



EDITORIAL

On recognition, rigour, and remaining ourselves

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In her exquisite exploration of how to navigate the unknown, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit (2006) writes about the difficulty of knowing where you are when the map changes around you. This year, our *JLDHE* map has shifted slightly, as the journal has been accepted for indexing in Scopus. This external recognition that the work published here meets standards of quality and scholarly contribution that extend beyond the immediate Learning Development community elicits two simultaneous reactions: satisfaction that the work has been recognised and a nagging question about what such validation means for a journal that has always done things a little differently.

If you are new to this journal—new to the field or arriving from a neighbouring discipline as an author, a reader, or a reviewer—it might help to know what kind of publication this has

been since its inception in 2009. For much of its history, the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* has been a small, niche, community-driven, and deliberately welcoming space. It has certainly not been a gatekeeping exercise. We like to think of ourselves as a forum where practice-based insight sits alongside theoretical work; where methodological diversity is treated as a resource rather than a problem; where first-time authors get a fair hearing and much-needed opportunities for writing in less traditional and more creative formats; where Learning Development values can be explored without the pressure to conform to external metrics; and where the boundaries of the field are treated as a subject of enquiry rather than a wall. Such openness has consistently been a strength. Over the years, it has created space for voices that might otherwise struggle to find a home in other academic venues.

While Scopus indexing does not change that original intention, it does raise the stakes around our approach. Broader visibility brings new readers and new submissions, including those from scholars who do not know *JLDHE's* history or immediately grasp its ethos, and that is genuinely welcome. At the same time, what we value and why we value it, cannot simply be assumed. It must not only be made visible but also constantly negotiated. That negotiation requires holding together our signature combination of rigour and inclusivity, developmental generosity, and scholarly ambition.

If the journal has long been a kind of landscape of ideas, then Scopus indexing introduces the need for clearer mapping. One practical outcome of this shift is evident in our decision to refresh the journal's visual identity this year. The new design reflects a considered recalibration of how we orient readers within the terrain of Learning Development. As our readership expands, helping readers navigate the journal more easily becomes critical. Small but meaningful details—distinctive headings, more consistent visual cues, and layouts that guide readers through each piece with intentionality—are all ways of making the journal more accessible and welcoming to those encountering us for the first time. In that sense, the redesign is less a rebranding exercise than an update to our navigational tools: a way of marking paths, boundaries, and vistas so that our readers can find their bearings more easily.

The refresh also strengthens the journal's discoverability and ethical transparency in an increasingly interconnected scholarly ecosystem. For example, our templates now integrate ORCID identifiers to help situate authors within the wider landscape of their fields and allow



readers to follow intellectual trails across publications. The inclusion of article history offers a transparent view of each piece's provenance, mapping how scholarship moves from idea to publication. These elements support responsible authorship and uphold the integrity of the publication process at a time when trust in scholarly publishing is increasingly vital. These changes matter because they ensure the diverse forms of scholarship that we champion can be found, cited, and built upon without losing their grounding in the values that shaped this journal. In this way, the new visual identity works to honour our roots while enabling us to navigate the unknown path ahead.

Solnit also writes about the value of not always knowing where you are going and of paying full attention to where you actually *are*. That feels like the right instinct for this moment. We know the direction, but what indexing asks of us is to stay alert to the terrain as it shifts and to keep making active choices about what we carry forward. We need to be mindful that indexing systems measure what they can count, not necessarily what matters most. Much of what makes scholarship in Learning Development valuable, however, sits outside those measurements. This includes the mentoring we have traditionally embedded in our peer review process and our publication of papers that shift someone's thinking without ever being widely cited. We neither want to pretend otherwise nor to forget where we come from and what we value.

The journal enters this new chapter with the same commitments it has always carried: to publish research that is rigorous, reflective, and honest about its own conditions; to make space for voices at different stages of their development; to treat Learning Development as a field still finding its shape, which is its strength rather than a limitation; and to see this indexing as an evolution, not a rupture. The map may have changed, but we are still much more interested in the terrain it represents than in the coordinates that delineate it. We remain committed to being a friendly, developmental, and intellectually generous journal. We remain committed to nurturing new writers and to valuing diverse forms of enquiry. We believe recognition for the excellence we promote (McDonald & Syska, 2025) does not require abandoning the ethos that shaped us. In fact, it may position us to strengthen it, to show that rigour and inclusivity can coexist and that scholarly excellence can reflect the richness of our community.



This issue offers its own form of mapping the field, with each of the 10 papers, 5 case studies, 3 opinion pieces, 2 letters, and 4 book reviews tracing a different part of the LD terrain, using different scales and ways of knowing the ground. We invite you to explore them.

In the first paper, Ruth Healey and Anthony Cliffe explore the role of block teaching in supporting first-year students' transition to university. Focusing on a two-week intensive module for Geography and Environment students at the University of Chester, introduced in 2022, the module functions as an extended induction designed to build academic skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging. Data from 127 students over three years indicate that the block format helped students better understand higher education expectations, develop essential academic skills, and form stronger peer connections. The module achieved a 100% pass rate, high average marks, and a 10% increase in continuation from year one to year two, highlighting the potential of discipline-based block teaching to support successful transition.

Overseeing a collaboration between the University of Sunderland and Northumbria Police, Adelle Hulsmeier critically examines how curriculum partnerships can bring together academia and industry. Building upon an authentic and partnership-based learning opportunity, students address a crime-prevention issue through film production. Drawing upon module data, surveys and student reflections, the study demonstrates that co-designed, client-led assessments enhance module engagement, employability awareness, and civic responsibility.

Shaylen Naidoo argues that effective integration of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) by educators is a critical priority in South Africa, especially for widening participation and improving access to HE. The study highlights educators' strong desire for training, multi-level support, and peer-collaborative approaches that build capacity for meaningful transformation through Critical Digital Pedagogy. While staff motivation is evident, the author identifies persistent structural barriers, including institutional constraints which can hinder progress toward equitable digital teaching practices. The article concludes that without addressing these systemic challenges, efforts to realise transformative digital pedagogies for both staff and students could remain constrained.

In their paper, Mohammad Bilal Nazir, Kate Johnson, John Greenhalgh, Louise Aston, and Nici Pedley explore the student perspective of student assessment literacy (SAL), with a particular focus on how SAL actualises and transforms across the student lifecycle. A narrative enquiry



approach was utilised to understand the perspective of 22 final-year undergraduate students at Leeds Beckett University. Through this method the authors identified three ‘types’ of student responses (actualisation and transformation) in relation to assessment stakes, but they also argue that SAL actualisation and transformation is multifaceted and individual experiences and histories will impact the assessment strategies students employ.

The paper by Puja Saini and Asha Yadav explores undergraduate students’ motivation for e-learning in Haryana, India, examining differences related to gender and locality. Data from a random sample of 400 college students revealed that female and rural students reported higher levels of motivation than male and urban students, with statistically significant differences between groups. The findings highlight the importance of addressing inequalities in digital access and learning support. The study suggests that educational institutions and policymakers should implement targeted strategies to improve digital infrastructure and provide tailored support, helping to bridge the digital divide and foster more inclusive, effective e-learning environments for diverse student populations.

Rebecca Rylance- Graham and Nashwa Ismail’s paper explores the expectations and needs of Generation (Gen) Z learners to better understand how educators may work with this cohort more effectively, with reference to their engagement with and levels of adoption of digital technology. The authors draw attention to the problems of the use of the label ‘digital native’ for this group as it can falsely suggest a higher level of academic competency than is reasonable, leading to mismatched learning experiences. Their extensive literature review cautions against the often asserted ‘short attention span’ Gen Z narrative but confirms a preference for gamified and interactive forms of learning. Pedagogies for this group therefore need to be designed to make best use of Gen Z’s relative comfort with digital technology, while providing sufficient scaffolding for it to be, in turn, used to best effect.

In their paper Rehan Shah, Anne Preston, Stephanie Fuller, and Elena Dimova argue that equity challenges persist for HE students engaging with global sustainability issues. Their study integrates Educational Sustainable Development (ESD) Community-Based Learning and Teaching (CBLT) across 2 institutions, demonstrating how embedding these approaches in the curriculum can widen participation by situating learning within local community contexts and priorities in partnership. Through their work, the authors show how such real-world community engagement in the curricula can have the capacity to help students connect



academic content with community contexts to make sustainability education more inclusive, collaborative, relevant and action oriented in addressing community and global issues.

Raudina Simelane's paper reviews the impact of digital feedback in South African higher education contexts. It highlights how students with restricted internet access may struggle to read and subsequently respond to assessment feedback placed on digital platforms. The paper includes qualitative data on how students are dealing with these issues. As a result, the feasibility and equity of digital feedback is called into question in the South African context.

'Bite sized brilliance: Mixed methods approach of unwrapping the benefits of sandwich courses for Sport Science Students' explores the potential impact of professionally-located, applied learning opportunities on student achievement, employment and professional development. Authors Craig Strong and Ellie Nesbitt consider the impact of Work-integrated learning (WIL) initiatives on learner experience and engagement, examining how placement learning might enhance not only student success but shape lifelong learning and the development of capabilities and attributes beyond the subject specific curriculum. The authors champion the transferrable impact of placement learning on preparedness to engage with professional identity and literacies.

Finally, Paula Villegas and Lucy Hall report on a collaboration between the University of St Andrews's in-sessional service and the postgraduate research learning development provision that aimed to address the varied challenges and obstacles to publication faced by doctoral students. This gap in support was tackled through 12 workshops, which students could take as a series or individually according to needs, giving them ownership over their learning. This scaffolded approach, and the protected writing time it afforded, supported these students in understanding conventions, building community, and learning to think of themselves as academics, while revealing the need to create an inclusive space where students can navigate uncertainty and the discomfort it can bring.

In our first case study, 'Bridging Worlds: a study of academic skills, cultural exchange, and integration in UK higher education', Anthony Cliffe and Lin Chou look through a collaborative autoethnographic lens to reflect on their dialogic experiences of cultural exchange in the context of academic advice, framed by third space professionalism and negotiating postgraduate academic literacies. The case study examines the unique contribution academic skills advisers make in enhancing student attainment, improving retention, and community



integration, while also addressing the challenges international students encounter in navigating cultural exchange within academic environments. The authors advocate for more integrated, responsive, and culturally attuned support systems within UK higher education.

Mari Cruz Garcia Vallejo's case study showcases a framework for the design and promotion of AI literacy, called the EUIA, or 'Scale of New AI Use', the original title being the Spanish 'Escala de Uso de la AI'. The framework has been piloted with students studying a module that focuses on strategies for the integration of AI into assessment, at the University of Las Palmas, in Gran Canaria, Spain. It builds on existing frameworks including the UNESCO AI Competency Framework for Teachers. While advocating for the use of this model, the author also cautions that it has limitations, notably the level of compliance, which may be difficult to measure and assure.

'Fostering belonging and reflection' by India Lawton outlines an intervention in a foundation year program at a UK university. This foundation year previously had issues with retention and progression to year one, however the author's holistic approach to the program has reversed the situation with almost 100% of students now successfully moving on to year one. Strategies used include reflective practice, collaborative projects, tracking tools, a flexible curriculum and experiential learning tasks.

Universities are seeing an increasing number of students with mental health needs and there is considerable pressure on the sector to improve support. Hence, Ainsley Miller examines the work of the Mental Health Support Service at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland. Rather than the previous model, with academics triaging students through pastoral care and making referrals to the central Disability and Wellbeing team, this service was set up locally, within the Department of Mathematics and Statistics, with staff trained in Mental Health First Aid. The study considers the overall benefits of the service and its approach, and how to improve uptake by currently under-represented groups, including first-year undergraduates.

The last case study by Stephanie Quon argues that universities should invest in the creation and development of spaces where neurodivergent students can spend time to self-regulate in safety and comfort. To establish how such spaces should be constructed, and to test these principles themselves, the authors conducted a survey of 41 community participants, 33 of whom were disabled and/or autistic, and 8 of whom were professional sensory room



developers. Results underlined the desire for spaces that were quiet, predictable and conducive to sensory regulation, identified key features preferred, and drew attention to broadening definitions of accessibility. There was consensus that the spaces should be accessible to all, without medical evaluation. Due to budget limitations not all recommendations could be fulfilled, but if sensory regulation is to be regarded as a necessary condition for learning, universities will need to create such provision.

Agentic AI is becoming more sophisticated, challenging how we understand concepts of authorship, assessment, and academic labour. Our first opinion piece explores the concept of agentic artificial intelligence (AI) literacy and its implications for higher education. To preserve learner autonomy and critical thinking, educators must prepare students to use these tools ethically, designing appropriate prompts and understanding their outputs. Octavio Murekian and Surabil Sudarshan argue that AI can be an effective 'partner' in knowledge production, and their framework charts the elements they see as most vital in helping students use agentic AI effectively, cognisant of its strengths and limitations.

Rooted in the context of an increased use of generative AI for writing, in the second opinion piece Valerie Storey argues that doctoral examination committees must reclaim the oral defence as a critical pedagogical tool for assessing doctoral competence. With AI able to generate text with quality that is hard to distinguish from human scholarship, there must be a focus on revealing the human capabilities for creative thinking and spontaneous reading, as opposed to the oral defence being a ceremonial rite of passage.

Maintaining coherence in doctoral supervision can be challenging for both postgraduate researchers and supervisors. In this opinion piece, Anja Stumpf argues that digital tools, such as Padlet, offer practical ways to bring structure to supervision. These tools can also be taken up by Learning Developers, by capturing discussions, decisions, and emerging ideas with students in a shared space. Here there is an opportunity to develop students' feedback literacies through such tools, enabling them to take intellectual insights forwards. Stumpf argues how Padlet can strengthen relationality by fostering sustained dialogue between students and educators, which is valuable in hybrid and online settings.

Our first letter by Lydia Bach, Ciorsdaidh Watts, Sarah Henry, and Ana Basiri reflects on discussions emerging from the Lovelace-Hodgkin Symposium: Responsible AI and Education at the University of Glasgow. Participants engaged in co-creative and cross-disciplinary



discussions on how AI is reshaping teaching, learning and professional practice. Uncertainty, AI-anxiety, and uneven literacy were key discussion topics, with acknowledgement they must be addressed through dialogue, trust and empathy as opposed to authority or compliance. Reflecting on the symposium, this letter identifies three recommendations for individuals: to reflect on their AI use, to be transparent and to keep learning. For institutions, recommendations include the creation of safe spaces, connecting policy with practice, extending access to all roles, and engaging external partners to create an AI ethics ecosystem.

Tanisha Burger's commentary explores the central role of information and communication technology in contemporary higher education, particularly in supporting the delivery of teaching and student-centred learning. It focuses on online discussion boards (ODBs) as spaces for collaborative exchange, enabling postgraduate learners to share ideas and engage with course content. Their effectiveness, however, depends largely on students' motivation and willingness to participate in self-directed dialogue. The research suggests that active engagement in ODBs stimulates cognitive processes that enhance learning outcomes and course performance. At the same time, meaningful interaction requires skilled facilitation. Integrating ODBs with face-to-face elements or peer support systems may strengthen social presence and foster deeper collaborative learning.

Our book review section opens with the topic of object-based learning (OBL), which has gained increasing prominence in higher education as a means of fostering critical, inclusive, and experiential learning. Robyne Calvert reviews Thomas Kador's *Object-based Learning: Exploring Museums and Collections in Education*, which offers a reflective introduction to OBL. She praises how Kador blends material culture theory with practice-based evidence through a range of case studies, exercises, and examples from museum and university settings. Calvert also highlights the book's sensitive handling of contested histories. While some discussions, particularly around digital objects, may feel discipline-specific, she recommends the book as a rich, inclusive resource that Learning Developers can use to enhance their practice through developing a range of multisensory approaches.

Evan Dickerson reviews *Student Belonging in Higher Education*, edited by Mi Young Ahn, Edward Venn, and Tom Lowe. He praises the book as a comprehensive guide to the theoretical and practical dimensions of belonging, coherently weaving together a diversity of concepts including mattering, identity, inclusion, and shared spaces. Dickerson particularly values how



the book's case studies translate complex ideas into practice, though he notes that greater focus could have been given to the work of third space professionals. He concludes that the book offers a timely call to action for institutions seeking to embed belonging across the student journey.

Zeena Salim reviews Mick Healey's *The Research-Education Nexus*, a wide-ranging report that argues for embedding research and enquiry across the student lifecycle. Salim highlights how Healey offers a rich synthesis of literature to argue for the democratisation of research engagement. She does question some aspects of the conceptual breadth of the definition of research used, particularly foregrounding the structural and labour inequities that could hinder the implementation of Healey's recommendations. Nonetheless, Salim positions the report as a significant and thought-provoking contribution for institutions seeking to expand equitable student participation in research.

Our collection closes with Zachery Spire's review of Chris Dennis and Stuart Abbott's *Excelling at University*, praising its academically grounded challenge to traditional study skills textbooks. He highlights how the book's framing of academic success is underpinned by scholarship focused on academic literacies, self-regulated learning, and dialogic feedback. Spire values its emphasis on identity formation, critical engagement, and the deeper purposes of academic work, noting strong alignment with the wider field of Learning Development literature. While pitched as a student guide, Spire finds the book to be theoretically robust and practically adaptable. He commends Dennis and Abbott for offering a thoughtful and timely resource that clarifies the deeper purposes of academic work and how students can become confident graduates.

As we conclude this volume, we extend our sincere thanks to the reviewers whose expertise and thoughtful feedback have strengthened the scholarship presented on these pages. Their ongoing commitment to fostering rigorous and generous intellectual exchange remains essential to our academic community. Our deepest appreciation goes to:

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With our very best wishes,

Alicja Syska and Chad McDonald

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The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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