



EDITORIAL

On care, candour, and capacity: a pedagogy of patchwork

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As the autumn term begins, the demands of a new academic year leave little time for reflection. Yet even amidst these pressures, there is an opportunity, however brief, to consider what the past year has taught us. For the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher*

Education, the past twelve months have brought significant change, including the journal's indexing in Scopus. At the same time, recent *JLDHE* editorials have consistently reminded us that markers of progress must be understood alongside the lived realities of contemporary higher education (HE) (see Syska, 2025a, 2025b, 2026; Syska & McDonald, 2026). While these editorials have explored the pedagogy of care and kindness, this editorial turns to a necessary tension within such discussions: what does caring practice require when challenge and accountability cannot simply be removed? How do we sustain this practice when our own capacity is finite?

Contemporary HE is characterised by increasing complexity and fragmentation. Learning developers help students and colleagues navigate experiences that can otherwise feel disconnected, forming part of a wider network of often unseen relational labour within HE. The language of patchwork offers a powerful way of understanding such work. A particularly resonant expression of the metaphor can be found in Dolly Parton's (1971) *Coat of Many Colors*. In the song, Parton recounts how her mother stitched scraps of fabric into a coat and told a story that transformed it into a source of dignity and pride. The song is not about making do with too little, but rather about the capacity of skill, care, and interpretation to create value beyond conventional measures of status or worth. When applied to HE, the metaphor takes on a particular significance, reflecting the work of creating coherence from experiences and systems that can feel fragmented. But this metaphor must not be used to romanticise austerity; the scraps are a reality of an under-resourced sector. Patchwork reminds us that connection is not passive. Decisions must be made about what can be joined together and where tensions will remain, while recognising how much can reasonably be carried by individuals. Like patchwork itself, Learning Development requires care in forming relationships, candour about the realities shaping them, and attention to the capacity of those undertaking the work.

To stitch these pieces together sustainably, our approach can be rooted in Noddings' (2012) account of caring relations and Denial's (2024) pedagogy of kindness. Crucially, Denial distinguishes kindness from mere 'niceness'; kindness may require honesty, challenge, and the communication of difficult truths. This tension echoes Scott's (2017) account of radical candour, which combines caring personally with challenging directly. Whether in teaching, leadership, or mentoring, care without candour can leave people uncertain about what is



expected of them, while candour without care can reduce people to their performance. Learning, scholarship, and professional development depend upon our capacity to experience critique without interpreting it as attack, disagreement without assuming disrespect, and revision without equating it with failure. Without these distinctions, developmental dialogue becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Yet discussions of care often pay less attention to a difficult reality: care is practised within limits. The ability to offer developmental critique depends not only upon skill and goodwill, but also upon the time, emotional energy, and institutional support required to undertake such work.

JLDHE is one expression of that collective patchwork: a space in which diverse forms of expertise are brought into productive relationship. Peer review is one of the key practices through which this patchwork is made, connecting authors with a wider scholarly community. *JLDHE* has long understood effective peer review as both critical and supportive, with reviewers contributing not only to editorial judgement but also to the development of authors' work (Loughlin et al., 2020). At its best, reviewing is an act of scholarly care, combining the candour that enables scholarship to develop with respect for the person and the work before us. Care may not always be experienced as care in the moment. Engaging seriously with an author's work sometimes requires feedback that challenges and extends rather than merely reassures. But this approach has greater value than feedback consisting solely of praise, which leaves little room for development. As Robinson et al. (2023) argue, feedback is a relational practice grounded in dialogue, trust, and mutual vulnerability. Whatever the context, it should be offered neither as uncritical affirmation nor as an authoritative verdict, but through a candid conversation directed towards growth.

In holding care and candour together, attention must also be paid to capacity. Sustainable care demands reflection on what can realistically be offered and recognition of the time, emotional energy, or resources available to those providing care. The moment at which limits become visible is often the moment at which care itself comes under question. At times, the most caring response may be to acknowledge with honesty what cannot be provided. Paradoxically, those most committed to care may be most vulnerable to being perceived as uncaring when they are forced to say 'no' or prioritise competing demands. Rather than seeing such boundaries as evidence of a lack of care, they are best understood as an essential requirement of sustainable caring practice.



In the context of a journal, peer review cannot rely upon limitless availability. Reviewing should not be perceived as a benchmark of collegial commitment, and an inability to review at a particular moment should never be interpreted as an absence of collegiality. The responsibility for sustaining a reviewing community cannot rest upon the goodwill and endurance of individual reviewers. It requires editorial practices that are manageable and sensitive to the pressures colleagues are carrying. Building on *JLDHE*'s longstanding commitment to developmental peer review, we are therefore introducing revised reviewer forms this autumn. Their purpose is not to make reviews less rigorous, but to support reviewers in combining rigour with developmental care while clarifying expectations for reviewers and authors alike. In this way, the revised forms give practical expression to the approach advocated throughout this editorial.

If patchwork depends on collective efforts, it also depends upon renewal. Academic communities remain sustainable only when responsibility, expertise, and leadership are continually shared with others. One of the privileges of editing this journal is seeing new colleagues bring fresh ideas and renewed energy into the community. It is in this spirit that we were delighted to welcome six new editors to *JLDHE* this summer: Anabela Soares, Angela Newton, Elaine Hills, Mohamed Maher, Suparna Ghose, and Zhi (Michael) Ma, as well as one new member of our international Advisory Editorial Board, Sofia Shan.

A patchwork coat cannot shield us from institutional restructuring, nor should the language of community be used to romanticise or conceal systemic issues. Neither kindness nor goodwill can substitute for secure employment or adequate institutional support. What community can provide, however, is recognition, encouragement, and a sense of connection. If such communities are to remain developmental and sustainable, they depend upon care, candour, and capacity. Care without candour risks becoming empty affirmation; candour without care can become destructive judgement; and both are unsustainable when practised without regard for capacity. Developmental communities are not sustained by limitless care, but by forms of care that recognise and work within human limits. Patchwork is the ongoing work of bringing different pieces into relationship without erasing their distinctiveness. Stitched together with many hands and from many histories, this coat bears the marks of effort, challenge, negotiation, and compromise. It is neither seamless nor complete, but it remains something of value that we continue to make together.



Comprising nine papers, one case study, one opinion piece, and two book reviews, the contributions in this issue add further pieces to that patchwork, each offering a different perspective on the opportunities, challenges, and complexities that characterise contemporary HE.

In the first research paper, based on a cross-sectional survey of 131 students, Paula Abola demonstrates how AI literacy is associated with both the use of generative AI (gen AI) technologies and learning outcomes. The findings emphasise the importance of equitable access to AI literacy opportunities and the need to frame AI literacy as a core component of contemporary digital literacies. Abola argues that Learning Development must now focus on scaffolded guidance for prompt construction, reflective AI use, and responsible integration of gen AI into academic workflows.

In their paper, Roisin Donnelly and Ita Kennelly demonstrate the use of their Inquiry and Academic Writing (IAW) model. The IAW model prioritises student learning by focusing on four stages of inquiry and output: discovery and planning, developing and revising, reflecting and connecting, and sharing learning. The authors argue that, when used in practice, the model supports deeper learning and can enhance student engagement with writing and assessment. In pedagogic use, the model has potential to reframe assessment design and guidance, supporting the use of gen AI within the curriculum for student learning and writing instruction.

Deborah Fetter's study investigates how open-book and closed-book assessment formats affected student performance in an online Nutrition course. As current debates focus on academic integrity in the age of gen AI, the study offers insight into understanding the pedagogical value of open-book versus closed-book exams, providing new perspectives that may inform assessment design. The article makes the case for incorporating higher-level thinking into assessments and focused support for student motivation and self-regulation in the online learning context.

In their analysis, Mark Gallagher-Read and colleagues use semi-structured interviews with eight mature undergraduate students to explore how students build and make sense of their success in university. From these interviews, the authors argue that institutions must move beyond viewing resilience and isolated policy interventions as the primary means of supporting widening access students. Instead, they emphasise that student success is a



shared achievement, built through personal growth, supportive relationships, and responsive institutional environments.

The paper by Bryony Parsons and colleagues analyses how online tutorials focused on prompt literacy were used to enhance students' use of AI. Students who engaged were significantly more likely to produce well-structured prompts aligned with the CLEAR framework. The findings suggest that students may overestimate their prompting abilities, reinforcing the importance of self-reflection in supporting the effective and critical use of AI.

In their paper, Samantha Pugh and colleagues examine the challenge of integrating employability skills development within content-intensive Physics degrees through an evaluation of the White Rose Industrial Physics Academy (WRIPA). Drawing on survey responses from 185 Physics students across five UK universities, the research explores students' perceptions of career preparedness and employability. While students identified barriers including insufficient employer feedback, limited time, and frustration with the recruitment process, those who completed industrial placements or internships reported greater confidence in their employment readiness, highlighting the value of work-based experience alongside academic study.

Lilian Schofield and colleagues report on the integration of gen AI literacy across all three years of the BSc Business Management curriculum, with progression operationalised through increasing complexity in learning activities, assessment tasks, and expected levels of student autonomy. Using Zhou and Schofield's four dimensions of AI literacy as an analytical framework, the authors found that the curriculum supported students' development across all four dimensions: 'Know and Understand', 'Use and Apply', 'Evaluate and Create', and 'AI Ethics'. The findings suggest that AI literacy is most effectively developed through a structured, curriculum-wide approach that combines technical competence with critical reflection, ethical awareness, and informed decision-making.

Completion of a placement year has been shown to reduce awarding gaps among diverse student groups. However, it is the students who would most benefit who are often the most underrepresented on placement programmes. For their paper, Kelly Traynor and colleagues report on a series of focus groups that asked students to discuss the barriers that prevented them from participating in placements and to identify potential solutions to overcome these. The outcomes of these conversations suggested that three key areas need attention for



students to benefit from placements: informational, psychological, and practical, coupled with fair and transparent employer practices.

The final research paper focuses on assessment literacy and meaningful feedback, which operate best when combined successfully with student engagement at every stage of the process. Zeenat Soobedar de Villeneuve introduces the SHARP framework (i.e. Strategic, Holistic, Adaptive, Reflective, Process) that involves students in assessment design. The framework was piloted with Foundation Mathematics students who reported increased clarity and perceptions of fairness, suggesting improvements to practice. The approach therefore has scope for wider application to other subjects and contexts.

Lucy Barker's case study explores what can happen when educational practices are transformed to ensure they are truly inclusive, through the introduction of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Barker developed the NURTURE scaffold as a critical lens for curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional culture, supporting the learning of a diverse student body through multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. Taking the work of bell hooks and Paulo Freire as a starting point, NURTURE in the context of UDL becomes a framework for social justice, troubling and interrogating the architecture of exclusion. The practical decision trees presented in this case study support educators in creating barrier-aware, inclusive learning environments for all students.

Mark Frohnsdorff's opinion piece examines the ongoing tensions we face about the use, effectiveness, and adoption of learning outcomes in HE. These tensions resonate with educators and students alike, signalling that poorly written learning outcomes can cause 'friction' and create barriers for learning. He proposes seven principles for readers to reflect upon, encouraging us to think about how we can reduce frictions that surround learning outcomes. Frohnsdorff also suggests that learning developers can play a pivotal role in reviewing and giving feedback to peers to identify where friction may have crept into the learning experience.

In the first of the two book reviews in this issue, Matthew Clark and Sophie V. Ellis explore Joy Igiebor's *Doing Learning Development in Higher Education*, foregrounding the book's compassionate approach to supporting new and early career learning developers. Alongside its wealth of practical guidance, the book offers a candid exploration of the personal and professional challenges of the role. Clark and Ellis praise Igiebor's ability to connect



pedagogical rationale with the everyday realities of Learning Development practice. They also emphasise the book's relevance beyond its primary audience, especially given its reflections on evidencing impact and the evolving nature of the profession. For Clark and Ellis, Igiebor's book offers an inclusive guide that makes a persuasive case for Learning Development's vital position within contemporary HE.

Lastly, Chad McDonald's review of David J. Dixon's *Walking Tours for Academic Skills: London* explores how the workbook moves academic skills teaching out into the city. He highlights its place-based approach, which encourages students to think critically through close observation and shared interpretation of their surroundings. By exploring the city together, students may build connections with one another while developing greater familiarity with the place in which they study. McDonald presents the book as an imaginative contribution to Learning Development whose underlying pedagogy can be adapted beyond London, inviting practitioners to reconsider where learning takes place and how local environments can support critical enquiry.

We conclude, as ever, by thanking those who have served as reviewers for *JLDHE*. Although their contributions are rarely visible to readers, they are fundamental to the intellectual quality and collegial life of the journal. Through careful reading, candid feedback, and developmental generosity, reviewers help authors strengthen their work and contribute to the evolving scholarship of the field. Recognition cannot resolve the pressures surrounding voluntary academic labour, but it can resist the assumption that such work is incidental, limitless, or owed.

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With very best wishes,

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

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