

**Academic developers and international collaborations: the importance of personal abilities and aptitudes**

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## Academic developers and international collaborations: the importance of personal relationships

Academic developers are increasingly involved in international collaborations in learning and teaching. Many factors contribute to successful collaborations; we argue that the personal abilities and aptitudes of academic developers are one key element. Building trust and relationships are central to creating the networks at individual, group and institutional levels that are essential for effective collaboration. There is limited literature on academic development in international collaborations and on its personal dimensions.

We illustrate these ideas using a UK - Pakistan collaboration. Attention to the personal dimension is likely to be a key consideration for other academic developers working in international collaborations.

Keywords: academic development, emotions, international collaboration, learning and teaching, networks, relationships.

### **Introduction**

There is an ongoing discussion around the concept of academic development.

Leibowitz (2014) quotes Candy (1996) in defining academic development as “practices designed to enhance the academic performance of an institution” (p73). She then goes on to show: “how activities carried out in the name of academic development vary in terms of target, activity and mode of analysis” (p73). However, the role of academic developers in international collaborations to enhance learning and teaching is not well reported in the literature. We hope to add to this debate by analysing the personal elements of academic development work in international settings. By this we mean when academic developers work in an overseas context with the aim of enhancing academic practice; learning and teaching in this case.

We will briefly outline some of the approaches to academic development by way of introduction before describing our collaboration and its impact, the principles of collaboration which we draw on, with a particular emphasis on the importance of personal elements and our own role as academic developers in the collaboration.

### **Roles of Academic Developers**

The ongoing debate to describe the field of academic development is well covered in the literature, including *International Journal for Academic Development*. In an early article Ray Land (2003) identified twelve orientations to academic development and later Sue Clegg (2009) has argued that academic development has shifted its focus from the individual teacher to strategic interventions at institutional and national levels.

Shelda Debowski (2014) adds to the discussion by claiming that academic developers must navigate a “dynamic and unpredictable context”, where their effectiveness depends on their “degree of influence, their capacity to engage individuals and groups, and the institutional context” (p50). In order to be effective, academic developers need to build partnerships through a “deep-seated collaborative approach” to blend pedagogic principle with local practice (p55).

International collaborations for academic developers certainly can represent an unpredictable context, as we found. In the following case study of such a collaboration, we offer first some grounds for believing that it was an effective collaboration; then we attempt to tease out some of the factors that made it so. With Debowski’s (2014) comments in mind, our focus will be on the engagement of individuals and groups through the building of relationships and networks.

### **Case study of a collaboration**

The collaboration was between the University of Liverpool in UK and the University of

Health Sciences in Lahore, Pakistan with the aim of ‘enhancing learning and teaching in medical education in the Punjab’. The Punjab is the most populous province in Pakistan with a population of 80 million people and it has over 40 medical and dental universities or colleges (medical colleges).

The University of Liverpool is a research-intensive university with a strong medical school. The University of Health Sciences was mandated by the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (the governing professional body) to provide a rigorous assessment and examination system in medical education throughout the Punjab. Almost all of the medical colleges are required to comply with the University of Health Sciences’ regulations on assessment and it therefore has significant influence on learning and teaching practice throughout the province. This meant that we were both tapping into an existing network and doing so at an existing site of influence and leverage.

The project was funded by the British Council for three years through the INSPIRE programme (International Strategic Partnerships in Research and Education). This funding covered travel costs only with the University of Health Sciences covering local costs and the University of Liverpool covering the time of the academic developers. The significance of this funding context is twofold. First, we were not under the type of pressure for short-term institutional income generation so negatively experienced by the academics interviewed by Smith (2014). It is true that we sought reciprocal benefits for the two institutions involved, to promote the sustainability of our work (Bovill, Jordan and Watters 2015) but for the most part we could focus on promulgating our educational values. Second, the funding period gave us the luxury of time and repeated visits, thus reducing (although not of course eliminating) the possibility that any observed transformation in practice was ‘illusory’ (Bovill et al 2015

p.16).

We made an initial visit to Pakistan prior to applying for funding. This involved running workshops to illustrate the types of activities that might be included in any future collaboration. Equally importantly we held a number of meetings with key staff to help prepare the bid to the British Council. The INSPIRE programme involved a competitive tendering process by UK – Pakistani partners; approximately one in eight bids were accepted and funded.

One of the aims of the INSPIRE programme was to build a variety of links across the institutions. As a result ten Pakistani staff have visited the University of Liverpool and three UK staff have visited Pakistan. Subsequently three Pakistani staff have been funded to study at the University of Liverpool and two additional UK staff have presented at conferences in Pakistan. However, the major UK input has been through visits to Pakistan by the academic developers. There have been ten visits usually of two weeks duration. This includes the initial exploratory visit, visits during the three years of the project and a further visit that was funded separately. Initially, these visits consisted of running learning and teaching workshops, centred mostly in the University of Health Sciences or the city of Lahore but also including workshops in other centres in the Punjab. The purpose of these workshops, apart from sharing something of current practice in learning and teaching, was to build a network and to explore local ideas for productively meeting the programme's aims.

The collaboration was explicitly founded on the basis of finding local solutions to local problems. There was also recognition that the University of Health Sciences needed international input in order to benchmark and draw upon established pedagogies. Teaching in Pakistan medical colleges is characterised by a reliance on didactic lectures for information transmission in the pre-clinical years (Khan, 2013).

Thus as academic developers we had a unique opportunity to negotiate processes that potentially had far-reaching impact.

### **Sources of data**

In trying to gauge the effectiveness of this project we were aware of the need to come to an accurate reckoning of impact against resource. We had quite a range of stakeholders: the British Council naturally wanted to know whether its funds had been put to good use; our department had contributed a substantial amount of the time and energy of two senior academic developers; the Pakistani participants had given time and sometimes lost salary to attend our workshops and to be trained as facilitators for our programmes. We ourselves needed a more objective assessment of impact, beyond the validation we received from our interactions with Pakistani colleagues and their evident enthusiasm.

However, there was no funding for an external evaluation. We collected data on numbers of participants, how many colleges they represented, how many facilitators we trained and how well their delivery of the programmes was evaluated. Additionally, we could access scattered data of impact on students in the colleges, through the portfolios developed by participants and a range of mini-projects they carried out and reported under our mentoring. For the more qualitative data we wanted on perceptions and experiences, one of us carried out five semi-structured interviews with those facilitators who had been involved with the project from its early stages. While we knew that the relationships we had established would inevitably have a strong influence, we hoped that a combination of the formalisation of the interaction as an interview and the standard of openness and honesty already developed in our relations would result in some meaningful feedback. These interviews sought to generate data on the interviewees' experiences during the project and specifically their perceptions of the factors that contributed to the outcomes of the project. The interviews were held in the

final stages of the project. A small amount of relevant data less directly influenced by us came from two focus groups with 20 course participants run by the facilitators we were training. These comments helped to confirm that what we offered was perceived as relevant and interesting to medical and dental teachers across many different colleges.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed following established ethical guidelines for this type of research. The data was thematically analysed, meaning that we sought to identify and analyse patterns or themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Our approach was allied to developmental evaluation, which is founded on the premise of support for “the process of innovation within an organization and in its activities” (Gamble, 2008 p13). We were in an innovative environment characterised by continuous development and adaptation that was “driven by new learning”. Whilst the methods of developmental evaluation are familiar, the process of evaluation is designed to support learning and new actions, rather than being designed for audit, or for an external audience. In addition, the evaluator is part of the team rather than an external auditor (Gamble, 2008). We were in this position, combining the roles of academic developers and evaluators, in evaluating learning, agreeing future actions and determining the impact of the project.

### **What was the impact?**

Our INSPIRE project had the aims of developing staff capacity in learning and teaching, institutional infrastructures and research in medical education. To date, the collaboration has resulted in the development of a University of Health Sciences accredited Certificate in Medical Teaching (CMT) (213 enrolments). The development of the CMT will be the main focus of our discussion in this article, although we will at

times refer to other aspects of the collaboration, as detailed below.

To support the CMT in a sustainable manner 13 local facilitators and 10 mentors have been trained and have demonstrated their capacity to deliver the programme without our help (we continue to be involved in a quality assurance role). The model we have set up will increase this number each time the programme runs, through recruiting successful and interested candidates into the role of, first mentors, and then facilitators, for the subsequent cohorts.

In addition, the collaboration has run Introduction to Medical Teaching courses (30), Medical Education workshops (105) and Technology Enhanced Learning workshops (65). It has also led to the development of a University of Health Sciences accredited Masters in Health Professional Education (60 enrolments). It seems reasonable on the basis of these figures to claim that we have had some impact in developing staff capacity in learning and teaching.

Developing institutional infrastructure is a longer term process and work is ongoing in this area. However, the accredited programmes and gradual increased usage of the virtual learning environment represent tangible progress.

Local staff who engaged with our research in medical education initiatives had previously not been involved in medical education research at all, although they may have carried out experimental/scientific research or have relied solely on quantitative research approaches. So with no background in qualitative methods local staff have led nine ongoing research projects, delivered four presentations at international peer reviewed conferences, produced six local conference presentations and over 10 poster presentations. In addition, one person was awarded a sponsored invitation to an international conference.



On the basis of these tangible outputs we can claim that the collaboration has achieved its immediate aims and is working towards sustainability. As academic developers we initiated processes and projects: our Pakistani colleagues have taken these on, developed and adapted them. The challenge now is to determine something more of the factors that contributed to these outcomes. In the next section we examine the nature and principles of collaboration and then draw out themes from the data that illustrate the personal qualities manifest in this international collaboration.

### **Collaboration principles**

Collaboration has a range of meanings covering any number of inter-institutional or inter-personal relationships (Gajda, 2004) with no clearly accepted definition, although there is a generally accepted notion of working in partnership for mutual benefit (Huxham, 2003). Set against the possibilities of benefit is the risk of ‘collaborative inertia’ and acknowledgement of the complexities of making collaborations work (Huxham, 2003). Collaboration can be seen as a process:

in which autonomous or semi-autonomous actors interact through formal and informal negotiation, jointly creating rules and structures governing their relationships and ways to act or decide on the issues that brought them together; it is a process involving shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions (Thomson, Perry, & Miller, 2009 p25).

In their analysis of collaborative working in higher education, Walsh and Kahn (2010) put forward the notion of collaborative advantage that allows the cross fertilisation of ideas and enthusiasms, realising a project not possible without others and the enjoyment of working with others. Central to their argument is the idea that collaboration is essentially a social activity. The importance of the social dimension and that relationships matter in collaborations is part of the notion that our social networks are

an asset. This can be expressed as social capital that can be defined as: “the networks, trust, norms and values that enable individuals and organisations to achieve mutual goals (Dhillon, 2009 p692). There is an increasing consensus that social capital includes the “ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks...” (Portes, 1998 p6). For academic developers, international collaborations are about more than just membership of networks. The ability and agency to develop networks is also a core role of academic developers in order to help to realise a collaboration’s goals.

This is directly related to Debowski’s (2014) assertion that academic developers need the capacities to build partnerships with individuals, groups and institutions. How they do this is intimately connected to their interpersonal abilities and aptitudes. Building social networks to achieve common goals is central to effective collaborative working in an international context.

In setting out a framework to evaluate collaborations, Gajda (2004) derived five principles of collaboration:

- (1) Collaboration is an imperative; complex issues require sharing of resources to achieve goals not possible by individual organisations working alone.
- (2) Collaboration is known by many names; the extensive terminology can make it difficult to evaluate the extent or effectiveness of a collaboration
- (3) Collaboration is a journey and not a destination; there are various levels of integration that can be used to describe the structure of a collaboration from loose cooperation through to unified structures.
- (4) The personal is as important as the procedural; collaborations need healthy interpersonal relationships and trust in order to succeed.

- (5) Collaboration develops in stages; these are compared to Tuckman's (1965) model for group development and imply a movement through predictable stages in order to generate effective performance.

In this paper the focus is on Principle (4) 'The personal is as important as the procedural' with the intention to uncover more of the motivations of the individuals involved in our international collaboration including the role of the academic developers. Whilst the personal is the focus for this paper, it is well recognised that the personal is but one level of interaction in successful international collaborations. Academic developers must build partnerships with individuals, groups and institutions (Debowski, 2010). Success in collaborations cannot be attributed to initiatives at a single level. We concur with [Roxå, Mårtensson, and Alveteg](#) (2011) that a "multitude of inter-related initiatives over a long period of time is likely to distinguish strategies that are successful in influencing academic teaching and learning cultures" (p99). In our experience the need for actions/initiatives over a long period of time and at many levels is particularly true of academic development work in international collaborations.

### ***Developing Trust***

Trust is one of the elements in Gajda's (2004) fourth principle of collaboration, that the personal is as important as the procedural. Trust and healthy connections, both personal and emotional, between the key individuals are an essential basis for collaborations.

According to Austin (2000) "trust appears to be one of the critical elements common to most forms of collaboration" (p83). In trying to understand how trust between collaborators develops, McAllister (1995) makes a distinction "between two principal forms of interpersonal trust - cognition-based trust, grounded in individual beliefs about peer reliability and dependability, and affect-based trust, grounded in reciprocated inter-

personal care and concern” (p.3). This seems a useful distinction in thinking about our developing relationships with Pakistani colleagues.

In relation to cognition-based trust, we could reflect about the extent to which we made good on our promises, or did what we said we would do, but also, and importantly, how far our actions in our professional sphere demonstrated and exemplified the values we explicitly claimed. Values are central to our professional identity as academic developers, which for UK academic developers are explicitly identified in the UK Professional Standards Framework, and we expect of ourselves that the values we espouse are demonstrated in our practice. For Bovill et al (2015), based on their own range of experiences, ‘practising what we preach’ and ‘modelling pedagogies and practices’ are presented together as the first guiding principle for transnational learning and teaching (p.18). In our workshops and in developing curricula for the programmes we stressed the value of active learning, reflection and criticality; consequently it was important that we modelled these values. We thought hard about the learning activities within each session, especially the balance between presentation and group activity; we openly discussed with each other what was working well and not so well and we encouraged the participants to join these discussions with their own critical perspectives. This openness to discussion and dialogue, which tends not to be the norm for teacher-student relationships in Pakistan and indeed in many other developing countries, was noted and appreciated by our Pakistani students and colleagues:

It’s apples and oranges when you compare people from this part to the world to people from your part of the world when you think about the openness and availability. Teachers are so respected here that they are not approachable enough.

I feel very comfortable with you, there are no barriers, you are always receptive, even if I am talking nonsense you don't show your expression. I'd say the people over here haven't developed this habit so much. That means I have developed some relationship with you and you have develop a rapport with me.

Arguably, however, there is an aspect of even cognitive-based trust which goes beyond the fact that we reliably enacted our values, and that is the extent to which these were values shared with our collaborators; this could not be taken for granted. Thompson et al. (2007) imply that 'shared norms' provide a basis for trust and this is echoed by one of our students:

Anyone with similar values I can form a relationship with: where thoughts match: compatibility helps with relationships, similar objectives, similar passions...

It was clear that the majority of the participants who attended our sessions did share our educational values, albeit not necessarily explicitly articulated. They were frustrated by passive students and delighted when students showed engagement and curiosity. They could distinguish between disrespect for teachers (strongly taboo within the culture) and genuine intellectual challenge. When encouraged to gather students' perceptions and experiences, not a feature of their educational system, they quickly realised the value to them and became enthusiastic about implementing methods for gathering evaluative feedback. Again and again they reported with delight the positive results of relatively small changes in their teaching approach, based on practices we had modelled.

### ***Developing Relationships***

In terms of affect-based or emotional trust, the other component in McAllister's (1995) formulation, it is clear from the interviews that the quality of relationships developed was key to the communication, the learning and beyond that to the actions that led to the educational and research outputs:

Relations are the main focal point around which it all evolves, if you had not been this much friendly or this much responding to us we may not be able to learn this much. The friendly nature it bridged that gap. The relations [amongst us] are very important, without it I may not be able to do all the things.

the relationships we had with the faculty from University of Liverpool is also remarkable we have had so much communication and the quality of communication is very important, it has a very strong emotional and rapport building aspect and this was utilised in facilitating the learning.

Giles, Smythe, and Spence (2012) make the claim that “relationships are essential to the educational experience whether they are recognised or not” (p232). This is well summarised by one of our Pakistani colleagues:

Collaboration is just a big relationship, more formalised, lots of paperwork but it boils down to people interacting with each other.

Relationship building involves all parties but as academic developers we had responsibility for initiating the relationships. This requires the academic developer to manifest the needed “dispositions and sensibilities towards relationships” (Giles et al., 2012 p232). Attending to relationships is important for academic developers in that it can lead to “dialogue that yields surprising results whereby there is a genuine exchange of ideas and learning occurs for both academics and academic developers alike” (Budge & Clarke, 2012 p62). Still, such a ‘professional’ stance is no doubt easier to maintain where there are the shared enthusiasms described above. Austin (2000) describes collaborations as “motivationally fuelled” by the connections between individuals involved and the goals of the collaboration. These connections can be seen in the interviews:

If you only stick with the practical components we wouldn't have opened up. The emotional component builds a bridge for knowledge to transfer, hopefully bilaterally you exchange knowledge

It happened because it was your passion, your main objective was to achieve something; it was your passion and then the response from us, from my side, that developed this relationship.

Emotionally laden words such as: passion, encouragement, enthusiasm, responsive and friendly occurred throughout the interviews. It seems clear that the emotional dimension of relationships was an important element in helping to make this particular international collaboration in higher education successful.

We are aware that this is conceptually a difficult area and Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2011) note that “teaching is connected with a variety of emotions, but research on this area is scarce in the field of higher education” (p799). On the one hand our observations and the evidence from the interviews would lead us to focus on authenticity as a crucial element of forging successful collaborative relationships. By this we mean the expression in action of sincerely held beliefs. On the other hand we are cautious about generalising to any international context. Smith (2013), reviewing the literature on the learning, teaching and assessment challenges of ‘flying faculty’, notes a stress on the importance of relationships for successful engagement. However, she also draws attention to cultural differences in expectations about the appropriate degree of formality and warmth in staff-student relationships. We experienced the Pakistani culture as very permissive to emotional expression, a characteristic we personally found very appealing and which no doubt helped in the formation of mutually satisfying relationships. This may have put a premium on our own ability to be emotionally expressive, as human beings rather than just as academic developers.

To summarise, it was crucial to the success of this educational collaboration that we remained constantly aware of the importance of modelling values-based practice, both in setting up learning activities in our classroom and in being open to constructive criticism from collaborators about how we could have done things even better. Following through on commitments demonstrated both our passion and our sincerity, themes that recur throughout the interviews with our participants:

Trust is bestowed on people who are genuinely sincere, and that comes through, it depends on your follow up; you will come back to it later.

### ***Developing a network***

We also believe that the creation of spaces for open dialogue helped to build trust between our colleagues, crucial for the development of a sustainable network to continue the initiative:

The atmosphere that was created where you can question anything and are able to inspire each other, putting the trust in the other person, trust is extremely important.

Although, as we noted above, the university we were working with held a position of influence and indeed power in relation to most other medical and dental colleges across the Punjab, the facilitators we were training were drawn from across this network of colleges rather than from the university. Several had met for the first time in our workshops. As we gradually identified those individuals with the enthusiasm and commitment to train, we could see how they started to self-identify as a group and build relationships among themselves. Over time, teams evolved who had gone through the early experiences of facilitation together. These teams of three or four individuals would plan the programme together for a new cohort, dividing up the responsibility and debrief together after a session.



So far, it seems that our facilitators have formed ongoing relationships based on their common commitment to the programme and experiences of working on it. We would not claim that the CMT is the entire basis for this network: other aspects of the collaboration have also contributed, such as the research initiatives (leading to joint conference presentations) and in some cases, enrolment at the same time on the MHPE programme we helped to establish. Also in one or two instances there was a prior relationship where individuals had worked or trained together. Nevertheless, our facilitators – still from a range of different medical backgrounds and different colleges - now strongly identify themselves with the programme and continue to work in supportive teams as new cohorts are recruited.

### **Familiarity with context**

We have dwelt on the importance of the relationships we developed to achieving our project goals; certainly in terms of the commitment of Pakistani colleagues to sustaining and growing the initiatives we helped start. There was another aspect of good relationships we found vital and that was the willingness of our Pakistani colleagues to share with us and explicate the context they worked in.

An experienced academic developer inevitably builds up a fund of examples and stories to illustrate the principles of practice and adapt it to particular contexts. Initially in such a new and different culture we were aware of the disadvantage of lack of familiarity with the context. It obviously made sense to ask our participants to describe the issues that they encountered and their contexts, and they did this willingly and patiently. Our genuine interest in their stories both helped to cement trust and also allowed us gradually to build our own credibility through a growing ability to offer relevant examples and to empathise with the specific problems they faced.

At the level of influencing individual classroom practice we would contend that such an awareness of context is crucial. We also used visits to colleges to help build familiarity but the key was careful questioning and listening to our Pakistani colleagues as they explained their practice and the issues they regarded as typical and recurrent. All the time spent doing this has paid dividends, in growing our confidence to engage in the same kind of advisory and consultative role we play in our home institution.

However, we found it far more difficult to develop the same level of confidence in relation to institutional politics. Just as we thought we were beginning to grasp key features of the context something would occur to remind us how naïve we were. Invariably the events which confounded what we thought was our ability to predict outcomes related to politics within or between institutions. We missed many of the nuances of relationships between powerful individuals, some of which we might have picked up in our own linguistic and cultural context. We also struggled to appreciate inter-institutional rivalries (although it was easier to gain information about these from our contacts, once we had appreciated that a question needed to be asked).

Mulling over such events and their possible consequences formed a major part of our nightly reflections, in which we obsessively analysed each day. Certainly we encountered Mezirow's 'disorienting dilemmas' which could hopefully lead on to transformational learning through critical self-reflection (Mezirow 1990 p.xvi). In this respect we think that it helped a great deal that two of us were involved in the project. Arguably our joint reflection gave us more powerful insights and stimulated creative solutions to problems as they arose. But it would also be true to say that on several occasions we were ready to abandon the project as ultimately doomed by a byzantine bureaucracy and politics we could not hope to pick our way through. At these times, the fact that two of us were in it together, and that we shared a common background of

values and experience, helped to maintain our self-belief that we were pursuing a worthwhile goal with some measure of success. This, plus the strength of the friendships we had already forged with Pakistani colleagues, gave us the support and optimism we needed to carry on.

We have learned never to be complacent about our understanding of context. We can and did directly influence the practitioners in their classrooms but the people who will bring about lasting institutional change are those who are embedded within the culture and have some degree of power. The main programme we established was aimed at new and less experienced teachers. We now see how important it is that applications to take part in the programme quickly started to come from individuals of increasing seniority – professors and heads of departments – whose voices matter in their colleges.

## **Conclusion**

Pakistan is a country in which it is difficult to make predictions. However, we have some confidence that our project will continue to have an impact, through the network of passionate educators we have helped to foster. Their commitment is not just to the implementation and practice of the educational values we discussed so often but also to the development of their own skills in academic development. We saw them become increasingly confident and competent in designing and running developmental experiences for their own colleagues.

As we have tried to demonstrate, we believe that the quality of interpersonal relationships we were able to achieve, both between us and our Pakistani colleagues and within the network we helped to create, was a crucial component in the immediate achievement of the project. We think that the capacity of these relationships to endure

will help provide the ‘motivational fuel’ to sustain the effort, grow the network and spread those educational practices which embody the values we shared.

We propose that this international collaboration illustrates something of the personal element of academic developers’ capacity to engage at individual, group and institutional levels in a dynamic and unpredictable context (Debowski, 2014). This attention to the personal element of collaborations (Gajda, 2004) is likely to be a key consideration for other academic developers working in international collaborations in learning and teaching.

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