

## **Learning development in higher education**

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This book is published at a crucial time for the learning development community as it is threatened by the funding cuts sweeping the higher education (HE) sector. In the closing weeks of 2010, the Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN) discussion forum reported redundancies, departmental closures and, generally, a need to justify the continued existence of the range of roles that constitute the learning development (LD) community.

With so many contributors and chapters, it might be tempting to take a pick- and-mix approach to reading this book. However, there is much to be gained from reading from a variety of perspectives since theories, methodologies and evaluation strategies are transferable. Indeed, this is encouraged as part of the book's call for greater collaboration and 'joined-up thinking' (Hilsdon, Chapter 1) between all stakeholders. It is useful to understand the range of factors that influence the motivations and decisions of individuals and institutions as the HE sector is forced to re-think its funding priorities.

### ***Audience***

For those working in LD, this book offers not only examples of practice but also serves as an articulate justification for the continued existence and further development of their field. For those who are looking to increase their strategic influence, it offers strategies for demonstrating impact with senior management. The book also offers a broader picture of the sector as a whole.

For course leaders, lecturers and tutors, on one level, this book raises awareness of practice through a series of case studies outlining the range of 'support' available to today's student cohorts. However, it is also a reminder that it is easy to generalise and make assumptions about incoming students that impact negatively on both teaching and learning experiences. It is an appeal to work more closely with experts in academic and social development/transition; an evidence-based justification for wider acceptance of learning developers as professionals working alongside course tutors and students.

For university managers concerned with strategic decision-making and under pressure to rationalise provision, this entire book states the case for the continued existence of and greater recognition for LD professionals and offers useful frameworks for evaluation and improvement.

There are 33 contributors to 19 chapters representing 18 UK HE institutions, significantly only two of which are Russell Group universities. The book is divided into five sections covering the aims and objectives outlined in the introduction: defining learning development; supporting students in transition; developing effective academic practice; students and technology, and looking into the future.

### ***Section A: defining learning development***

Hilsdon opens with a discussion of learning development, its origins in widening participation and skills support, typically within post-92 universities where practices that suited the 'elite' model were less appropriate for the new diverse cohort. He argues for a move away from the skills deficit model that pathologises the student, towards a more collaborative, holistic approach to LD, rooted in theories of academic literacies, social identities and pedagogy. This framework reflects the views presented by the editors in the closing chapters of the book, but would appear to be an emergent one based on the continued use of the skills deficit discourse in subsequent chapters.

Murray and Glass present an illuminating evidence-informed picture of the LD community with its broad range of job titles, funding, recognition and institutional bases. They call for LD to build on its current status as a community of practice to establish itself as a

profession in the eyes of the wider academic community, with whom it seeks to collaborate more effectively.

Barlow et al. argue that a better understanding of the history and philosophy of HE and specific institutional contexts will enable a more reflective approach to LD. The LD community will be better able to respond to the changing nature of HE if it questions what underpins perceptions of learning and teaching. This is an important point. In attempts to persuade sceptics that LD should be given professional status, it is essential to consider that people's aims, values and goals, both pedagogic and personal, will influence the position they take.

Drawing on the theories outlined in Chapter 1, Sinfield et al. argue for LD to 'be embodied in practice that puts the students at the centre of the work' in order to support development of 'the' student voice. This chapter outlines a range of initiatives led by three Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) that create 'emancipatory space' for 'the' student voice to develop, including a student-led conference.

### ***Section B: supporting students in transition***

Keenan outlines the role of personal development planning (PDP) in student retention and developing effective academic practice. She argues for student involvement in the design of PDP programmes as a useful engagement strategy. The chapter presents three example interventions, outlining the value of surveying students on their prior learning experiences at the pre-induction stage, thereby informing the tutorial process from the outset. It would be interesting to know more about the administration and practicalities of these initiatives, and their effect on retention beyond the first term.

Foster et al. focus on early student transition, arguing that it is essential to apply contextual research and theories of student transition to understand, rather than make assumptions, about their prior learning experiences. Importantly, the authors stress the role of academics in this process and how learning developers are well-placed to contrast the expectations of both perspectives. This emphasis is an encouraging move away from 'quick-fix' models that appear to overlook or make assumptions about the teaching perspective.

Turner argues the value of one-to-one tuition and stresses the importance of the professional 'academic advisor' as a crucial intermediary between feedback from tutors and the student's development. As Turner acknowledges, this level of provision is under threat in the current economic climate. However, might there be room for LD practitioners to work with teaching staff and students to improve feedback processes at a departmental level? This might reduce the pressure on face-to-face provision.

The Academic Success Programme, outlined by Sedgley, was aimed at international MSc students, but is transferable as a model of practice and evaluation. Its grounding in theories of academic literacies and socialisation result in thorough evaluation and interesting outcomes, most notably, reflection by staff on their own literacy practices and how these influence their teaching. Acknowledging differences in disciplinary discourses and encouraging dialogue between departments is a strength of this project and such methodology is invaluable in the attempt to engage academic staff with LD.

Chapman closes by looking in detail at key transition points for disabled students for the duration of their courses and presents models of inclusion that are relevant to all contexts.

### ***Section C: developing effective academic practice***

This section presents five projects that aimed to improve academic practice in a range of areas. Collectively they raise some important considerations for any institution or department seeking to improve provision and the methodologies are transferable to a range of contexts.

Gill and Greenhow's mathematics case studies reveal the difficulty of evaluating the impact of resources on students' development. For instance, when useful resources cannot be withheld from particular students simply because the evaluators need a control group. If students, as part of their development as independent learners, should themselves make the decision to access resources, then the focus needs to be on finding ways in which to encourage self-reflection in a constructive way. Evaluation of the projects revealed that those who need support are not necessarily those who are pro-active in accessing it, posing the question of how to prove impact in an optional programme.

Two initiatives presented by Bell emphasise the need to take a holistic approach to the teaching and learning of academic writing, which the learning developer is in a unique position to advise on. Both projects sought to strengthen relationships with academic staff by investigating ways of developing writing within subject-specific contexts. This chapter offers useful questions to prompt reflection on academic writing provision at an institutional level in other contexts.

Elston et al. outline an award-winning LearnHigher web-based resource in support of group- and teamwork. They make the crucial point that 'however good the resources, they will have little impact unless embraced by the educator'. The authors are refreshingly honest about the challenges they faced in leading this project, encouraging others to learn from their experiences and more easily apply the process to their own contexts.

Amid the frequent depictions of students as 'consumers', it is also refreshing to read of the student as 'producer' in Hagyard's and Watling's research bursary scheme for undergraduate students. They argue for the mainstreaming of undergraduate research, placing students in control of their own projects and breaking down barriers between teaching, learning and research. Offering students opportunities to present their research for review makes this a more meaningful learning experience than the traditional dissertation, with the agency firmly placed with the student.

Finally, Ridley argues that the visual learning approach adopted by LearnHigher projects can be effectively applied to all subject disciplines in HE. These case studies demonstrate how the concept of visual knowledge was introduced to clinical and laboratory settings and those working in the field. It would be interesting to see the effect of this approach within less vocational disciplines.

### ***Section D: students and technology***

Holley et al. argue for e-learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be viewed as a 'new and emergent pedagogy' that is informed by all stakeholders rather than a convenient quick-fix, deficit response to financial cuts. This chapter offers characteristics of 'good' resources based on a range of case studies and argues for such resources to be public rather than hidden behind institutional VLEs. The question remains as to how difficult it can be to reach

agreement within a particular context on what constitutes a 'good,' appropriately-pitched resource.

Currant et al. urge caution in making assumptions about the technical capabilities of what has become known as 'the digital generation'. Although its typology of digital learners might be viewed as reductive, this chapter raises important questions about whose job it should be to investigate the assumptions made about technology by both students and staff, and to support even the most technologically able of students as they adapt to using technology within a new academic context.

The case studies presented by Shahabudin in Chapter 17 reflect the wide range of variables affecting the issue of time management for students. It is certainly an issue that all parties seem to agree impacts greatly on the transition to university study, and yet is too frequently addressed generically, with web resources that can be both a help and a hindrance.

### ***Section E: looking into the future***

This section reflects on issues raised in this book and calls for a move away from a view of LD as 'institutional first aid' and sees its future in 'situationally contingent' contexts on a global scale. Drawing on LearnHigher CETL experiences, it emphasises the importance of 'persuading the right people through good data and reasoned argument' rather than pursuing blanket coverage. This is arguably the biggest challenge for the sector: determining what kinds of data will best illustrate impact and identifying ways in which it can fund such evaluation and analysis.

Although the editors distance themselves from the skills deficit model and from pathologising the student, it is clear that this has still to filter down to institutions as its discourse is still apparent within case studies. Words and phrasing such as 'diagnose', 'intervene', 'modular skills', 'to teach a skill' and 'bridging skills gaps' in their various forms all imply that the agency is still not with the student, which undermines the notion of the independent learner. The time has now come to think carefully about such terminology as the sector seeks to collaborate more widely.

The closing paragraph calls for a LD approach that is 'relevant to all with the ability to benefit', that is 'applicable to all students, not just groups seen as vulnerable'. There is frequent reference throughout the book to support for the non-traditional student as part of the retention agenda, to the danger of making assumptions about any cohort, even with regard to perceived differences between generations. The 'unique and individual' (Keenan, Chapter 5) nature of each student needs to be considered.

This book progresses both debate and practice within the LD community but is perhaps not as representative as it could be. It would be good to see evidence of greater collaboration and 'joined-up thinking' reflected in contributions from a wider range of institutions. For learning development to be 'transformative' (Hilsdon, Chapter 1), the LD community needs to do more to challenge assumptions made about learning and teaching on a wider scale. One such assumption is that there is less demand or need amongst high-achieving students from 'traditional' backgrounds for the kinds of initiatives outlined in this book. The motivation for research-intensive universities to engage with this agenda might be different but there is nevertheless justification for them to do so.

## **References**

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