



EDITORIAL

## Is it exploitation? On stewardship in academic communities

**Alicja Syska** 

University of Plymouth, UK

### *Editorial input by:*

**Laura Barnett** 

University of Surrey, UK

**Laura Dyer** 

University of Leeds, UK

**Amy Sampson** 

University of Greenwich, UK

**Vic Boyd** 

City of Glasgow College, UK

**Lee Fallin** 

University of Hull, UK

**Maggie Scott** 

University of Salford, UK

**Steve Briggs** 


University of Bedfordshire, UK

**Chad McDonald** 

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

**Paula Villegas** 

University of St. Andrews, UK

**Carina Buckley** 

Southampton Solent University, UK

**Craig Morley** 

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Following the call for Assistant Editors we issued last month, I received a pointed email to the tune of 'it sounds like exploitation'. Before I even took a hard look in the mirror, I turned to our editorial board; their response, with its reassuring chorus of quips and reflexive observations, confirmed that no one on the inside felt that way. But the email was written, which means the thought was thinkable, and if one person thought it, others most likely did too. So here we are.

The call was, I'll admit, unusually candid in its wording. In the past, we have tended to frame editorial roles mostly through their benefits, such as the implied prestige, the skills developed, an attractive CV line, and the professional networks acquired through the role. These things

are real, and there is nothing wrong with wanting them. Indeed, extrinsic motivation can be an extremely powerful driver of excellence and meaningful work (Ryan & Deci, 2000), acting synergistically with our inner passion for the craft (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). It has been also shown that when voluntary labour aligns with functional career goals and professional development, it serves as a healthy and highly protective driver of long-term commitment (Clary & Snyder, 1999). But surface benefits also attract candidates who may not be fully prepared for what actually lies beneath the shimmering surface: the sustained, effortful, often frustrating work that requires patience, resilience, love for the craft, and a genuine commitment to the field.

Exploitation is, of course, a real thing; so real, in fact, that the way we predominantly use the word tends to convey a very narrow sense. Its etymology, however, gives us two related but distinct meanings. The first is to exploit as to *take advantage*, or to extract something from someone without just return—for one-sided profit. The second is to exploit as to *put something to good use*, to develop a resource, or to make the most of what exists. The first is what my correspondent feared. The second, I will argue, is what actually describes editorial volunteering at its best.

The first meaning deserves its due, though. People get exploited all over the world—for their bodies, their minds, their money, their labour. Human nature has been endlessly creative in inventing ever more intricate and brutal forms of exploitation. Most of us can locate somewhere in our histories an episode we could classify as being exploited. If we cannot, we have been very fortunate indeed. And academia in particular is a sophisticated practitioner of exploitation in the extractive sense. We work within promotional structures that expect advanced-level performance before granting the title that legitimises it (Heffernan & Smithers, 2025). We accept flexible hours that become boundless ones, and contingent contracts that secure cheap labour under the name of opportunity. We also participate in a publishing system that responds to the academic ‘publish or perish’ reality by demanding the intellectual work of writing articles, peer reviewing, and editorial expertise, often charging all the involved parties extortionate amounts for both releasing and accessing that work, while packaging it as prestige for those who can afford to participate in the system, which—in Sioux McKenna’s (2026, para. 2) biting critique—indeed ‘sounds very much like a scam’. These systems of



exploitation shape careers, perpetuate injustice, damage health, and have become the water many of us swim in without noticing.

But the editorial labour that sustains a community-owned, open-access journal like ours is not that. It is labour given willingly and—we hope—with full knowledge of the terms. Indeed, the terms were spelled out plainly in our call for editors, and the complaint was precisely that we were perhaps too plain about them. This is also why it is important to emphasise that the labour put into *JLDHE* is not extracted for profit. The journal does not bring any money to the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education which underwrites it; to the contrary, it requires a dedicated budget to ensure that the scholarship we publish is well presented (via professional copyediting), accessible (via a hosting platform), and findable (via indexing, DOI numbers, and a website). The job of a voluntary editor may be bittersweet—in the sense of the word so marvellously explored by Susan Cain (2022): as a driving force, an ache to make a difference—but it is a job for those who ‘care enough to act’ (p. xxvi). This labour creates a venue for scholarship that would not otherwise exist, for and with a community held together by shared investment in a field. The second meaning of exploitation—developing what we have and bringing it to use—is thus the one that fits better here, and one our editorial board members share.

The distinction matters because collapsing all voluntary academic labour into ‘exploitation’ leaves us with nowhere to go. It cannot account for the difference between the unpaid Ph.D. supervisor, casualised lecturer, or examiner whose institution profits from their expertise, and the editorial board member who volunteers because the journal is theirs too. Both meanings deserve scrutiny, but they are not the same thing. And if we cannot say so, we lose the precision we need to actually fight the exploitation that does the damage.

We live in a moment when the boundaries between voluntary contribution and exploitation are necessarily contested. The reality of the gig economy, the constant threat of redundancies, the casualisation of academic labour, and the exploitative practices of many academic publishers rightly demand scrutiny. But scrutiny is most powerful when it is precise and discerning, and when it can offer us ways to direct our precious time and effort towards what brings us value—as Cain put it, ‘to investigate the bitter, and commit to the sweet’ (p. 15). This editorial, then, is also a kind of call for a clearer and more honest conversation about



what we owe each other in academic communities, and what it means to give, freely and knowingly, in a field we love.

Comprising five research papers, four case studies, two opinion pieces, one letter, and five book reviews, this issue is a collective work of authors, reviewers, and editors committed to the LD field. We invite you to engage, explore, discuss, contest, appreciate, and share these pieces with your teams and circles to keep these conversations dynamic and alive.

In the opening paper by Alexander Cuthbert and Ursula Canton, the authors consider the professional identity of learning developers. Specifically, they undertook a structured review of current learning development professional identity and practice literature with a focus on identifying potential limitations amongst this collective knowledge base. Based on findings, the authors also present a rationale for future work.

In the second paper, Zara Hooley and colleagues consider how diagnostic and self-reflective tools can be used to support diverse student groups. A mixed methods study was adopted that utilised a survey and reflections from practitioners and recurrent issues were identified through thematic analysis. Four key themes were identified; these related to student confidence, conditions for meaningful reflection, accessibility and engagement challenges and the design and delivery of supporting initiatives. Implications for learning development practice are also discussed.

Megha Kashyap's paper applies Feminist Systems Thinking as a decolonising praxis within higher education, interrogating the intersections of power, knowledge, coloniality, and institutional practice. Drawing on postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, it documents four years of action research leading institutional curriculum redesign, critical pedagogy workshops, and the incorporation of marginalised epistemologies. The work prioritises reflexivity, sustainability, and accountability, embedding decolonial practice within existing regulatory frameworks. Interventions enhanced student experiences and outcomes while advancing intersectional methodologies for social justice. The paper contributes to ongoing debates about universities' responsibilities in redressing colonial injustices and offers transferable models for equality, diversity, and inclusion in teaching and learning.

In 'Bridging the gap: motivations, challenges and early attainment among widening participation students in higher education', researchers from the University of Manchester



examine the differences in motivations, barriers and support for widening participation and non-widening participation students. This qualitative study was conducted through an online survey that was completed by 293 first- and second-year Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience undergraduate students at the University of Manchester. From their findings, Elizabeth McManus and colleagues argue that final degree awarding gaps are likely driven by pressures particularly experienced by widening participation students during their studies, such as finances and social exclusion, rather than intrinsic factors or academic under-preparedness at the beginning of their studies.

In the face of increasing pressures to assure the authenticity of student work and the integrity of students, many institutions have turned to policy to inscribe the guidelines that will allow the university community to be confident in using generative AI. However, through Critical Discourse Analysis, the final paper by David Yarwood shows that such policies are often framed in terms of surveillance and standardisation, rather than as opportunities for feedback and development. The danger of such control is that pedagogic innovations find little room to breathe. The involvement of staff in policy development is a crucial step in allowing full and best use of all the tools available to us as educators.

In the first case study, Steve Briggs and Ralitsa Kantcheva examine factors that impacted on academic language and learning development practitioners' reporting of access to professional development, professional recognition and internal promotion pathways. This study was supported by ALDinHE research funding and participants were recruited with the assistance of ICALLD. The authors compared the reported experience of participants based in the UK, Canada and New Zealand, with notable differences highlighted.

Fieldwork is a cornerstone of wildlife conservation education, yet it can present challenges relating to accessibility, cost, and environmental sustainability. In their case study, Danielle Hinchcliffe and Luiza Figueiredo Passos explore how immersive virtual reality (VR) can complement traditional field-based teaching by enabling students to engage in authentic ecological survey activities within a simulated environment. Drawing on a comparison of in-person and VR bird monitoring exercises, the study considers how different learning settings support the development of graduate skills relevant to conservation careers. The findings suggest that VR can broaden participation, reduce barriers to fieldwork, and provide valuable technological competencies alongside established practical skills.



We know that generative AI is biased—but how does this bias play out in more creative fields? India Lawton's case study reports on a workshop whereby students were tasked with creating their own summaries, extensions and images of a series of well-known fairy tales before asking CoPilot to do the same. In the subsequent critical analysis that took place among the group, students identified that the AI-generated images often conformed to Eurocentric beauty standards and gender tropes, for example, with the limitations of AI recognised as a productive learning moment; with clear evidence that it was not a neutral generator of text or image, the students underwent a transformation in their understanding of ethics, bias and subjectivity.

The case study co-authored by lecturers and a student (Manolchev et al.), presents an example of how AI and compassionate pedagogy can be successfully embedded into learning. The context is an undergraduate research methods module for Business and Law students. This module had previously been considered challenging, but once a compassionate approach to pedagogy had been added alongside AI training, student engagement and learning outcomes improved. The case study highlights that although compassionate pedagogy may be considered 'soft', with the right application there is potential for positive impact on learning.

In their thought-provoking opinion piece, Oliver Irvine and Glenn Hurst explore support for stammering in UK higher education. Demonstrating a lack of awareness and support for stammering, the authors make a convincing case for further research and support. Recognising and supporting stammering is even more important in the context of new technologies, changing assessments and new communication modalities.

Manesha Peiris's opinion piece demonstrates the emerging opportunity for Large Language Models (LLMs) to be used in the mediation of written assessment feedback. Arguing feedback sits in a 'third space' between educator intent and learner interpretation, LLMs are not framed as replacements for academic judgement. Instead, Peiris argues the potential for LLMs to serve as mediators that help make feedback more accessible, actionable, and emotionally manageable.

In Joy Igiebor's short essay, Virginia Woolf's important text 'A room of one's own' becomes a jumping off point for considering what it might take for a learning developer to feel empowered enough to write themselves and their practice into existence. Although Woolf



identified that women need space free from social expectations and constraints in order to write, Igiebor suggests instead that new and emerging learning developers would benefit from more communal and collaborative spaces where they can build their confidence, sharing ideas in low stakes and supportive environments.

Rabia Arshad's review of Ryan Arthur's *Ultimate Academic Writing Hacks* emphasises the book's practical focus. She draws attention to Arthur's conversational tone and the deliberate use of 'hacks' as an engaging way into evidence-informed academic writing, particularly in a GenAI-shaped landscape. She highlights the book's extensive use of examples and templates, alongside its coverage from assignments through to dissertations, as being particularly supportive for diverse student cohorts in contemporary higher education. Overall, Arshad argues that the text is an accessible student-facing resource with clear value for Learning Development practice.

In reviewing Sam Illingworth and Rachel Forsyth's *GenAI in Higher Education*, Hannele Diehl explores how the book responds to a rapidly shifting pedagogical context. She highlights its clarity, with learning outcomes and reflective activities guiding readers through ethical, practical, and educational questions. The emphasis on principles such as agency and trust is particularly valued, as is its relevance for those engaging with emerging forms of GenAI literacy. Diehl suggests that a more explicit framework for integrating GenAI into assessment would strengthen the discussion. Nonetheless, she emphasises that the book is a thoughtful and forward-looking contribution to AI-enhanced teaching and learning.

Jennifer Harper's review of Paula Beesley, Belinda Cooke, Laurence Morris, and Louise Warwick-Booth's *The Critical Thinking Toolkit* foregrounds its role in demystifying a concept that students often find difficult to grasp. She highlights the book's strength in translating critical thinking into concrete strategies embedded in everyday academic activity, from engaging with lectures to constructing arguments in assessment. This practical emphasis is seen as particularly valuable for students new to studying in higher education. At the same time, Harper notes the relatively limited engagement with theoretical frameworks and disciplinary specificity, which may constrain its depth. She ultimately presents the book as an adaptable starting point for developing students' critical engagement with their academic work.

Reflecting on *Stories of Hope: Reimagining Education*, edited by Sandra Abegglen, Tom Burns, Richard F. Heller, Rajan Madhok, Fabian Neuhaus, John Sandars, Sandra Sinfield, and Upasana



Gitanjali Singh, Alistair McCulloch situates the collection within a higher education sector under considerable strain. His review emphasises the book's positioning of hope not as optimism, but as a grounded and relational practice tied to action and agency.

He emphasises the collection's breadth, bringing together critical, creative, and collaborative approaches to reimagining educational futures. McCulloch presents the volume as a rich and thought-provoking contribution to ongoing debates about the purposes and possibilities of higher education.

In her review of Kevin Merry's *Better Assessment in Higher Education*, Lesley Raven presents the text as a concise and purposeful introduction to UDL-informed assessment. She praises Merry's reframing of assessment as a site of inclusion, shifting attention away from learner deficit and towards the design of learning environments. The book's structured approach, use of practical tools, and incorporation of reflective prompts are all highlighted, with specific appreciation for its attention to affect and authenticity. Raven ultimately argues that the book is a useful guide for developing inclusive assessment practices.

As ever, we thank all the reviewers who have contributed to making this issue a success. Without their voluntarily given labour, their commitment to the field, and their love for quality scholarship, our work would not be possible. Our heartfelt gratitude goes to:

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With very best wishes,

Alicja Syska

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## Disclosure statement

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

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