

Learning development and English for academic purposes: opportunities and challenges in collaboration

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Abstract

The aim of this practitioner's mini keynote was to reflect on the experiences of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and learning development (LD) practitioners from across UK higher education institutions to explore how we can collaborate to benefit students' educational experiences and outcomes. Despite different pedagogical and professional contexts and identities, both EAP and LD practitioners aspire to develop students' understanding of, and engagement with, key academic and disciplinary literacies (McCulloch and Horak, 2019). Within many institutions, however, EAP and LD colleagues deliver provision separately – either to different cohorts or through different teaching models (pre- and in-sessional delivery, for example). Although this separation speaks to specific disciplinary identities and points of theoretical and pedagogical difference (see, for example, Wingate, 2012), it can cause duplication of content, confusion for students, and competing demands for institutional funding and support. Given increasing student numbers, widening diversity of student needs and experience, and funding concerns, it is more important than ever to understand how EAP and LD practitioners can collaborate in the best interests of our students.

Prompt questions:

- What opportunities for collaboration between EAP and LD colleagues are available at your institution, and what challenges or barriers have you experienced?
- How can EAP and LD practitioners effectively collaborate while maintaining their professional identities?

- How can effective collaboration between EAP and LD practitioners benefit student education experiences and outcomes?

Keywords: collaboration; EAP; learning development; student experiences; professional identities.

Community response

Webb began her practitioner's mini keynote by outlining her own interest in the connections between learning development and English for Academic Purposes, and where there may be areas of similarity and difference in our professions' approaches to working with students. Through doing so, she provided a grounding for the lively discussion that followed her presentation. The audience consisted of a mixture of learning development and EAP practitioners, with participants sharing their own experiences of working in—and sometimes across—both disciplines.

The discussion demonstrated that there are clearly fruitful opportunities for collaboration and partnership between LD and EAP colleagues, which was further evidenced by the concrete examples participants shared of how these connections can be fostered in practice. One example was provided by a colleague from Plymouth University where EAP and LD colleagues have been combined into one fully integrated learning support team that works across the institution. Other examples demonstrated the smaller ways in which collaboration across the two professions would benefit students. Webb's example of working collaboratively with her colleagues from the University of Leeds Language Centre provided one such case study. Having identified a need within the undergraduate cohort for academic literacy and language support, Webb and her colleagues collaborated to design a holistic and embedded approach. Drawing on the expertise of LD and EAP colleagues meant the project encompassed a far wider range of skills, approaches, and pedagogies to enhance the students' experience than if either team had undertaken the project in isolation.

Participants at the conference found it useful to hear from colleagues about successful collaborations, alongside also having the space to discuss potential challenges in a safe way without being deemed 'negative' for raising issues or concerns. Through this discussion, participants felt that the nature of the two professions were perhaps more closely aligned than previously had been the case due to changes in the university sector, such as the significant increase in international students studying in the UK.

Figure 1. Webb's presentation slide, including the three prompt questions for her practitioner's mini keynote.

**Learning Development and English for Academic Purposes:
Opportunities and Challenges in Collaboration**

Dr Emily Webb, University of Leeds

The slide features a central box with three numbered prompts:

- 1 Hear about some project happening at the University of Leeds.
- 2 Share your thoughts and experiences.
- 3 Learn how LD and EAP colleagues in other institutions are working collaboratively.

Three sticky notes are positioned to the right of the central box, each containing a question:

- What are some opportunities and challenges for collaboration?
- How can practitioners collaborate while maintaining their professional identities?
- How can effective collaboration benefit student education experiences and outcomes?

The University of Leeds logo is located in the bottom left corner of the slide.

Discussion turned to how the structures within our individual institutions can influence how far and how effectively synergies develop between EAP and LD practitioners. Some participants explained that they now work in teams in which learning development and EAP have been combined into a single team. Others, however, explained that wider institutional structures had prevented a similar approach at their universities. It was felt that particular sensitivity was needed at a time when resources are constrained and roles could be under threat. This situation means that, although points of convergence are worth exploring, it is also important to be clear on the boundaries and expertise each profession brings. Such discussion picked up on a common thread that was considered throughout the conference, as seen elsewhere in this special issue, about the importance of clarifying

the distinct contribution of learning development—and other third space professionals—to higher education.

Next steps and additional questions

Several contributors asked how we could make more meaningful connections that bridge the divide between learning development and EAP practice, recognising how potential institutional barriers and silos may stymie such work. In bringing together our professions, perhaps fertile ground could be explored through professional networks, such as by bringing together ALDinHE and BALEAP in a joint forum?

Author's reflections

I would like to thank all participants for contributing to a thought-provoking and lively discussion during my session. Some key themes emerged during the discussion, including concerns surrounding professional identity, differences in approaches towards quality assurance, levels of involvement in credit-bearing modules, as well as points of difference in pedagogical approach and the centrality of language versus wider literacies (for more information, see McCulloch and Horak, 2019). Yet, despite these differences, the overwhelming direction of discussion was on opportunities for the two professions to work more closely together to benefit students' educational experiences and outcomes.

Some participants noted that in their institutions learning development and EAP were already merged into Learning Services (or similar) teams, and knowledge, experience and duties were being shared. This approach, of course, has its challenges, including discrepancies between academic and professional services contracts, but in all cases seemed to have been a positive step. Some other colleagues—particularly at larger institutions—noted this model would be difficult to implement, but they are working on smaller collaborative projects or were planning to do so. Those who worked largely separately at the moment discussed how they could take some ideas back to their institutions to see if there were new opportunities that had not previously been explored.

It was striking to hear that some of the challenges and opportunities in this area were similar across the country in both smaller and larger institutions.

Acknowledgments

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The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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