust in academic development remain rather scarce, and empirical research is even rarer (it is worth noting that these direct search terms may have limited our results, and

that trustful relationships could be explored elsewhere without being directly named as such), prompting us to develop this discussion here. Although trust is acknowledged as a crucial starting point for a productive working relationship (e.g., Taylor et al., 2022), it has not been explored in its own right.

Despite this, trust is essential for the success of academic development processes. When academic staff trust Academic Developers, they are more likely to be open to new ideas, participate in development activities, and implement changes in their teaching practices (Iqbal and Vigna, 2021). Their willingness to be vulnerable with a fellow professional and take risks is based on a belief that the trusted partner is capable and benevolent (Simon and Pleschová, 2021). Other scholars (Cook-Sather et al., 2021, p.350) have referred to trust helping to counter institutional resistance to innovations in academic practice (Neame, 2013; Stocks and Trevitt, 2016) and increasing the likelihood of more constructive conversations among colleagues about teaching in higher education (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2017).

Given its potential for enhancing practice, there is scope for more research on the role of academic development and Academic Developers in identifying, building and maintaining trust in different HE contexts and among different HE practitioners and learners. The aim of this paper is therefore to contribute to this literature and highlight alternative practices that can boost it. In particular, we introduce the notion of ‘intrapreneurship’ in relation to how HE providers might better support the professional development of their Academic Developer colleagues. This is crucial because our own experience suggests that each university tends to take a variety of localised approaches to boosting trust between Academic Developers and their academic community, with more or less success. This reflection seeks instead to offer suggestions for a more transferable and scalable approach to building trust applicable to a variety of HE organisational settings, based on taking a broader, contextualised view of the role of the Academic Developer.

In the discussion that follows, we first consider the problem with trust and academic development by pointing to some of the prime causes for this. We then explore what academic development teams can do differently to build this trust. Lastly, we come to the important linkage between academic development, third-space professionals and intrapreneurship in terms of considering how best to position the academic development community to build and bolster trustful relationships.

Part one: the problem with trust and academic development

Trust between academics and Academic Developers is contingent (Sugrue et al, 2019); institutional authority – status within an institution – and administrative authority – structural hierarchies – must compete with the cognitive authority by which the Academic Developer is valued as a source of knowledge and therefore someone whom the academic *consents* to be influenced by (Little and Green, 2022). Nevertheless, the Academic Developer’s increasingly prevalent role as a ‘broker’, between institutional direction and collegial relationships (Sugrue et al., 2019, p.756), suggests tension in the academic–developer relationship. Indeed, there is something of a tension in the job title itself, which appeals to both a specific kind of knowledge (academic) and a managerial (hierarchical and instrumentalised) role. There are several possible reasons for the problematic relations referred to.

The first relates to a gradual erosion of the Academic Developer role profile so that, ‘while striving to elevate the importance of teaching and learning in their institutions, academic development as a profession has lost something, its history, its values, and thereby its power to steer development’ (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2017, p.96). The upshot of this is that the “the goods” of Academic Developers’ professional judgement – expertise and scholarship – are subject to institutional capture both for good and ill’ (Peseta, 2014, p. 66). This then leads to Academic Developers becoming ‘entangled in’ intra-institutional ‘power dynamics’ (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2017, p.96), their administrative authority usurping and undermining their cognitive authority.

Another potential factor is that Academic Developers may be viewed as a type of management entity, brought in to offer guidance on what and how academics should teach. This guidance is often supported by evidence from the pedagogical literature and may include recommendations for new practices. Unfortunately, however, the perception that this derives from management can lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions between academics and Academic Developers, which can hamper collaborative efforts. Some may also believe that the emergence of educational development as a profession poses a risk to academic independence (Bayerlein and McGrath, 2016). This may be partly due to the often-collapsed hierarchy between Academic Developers and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) Education role within HE institutions, funnelling Academic Developers into a silo in proximity to senior management and making them appear to be a

conduit for the correction of wrongdoing or malpractice. This is compounded by the PVC role often and increasingly focusing on metrics, results, performance and drivers for excellence, rather than qualitative aspects of teaching excellence. In essence, it is a context of speaking different languages with different, sometimes clashing, goals.

A lack of appreciation for, or knowledge of what Academic Developers are and do is captured in the ‘contradictory propositions’ inherent in the relationship between academics and Academic Developers (Fyffe, 2018, p.361). These tensions at least partially emanate from limited opportunities for interaction and engagement between the wider academic community and the offering of an institutional academic development team. It is perhaps also borne of academics’ heavy discipline focus and increasing Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory Bodies’ (PSRBs) subject requirements, and a fear that central academic development teams are unappreciative of particular subject area nuances reflecting effective learning, teaching and assessment practices. Even those parts of the academic community who feel positively towards Academic Developers tend, in our experience, to only approach them when experiencing problems or struggling. Consequently, academic development teams are often perceived as fixers. Never was this more prevalent than during the COVID-19 pandemic when many universities pivoted at pace to partial or full online learning.

Whatever the issues, the divide between academics and Academic Developers is a perennial issue that requires some reflection and a transferable and scalable plan for change that goes beyond institution-centric fixes.

Part two: what can academic development teams do differently to build trust?

While no magic bullet exists to resolve trust deficits between academic communities and Academic Developers, there is scope to consider ways of moving beyond localised strategies towards a more sector-wide approach. We suggest a roadmap for successful trust building between Academic Developer teams and the wider academic community achievable at scale intra-organisationally as well as inter-organisationally. Four key ideas ensue.

The first is that developing wider and clearer organisational visibility of Academic Developers, as both people and professionals, is a vital yet multifaceted issue. Enhancing the profile of Academic Developers through building their academic credentials, engaging them via academic rather than professional service contracts and encouraging the same research activity and outputs as other academic community members, could enhance credibility and trust in the professional expertise of academic development teams (Little and Green, 2022, p.813, refer to credentials as the ‘gatekeepers to the academy’). Investments in mentoring Academic Developers to become research active and enhance their external profiles could also enable them to draw on their research to evidence and substantiate suggested internal enhancements to practice. In addition, ensuring academic development teams receive professional development opportunities equal to academic peers via, for example, Fellowship, National Teaching Fellowship (NTF), the Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE) and other recognition, could ensure that Academic Developers acquire sufficient kudos to engage in more equal professional interactions with academics. This strengthening of their professional profile will likely bring additional spin-off benefits in enabling Academic Developers to increasingly speak truth to power. As Lee-Ann Sequeira has commented, it is ‘important for us as Academic Developers, in our growing numbers, not to be just the Master’s tools, but to disturb and disrupt – to engage in a spirit of productive discomfort’ (2021).

The second issue is the lingering sense that Academic Developers take a remedial or deficit approach towards problematic teaching staff (Boud and Brew, 2013). One solution is for Academic Developers to engage in a form of matrix leadership (Heard-Lauréote and Buckley, 2022), whereby an initial approach to influential individuals, such as course or programme leaders, can open a route to the whole course team. Thereafter, Academic Developers can adopt the position of learners, for example, by initiating teaching reviews to better understand the dynamics, challenges and processes of academic classrooms in a non-threatening way. In doing so, they meet a course team where they are; by listening to and responding to local concerns, the Academic Developer actively contributes to the empowerment and ownership of the teaching team by reinforcing their expertise, instead of imposing their own. Similarly, providing general guidance or suggestions that nevertheless assert and even cultivate the freedom of the subject discipline, and the cultural nuances required in practice, acknowledges the specific context, and the expertise it entails, of the academic community.

Matrix leadership relies on working with the collective rather than the individual, which in turn fits with ‘the increasing need in our respective institutions to support course teams with curriculum design in tandem with developing their professional practice [...] while simultaneously creating chances for individual academics to develop themselves professionally.’ (Wason, Gramaglia and Saunders, 2024). Academic developers have a central role to play, and Wason, Gramaglia and Saunders (2024) argue that ‘curriculum development should no longer be at the margins of what we do, but central to it’. This sentiment fits with the work of Ashwin (2022), who also underscores the need for Academic Developers to shift their focus from individual practice to collaborative work with course teams to improve and transform curricula. This method can be considered more sustainable as it requires a joint effort from course teams working alongside educational and curriculum developers, rather than simply relying on individual educators who may not have the necessary support or power to implement changes on their own. By supporting the professional development of individuals through collaborative efforts to enhance a curriculum, colleagues get more opportunities to develop and enhance their practices (Wason, Gramaglia and Saunders, 2024).

The third idea is that Academic Developers can leverage their cross-institutional roles and ‘ability to navigate contested spaces’ (Sequeira, 2021) through nurturing networks and communities of practice (CoP) for and at the service of the academic community. These communities may take various forms; of paramount importance is that they have sufficient integral strength to exist, operate and grow independently of the academic development team. Where Academic Development teams co-create practical courses with the academic community to assist the latter in the responsibilities and duties of key roles such as module leader, they can provide the academic community with practical help and guidance and a forum for collective problem-solving and mutual peer-to-peer support. CoPs focused specifically on good practice sharing, such as monthly lunchtime sharing events, a regular seminar series and an annual learning and teaching conference, all provide academics with a place to spotlight their innovative practice, in turn providing them with internal dissemination opportunities which can later be supported (by the same Academic Development team) towards external dissemination and/or publication. All of this enhances the career trajectories of the academic community and is thus a service to them. In taking forward these initiatives, we must, however:

avoid becoming complicit in the cultivation and celebration of the ‘good’ academic or model teacher who jumps on the issue-of-the-day bandwagon at the appropriate time, spouting platitudes and conforming to the safe, sanctioned standards of excellence (Sequeira, 2021).

Instead, we can work to ‘position ourselves to practise pedagogical citizenship [...] [t]hrough the programmes we run and the advice we offer to our colleagues’ (Sequeira, 2021). Similarly, Barry (2023) places value on the role of Academic Developers in encouraging ‘academics, especially those who are new to HE, to develop a professional learning network’, thus enabling academics to identify what are sometimes called ‘knowledgeable others’ (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016; Trust, Carpenter and Krutka, 2017; Jesacher-Roessler and Agostini, 2021). This collapsing of the space between the academic community and those charged with development could lead to spin-off benefits such as future Academic Developers being recruited from the same academic community that the former has helped develop.

One final effective way to potentially build and enhance trust in academia is through Academic Developers acting as intermediaries between the academic community and students. Academic staff can leverage the expertise of student partners to gain a more diverse and comprehensive perspective on the advice and guidance provided by Academic Developers. By incorporating the feedback and input of students, academic staff can be assured that any changes implemented in their teaching practice will be well-received by the student population. This approach not only fosters trust and collaboration between academic staff and students but also promotes a more student-centred approach to education.

Part three: a framework for building trust through integrating intrapreneurship in academic developer CPD activity

So far, we have provided four recommendations for how academics’ trust in academic development can be strengthened:

- Building Academic Developers’ academic credentials.

- Acknowledging and recognising Academic Developers as influential individuals with the capacity to adopt the position of learners and meet their learners (academic staff) where they are.
- Nurturing robust organisational networks and communities of practice.
- Recognising and showcasing Academic Developers as intermediaries between staff and student communities leveraging student partners.

However, these should not be viewed as a mere checklist that individuals or institutions can tick off to build and strengthen trustworthy relationships. Trust is a fundamental element of organisational culture and the network of relationships that define and sustain it. Therefore, it should be considered as part of the broader relational context. By doing so, trust will be recognised as a valuable feature of the entire university ecosystem, not just the Academic Developers and the staff they assist. As such, its presence and state of health are beyond the responsibility (or the scope and indeed pay grade) of the individual Academic Developer, and instead, the institution is better placed to ensure the conditions in which it can flourish by investing appropriately in its Academic Developers.

In this final section, we highlight several inherent qualities and attributes commonly associated with Academic Developers that can benefit the entire institution. We suggest that a specific focus on these can help institutions prioritise where professional development enhancements can be made to enhance trustful relationship building.

Academic Developers have already been established in the literature as Third Space Professionals (TSPs) (Whitchurch, 2013), and the subsequent TSP literature has highlighted that the academic development community has some typical expertise (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). In our opinion, from the multiple examples offered, the following key attributes are crucial when thinking about building trust between academics and Academic Developers as TSPs:

- **Continuous learning and development:** due to the evolving nature of their roles, TSPs are committed to continuous professional development and often engage in lifelong learning to stay up to date with the latest trends and technologies.
- **Cultural and emotional intelligence:** understanding and navigating the cultural dynamics of an organisation is critical for TSPs. They typically possess high levels

of emotional intelligence, which helps them manage relationships and foster a positive work environment.

- **Innovative and adaptive:** TSPs are known for their ability to think creatively and adapt to changing environments. They often bring fresh perspectives to traditional processes and are skilled at finding new solutions to complex problems.
- **Collaborative approach:** TSPs excel in collaborative environments and are often involved in projects that require coordination across different departments or external partners.

Effective communication is also vital as TSPs like Academic Developers often act as intermediaries between different groups, translating and aligning the needs and goals of various stakeholders. Additionally, their work often requires them to be flexible and agile, as they may need to shift focus quickly in response to new challenges or opportunities. As Heard-Lauréote and Kell (2024) note, Academic Developers, as a constituent group of TSPs, are versatile, innovative and skilled individuals who have a crucial role in bridging gaps and promoting teamwork within and beyond their institutions. They therefore have the potential to function as intrapreneurs (Algozo, 2015) who can build trust within complex organisations like universities.

Intrapreneurs are employees who take the initiative to develop innovative solutions to problems within their workplaces. This concept is closely related to entrepreneurship, but instead of starting a new business, intrapreneurs apply entrepreneurial skills and approaches within their organisations. They focus on developing new products, services or processes, driving growth and competitiveness by taking informed risks and leveraging the organisation's assets, such as its people and digital infrastructure, with a forward-thinking and system-wide perspective (Algozo, 2015; Heard-Lauréote and Kell, 2024).

By aligning the intrapreneurialism of Academic Developers to the four institutional behaviours advocated in Part Two, we can establish a new framework for effectively building trust between the academic community and Academic Developers. Essentially, we believe that adopting a mindset of intrapreneurship within the organisation, particularly amongst the Academic Developer team, can improve trust in relationships between these often centrally located teams and the wider academic community. These ways of working

are significant because they can bring the right people together to solve problems, help break down silos and counteract silo thinking.

The framework below (Table 1) aligns recommendations for building trustful relationships between academics and Academic Developers with the key attributes of Academic Developers as TSPs and their inherent intrapreneurial qualities. It also provides some practical examples of how this may be done in practice. By doing so, it highlights the significance of Academic Developers' expertise and centrality in the CPD process and emphasises the importance of fostering and developing intrapreneurship in the academic development community.

Table 1. A new framework for effectively building trust between the academic community and Academic Developers*.

Our four recommendations for how HE providers can support the building of trust between Academic Developers and the academic community	The typical expertise of TSPs (according to McIntosh and Nutt, 2022)	Intrapreneurial qualities (according to Heard-Lauréote and Kell, 2024)	Examples of practice
Strengthening Academic Developers' academic credentials	Continuous learning and development – given the evolving nature of their roles, they are committed to continuous professional development and often engage in lifelong learning to	Continuous learning and development – the rapidly changing business landscape requires intrapreneurs to learn and adapt continuously. This mirrors the commitment of Third	Academic Developers need professional development opportunities to be considered at each annual performance review (or equivalent), including for those activities that might seem to be

	<p>keep up with the latest trends and technologies.</p>	<p>Space Professionals to lifelong learning and staying abreast of trends and technologies.</p>	<p>beyond the scope of the role. This will enhance their credibility.</p>
<p>Acknowledging and recognising academic developers as influential individuals with the capacity to adopt the position of learners and meet their learners (academic staff) where they are</p>	<p>Cultural and emotional intelligence – understanding and navigating the cultural dynamics of an organisation is crucial for Third Space Professionals. They often possess high levels of emotional intelligence, which helps them to manage relationships and foster a positive work environment.</p>	<p>Navigating organisational dynamics – must be adept at both understanding and working within the cultural and political dynamics of their organisations. This requires a high level of emotional intelligence and the ability to manage relationships effectively.</p>	<p>Academic Developers may often work with academic teams facing pressures of NSS results or recruitment, for example, and need to approach this in a non-judgemental way. This will establish partnership working.</p>
	<p>Innovative and adaptive – these professionals are known for their ability to think creatively and adapt to changing environments. They often bring fresh perspectives to traditional processes and are adept at finding new solutions to complex problems.</p>	<p>Innovation and creativity – both intrapreneurs and Third Space Professionals are known for their innovative thinking. They bring new ideas and perspectives that challenge the status quo and foster innovation.</p>	<p>Through their cross-institutional work, Academic Developers can seed new perspectives and share ideas across seemingly unrelated disciplines. This will position the Academic Developer as a network hub.</p>

<p>Nurturing robust organisational networks and communities of practice</p>	<p>Collaborative approach – they excel in collaborative environments and are often involved in projects that require coordination across different departments or external partners.</p>	<p>Collaborative approach – intrapreneurs often work across different departments or teams to bring their ideas to life. This is akin to the collaborative nature of Third Space Professionals, who excel in projects that require coordination across various parts of an organisation.</p>	<p>Academic Developers should be involved in committees, fora, discussion groups, working parties, task and finish groups, etc. to ensure they are well-connected across the institution. This will ensure they are involved in expanded networks.</p>
	<p>Strong communication skills – effective communication is key, as they often act as intermediaries between different groups, translating and aligning the needs and goals of various stakeholders.</p>	<p>Strong communication skills: effective communication is crucial for both roles. Intrapreneurs and Third Space Professionals must articulate their ideas clearly and persuade various stakeholders to buy into their vision.</p>	<p>Academic Developers might persuade academic course/programme teams to change their use of the VLE, for example, to put the student as a user at the heart of their teaching rather than the perceived subject area requirements. This will establish a shared goal between Academic Developers and academics.</p>

<p>Recognising and showcasing Academic Developers as intermediaries between staff and student communities, leveraging student partners</p>	<p>Flexibility and agility – their work often requires them to be flexible and agile, as they may need to shift focus quickly in response to new challenges or opportunities.</p>	<p>Adaptability and flexibility – intrapreneurs must be adaptable to thrive in the dynamic environment of a large organisation. Similarly, Third Space Professionals are known for their agility and ability to respond effectively to change, which is crucial in navigating and driving organisational transformation.</p>	<p>Academic developers might be involved in a wide variety of activities, including developing inclusive curriculum approaches, scoping new technological implications such as AI, mentoring fellowship applicants, and supporting continuous, metric-driven enhancement for TEF and APP requirements. This will provide Academic Developers with trustful expertise in institutional and sectoral changes and developments.</p>
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* It is the nature of academic development that these qualities are interdependent, and therefore there will often be blurring between them.

There are a few ways to promote the development of intrapreneurial skills. One way is to include it in PGCert programmes in which it is not already covered. This will benefit both Academic Developers and the wider academic community. Another way is to include it in professional association accreditation schemes. Additionally, ad hoc CPD opportunities for Academic Developers can support different aspects of intrapreneurial thinking. For instance, they can help with brokering, negotiating and fostering community, connection and collaboration. As Heard-Lauréote and Kell (2024) suggest, highlighting the intrapreneurial expertise of TSPs like Academic Developers could strengthen institutional approaches and help develop and support colleagues in these crucial roles.

Conclusion

The primary premise that we began with was that trust is an essential component for successful academic development processes. In light of this, we have proposed several suggestions for a less localised, more transferable and scalable approach to building trust that can be applied to a wide range of HE organisational settings. This approach is based on taking a broader, more contextualised view of the role of Academic Developers as TSPs in the academic development process.

To achieve this goal, we have argued that Academic Developers need to focus on their professional development through activities such as professional recognition, research and scholarship, as well as facilitating practice sharing and peer reviews. By positioning themselves as learners, Academic Developers can become more trusted and therefore more effective in their roles as Academic Developers.

In essence, our discussion has emphasised the importance of Academic Developers continually developing their knowledge and skills, while at the same time modelling this learning process to others. In doing so, Academic Developers could better create a culture of trust and collaboration in which everyone is committed to ongoing learning and development, potentially enhancing the academic development process and improving outcomes for all stakeholders involved. They could do this by approaching work as a collaboration rather than staff training. Academic Developers cannot do this alone, however; it requires investment, buy-in and championing by senior executive teams to ensure Academic Developers are themselves appropriately developed to fulfil their potential in building trustful relationships. Our new framework for building trust on an institutional scale, introduced here, illustrates how this might meaningfully be achieved. Subsequent research could explore the impact of some of the suggested practices in the above table on perceptions of trust.

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