

## Continued growth, increasing complexity: Examining the evolving role of the Canadian educational developer

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Volume 51, Number 3, 2021

Special Issue: Looking back, looking forward

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085331ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.vi0.189091>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education

ISSN

2293-6602 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Laskar, B. (2021). Continued growth, increasing complexity: Examining the evolving role of the Canadian educational developer. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education / Revue canadienne d'enseignement supérieur*, 51(3), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.vi0.189091>

Article abstract

The improvement of teaching and learning in the Canadian post-secondary sector has grown in importance over the past fifty years as seen by the rise of the field of educational development. Educational Developers (EDs) can now be found at almost every publicly-funded college and university in the country and are increasingly integral to institutions of higher learning. However, as EDs engage in such a variety of multi-level support, it is difficult to precisely define their role. This paper will examine the role of the Canadian ED and how it has grown in complexity through an overview of the field of Canadian educational development, environmental influences on EDs, how their work is enacted, current challenges, as well as present and future directions of the role. A greater understanding of EDs will enable institutions to make effective use of these individuals, and to offer them the tailored support they require to excel.

# CONTINUED GROWTH, INCREASING COMPLEXITY: EXAMINING THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE CANADIAN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPER

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## Abstract

The improvement of teaching and learning in the Canadian post-secondary sector has grown in importance over the past fifty years as seen by the rise of the field of educational development. Educational Developers (EDs) can now be found at almost every publicly-funded college and university in the country and are increasingly integral to institutions of higher learning. However, as EDs engage in such a variety of multi-level support, it is difficult to precisely define their role. This paper will examine the role of the Canadian ED and how it has grown in complexity through an overview of the field of Canadian educational development, environmental influences on EDs, how their work is enacted, current challenges, as well as present and future directions of the role. A greater understanding of EDs will enable institutions to make effective use of these individuals, and to offer them the tailored support they require to excel.

**Keywords:** educational development, educational developers, role, higher education

## Résumé

L'amélioration de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage dans le secteur postsecondaire canadien a pris de l'importance au cours des cinquante dernières années, comme en témoigne l'essor du domaine de la pédagogie. Des conseillers pédagogiques (CP) sont désormais présents dans presque tous les collèges et universités publics, et aussi plus intégrés aux établissements d'enseignement supérieur. Cependant, comme les CP s'engagent dans de multiples formes de soutien, il est difficile de définir précisément leur rôle. Le présent document examine le rôle des CP au Canada et sa complexité croissante en donnant un aperçu du domaine de la pédagogie au Canada, des influences environnementales sur les CP, de la façon dont leur travail est effectué, des défis actuels et des orientations actuelles et futures du poste. Une meilleure compréhension des CP permettra aux établissements d'utiliser efficacement ces personnes et de leur offrir le soutien personnalisé dont elles ont besoin pour exceller.

**Mots-clés :** pédagogie, conseillers pédagogiques, rôle, enseignement supérieur

## Introduction

Faculty are crucial to the success of any institution of higher learning as they are major contributors to a student's education (Fullan, et al., 2006; Wilson, et al., 2001). The past fifty years has seen increased recognition and interest in this fact as evidenced by the rise of the field of educational development described as "all the work that is done systematically, to help faculty members do their best to foster student learning" (Knight & Wilcox,

1998, p. 98). The individuals who work in educational development—Educational Developers (EDs)—have become an integral part of an institution's success. They possess various responsibilities, and share an overall purpose "to lead and support the improvement of student learning" (Popovic & Baume, 2016, p. 1). Although many EDs share this focus, differences in responsibilities and institutional needs make it difficult to precisely define the role (Clegg, 2009; Green & Little, 2017). Gregory & Burbage (2017) recommend further research into EDs

and “the multiple roles faculty developers play within a higher education institution, the perceived and actual responsibilities of faculty developers, and the identity development of faculty developers” (p. 122). This article will provide an overview of the field of educational development in Canadian higher education and the role EDs play within it. With a deeper understanding of the role’s demands, challenges, and the relationships EDs have with other instructors and the school itself, it would be possible to increase ED capacity, better utilize and support these individuals in the work they do, and thereby benefit the Canadian educational system as a whole.

## History of Educational Development

In the past, professional development consisted of universities helping professors maintain their content specialization, be it through sabbaticals, funds to attend professional meetings, or research aid (Tiberius, 2002). However, the higher education sector began to experience some shifts in the 1960s with the appearance of new fields of study, various learning technologies becoming available, a rise in student enrolment, as well as an overall trend toward democratization (Lee, 2010). Students began demanding more control over their studies, were interested in sharing feedback with faculty, and wanted their needs met through alterations in teaching and curriculum (Ouellet, 2010). In addition, this time period saw a growing preoccupation with quality and accountability that extended beyond research to that of curriculum and teaching (Beach, et al., 2016). In order to support faculty, instructional staff, and graduate students in navigating these trends, many institutions created centres tasked with fostering the improvement of teaching and learning. The United States opened its first educational development centre at the University of Michigan in 1962 (Lee, 2010) and Canada had its first centre open a few years later at McGill University in 1969 (Wilcox, 1997), with many universities and colleges following suit across North America (Knapper, 2003; Shore, 1974). As class sizes increased and student evaluations of teacher competence became a focus, over the years these centres increased in capacity and influence to offer further support in these areas (Dawson, 2017). Today, educational development centres are engaged in a myriad of different forms of assistance, from teaching strategies and curriculum development to institutional management of learning via planning and policy (D’Andrea & Gosling,

2001; Knapper, 2010). It should be noted that institutional type and context have led to various degrees of focus by these centres and as such, even to this day there is some ambiguity as to the specific terminology and definitions used in naming this area of work. It has been known interchangeably as *instructional development*, *academic development*, *faculty development*, and *educational development* (Di Napolia, et al., 2010; Guskey, 2003; Knight & Wilcox, 1998). Although Australasian and British contexts seem to favor academic development (Stes, et al., 2010), North America and Europe seem to have mainly embraced educational development, as it better captures the institutional level work done by these centres (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012; Beach et al., 2016), and consequently will be the term utilized in this article.

Early Canadian studies in this area focused on defining and explaining the work of educational development centres and only implicitly dealt with the ED role (Konrad, 1983; Shore, 1974). Wilcox (1997) reveals that initial interest in educational development was influenced by the aforementioned social and political trends, and also by early pioneer EDs that were driven by an interest in teaching more effectively. Major Canadian developments in the field consisted of the creation of the Professional Orientation Committee (later the Teaching Effectiveness Committee) of the Canadian Association for University Teachers (1970–1980) which was to provide guidelines on teacher training and other academic responsibilities, and the development of the Ontario Universities’ Program in Instructional Development (OUPID, 1973–1980), which was an Ontario-based program targeting the improvement of teaching in universities by offering funding as well as teacher-leader training (Wilcox, 1997, p. 4). Although these initiatives proved ineffective in substantially impacting the quality of teaching and learning, Wilcox reveals they did serve to legitimize the field by demonstrating educational development was “a valuable thing on which to spend time and money” (p. 25). In the early 1980s, regular meetings between EDs interested in improving the quality of teaching in higher education evolved into the self-governed Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) (Knapper, 1985, p. 1), and a more recent Canadian advancement in educational development occurred in 2003, when a group of EDs interested in maintaining a focus on educational development itself established the Educational Developers Caucus (EDC) as a formal constituency within STLHE. The EDC was created with the

goal of championing the “advancement and evolution of educational development as a field of practice and scholarship by communications, networking, professional development opportunities and advocacy strategies” (EDC, n.d.). Today, it is a substantial organization that engages in activities such as networking, collaboration on educational development projects, cross-institutional visits, and resource sharing. Lastly, the Canadian Society for Studies in Higher Education (CSSHE) led to the creation of the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* (CJHE) in 1971, and later in 2008 STLHE established *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (CJSOTL), both of which have been places to promote and disseminate educational development research until the present day.

Unlike the Swedish government, which mandates faculty development programs (Lewis, 2009), there is no legislated mechanism for national coordination of educational development in Canada as education is under provincial regulation (Taylor & Bédard, 2010). The absence of Canadian governmental infrastructure for educational development has led to national organizations such as CSSHE, STLHE, and EDC largely advocating for the field.

## Major Studies

The effectiveness of educational development practices has been explored in a number of literature reviews (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012; Steinert et al., 2006; Stes, et al., 2010; Sugrue et al., 2018) but the specific requirements, activities, challenges, and needs of the ED role are rarely addressed, particularly within a Canadian context. That being said, a few seminal studies have contributed valuable information with regard to EDs, but possess limitations. Some of the largest studies (Beach, et al., 2016; Chism, 2011; Sorcinelli, et al., 2006) draw their respondents from the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education. Created in 1970, this network consists of primarily U.S. membership, so the aforementioned studies include only a small representation of Canadians (8–11%). Furthermore, of this number, the studies do not distinguish between Canadian college EDs and university EDs. In another large-scale international study by Green and Little (2016), the authors warn they were unable to determine the composition of respondents as to whether they specifically possessed the role of ED, or if they were in fact

researchers or academic leaders. Lastly, Dawson, Britnell, and Hitchcock (2010) examine the characteristics, knowledge, and competencies of EDs, but again draw on international EDs of mixed status composition. The literature that deals specifically with Canadian educational development and the ED role is small. As such, although this article will focus on studies involving Canadian EDs, it will leverage international studies in order to further develop points found where possible.

## The Educational Developer Role

The following sub-sections detail components of the ED role.

### Scope

Since the role began, EDs have supported teaching and learning at institutions of higher learning. Fostering pedagogical knowledge and supporting changes in facilitation have been accomplished through activities such as orientation, classroom observations, workshops/courses, and peer consultations, as well as resource promotion and sharing (Howard & Taber, 2010; Popovic & Plank, 2016). Over time, the ED role has expanded to include a variety of professional development support work with different personnel (e.g., administrative heads, support staff, etc.) in order to fulfill institutional initiatives (Sorcinelli et al., 2006). Rather than only responding to the needs of those teaching, EDs have shifted from “the periphery to the center of the institution” (Dawson, Mighty, & Britnell, 2010, p. 70) and now play a major role in influencing a school’s strategic directions (Cassidy & Poole, 2016). An increased focus on accountability and quality assurance in higher education has led EDs to be viewed as leaders and change agents who promote institutional culture and apply models of organizational change (Rouseff-Baker, 2002; Taylor, 2005). In addition, EDs have come to strengthen organizational capacity (Steinert, 2011), contribute to policy, governance, and institutional directions, and support faculty, students, and administration with these changes accordingly.

### Skills

In regard to enacting the role, adaptability is a key requirement in being an ED. Timmermans (2014) examines threshold conceptions of EDs—the ways of knowing

and being EDs have—and the hidden assumptions and values that lead to individual transformation into the role. The study determined 19 threshold concepts, of which relationships, collaborating and adapting to context were rated highly. Concerning ED ways of knowing and being in regard to facilitating change, Timmermans relates that EDs are responsive to the diverse needs and abilities of the faculty they are trying to assist, and alter their approach to best draw out faculty's own expertise, and at times, even repress themselves by knowing when to "get out of the way" (p. 311). Kolomitro (2013) looks at ED conceptions and use of learning theories and concludes that, although there was some consistency in EDs prioritizing collaboration and knowledge sharing, EDs are malleable and alter their approach via personal preference, context, and according to faculty needs. In a study by Dawson, Britnell, and Hitchcock (2010), an ED's interpersonal skills involving negotiation, mediation, and diplomacy were noted as the most important, and that the manner that these competencies were actioned was context dependent. Carew et al. (2008) speculate that ED work is best described as an *elastic practice*, which is tailoring an activity/approach to a specific context or need through the use of a variety of experiences, ideas, and theoretical stances. They reveal that academics require ED support that "recognises and caters to the particular demands and cultures of teaching and learning that exist within their particular field of specialisation or faculty context" (p. 62). As such, when EDs enact their role, they must alter approaches and themselves in order to meet the needs of those they support.

Behaving in such a responsive and versatile manner is a complex undertaking, and the literature is limited on how to enact said behaviour, likely due to the fact that the behaviour is often context-dependent. The EDC has assisted in this area by producing a guide on rapport-building by West et al. (2017) that details how EDs can engage in collegial relationships displaying specific awareness, sensitivity, and respect of diverse discipline-based cultures, as well as a guide on portfolios by McDonald et al. (2016) that includes characteristics and competencies for EDs. Further work in this area could help clarify the role as to frame a position based on its malleability potentially obscures further insights on it. As Rowland (2007) expresses with regard to the ambiguous roles of EDs, there is a danger in accepting a "relativism that enables difficult questions about purposes to be avoided" (p. 12).

## Pathways and Development

Although the role is becoming of increasing importance and requires a high degree of flexibility, training and pathways into the profession are unclear (Kensington-Miller et al., 2012). McDonald (2011) observes that developers come to the role through "chance, happenstance, and serendipity" with little planning or intention (p. 69). Stockley et al. (2015) elaborate that situational and personal factors influence an individual in becoming an ED, such as having encouraging mentors, being motivated by attending an educational development session, or simply being in need of employment. Beach et al. (2016) also reveal that a high percentage of current EDs are rather new to the role, with 33% of ED directors and 59% of faculty members possessing less than five years of experience (p. 24). In addition, when examining the discipline of their highest degree, it is apparent that the large majority of EDs do not come from the field of education (Green & Little, 2016). McDonald (2011) notes that there is "the absence of common educational credentials and a foundational understanding of the field (i.e., its models, approaches, scope of practice, philosophical underpinnings)" (p. 43). Furthermore, in Kensington-Miller et al.'s (2012) study, educational development hiring managers reveal they often value candidates with strong interpersonal skills as well as the "potential" to develop into the role (p. 125). The authors observe a resulting difficulty of this hiring approach is that by not starting as an established ED, new EDs must obtain credibility through work that they are not yet fully competent at completing (p. 129). Finally, training in the role takes place through mentorship, if at all (Mighty et al., 2010), and although EDs require time and resources to pursue their own professional development (Sorcinelli & Austin, 2010), often only limited institutional support is available (Grabove et al., 2012).

## Challenges

A number of stressors exist for the ED role. Kolomitro et al. (2020) discuss the pressure and potential burnout in being an ED due to career disruptions, budget shifts, and frequent organizational changes. Their study, which includes 38% Canadian respondents, finds that EDs perceive their work as devalued and that they desire to engage in work that is recognized and respected. It is commonplace for EDs to feel uneasy when engaging in

their roles due to a sense of isolation at being “outside” accepted academic disciplines, and by having their credibility questioned (Manathunga, 2007). Kensington-Miller et al. (2015) note that working as an ED is an uncertain position, as EDs are often required to defend their role and purpose to the larger community. Acting as a change agent can also generate feelings of discomfort for the ED, as frequently there exists resistance to change from various stakeholders (Ekecrantz & Schwieler, 2016). The ED can also feel they occupy a “powerless position” (Grant & Keim, 2002, p. 803) as high-level administrators often oversee and direct educational development in institutions. MacKenzie et al. (2007) explain the current higher education institutional environment EDs work within is operationally driven, and performative in nature. The authors detail that this environment has led to a crisis of identity amongst EDs due to the “inner, moral summons for authenticity as developers and the external, institutional demands for performativity” (p.46). They relate that EDs can feel tension when asked to promote initiatives that might not be in accordance with their personal values or beliefs about their role, and that this can lead to feelings of inner conflict, alienation, and inauthenticity. As observed by Handal et al. (2014), EDs can become preoccupied with communicating change rather than creating or coordinating it. Managerial directives can come to be seen by EDs to supersede educational principles, affecting an ED’s sense of authenticity and credibility to themselves and those they try to support (Mullinix, 2008). Manathunga (2007) warns EDs are at risk of being colonizers, or management’s “foot soldiers” (p. 26), by forwarding progressive, linear ideology and promoting performative/neo-liberal ideals such as there exist so-called right and wrong ways to teach. MacKenzie et al. (2007) warn that when EDs are positioned or perceived as experts who correct their colleagues and dictate what are acceptable knowledge, skills, and behaviours for teaching and learning, it can lead to “inequalities, insecurities, and unhappiness” for all involved (p. 52).

Authenticity and self-awareness have been forwarded as a means to address the increasing stress brought about by performativity. Kloet and Aspenlieder (2013), in their study of Canadian EDs, counsel against simply accepting “the proposed belief in the political neutrality and pragmatic utility of active learning, student engagement, best practices and other educational development

tropes” (p. 287). They feel EDs must remain critical and aware of what discourses they are forwarding and sustaining, and that these are not bias-free or neutral. Felten et al. (2004) counsel critical consciousness as a means to resist institutional agendas and promote an authentic approach. Holmes et al. (2012) forward the metaphor of EDs as a middle power country, like Canada and Australia, in that although said countries lack the influence and resources of some great power countries, they are still able to leverage change through creativity, collaboration, and cooperation. Wuetherick and Ewert-Bauer (2012) echo this sentiment and feel EDs must acknowledge their lack of neutrality and work respectfully and inclusively by recognizing and supporting the knowledge and perspectives of those they seek to assist.

## Employment Status

ED employment status (administrative vs. academic) can also have an impact on perceived performativity and authenticity. Green and Little (2017) performed a large study involving 1,000 ED respondents across 38 countries and found the number of EDs on administrative contracts to be higher in North America than in other parts of the world, with 51% of U.S. EDs and 44% of Canadian EDs being classified as administration, both much higher than the global average of 29%. They examine many factors—participation in research, teaching duties, terminal degrees—but find there to be negligible difference in these factors between EDs internationally and in North America. They suggest political and financial reasons be explored further in order to understand said differences in status. Saroyan (2014), in her Canadian study, finds that when EDs possess a similar status as faculty, they are more comfortable in voicing alternative viewpoints, and their contributions are seen to be of increased value (p. 59). She goes on to mention that if the status between EDs and their peers is not the same, EDs might not be considered as an equal and their suggestions may be resisted (p. 59). Mullinix (2008) found the vast majority of EDs indicated academic status as important because it impacted their credibility with colleagues and directly assisted them in their work (p. 182). Harland and Staniforth (2003) further indicate that academic status allows EDs to have greater independence over management agendas (p. 32). Although Saroyan (2014) concludes that collaboration between EDs and

administration is key to forwarding effective change, she identifies a concerning trend that centres are moving away from employing EDs with PhDs to employing those with no teaching or research responsibilities (p. 62). She warns that this could eventually result in EDs being excluded from higher-level decision making.

## Accreditation

Ronald Macdonald (2003) forwards that the field of educational development can be legitimized through the establishment of research and practice traditions, and that professional teaching and learning associations can support this endeavor. The Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) in the UK is an external accreditor for educational development programs and has been operating since the 1990s. Although membership is mainly based in the UK, international institutions have joined SEDA including Humber College and the University of Windsor in Canada (SEDA, n.d.). In Canada, with the absence of a formal accreditor at the national level, the aforementioned EDC has also become involved in a peer-based, voluntary accreditation process at the institutional level (Popovic et al., 2018). It has the aim “to provide a means to ensure high quality provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs at Canadian post-secondary institutions” (EDC, n.d.). This programmatic accreditation aims to enhance higher education teaching and learning, and also offers institutions a means for EDs to collaborate, highlight important aspects of their work, and to give and receive feedback from each other. It remains to be seen if this qualification will continue to grow in Canada; however, it is currently the sole type of formal endorsement offered by the EDC, unlike SEDA, which also accredits individual EDs under its Fellowship scheme (SEDA, n.d.). It is possible a similar individual ED Canadian accreditation could contribute to the preparation of prospective EDs with the requisite knowledge and competencies to take on the role and alleviate to some extent the aforementioned stressors EDs face due to a current lack of training and support. The development of an individual ED qualification could also assist EDs, as Baume and Popovic (2016) observe, “feel more secure within a defined profession” (p. 305). In addition, accreditation could further support ED hiring practices, as currently EDs are often hired based on managerial judgement due to the lack of clarity around established ED capabilities and skills (Dawson, Britnell,

& Hitchcock, 2010; Timmermans, 2014). It should be noted that although a number of scholars indicate a need for more ED training, there exists resistance from others who feel formalized training could impact the diversity of those that become EDs, or the freedom EDs might have to learn about and engage in their role (Stefani, 1999).

## Scholarship

The rise of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), defined as “the development of scholarly knowledge about teaching through reflection, conducting research and sharing expertise” (Evers et al., 2010, p. 31), among faculty and EDs is bringing greater clarity to the educational development field and the ED role. Felten et al. (2007) express the importance of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in that it helps EDs prioritize their time and efforts, generates respect for the educational development field, and contributes overall to the improvement of teaching and learning. A need for EDs to learn and engage in SoTL is echoed by Badley (2001), and Geertsema (2016) also believes EDs should be involved in SoTL to share and promote international research, as well as to investigate and promote local practices. Kenny et al. (2017) build on the work of SoTL and forward the Scholarship of Educational Development (SoED). They feel it is important EDs develop proficiency and contribute to this area as it will enhance their work and add legitimacy to the field of educational development. Although SoED holds similarities to SoTL, it focuses on ED outcomes, and enables EDs to examine and share the impact of their practice, as well as contextualize complexities in their position and field. SoED benefits educational development by providing shared definitions, ways to communicate ED work, a means to build a larger knowledge base, and a network to enable wider collaborations.

A number of government-based changes are also positively affecting the state of the Canadian ED role and its associated scholarship. Stockley et al. (2015) observe that a teaching and learning component is a requirement in national grant applications, and this potentially fosters further collaborations between EDs and researchers in other fields. In the Ontario context, we also see the government giving precedence to teaching-based research when in 2005, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) was created with a purpose to enhance quality and accountability at Ontario

colleges and universities. Not only does HEQCO's quality assurance emphasis increase support for educational development initiatives in Ontario, it offers funding for SoTL and SoED projects.

## Conclusion

Over the past 50 years, the field of educational development in Canada has grown in importance, and the role of the ED has increased in scope and complexity. An examination of the current literature reveals the role has moved beyond teaching assistance to include involvement at the institutional and sector level. Stressors exist for EDs, in particular around their sense of inauthenticity due to a lack of formal training and the demands of a performative environment. However, change in this area is occurring, with the ED role becoming more professionalized with increasing explorations around accreditation, and SoTL and SoED scholarship. Although the Canadian ED role is growing in influence and responsibility, a number of areas warrant further research.

Scholars often cite institutional environment, culture, and goals as large factors that affect the ED role, but more studies could be done to explore specifically the link between school priorities, ED perceptions, and ED work, especially as they vary provincially and in university and college contexts. Perspectives from faculty, students, and staff on the ED role and how these perspectives align with current ED perceptions of being marginalized, seen as lacking credibility, etc., could increase further understanding about the position. In addition, while some scholars caution against formal qualification requirements to becoming an ED as it might impact the diversity of those who enter into the role and the manner in which they execute it, studies involving individual ED accreditation/licensing should be explored. With accreditation, EDs could enter into the role with a solid and shared understanding of the field and its requirements. It might also increase the role's perceived value and credibility, thereby enabling greater confidence, influence, and effectiveness. Barriers do exist, as personal accreditation would involve a cost, time, and effort, and would also need to account for the variety of contexts EDs work within. Furthermore, in light of the current performative environment pervasive in higher education, the possibility should be admitted that individual accreditation might not be supported, as

it could redefine the ED role further, thereby limiting the power of institutions to decree the scope, function, and goals of the position, and possibly employment status. Concerning status, the current literature indicates there is a desire amongst EDs for an increased sense of credibility, and that status is a factor for them in establishing a sense of authenticity and effectively carrying out their work. Additional research on management's motivation and their involvement in setting the ED role as either administrative or academic would offer important contributions to this area of study. Finances likely are a key factor, but other cultural and political factors should be examined in order to determine how both ED and institutional goals can be supported in the most effective manner possible.

Attaining a better understanding of the Canadian ED role stands to only enrich the position and strengthen communication between EDs and the institutions that employ them. Through increased understanding and collaboration, EDs and institutions can reformulate the ED role to meet their mutual needs. This would enable both parties to contribute toward their shared goal of offering a robust and meaningful education to students, and bring further improvements to the Canadian educational system. As EDs continue to support individuals and institutions, further definition and formalization of the role will continue. It is up to EDs to decide, through action and scholarship, how this will materialize. It is time for the skills EDs possess in implementing change and building relationships to be applied to themselves to ensure and establish their own position and rightful place as major contributors to academia and higher education. Through scholarship, collaboration, and mutual support, the future will see EDs achieve the recognition they aspire to and very much deserve.

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