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Exploring the engagement of students who identify as Black, Indigenous (and/or) People of Colour (BIPoC) with Learning Development practitioners: reviewing the value, impact, and recommendations for future practice

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Abstract

The need for universities to effectively support students identifying as Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Colour (BIPoC) remains a pressing element of strategies to close awarding gaps. Within overall support packages, the contribution of Learning Developers merits investigation, since these staff are often responsible for nurturing growth in students' academic abilities. Through this small-scale, exploratory, qualitative study, we sought to better understand how Learning Developers can contribute to narrowing awarding gaps by exploring the benefits of and barriers to students engaging with Learning Development (LD). These benefits and barriers were elicited in interviews with twelve BIPoC students within one school in the Humanities and Social Sciences faculty in a UK university setting. The study explored their experiences of the value of LD interactions and how the value might be enhanced. Aspects deemed valuable emerged broadly as anticipated, centring around how Learning Developers assisted students to learn academic practices such as: decoding assessment instructions and marking rubrics, referencing, breaking down tasks, and feedback uptake. More specifically relevant to BIPoC students, however, was firstly the desirability of a flexible approach to the number and length of LD tutorials, enabling them to build relationships, understand guidance, and ask questions. Secondly, they mentioned the need to see ethnic diversity represented in the LD staff base and amongst student champions for LD. These factors were noted as good practice when evident, but open to further improvement. We conclude that whilst effective foundations

were in place, the task of supporting BIPoC students remains one for ongoing reflection and action.

Keywords: Learning Development; student support; ethnicity; awarding gaps.

Introduction

This research took place at a UK university within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and explores how students who identify as Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPoC) articulate the value of accessing guidance from Learning Developers. We acknowledge that this student population is variously referred to elsewhere as Black (And) Minority Ethnic (BAME/BME) and more recently as People of the Global Majority (PGM). We elected to use 'BIPoC' to characterise the group whilst recognising the nuanced differences between the terms and the non-consensus over which is most apt. We were interested in the experiences of both British-born and international BIPoC students, again acknowledging that these are two distinct groups who might more ideally be treated as separate entities (Madriaga and McCaig, 2019).

This research responded to the university's desire to address the awarding gap and variance in student assessment outcomes. The faculty concerned had an awarding gap of 12.9% between White and non-White students in 2023 (Spendlove, 2024, private correspondence), although the authors note that this statistic problematically overlooks substantial nuances in the non-White category. LD involves 'democratising' practice (Roberts and Reid, 2014), which seeks to reduce awarding gaps by helping with students' feelings of belonging and their access to both the explicit and implicit demands of HE. The model examined here featured school-based LD staff providing academic support. Recent studies (Gornall, 2019; Hallett, 2019) have argued that embedding LD work within academic disciplines increases its effectiveness by positioning the Learning Developers as relevant and identifiable figures within communities of practice. Our findings therefore relate to the experiences of BIPoC students with LD staff who worked within that paradigm specifically. We wanted to listen to the voices of those who had met at least one LD practitioner to elicit their views on the value of the meetings and their recommendations for enhancing the provision.

The two research questions addressed are:

1. To what extent do BIPoC students perceive/experience the value of academic support within their university?

2. What are the students' recommendations for the delivery of effective Learning Development practice?

Literature review

BIPoC students' experiences in HE and the value of Learning Development work have been largely studied within separate bodies of literature and with any significant overlap emerging only recently (Arthur, 2023). This section will therefore consider each topic in turn, before turning to studies that combine the two.

BIPoC students' experiences in HE

Data cited within the Universities UK report (2022) showed that BAME (sic.) students comprised 25.9% of the student population in 2020/21. Studies capturing the voices of this group have reported that BIPoC students self-perceive and are led by outside assumptions to feel that they face systemic disadvantages ingrained in the structural and cultural norms of higher education (Roberts and Reid, 2014; Arday and Mirza, 2018; Madriaga and McCaig, 2019). Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid (2019) suggest that even where opportunities to access higher education have been levelled out, these interventions do not necessarily translate into equal access for all student groups, and equal opportunities are thus not provided. This issue can be related to awarding gaps through, for example, assessment characterised as 'a practice and a process arising from specific historical, social and cultural loci through and in which specific values are reflected and enshrined' (Hanesworth, Bracken and Elkington, 2019, p.98). Those students with less prior exposure to the contextual factors mentioned are at a systemic disadvantage compared to their peers, which typically manifests in them being less equipped to produce assessments deemed 'successful' by these cultural criteria.

Where students have joined an institution from overseas, another significant factor is the prospect of cultural isolation (Bunce and King, 2019). Although a more commonly cited barrier is the significance of learning in a second language (Roberts and Reid, 2014; Rear, 2017; Bunce and King, 2019; Barber, 2021), this perhaps masks the greater difficulty of being introduced to unfamiliar academic structures that impede progress (Busher, Lewis and Comber, 2014). Madriaga and McCaig (2019) have argued that students from minority backgrounds—whether British-domiciled or international—often find themselves having to navigate a system within which they are 'othered' against the perpetuated idea of White being normal. Practically speaking, students describe having to grapple with referencing and citation along with applying the right language in assessments (Cowley and Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018). As one of their participants explained, 'the biggest problem is understanding language and then expressing it in assessments' (p.120).

The difficulties identified have been the focus of much research to establish the causes of awarding gaps in Higher Education between BIPoC students and their White peers (Woolf, Potts and McManus, 2011; Stevenson, 2012; Frumkin and Koutsoubou, 2012; Richardson, 2013; Coulson, 2023). Multiple facets of the student experience have been offered as influences over student outcomes, and these often intersect, producing experiences of educational disadvantages for BIPoC students (Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020). Summarising several of these arguments, Bunce and King (2019) mention: course materials not reflecting culture; the possibility of isolation, reduced motivation, and reduced wellbeing; accent and language-based barriers; and assumptions—sometimes implicit—by lecturers that BIPoC students will underperform compared to White British peers. Claridge, Stone, and Ussher (2018) add that BIPoC students are often left on the periphery of informal, peer-formed groups and may also change their behaviours to fit perceived systemic norms. Awarding gaps are likely to be a consequence of these factors, among others, in combination.

It is not uncommon for BIPoC students to describe the importance of having a social system of support. As Roberts and Reid (2014) suggest, this can be a challenge for any 'non-traditional' group, as they are obliged to learn behavioural dispositions termed 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1993) that may already be more familiar to others. In some cases, students describe having to change their behaviour to fit in with the cultural norms, meaning they cannot be authentic to themselves and are distant from their home and familiar norms (Guthrie et al., 2013). Interviews with forty-one students from the BAME

(sic.) community also highlighted the effect of outside familial and cultural pressures (Claridge, Stone and Ussher, 2018).

The combination of evident difficulties—institutional assumptions, language, hard-to-decode assessment requirements, social differences, and struggles for belonging—seemingly act in tandem as systemic drags on BIPoC students' university performance. Identifying these challenges naturally directs attention to the support mechanisms in place at universities focused on overcoming them. The Learning Developer is one such role, and we now turn our focus onto how their role can address some of these challenges, both on the interpersonal side and its trajectory through to assessment outcome variance.

Learning Development in HE

The relatively recent history of LD roles in HE is intertwined with several agendas discussed above. Professional LD roles were first created in the mid-1990s, in line with governmental objectives to widen participation and increase diversity (Hilsdon, 2018). These requirements rationalised roles to support student retention and attainment, often initially funded by the governmental widening participation (WP) agenda (Hilsdon, 2011; 2018). WP was designed to increase the presence and achievement in higher education of five underrepresented groups including ethnic minorities (Dearing, 1997; Dulini and Etlyn, 2021).

As the LD field has grown its collective voice, it has made sustained attempts to distance itself from models that situate its work as fixing deficits in students (Wolfendale and Corbett, 1996; Hilsdon, 2011; Wingate, 2015; Hilsdon, 2018; Johnson, 2018; 2023; Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2023; Webster, 2023). This paradigm shift does not, however, mean that the field fails to recognise that certain students face educational disadvantage. These two positions are reconciled as LD practitioners generally understand these deficits to be systemically imposed. This stance is best illustrated by the fact that LD draws theoretical underpinnings (Hilsdon, Syska and Malone, 2019) from Academic Literacies (AcLits) theory (Lea and Street, 1998). AcLits emphasises carrying out democratising work with students and staff to resolve contradictions and build bridges between the HE system and its learners (Chanock, 2007). In operating as such, AcLits instruction 'encourages exploration of the ways in which meaning-making and identity are

implicated, not just in student writing, but in teaching and learning more generally' (Ivanič and Lea, 2006, p.12).

The AcLits literature widely recognises that almost all students will struggle for legitimacy in HE until they master the 'complex codes and conventions […] to become accomplished players in the academy' (Ivanič and Lea, 2006, p.12), an effect amplified for minoritised groups such as BIPoC students. This said, LD work did not grow to support international students *per se*, while British-born or British-domiciled BIPoC students were only a part of the broader WP remit that catalysed LD roles (Wingate and Tribble, 2011). Studies have shown that well-intended initiatives to support the sense of belonging in WP students can backfire unless carefully planned, for example by appearing tokenistic (Bettencourt, 2021), over-promising (Cant, 2017), or leading to students feeling pressured into conforming with alien expectations (Crozier, Reay and Clayton, 2019). These studies confirm that the nature of support mechanisms requires considered thought and should incorporate student voices.

Learning Development and race

On race more specifically, Arthur (2023) argues that work to theorise the key issues around BME students' participation in HE did not gather momentum until Singh's (2011) literature synthesis, and that the LD profession's scholarship on the matter has trailed further behind. Arthur (2023) identifies that the lag has been influenced by the LD field's 'whiteness' (p.127), and its newness and lack of confidence create a tendency to position itself neutrally. However, Arthur cites Buchanan's (2015) findings, which highlight that BME students were more likely than their White counterparts to obtain LD support. Furthermore, Arthur cites Loddick and Coulson (2020), who found that BME students under 25 years of age gained more from LD engagement in attainment terms—up to four sub-grades (Coulson, 2023)—than either their White peers or mature students. It is thus increasingly evident that LD work stands to impact ethnicity-based awarding gaps, but more research is needed to establish and document how this may be achieved. Such research should factor in multiple stakeholders, including the BIPoC student population. While we must be wary not to place this group as responsible for solving systemically imposed deficits, only they have the lived experiences of how LD can support attainment among their group. Our research seeks to apply the knowledge gained by listening to the voices of this student

population as a way to further enhance the experiences of those seeking guidance via LD engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

This small-scale research took a qualitative approach because the authors were keen to identify issues by listening to the voices of BIPoC students, developing an understanding of the meanings and interpretations they attached to their experiences of support. Quantitative research would have involved methods such as surveys and questionnaires leading to statistical analysis, which was not the purpose (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020). Instead, a case-study approach was adopted to investigate how twelve students articulated the value of LD activity and the recommendations for future practice.

Participants

The twelve participants were drawn from a population of 48 students who met a departmental Learning Developer in the 2021−2022 or 2022−2023 academic years. Included students were from one of three groups:

1. Students born in and permanently resident in the UK.
2. Students born abroad who are permanent residents in the UK.
3. International students with visas to complete their qualifications at the university.

Once again, we acknowledge that amalgamating these groups into a single label (BIPoC) is complex and could be interpreted as not an optimal method. However, in the absence of literature addressing this issue directly, our identification seeks to provide clarity for the reader by identifying the different paths that bring students to study in the institution.

Research from Madriaga (2022) and Madriaga and McCaig (2019) indicates that in HE institutions where 'whiteness' dominates, having English as a foreign language (EFL) is likely to be judged as a deficit. We were therefore mindful to avoid making assumptions as

to whether any of the participants had EFL, and instead let this emerge if they wished to raise it.

Following a conversation with a Learning Developer (Author Two) about the research, students who wanted to take part emailed the principal investigator (Author One), who provided them with the participant information sheet (PIS) and consent form. This led to an online meeting at a convenient time for each student. Despite being a relatively small sample, we deemed twelve respondents (25% of the eligible population) sufficient to produce a manageable amount of data within our scope to identify key themes. Therefore, the first twelve participants who responded were recruited. A full breakdown is presented in Table 1.

Three males and nine females ranging in age from 19−45 took part in the study. Eight participants were studying on undergraduate courses and four were studying on postgraduate courses. Four identified their ethnicity as from Africa and eight identified as from Asia. It was noted that none of the participants were from a Black Caribbean background, which was a limitation in the representation, but as the participants were self-selected, this was not a variable under our control. They had met with the Learning Developer 2−8 times, with an average of 3 meetings. The students had been working with a departmental cap of three tutorials per teaching block, or six per academic year.

Table 1. Participant breakdown.

Pseudonym	Level of Study (UG or PG)	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Number of Interactions with Learning Developer	Length of Interview (in Minutes)
Ariana	PG	Bangladeshi	F	38	8	33
Bernardo	UG	Asian	F	22	4	22
Chris	UG	British Asian	F	45	5	26
Duomi	UG	Chinese	F	36	4	19
Eric	UG	White/Black African	M	23	2	18
Freya	UG	Bangladeshi	F	19	2	15
General	PG	Black African	M	40	4	32
Helen	UG	Asian	F	23	2	19
Imogen	PG	African	F	25	3	19
Jasmine	UG	Black African	F	22	2	19
Kate	UG	Chinese/ Malaysian	F	43	2	26
Laser	PG	Chinese	M	30	2	22

Methods and procedure

Author One, an academic with additional responsibility for student experience, gathered data from students via semi-structured, open-ended interviews (see appendix for interview schedule) to provide what Parlett and Hamilton (1972) explain as an 'illuminative evaluation' of a learning-related phenomenon. As both authors are White British and HE professionals, our positionality had a role to play in data collection. Each participant was interviewed by Author 1, with whom they had not previous met in an LD capacity. As a power relationship existed, the intention was to establish rapport by articulating the research aims and reassuring the students that their contribution was very helpful to others and to the institution. However, we recognise that the interpretation of results must be mindful that the status-based and race-based systemic power imbalances could not reasonably be eliminated, and therefore contributed to the results. For example, students may have felt that their responses were expected to reflect how LD had helped them to move towards systemic norms (Crozier, Reay and Clayton, 2019). We acknowledge that this is firmly not without bigger-picture problems or contention, especially given the assumptions of the AcLits underpinning LD discussed above.

The personal nature of interviews increases the opportunity to obtain rich, authentic data (O'Leary, 2017; Silverman 2020). While the pre-planned areas for discussion are useful prompts, Noaks and Wincup (2004) recommend the use of open-ended questions to gather information linked to personal experience. Fontana and Frey (2000) add that this is a useful way to understand both language and culture. Interviews lasted between 15 and 33 minutes, with an average duration of 22.5 minutes, as longer could have risked leaving participants feeling inconvenienced or misled (Robson, 1993). All respondents' identities were kept confidential as students selected a pseudonym, while records of their courses of study were removed to limit the chance of implicit identification. Students selected their own terms to describe their ethnicity, recorded verbatim in Table 1.

The interview questions moved upwards through the five levels of Guskey's (2000) widely adopted framework for evaluating learning: reactions, learning, change, use, and outcomes. However, adaptations replaced the framework's 'impact' language with words that participants would find clearer, relatable, and less ambiguous (de Vaus, 2014). The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided a framework for focus and consistency yet preserved the flexibility of a natural conversation. The question order varied slightly

and supplementary questions were used to clarify or probe. Respondents were free to deepen answers, thus deciding their own emphases (Robson, 1993; Denscombe, 2010).

Analysis

Following data collection and transcripts agreed with each participant, analysis of the content was undertaken by each author independently and recorded using a form of framework matrix (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) in Excel to ensure the consistency and accurate representation of each participant. Hutter-Hennink's analytic cycle (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020) was used to develop themes linked to the value of academic support and the recommendations to enhance practice in the future. A process of comparing and describing, followed by categorising and conceptualising, enabled us to report both overarching themes and key aspects of the student experience in relation to the value of and recommendations for LD.

Ethics

The project was approved by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (Ref FHSS 2021- 056). All participants were provided with information in advance and were asked to sign a consent form before talking to the researcher. During interviews, participants were reminded that they were being recorded and that it would be possible to pause the recording at any point. Although no participants showed any signs that the experience had been emotional, at the end of each interview they were reminded of the university's support services. Each participant was sent a copy of the transcript with an opportunity to edit or request the removal of any aspects of it. Author One agreed not to share the data until it had been agreed with the student. None of the transcripts used the student's name, and where the LD's name was used, it was redacted to XX. Students were also given the opportunity to withdraw at any point until the data collection was completed at the end of April 2023.

Findings

Question 1: To what extent do BIPoC students perceive/experience the value of academic support within their university?

This section reports on how the students described the value of their meetings with the Learning Developer. All students said that the tutorials had been useful. Due to the interview's open structure, they expressed the value by reflecting on the aspects that had been most significant to them personally. This section uses Figure 1 to illustrate the overarching themes that arose from applying the analysis framework described above. The findings are then presented thematically to highlight the students' authentic voices, followed by a discussion in which we link these findings to wider theory.

Figure 1. Value of academic support (LD) as reported by BIPoC students.
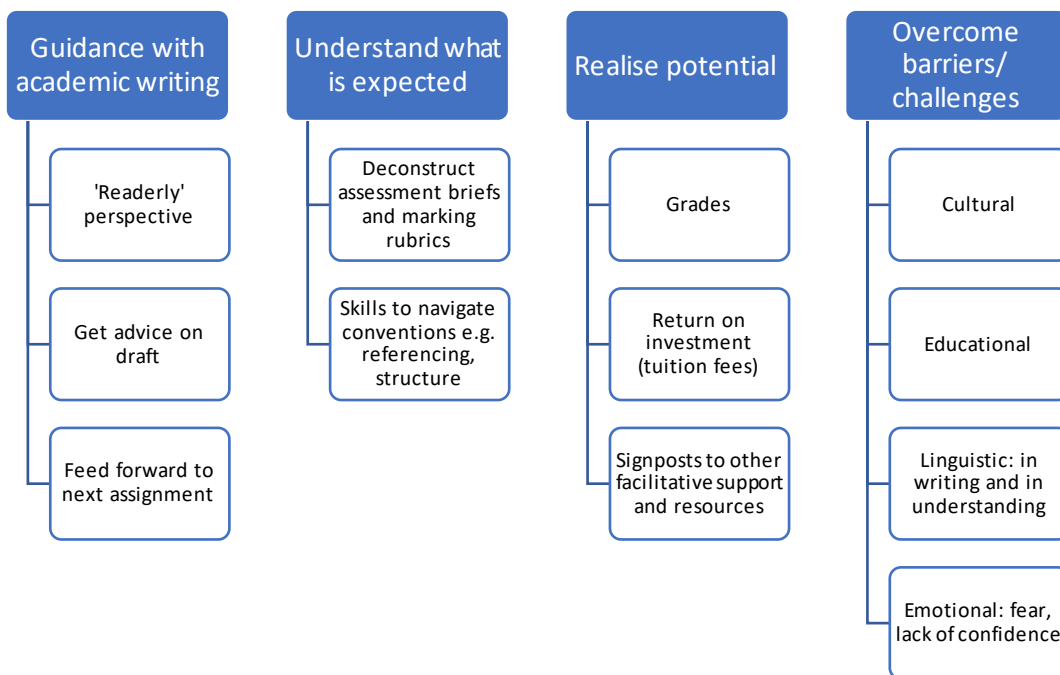
'Guidance with academic writing' and 'Understand what is expected'

We begin by sharing the voices of students who talked about the significance of receiving support in their academic writing skills and establishing expectations.

General summed up the value of this provision for him, saying:

> I think engaging with them [the LD] has really, it really helped to improve my writing skills.

Laser found that the most valuable aspect of the meetings was that:

> They can help according to the requirements of the task or the essay to give you advice. That's the most valuable thing.

While these two participants provided a general overview of what they found useful, others shed light on the root of the difficulty. For example, Ariana and Imogen respectively explained that:

> I would say when our students literally struggle that they how they will proceed an assignment because it's quite a bit difficult sometimes to understand (Ariana).

> I wasn't sure if it was on brief... I didn't know if I hadn't interpreted it well (Imogen).

When carrying out the analysis, we were able to identify the specific advice that had made a difference to students such as Eric, Freya, Helen, and Kate:

> To go through every step of my essay and then talking to the team, I sort of, like, understand my role a bit more in writing (Kate).

Listening to the students' experiences made it possible to identify the importance of preparing for meetings by reviewing the requirements of the assessment and offering to make comments on drafts. We were particularly pleased to hear that the advice the students received from one tutorial was then used for future assignments as mentioned by Ariana, Duomi, Freya, General, and Kate.

Bernado also articulated this point by saying that:

> They're really supportive because when you can send them the essay they will help that maybe for your next assignment.

By enabling students to apply the skills beyond one assessment, we understood the significance of empowering them to develop their academic writing independently.

Whilst the aspects described above could also apply to White students, we thought it was important to give these students the opportunity to voice the experience from their own perspective. We do not share this information as a generalisation of all BIPoC students'

experience, but rather as a summation of the experiences common to those who shared their thoughts with us.

'Realise potential'

It was interesting to discover more about the factors that had motivated the students to approach the Learning Developer, which often included a desire to do better in assessments and realise their potential (as specified by Duomi, Kate, Chris, Helen, and Jasmine). Eight participants who had interacted with the Learning Developer reported a positive impact on their assessment results.

Participants explained that:

> I was tired of getting forties. I wanted to achieve higher grades for my modules (Eric).

> I realised that subsequently I improved from 40 to 55 and then 60 to 68 and then 70 (General).

> I can say that this year they've been really helpful for me, especially for my marks (Bernado).

Laser highlighted that his impetus for making the first approach to the Learning Developer was the cost of tuition fees and his desire to see a return. He explained:

> I just say, I paid my tuition fee, I paid my money, I don't want to waste my opportunity.

We realised the importance of supporting students beyond the LD tutorials, and it was pleasing to hear participants such as General and Jasmine identifying the benefit of receiving this signposting. Kate specified that:

> They sent me a link and that is really good for pupils like myself like go on additional course to better your writing academically.

'Overcome barriers/challenges'

Prior to interviewing, we were conscious to avoid making assumptions that the challenges the students may articulate would relate or be specific to their BIPoC identity. The following examples helped us to better understand the previous experiences of these participants and why offering them LD support was particularly important. For example, when listening to international students it became apparent that meeting the UK higher education requirements was different to their previous study experience, as shown during interviews with Duomi and General. Ariana also articulated this:

> I'm from a public university and it was National University of Bangladesh, and it is like we really literally didn't have a syllabus.

In addition to this requirement to adapt, several students explained the impact of having EAL. Kate said that:

> Malaysians, we don't have any past tense. We don't have any tenses.

Laser offered another perspective on the impact of language difference:

> I'm not the English to Britain. So, they talk to me slowly and for their best they can let me understand.

In many cases there was an undercurrent of the emotional (implicit and explicit) impact of the encounter with the Learning Developer. For example, Kate explained that the meeting had helped her to feel less fearful, while Duomi said that 'I just feel less panic'.

The student voices quoted here capture key areas of their experiences of working with the Learning Developer. These examples highlight the key areas of value when providing advice to develop academic writing: deepening understanding of expectations, realising the individual's potential, and overcoming barriers. The next section delves further into the specifics of these challenges for BIPoC students in order to focus on the second research aim: to identify recommendations for improving practice.

Question 2: What are the students' recommendations for the delivery of effective Learning Development practice?

This section focuses on providing examples of students' suggestions on how to enhance LD practice along the three themes that emerged through the study.

Figure 2. Recommendations for improving LD practice from BIPoC students.
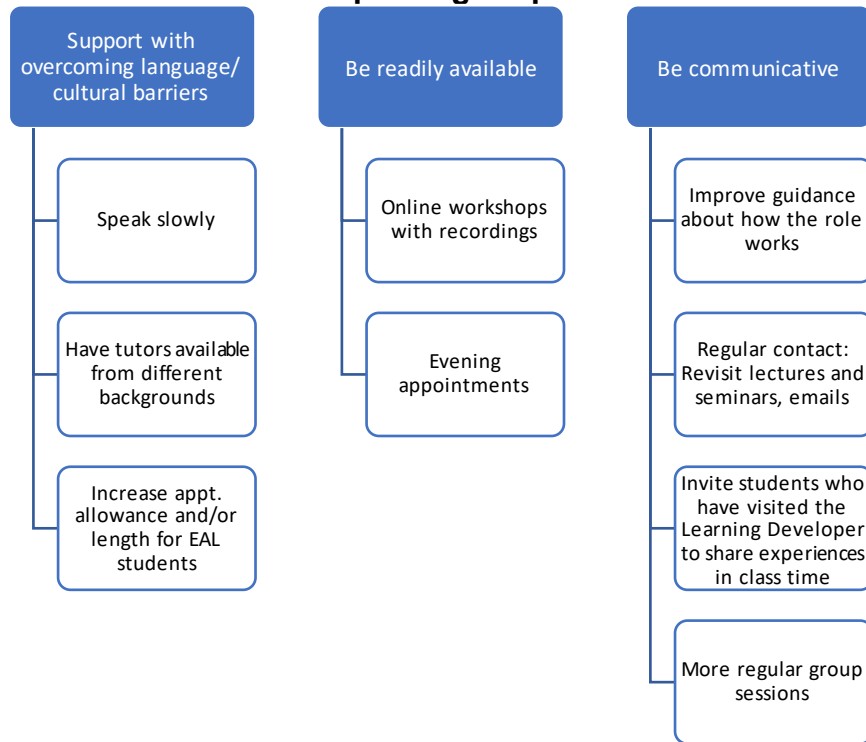
'Overcoming language and cultural barriers'

Ariana talked about the impact of a lack of confidence in speaking English, including her own and other students' perspectives:

> My bachelor was in Bangla, but due to illness I developed myself. That's why it was much difficult for me.

General explained that he was worried about his ability to understand what the Learning Developer was saying and in turn making himself understood. Interestingly, he also explained that he had needed 'courage' to book with the native-speaking Learning Developer. Bernado expressed similar worries, suggesting that language was a barrier to understanding the advice provided. To manage this, General and Laser wondered if Learning Developers from different cultural backgrounds could be employed, while Ariana and Duomi thought it would be helpful for each student to have one specific tutor.

Recommendations that could address the area of language were articulated in different ways, with Duomi, Freya, and General suggesting that longer appointments would be particularly beneficial:

> We struggle to really comprehend the accent… It kind of takes time to review and understand what you mean and then the solutions you are giving me (General).

The participants also recommended that LD tutorials could be extended to allow the tutor to speak slowly and for clarification questions.

'Being readily available'

A further point raised by Bernado, Kate, and Chris was the availability of appointments. This was more challenging for those who had to schedule meetings around work commitments. Chris suggested that this could be improved by including more opportunities for evening appointments and noted that the online workshops were particularly valuable to students who could not attend in person. Currently, students can meet with the Learning Developer three times in a teaching block, a limitation raised by Bernado, Duomi, Helen, and Imogen, who all enquired about increasing this allowance to four meetings per teaching block for EAL students.

'Being communicative'

Other areas of improvement focused on ensuring that students are aware of the Learning Developer's availability and the support they can offer. Bernado and Chris suggested that these elements could be improved, and Jasmine, General, and Eric suggested that this could be achieved through the Learning Developer revisiting lectures and seminars throughout the courses studied by each participant. Kate recommended emails to inform students of LD support. General praised the opportunity given to an international student who had already engaged with LD to share their experiences in a teaching session, explaining:

> …trust me, he was he was an international student… It was motivating, right? I think possibly one of the barriers of people approaching them is that they don't have … We don't have cultural diversity.

It is noteworthy that every participant felt comfortable to identify aspects of the LD practice that could be further enhanced, which perhaps reflects the measures taken by the researcher to establish comfortable interview conditions.

Discussion

Bamber and Stefani (2015) reminded us that the focus of this research was to gather data that explained the 'value' to the individual in the form of a subjective construct which, compared to 'impact', can 'release us from inadequate or instrumental approaches […]. [It] acknowledges the role of judgement, experience and contextual knowledge in determining what needs to be evaluated, and how' (p.242). Hearing students' voices raised our awareness of the disadvantages they face when arriving at the university without prior encounters with the referencing system or the marking criteria on their course. The data allude to an interaction between the emotional value gained by students through interacting with the Learning Developer—for example the impact on their sense of belonging, confidence, and barrier removal—and the realisation of the practical value in helping them to develop their academic writing style and ultimately their grades. The findings corroborate the various studies (Claridge, Stone and Ussher, 2018; Bunce and King, 2019; Madriaga and McCaig, 2019) that advocate for the importance of creating opportunities for BIPoC university students to feel belonging and authenticity, perhaps as a precursor to more practical academic gains.

In terms of the concept of 'value' itself, these findings support previous work that shows how practical and emotional forms of value are often codependent and can positively mediate each other in a co-created cycle of 'value-in-use' (Grönroos and Ravald, 2011). In line with Cowley and Hyams-Ssekasi's (2018) findings, students' focus was to both understand the assessment requirements and how to meet these, which in several cases was reported to have led to an improvement in grades. Hearing students' voices raised our awareness of the impact of arriving at the university without prior encounters with the referencing system or the style of the marking criteria on their course, which disadvantaged them.

Helping students to build confidence through sending the Learning Developer a draft for comment, advising on structure and planning, and helping them to make sense of the

marker's feedback seemed particularly significant when hearing their desire to achieve their potential. Gravett and Winstone (2018) investigated the key means by which Learning Developers may intervene in these processes to support students, identifying five key faces of the learning developer: interpreter, coach, listener, dialogue partner, and intermediary. Reflecting on this point helped us to recognise why individuals value a suite of options such as online workshops, emails, and both face-to-face and online meeting support. Within this process, the Learning Developer's sensitivity, shown by speaking slowly in the encounters with EFL students, was clearly significant. We were also aware that signposting them to university services such as In-Sessional English courses added another layer of guidance which is important to maintain.

We also noticed that addressing the students' concerns has a clear emotional value, reducing overwhelming feelings and fear. Ivanič (1998) helps to contextualise this by explaining writing as an act of identity projection which can be manifested in students' struggles to construct an academic voice. Ivanič, Clark, and Rimmershaw (2000) later showed how easily discourses associated with writing, such as receiving developmental feedback, could be misconstrued by students, leading to feelings of inadequacy or not belonging. Burke (2008), drawing upon Reay (2010), illustrates how these effects are greatly compounded for students who may identify as 'non-traditional' and believe themselves lacking in academic capital. Recognising this tendency and the need to act democratically to reduce it (Roberts and Reid, 2014) reinforces the position of the Learning Developer as someone to reassure the student. Although not always made explicit, this came across in the enthusiastic approach that the participants showed when asked about their experiences. Our findings, in collaboration with the cited studies above, suggest that LD interactions do not always have a directly measurable impact such as grade increases, but rather that these impacts are indirect via initial gains on intervening variables such as confidence, self-efficacy, or a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Alongside hearing the reasons for approaching the Learning Developer and the personal value this afforded, the students also offered recommendations for us to consider. While they found the current staff empathetic and helpful, they also suggested, in concordance

with Arthur's (2023) arguments, that employing Learning Developers from different cultural backgrounds would further enhance their opportunities to connect. Given the potential issues linked to understanding the language and making themselves understood, they thought that longer appointments would be useful. Alongside this, they proposed allowing EAL students one additional appointment per teaching block. Some students, due to their work commitments, found evening appointments, workshops, and recordings beneficial and suggested that we extend these where possible.

It was particularly valuable to learn how to develop awareness-raising communication about the LD offer. Several ideas were suggested to address this, including more information during induction, increasing email reminders, and inviting the tutors to visit lectures and seminars more regularly. It was also suggested that providing a student who had engaged with the Learning Developer with an opportunity to talk about this in a seminar may lead to more students accessing this support. This suggestion, along with employing Learning Developers from varied cultural backgrounds, reinforces the notion that the presence of relatable role models is a predictor of the perceived value of educational provision (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam and Reid, 2019).

The students who took part in this research were keen to explain why they had engaged with the Learning Developer and articulated the value that had arisen due to these encounters. Their voices provide us with a starting point by which to gauge what is working well and how to further enhance the provision moving forward. However, we acknowledge that this is a small-scale study and as such does not claim to represent all BIPoC students, noting for example that no Black Caribbean students took part. We conclude that it is important to continue to focus on routes to increase equitable provision by tailoring it to the specific desires and needs of BIPoC students, be they British or international.

Acknowledgements

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Author details

Gina Sherwood retired as Faculty of Humanities Lead for Student Support and Development in June 2024 and is a visiting researcher based in the School of Education, Languages and Linguistics at the University of Portsmouth. Gina is currently particularly interested in exploring student experience in Higher Education.

Ian Johnson has been a Learning Developer at the University of Portsmouth since 2015 and is now a Teaching Fellow in LD. Ian recently completed his Professional Doctorate on the framing and value of LD in British Higher Education and has research interests in how embedded and individualised LD practices contribute to students' learning. He has led ALDinHE's Research and Scholarship Development Working Group and been a member of their Steering Group since August 2023, having previously established and led the Research Community of Practice from 2020−2023.

Licence

Appendix

Interview Schedule

Understanding of the role

- What is your understanding of the Learning Development role and its purposes?
- What aspects of your studies do you feel that Learning Development tutors contribute to?
- What has encouraged you to engage with an LDT?
- Is there anything that has prevented greater engagement?

Value of the role

- Thinking back over the times you have met with the Learning Development Tutors, what is your experience and in what ways has it been helpful to you?
    - What was helpful/what did you get from it?
    - What (if anything) did it cause you to do differently?
    - What results did it have?
    - What could have made it even more valuable?
    - What should be done the same/differently if a similar situation happened?
- Do you have any experiences you would like to share in which the outcome of working with Learning Development Tutor was not what you expected?
    - What did you hope for and how did it turn out the same of differently?
    - What might have got in the way? Why do you think that happened?
    - What could have been done differently to make it more valuable?

Others' understanding of the role

- Reflecting on the experiences you have shared, to what extent do you think your views on the value of working with a Learning Development Tutor would be shared by other students?
    - What do you think are some of the different views?
    - How do you think the LDTs can move towards a more mutual understanding?
- How well have messages about Learning Development been communicated to students in general, in your experience?
    - How in particular has that happened?
    - Why do you think that worked/didn't work?

Personal context

- How does your experience of engaging with LDT support compare with guidance you have received at other stages in your education?
- Thinking back, did you experience any personal barriers to approaching the LDTs [e.g. embarrassment, fear of experiencing negative judgement, peer pressure, family pressure, cultural expectations]?