



## Redefining the role of learning development practitioners

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### ***Abstract***

At a time when higher education (HE) sector funding is reported to be ever more perilous (Simons and Lister, 2024; Wareing, 2024) and means of making savings may need to be enacted at universities, it is essential that the unique role and impact of Learning Development (LD) practitioners is clearly understood by decision makers, for only then will it be valued and resourced. Use of non-distinct titles such as 'third space practitioner' or even 'LD practitioner', whilst interesting philosophically, hide the powerful ontological roots and epistemic practices of LD and may suggest duplication of role functions and incorrectly the potential to merge roles or teams together. In this opinion piece, I propose there is now a need to adopt greater specificity in how the role of LD practitioners is defined. I suggest this can be achieved by defining areas of activity, quantifying time spent on each and through doing so establish a taxonomy or sub-specialisms of LD practitioners. This serves to emphasise the distinctiveness of LD practitioner work and facilitates comparisons between both LD practitioners and LD community members within and between higher education institutions. It would also allow for the extent to which LD related roles are comparable to other 'academic', 'non-academic', and/or third-space roles to be determined.

**Keywords:** third space practitioner; learning development practitioner; job roles; sub-categorisation

## ***Learning Development as a third space***

The term ‘third space’ professional describes an individual who works in a HE position that transcends traditional academic and non-academic roles (Whitchurch, 2013). Despite the emergence of the third space paradigm, there has been a prevailing focus on classifying HE job roles as ‘academic’ or ‘non-academic’ (see Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024) and this remains to be how many universities categorise jobs. Many HE roles are evolving (Advance HE, 2023) in ways that surpass historic academic/non-academic dichotomies (for example, lecturers participating in access and outreach activities, marketing of subject areas and use of learning analytics). This means many third space practitioners’ job titles may be ambiguous, lack clarity and not reflect a distinctive nature and purpose.

The field of LD has long since been synonymous with the third space (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2023; Hood, 2023; Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2023). Although LD community members have shared values (Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE), 2024a), they are far from a homogenous group in terms of institutional team remits, individual job roles, and career histories. As such what it means to be a ‘third space practitioner’ in the context of LD can vary significantly. Such diversity has also meant that historically the broad term ‘Learning Developer’ has been used to describe membership of the LD community; moreover as a welcoming community ALDinHE also embraces those disciplinary academics committed to integrating academic literacies and writing development within their practice. Briggs (2018a; 2018b) discussed how the liberal use of this title should be avoided as it presents a significant risk to the professional standing and status of those working within the LD field given it does not differentiate the unique specific skills and experience needed to be an effective LD practitioner. Accordingly, Johnson and Bishopp-Martin differentiate between “‘lowercase” LD [as] a mindset that can be taken on widely but importantly only in the continued presence of “uppercase” LD professionals driving that process’ (2023, p.20).

## ***Who are Learning Development practitioners?***

The nature of roles held by individuals who work in the LD field varies significantly. By way of an example, there is significant diversity amongst names of the roles held by the members of the ALDinHE Steering Group (ALDinHE, 2024b) as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Job titles of ALDinHE steering group members – March 2024.**

| <b>ALDinHE Steering Group member job titles</b> |
|---|
| Learning Developer Advisor                      |
| Head of Library Learning Support and Engagement |
| Academic Mentor for Psychology                  |
| Instructional Design Manager                    |
| Head of Academic Development                    |
| LD Tutor and Mentor Manager                     |
| Teaching Fellow                                 |
| Associate Dean for Assessment                   |
| Lecturer in Nutrition                           |
| Head of LD                                      |
| Senior Graduate School Tutor (PGR Lead)         |
| Associate Teaching Professor                    |
| Head of LD                                      |
| Senior Teaching Fellow                          |

As such HE professionals who move between institutions are likely to encounter very different manifestations of LD delivery. Likewise, there could be stark differences in relation to the work of LD practitioners (and those individuals who have adopted a Learning Development mindset). This highlights how current labels used to describe the work of the LD community can easily lead to incorrect assumptions and encourage inaccurate pre-conceptions. The additional fuzziness of ‘third space practitioner’ may complicate the issue further which is unhelpful in practice.

## ***What do Learning Development practitioners do?***

Even where LD practitioners have relatively comparable job roles (such as academic skills tutors), there are still variations in remit and workload allocations based on institution. Such differences might be attributed to the organisational structure in which LD teams are located (for example, in a teaching and learning unit, library, student service, or faculty-base) and individual contractual arrangements (for example, academic or non-academic). Table 2 lists areas of activity that I would anticipate most LD practitioners undertake; most activities listed however, would have more dominant areas of work. It is acknowledged that this list is illustrative and not exhaustive.

**Table 2. Areas of activity commonly undertaken by LD in higher education professionals.**

| <b>Areas of activity</b> | <b>Description</b>  |
|--------------------------|---|
| Academic Development     | Delivering professional development opportunities for staff (for example, via training sessions/mentoring)  |
| Access and outreach      | Supporting access and/or outreach activities (for example, pre-arrival courses/work with schools or further education providers).   |
| Administration           | Managing appointment bookings and/or student enquiries and/or staff enquiries and/or meeting scheduling.  |
| Content Development      | Creating learning resources or materials (such as guides, videos or podcasts) for students and/or staff.  |
| Curriculum Development   | Supporting the development of courses, teaching methods and/or assessments.   |
| Impact evaluation        | Evaluating how areas of work individually or collectively impact on the student experience and/or outcomes (for example, student satisfaction/continuation/reducing awarding gaps). |
| Open access support*     | Providing student support independent of a unit/module (for example, 1:1 appointments).   |
| Learning Technology      | Supporting the use of digital learning systems (such as VLE, originality checkers, or lecture capture software).  |
| Research                 | Undertaking and disseminating research.   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Scheduled teaching*                          | Delivering teaching/support aligned to a unit/module (for example, scheduled workshops or drop-ins).   |
| Service promotion                            | Informing the university community of how to access services (for example, briefings for staff and/or students/via social media).                              |
| Strategy and policy                          | Supporting the authorship of policy/strategy (for example, institutional policy, Access and Participation Plan or a Teaching Excellence Framework submission). |
| Team Leadership                              | Leading a team (potentially via formal line management and/or project leadership).   |
| <i>*Typically aligned to academic skills</i> |  |

### ***Identifying dominant Learning Development activities***

There are various approaches to job analysis (Indeed Editorial Team, 2024) that could be adopted to establish the nature of LD practitioner roles. This could include questionnaires, interviews, or work diaries. Establishing the frequency with which a LD practitioner undertakes specific tasks would allow the nature of work to be quantified and more meaningfully compared. Proposed approximated scoring is listed in *Table 3*.

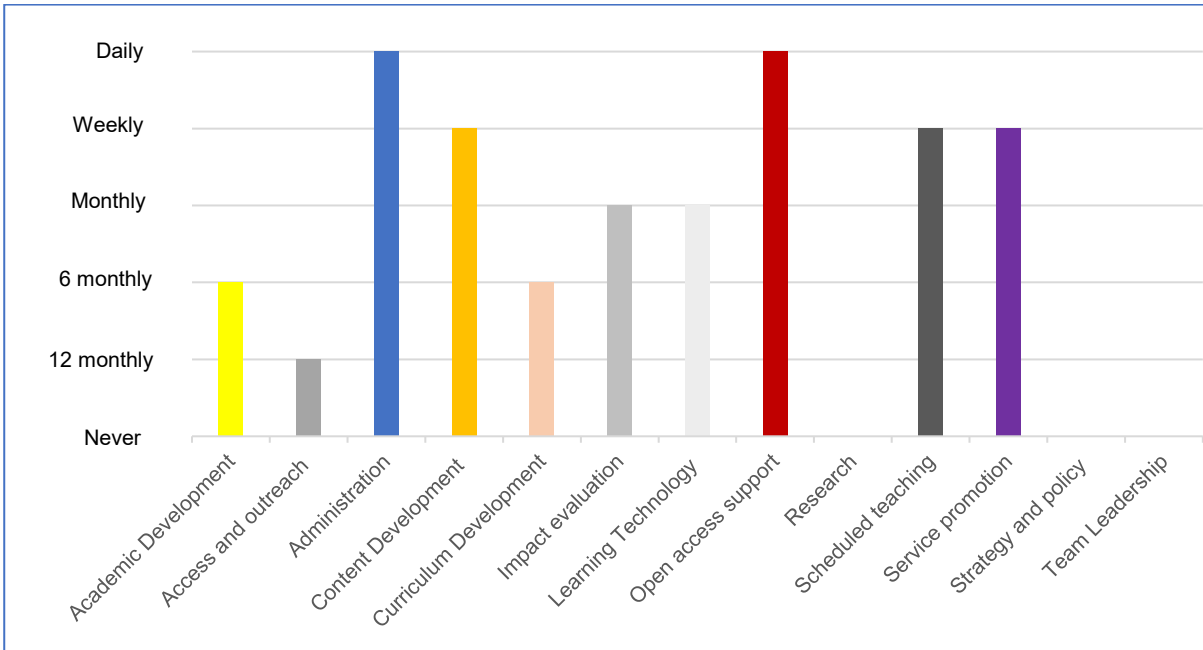
**Table 3. LD areas of activity frequency scores.**

| <b>Frequency activity is undertaken</b> | <b>Score</b> |
|---|--------------|
| Daily                                   | 5            |
| Weekly                                  | 4            |
| Monthly                                 | 3            |
| Every 6 months                          | 2            |
| Every 12 months                         | 1            |
| Not part of role                        | 0            |

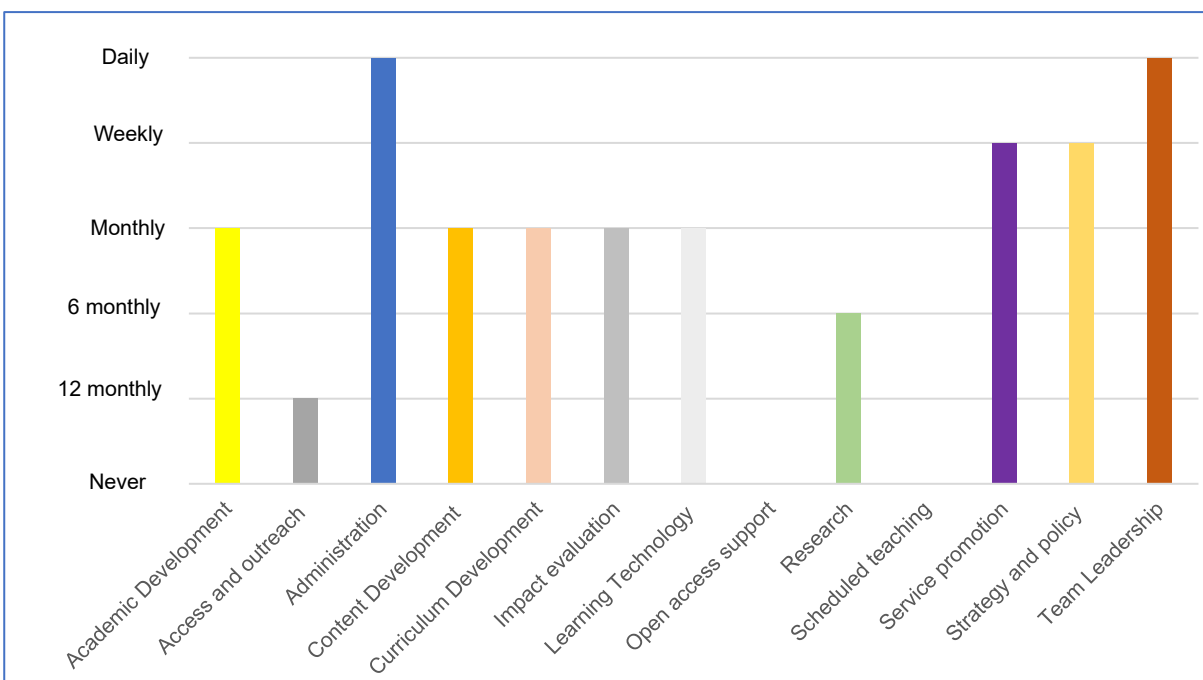
By way of a worked example, I have broken down the work of a LD Tutor and the Director of Learning and Teaching Excellence (my position). Both role holders would describe themselves as ‘third space practitioners’ and ‘LD practitioners’.

Chart 1 illustrates the frequency with which LD areas of activity would be typically undertaken by a LD Tutor at the University of Bedfordshire. In contrast, Chart 2 illustrates the frequency with which LD areas of activity would be typically undertaken by the Director of Learning and Teaching Excellence.

**Chart 1. LD areas of activities frequency: LD Tutor.**

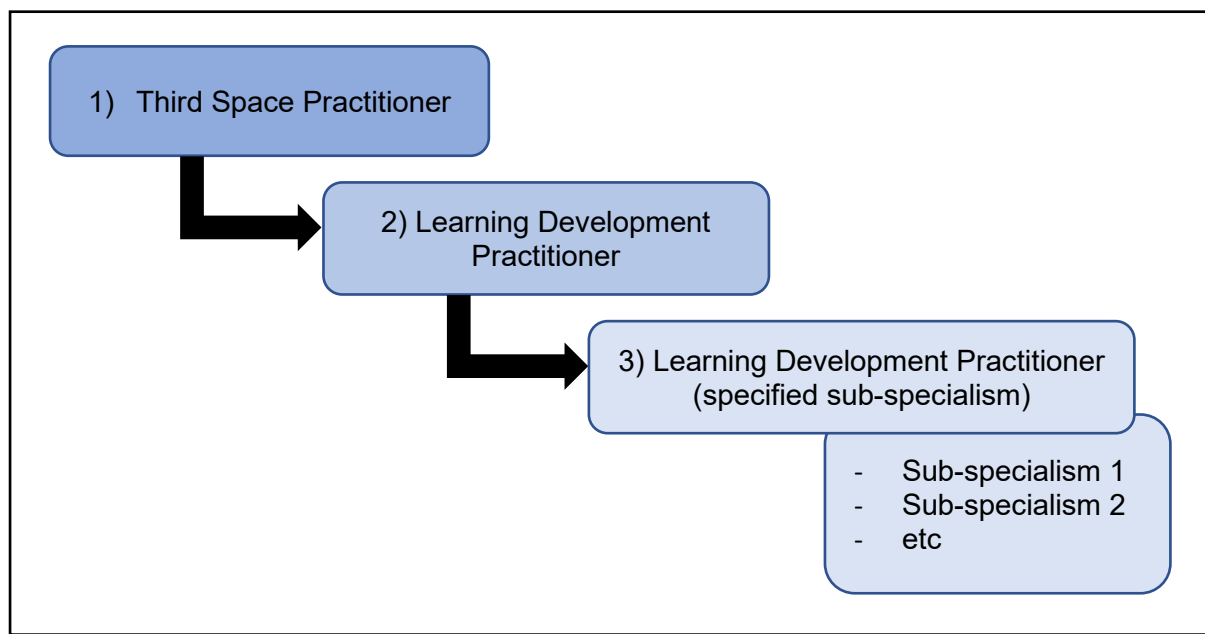


**Chart 2. LD areas of activities frequency: Director of Learning and Teaching Excellence.**



As shown the nature of work undertaken by LD practitioners can be fundamentally different. It is therefore suggested that sub-specialisms of LD practitioner should be formally defined to provide greater transparency and differentiation as to the nature of work undertaken. As illustrated in Figure 1:

**Figure 1. Potential hierarchy for conceptualising the role of LD practitioners.**



To illustrate, the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) (no date) outline eleven distinct librarianship related roles:

- Academic and Research Librarians.\*
- Cataloguers.\*
- Data Librarians.\*
- Healthcare Librarians.\*
- Government Librarians.
- Library Managers and Assistants.\*
- Local Studies Librarians.
- Prison Librarians.
- Public Librarians.
- School Librarians.
- Subject Librarians.\*

*\* indicating a role where a professional could work in a third space capacity in HE.*

As such librarians working in HE in a third space capacity would be able to use this taxonomy to articulate with consistency a professional sub-specialism in line with definitions endorsed by their professional body:

1) Third Space Practitioner

2) Librarian

3) Librarian Specialism:

- *Academic and Research Librarians*
- *Data Librarian*
- *Healthcare Librarians*
- *Library Managers and Assistants*
- *Subject Librarians*

In contrast, in the absence of recognised LD sub-specialisms, LD practitioners may struggle to articulate with any consistency the specific nature of their work beyond:

1) Third Space Practitioner

2) Learning Development Practitioner

In terms of the worked examples the Chart 1 profile might be described as a 'LD Practitioner: Teaching-focussed position' whereas the Chart 2 profile reflects a 'LD Practitioner: Strategic Leadership position'.

Evidently, the mapping of the time spent undertaking LD areas of activity in the worked examples was approximated but a more specific assessment would be possible through structured job analysis techniques – perhaps even as an extension of the ALDinHE (2024c) collective diary. This may also facilitate comparisons to be made across institutions.

I anticipate that the list of LD activities included in this paper could be expanded through consultation with the LD community to capture the full range of activities that are currently being undertaken (obvious additions include, peer assisted learning, English as a second



of other language teaching, maths and statistics teaching or dyslexia tuition) – in line with how the ALDinHE values were developed (Buckley and Briggs, 2017). Similarly, it could be extended to capture the role of LD practitioners in terms of leading scholarship and community engagement. This could in turn facilitate the creation of a taxonomy of LD practitioner sub-specialist role profiles. Establishing such a taxonomy would enable LD practitioners to compare other profiles (for example, contract type/position within institution) with their own role. I would anticipate that such benchmarking opportunities would be particularly helpful for LD practitioners when discussing their eligibility for career progression and recognition opportunities.

## ***Conclusion***

At a time when the HE sector may be looking to identify efficiencies, actions that serve to help decision makers to understand the diversity and distinctiveness and impact of LD practitioners' work must be prioritised. It is my proposition that LD remains widely misunderstood within the HE sector. The origins of LD trace back to the emergence of 'study skills support' and for many this has remained a prevailing view of LD. Subsequent emergent role descriptions adopted by the LD community such as 'third space practitioners', 'Learning Developers', 'LD practitioners' and 'Learning Development mindset' are relatively non-specific and for those working outside of the LD field could be easily misunderstood and/or incorrectly suggest significant duplication of function. More broadly, I would propose that this principle extends to all third space roles and the example of differentiation adopted by CILIP should be mirrored by all associations that represent third space professionals. I suggest that greater differentiation of third space sub-specialisms would enable the third space community to reclaim and better communicate their distinctiveness and expertise.

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