



## **Raising the profile of Learning Development: thinking forwards**

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### ***Abstract***

Following an article comparing ‘study skills’ provision to J.M. Barrie’s Tinkerbell (Richards and Pilcher, 2023), discussions – and emotions – were stirred again this year regarding how Learning Development is understood among academic and third-space colleagues. Inspired by White and Webster’s (2023) session at last year’s ALDcon, the Study Advice service at the University of Reading, in collaboration with Dr Helen Webster from the University of Oxford, decided to run an ALDinHE regional event to address this very question: how do Learning Developers promote a better understanding of what we do, and raise our profile in our institutions?

This presentation reported back from this regional event, sharing both the barriers and proposed solutions to raising our profile. But there is still work to do. Together we hope to create a useful action plan from this work. We discussed whom we need to communicate with, what we feel these messages should be, and how we claim our expertise. Finally, we considered what we can do as a cross-institutional collective to ensure that we are seen as a profession with our own expertise and identity.

**Keywords:** professional identity; collaboration; raising profile.

### ***Community response***

This session elicited much response from participants as presenters questioned what opportunities are available to promote the work and profile of learning development.

Discussions previously in this space have been emotive, and presenters reflected on prior publications that have stirred a response from the Learning Development community, which set the tone well for this session. Previous publications included a contentious Wonkhe article titled “Study skills are not the answer to students’ academic woes” (Richards and Pilcher, 2021).

Perspectives from a regional ALDinHE event, where post-it notes were used to document experiences, were presented to the audience. Focusing on barriers and solutions, these contributions were separated into the following areas:

- Lack of knowledge/understanding of LD
- Lack of power/influence
- Institutional structures
- Lack of resources
- Other

The slides provided attendees at this session with an excellent overview of the types of discussion at the regional event with agreement reflected in the chat that this was a good representation of personal experiences and complexity in this space. We used to think about the 'levers' we needed to pull, as you have said. The new landscape seems to be throwing up more and more barriers that we have to see, identify and overcome. This terrain is more contested than ever. Further detail was explored for each area, and subsequently, an analysis was applied to the contributions, with four themes emerging (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Themes emerging from content analysis.**



Presenters then posed a series of questions to the group, which prompted discussion:

- What can you control yourself? (CeP etc)
- What can you do within your institution? (as a team etc.)
- What can we do as a professional organisation?

Community commentary highlighted a particular resonance on the theme of identity, reflecting that members of a team have to first come to a consensus before presenting themselves consistently to students and others at the university. Reaching agreement on this has sometimes proved challenging as responsibilities within the field differ between individuals and institutions.

Where and how you can advocate and raise your profile was another topical theme, with opportunities to connect and network with other Learning Development professionals particularly well received. The time, space and agency available to raise our profile was articulated well as a challenge:

I find it difficult to consider what I can control or how to raise profile as I spend so much time 'fire-fighting' that finding the time and space to develop myself/my expertise, never mind profile-raising, seems an impossible task.

I agree with your point about the limitations within our immediate environment...there are limits to individual agency and as important as it is to push them, it might be important to recognise them to avoid creating the sense of personal failure.

Commentary from one participant reflected on how interlinked the main four themes were:

In terms of control over those 'themes', my initial thoughts are that we may have more control over advocating for ourselves and gaining influence through impact than identity and inconsistency of roles. In fact, doing more advocating for ourselves and demonstrating impact may well strengthen our own distinct identities.

A wider observation around the changing nature of education was highlighted by another participant, prompting the idea that education is now seen as more transactional and therefore influences how we might see ourselves as LD professionals:

We think this provided a good working model for collaborative exploration - some great thoughts and questions - and excellent discussion. What we realise is that we keep interrogating ourselves - but perhaps we really do need to interrogate and critique what has happened to 'education' and 'higher education'...The public and popular discourse here has been so reduced that everybody is being coerced into thinking that this is all a very transactional practice - it's about skills for jobs. DUH!! So our fight for liberatory practice and something ineffable and emergent seems a bit more like Tinkerbell than you might think!? (We say that with love!!)

Taking positive steps to see where there is potential for more visible impact was put forward as a solution. We spent a while addressing the prevailing problems rather than coming up with potential solutions, but perhaps one way of raising the profile is to be very strategic in what we choose (if we have a choice!) to get involved in and who we collaborate with. One example here might be aligning the work we do with major issues within HE currently: student engagement, student retention etc. Having a narrow focus on one major issue that LD practitioners can help with for a period of time (e.g., student engagement over the next few years), whether internally or cross-institutionally, could make our work collectively more visible.

This was also reiterated by other participants reflecting on the emergence of AI as another example to become more involved with strategy. Involvement and profiles have been raised due to policy creation and AI's relationship with HE study. Is this one such opportunity to gain influence? Are there other areas like this that provide more opportunities?

### ***Editorial comment***

This workshop provided an active and topical event for attendees, taking inspiration from a previous ALDcon23 session. There was much commentary in the chat, and it was good to see the discussions from the regional event presented back in this format. Ideas around identity and the role of Learning Development continue to be debated, and this session provided a great forum for those interested in discussing how to approach raising our profile. It was good to see positive suggestions discussed on how to take this forward, and it linked well to the main conference theme of building learning development for the future.

## ***Next steps and additional questions***

How are the findings that have been collected so far being used to form an action plan?  
Given the insights you have collected and your experiences, what are your recommendations on how the profile of learning development can be raised?

## ***Authors' reflection***

This workshop gave us an opportunity to continue the conversations we started when hosting November 2023's South-East Regional Event, and to include voices from further afield. Our goal was to present our analysis of those conversations, and to determine how they compared with understandings from colleagues at other institutions of the challenges and opportunities we face with raising the profile of our services and profession. Additionally, we aimed to start moving the conversation beyond identifying challenges towards better understanding them in order to find solutions, along with an emphasis on identifying factors that were within our control. As is to be expected, there were no easy answers, but there was a noticeable consensus over the need to start making practical steps towards increasing the profile of Learning Development in our institutions and across the sector.

One significant challenge identified in the workshop seems to be that continual lack of consensus over identity, whether in individual teams or across the LD community. Attendees noted how this disagreement compounds the lack of understanding of LD among academics and colleagues from other support services, and enables the misrepresentation of our profession by detractors. There seemed to be more appetite for describing LD as a profession than in previous years, and for ALDinHE to provide a stronger voice in support of LD at the sector level. Practical steps identified here included ALDinHE developing an induction course for new Learning Developers, hosting a bank of case studies of successful collaboration between Learning Developers and academic colleagues, and identifying ways of demonstrating the impact of LD in order to gain the attention of senior managers. Interestingly, the latter two resonate with Hakim and Wingate's (2024) recent recommendations to EAP specialists for promoting collaboration with academics to embed academic literacies support in their programmes. Given the overlapping remits of LD and EAP, along with their comparable institutional status, it is

unsurprising that our professions face many similar challenges, including a lack of prominence and understanding among subject lecturers and university managers. As such, LD may well find that similar conversations between EAP specialists have already identified potential solutions to the challenges identified in this workshop.

There is also great value in working with our other third space colleagues. With much focus now on graduate attributes, working alongside our colleagues in careers can help raise both of our profiles. Collaboration, in this way, can help us to work on strategically significant outputs, whilst promoting our distinct, yet complementary, services. We appreciate there is already some pioneering work of this kind in our HEIs; sharing our experiences and offering opportunities to learn from each other will strengthen the Learning Development profession.

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