



## Editorial

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Opening any edition of our journal reveals the richness, variety, and sheer breadth of professional activity that learning developers in higher education engage in on a daily basis. The many hats they wear and roles they practise result in a vibrant mosaic of research and scholarship. What is equally impressive, but perhaps less visible, is the range of relationships they develop with those in related roles, including educational developers, librarians, digital specialists, learning designers, and academic developers, to name just a few in the rich tapestry of HE's Third Space (Whitchurch, 2008). Rubbing shoulders with this eclectic bunch creates a bustling academic bazaar where ideas and expertise are traded freely and people connect in the most surprising ways.

More impactfully, they don't just build their own connections; learning developers are also the architects of spaces where others can forge meaningful bonds. Often behind the scenes, they set up peer mentoring schemes and promote student-teacher connectedness, gently nudging students to engage and staff to teach with compassion and kindness. They open conversations that bring together different academic disciplines and departments, encouraging cross-pollination of ideas across often rigid disciplinary

boundaries. Perhaps most importantly, they are relentless in waving the flag for inclusivity, working tirelessly to level the playing field for marginalised students and championing teaching practices that welcome all. They're some of the (often invisible) superheroes of higher education, minus the capes.

But to be successful as apologists for compassionate teaching practices, to achieve results in the highly complex world of HE, and to grow as professionals, less conventional relationships are also required. Despite our preconceived notions of which professional relationships serve us best – the more traditional being mentors or sponsors, whether organic or formal – sometimes those less conventional relationships can have a more profound and long-lasting impact on how we navigate our professional world. This is one of the reasons why reverse mentoring has gained in popularity in recent years (Nemanick, 2023), as it bridges generational gaps, facilitates knowledge transfer, and increases the inclusivity of workplaces. Other less traditional but highly valuable relationships include those forged by the 'connectors' (Cooper, 2024), a term borrowed from the corporate world and which describes informal influencers and social butterflies (often extroverts) that connect people who have similar values and concerns (often introverts), opening previously closed doors and creating synergies for an environment of growth and possibility. Beyond mentoring, networking, and connecting in affirming ways it is also worth challenging ourselves by seeking critical friends or empathetic provocateurs, who will stress-test our ideas and provide that sometimes uncomfortable feedback on our choices and decisions. These provocateurs are at times our colleagues and at times our students, whose responses to what we do serve as potent mirrors for our practice. While the higher we go up in whatever progression ladders are available to us the harder it may be to hear difficult or critical feedback, building those seemingly antagonistic relationships can sharpen our thinking and take us to the next level. Ultimately, it is through partaking in this lively marketplace of diverse relationships – from the conventional to the unexpected – that we can truly flourish, innovate, and adapt to the ever evolving HE workplaces so we can continue to support and empower our students and each other.

Some of these themes are addressed by the articles in this volume, which collectively emphasise that effective LD work is fundamentally relational. Whether it's through peer mentoring, personalised academic support, cross-disciplinary collaboration, or addressing inclusivity and well-being, the quality of relationships between students, LD practitioners, academic staff, and the broader institution plays a crucial role in supporting student

success and enhancing the overall learning experience. Our authors tell this story through 11 papers, 2 case studies, 3 opinion pieces, 1 brief communication, and 3 book reviews.

We open the volume with the research paper by James Blackmore-Wright, whose comparative study explores how online and on-campus environments influence students' approaches to problem-solving and decision-making. Focusing on students in a global MBA programme and prompted by questions around the extent to which there should be the same expectations of face-to-face and online learners, an exploratory qualitative content analysis of assessment feedback and subsequent student survey were conducted. The author's interpretation of the results, through the lens of Administrative Behaviour Theory, serves to elucidate the impact of learner modes on how students engage in problem-solving and decision-making. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of considering diverse learner modes in module design, cautioning against a one-size-fits-all approach to module design and a call for further investigation of the relationship between grade point average and critical thinking across different disciplines.

Kate Daubney's article examines the co-creation of a taxonomy to recognise, develop and apply transferable skills through cross-institutional partnerships, drawing on an anonymised UK case study of SmallTown University. Daubney outlines four core principles of building a taxonomy of transferable skills: recognising the skills development ecosystem at universities, a sense of identity and ownership of the taxonomy for staff and students, the need for consistency and coherency across the ecosystem, and finally for the taxonomy to be simple and visible. These principles are then applied to SmallTown University, outlining the need to build the taxonomy from the bottom up, and then expand from the top down. The article concludes that in the seeming opposite of a bottom up and top down approach lie practical ways for cross-institutional co-creation of a shared language of skills.

In James Lamont's pilot study, five international students studying for an M.A. in Education were recruited as peer mentors for students enrolled on the pre-session course in summer 2023. While there is much useful research on the benefits of pre-session courses for international students, as well as the benefits of being mentored, this study takes as its focus an investigation into the benefits for the M.A. students in acting as peer mentors. Although the concerns of the pre-session students in this study centred mainly on city knowledge and living independently in the UK, bringing PGT students into the

classroom has shown the potential for further collaborations, and provided those M.A. students with valuable classroom experience.

In a related study, Huong-Giang Le, Sarin Sok and Kimkong Heng offer readers of the learning development community a systematic review method to examine the benefits of peer mentoring in higher education of published works 2013–2023. The findings highlight that the benefits of peer mentoring in HE could be categorised into four fundamental aspects, including academic performance, retention rates, emotional and psychological wellbeing, and social integration – categories that could be developed into a conceptual framework for studying the impacts or benefits of peer mentoring in HE. The authors also highlight the significance of adopting peer mentoring as a supportive scheme for students encountering critical challenges due to its manifold benefits, pointing to the importance of identifying the varying factors contributing to the success of peer-mentoring schemes. The paper concludes with a discussion and the implications of the findings, as well as suggestions for future research to examine how peer mentoring could be effectively implemented in different educational contexts.

The research paper by Jed Locquiao and Abby Gronlund explores the influence of three student-level variables in Basic Psychological Needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness among students) as they participate in online higher education coursework. The authors conducted multiple regression modelling on 159 first-year undergraduate students to determine the extent to which the three variables relate to engagement and achievement in online coursework. Results present preliminary empirical evidence that the basic psychological need for autonomy relates to achievement in online coursework. However, the other basic psychological needs of competence and relatedness did not clearly relate with either engagement or achievement. These findings provide empirical evidence for the importance of autonomy in assessment for online courses, allowing students to include their perspectives and life context while supporting their own interests, motivations and mode of engagement.

Student engagement in online learning is a prevalent theme, particularly given the increase in online as a learning mode over the last few years. Drawing on their experiences and findings from 73 undergraduate physics students, Ridwan Enuwa Mohammed, Oluwasegun Odeniyi and Eliot Kumassah explore student perceptions and experience of online teacher-learner connectedness. As part of this study, the level of

interaction, student comfort and use of social media is explored to help inform findings. The paper features recommendations to support belonging, retention and student-teacher interactions for students studying online. Suggestions to help improve online student connectedness focus on curriculum design and the ways in which educators can digitally facilitate and encourage belonging.

Jemma Oeppen Hill explores the complexities of the role of the Programme Leader in HE including its responsibilities that link to external performance metrics such as satisfaction, retention and graduate destinations. Often delegated but not senior to their colleagues, and existing outside of the traditional teaching/research, the role often lacks visibility and esteem, with the paper investigating how this influences role-holders' understanding of the role, and how they can be better supported. The study follows seven Undergraduate (UG) PLs over the course of the academic year 2020/21 and the author uses a cross-portrait analysis to illuminate aspects of the organisational context that influence PLs' experiences. Findings from this study suggest that how PLs see themselves in the role influences their experiences. The paper discusses factors such as absence of formal training, lack of role clarity, mixed understanding of responsibilities, and increasing PLs' sense of personal accountability, extending our knowledge of the PL role and support needs, illuminating reasons for variances in practice seen in previous studies. It supports the need for culture change around this challenging but strategically focal role, along with the importance of ensuring it is valued, and resourced, as the leadership role it is.

Gina Sherwood and Ian Johnson's paper explores the role of Learning Developers (LD) in the support provided to students identifying as BIPoC (Black, Indigenous or People of Colour) within universities, noting particularly how such support can help close awarding gaps. Using a small-scale study of BIPoC student experiences within a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI), the authors report on interview data that illuminates the importance of LD engagement and how this might be improved. While some findings are fairly predictable of students generally, e.g., support to understand rubrics, referencing, and making best use of feedback, they also suggest that BIPoC students prefer flexibility in LD support, with opportunities to build trusting relationships to enable them to feel more confident in asking questions and seeking guidance. They are also keen to see wider ethnic diversity and representation within the LD staff base.

Peter Shukie, Stjohn Small and Jamie Holman present three case studies that formed a transdisciplinary project between three distinct subject areas: Education, Fine Art, and Art Therapy/Counselling. United by a shared love of art and a belief that it could serve as a catalyst for transformation for their students, the three authors established a participatory action research project called CollaborArt Blackburn, to better understand art's role in academic and community settings. The collaborative environment created by the project allowed for the boundaries between disciplines to dissolve and new creative possibilities to emerge, within a transdisciplinary space that offered each author the opportunity to reassess and reflect on what they brought to their own practice.

In their theoretical exploration of the pedagogical basis for LD, Steve White and Sunny Dhillon offer a provocation to the field in challenging the role of academic literacies (AL) in LD and its connection to praxis. Their goal is to explore and understand the coherence of the AL model, its hierarchical nature, and its social constructivist foundations. The authors' concern is that the focus on AL, given these three elements, has precluded the development of an effective pedagogy for LD. In questioning AL as the epistemological basis for LD, they open up the field to alternative approaches, such as the student-centred possibilities offered by critical realist or social realist contributions. Most importantly perhaps, the authors call for further research and considerations of this area in order to strengthen and consolidate LD praxis.

In the final paper in this volume, Clair Zawada turns our attention to the development themes of fostering our students' sense of belonging alongside ensuring our staff facilitate a sense of mattering, which have dominated the post-COVID-19 discussions relating to the student experience of HE. While student belonging is well researched, with links identified between a sense of belonging in students and student experience, satisfaction, and student persistence, mattering – which refers to an individual student's perception that they are noticed and valued – has received less attention. In this paper the author investigates levels of belonging and mattering across the academic and the clinical environment in an undergraduate Allied Health programme and its relation to students dropping out. Zawada shares findings from a quantitative, cross-sectional survey, which utilised four previously validated Likert scales measuring feelings of: mattering in the university environment; mattering in the clinical placement environment; belonging in the university environment; and belonging in the clinical placement environment. With 264 participants, this paper's findings show that students who had seriously considered

dropping out had significantly lower scores for all four scales. This research paper demonstrates that feelings of belonging and mattering may impact on the student's intention to persist with their studies, offering in-depth data and concrete recommendations for supporting students in the placement environment in particular.

Opening our case study section, Mari Cruz Garcia Vallejo offers a timely account of introducing a module for teaching staff designed to nurture critical awareness and practical technical skills around the use of Generative AI in teaching and learning. The author details the pedagogical rationale that underpins the development of this comprehensive module, covering diverse topics including AI ethics, data protection, and copyright issues. Featuring practical activities and discussions, the module culminates in a final project where participants design an AI-based learning activity or assessment method. The piece concludes by highlighting the module's positive impact on participants' skills and knowledge, while emphasising the need for institutional policies to guide both pedagogical approaches and the ethical and effective integration of GenAI in educational practices.

Concerned with the awarding gap for students from marginalised ethnic backgrounds in UK higher education, Julia O'Connell and Alison Daniell examine a dissertation writing retreat programme at a university in South England. Based on an innovative framework focused on the three core areas of community, culture and curriculum, the authors demonstrate that the programme was an impactful and innovative attempt to address awarding gaps for Black students. It built trust and collaboration between specialists and students, aiming to empower Black students to excel in one of the most important aspects of their degree. It also provided them with a space to engage positively with their peers and the wider university community.

The opinion piece by Asa Carlsund and Annette Björk focuses on the integration of academic and professional literacies in specialist nurse education. The authors argue that a holistic approach to academic and professional literacies not only empowers individuals in their specific fields but also has a profound impact on patient care and safety. This requires a more intentional use of both academic and professional literacies in professional education. In the case of nursing, this opinion piece argues it can support specialist student nurses in navigating and delivering quality nursing care in a complex healthcare environment.

News and media indicate that the students' faith in university education is dwindling, and it is not as high as we expect. If we wish to make higher education valuable and desirable, we need to broaden our thinking around HE, make alterations and additions to the curricula, and prepare students for life. Kosha Mehta invites educators to think beyond the subject-specific threshold concepts and support students in developing life skills and thought processes that promote mental, physical, and societal wellbeing. The author introduces six domains of education that can be embedded within the curricula of all disciplines. These domains include education on sustainability, equality, diversity and inclusion, arts, resilience, moral science/personal integrity, and physical activity. To support the inclusion of these domains, the article discusses the significance of each domain and provides evidence of the positive impact of its application on students.

The final opinion piece by Xue Zhou and Lilian Schofield provides a conceptual framework for integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the curriculum, building upon an earlier article published in *JLDHE* from the same authors. The aim of the conceptual framework presented in this article is to continue our thinking around how to support educators in integrating AI into their teaching, thereby also developing students' AI literacy and skills. The paper also aims to contribute to the current discourse on AI literacy in and beyond LD. The article presents an AI literacy conceptual framework to support educators in integrating AI into their teaching and provides suggestions on how to engage with it.

As student demographics become increasingly diverse, the significance of fostering inclusive teaching practices cannot be overstated. In his brief communication, Angelos Bakogiannis summarises the findings from a wide-scale project, reaffirming the importance of systemic transformation in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The author contends that fostering inclusive teaching practices of EAP in HE demands a multi-faceted approach that spans from the individual to the institutional level. Investment in change should be comprehensive, involving continuous professional development for educators, the formulation of inclusive policies at the institutional level, and active collaboration among all stakeholders. Independence, coupled with active multi-directional collaboration, can ensure that inclusivity is not only a theoretical concept but also a lived reality in higher education.

In the first of our three book reviews, Karen Clinkard reviews the second edition of *Academic Skills Handbook: Your Guide to Success in Writing, Thinking, and*



*Communicating at University*. Written and contributed to by experienced university lecturers Diana Hopkins and Tom Reid, the book uses an informal tone, concisely covering key aspects of settling into university life and preparing for academic study. There is a stimulating blend of text and imagery, combined with online interactive skills development tasks, which is a novel feature of this text, taking it to the realm of being a learning device rather than simply a book. As part of Sage's 'Student Success' series, this updated edition helps guide students through each transitional phase of university life, providing diagnostic exercises to boost self-confidence, academic performance, interpersonal communication, wellbeing, and employability prospects.

Constantine Manolchev reviews the *Academic writing and grammar for students* book by Alex Osmond. This review reflects on the importance of publishing a book on academic writing in the new world of Generative Artificial Intelligence. How important is it for students to know how to craft a sentence or where to place a comma when such tasks can be outsourced to OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google AI's BERT, and Microsoft's Turing? Ormond's practical, accessible, and comprehensive guide offers a set of productive answers. GenAI can provide quick and convenient solutions, but developing good, critical, and authentic writing skills is a process and takes time. Learning more about the academic conventions which guide it in the context of student learning can allow students (and tutors) to write with authority and intent.

Finally, Nathan Sands reviews Karen Gravett's *Relational pedagogies: connections and mattering in higher education*. What he shows is that in asking about the value of connections in higher education, Gravett challenges us to think about authenticity, trust and vulnerability, and how these are central to an effective learning and teaching environment. In presenting that environment as a 'web of relations' between people, technologies and spaces, she brings to the fore the social context of education, in stark contrast to the neoliberal discourses that dominate HE. Gravett's writing is a timely reminder of our power and agency, even as they seem to be something constantly fought for, and these are illustrated through a series of anecdotes and interviews that provide, for Sands, a raw openness to the book which will undoubtedly stimulate further exploration.

We hope that this collection of articles and book reviews will open up new conversations around the issues that matter to all those invested in learning and teaching.

With this volume, we are also saying goodbye to two of our longstanding editors, Prof. Gita Sedghi and Dr Eleanor Loughlin. Gita served as Co-Lead Editor for four years, during which she made important contributions to the journal's direction, its daily operations, and initiatives such as indexing. Eleanor was an important presence on our Editorial Board, overseeing our reviewer support as well as ensuring robustness of our processes. We would like to thank them both for their service to the journal and the community, and wish them well on the new stage of their professional journeys.

We also want to take this opportunity to thank our magnificent reviewers whose critical reading of submissions and thoughtful feedback and recommendations have made invaluable contributions to the quality of the articles in this volume. Our heartfelt appreciation for the time, expertise, and work it took to review articles in this issue goes to the following reviewers:

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With very best wishes,

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