

Building Bridges and Connections – The Language used to Connect and Define Communities in the Third Space

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Introduction

This chapter identifies educational developers as key third space professionals in UK universities and comments on how educational developers use different types of language to connect university communities which can otherwise be siloed and separate. This chapter argues that senior university staff often underestimate the important role that educational developers play on campuses to bring people together and create powerful synergies for the benefit of the organisation. This chapter looks at the ways in which educational developers do this, from their own words, and how these roles might be better appreciated within modern universities.

Educational Developers as Third Space Professionals

For the purpose of this chapter, the term 'educational development' is used to describe those members of staff who work across their institution to support systems, process and individuals in order to enhance the educational experience of students. Typically in UK higher education institutions educational developers (sometimes called 'academic developers' e.g. Mårtensson, 2014) work in centrally-located departments and may cover a variety of educational aspects including, but not limited to, student academic support and the enhancement of academic practice through staff training and development. Often the head of this unit will report directly into the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education or equivalent second-tier leadership role in a UK university, and the position of the head of educational development will be predominantly part-strategic and part-operational. The common denominator across these roles in different universities is that the main focus is always on enhancing teaching and learning in the institution for the benefit of the students' educational experiences (Bamber and Stefani, 2016; Leibowitz, 2014). As such, educational development roles are often hybrids of both academic and professional services, and different universities treat educational developers in varying ways in terms of the types of contracts that the staff are on. From work that I have conducted across the sector in the UK, I have identified that it is more usual for educational developers in the post-1992 sector to be on academic contracts than for those in pre-1992 universities. And the more prestigious the university, particularly with regards to research, the less likely it is that the educational developers will be appointed automatically onto academic contracts, although some have negotiated this at a later point (Denney, 2020). They may, however, have come originally from academic backgrounds. Macfarlane (2011) refers to educational developers as 'para-academics' and considers that their transition from being an academic into this role involves 'de-skilling' (Macfarlane, 2011). Macfarlane considers that the specialisation required by those from academic backgrounds moving into these roles is somehow a 'limited' skills set due to the tailoring from the broader academic base into a specific role. This chapter makes the point that educational developers themselves consider that they have developed a broader skills set which

plays an important role in cohesion and synergy across the organisation. Specifically, educational developers identify themselves as key people who operate in a way that helps to bring academic colleagues together and bridge across some of the siloes that universities are traditionally famous for.

This chapter takes the following structure: firstly, a review of third sector literature relevant to educational developers is provided followed by an analysis of data from interviews with educational developers about how they see their roles and the specialist skills they have developed and the impact that these have on their institutions. Lastly I provide some guidance for institutions on how they can use these members of staff more effectively.

The 'Third Space'

Whitchurch defines Third Space Professionals as 'hybrid workers' in higher education who work across functional boundaries and tend to work mainly on projects (Whitchurch, 2006). In her later work, Whitchurch expanded her view on this and explained that the formerly-clear-cut boundaries between professional staff and academics are no longer applicable when the institution is focusing on cross-cutting projects such as widening participation and access, student mental health and wellbeing and students' educational experiences (Whitchurch, 2012).

Third Space roles have therefore emerged in UK universities for a number of reasons not least the lack of certainty and stability in academic careers and the lack of linear career progression in both academic and professional services career paths. As such, university employees are demonstrating agency and flexibility by increasingly moving between professional and academic roles as well as through adopting quasi-academic roles such as academic skills and English language support. Many of these roles have emerged directly as a result of the growth of student numbers, including increasing intakes from international and complex backgrounds. As a result, it is increasingly common to find individuals in the sector behaving with agency and creating their own portfolio career according to their needs rather than tailoring their career progression to that offered within the confines of an academic structure (see Denney, 2020 for an example of this). As such, Whitchurch points out that these 'mixed roles' are no longer unusual and it is increasingly common to find staff with academic backgrounds and credentials – often with doctorates – occupying them. Some of whom may have moved into these roles directly from their doctorate (or post-doctoral role) due to the lack of academic vacancies available (Marini et al., 2019).

The educational development role can be seen as one that fits well into the description of the Third Space. Although people come into this role from a variety of backgrounds, it is common to find those with doctorates (and sometimes professorial appointments) leading these units. Career journeys can be complex but often demonstrate agency in moving between academic and professional services contracts and although there is often limited time available for research, this is an area that educational developers actively engage with – although questions continue about the quality of the research done under the banner of 'Scholarship of Teaching and Learning' (SOTL). (See for example, Professor Tansy Jessop's talk at the University of Greenwich *At home everywhere and nowhere: the place of pedagogic research in higher education*, which eloquently expresses the concerns with the quality of the research carried out.) Interviews that I have conducted with educational development colleagues have identified frustration at not being recognised for their academic worth (particularly in prestigious, research-intensive universities) and confusion from senior academic colleagues about the career paths that educational developers have taken. They are often regarded as being 'neither fish nor fowl' in the institution and, as such, it is my contention

that senior leadership teams often miss the value of these staff – which results, in part, from their Third Space occupation. The next section describes some of the unique skills and abilities that educational developers have themselves identified before going into more detail about the way that they act as bridges and translators.

Uniquely Different – the contributions of educational developers

“Covid has been catapulting educational development into a central role at the university” [interviewee 7]

I was fortunate to be able to interview 7 colleagues [listed as Interviewees (Int)1-7] and collect written data from a further educational developer [I8] as part of background research for both this chapter and for an earlier related research project [see Denney, 2020]. As such, the contributions and skills that are identified here are grounded in not only my experiences of having been a Third Space Professional (formerly both an educational developer and a researcher developer) but also in those of colleagues. At the time of writing, Covid-19 has caused enormous disruptive change across the higher education sector. From a place of arguably some obscurity, educational developers, and digital education specialists in particular, have been thrust into the limelight, in order to turn face-to-face teaching into something meaningful and engaging that can be achieved online. As such, it is important to recognise that this is an important opportunity for those in Third Space roles and hopefully a key time for senior management to recognise the value of these roles and the skills that are demonstrated. In particular, the ‘bridge’ and ‘translator’ skills are some of those that have been particularly highlighted by the colleagues I interviewed and have highlighted here.

‘Bridge’ and ‘Translator’ – Introduction and Background

Educational developers act as ‘bridges’ and ‘translators’ in different ways and at different levels in their organisations. In spite of combining them both here together, ‘bridges’ and ‘translators’ actually do rather different things in an organisation. Someone who acts a ‘bridge’ brings two or more different communities together for a variety of reasons – they may, for example, bring colleagues together for professional development (e.g. workshops) and help to facilitate the sharing of experiences which contributes to building shared values and networks. ‘Translators’ however have a somewhat different role in that they understand the individual ‘languages’ used by subject areas in universities and are able to facilitate communications across different groups for the wider benefit of the university as a whole. This might be conceptualised as ‘bigger picture’ work.

For example, Int.7 referred to the following situation:

“Needing to design a set of principles for online learning and teaching, listening to different schools and then agreeing a set of principles that also included aspects of our learning and teaching strategy.” [Int.7]

The distinctions between the two terms are important as they indicate different nuances in the ways in which educational developers work. The Cambridge English Dictionary, for example, defines the term ‘bridge’ as something that makes:

“the difference or division between two things smaller or less severe”

And ‘translator’ as:

“a person whose job is changing words...into a different language”

From this perspective, it can be seen that the job of translation is one that might be necessary in order to connect different groups to promote effective co-working.

In this section, I have therefore identified different ways in which educational developers work as 'bridges' or 'translators' – as well as acknowledging that these might not necessarily be the best terms to use to describe accurately the scope of their skills and abilities. Some interviewees, for example, argued that creating hubs and networks was more of a key part of the role, but for the purposes of this chapter, I have included those activities as being part of acting as a 'bridge' or a 'translator'. The different ways of being 'bridges' and 'translators' has fallen into 4 categories, which do overlap with each other to some extent. These are:

- Supporting senior management;
- Speaking and translating across different languages within the institution;
- Bridging the research-teaching divide and;
- Building hubs.

Supporting Senior Management

In the current Covid-19 global pandemic, support for senior management in dealing with the immense challenges that this is presenting for university education has probably been the most critical way in which educational developers have clearly demonstrated their skills and academic worth. As Int.7 noted at the start of this section, this has been a time when educational developers have been literally thrust into the limelight to provide guidance to senior managers about how to transfer teaching and learning into the online space in an effective way that is pedagogically sound and engaging for students. This, however, is only one high-profile example of how educational developers act as 'bridges' with senior management. In reality, this is something that goes on all the time but is often under-valued and under-recognised as a key skills set. Interviewees talked about the ways in which they have worked with senior leaders in their institutions in a variety of ways before Covid:

“The thing is if you're an educational academic developer and you lead that sort of team and you're effectively, you know, special adviser to the pro vice chancellor, because that's what we quite often are for quite a long time, you have been so close to that pro vice chancellor's job. I think you understand that, you have written most of the strategies, never goes out under your name but you've written most of them or part of them. Or the final rewrite has been done by somebody else or whatever, but so much of what is in there has come from you, your staff, your team, what you've learned around university et cetera.” [Int.4]

This quote from Int.4 is illustrative of what several interviewees talked about, in terms of working very closely with the PVC (or equivalent) for Education and indeed, substantially contributing to university policy although sometimes not having their contribution publicly acknowledged. In this context, there is a type of subterfuge of translation that is going on, whereby the educational developer is taking in information from their close work with academic colleagues and disciplines and ensuring that this is fed into institutional policy in a language that is acceptable to the senior leadership team. The Covid pandemic has exacerbated and speeded up the need for this to happen – particularly where digital education is concerned – but this is something that most educational developers would recognise as being a key part of their role.

In order to do this effectively, there are a number of skills that educational developers need – and not least the abilities to persuade and influence senior staff are key to this, as is the skill in building a

positive working relationship with the PVC Education (or equivalent). Part of the problem, however, is that often those in the senior leadership team are unsure of how to understand educational developers and their 'Third Space' position in the modern university.

Int.7 encapsulates her own identity clearly:

"I see myself as a "third space" leader - I'm an academic professor with professional service expertise so I bridge between the academic and professional services role. I see my role as a facilitator and guide to support schools achieve their ambitions with students and also help prepare for the future, try out new things from an L&T perspective."

But this in itself is problematic for the relationship with senior management – particularly in the older, research-intensive universities where the majority of the senior team have come to their position through a very traditional route (Smith and Adams, 2008). Universities have changed significantly over the past 20 years due to an increase in government scrutiny and marketisation (Deem, 1998) and the leadership team has moved away from the traditional culture of academics who stepped into a largely 'caretaking' role to support the collegiate community in managing the affairs of the university (Shepherd, 2015). The leadership team of most universities in the UK today tends to consist of both academic and professional services staff who take on formally-appointed positions with large portfolios. The majority of those in the DVC / PVC second tier roles (as with the Vice Chancellor) have come from a traditional academic career and unfortunately this does not help in terms of the senior team understanding and appreciating those who truly occupy a Third Space role as they fit into neither the traditional academic role nor the clear professional services role (such as estates, human resources or finance). In the past, the Third Space roles often held the distinction of being 'academic-related' and at least two of the interviewees for this chapter bemoaned the passing of this term in the sense that it more clearly indicated the bridging and translation work that educational developers do and that academic-related positions were better understood in the landscape of the university.

Educational development departments in universities vary considerably in terms of their composition. In the UK, it is not uncommon to find educational development units that include some forms of student support – particularly academic skills support; along with staff support in areas such as digital education support and academic practice development. In other countries educational development units look somewhat different. Universities in North America, for example, tend to have more academically-focused educational (academic) development departments. In Australia, models are more similar to the UK although there are units with specialisms in pedagogically-based digital education and support for transition to learning in higher education (Nelson and Kift, 2005). Some of the interviewees I contacted for this work were digital educational specialists, probably because of the timing of this work taking place during Covid. As such, some of the examples particularly illustrate the importance of being able to translate effective pedagogy, technical requirements and disciplinary specificities into university policy.

In the recent situation of needing to design a set of overarching university principles for teaching online, Int.17 also refers to this as being a 'bridge':

"I think my role as a bridge was to encompass the 'unique' positions of the schools and the different needs of professional services and presenting a university "view". Some schools were much further along in their thinking and I

needed to translate their needs into a set of pedagogic principles that we could all agree and would govern our way forward.”

In this situation, the skills required were to identify and articulate the specific requirements of the different components within the organisation and to be able to bring those together in a single document that would be broadly acceptable both to senior management and to those within the university as a whole and would be workable in terms of the operationalisation of this particular set of circumstances, whilst still reflecting a space for disciplinary differences. As such, the expertise required to be able to do this is not a million miles away from that of a ‘traditional’ academic who has to synthesise literature for research purposes or who is able to identify and effectively communicate the central theories and arguments in their discipline for students to be able to understand. In spite of Macfarlane’s position that para-academics have somehow become deskilled, my own position is that the ability to be able to do these things with an additional high sense of the politics both at the top of the organisation and right the way across the university actually requires a much higher level of skill. The ability to bridge different factions and be able to bring them together in a politically- and strategically-effective way with senior management, whilst also not neglecting diversity across the institution, is very skilful indeed, and requires considerable expertise. This is not the skills-set of a novice but of someone who understands academia thoroughly and who is able to live effectively in the sometimes-uncomfortable space between the more clearly defined roles in the academy.

Speaking and Translating Across Different Languages within the Institution

Another way in which educational developers demonstrate their ability to thrive in the space between the gaps in the academy is through speaking and translating the different languages that are inherent within our universities. Since Becher and Trowler (Becher and Trowler, 1989) first talked about different disciplines using the ‘tribe and territories’ metaphor, it has been more widely acknowledged that the languages and behaviours in academic disciplines vary considerably across the organisation. Paul Blackmore, in a keynote to the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) conference in November 2006, commented that:

“Disciplinary difference extends to language and all that is associated with it.”
(Blackmore, 2007)

Educational developers, by the very nature of their role working across the institution for the broader benefits of educational enhancement, have to learn to speak the different languages and cross those boundaries.

It is, however, considerably unrecognised and undervalued that Third Space Professionals such as educational developers also have to bridge the divides between academic and professional services roles. This is probably best illustrated by tasks that many learning technologists do when they take the requirements of academics, for example in translating teaching materials into effective online learning content, and bring those together with the highly technical language of IT specialists. Int.6, in particular, talked about this issue:

“...there was a point in the conversation when I realised that there had been a complete communication ‘gap’ between the [academic] colleagues and the developer colleagues - a moment when one said something, the other repeated back (or thought that was what they were doing), but I recognised, because of familiarity with both ‘vocabularies’ that if the developers implemented what they

thought they'd heard then the system would be missing a fundamental element.”
[Int.6]

Int.6 went on to talk about how she felt about her position within the university:

“In my institution I am, organisationally, a member of professional support staff (what would previously have been 'admin'). As a Learning...I don't feel I sit entirely in the P[rofessional] S[ervices] category. But nor am I an academic. My role, and that of my team, sits across these two areas - it is, I believe, what would previously have been known as 'academic related'.”

The work that is done by educational developers is therefore broader than translating across disciplinary differences but also involves important work in bridging the divides between academics and professional services. Blackmore (2007) refers to this as a “...very powerful demarcation” (p.1) and that people with a development role are “...often uneasily poised between the academic and the management or administrative parts of the University” (p.1). Although interviewees for this chapter referred extensively to their abilities to bridge these divides, they did not refer to themselves as being “uneasily poised” between the two worlds, although they very much recognised that they did not fit into either of the pre-ordained camps that exist in academia – academic or professional services. Instead, they each demonstrated a clear ability to identify themselves and their own role within the institution, and that this ‘bridging’ space was what enabled them to influence the practices of others for the ultimate benefit of the students. Indeed many educational developers felt that they were thriving in the space between the more clearly defined roles. Where they run into problems, however, is how they are regarded by others, and, as commented earlier, the fact that they are often overlooked by the senior management who do not necessarily recognise the high level of skills that educational developers have in being able to bridge divides, translate different languages and create effective working synergies.

Bridging the Research-Teaching Divide

It is an uncomfortable truth that in most of our universities, there is still a division between the two most important aspects of academic work – research and teaching. In the majority of institutions, research is still regarded as being more important than teaching, even if this is not acknowledged publicly by senior management. Academics themselves know that professional status and prestige are conferred most readily through the research track (see Blackmore, 2015) and most universities have struggled to give teaching the status that it deserves. Educational developers, in the most ‘Third Space’ of all, are uniquely placed to bridge this divide as they have spent a considerable part of their careers engaging with pedagogical literature and, in many cases, contributing to it through their own research. Whilst many universities have sought to introduce educational- and practice-academic career pathways all the way through to the professoriate, educational developers are still too regarded as being professional services staff, and their engagement with research is not valued in the same way that it is for academic staff, even educational-academics. To some extent, this is partly because the field of higher education research is not, as mentioned previously, particularly highly regarded and much certainly suffers from being too poor in quality and too small in terms of samples to be more widely applicable. Although regrettable, this has to be recognised as a vicious cycle – poor regard leads to under-funding which leads to small samples and poor quality of research which leads back to poor regard, and so on as illustrated in Figure 1 below. It is important that this cycle is understood and broken by institutions, who could be more supportive of educational-

academics and Third Space staff in terms of giving them funding and time to develop a significant research base.

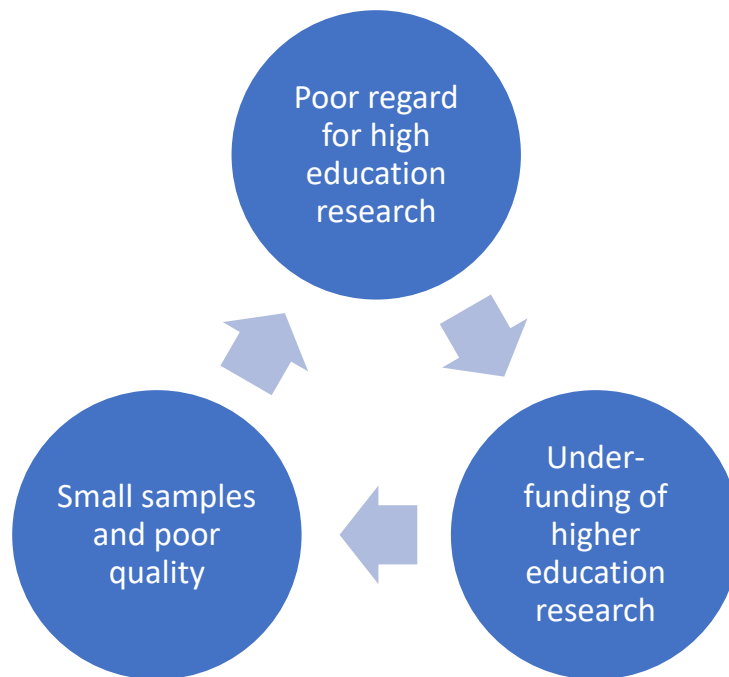


Figure 1: An illustration of the vicious cycle affecting higher education research

There is, however, some good research that has been conducted, and in spite of the drawbacks of this nascent field of research, educational developers are in a key position to be able to introduce discipline-based colleagues to an evidence-base in order to enhance their teaching. From this point of view, the ability to bridge the research-teaching divide is distinctive. For the first time, on occasion, academic colleagues are introduced to the notion that not only is teaching as an activity underpinned by an evidence-base, but there are also other ways in which research can take a central role in teaching, beyond that of a lecture based on a pet research topic. Fung's seminal work (Fung, 2017) on *the Connected Curriculum* provides exceptional insights into what it means to have a research-based university where research is infused throughout the curriculum. A solid evidence-base is also very important for making well-informed policy decisions on practices concerning aspects such as student support and factors affecting student transition and progression, for example.

Educational developers, for their part, provide the crucial bridging role between research and teaching when they introduce academic colleagues to the evidence base for activities in the classroom. Int.2 spoke eloquently about this:

“So just last week with another colleague here, who’s also involved in a research study with me...we spent a morning with new Heads of Department, about 11 or 12 of them I think, as part of their leadership development experience and we used our research and some research I’ve done with another colleague, and other research, as a way of framing a more developmental morning and really getting to know the Heads of Department. It was immensely useful and to frame that

conversation...so that they understood a kind of theoretical framing and they understood that there was an academic substance to the thinking behind what's going on here and the plans for the institution and the plans for education in particular. It was immensely useful, so that hybrid opportunity to bring those things together into one space is enormously powerful when you can do it."
[Int.2]

Int.2 was speaking as someone who had moved from an educational development background in a senior leadership position so she had the benefit of the hindsight of having been an educational developer combined with the responsibility for the strategic direction for the educational portfolio of the institution. Int.2 very powerfully articulated the importance of educational developers being able to bridge the research-teaching divide and how that could work very positively in bringing academic colleagues along in enhancing their teaching:

"if you can play those two tunes at the same time so that they really are harmonious in the same moment, the same event or whatever it might be, it's immensely powerful because it speaks to people on a whole range of different levels." [Int.2]

This is undoubtedly where bridging the research-teaching divide can be of enormous benefit to the institution. Educational developers work hard to support academic colleagues and the institution in enhancing teaching for the primary benefit of the students. There is, however, yet another divide between those in development roles and those in the formally-recognised academic roles which creates more 'tribes and territories' that have to be bridged. The ability to communicate the scholarly value of teaching enhancement is a vastly underrated skill of educational developers that is of enormous importance to the institution in being able to move forwards with teaching improvements. Int.2 put it this way:

"...unless you [the institution] recognise that this...is scholarly expertise and it's a really strategically important, evidence-informed, theoretically-framed, values-based, dynamic kind of field of scholarly insight and leadership and strategic thinking... to enough of an extent that you can reward it with the appropriate titles that you recognise other kinds of expertise as, then you're sunk before you start, because you're already conveying to everybody the idea that this is a kind of...service level subservient type of field" [nt.12]

Sadly, the Third Space is not often supported as a place to thrive. Educational developers are past-masters at bridging the research-teaching divide effectively for the broader benefits of the institution but their abilities to do this are often lost in terms of institutional recognition because they have limited access to aspects such as academic contracts and career progression..

Building Hubs

The final area of work that is part of the 'bridge' and 'translator' aspect of educational development is that of building hubs within universities. In many ways, this is reflected in earlier sections about

the work of educational developers being focused on bringing different disciplines and groups together in the institution. It was, however, something that interviewees for this chapter referred to as being both a distinct activity and a role for educational developers, and was expressed as being something significant and unique.

The origins for the hub-work done by educational developers probably has its roots in the *Communities of Practice* work by Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991). A community of practice is intended to bring together people in a shared learning experience for the purposes of development or to overcome similar problems. Although there may be variance from the principles of communities of practice as identified by Wenger *et al* (2002), much of the operational work done by educational developers is focused on creating and supporting opportunities for enabling shared reflections on teaching experiences or learning about the evidence-base for higher education through a seminar series, as examples. The core aspect being about supporting organic and dynamic development of colleagues for the benefit of the students' educational experiences.

In my experience, educational development hubs are rarely disciplinarily-based for the simple reason that educational development is founded on the principle that teaching is a common activity which bridges disciplinary-divides. Educational developers are therefore skilled at ensuring that disciplinary nuances are, at the very least, acknowledged, but do not dominate and form only one part of the patchwork quilt of the hub. Educational developers are often seen as neutral facilitators in this situation precisely because their disciplinary allegiance is to higher education and not to any other discipline in the university, even though some may be aligned to particular schools or departments for the enhancement of service delivery.

Hubs provide a neutral space for academics to share frustrations and concerns about teaching and an opportunity for them to grow and develop as educators. At the same time, they play an important, but often under-appreciated, role in supporting the institution in overcoming siloes and benefitting it from synergies.

Conclusions

A constant theme throughout this chapter has been the under-valuing of the skills and abilities of educational developers in their Third Space role. The under-valuing stems largely from the Third Space position in a modern university itself. Sadly, the move in the UK to a single pay spine in 2007 meant that the term 'academic-related' was largely abandoned and most universities only recognise 'academic' and 'professional services' roles. This has left many Third Space jobs in limbo – neither fish nor fowl – and senior management unable to appreciate fully where the roles fit in the landscape of the organisation and what the particular skillset of those in the roles are. In particular, the research-intensive universities in the UK have a deficit of representation at DVC / PVC level of those who have come through the Third Space route (see Denney 2020), although it is more common in the post-1992 institutions. Some institutions have tried to solve this problem by introducing different types of academic contracts, such as teaching-only (or academic-education) but often these continue to neglect the importance of the scholarly aspect of educational development, which serves only to perpetuate the vicious cycle of under-regarded higher education research illustrated in Figure 1.

This chapter has identified a number of skills and abilities that educational developers have to be good at in order to act as 'bridges' and 'translators' effectively. Senior management would therefore be advised to take note of these and identify appropriate reward and recognition schemes which

continue to encourage and support educational developers as key members of the university-community. After all, in a Covid-impacted-world, they are surely more critical now than ever before.

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