

# **Developing Academics**

The essential higher education  
handbook

**Shelda Debowski**



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## Shelda Deboowski

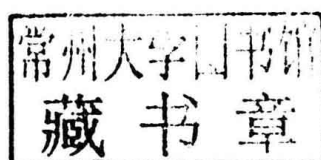
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# Developing Academics

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Academics work in a highly complex world where they must build integrative capabilities and outcomes as teachers, researchers and leaders. As they progress from novice to expert their evolving identities, methodologies and strategies need to be well-attuned to their own strengths and the sectoral expectations: a process that is greatly facilitated by the guidance of leaders and specialist developers. *Developing Academics* offers guidance to developers, senior leaders and academics on the principles and practices that support high-performing and adaptive academic communities. As the first work to explore the complex nature of academic capacity building, it offers comprehensive development principles, learning theories and specific strategies to encourage academic growth and development.

*Developing Academics* explores academic capacity from a range of perspectives, including:

- What makes a high-performing, well-rounded academic?
- How can our academics be equipped to meet the demands of their current and future roles?
- What are the essential characteristics of an outstanding developer and development service?
- How can leaders support and guide high-performing academics who wish to excel?

This book is divided into five parts. The first explores academic capacity building and the role developers, leaders and academics play. The second part offers comprehensive guidance to higher education developers, providing the theoretical grounding, methodologies and advanced professional techniques that support their service delivery. The third explores the academic development context, mapping the key capabilities that academics need to acquire as they progress from early career to senior roles across their various portfolios. The fourth explores strategies to evaluate and research the impact of higher education development on learners and their performance. In the final part, the design of higher education services and their interaction with university leaders is explored, illustrating

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the critical importance of building influence and impact across the university community. The positioning of higher education development as a discipline is also mapped.

Developers, leaders and academics will find this handbook to be an essential resource for regular reference: full of useful insights, tips and strategies to help them increase their outcomes and impact. Readers are challenged to reflect on their own leadership and effectiveness throughout this work, as individuals and contributors to academic capacity building.

**Shelda Debowski** holds a PhD in organizational learning and a Masters in education. She has an extensive background in higher education development and leadership.

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# Dedication

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This book is dedicated to:

Emeritus Professor Alan Robson, a long-term sponsor of higher education development and model of good executive leadership.

My dear Organisational and Staff Development Services (OSDS) team at The University of Western Australia who came with me on my higher education journey and taught me so much about leadership, development and service delivery.

The many colleagues and participants who have shared their wisdom, experiences, insights, journeys and dilemmas as leaders, academics and developers with me. May this book offer a rich stimulus for your ongoing academic journey.

Vivienne, Ree and Ross for generously sharing your knowledge and professional insights.

Sandra and Sue: my first higher education development (HED) mentors who taught me to dance in time to the music.

John, ever patient as I continue to be distracted by new projects.

And to Alysia for your unending support and willingness to be a critical litmus tester.





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# Preface

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This work has been long in the making. I first entered the field of higher education development (HED) in 2002 when I was recruited to head a central development service at the University of Western Australia. This service supported all facets of academic learning, including learning and teaching, research, leadership and career strategy. While this was the start of my formal career as a developer, I have since come to realise that my prior roles had reflected similar work in different guises.

My first discipline, for example, was teacher librarianship, a field that guides student learning through the delivery of high-quality educational services through individualised support, mediated instruction, and whole of school reforms. My early years managing school libraries supported the acquisition of teaching strategies, including the design of programs and engaging learning experiences, as well as marketing strategies and designing innovations. I learnt to lead staff, guide high-quality service delivery, and I received a grant to design online learning strategies. This role required the development of partnerships with teachers, who often acted as co-contributors to educational activities. The use of my service was highly contingent on my capacity to influence, engage and add value to my colleagues' programs. When I moved into lecturing in the same field, I also observed a field in transition, as it grappled with the challenge of building a separate identity from both teaching and librarianship.

Later, I completed my PhD, which explored the impact of learning and feedback on self-efficacy, motivation and performance. This wasn't an easy transition: I had two young children and was working in a field where there was little support to combine research with my substantive teaching responsibilities. The challenges, though, started me thinking about why research should be so hard to integrate and execute in some academic contexts.

My move to a business faculty where I lectured in organisational development and human resource management offered new insights into learning cultures and service delivery. I continued to observe academics struggling to manage their composite roles, and I ultimately moved toward leadership roles within my school, faculty and the university to learn more about how research was structured and encouraged. I also became more engaged with the various development groups

that offered somewhat disjointed support. I observed the restructuring of two service areas and noted the disruption and distress that these decisions caused.

These diverse experiences encouraged my interest in being a Professor of Higher Education Development. I hadn't intended to move outside a faculty role, but the opportunity was enticing. Here was the chance to model best practice organisational development, to support teaching, research and leadership from the inside. Located in a Human Resources Department, we aimed to build the best service possible, based on educational and learning theory, human resource, research and knowledge management principles. The journey was smooth initially, with a fabulous senior sponsor who understood higher education development and was happy to trial new approaches. Later experiences of adversarial, ineffectual or indifferent sponsors illustrated the real difficulties that can occur when lines of authority change. For two years, for example, we did not receive an annual budget, innovative ideas were rejected and, for some time, it was better to be invisible. My integrated HED centre was split apart, with the resources re-allocated and all collaborative systems sundered. The seamless delivery of HED support became fractured and in some areas, contentious, as learning and teaching support shifted to a new sponsor and home. It was a tough time for my team as we grappled with the need to reshape our own identity and purpose.

But tough times can also be fertile, creative periods of innovation. Over those years we refined our functions, emphasising research, leadership and organisational development. The team increased its service orientation, built enhanced diagnostic skills and tools and moved toward more systemic influence as we shaped a number of institutional systems. We increased our focus on building partnerships and alliances with faculty leaders and commenced the brokering of networks. The key to our successful rebuilding related to these associations: we were integral to the leadership community and became their first contact when they experienced difficulties. In turn, this translated into a suite of new services and models that were grounded, relevant and valued. Our productivity escalated as more academics came to us for support and development. I continued to learn and reflect on the turbulent nature of higher education development and its positioning in universities.

Our innovative practices in research development led to a collaborative partnership with seven other Australian universities, where we developed one of the earliest blended learning programs for researchers. At one stage, my leadership of this project encompassed 161 stakeholders, including many executive leaders. Later, I led a range of other initiatives to support academic capacity building, particularly through collaborative blended learning programs. As a leader, author and collaborator in these projects, I learnt a vast amount about what works for academics and the challenges associated with encouraging them to engage with online learning for their own professional development.

At the same time, I moved toward external leadership roles in this field. As President of HERDSA (the Higher Education Development Society of Australasia) for six years and the International Consortium for Educational

Development (ICED) for two years, I built connections with colleagues across the world. In these roles, I interacted with many of the key thinkers in this field. I was able to visit a range of nations and see how they each configured higher education development. We shared different perspectives and lexicons. The efforts of different nations to move toward academic capacity building were tracked, and I contributed to the development of some national higher education networks. Invitations to present to development colleagues in China, Japan, the UK and the US affirmed the complexities of creating an inclusive space for higher education development.

Thus, my time as a Professor of Higher Education Development was educative, rich and enlightening. It taught me about politics, leadership, HE development, strategy and resilience in more ways than I could ever have imagined. I enjoyed the chance to shape new programs and products and to build evaluative frameworks for testing the impact of these support strategies. The boundary-spanning nature of the role opened up many fascinating insights into how university fiefdoms and leadership operated. I made mistakes and misjudgements: fruitful causes of reflection and learning. I continued to think about the holistic nature of academic capacity building and how we could better support both academics and leaders.

I found a paucity of good resources to assist those moving into development, and indeed, for those moving into academe. And so, I wrote *The New Academic* (2012) to fill one perceived gap: guiding those in the early career academic phase. This work drew on the existing research and literature about being academic, but also integrated much of the practical and evidence-based material that I had developed over that ten years. It explored all elements of academic work providing a comprehensive toolkit for academics, and a resource for HE developers.

Later, I moved to a deputy vice-chancellor role. As a member of the executive, I strove to build alignment across the university activities and to increase leadership capacity. The deans were key partners in this quest, demonstrating a strong desire to make a difference, but benefiting from guidance on ways to increase academic engagement with identified priorities. I explored a range of reforms with academics and witnessed their passion to do things better. The right guidance, incentives to participate and coherent messages made a very real difference to their efforts.

In the last few years, I have moved to my new role as a higher education consultant. My visits to multiple universities have continued to illustrate the challenges that leaders and academics face in acquiring the capabilities they need to succeed in an increasingly complex and challenging setting. My interactions with developers from all specialist fields also confirms the challenges of achieving effective positioning and outcomes of HED work. This is understandable, given that so little practice wisdom is shared and so few core principles are mapped. The field primarily operates from assumptions and peer learning. While this has its place, it keeps higher education development firmly located as a cottage industry, with each group shaping unique products according to their own

particular interpretation of the field. As this book illustrates, the establishment of a theoretically-informed and methodologically-sound suite of tools and practices requires more rigorous research-informed frameworks that reflect educational, adult learning and human resource development principles, as well as higher education research and scholarship.

So this book has been developed as a response to these observations and reflections. However, the plan has morphed to some extent since its first inception. I had initially envisaged writing something that just explored HED. However, without recognising the context in which these services are situated and the need to be politically savvy and keyed into the university and its transitions, even excellent developers can find themselves marginalised. So this work now maps the field from four primary perspectives:

- providing executive leaders with a blueprint for thinking about the types of HED support they need or anticipate, and encouraging them to think about their own leadership journey and impact;
- offering senior leaders guidance on the ways they can build academic capacity, high-functioning academic communities and enhanced leadership capabilities;
- assisting academics with exploring their academic capabilities and practices to encourage more strategic positioning of their careers and roles;
- providing any developer facilitating academic capacity building with a foundational handbook to support their role and the positioning of their service.

The book therefore seeks to provide a full overview of the HED landscape. It maps core theories and research and integrates many of the resources and models that I have developed and tested across the last fifteen years. This practice wisdom fills many of the evident gaps I have identified. I have integrated some new frameworks and models that articulate the partnerships that underpin successful HED work.

However, the work also includes some messages that I hope will be considered. HED is at risk of remaining in the margins if it continues to assert its differences rather than commonalities, if its evidence base continues to be anecdotal and hard to source or if it remains peripheral to the real work being done in universities. This is a call to arms: it is time to think about this field as a professional discipline that can make a substantive difference. First though, it is necessary to start building a name and identity that is inclusive and can translate across all nations; thus, the framing of this field in this work as *higher education development*. A second key message is the importance of building alignment and collaborations between leadership and HED services. This is a partnership that can build significant impact once both groups are in sync. Finally, the necessity of being aligned with institutional strategy is emphasised: the reality of higher education has changed and so too, must HED. Thus, this book threads realism, pragmatism and idealism throughout its many chapters.

I hope you find this work stimulating, challenging and, at times, confronting! While it integrates considerable reflection from my own professional journey, it also draws on the experiences of hundreds of others. I hope it adds new perspectives and enrichment.

Shelda Debowski  
February 2016

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