

The High Performance Academy

A Research Digest for You

Exploring how Learning and Development leaders shape and sustain internal academies within their organisations

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Master's Thesis in Management | Nyenrode Business Universiteit
April 2026



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Universiteit, April 2026

A Note to You

Welcome to this research digest. This project started with a question:

How do top L&D leaders build internal academies that deliver real, lasting value to their organisations?

To find out, I sat down with seasoned practitioners to capture what actually works in practice.

Instead of a dense academic thesis, I wanted to give you a practical, curated summary of key findings and takeaways designed to spark inspiration for your own journey.

I hope you find it both useful and encouraging.

For full appendices and references, please refer to the original thesis:

Walgering, F.T. (2026). *Exploring how Learning and Development leaders shape and sustain internal academies within their organisations*. Master's Thesis in Management, Nyenrode Business Universiteit.

Table of Contents

Management Summary	1
Theoretical Framework	3
Participants & Research Approach	6
Results	7
Discussion and Conclusion	17
Practical Implications	18
A Final Reflection	19



Management Summary

Internal academies are increasingly expected to contribute far beyond training delivery. In practice, many academies struggle to maintain relevance when business priorities shift, stakeholder demands increase, and AI accelerates change.

The challenge is no longer whether an academy exists. It is whether it is strategically positioned, governable, and capable of contributing to sustainable organisational success.

Here's the question this research set out to answer:

How do Learning and Development leaders shape internal academies, and which factors do they perceive as shaping and conditioning their organisational contribution to sustainable success?

Based on interviews with 12 senior Learning and Development leaders, one finding stood out above the rest:

Internal academies create lasting value not through programmes or platforms, but through continuously keeping four interdependent capital domains working together.

Human Capital

Expertise and judgement of the L&D function itself

Structural Capital

Governance, prioritisation, and evaluation routines

Relational Capital

Stakeholder legitimacy, co-creation, and partnerships

Human-Artificial Capital

Responsible integration of AI-enabled systems

Success depends less on how many programmes you run, and more on whether these four domains stay aligned over time.

Three messages stand out.

01

Strategic embedding is essential

Academies contribute more when explicitly connected to executive priorities and transformation agendas. Without top-level sponsorship, they risk reverting to operational training provision rather than functioning as a strategic learning infrastructure.

02

Governance must combine discipline with flexibility

Clear intake procedures, portfolio steering, and evaluation routines keep academies focused and credible while remaining adaptable to shifting priorities.

03

Sustainable impact depends on professional and AI capability

Strategic advisory skill, didactic expertise, data literacy, and AI literacy all matter. AI can improve speed and personalisation, but only when embedded responsibly with human oversight, ethical guardrails, and accountability.

Internal academies create value by sustaining coherence across these interdependent capitals while navigating persistent tensions: flexibility versus control, central direction versus local input, and automation versus human judgement.

This is what defines a **High Performance Academy**. It is characterised by a continuous pattern, not a one-off achievement. In this state, **alignment capability¹ is built directly into everyday decisions and routines.**

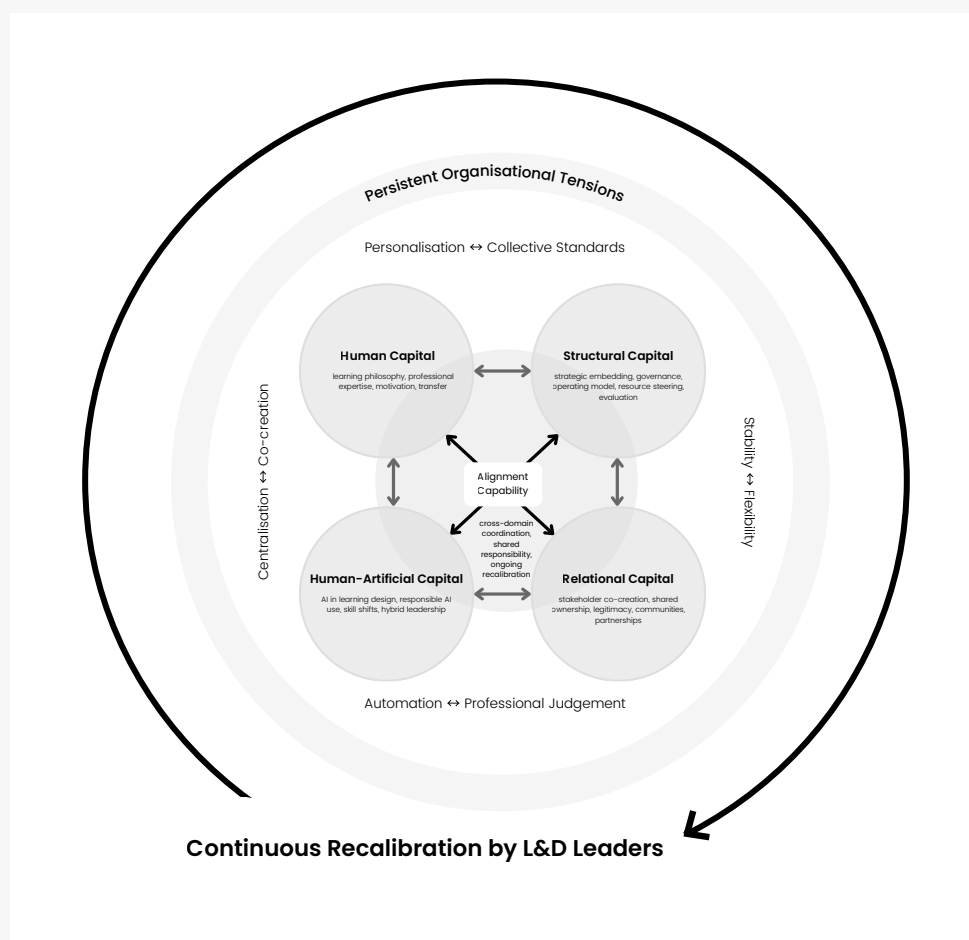
¹ Alignment capability refers to continuously coordinating Human Capital, Structural Capital, Relational Capital, and Human-Artificial Capital under conditions of strategic volatility and technological change.

Theoretical Framework

Why four capitals?

This study uses Intellectual Capital theory as its lead perspective. The core insight is: organisational contribution depends not on isolated investments, but on how intangible resources are configured and made mutually reinforcing in practice.

For internal academies, this means **four domains matter and they matter together**.



As shown above, these four capitals do not operate in isolation. L&D leaders are constantly navigating the tensions between them and recalibrating as needed.

Internal academies sit in the middle of the organisation, connecting strategy, capability needs, stakeholder expectations, and new technology, and constantly adjusting as these things shift. This isn't a one-time setup. **An academy's value comes from how well it keeps adapting to these demands over time, not from following a fixed blueprint.**

The Four Capital Domains

Human Capital

It concerns not only the knowledge, skills, judgement, motivation, and learning capacity developed among employees, leaders, and subject-matter experts, but also the professional capability of the Learning and Development function itself. Human Capital is thus linked here to capability mediation rather than capability provision alone.

Structural Capital

The governance mechanisms, prioritisation routines, and evaluation practices that stabilise learning activity over time. Structural Capital is linked most directly to governance discipline and organised continuity. Too little structure produces fragmentation. Too much reduces responsiveness.

Relational Capital

The relationships through which the academy earns legitimacy. Stakeholders must recognise the academy as credible, engage with it as meaningful, and reinforce it in practice. This is built and rebuilt, not assumed.

Human-Artificial Capital

This is about how AI-enabled systems and human expertise work together. Human-Artificial Capital is linked most directly to responsible augmentation. The question is not whether AI is present, but whether it is integrated in ways that remain professionally governable and ethically defensible.

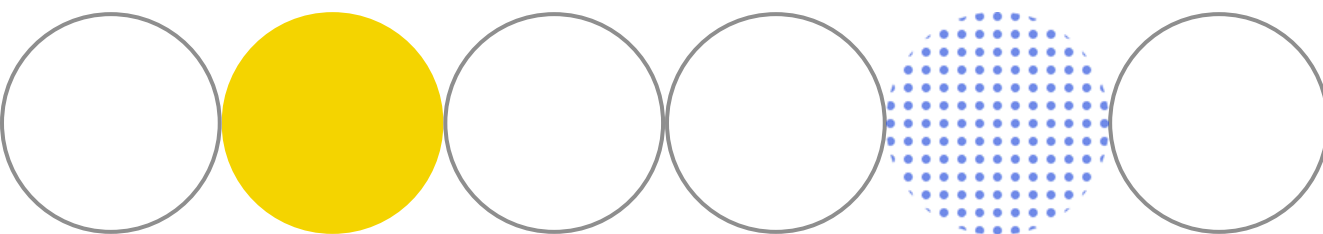
Why Alignment Capability Matters Most

Alignment capability is the ability of internal academies to keep coordinating and adjusting all four capitals, even as strategy shifts, stakeholders change, and technology evolves.

This matters because no single capital works well on its own. Strong people without the right structure stay scattered. Good structure without trust never really gets used. And AI, without the other three, can move fast while quietly eroding judgement, legitimacy, or accountability.

Ultimately, the academies that make a real difference are the ones that keep all four working together.

But this integration isn't a one-time achievement. An internal academy doesn't align with strategy once and then stay effective forever. It is a continuous process of navigating real tensions—between personalisation and collective standards, centralisation and co-creation, stability and flexibility, and automation and professional judgement.



Participants & Research Approach

12

senior L&D
leaders

11

sectors

5

countries

22

avg. years
tenure

This study draws on interviews with **12** senior Learning and Development leaders across **11** sectors and **5** countries, with an average tenure in their current role of **22** years.

Participants held **senior titles** such as Chief Learning Officer, Head of Learning and Development, and Director of Learning and Development, representing organisations across information technology, manufacturing, energy, retail, tourism, food delivery, telecommunications, media, consulting, research services, and veterinary care.

Most were based in the **Netherlands** and **Belgium**, with additional participants from Germany, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (~60 min each), audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymised. Analysis used an abductive template approach guided by the four capital domains.

Results : Human Capital & Learning Practice

The internal academy was no longer described as a reactive service function. It required strategic and consultative capability: the ability to diagnose, translate, and engage.

“If my team cannot have a strategic conversation with the business, then we are simply order takers.”

To do this effectively, the academy must position itself carefully alongside managers and HR: acting as a supporting and methodologically specialised actor, rather than taking over managerial ownership.

“We are not the ones who sit down with people to talk about development plans. That is still the manager, or secondly the HR business partner. But we really operate in that supporting and facilitating role, which means you also need technical expertise.”

The quality of the Learning and Development function itself is the foundation.

This shift means the L&D function needs far more than standard instructional skill. Professional expertise must extend to analytical capability, strategic judgement, and the ability to design learning around real capability rather than just course attendance. Learning matters most when it is tied to the work itself, built into practice, and focused on application.

“It's often only about the theory, not about putting it into practice.”

When it comes to putting this into practice, three design principles came up again and again: **contextual relevance, practical usability, and coherence in programme structure.**

Human Capital & Learning Practice

“Back to the basics, keep it simple, and make sure you can change quickly. You need to build something that provides structure.”

The Learning and Development function needs more than instructional skill.

Professional expertise was described as extending beyond instructional skill to include analytical capability, strategic judgement, and the ability to translate organisational needs into meaningful responses. L&D leaders must be able to think critically and analyse incoming information meticulously.

“I think that this competence really needs to be there: thinking critically, critically analysing the information that comes in, and then following every step in that process very meticulously.”

At its core, **Human Capital comes down to the judgement, expertise, and capability of the academy function itself.** It is not only a matter of professional quality, but of whether sufficient capability exists within the academy to act on that quality in a sustained way.

Structural Capital & Academy Architecture

Structural Capital is the architecture that makes the academy work day to day: how it's positioned, governed, and kept operationally sustainable. It covers governance, how priorities get set, how resources get allocated, the digital systems in place, and how results get evaluated.

Structure is not formality. It is the mechanism through which the academy maintains focus.

Strategic embedding emerged as the strongest structural condition for academy relevance. Academies were more influential when directly linked to strategic priorities, executive agendas, and formal decision-making structures.

"I think that as a functional academy you cannot do otherwise than stay connected to the strategy. If you want to be a catalyst for your organisation, you need to hook into it."

Governance worked the same way, through prioritisation and coordination that prevented things from becoming fragmented and made decision-making clearer.

"These are our governance mechanisms: steering committees, business sounding groups, stable meetings, newsletters, information sharing. Everything to ensure that the business stays connected to what is coming, can actively think along or participate in the design, and is not politically surprised by what is coming."

Evaluation as recalibration, not just measurement.

Performance discipline formed a further recurring pattern, although here the findings showed more variation. Decisions are increasingly anchored in structured frameworks like OKRs to determine what to do and where to invest.

"Decisions are made on the basis of the OKRs. Every quarter it is decided: this is what we are going to do, this is what we are going to spend money on."

Structural Capital & Academy Architecture

However, plenty of leaders were honest about the practical limits of evaluation. Relying purely on traditional metrics often proves unrealistic given the lean size of academy teams.

“We measure how many trainings were completed... With three permanent staff members for 2,400 employees, that is not feasible.”

The operating model is where strategy meets reality.

This is precisely where the operating model makes the biggest difference: when it helps the academy move away from ad-hoc delivery and towards clearer prioritisation and resource decisions.

“We look at what the highest-prioritised success metrics are.”

Managing resources was a constant challenge. The operating model isn't just about how things are designed on paper. It's about what the team can realistically sustain given its actual capacity.

“I do not think it is possible to continue handling all learning and development requests from my team in the long run.”

In short, **Structural Capital** is not a fixed, rigid architecture, but **an operating arrangement that has to remain both highly organised and deeply adaptive.**

Relational Capital & Ecosystem Positioning

Relational Capital is the set of relationships that gives the academy its legitimacy, shared ownership, access to expertise, and strategic influence.

Stakeholder Co-creation, Alignment, and Shared Ownership

Learning initiatives gained far more traction when managers and business stakeholders were brought in early, and when ownership was shared rather than kept inside the academy.

“The senior leadership team needs to be involved as early as possible. They need to co-create and shape the learning tracks, experiences, and interventions within the academy.”

Respondents portrayed the academy not as a function that imposes direction, but as a connective actor working through relationships, dialogue, and shared agenda-setting. One leader described the role as 'initiating, enthusing, monitoring, and steering where possible'.

Legitimacy is not given. It is built and rebuilt.

The study highlights that stakeholder support is never static; it is a dynamic force that can grow, weaken, or remain uneven across different business units. This means an academy's legitimacy is not given. It is built and rebuilt. True relevance must be continuously earned through proven business alignment and ongoing engagement.

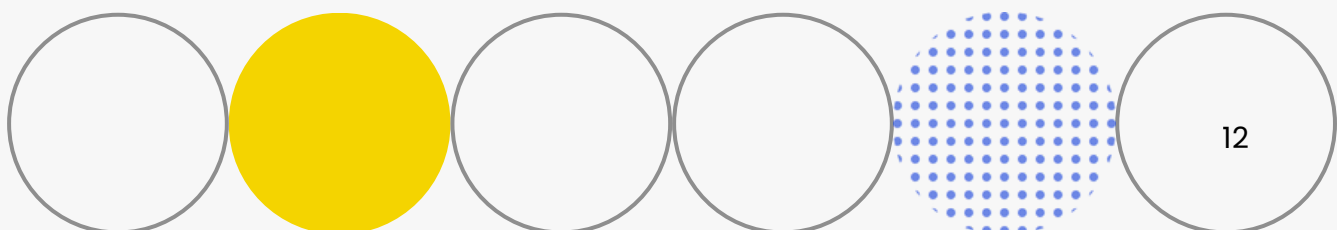
Inside and outside the organisation

Internal communities and local networks were especially important when the academy had a group-wide role. These communities became spaces for sharing knowledge beyond formal programmes, and the academy helped break down silo thinking between departments.

External partnerships extended capability where specialist expertise or speed was needed. Some leaders described the academy less as a producer of content and more as an orchestrator, working with trusted partners. As one put it, organisations need to be far more interactive with the wider ecosystem.

Relational Capital & Ecosystem Positioning

To wrap up, **Relational Capital positions the academy not as an isolated island, but as the central orchestrator of a thriving learning ecosystem.** Its success depends entirely on the strength of its connections, both internally with stakeholders and externally with the wider market.



Human–Artificial Capital & Digital Augmentation

Human–Artificial Capital is about **how AI and digital systems support the academy's work, while keeping responsibility, judgement, and final accountability with people.**

AI is not replacing the academy. It is changing what the academy must do.

AI proved useful in repetitive, procedural, and preparatory tasks: faster content creation, translation, design support, and more responsive delivery. But acceleration did not eliminate the need for human design choices.

“It's powerful, but I still find myself rewriting sections because I don't like the way the AI phrases things.”

“If I already see how much faster we can translate things now, or how easily we can generate a video in multiple languages from a transcript, that is already changing enormously.”

Bringing AI into the mix has fundamentally changed what skills the academy team needs to thrive. Digital literacy, knowing how to write a good prompt, critical evaluation, and comfort with new automated tools have all become essential baseline competencies.

Responsible use is not optional.

However, as AI capabilities grow, leaders are clear that continued human accountability is paramount. Trust, risk, and unintended consequences are recurring concerns, particularly around fabricated information, algorithmic bias, data security, and knowing the true source of data.

“You must always keep using the human factor. We use AI as a tool, but everything still goes through a proofreader and a subject matter expert.”

Human–Artificial Capital & Digital Augmentation

Across all of this, AI integration is still a work in progress, not something settled. Organisations are still experimenting, setting limits, and adjusting their expectations. Automation, human oversight, and professional learning are developing together, not as separate tracks.



Interdependence and Persistent Tensions

Across the **four** themes, respondents did not describe Human Capital, Structural Capital, Relational Capital, and Human-Artificial Capital as separate domains operating independently. Instead, they portrayed the academy as **a configuration in which these domains continually affected one another.**

Stability vs. Flexibility

The academy has to stay strategically anchored, while still responding to emerging needs.

“The market sometimes has different needs than what management has determined. So that tension is always there.”

Centralisation vs. Co-creation

Group-wide consistency is needed, but so is local ownership and distributed involvement.

“We exist to create group-wide consistency so that people across the organisation speak the same language.”

Collective Standards vs. Personalisation

Common frameworks must coexist with differentiated pathways for different functions, levels, and contexts.

“In a learning platform everything should be available to everyone.”

Automation vs. Professional Judgement

AI accelerates, but final responsibility and critical review must remain human.

“You must always keep using the human factor. We use AI as a tool, but everything still goes through a proofreader and a subject matter expert.”

These tensions do not resolve. They are managed continuously.

Alignment Capability

Alignment capability emerged as the broader, overarching pattern through which academy contribution is sustained over time. **It requires maintaining constant coherence across all four capitals through ongoing coordination, shared responsibility, and repeated recalibration under persistent tension.**

To achieve this level of impact, top L&D leaders focus on four essential dimensions:

Cross-domain

Alignment means coordinating all four domains at once, not just getting better in one area.

“I see us more as a spider in the web. We work from Learning and Development with almost all functions and sometimes connect functions on the basis of the topic.”

Shared

The academy can't own alignment by itself. It needs shared responsibility with executives, line managers, and stakeholders.

“It is always a linked combination of responsibility... always shared responsibility. That is how I see it.”

Continuous

Alignment is never finished. One leader described their academy becoming more anchored in the organisation every quarter, built progressively, never achieved all at once.

Organisational Contribution

Alignment capability connects directly to what the academy actually delivers for the organisation. It makes sure employees have what they need to execute the strategy, and keeps the academy close enough to the business to spot where capability-building needs to support bigger changes.

The High Performance Academy

The **High Performance Academy** is not the largest, the most digital, or the most centralised. **It is the one where alignment has become the way the academy works.**

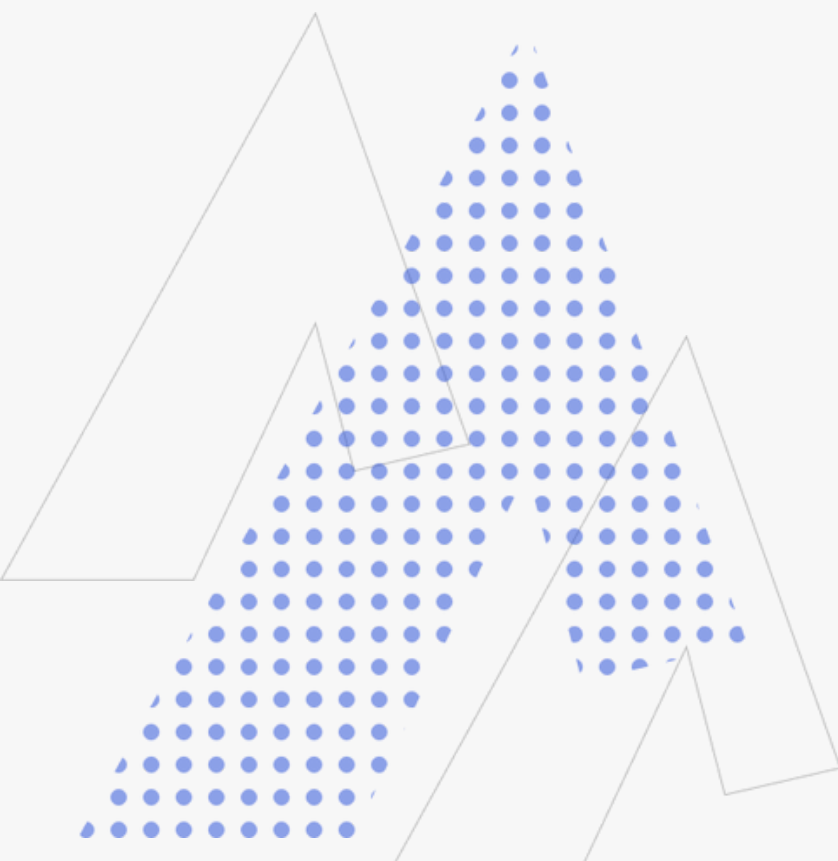
Shifting from Expansion to Alignment

Internal academies are shaped less through structural expansion, curriculum proliferation, or platform sophistication than through continuous alignment work across interdependent capital domains.

Their contribution depends on the ability to sustain coherence under conditions of strategic volatility, stakeholder plurality, and technological acceleration. Alignment is not a static state of fit. It is a processual capability.

The High Performance Academy is an internal academy in which alignment capability has become institutionalised as an organising logic.

It's a concept drawn directly from a pattern that kept showing up in the research: **organisational contribution depends on whether alignment capability genuinely becomes part of how the academy operates, not just an idea on paper.**



Practical Implications

For Learning and Development leaders, four priorities.

01

Govern with purpose, not process.

Governance should function as a steering mechanism, not an administrative overlay. Clear intake criteria, portfolio prioritisation, decision rules, and evaluation routines keep the academy credible and focused while remaining adaptable.

02

Shaping an internal academy requires more than learning design expertise alone.

Strategic advisory skill, consulting capability, stakeholder management, data literacy, and AI literacy all matter.

03

Invest actively in sponsorship and legitimacy.

Academy contribution depends partly on negotiated support and shared ownership rather than on formal mandate alone.

04

Treat AI as a governed capability.

AI's value depends on human oversight, clear boundaries of use, and continued professional judgement in design, curation, and decision-making.

For senior executives: one central implication.

Internal academy impact can't be left entirely to the L&D function. **It needs explicit sponsorship, a clear governance position, and visible links to strategic decision-making.** The real question isn't whether an academy runs great programmes. It's whether it can sustain alignment across governance, sponsorship, professional capability, and responsible AI use, over time.

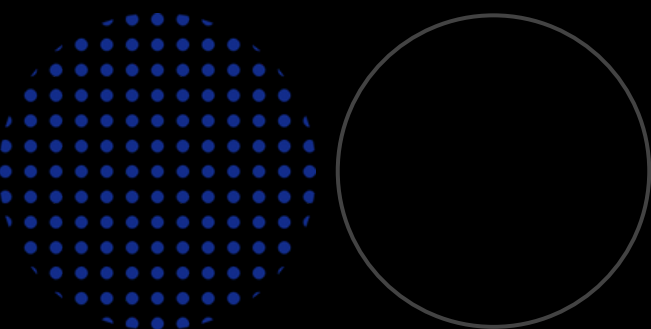
A Final Reflection

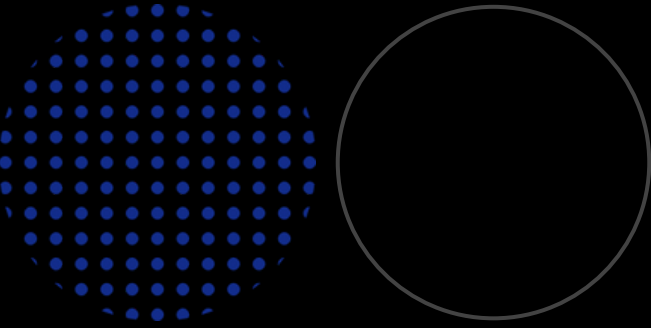
Internal academies are often discussed in terms of programmes, platforms, or organisational form. This thesis suggests their significance is better understood in configurative and relational terms.

What appears to matter is not simply whether an academy exists, how visible it is, or how many learning activities it offers, **but how it is shaped as an organisational arrangement that connects expertise, governance, stakeholder relationships, and technological augmentation over time.**

Their contribution is neither automatic nor reducible to isolated success factors. It is conditioned by continuous alignment work carried out under persistent organisational and technological tensions.

Ultimately, internal academies become most consequential when alignment capability is institutionalised as an organising logic.





Thank you for taking the time to read this.

If this resonates with where your own academy stands today,
I'd love to continue the conversation.

