

## Formation and Competence building of University Academic Developers

### Part 1 Knowledge needs

While teaching and learning is a core activity in universities, there is little knowledge available on those who teach the university teachers and guide educational leadership – the academic developers. The project aims to study current practices of academic development in five universities in Norway, Sweden and the US as a basis for initiating a competence building project of academic developers in two Norwegian universities.

The starting point for the project is how universities may teach values, beliefs, and moral responsibilities to uphold the public good. Universities are entrusted with responsibility to provide society with highly skilled professionals, citizens and leaders, who work for both individual and public interests (1). In turn, a university's priorities will strongly influence the *formation and competence building* of both staff and students (2).

At the same time as university education is expected to contribute to protect democracy and foster social mobility and cohesion it is under pressure in ways that might emphasise economic over moral and social dimensions. In Europe as well as in many other parts of the world, there have in the last 10-20 years been a growing political focus on the utility of university education. Universities are under increased pressure to act as production units, delivering skilled graduates who are able to adapt to changing needs of the market and to increase competitiveness in a global environment (3,4). Many universities seek to use innovative methods of teaching and student learning assessment, notably more digital and blended learning programmes - also to better meet the needs of students with increased variation of academic preparation and cultural diversity. International political collaboration (as the Bologna process) and new governance regimes reshape the organization, goals, and purpose of universities, with profound consequences for their employees and students (5,6,7). Studies indicate that these changes have altered the priorities of university education (8,9) by privileging economic missions over moral and social dimensions (10,11,12,13).

Given these circumstances there is an urgent need to increase the research-based knowledge on how to promote the public good through formation and competence building in university teaching. For university education to strengthen democracy and maximize student and faculty engagement for the public good, we need to know more about how to teach along the multiple dimensions; economic, functional, moral and social in a more balanced and integrated way (14).

Many universities have in recent years established a professional position of academic developers in order to support university teachers and leaders in developing high quality education and learning environments. Despite this growing investment in academic developers (15), there is a dearth of research on the values and dispositions that academic developers seek to cultivate and a lack of knowledge about what academic developers *do*. Situated between institutional leaders, who articulate their visions and goals for a university, and their academic teaching colleagues, academic developers are in a unique position to influence pedagogical choices in university education - thus also the conditions in which formation of both university staff and students takes place. The quality of academic developers' work and their competence development is thus crucial.

### Part 2 The knowledge-building project

At core of this project is to build scientific knowledge on how to promote *competence building* of academic developers by supporting them in developing awareness of fostering *formation* in teaching and thereby increasing their repertoires for enacting institutional missions as they engage with university teachers or leaders. This requires critical self-reflection about the purposes, values and norms internal to their work and reflection on

students' learning processes and outcomes (16). Embedded in the concept of formation is also a normative dimension derived from the societal mandate given to universities. The concept of formation thus provides a valuable resource as a means to explore the normative and moral orientations of current university education.

The project will interrogate different approaches used by academic developers, when they work with university teachers or leaders. While documenting the practice and reflection repertoires of academic developers, the project will develop insights into and greater understanding of the concept of formation in academic developers, academic teachers, and university leaders – all individuals entrusted to uphold the mission, values, and goals of contemporary universities in light of multiple and possibly conflicting interests. Formation refers to the ongoing, lifelong process of change and individual undergoes in the course of their study or work.

## 2. Objectives

The primary objective of this project is to build knowledge of the practices, formation and competence development of academic developers and gain insight into how the work of academic developers contributes to the formation of other university staff and in turn students and universities as institutions. The project will meet the overall objective by building new knowledge on:

- 1 research literature on academic development
- 2 the articulated values and aspirations of five universities
- 3 how university aspirations are interpreted by academic developers
- 4 how academic developers in five universities *believe* their values, goals and aspirations change in the course of their work
- 5 how academic developers *enact* their values, goals, and aspirations
- 6 new teaching practices that encourage education for the public good
- 7 how a virtual community of practice of academic developers<sup>1</sup> and researchers might increase pedagogical repertoires and research capability
- 8 a new research method based on interactive communication/deliberations

The anticipated results of the project is that it will (with reference to the objectives):

*contribute new knowledge on:*

- the formation and competence development of academic developers (1,2,3)
- how academic developers collaborate with other academic developers, university teachers or leaders in order to develop pedagogical repertoires that encourage formation (5,7,8)
- the relationship between the formation of individual university staff and a university's institutional formation (2,3)

*promote the development of academic developers' competence to:*

- support university teachers and leaders to encourage students and staff to have dispositions, attitudes, and values that resonate with institutional missions and mandates (4,5,6)
- integrate research in their work with university teachers or leaders (6,7,8)
- use the potential of communication technologies to cultivate communities of practice and as a learning platform for competence building (7,8)

*establish and contribute to developing:*

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<sup>1</sup> Academic developers are also researchers in the project. How their dual roles will be coped with is described in part 4.

- critical reflection on formation among researchers and academic developers in order to foster awareness of the responsibilities of academic developers to enact the purpose of universities, especially in complex or ambiguous situations (2,3,4, 5,6)
- the potential of deliberative communication for academic developers to strengthen formation through research and teaching (7,8)
- collaborative research engagement among academic developers and university teachers or leaders as measured by more co-authored research publications/grant proposals/conference presentations (5,6)
- national learning communities (real and virtual) for academic developers that benefit from international collaboration (7,8)
- stronger national collaboration between Norwegian academic developers (5,6,7)
- greater competence in the use of a virtual community of practice with greater awareness of their potential to enhance and advance formation, universities' missions and values (7)

### **3. Frontiers of knowledge and technology**

The research on academic development has changed recent years. Until the late 1980's the field of academic development had few practitioners and little research on practices (17,18). The work of academic development has grown from informally organized interventions in the 1960's to more formally organized activities with whole course teams and departments (19,20,21). Academic development in Norway mirrors the international movement of the field shifting from working with individual teachers to including also broader responsibilities for academic development and leadership of education (15).

The proposed project will draw on research on university teaching and academic development from varied perspectives. Recent research, such as the Teaching, Learning and Research Project in Britain (22), identifies key principles of teaching and learning. Other studies, such as Stees et al's (20) in his review of the research on the impact of academic (instructional) development in higher education show a positive correlation between academic development interventions and change in teaching and learning activities. The link between teacher reflection and student learning and other research demonstrates how university teachers' conceptions of teaching impact both their pedagogies and their students' learning approaches (23,24). These studies provide useful information on university teachers' conceptions and reflections, yet leaving the practices and formation of academic developers little explored.

The interest in 'formation' in this project is inspired by how formation is articulated and approached in several studies on professional education from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (25,26,27). These studies show that most university programmes help students become knowledgeable and technically competent but to a large extent neglect the implications of what is at the core of professions and their importance to society: the ethical purpose to serve the public. With some exceptions, professional education tend to provide factual knowledge and skills as separate from values and the overall purpose of their profession (28,29). Such findings are also evident in a Norwegian study (30).

Other studies in the Norwegian context, point to how new systems in higher education that have occurred after the implementation of the Quality Reform in Higher Education (aligned with the Bologna Process) have consequences for teaching approaches. University teachers report that increased work pressure, an over-emphasis on time efficiency, and modularisation of study programmes "force" them to lecture, rather than using more time-consuming activities designed to stimulate student engagement in critical thinking (31). Additionally, new organisation of study programs and assessment requirements, such as the implementation of learning outcome descriptors aligned with the National Qualifications

framework, have not only had a direct formative impact on study programs and university teachers' teaching tasks, but also on the work of academic developers (32).

These changes resonate a general trend internationally, as evidenced in a recent special issue of the *International Journal of Academic Development*. Research on academic developers' practices and mediating strategies indicate that academic developers are increasingly pressured by the demands of efficiency, marketability and accountability – demands that tend to highlight economic and functional dimensions on the cost of moral and social dimension. One paper, based on a Norwegian case study, demonstrates how interactive dialogues may help academic developers and the researchers in this case, to become more aware retrospectively of their own formation when being encouraged to articulate and reflect upon the actions of the academic developers. The study also demonstrates the need to develop assessment instruments that capture changes in performance as a result of reflection (32).

#### **4. Research tasks and scientific methods**

In order to capture all aspects embedded in the project a qualitative design that draws on ethnographic approaches have been found appropriate (33). The research will include literature review, document analysis, individual interview and focus groups. Fieldnotes will be deployed to capture the detail of practices. Researchers and academic developers will, in collaboration, create a base-line for the interventions aimed at developing pedagogical capabilities in two Norwegian universities, University of Oslo (UiO) and University of Tromsø (UiT) (see part 5). Based on action research (4), academic developers' practices will be scrutinized with the aim of improvement. The project will also create a virtual community of practice that will use a method of deliberative and reflective communication (see below) and will provide detailed records of the use of the method.

The project also includes research on two comparable universities in Sweden; Örebro University (OU) and Uppsala University (UU) and one in the United States, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNCCH). All universities are public institutions, yet they are situated in different governance systems, thus representing different contexts in which academic developers operate – and also influenced by how their respective institutions seek to position themselves within international capitalism (35). The international comparison puts the project into a wider context and provides additional data about how to build the capacities of academic developers.

Many of the members in the project team participate with dual roles, both as researchers and practitioners. The project draws on 'insider' knowledge of academic development yet also benefits from 'outsider' perspectives and critical interrogation of the approaches and goals that academic developers may take for granted. This is particularly important in order to encourage formation of academic developers by being able to question the values and norms implied in the work with academic development. However, the project researchers will seek to be vigilant about bias when studying their own institutions. This will be done by assigning researchers to work in pairs. For example, to observe the academic developers' practice at UiO, one Swedish researcher will join the partner from UiT to do the interviews and to observe the practices of the academic developers at UiO. This pattern will be followed in all university contexts.

An important task in the project will be to develop and use an online communication platform to build a sustainable learning community that will be designed to continue after the project period. Deliberative communication will be used as a way of strengthening the reflection of individual and collective practices and critically to investigate the formative effect of deliberative communication to promote values, beliefs, and moral responsibility that collectively create a disposition of service to society. Inspired by the ideas of Habermas, Englund has developed criteria of deliberative communication in higher education (36):

- Different views are confronted and arguments for them are given time and space to be articulated and presented
- Tolerance and respect for the ‘concrete other’ and participants learn to listen to other’s arguments
- Elements of collective will-formation are present; endeavor to reach consensus, at least temporary agreements or to draw attention to differences
- Authoritative (dominant) teaching approaches (e.g. “culture based practices”) can be questioned, and there are opportunities to challenge one’s own tradition

As academic developers will be actively involved in nearly all stages of the research process, research capacity will be built in tandem with focusing on pedagogy and the formation of the participants. The observations of academic developers’ practices with university teachers or leaders along with individual and focus group interviews with academic developers will not only provide emerging themes, they will also provide opportunities to draw on each others’ competence as researchers and academic developers to act as critical friends (38). Thus also increase our collective and individual competences.

Consistent with the project plan distribution of findings, and sharing of experiences with Norwegian academic developers will take place at different stages while the website is intended to engage internationally as early as possible. Papers will be presented at conferences like NERA; Nordic Educational Research Association, ECER; European Conference Educational Research and ICED; International Consortium for Educational Development. The Norwegian Network of academic developers (UHpEd network) will serve as a national arena for dissemination of results from the project, and also contribute to the development of national competencies of academic developers and encourage more inter-institutional and international collaboration. A project web site will be established to serve as a hub for all communication activities. Scholarly articles will be published in national and international journals such as *UniPed*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *International Journal of Academic Development*, *Teaching in Higher Education* and *Higher Education Research and Development*. An edited book will be considered for the international market.

## 5. Organisation and project plan

*The project leader team.* The project will be carried out in close collaboration among the partners, which in addition to the Swedish and the US universities includes a researcher from University College of Dublin (UCD). The University of Oslo is the host and lead partner. Partners have been chosen on the basis of their interest in, commitment to, and publication on the formative influences of practices in higher education. The project leader team has already extensive collaboration experience in research and publishing. Some have also collaborated on international conference presentations on initial analyses of universities’ strategic plans (ECER 2013 and 2014).

The project leader team includes a diversity and complementarity of expertise in terms of research and practice in higher education. *Tone Dyrdal Solbrekke* has published extensively on professional responsibility in higher education and has broad experience as academic developer. *Trine Fosslund* has published on academic building and blended learning and has experience as an academic developer. *Molly Sutphen* has published extensively on professional education and situated teaching, and has experience as academic developer. *Ciaran Sugrue* has expertise in leadership and policy analyses, and will be assisting leader of the project. *Tomas Englund* has published extensively on issues about socialization and citizenship education and deliberative communication. *Andreas Bergh* has expertise in the issue of quality in education (see CVs for further details). Additional practitioners/researcher: *Line Wittek*, UiO, is an experienced academic developer with expertise in learning theories and academic development. *Kristin Ewins*, OU, is an experienced academic developer and

Åsa Kettis has expertise in quality assurance and academic development at UU. In addition persons from Department for Educational Technology at UiO are involved in the development of the 'virtual' communication platform. While virtual meetings cannot substitute for face to face communication, existing platforms or a hybrid will be created to establish a virtual community for all the participants that will be synchronous and 'simultaneous' on occasion. Through this all the participants will gain experience with the technology needed for a crossnational virtual community of practice encouraging 'blended' and collective learning.

*The project phases and activities.* The project is divided into four phases, yet with overlap in time for some of the activities (see part 6 and application). The project leader has the overall coordinating responsibility for all phases. The activities (with reference to the objectives part 2) within each phase will have an appointed coordinator. However, to develop deliberative communication as a mode of interactive communication and research approach and to develop a virtual communication platform and the integration of these two activities start in phase 1 and run through all phases, thus described first (1-4):

### **Running**

*Activity:* Develop and deploy deliberative communication as a modus operandi within virtual and physical communities to promote reflection and build research capacity among researchers and academic developers. (7,8)

*Participants:* All researchers and academic developers

*Coordinators:* Englund, Fosslund, Solbrekke/ Department of Technology at UiO

### **Phase 1 "Mapping" (objectives 1-5)**

*Activity:* Develop a literature review of academic development

*Sources:* International research literature on academic development.

*Participants:* All researchers in the project leader team.

*Coordinator:* Sugrue

*Activity:* Map and analyse values and aspirations of five universities

*Sources:* University strategic plans and policy documents for academic development.

*Participants:* All researchers in the project leader team.

*Coordinator:* Sutphen

*Activity:* Map and analyse university leaders' strategies.

*Sources:* Interviews with University leaders.

*Participants:* Sugrue in all five universities together with the internal researcher.

*Coordinator:* Sugrue

*Activity:* Map and analyse; 1) how university aspirations are interpreted by academic developers, 2) the formation of academic developers in five universities, in particular how they believe their values, goals and aspirations change in the course of their work, 3) how academic developers enact their values, goals, and aspirations in their work with university teachers or leaders.

*Sources:* Interviews with academic developers individually and in focus groups; observation of academic developers' practices.

*Participants:* Internal /external researcher at each institution; UiO + researcher from OU; UiT + researcher from UU; OU with researcher from UiO; UU with researcher from UiT; UNNCH with researcher from University College Dublin

*Coordinator:* Solbrekke

## **Phase 2 Interventions** (objectives 6 - 8)

This phase is seen as essential for the competence building of the Norwegian academic developers to extend their repertoires of teaching approaches. As described in part 4, the interventions will be decided after close collaboration with the other academic developers and researchers and may span over longer or shorter period – depending on what kind of interventions will take place (one intervention in each institution, eg. course in university pedagogy aimed at academic staff, consultation and development projects with teachers and leaders). During this work, both in the planning of interventions, and in the period of practice, as well as after the intervention phase, the academic developer will be challenged to articulate and write down their arguments for chosen teaching and consultation approaches and reflect upon the values underpinning the choices made, and finally reflect upon the result of the intervention. These reflections will be shared with the researcher who has followed the intervention and who will point at what may be changed for the purpose of strengthening the capability to reflect on their own formation and in turn what promote the public good. The result of the Norwegian interventions will be shared with the other participants in the project group to encourage collective learning.

*Activities:* 1)Develop a base line for interventions by using reflective deliberative communication 2)Develop new practices/intervention options for UiO and UiT  
*Sources:* Analysis of base-line from phase 1  
*Participants:* All researchers and academic developers.  
*Coordinators:* Bergh

*Activity:* Try out interventions and observe academic developers' practices at UiO and UiT  
*Participants:* Researchers from OU and UU and academic developers at UiO and UiT.  
*Coordinators:* Bergh, Englund

## **Phase 3 Analysis** (objectives 6-8)

*Activity:* Analyses of interventions at UiO and UiT and initial dissemination among national academic developer colleagues. Interpretation of evidence, feedback, dissemination of results at national seminars  
*Sources:* Reports from the interventions  
*Participants:* Researchers/academic developers/university teachers/leaders at UiO and UiT  
*Coordinator:* Solbrekke

*Activity:* Interpretation of outcome from and experiences with the interventions at UiO and UiT seen in an international perspective  
*Sources:* Reports from interventions at UiO and UiT  
*Participants:* All researchers and academic developers  
*Coordinator:* Sutphen

*Activity:* Evaluation of research method /deliberative communication and the competence development achieved through face to face meetings and the work in the virtual community of practice  
*Sources:* Ongoing reflection and communication between researchers and academic developers within the virtual and physical meetings  
*Participants:* All researchers and academic developers  
*Coordinator :* Englund

**Phase 4 Communication** (results 1-8)

*Activity:* Communicating activities at each partner institution and international conferences.

*Responsible:* Each partner participant.

*Activity:* Communication to the The Norwegian national network of academic developers (UHped) and the existing network conferences for experiences and research sharing regarding the practices and formation of academic developers.

*Responsible:* Solbrekke and the other Norwegian participants .

*Activity:* Co-authored publishing in national and international journals, based on work in progress during phases 1-3 (app. 3 articles per person).

*Sources:* Analyses of formation and competence building of academic developers

*Participants:* All researchers and academic developers (and potentially with university teachers/leaders)

*Responsible :* Each partner participant.

*Activity:* Final conference for all researchers and academic developers, yet also open to other participants in Norway who may have participated in the project.

*Responsible:* Solbrekke and the other Norwegian participants .

**6. Key milestones year and quarter** (ref. objectives listed at pp 2-3)\*

<i>Milestones</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Objectives</i>
2015/3-2017/1	Phase 1: Mapping	1-5, 8
2017/1-2018/2	Phase 2: Interventions	6-8
2017/1-2018/4	Phase 3: Analysis	6-8
2016/4-2019/3	Phase 4: Communication	1-8

A more detailed activity listing is provided in the application progress plan

**7. Costs incurred by each research-performing partner (NOK 1 000)**

<b>Financing partner</b>	<b>Cash financing</b>
UiO	2 064
UiT	110
OU	550
UU	315
UNCCH	343
UCD	520
From Research Council	<b>6 999</b>

**9. Other collaboration** Not relevant**Part 3 Project impact:****10. Importance for national knowledge base**

As outlined in part 1, there is an urgent need to raise awareness and knowledge and competence of academic developers to strengthen the formation aspects of university

education. The relevance of this project is also demonstrated through the increased political interest in improving university teachers' pedagogical competences. There is currently an ongoing work with national guidelines for basic pedagogical competence in public higher education institutions organised by The Norwegian Research Council and Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions. This project will contribute significantly to the knowledge base of Norwegian academic developers by benefitting from the international collaboration.

### **11. Relevance for partners and society**

All partners, and their institutions, will benefit from new knowledge on how to improve academic development and thereby university teaching; to develop dispositions and courage to fulfill the mission of university education. To develop competence on how to teach along the multiple dimensions; economic, functional, moral and social in an integrated way, is a challenging task, but highly needed for the benefit of their graduates, their staffs and society, nationally and internationally. The project will also develop new knowledge on how communication technology and deliberative communication may be used in teaching and learning. New knowledge disseminated through a variety of means that will enhance the awareness of the formative aspects of university *teaching*, and thus also contribute to public awareness of its significance.

### **PART 4: Other aspects**

#### **12. Communication of results**

See part 5 above and part X in the grant application form.

#### **13. Environmental impact**

Not directly applicable

#### **14. Ethical concerns**

The research will comply with the Personal Data Act, the regulations of the Data Protection Official for Research, and the guidelines of The National Committee for Research Ethics. Data will be collected based on informed consent from all participants.

**15. Gender issues** The project has a female leader and the project is well balanced regarding gender among the researchers and academic developers.

**16. Additional information specifically requested in the call for proposals** None

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