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To cite this article: Trine Fosslund & Ragnhild Sandvoll (2021): Drivers for educational change? Educational leaders' perceptions of academic developers as change agents, International Journal for Academic Development, DOI: [10.1080/1360144X.2021.1941034](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.1941034)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.1941034>



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Published online: 17 Jun 2021.



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Drivers for educational change? Educational leaders' perceptions of academic developers as change agents

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ABSTRACT

Educational leaders are responsible for educational change, and many scholars have argued that academic developers (ADs) have expertise with the potential to influence educational change. We argue, however, that ADs' influence depends on how educational leaders perceive educational change and position ADs' roles and responsibilities in relation to that change. In this paper, we critically analyse data from interviews with educational leaders from four universities, within two national contexts. Informed by a significant current discussion about academic development, we reveal the extensive potential of educational leaders to enhance ADs' influence on educational change and their ability to become change agents.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 May 2019
Accepted 10 March 2021

KEYWORDS

Academic developers;
educational change;
educational leaders;
teaching and learning

Introduction

A significant current discussion in higher education centres on educational leaders' responsibility for educational change to enhance quality in teaching and learning at universities. Leading complex organisations such as universities constitutes a considerable normative, practical, and organisational challenge that educational leaders must navigate, and that requires collaboration (Stensaker et al., 2017). Within this landscape, academic developers (ADs) are often thought to have expertise, roles, and responsibilities with the potential to influence educational change. Debowski (2014), who explores the role ADs may enact as agents of change, highlights ADs' expertise in guiding individuals, groups, and institutional practice to encourage the development of teaching and learning, but she also identifies an 'emerging shift from acting as an institutional teaching and learning "expert" (i.e. agent of change) to a more adaptive, collaborative partnership model, where ADs work together with educational leaders to change educational practice' (p. 50).

In this paper we critically investigate how educational leaders within four universities: (1) perceived educational change, and (2) positioned ADs' roles and responsibilities in relation to that change. We argue that ADs' potential to influence educational change depends both on how educational leaders perceive such change, and how they position and recognise ADs' expertise.

Educational leaders' responsibility for educational change

Educational leaders are responsible for educational strategies and change, and how new requirements influence their everyday strategic work (Stensaker et al., 2017). We define 'educational leaders' as those in formal positions within a university with responsibility for leading education (Grunefeld et al., 2017). Their responsibilities are therefore not limited to educational management, resource allocation, logistics, and the administration of education (Bolden et al., 2012). Grunefeld et al. (2017) argue that the quality of educational leadership requires expertise in and attention to supporting teaching, and therefore the ability to stimulate discussions to develop education as a core business of the university, as most faculty members in leadership positions have a strong research record. Previous work has highlighted how new requirements have influenced educational leaders' practices, roles, and tasks as these relate to their increased responsibilities for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Gibbs, 2013; Leibowitz, 2014; Stensaker et al., 2017).

Universities tend to adopt distributed or shared leadership models to address the need for agentic action (Bolden et al., 2008). This approach involves relationships and collaborations across different levels of leadership, where it is essential to position others to become contributors to educational change (Bryman, 2007; Ramsden, 1998). Given the often large number of actors involved in leadership, the importance of organisational processes in shaping their engagements becomes essential (Gosling et al., 2009). Fields et al. (2019, p. 2) note that 'educational leadership is best conceptualized as distributed'. In line with Amey (2006, p. 157), however, we underline a need for leadership that is derived 'from multiple levels and functions, as a mix of top-down, bottom-up and middle-out contributions'. Ideally, this approach involves shared, deliberative leadership practices across the institution or groups, rather than the practices being undertaken by one strong leader (Floyd & Fung, 2017; Jones et al., 2014). The combination of a top-down and bottom-up educational leadership depends, however, on the dynamics, traditions, and history of each institution (Grunefeld et al., 2017). Bolander Laksov and Tomson (2016, pp. 1–2) note that educational leaders also need to be 'able to adapt to societal needs and implement changes at the same time as being sensitive to the structural requirements of the academic organization'.

Within this landscape, the field of academic development has evolved from providing small-scale courses and support to individual teachers, in the direction of engaging in strategic work related to teaching and learning (Gibbs, 2013). According to Stensaker et al. (2017, v–vi), academic development units' responsibilities vary, but their core mission is to engage with professors, postdoctoral associates, and/or graduate students to strengthen pedagogy, curricula or educational technology, and to collaborate on innovation within these areas. They also undertake research to gather empirical evidence on teaching and learning to inform strategic decision-making about the educational mission of universities (Stensaker et al., 2017).

Given the tension between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' roles and responsibilities within universities, educational leaders hold formal positions with the potential agency to influence educational policies, strategies, and structures (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2017). Despite the increased 'web of commitments' that characterises the complexity of leading higher education (May, 1996), little evidence exists to explore how educational leaders position ADs' roles and responsibilities so that ADs will have the potential to influence educational change. In line with Fanghanel (2012), we argue that sustained

academic development is unlikely to happen if an organisation does not support ADs' efforts. Jones and Wisker (2012) underline that the effectiveness and success of ADs' work often appear to depend on support from leaders. The way educational leaders perceive educational change and position ADs seems to matter. This scenario makes it important to investigate the following research question: *How do educational leaders perceive educational change and position ADs' roles and responsibilities in relation to that change?*

ADs: agents of change or collaborative partners?

ADs' roles and responsibilities as contributors to educational change are positioned differently in the current discourse of academic development. Firstly, scholars have found that ADs inhabit a strengthened and increasingly strategic position within higher education. This position includes ADs' support of leaders in adapting political expectations into institutional practices, as well as describing ADs' positions as power holders linked to expertise, institutional management, and policies (Stensaker et al., 2017; Sugrue et al., 2018). In terms of their roles and responsibilities, they are experts who hold key roles related to the university's strategic work: running courses, implementing teaching development, and guiding individuals, groups, and institutional practices to enhance teaching and learning (Debowksi, 2014; Gibbs, 2013; Sugrue et al., 2018).

Secondly, ADs occupy a contested role, in which they operate between different power dynamics. Rowland (2007) distinguishes between those ADs who are positioned as central outsiders and are free to engage in critical conversations, and those who are positioned close to management and therefore more bound to how managers define discourses on teaching and learning. Having a closer connection to university leadership can generate challenges for ADs' legitimacy and interactions with their academic colleagues (Handal et al., 2014; Sugrue et al., 2018). Roxå and Mårtensson (2017, p. 2), for example, argue that ADs risk becoming 'entangled in the power dynamics of the institutions' by being positioned as part of the machinery of leadership policy, which often involves having conflicting responsibilities.

Thirdly, scholars have highlighted how ADs can use their possible agentic positions to lead deliberative discussions about the implementations of national and institutional educational policies and strategies, as well as their implications (Sugrue et al., 2018; Sutherland, 2018). Handal et al. (2014) emphasise ADs' potential policy implementations at the university. They argue that ADs' new agentic leadership positions enable them to become activist advocates who are aware of their own values and leadership roles. Wouters et al. (2014) have found that ADs' goals are collectively focused on encouraging quality teaching and learning. In doing so, ADs assume a number of roles, including as lobbyists, change partners, educators, and influencers. Scholars have also highlighted ADs' deliberative role and their potential to challenge and influence educational change with critical, autonomous, and deliberative actions of their own (Fremstad et al., 2019; Peseta, 2014). According to Handal et al. (2014), ADs' potential agency exists between institutional expectations of professional accountability, and ADs' own professional responsibility when manoeuvring between recognising power relations and what they professionally think is right. Positioned as brokers as well as enforcers, ADs must manage tensions that sometimes require silence and sometimes resistance (Little & Green, 2012).

ADs' potential agency seems to be highly dependent on their positions within the institutional context (Fremstad et al., 2019; Kensington-Miller et al., 2015). Debowski (2014, p. 51) asks whether ADs should see themselves as agents of change, invincible in the face of resistance, or as 'partners in arms' who are ready to adapt their perspectives to accommodate the views and needs of particular academic communities.

Empirical contexts, method, and limitations

This study is an integral part of the international research project 'Formation and Competence Building of University Academic Developers' (henceforth 'Formation'), which focuses on a range of aspects related to academic development and ADs' roles and responsibilities at different universities. The main empirical source referred to in this paper includes semi-structured interviews with 20 educational leaders at two Norwegian and two Swedish universities that vary in size, profile, and structure. Two of the universities, one from Norway and one from Sweden (A and C), are relatively young institutions, with 15,000 to 16,000 students and between 3,300 and 5,000 employees. The other two (B and D) are more traditional universities that have longer histories and stronger research profiles, with 28,000 to 45,000 students and around 6,500 employees each. At each university, formal educational leaders at five different organisational levels were selected for interviews. The leaders consist of:

- senior academics or senior administrative leaders (positions 1 and 2, meaning they are top-level leaders);
- deans, department heads, and leaders of larger academic development units (positions 3 and 4, meaning they are mid-level leaders);
- heads of AD groups (position 5, meaning the level of leadership closest to the ADs in the organisation).

These different levels of educational leadership imply vast variations in power and influence, but they share the common responsibility of developing and enhancing teaching and learning. In one way or another, they are responsible for educational change. The table below provides an overview of the various titles of the educational leaders selected for the study (Table 1).

The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide, where the construction of the questions was informed by a literature review of AD practices (Sugrue et al., 2018). During the interviews with the educational leaders, to explore their perceptions of educational changes we focused on the values and aspirations at their university as articulated in their strategic plans; we also asked about how they understood ADs' roles and responsibilities in relation to these changes.

The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes each and involved both an 'outsider' (a researcher who held no formal position at the particular university) and an 'insider' (a researcher who worked at the specific university), both of whom were involved in the Formation project. In the interest of consistency and continuity, the same outsider conducted all the interviews across all four universities, while the insider ensured that the context was actively represented both in conducting the interviews and in the subsequent data analysis. The interviews were conducted in

Table 1. Leadership positions.

University	Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4	Position 5
A	Pro-rector for education	Director of education	Leader at the Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology	Deputy at the Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology	Leader of the AD group
B	Pro-rector for education	Director of the Department of Academic Administration	Dean of the Faculty of Education Sciences	Head of the Department of Education	Leader of the AD group
C	Pro-vice-chancellor	University director	Director of the Division of Quality	Pro-dean of education	Leader of the Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology
D	Vice-chancellor for education	University director	Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Senior advisor to the vice-chancellor	Leader of the Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology

English because the outsider did not speak the native languages. All interviews were transcribed verbatim but the interviews have been edited for clarity. Both authors separately coded the interview transcripts in relation to the research question. The codes were then compared and critically interpreted in an abductive manner (Alvesson & Skölberg, 2000). The analysis alternated between reading the transcript, conducting categorisation, and exploring the relevant literature, then returning to the transcript in a process that allowed issues to be identified, critically interrogated, and categorised. During the first step of the analysis, we explored how educational leaders perceived educational change, while in the second step we focused on how leaders positioned ADs' roles and responsibilities in relation to that change. The main categories will be further elaborated upon in the next section.

This study has investigated a small sample of educational leaders (N = 20), which only covers part of the overall picture. Further investigation will be necessary to identify the complexity of possible and specific barriers related to how educational leaders position ADs as change agents within different institutions.

Educational leaders' perceptions of ADs as change agents

The presentation of findings below follows three main categories that emerged in the data. ADs were positioned: (1) as *strategic actors related to the universities' strategic work*; (2) as *experts who hold key roles related to courses of teaching development and support*; and as (3) *agentic actors who hold a deliberative position within the institution*.

Strategic actors related to the universities' strategic work

The first category concerns strategic work and orientations, both within and outside the university. Nearly all the educational leaders expressed overall ambitions in line with their university's strategic plans, such as: 'becoming a leading university'; developing

‘teaching excellence’; or ensuring ‘innovative societal development’, including intentions of maintaining high standards and attracting the best teachers and students to their university. Only a few positioned ADs’ roles and responsibilities directly to strategic work in this manner, however, as this educational leader noted:

I think academic developers are very important if we want to reach our goals within education, and with all new technologies and all the new generations . . . all our teaching staff need help to become better. And, if the university still wants to have the best students here, I think we have to be the best in education . . . where ADs have an important role to go out and actually help the different departments and teachers to develop their education. (B1)

This senior leader perceived ADs’ roles and responsibilities as being closely related to challenges regarding educational change, such as new requirements for the use of technology and teaching development. One leader at this same university also highlighted that the AD units played an increasingly more strategic role, both at the university and at the national level:

In that sense, [the ADs are] moving into the national institutional conversation, which includes administrative actors at different levels. (B3)

At the same university, educational leaders perceived ADs’ roles and responsibilities in relation to strategic work, and acknowledged their status and influence as researchers. Where ADs were located within the organisation also seemed to be significant. One leader said:

I think it’s important that ADs have the autonomy to define their position, and that the best place to be is actually in a research-oriented department where excellent research is done. [ADs] also need this room for manoeuvring. And in that way, I think the AD unit is placed very, very well. If you’re working strategically and you want to expand, I think it’s best to be in a department. (B2)

Leaders perceived the ADs’ research-based context and placement within the organisation to be important for their positioning in relation to strategic work and their ability to influence educational change.

Previous research has emphasised that ADs must be familiar with strategic work and top-down expectations in order to influence and understand academic development today (Land, 2001; Stensaker et al., 2017; Sugrue et al., 2018). Whether ADs were positioned as change agents, with ‘room for manoeuvring’ and legitimacy, in other words with the potential to influence educational change through partaking in strategic work, can be linked to how they were positioned, placed, and perceived as experts and researchers within their institution. Some leaders, however, said the AD unit was important in securing institutional strategies and standards when, for instance, a programme did not meet institutional requirements. One educational leader expressed this scenario as follows:

If I get a signal that we’re failing, or that we’re performing poorly in some programmes, then I take the initiative to meet with the programme, the dean, and the AD leader, and then we discuss what to do. (C2)

This quote illustrates how ADs were perceived as deliberative partners in strategic programme work, as addressed by one of the senior leaders at the university.

In summary, the leadership interviews revealed that educational leaders emphasised strategic work as important for educational change, but they rarely positioned ADs in relation to strategic work on teaching and learning. At one of the universities, however, educational leaders of all levels perceived ADs' potential influence on strategic work as an important part of and source for educational change. The recognition of ADs' roles and responsibilities as experts positioned and enabled them to provide significant contributions to strategic work related to educational change.

Experts who hold key roles related to courses of teaching development and support

The second category includes positioning ADs as experts who hold key roles in running courses, conducting teaching development, and supporting the development of teaching and learning. This work includes guiding individuals, groups, and institutional practices to enhance teaching and learning. Nearly all leaders highlighted ADs' roles and responsibilities as providers of these aspects of teaching development and support as being important for educational change. The teaching development was primarily related to basic pedagogical teaching and learning courses and consultations; several of the educational leaders stressed how this aspect had become a sustainable part of educational change at their institutions. As one leader noted:

I think there's . . . a new generation of university teachers that have . . . grown up with doing the teachers' training early in their career, getting interested in the learning issue, in the sense that they take new courses [and] work with their teaching formats in a very much more active way than was the situation a generation earlier. (A4)

In particular, leaders positioned teaching development and support as being clearly related to the AD units:

To me, as with most people, that unit is the one that does the teacher-training courses. (C1)

Leaders at all four universities underlined the importance of developing professional responsibilities through ADs' consultations and deliberative discussions with individual teachers and teacher teams. As one leader noted:

Our main obligation is to support academic staff in their own personal development as well as in their work with developing their teaching and learning activities at the departmental level. (C5)

An additional finding was that the more academic staff attended pedagogical courses, the more requests the ADs received for support and help enhance and develop their teaching and learning. As one AD group leader noted:

The consultancy work is like the courses, in a way: the work supports the development of single teachers (or groups of teachers) or department activities, or it inspires development and good educational development work and projects. Most of these activities are in demand, and most of the demand comes from people who have gone through some of our courses before. (D5)

The quote illustrates how educational leaders positioned ADs' roles and responsibilities in relation to educational change and perceived them as change agents, both in

consultations and in the development of individual as well as departmental teaching and learning activities within their institutional contexts. The leaders positioned ADs as holding significant potential to influence, enhance, and address the expanding web of commitments, as well as a growing necessity to work with teacher teams and diverse collegial processes (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016; May, 1996). Our findings also exemplify how ADs' occasionally long-term work on developing teaching and learning can contribute to educational change in the long run, for example, that participating in consultations or courses can inspire pedagogical projects or other collegial change initiatives for the participants long after the sessions have finished. Educational leaders positioned ADs both as agents of change and as 'partners in arms' as they accommodated academic communities with significant reflections on institutional practices that were important to enhance teaching and learning.

To summarise, leaders positioned and recognised ADs' roles and responsibilities as experts and collaborative partners related to courses of teaching development and support. They ran courses, led teaching development, and guided individuals, groups, and institutional practices. ADs' key roles as they relate to courses of teaching development were the most substantial way educational leaders within all four universities positioned ADs as drivers for educational change.

Agentic actors who hold a deliberative position

The final category is related to the ADs' agentic position with reference to their own internal and external change initiatives, in which researchers have described ADs as brokers and bridge builders (Green & Little, 2013; Handal et al., 2014). Especially at one of the universities (B), leaders positioned ADs' own agentic, entrepreneurial, opportunistic, and broker-oriented positions within the university as important contributions to educational change. The leaders recognised ADs' collaborations and deliberative actions across different levels of the university in order to influence and follow up on change initiatives related to the development of teaching and learning. One of the leaders of the AD groups (an AD leader) articulated how ADs collaborated with other educational leaders to influence the development of teaching and learning at the university:

We collaborate closely with the pro-dean for education, who's our formal contact. We're also in contact with teachers and the dean of studies. (B5)

Only a few of the unit leaders worked directly with top-level leaders to influence and contribute to the formation and development of teaching and learning. More commonly, they engaged in critical, deliberate discussions with educational leaders and academic staff. ADs' agentic actions included inspiring others to develop their own ideas and projects regarding teaching and learning locally. Some unit leaders highlighted ADs' responsibility for acting more proactively within areas where decisions were made:

During some periods, we have more or less proactive activities. For instance, the most extensive activity was when the qualification framework was introduced: then we actively invited ourselves to different consultations in order to promote the framework and to provide support. (D5)

This quote illustrates that even though the ADs were not directly invited to the table, they still promoted various agencies and initiatives. Another unit leader also expressed the importance of taking a more proactive role:

I think we should, as ADs, be proactive and help the staff to see their own needs, [which] they don't always see. (B5)

This AD leader had collaborated with educational leaders at various levels to raise awareness of possible tensions related to practice, policy, and strategy within the field of teaching and learning at the university. Partly in contrast to scholars such as Green and Little (2013), who have pointed to ADs' new agentic leadership position enabling them to become activist advocates who hold a critical, autonomous, and proactive role, we found major institutional differences in how ADs were positioned. The study's findings show that ADs' potential agency seems to depend on their positions as researchers within their institutional context. ADs at the Swedish universities were not employed as researchers, while their Norwegian counterparts were employed as both researchers and teachers (50/50). Rowland (2007) distinguishes between ADs who are positioned as central outsiders with opportunities to engage in critical deliberative conversations, and those who are positioned close to the leadership and are more tied to how leaders define discourses on teaching and learning. This distinction resonates with our findings, as some of the leaders only provided ADs who held research positions the space, legitimacy, and potential agency to be influential as brokers and to use their agentic potential to have strategic influence within the institution.

ADs were invited to discuss and develop both educational leaders' perspectives and academic staff practices. They were able to draw on external change initiatives as well as their own expertise when challenging the educational leaders' perspectives. This positioning is arguably an important source of legitimacy, with opportunities to raise their own agency within developmental processes and deliberative conversations with educational leaders and academic staff; other parts of our work examine this aspect more deeply (Fremstad et al., 2019). Having their expertise recognised was important for the possibility of influencing educational change, as were having access to appropriate and timely information and being invited to have influence, contribute, and use their expertise in both formal and informal settings.

In summary, whether the educational leaders positioned ADs as agentic actors with relevant competence to influence educational change varied. This contribution depended on whether educational leaders recognised ADs' expertise and positioned them as collaborative partners with potentially valuable contributions to educational change.

Educational leaders' perceptions of ADs as change agents

How do educational leaders perceive educational change and position ADs' roles and responsibilities in relation to that change? We have identified three main categories in this study: ADs were perceived as: (1) *strategic participants related to universities' strategic work*; (2) *experts who hold key roles related to courses of teaching development and support*; and (3) *agentic actors who hold a deliberative position within the institution*. We found differences among the four universities within all three categories. Two of the

three categories seem to suggest unexploited potential to position ADs more extensively as drivers for educational change.

Educational leaders within all four universities perceived ADs' roles and responsibilities first and foremost as experts who hold key roles related to courses of teaching development and support (the second category), and not as either strategic actors (the first category) or as agentic actors (the third category). Therefore, our findings partly contrast with those of scholars who have emphasised ADs' more strategic positions (Gibbs, 2013; Stensaker et al., 2017). At one of the Norwegian universities, ADs were invited – and invited themselves – to participate as deliberative partners with the potential to influence educational change. They were also positioned as *agentic actors who hold a deliberative position* with the potential to *use* their own expertise to intervene in various aspects of the development of teaching and learning. The fact that the ADs seemed to be extensively informed and involved in strategic work gave them the ability to act as brokers and bridge builders within the institution. Their room for manoeuvring illustrates our main argument, namely that ADs' influence depends on how educational leaders perceive educational change, and how they position and recognise ADs' roles and responsibilities in relation to that change.

In our study, the ADs at the Swedish universities were positioned within the administration. This contextual positioning can be understood in relation to the fact that educational leaders at these two universities mainly characterised ADs' roles and responsibilities as providers of course development and as consultants who supported the institutional leaders in adapting educational practices to meet external requirements. Even though our findings only consider four cases, they indicate that ADs' research backgrounds seem to condition how educational leaders positioned their strategic agency and collaboration across different levels within the organisation. In line with what others have found, context mattered (Fremstad et al., 2019; Kensington-Miller et al., 2015).

ADs' strategic agency appeared to be more limited if they solely held administrative positions as course providers and teaching developers, instead of focusing on how their expertise could be addressed in line with a distributed and shared leadership model. Debowski (2014, p. 54) addresses the increased recognition of ADs as 'co-learners' who build partnerships with communities 'to help them reach a higher state of understanding and critique around their system, practice, and outcome'. She argues that as partners, ADs not only hold positions as experts, but also get to explore and know the local context and culture when assisting the community.

Our findings reveal that the same argument can be used in our study. ADs need to become co-learners in order to use their expertise to influence the complex responsibility of leading higher education. While ADs mainly hold contextual knowledge, though without the authority to translate their knowledge of teaching and learning into widespread institutional practices, leaders' initiatives to invite ADs to become what Debowski (2014) calls 'partners in arms' seem significant. This finding highlights ADs' strategic potential, for instance in playing a key role in interpreting plans for developing teaching and learning. Because they operate within the tensions between university leaders and university teachers, ADs hold possible agentic positions to both influence educational policy and to promote perspectives from the academic staff.

ADs are familiar with academic staff's work and struggles, and their teaching and learning expertise as well as research-based knowledge is helpful in their deliberative conversations to develop staff's teaching and learning. In line with Amey's (2006) argument, complex organisations such as universities seem to require a mix of top-down and bottom-up contributions to meet different requirements for educational change. Achieving such a structure to reach a higher understanding of the shared and complex responsibility for educational leaders, requires distributed collaboration across the institution – and not only with ADs. However, ADs' potential to provide additional knowledge to enhance leaders' ideas and strategic plans to meet challenges regarding educational change within their institutions, stands out as a constructive, unused potential.

To conclude, educational leaders need to follow up, support, and position relevant others, in our case ADs, in order to ensure that educational change will be sustained. The responsibility for educational change needs to be distributed and shared by building on collaborative partnerships with the potential to expand their mutual understandings and responsibilities.

Based on our study, we argue that ADs can potentially be key actors, as drivers of educational change. To release this potential, educational leaders at all levels should pursue shared, deliberative leadership practices across the institution. They need to position ADs as experts on teaching and learning and as contributors to educational change – beyond their work on teaching development and support. This potential includes engaging ADs in developing strategic work for teaching and learning at the university, supporting their work in providing courses and consultation, and creating arenas where their own agency can be a part of the educational development at each institution. It is thus important to consider whether educational leaders make the most of ADs' possibilities for powerful and useful agentic roles. Sutherland (2018) recently asked whether the time has come for educational leaders to think more broadly about academic development projects, and to include ADs more actively in their educational development missions. Our findings indicate the clear potential to do so.

Acknowledgments

We are sincerely grateful to the participants for spending time to share their experiences. We also wish to thank the reviewers and the editor for their thoughtful and constructive feedback, as well as colleagues in the Formation project for valuable collaboration and discussions in our joint project.

This work derives from the project 'Formation and Competence Building of University Academic Developers', which was supported by the Norwegian Research Council (project number 246745/H20).

Rules for ethical clearance and confidentiality were followed in accordance with the relevant ethical committees (NSD)

Data availability statement

Data (audio files and transcripts) are available on request.

Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Norwegian Research Council. Project number 246745/H20.

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