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CASE STUDY

Academic language and learning development practitioners' access to professional development, recognition and promotion pathways: an international case study

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ABSTRACT

Since 2015, there has been an expansion of professional development, recognition, and internal promotion opportunities open to Academic Language and Learning Development (ALLD) practitioners (Briggs, 2023; Briggs, 2025). However, limited information, beyond informal and often anecdotal community reporting, is available to inform what factors inhibit or facilitate access to such opportunities. This is concerning because it prohibits evidence-based interventions that aim to address inequalities of opportunity. This international study therefore sought to establish personal, institutional, national, and/or international factors associated with ALLD practitioners (n=92) reporting access to professional development, recognition, or internal promotion pathways. Several trends were identified, including country influence on access to professional recognition and contract type influence on access to internal promotion pathways. Implications of findings are considered in terms of how ALLD practitioners might be best supported by corresponding professional associations in terms of their career development and progression.

KEYWORDS: learning development practitioner, academic language practitioner, professional development, professional recognition, internal promotion.

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Introduction

Academic Language and Learning Development (ALLD) practitioners are 'higher education practitioners working to enhance students' learning and academic literacies' (International Consortium of Academic Language and Learning Developers (ICALLD), n.d., para. 1). Over the last ten years, professional development and recognition routes open to ALLD practitioners have expanded (see Briggs, 2023). However, there are often reports of inequalities of opportunity in terms of access among the ALLD community, such as conversations through the LDHEN email list (JISCMail, 2025). Moreover, studies suggest that higher education (HE) institutions provide limited support for career progression for staff on professional services contracts, as is often the case for ALLD practitioners (Allbeson, 2025; De Vos & Dries, 2013; Gander et al., 2019). The following considers how financial, institutional, and contractual factors have the potential, individually or collectively, to impact ALLD practitioners' perceptions and experiences.

First, the budget for staff learning and development is often one of the first areas cut when an organisation needs to reduce costs (Haddaway, 2025). Therefore, higher education financial circumstances will impact the availability of institutional funding to support professional development and recognition for ALLD practitioners. In the UK, many universities are currently navigating significant financial challenges (Roper & Vorley, 2025; Wareing, 2024). A similar picture is emerging in Canada (Jack, 2025; Universities Canada, 2025) and New Zealand (Gaston, 2023; Ross, 2025; Universities New Zealand—Te Pōkai Tara, 2025). Consequently, many ALLD teams face reduced budgets to support staff development relative to five or ten years ago.

Second, HE institution membership affiliations will determine access to certain developmental and recognition opportunities. For instance, Advance HE's (2023) Professional Standards Framework acknowledges 'the diverse practices and roles that contribute to high-quality learning' and so is intended to be inclusive of learning development (LD) practitioners. Many Advance HE member institutions have accredited internal schemes that allow them to award fellowships to staff (Advance HE, 2025a). Institutional membership also offers discounts for direct fellowship applications to Advance HE. Notably, most UK HE providers are members of Advance HE, however this is not the case in Canada and New Zealand (Advance HE, 2026). For ALLD practitioners not working at a member institution, there would be a personal financial

cost to apply directly to Advance HE (unless sponsored by their institution), thus creating a potential barrier to recognition. Likewise, ALDinHE's (2025, para. 1) Fellow and Senior Fellow recognition scheme 'acknowledges the unique commitment and values of practitioners who work in the field of LD'. However, this scheme is only open to LD practitioners working at ALDinHE member institutions, which are limited to the UK.

The contractual status of ALLD practitioners also has the potential to impact professional recognition and development. Holmes (2020) reported that staff employed on professional service contracts (as will be the case for some ALLD practitioners) have less CPD opportunities relative to their academic counterparts. For instance, LD practitioners based at UK universities are theoretically eligible to apply for a National Teaching Fellowship. However, Briggs et al. (2024) discussed how structural inequalities related to traditional HE role classifications appear to impact third space professionals' prospects. Likewise, Little et al. (2026) highlighted how those on professional service contracts face more challenges than their academic counterparts in achieving Advance HE recognition.

Furthermore, contractual status can determine access to promotional pathways for HE professionals. For instance, Briggs (2025) outlined how the emergence of new teaching, learning, and student-experience focused professorship pathways provide the potential for more third space professionals to access this promotion route. However, eligibility is often restricted by contractual status. Likewise, Smith and Walker (2024) detailed how education-focused academics can experience considerable career advancement challenges relative to those eligible for traditional teaching and research pathways. Given the nature of ALLD work, those employed on academic contracts would primarily be working in an education-focused capacity. Challenges related to promotion routes are likely to be even more pronounced for ALLD practitioners employed on a professional services basis, given that many professional services positions do not offer any formal promotion pathway (Hodgson & Compton, 2026).

Given that more senior positions with HE institutions typically require significant experience and potentially specialist qualifications, one might also conclude that perceptions of promotional pathway opportunities will be influenced by the length of time in post and/or highest qualification. Where there are perceived tiered levels of recognition (such as the Advance HE (2025b) fellowship scheme) it is possible that tenure in post and highest qualification may also affect perceptions.

Finally, Gander et al. (2019) reveal that there are career enablers and barriers for professional staff in HE at both individual and institutional levels, with organisational expectations and support playing a crucial role in career progression. This is problematic, as it means that any efforts to address inequalities experienced by ALLD practitioners at an individual level, whilst well-intentioned, could be misguided. Accordingly, this 2024 ALDinHE funded research project sought to provide a better understanding of other influential factors surrounding ALLD practitioners' access to professional development, recognition, and promotional pathways. The project had two objectives:

1. Develop a ALLD practitioner role taxonomy.
2. Identify personal, institutional, national, or international factors that facilitate ALLD practitioners' engagement with professional development, recognition, and promotion opportunities.

Briggs and Kantcheva (2025) addressed objective one and presented corresponding research methodology, ethics, and findings. This case study reports notable trends that were identified particular to the second objective.

Methodology

A high-level summary of data collection, participants, and analysis is provided in this section. See Briggs and Kantcheva (2025) for a full overview of the research methodology.

Data collection

A 20-item online questionnaire was distributed to members of ICALLD (n.d.) between November 2024 and January 2025. The questionnaire collected information about respondents' backgrounds, along with access to professional development, recognition, and promotion pathways. This was based on three four-point scales (0=No support; 1=Limited support; 2=Supported; 3=Highly supported), each supplemented with an open-text question (see Appendix 1 for specific question topics).

Participants

There were 92 responses to the questionnaire. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participant demographic characteristics:

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

		N	%
Country of work	UK	45	48.9%
	Canada	25	27.1%
	New Zealand	18	19.6%
Type of institution	University	72	78.3%
	Polytechnic*	12	13.0%
	College	8	8.7%
Size of institution	Under 10,000 students,	13	14.1%
	Between 10,000 and 25,000 students	45	48.9%
	More than 25,000 students	34	36.9%
Where in the institution are you based?	Student support directorate	38	41.3%
	Library	24	26.1%
	Teaching and learning unit	17	18.5%
	Faculty	7	7.6%
Type of contract	Academic contract	32	34.8%
	Professional services contract	54	58.7%
	Support staff contract	3	3.3%
Highest qualification	Doctorate	37	40.2%
	Master's	46	50.0%
	Undergraduate	5	5.4%
How long have you worked in a ALLD role?	Over five years	65	70.7%
	Less than five years	27	29.3%

*(i.e. an institution outside the UK with a vocational subject focus).

Analysis

Due to the size of the sample and associated sub-samples (less than 30), data analysis was limited to examining response frequencies and percentages (Dekking et al., 2005). Given that statistical significance could not be tested, it was decided that reportable differences required at least a 0.5 difference between the groups' mean respondent scores (Urdan, 2022). Additionally, comparisons were only made when there was a minimum of five respondents in a specific grouping. In the case of the internal promotion pathway question, a 'not applicable'

answer option was included. In relation to this topic, the number of 'not applicable' responses was therefore considered when drawing conclusions.

Findings

As shown in Table 2, participants reported that they felt broadly supported (mean=1.8) in terms of access to professional development. Participants indicated that they have some access (mean=1.6) to professional recognition opportunities. As anticipated, not all participants had access to an internal promotion pathway, and the 49 who did reported limited support (mean=1.0) to engage with these pathways.

Table 2. Levels of support experienced by participants across professional pursuits.

Professional development	Professional recognition	Internal promotion pathway		N
Mean*	Mean*	Mean* (n=49)	N/A	92
1.8	1.6	1.0	43	

*Based on a four-point scale (0=No support; 1=Limited support; 2=Supported; 3=Highly supported).

Influences on professional development, professional recognition, and promotion pathways were then considered. Table 3 lists the variables that were examined and corresponding sub-samples.

Table 3. Variables examined.

Variable	Sub-sample(s)
Country of work	UK/Canada/New Zealand
Type of institution	University/Polytechnic
Size of institution	Under 10,000 students/Between 10,000 and 25,000 students/More than 25,000 students
Where are you based in the institution?	Student support/Library/Teaching and learning unit
Type of contract	Academic/Professional
Highest qualification	Doctorate/Master's
Time in an LD role	Had worked in a ALLD role for over five years

The following summarises where sub-sample differences were found in terms of professional development, professional recognition, and access to internal promotion pathways.

Influences on professional development

No sub-sample differences greater than 0.5 between mean scores were found in reported access to professional development. The following illustrates the similarity of scores between sub-samples of participants:

- Canadian participants reported similar access to professional development (n=25, mean=1.6) relative to the participants based in UK (n=45, mean=1.9) and New Zealand (n=18, mean=1.9).
- Participants with a doctorate reported a similar level of access to professional development (n=37, mean=1.8) relative to those with a master's (n=46, mean=1.9).
- Participants working in a university reported a similar level of access to professional development (n=72, mean=1.9) relative to those based in a polytechnic (n=12, mean=2.0).
- Participants working in an institution with over 25,000 students (n=34, mean=2.0) had a similar level of access to professional development relative to those based in an institution with under 10,000 students (n=13, mean=1.8) or in an institution with 10,000 to 25,000 students (n=45, mean=1.8).
- Participants based in a library (n=24, mean=2.1) reported a similar level of access to professional development relative to those based in student support (n=38, mean=1.9) or a teaching and learning unit (n=17, mean=1.9).
- Participants on an academic contract reported a similar level of access to professional development (n=32, mean=1.8) relative to participants on a professional services contract (n=54, mean=1.9).
- Participants who had worked as an ALLD practitioner for less than five years reported a similar level of access to professional development (n=27, mean=2.0) relative to participants who had worked as an ALLD practitioner for more than five years (n=65, mean=1.8).

Open text responses indicated that the most common forms of professional development accessed by ALLD practitioners in the UK were conferences (institutional, regional, or national), Advance HE fellowships, and in-house training workshops. In Canada,

the most common forms of professional development reported were local and regional conferences and in-house training workshops. In New Zealand, the most common forms of professional development reported were in-house training workshops, followed by national conferences.

Influences on professional recognition

Several sub-sample differences greater than 0.5 between mean scores were found in terms of how participants reported access to professional recognition:

- Participants based in the UK reported much higher access to professional recognition (n=45, mean=2.2) relative to those based in New Zealand (n=18, mean=1.1) and Canada (n=25, mean=0.8).
- Participants working in a university reported a much higher level of access to professional recognition (n=72, mean=1.8) relative to the those based in a polytechnic (n=12, mean=0.8).
- Participants working in an institution with 10,000 to 25,000 students (n=45, mean=1.8) had the highest level of access to professional recognition relative to those based in an institution with over 25,000 students (n=34, mean=1.6) and under 10,000 students (n=13, mean=1.2).
- Participants based in a library (n=24, mean=2.0) reported the same level of access to professional recognition relative to participants based in a teaching and learning unit (n=17, mean=2.0). Interestingly, participants based in student support (n=38, mean=1.2) reported a significantly lower level of access to professional recognition.

The following illustrates the similarity of scores between sub-samples of participants:

- Those with a doctorate reported a similar level of access to professional recognition (n=37, mean=1.8) relative to those with a master's (n=46, mean=1.5).
- Those on an academic contract reported a similar level of access to professional recognition (n=32, mean=1.6) relative to those on a professional services contract (n=54, mean=1.7).
- Those who had worked as an ALLD practitioner for less than five years reported the same level of access to professional recognition (n=27, mean=1.6) relative to those who had worked as a practitioner for more than five years (n=65, mean=1.6)

Open-text responses indicated that the most common forms of recognition that ALLD practitioners were supported to obtained in the UK were Advance HE fellowships, followed by ALDinHE fellowships. Most Canadian and New Zealand respondents used the open-text field to reiterate that they did not feel supported to obtain professional recognition.

Influences on promotion

Several sub-sample differences greater than 0.5 between mean scores were found concerning how participants reported access to internal promotion pathways. However, caution must be applied to these findings, as 44.6% (n=41) of respondents reported that this question was 'not applicable' to their working situation. Among the respondents who reported access to internal promotion pathways:

- Those on an academic contract reported a much higher level of access to pursue career promotion through an internal promotion pathway (n=32, mean=1.4) relative to those on a professional services contract (n=54, mean=0.7). This is further reflected in the fact that only 34.4% (n=11) of participants on an academic contract reported that this question was 'not applicable', while 53.7% (n=29) of participants on a professional services contract reported the same.
- Those working in an institution with 10,000 to 25,000 students (n=45, mean=1.2) had the highest level of access to pursue career promotion through an internal promotion pathway relative to those based in an institution with over 25,000 students (n=34, mean=0.8) or under 10,000 students (n=13, mean=0.5). This is further reflected in the fact that only 40.0% (n=18) of those working in an institution with 10,000 to 25,000 students reported this question as 'not applicable', while 52.9% (n=18) of participants in an institution with over 25,000 students, and 53.8% (n=7) of participants in an institution with under 10,000 students reported this question as 'not applicable'.
- Those based in New Zealand reported higher access to career promotion through an internal promotion pathway (n=18, mean=1.5) relative to those based in Canada (n=25, mean=0.8), and the UK (n=45, mean=0.8). Notably, 56.0% (n=14) of Canadian and 55.6% (n=10) of New Zealand respondents reported that this question was 'not applicable', compared with only 37.8% (n=17) of UK respondents.

The following illustrates the similarity of scores between sub-samples of participants:

- Those with a doctorate reported a similar level of access to pursue career promotion through an internal promotion pathway (n=37, mean=1.0) relative to those with a master's (n=46, mean=0.8).
- Those working in a university reported a similar level of access to pursue career promotion through an internal promotion pathway (n=72, mean=0.9) relative to those based in a polytechnic (n=12, mean=1.2).
- Those based in student support (n=38, mean=1.1) reported the highest level of access to pursue career promotion through an internal promotion pathway relative to those based in a library (n=24, mean=0.8) or a teaching and learning unit (n=17, mean=0.8).
- Those with less than five years in a role reported the same level of access to career promotion through an internal promotion pathway (n=27, mean=0.9) relative to those who have worked for more than five years (n=65, mean=1.0).

Most respondents across the UK, Canada, and New Zealand used the open-text question to reiterate that they did not have access to a promotional pathway. Across countries, a small number of respondents suggested that promotion may be possible into a more senior position within their team, but this would be dependent on vacancies arising as opposed to happening automatically due to tenure or experience.

Discussion

Results suggest that certain personal, institutional, national, or international factors do affect ALLD practitioners' engagement with professional recognition and promotion opportunities. In contrast, no factors were found to be associated with reported opportunities to engage with professional development.

In terms of professional recognition, most notably ALLD practitioners based in the UK reported far better access to opportunities compared with those in Canada and New Zealand. This is potentially attributable to the Advance HE fellowships scheme being more established in the UK and the ALDinHE professional recognition scheme being UK specific, as supported by open-text responses detailed above. It is also noted that multiple ALDinHE steering group alumni have connections with Advance HE, having either previously worked for Advance HE or in collaboration with Advance HE via other associations, such as the Committee for the Association of National Teaching Fellows (2025). This may mean that they have effectively

acted as ambassadors for the professional recognition opportunities afforded by Advance HE. Likewise, working in a library or teaching and learning unit was associated with reports of greater access to professional recognition. Although Holmes (2020) found that those on academic contracts had better access to continuing professional development opportunities, it was not found that academic contracts were exclusive to ALLD practitioners working in a library or teaching and learning unit. This highlights how personal circumstances play a pivotal role in engagement with recognition, rather than this just being dictated by contractual status. Working in a university with over 10,000 students was also found to be related to greater access to professional recognition, and thus one might conclude that larger institutions have more internal capacity available to support professional recognition for staff.

In relation to reported access to an internal promotion pathway, the most notable influence on access appeared to be whether or not an ALLD practitioner was employed on an academic contract. This is in line with previous studies (Allbeson, 2025; De Vos & Dries, 2013; Gander et al., 2019). Traditionally, there are more established progression routes associated with academic contracts (such as lecturer to senior lecturer to principal lecturer to reader to professor) and that reinforces the promotion pathways inequity between academic and professional services staff highlighted by Briggs (2025) and Hodgson and Compton (2026).

Two additional factors were found to be related to higher reports of access to internal promotion pathways. First, working in a smaller institution (10,000 students or less) appeared to be related to reduced access to promotion pathways based on both mean score and a higher number of 'not applicable' responses. This is perhaps attributable to small and specialist institutions having more focused provision and potentially variations in workload (i.e. those in a small institution might have a more expansive role). Second, it was found that ALLD practitioners based in New Zealand reported better access to promotion pathways. However, given that 55.6% of participants based in New Zealand reported that this was 'not applicable' to them, this finding is treated with caution.

The finding that there were no apparent connections between professional development and other variables is encouraging in so much as it suggests equality of opportunity across groups. That said, overall means suggested that respondents only felt relatively supported in terms of accessing such opportunities. There is perhaps work required to better understand the impact of institutional culture and support (Gander et al., 2019) for such engagement. This

would require the research project to be repeated with an expanded sample comprising ALLD practitioners alongside comparator groups of lecturers, teaching and learning professionals, student support teams, and/or administrative staff.

These results have the potential to inform the future strategic activities of ICALLD (and affiliated sub-associations) in terms of advocating for and/or providing CPD opportunities for members. For example, given the connection between country and professional recognition, ALLD associations outside the UK might consider providing access to a formal professional recognition scheme. This could be through working in partnership with ALDinHE to expand their recognition scheme internationally. This is in-keeping with the approach already adopted by the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (n.d.) to establish a professional accreditation scheme. Likewise, given the connection between contract type and reported access to promotion pathways, associations might consider whether they need to undertake targeted advocacy campaigns to support members who report contract status restrictions.

Limitations and future work

Caution is advised when using these findings, given the sample size and composition. First, when the sample was split to examine differences between groups, the size of sub-samples varied quite significantly. Thus, the reported mean values need to be reviewed with caution, as these might not be replicable in a statistically robust sample (Dekking et al., 2005; Urdan, 2022). Second, the limited sample size meant that only basic descriptive analysis was possible. Third, the sample composition meant that five of the twenty planned comparisons were not possible. Namely, the influence of 1) role title; 2) Advance HE fellowship status; 3) Advance HE teaching excellence award; 4) ALDinHE recognition status; and 5) principal job responsibilities could not be explored. Future work should seek to expand on these areas of investigation with a larger sample that would allow for statistical analysis and a more robust comparison of sub-groups.

Conclusion

Based on the case study findings, there does appear to be a connection between certain personal, institutional, national, or international factors on the career outlook of ALLD

practitioners in terms of professional recognition and access to internal promotion pathways. As noted, caution is advised around the generalisability of these findings. However, the results from this study provide a far more robust insight into how such differences may manifest relative to anecdotal and informal accounts that have previously been referenced by the ALLD community when discussing this topic. In turn, this provides a valuable insight into where those associations who represent ALLD practitioners might best channel their efforts to improve equality of opportunity for their membership.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix

Questionnaire sections and topics

Qualifications, professional recognition, and experience

- Highest qualification
- AdvanceHE fellowship status
- ALDinHE recognition status
- Teaching excellence awards
- How many years have you worked as a ALLD practitioner?

Place of work and job role

- Country of work
- Type of institution
- Size of institution
- Where are you based in the institution (e.g. library or teaching and learning unit)?
- Type of contract
- Principal responsibilities
- Areas of specialism
- Current job title
- What should be your job title?

Access to professional development, recognition, and promotion pathways

Four-point scales (0=No support; 1=Limited support; 2=Supported; 3=Highly supported).

Addressing the extent to which participants are supported to:

- Engage in professional development opportunities
- Pursue professional recognition
- Pursue career promotion via an internal promotion pathway

N.B: participants could expand on ratings via corresponding open-text boxes.