

Research Article:

Navigating Opportunities and Challenges during Uncertain Times: Role and Value of Academic Development Units

Kiruthika Ragupathi¹ and Lee Kooi Cheng^{2*}

¹Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL), National University of Singapore, 15 Kent Ridge Road, 119225 Singapore

²Centre for English Language Communication (CELC), National University of Singapore, 10 Architecture Drive, 117511 Singapore

*Corresponding author: elcleck@nus.edu.sg

ABSTRACT

What role do academic development units (ADUs) have to play in responding to rapid shifts in the global landscape, especially in times such as the recent pandemic? This paper retrospectively captured and reflected upon how an ADU at a research-intensive university in Asia responded during the pandemic. Using semi-structured interviews, perspectives were sought from multiple stakeholders at micro, meso and macro levels including academic developers. Together, responses from these 17 respondents converge on who they reached out to and the areas of support they received from the ADU during these uncertain times. The implications for ADUs in supporting the faculty community both during crisis situations and in navigating changes are discussed.

Keywords: academic development, remote teaching, online teaching, uncertainty and crisis, higher education

Received: 24 November 2021; **Accepted:** 30 December 2021; **Published:** 20 January 2022

To cite this article: Ragupathi, K., & Lee, K. C. (2021). Navigating opportunities and challenges during uncertain times: Role and value of academic development units. *Asia Pacific Journal of Educators and Education*, 36(2), 281–298. <https://doi.org/10.21315/apjee2021.36.2.14>

INTRODUCTION

The move towards digitalisation of teaching and learning at higher education institutions has been seen as a negotiation between two key forces: first, external processes that are influenced by top-down institutional strategies, governmental initiatives, and/or international trends; and second, internal processes through bottom-up initiatives from academics (Tømte et al., 2019). However, the recent COVID-19 outbreak tipped this balance by pushing universities to make a dramatic pivot from in-person to technology-based online instruction and learning at a rapid speed (Stevenson, 2020). This immediate shift to emergency remote teaching and online instruction was ‘unprecedented and staggering’ (Hodges et al., 2020). While many universities have had the experience of facilitating remote as well as online teaching, the massiveness and need for time-sensitive response have caught many unprepared. Many institutions realised that not all educators had the necessary devices nor adequate infrastructure and support to transition seamlessly into online teaching and learning (Burnette, 2020; Lim, 2020). This is in addition to an even more pressing issue of teacher familiarity with and competency in a new way of teaching and engaging students.

Conventionally, centres for teaching and pedagogy or academic development units (ADUs) have the role of preparing their faculty communities for teaching and learning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, its role became more prominent in providing support, guidance and directions. As academic developers, we are interested to understand the level of support needed and the role of ADUs, as perceived by faculty members. In order to investigate this, our study draws from Granovetter’s (1973) conceptualisation of interrelatedness between macro, meso, and micro levels of interpersonal networks within the context of higher education institutions. The establishment of the macro-meso-micro bridge, loosely or strategically, into a support network within a university community has been recognised as beneficial, if not necessary, for faculty development. In line with this, our study also takes reference from Roxå and Mårtensson’s (2009) significant conversations and significant networks. Together, both conceptual frameworks will help establish with whom faculty share their motivations, views, thoughts, plans for their teaching practice, and strategies and approaches that work, during challenging situations. Suffice to underscore that if activities, conversations, and motivations at the micro, meso, and macro levels are not aligned, there will be much disjoint, which in turn will have implications on the quality of teaching and learning.

In a crisis such as the recent pandemic, our questions are as follows:

1. What were the challenges faced by faculty members and how were these addressed? Where did they draw references and direction from?
2. What are the key learning points that the university and specifically the ADU can learn from in preparation for not only such crises but also changes in the university landscape?

We sought answers to these questions through data collected from a semi-structured interview with 15 colleagues at senior management, micro, meso, and macro levels, and two academic developers at a research-intensive university situated in Asia. In this paper, we evaluate and discuss the implications these findings have on the role and value of ADUs.

Academic Development During Uncertain Times

Supporting ‘colleges and universities to function effectively as teaching and learning communities’ (Felten et al., 2007, p. 93) has been the primary role of ADUs. However, as noted by Hodges et al. (2020), although academic development units and other support teams within the universities are generally equipped to supporting faculty members, as well as students, it is common for ADUs to typically support only a small percentage of the community, namely those who are already interested in teaching and learning. It may be worthwhile to clarify that this appears to be the nature of reach and not a strategic plan of ADUs. During COVID-19 pandemic, a similar trend was observed namely the number of those who reached out our ADU and those whom our ADU could reach out to were small. This is despite the fact that it is even more critical during COVID-19 that faculty members who require support for remote and online teaching reach out and receive such timely support. Burnette (2020) asserts that many educators were unprepared without any formal training on remote instruction. In fact, Boice (2021) reported concerns on the level of faculty member preparedness in conducting online classes even before the pandemic and highlighted multiple challenges faced by the campus teaching community. Challenges range from the design of the learning environment, difficulty in conveying content knowledge especially lab-based lessons, accessibility, and a lack of technology-based pedagogical skills (Boice, 2021).

Separately, Kessler et al. (2020) identify three key areas of support for faculty shifting to remote online instruction: (a) a central sharable resources platform including community-based resources; (b) virtual training sessions and accessible supports focused on online instruction, and (c) a clear communication strategy. Likewise, a more recent study by Boice (2021) concluded several components of staff development and training specifically for preparing academics to conduct online teaching. Key components include: (a) easy access to resources that support online instruction, drawing collective inputs from the university community; (b) hands-on practical training that support delivery of online instruction including technology skills; (c) modelling of best practices; and (d) a virtual community space for sharing ideas. These spaces for connecting and sharing should be spaces where faculty, staff, and students alike can exchange ideas and learn from one another (Buckner, 2021; Moore et al., 2021). Both these studies highlight the benefits of such networking, peer mentoring and resource-sharing opportunities to be far more transformative than passively listening to an expert.

As a response to tumultuous periods such as the ongoing pandemic, academic development needs to change how it is conceptualised, organised, and conducted (Alexandrou, 2021) to address the challenges that academics face both professionally and personally, even as the ADU's function remains largely the same. It requires academic developers to manage and respond to the changing landscape and swiftly adapt to challenging situations in four key aspects.

First, academic developers would need to scale up support for faculty members within a narrow preparation window in assisting and training faculty members to adopt technology in their pedagogical work. Traditionally, ADU support is most often limited to offering support for generic skills rather than discipline-specific pedagogical and technological skills (Rienties et al., 2013). This needs to change. Second, academic developers need to consider their own adjustments and transition, and to reconcile how their own agency might be linked to the spaces they are transitioning into, in this case, the online spaces (Lennon & Barnes, 2020). Academic developers are adept in managing and brokering change in dynamic environments and that this COVID-19 has only brought to the forefront the centrality of their work within higher education institutions (Huijser et al., 2020). Understanding the value and role of an academic developer in this highly ambiguous complex environment will also 'need to deepen' as practices, identities, and contexts change and influence what it means to do academic development in such times (Zou & Felten, 2019, p. 301).

Third, it is critical for academic developers to step up as leaders and become "change agents and institutional voices on good educational practice" (Chng et al., 2019, p. 102). This requires establishing strategic partnerships with multiple stakeholders at different levels in the institution (Chng et al., 2019), and in negotiating and being flexible to provide support while also dealing with their own respective pathways (Brew & Boud, 1996), all at a staggering speed so as to provide timely response during these uncertain times. Lastly, "the need for collaboration and the power of learning from each other" (Stevenson, 2020, p. 729) has been re-emphasised. Most, if not, all the academic development work is now undertaken online; hence, changing the dynamics in terms of communication, interactions, teaching and learning (Alexandrou, 2021).

Role of Significant Networks in Academic Development

In their seminal book on academic tribes and territories, Becher and Trowler (2001) argue that academics rely on a small network of individuals to gain new perspectives, nurture new ideas, and give each other critical feedback. Drawing from Becher and Trowler's work, Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) closely examined the socio-cultural perspective of academics' conversations and interaction with colleagues both within and outside their respective disciplines and departments. They found that university teachers are more likely to engage in small-group private conversations about teaching and learning, than in a larger group. In the same vein, Poole et al. (2019, p. 67) contend that 'birds of a feather flock together' to form small networks particularly since they share similar

beliefs and find such relationships more meaningful and valuable. Academics use these small significant networks to ‘promptly discover what works within their context’, seek ‘practical quick-fix to address a specific problem’, ‘resolve teaching-related issues in contextually appropriate ways’, ‘reassure themselves’, ‘release frustrations’, and ‘discuss and develop’ their teaching practice (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018, p. 1545). These individuals are often referred to as critical friends (Handal, 1999) whose relationships are built on the strong foundation of mutual respect and trust between them.

In times of uncertainties, crises and during changes in the university landscape, the ‘value’ they associate with their network relationships may be different for different individuals. Drawing from the work of Wenger et al. (2011), Van Waes et al. (2016) identify six different types of value—immediate value, potential value, applied value, realized value, reframing value, and aspirational value. Even as there is value in having critical friends, Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) caution the likelihood of these conversations becoming very narrow and insulated and the extent to which they are evidence-based and are grounded in teaching and learning theories.

However, Van Waes et al. (2018) argue that through appropriate interventions, these significant networks can be further developed and strengthened over a short time-period. The role of these significant small networks and the implications they have on teaching and learning warrant the ADUs’ close attention to fostering and strengthening these personal teaching networks within their campuses. Poole et al. (2019, p. 69) outline this role of the ADUs and that of academic developers as follows:

By virtue of their roles, educational developers are connected to multiple networks and people who have varying approaches to teaching and learning. As such, they can serve as hubs, [...] hubs connect people to each other and link networks to one another. Connecting people and networks can be done through formal and informal means. [...] They do, however, require that educational developers be aware of instructors’ current interests, questions, and priorities – something they may learn via their own interactions with instructors or in conversation with colleagues. Knowing this information helps the educational developer to foster meaningful relationships.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study takes a critical reflection approach to reflect on the data collected and to interrogate the research questions. This approach is best suited given the high degree of uncertainty and the rapidly changing situations in such times of crisis. Fook (2011) asserts that critical reflections involve ‘an overall process of learning from experience, with the

express aim of improving professional practice' (p. 56). We adopt Fook's two-stage model of critical reflection where the study participants and the researchers effectively become co-researchers. First, we took the stories presented by participants during the interviews to unearth their fundamental assumptions, values, and beliefs crucial to the development of their professional practice in times of crisis. The dialogic and interactive nature of the semi-structured interviews enabled representation of individual, social and collective views of study participants and the researchers. Second, it allowed us to reflect and integrate the different aspects of their complex and diverse experiences from different levels, the macro, meso and micro levels, and the senior management so as to create and represent their collective experience as relevant themes for communication and action.

The content analysis approach was further used to facilitate the identification of relevant themes from the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews with the 17 respondents in the study. Content analysis is a method that is empirically grounded to draw and make valid inferences from qualitative data such as interviews, texts, images, and symbols (Krippendorff, 2004). It is used most commonly by social scientists to systematically look at communication patterns, and it requires close reading of the data in order to surface meaningful intent and phenomena that are not easily observed directly. The study also included elements of insider research particularly since we are also academic developers with strong views on academic development and our affiliation with the ADU. Our role has enabled to create associations with numerous academics bringing in credibility with research respondents who may feel more comfortable working with us, but we also need to take into consideration the implicit bias that is likely to present itself in how we academic development and online learning. In this regard, two academic developers' perspectives and reflections were sought on our ADU's preparedness and response during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Semi-structured interviews with faculty respondents at the senior management, academic macro, meso and micro levels, and with academic developers were the primary method of data collection. Information gathered for analysis included the challenges faced, strategies employed, support respondents reached out to and/or received from, views on ADU's response and its impact on behavioural change and practice change. An ethnographic content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) of the respondents' interview data was then applied for insights and interpretations through consolidation and comparison comparing of different perspectives from the respondents. Finally, researcher interpretation of and reflection on the data was used to identify and categorise key themes that emerged.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Faculty Members

Among the 17 respondents of the semi-structured interviews, 15 were faculty members and two were academic developers. The faculty members comprised two at senior management level, three at macro level, three at meso level, and seven at micro level at respective academic departments. These faculty respondents represented the diversity of teaching and learning contexts at the university in which the study was done. Further, the respondents led different departments of STEM and non-STEM disciplines, residential and non-residential settings, coordinated and taught varied modules of varied class sizes, and the nature of classes ranged from lab or studio based, to lecture and seminar styles (see Figure 1). To further clarify, STEM is the abbreviation for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and any disciplines that fall under these four broad categories. Non-STEM refers to the other disciplines. Majority of the faculty members are attached to their respective disciplinary departments and faculties. However, there are also faculty members who teach in residential colleges which offer living-learning programmes. Students in such settings read four to five modules together with their college residents.

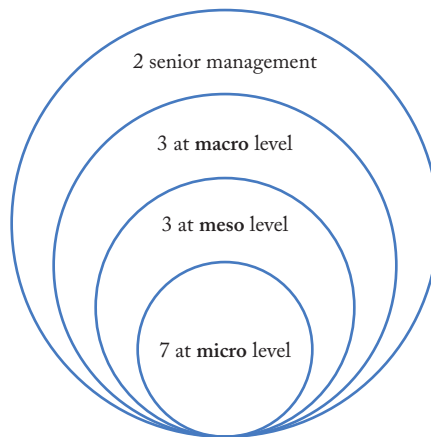


Figure 1. Profile of faculty respondents

Current studies on challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and teaching in higher education elicit three common challenges: (a) teacher preparedness and competency in promptly adapting to a new teaching approach; (b) student readiness and mental resilience for a paradigm shift in learning in a changed environment; and (c) accessibility to guidance, resources and infrastructure necessary to function in a new teaching and learning environment (Barrot et al., 2021; Coman et al., 2020; Dubey & Pandey, 2020). Using these as guide, the interview transcripts were first coded into these three common categories. Respondents' contributions not falling into these three categories were initially labelled as Others.

It is not surprising that most of the challenges observed from our faculty respondents did fall into these three categories. However, there are two other dominant categories that emerged from our data. One such impact is the fast-changing policies and safe management measures which had consequences on stabilising newly adopted approaches for the learning environment. For example, decisions on in-person, hybrid, fully online mode of delivery and assessments affected how materials were shaped and activities were carried out. Demand for student participation and engagement in what was once considered critical for application, such as for lab-based and studio-based lessons, was questioned and re-examined. While quick and in-time adaptations were made in response to public health concerns, most faculty members were not convinced of the degree in which the intended learning outcomes were met.

Another category of challenge relates to engagement between faculty and students. In order to compensate for the lack of in-person interaction, in particular the absence of non-verbal communication cues, and to enhance engagement with students, all the faculty from our interviews made use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram to keep in contact with students. This, however, created predicament for faculty who felt compelled to respond to constant questions from students, day and night. On one hand, there was a sense of responsibility and obligation to respond; on the other hand, there was also a desire to have clearer boundaries set. Pre-pandemic, such a boundary seemed clear; but with the pandemic, faculty were themselves initially unclear of the management of this blurring of boundary. Another phenomenon raised is student behaviours while they were online. Students multi-tasking, being distracted from lessons, disabling of video during lessons are a few prominent issues that posed challenges to faculty who were concerned about engagement.

Table 1 summarises the categories and their respective descriptions. Except for the category on “Policies and measures” which were brought up primarily by faculty in the senior management and the macro levels who were responsible for setting and conveying them, all the other faculty members interviewed made reference to the other four categories of challenges. Those in the meso level who were coordinators of modules were most concerned with preparing their tutors for changes in a timely manner in the midst of evolving situations.

Significant Network Map of Study Respondents During Challenging Times

In the semi-structured interviews, respondents were also asked who they approached during the pandemic when all lessons pivoted from in-person to fully online or hybrid. Not surprisingly, we found that most reached out to those within their teaching units. They also actively searched for external sources on the Internet. What surprised us was that only three mentioned that they included ADU as their source for help.

Table 1. Summary of challenges and descriptions

Category	Description	Characteristic features
Teacher preparedness and competency	Responses relating to teacher preparedness and competency in promptly adapting to a new teaching approach.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • familiarity in using online, hybrid approaches; • level of confidence; • preparing and communicating about changes
Student readiness	Statements referring to student readiness and mental resilience for a paradigm shift in learning in a changed environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • student anxiety about academic work, exams (online); • lack of in-person socialisation opportunities for students; • management of online and hybrid learning
Guides, resources, infrastructure	Comments about accessibility to guidance, guides, resources, and infrastructure necessary to function in a new teaching and learning environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quick “how-to” guides; • repository of good practices for different types of situations • infographics; • hardware and software support
Interaction, engagement, boundaries	Statements relating to rapport, interaction, engagement between students and faculty; and between students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing rapport online at the start of semester; • difficulties in reading nuances, discussing controversial topics; • problems of students ‘hiding behind the computer’
Policies and measures	Concerns about fast changing policies which have consequences on stabilising newly adopted approaches for the learning environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pivoting of in-person, hybrid, and online lessons depending on policies; • ensuring safe management measures

In terms of the context where such conversations took place, most of the respondents, especially at meso and micro levels, indicated that the conversations, especially significant conversations, took place in semi-formal and casual settings although there were instances where more formal settings such as meetings stimulated new ideas and further dialogues. The findings seem to be aligned with Roxå and Mårtensson’s (2009) conclusion of a study that took a closer look at the socio-cultural perspectives of faculty members’ interaction with their colleagues in which they found that faculty were more likely to reach out to a small group of colleagues whom they trust and respected. This attests to the strength of small yet significant networks where faculty members support one another. Through these significant conversations, faculty members make sense of meaning of local policies and changes in the teaching and learning landscape. Further, Hodges et al.’s (2020) contend that ADUs are typically effective in reaching out to and support only a small percentage of the community, in particular those who are already familiar with the work of the ADUs.

In the same study, Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) found that individual faculty members with a local culture supportive of teaching and learning conversations seemed to belong simultaneously to a larger network with more significant conversations. However, this is not apparent from the findings of our study. Whichever the case may not, Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) indicate that while such conversations and networks among critical friends are important, they caution the implications on teaching quality.

Notwithstanding the similarity of our findings with Hodges et al's and Roxå and Mårtensson's contentions, the data strongly suggest a need for a re-evaluation of ADUs' relationships and significant networks with their communities. For such a change to be effected, careful navigation between a systematic and strategically planned approach and paradigm shift seem necessary. These are referred to by Kezar (2014) as the scientific management and cultural schools of thought in her typology of models that describe six schools of thought - scientific management, evolutionary, social cognition, cultural, political and institutional.

ADU's Support for Faculty Transitioning to Remote Online Teaching

While observation about significant networks gives us a general sense of those whom faculty members reached out to, interview data also revealed areas in which respondents felt ADUs contributed to or could contribute to in supporting them in transitioning to remote online teaching. Academic developers and senior management that we interviewed recognised that although many academics were familiar with blended learning and educational technology, a majority of them needed a great deal of support in accelerating the move from in-person to hybrid and fully online teaching for different teaching and learning contexts. Faculty members were concerned not only about how they could manage but also about the quality of teaching and the impact on student learning.

In response to this, we draw upon Boice's (2021) suggestion of four key roles of ADUs in providing directions and support. They are (a) a repository of targeted resources, (b) provider of targeted and practicable workshops, (c) community portal, and (d) ADUs' model of good practices. Additionally, a fifth category, a bridge to support close-knit networks emerged as a dominant theme, which in fact, was largely valued by a majority of respondents at all levels (see Table 2). Our data also showed that the second category related to workshops refers to providing contextualised and short workshops for teaching ideas which are practicable and easy to implement.

In addition to emphasising on what the ADUs can offer, the respondents also cautioned what the ADUs should avoid doing. These include: (a) the use of a prescriptive tone, (b) an enforcer of standards (e.g., you must do this, you must do that), (c) an offer of purely or primarily theoretical rather than practical workshop sessions, and (d) a showcase of too many technology tools and resources that confuse and frustrate faculty members.

Table 2. Key roles of ADUs in supporting faculty members

Category	Description	Characteristic features
Repository of targeted resources	Relates to providing a resource bank of easily accessible information, especially using technology tools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ideas, strategies, techniques, and knowledge in the form of short video clips, infographics, guides, and websites
Provider of practicable workshops	Relates to online training sessions that support effective and efficient online instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> conduct short, simple, practical online training sessions; offer contextualised training sessions addressing the nuances that are specific to the discipline; harness best practices and hone that into a course support younger faculty in terms of providing really good and ample training opportunities
Community portal for sharing ideas	Relates to supporting an informal virtual community space for exchanging ideas and experiences on online teaching with colleagues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> platform for cross fertilisation of ideas and methodologies between faculty members; platform for sharing and collaboration, understanding the challenges or hearing what tricks other people have up their sleeves
Model good practices	Relates to modelling good practices of teaching and engaging in online platforms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> how to stimulate and model engaging conversations among students; how to ask and manage questions; how to facilitate small group discussions; how to increase social engagement in online webinars
Bridge to support close-knit networks	Relates to fostering small networks to promote interaction with colleagues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> create opportunities to meet with different people around campus; encourage informal conversations after workshops and webinars and during breaks; foster small group conversations during programmes

IMPLICATIONS

Our study findings have confirmed that an overwhelming majority of respondents referred to others for support who are usually within their own small significant networks. From our interview conversations, analysis, and reflection, it has also become fairly clear that during periods of crisis, macro-level staff delegated operationalising of policies to the meso-level leaders who in-turn became the second go-to person for colleagues at the micro-level beyond their close-knit networks. Once these alternatives had been exercised, some might look to the ADU for support. This motivated us to further examine and understand the value—immediate, potential, applied, realised, reframing, and aspirational—these faculty members saw in these network relationships.

As online teaching and learning are becoming increasingly important for the future, we as academic developers need to ask ourselves how academic development should look like, where should we focus our attention and resources, and how should we best assert ourselves to value-add (to faculty members).

In this section, we share implications of our findings vis a vis the role and value of ADUs. We refer to Fook's (2011, p. 61) critical reflection process which has been transformative in that it leads to 'fundamental and empowering changes at both personal and social levels' in instilling a sense of agency and in providing us with a framework for action. The insights gained from the study are not merely applicable to the role that ADUs play in supporting the transition to remote online teaching and learning, but they are also useful for ADUs to respond to the constantly evolving university environment and higher education landscape.

Act as a Bridge to Foster Significant Support Networks Within Campus

Data might have shown that the respondents reached out to those in their inner circles, but respondents also shared they would like to know how other colleagues had managed. The respondents believed in a collective effort to overcome the crisis that benefits student learning. Our observation from the findings informs us that not only did our colleagues value ideas from those with similar beliefs, but they also placed value in diverse thoughts and interactions among dissimilar network members. Respondents saw the benefits of such networks as platforms for interaction with colleagues from very different fields and different contexts to enable cross-fertilisation of views and ideas. For this, they looked to the ADUs to be the link. They expected the ADUs to act as a bridge and a broker to help them expand their own small networks, both formal and informal. One respondent explained the value for diverse thoughts and the ADUs' role in forming the network as follows:

The opportunity in the programme [for early career academics] for a chance to speak to some of the other people who have just joined [the university] and we all are from very different fields. I was in a group where they were all from the computing school; they had very different concerns, and I think that was interesting. It was a good exchange of how they go about conducting the classes, even though they were very different contexts. And yeah, so the exchange of views during such small group conversations was the most useful.

Another respondent added:

The continuing efforts of CDTL [the ADU], in sharing and providing the platform for cross fertilisation of ideas and methodologies between faculty members has been helpful.

The respondents also saw academic developers as the best people to identify excellent teachers and technology evangelists as well as emergent changes that occur across the university, so as to spread good teaching and learning practices to a larger pool of colleagues. At least one respondent felt the ADUs are in a good position to create opportunities to opening classes of these champions so that others could benefit and learn from them. This resonates with Huijser et al.'s (2020) observation that academic developers are adept in managing and brokering change in dynamic environments, and as one macro-level respondent acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the centrality of the ADU and our work within the university.

Overall, the respondents reported the immediate, potential, and applied value gained from their inner-circle networks, that is, their conversations produced value in themselves, they were able to leverage on strategies, ideas and resources, or made immediate changes to their teaching practice (e.g., trying out a strategy, a technique). The interviews also shed light on another key finding that these small networks need not be restricted to faculty members but could, in fact, include students. We think that as academic developers become bridges and brokers who link up and foster small networks within micro-levels, between micro, meso and macro-levels, and with our student community, we are likely to lay a strong, sustainable foundation to generate wider ripples of conversations within the institution in contributing to a culture of collegiality (Ragupathi, 2021).

Offer A Virtual Community Space

In addition to linking up networks of individuals, study respondents also saw value in an informal community, connected virtually through a common online platform for “exchanging ideas and online teaching experiences with colleagues from other departments and faculties and from different contexts”. One respondent explained,

Maybe an informal community, although I don't know how to go about starting that, or how to execute it. [...] yeah, something a bit more informal, where people can reach out and ask for help, or simply find out more. Like, again, I think it's dependent on people's personalities as well.

As Chng et al. (2019) argue, such a collective effort is needed for the benefit of student learning and in sustaining a culture of excellence in teaching. We think that ADUs involvement in creating and maintaining such informal spaces can create a culture of valuing dialogues within the campus community. Such a space has the potential to offer reframing and aspirational value in addition to the immediate, potential, and applied value. This is because faculty members can develop a new understanding of how the strategy is implemented in other contexts, which may in turn help reframe their own strategies or the potential for use in the future.

Curate a repository of resources (ideas, strategies, techniques, and knowledge)

All the respondents felt that our ADU could strengthen its repository of resources contextualised for the community. They looked to the ADU as a storehouse of techniques, seeded ideas, examples, resources and formal frameworks that detail how faculty members can go about teaching during a pandemic. The repository should be easily accessible in the form of websites, short video clips, highly summarised texts, and infographics. In times of uncertainties, and for rapidly shifting to emergency online teaching, faculty look towards resources that showcase how to use technology, how to record online lectures, how technology/pedagogy is successfully employed in classes, and how others go about engaging students and increasing collaboration amongst students in online lessons.

The respondents underscored that during a crisis when time is critical, such resources should be simple, succinct, and straight to the point. Pedagogical underpinnings, while important, could come later. In relation to this, there seems to be an assuring sense of trust the respondents had in the ADU to put up resources with sound pedagogical underpinnings. Such resources, they said, could provide the means for adaptation to their own situation or to help them envision the productive use of online tools in their own classes. A caution respondents mentioned is the use of prescriptive tone and the timeliness in which these resources are presented. One respondent noted:

A store of easily accessible information. How did you do this? or How did you do that? So not standards that are going to get enforced, you must do this, you must do that. But rather, if I'm going to envision how I've got to do this class productively using online tools, what can I use? What would really work? What different formats? Can I come up to a central place to get ideas? So, if I could, like in one click and see, oh, here's some ideas for how to incorporate [...] this interactive exercise [...], just so that it's fast, it gets me thinking about how to design my own class, that would be helpful.

Separately, our experience with the recent pandemic suggests to us that parallel resources strongly related to teaching, learning, and assessment should be prepared and made available to students.

Provide Contextualised, Practicable Workshops

It is common that ADUs offer generic workshops that cater to most but often do not address nuances that are specific to the respective disciplines. Rienties et al. (2013, p. 3) contend that such an approach could result in 'programmes that reflect institutional goals rather than actually enhancing teachers' competencies'. Probably this was also the reason why the respondents did not consider looking to our ADU as the first point of contact when the pandemic unfolded, and they found themselves looking for support within their own small networks. When pointed out to respondents that there were

workshops and conversations initiated on topics closely related to addressing teaching and learning during the pandemic, most respondents were either unaware of them or did not show an interest. This again speaks of the importance of the ADU building relationship and significant networks with faculty members. Albeit resource intensive, partnering specific units in offering faculty development activities could be beneficial in the longer term especially in timeliness in navigating changes and disruptions. Adding to this are outreach efforts in disseminating information.

For enhanced contextualised, one respondent suggested that ADUs tap into the experience of departmental colleagues and their practices and have them co-teach workshops. This, we think, can encourage both formal and informal dialogues between ADUs and academics as well as between academics from different departments to draw out the rich tacit knowledge of their own teaching environments. Such opportunities serve as a platform to groom future leaders within the university, who will then be in a position to initiate change within their departments.

Even as ADUs are more explicit about theorising and articulating theoretical underpinnings, they should not lose sight of offering workshops that are practical, readily applicable and useful for teaching. Respondents at the meso and macro levels envisaged ADUs to provide guidance in designing modules, assessment components, and ways of delivering content that bring together coherent and aligned pedagogies as well as educational outcomes. This group of respondents associated this with their faculty's need for ample training opportunities and support on the technology skills needed to teach online such as navigating and understanding the Learning Management System (LMS), creating content in the form of short videos, conducting online lectures via webinar tools, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, creating and adding textual materials such as infographics and documents, and linking to additional resources for students. However, this role was not mentioned by the micro-level respondents. Nonetheless, all respondents including the micro-level respondents preferred training and resources that are simple, short, timely with ample hands-on opportunities to experience the tools and strategies offered during training.

Finally, the respondents also emphasised the importance for academic developers to model good practices of online teaching and learning when conducting online training sessions.

CONCLUSION

Our observations re-affirm the importance of ADUs being part of the teaching community, and truly understanding their needs at different phases of a crisis so that initiatives introduced are timely and strategic. Further, enhancing strategic partnerships with multiple stakeholders at different levels in the institution (Chng et al., 2019), and being nimble to provide support (Brew & Boud, 1996) are critical for ADUs to be effective.

This study timely highlights the opportunities for ADUs to be the agents of change and partners in arms (Debowski, 2014) taking into account the affordances offered by online teaching for academic development. This may require a paradigm shift not so much in how academic developers view what their role is, but in how they carry out their role as agents of change and ‘institutional voices on good educational practice’ (Chng et al., 2019, p. 102). Conversely, it would be detrimental for ADUs to be perceived as conduits enforcing university policies. This requires establishing strategic partnerships with multiple stakeholders at different levels in the institution (Chng et al., 2019), and in negotiating and being flexible to provide support while also dealing with their own respective pathways (Brew & Boud, 1996), but all at a staggering speed, so as to respond during these uncertain times. As such, there is a ‘need to deepen’ our practices (Zou & Felten, 2019, p. 301), to clearly define and articulate our identities, and to reconcile how our individual agencies might be linked to the spaces we are transitioning into (Lennon & Barnes, 2020).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank our respondents from whom we have learned much insight for us to continue our work in strengthening our ties with the faculty community.

REFERENCES

- Alexandrou, A. (2021). Professional learning and development – change, conceptualisation, innovation and opportunities. *Professional Development in Education*, 47(5), 725–728. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1966588>
- Buckner, M. (2021, June 29). Pivoting professional development through the framework of digital transformation. *EDUCAUSE Review*. <https://er.educause.edu/blogs/2020/6/pivoting-professional-development-through-the-framework-of-digital-transformation>
- Barrot, J. S., Llenares, I. I., & del Rosario, L. S. (2021). Students’ online learning challenges during the pandemic and how they cope with them: The case of the Philippines. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26, 7321–7338.
- Becher, T., & Trowler, P. (2001). *Academic tribes and territories*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Brew, A., & Boud, D. (1996). Preparing for new academic roles: An holistic approach to development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 1(2), 17–25.
- Boice, T. (2021). Training components American University managers need to prepare instructors for online teaching: A phenomenological study, [Doctoral dissertation, Colorado Technical University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Burnette, D. (2020, May 8). Devastated budgets and widening inequities: How the Coronavirus collapse will impact schools. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/devastated-budgets-and-widening-inequities-how-the-coronavirus-collapse-will-impact-schools/2020/05>.

- Chng, H. H., Mighty, J., Roxà, T., Deane Sorcinelli, M., & DiPietro, M. (2019). The danger of a single story: a reflection on institutional change, voices, identities, power, and outcomes. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 24(2), 97–108.
- Coman, C., Tiru, L.G., Mesesan-Schmitz, L., Stanciu, C., & Bularca, M.C. (2020). Online teaching and learning in higher education during the Coronavirus pandemic: Students' perspective. *Sustainability*, 12(24), 10367. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su122410367>
- Debowski, S. (2014). From agents of change to partners in arms: the emerging academic developer role. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(1), 50–56.
- Dubey, P., & Pandey, D. (2020). Distance learning in higher education during pandemic: Challenges and opportunities. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(2), 43–46.
- Felten, P., Kalish, A., Pingree, A., & Plank, K. (2007). Toward a scholarship of teaching and learning in educational development. In D. Robertson, & L. Nilson (Eds.), *To improve the academy: Resources for faculty, instructional and organizational development* (Vol. 25, pp. 93–108). Jossey-Bass.
- Fook, J. (2011). Developing critical reflection as a research method. In J. Higgs, A. Titchen, D. Horsfall, & D. Bridges (Eds.), *Creative spaces for qualitative researching* (pp. 55–64). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-761-5_6
- Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360–1380.
- Handal, G. (1999). Consultation using critical friends. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1999(79), 59–70. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.7907>
- Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, M. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *EDUCAUSE Review*. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- Huijser, H., Sim, K. N., & Felten, P. (2020). Change, agency, and boundary spanning in dynamic contexts. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 25(2), 91–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2020.1753919>
- Kessler, A., Barnes, S., Rajagopal, K., Rankin, J., Pouchak, L., Silis, M., & Esser, W. (2020). Saving a semester of learning: MIT's emergency transition to online instruction. *Information and Learning Sciences*, 121(7/8), 587–597. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-04-2020-0097>
- Kezar, A. J. (2014). *How colleges change: Understanding, leading and enacting change*. New York: Routledge.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lennon, S., & Barnes, N. (2020). A New Materialist take on the possibilities and impossibilities of becoming a scholarly blogger. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 25(3), 247–258.
- Lim, M. (2020, March 20). Educating despite the Covid-19 outbreak: Lessons from Singapore. *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/educating-despite-covid-19-outbreak-lessons-singapore>
- Moore, S., Trust, T., Lockee, B., Bond, A., & Hodges, C. (2021, October 11). One year later... and counting: Reflections on emergency remote teaching and online learning. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 11 October. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2021/11/one-year-later-and-counting-reflections-on-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- Poole, G., Iqbal, I., & Verwoord, R. (2019). Small significant networks as birds of a feather. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 24(1), 61–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2018.1492924>

- Ragupathi, K. (2021). Desired characteristics of continuing professional development for holistic academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.2007484>
- Rienties, B., Brouwer, N., & Lygo-Baker, S. (2013). The effects of online professional development on higher education teachers' beliefs and intentions towards learning facilitation and technology', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 29, 122–31.
- Roxå, T., & Mårtensson, K. (2009). Significant conversations and significant networks – Exploring the backstage of the teaching arena. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(5), 547–559.
- Stevenson, H. (2020). Learning to live in uncertain times. *Professional Development in Education*, 46(5), 729–730. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1819722>
- Thomson, K. E., & Trigwell, K. R. (2018). The role of informal conversations in developing university teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(9), 1536–1547.
- Tømte, C. E., Fosslund, T., Aamodt, P. O., & Degn, L. (2019). Digitalisation in higher education: Mapping institutional approaches for teaching and learning. *Quality in Higher Education*, 25(1), 98–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2019.1603611>
- Van Waes, S., De Maeyer, S., Moolenaar, N. M., Van Petegem, P., & Van den Bossche, P. (2018). Strengthening networks: A social network intervention among higher education teachers. *Learning and Instruction*, 53, 34–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2017.07.005>
- Van Waes, S., Moolenaar, N. M., Daly, A. J., Heldens, H. H. P. F., Donche, V., Van Petegem, P., & Van den Bossche, P. (2016). The networked instructor: The quality of networks in different stages of professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 59, 295–308. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.05.022>
- Wenger, E., Trayner, B., & de Laat, M. (2011). *Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: A conceptual framework*. Heerlen: Open University.
- Zou, T., & Felten, P. (2019). Being and becoming in academic development: Enduring questions, new contexts. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 24(4), 301–304.