Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education ISSN: 1759-667X
Issue 23: March 2022

Engaging students online: an analysis of students' motivations for seeking individual learning development support

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Abstract

In the context of increased concerns about student engagement across the higher education sector, which have intensified subsequent to the rapid transition to online delivery in March 2020, this small-scale research project aimed to explore the motivations for student engagement in self-selecting learning development (LD) online tutorials. The study used a mixed methods approach, including an online survey (n=43) and online interviews (n=5). The sample comprised undergraduate and postgraduate volunteers recruited from a pool of LD tutorial users (n=390) within the project timeframe (October 2020-April 2021). The generalisability of findings is limited by the low response rate as well as age bias. The main driver for engagement reported was participants' limited confidence in their own academic writing abilities, which was consistently linked to attainment. Engagement was further motivated by a range of perceived impacts, including improved confidence, awareness of academic conventions, and higher grades. In this context, the main challenge was limited availability of support. Participants reported a generally positive attitude towards online delivery. Qualitative data from both the survey and interviews were further investigated using a discourse analysis framework. One key finding was that the path to LD engagement is often mediated by academic authority figures, who may exert a significant impact on learner self-views. Key recommendations for learning developers include maximising the potential of lessons learned from the enforced pivoting to online delivery to underpin the developmental dimensions of LD, with the ultimate goal of promoting learner confidence and growth.

Keywords: learning development tutorials; one-to-one support; student engagement; online learning; Covid-19.

Introduction

Engaged students have consistently been found to achieve better academic outcomes than their peers (Reyes et al., 2012; Bond et al., 2020). In this context, whilst student engagement has been at the forefront of educational research and practice for the past 15 years (Lowe and El Hakim, 2020), significant questions are yet to be resolved, with recent research calling for a more careful conceptualisation of the term. In a recent review of 243 studies on student engagement, Bond et al. (2020) found that 'few. . . provided a definition. . .and less than half were guided by a theoretical framework' (p.1).

This study will adopt the position that student engagement is a complex term which can be best viewed as a meta-construct encompassing a set of behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions (Henrie et al., 2015). Behavioural engagement is often linked with observable behaviours such as attendance, completion of tasks or interaction with others. As behavioural engagement is more easily quantifiable, it tends to dominate both research and policy to the detriment of less visible, but equally important dimensions (Bond et al., 2020). For example, it could be argued that none of these behaviours advance learning unless underpinned by cognitive engagement, which refers to the mental effort that learners make to develop knowledge and skills. Furthermore, educational psychologists have shown that the motivation to undertake this effort often relies on emotional engagement (Reyes et al., 2012; Mega et al., 2014), which encapsulates feelings about personal learning such as excitement, frustration or boredom, as well as the sense of belonging to a learning community.

This study does not aim to enforce distinctions between these complementary and often overlapping aspects of engagement (Bond et al., 2020), but rather to dwell on this tripartite conceptual perspective to examine self-reported motivations for engagement in learning development (LD) tutorials at a UK university. In doing this, the study hopes to advance LD practice and pedagogy by providing a more in-depth understanding of learners' support seeking motivations, which can inform a range of student engagement interventions.

Alongside its broader focus on engagement, the study explores student responses to technology-mediated learning in the specific context of the Covid-19 crisis. Even in the

pre-Covid era, scholars such as Henrie et al. (2015) had called for further research into student engagement with online learning experiences, highlighting that traditional approaches devised to measure face-to-face engagement cannot be adequately transferred to this context. More recently, researchers investigating the pivot to online delivery in response to the global pandemic have identified a number of specific challenges. These included students' negative response to online learning – both affective and behavioural (Bao, 2020; Tang et al., 2020) – communication barriers (Bao, 2020) and the enhanced risk of 'shallow' learning experiences (Bryson and Andres, 2020). All of these render the impetus to investigate the specific mechanisms of student engagement in the current online learning context even more pressing.

Another problematic area in student engagement research is the persistent bias towards large-scale quantitative approaches (Bond et al., 2020). This trend might have been determined by institutional and broader sector pressures, which require engagement data to be unequivocally linked to objective outcome measures. However, effective LD practice pivots around an understanding of 'each student's context and background' (McIntosh and Barden, 2019, p.4) as well as individual learning practices and needs. To address these concerns, this study adopts a mixed methods, predominantly qualitative approach, including a discourse analysis framework adapted from Goodfellow (2005) to probe further into individual learner experiences and identities.

Research aim

The aim of this project is to develop a more in-depth understanding of the drivers for student engagement with online LD tutorials at a UK university. It is expected that the findings can be used to inform promotion of support to students, as well as boost student engagement with a more diverse range of learning opportunities, including independent study resources.

The following objectives have been derived from this research aim:

- To identify what reasons students provide for their decision to book one-to-one online LD tutorials.
- To analyse student responses using (1) descriptive statistical analysis, (2) thematic analysis and (3) a discourse analysis framework.
- To derive recommendations for LD practice.

Discourse analysis framework

To provide a more in-depth investigation into the subtle mechanisms of student engagement with an online writing resource, Goodfellow (2005) turns to a discourse analysis framework from Gee (2005). Gee (2005, p.21) defines discourse as the individual use of language and behaviour to enact any form of 'socially recognizable identity', and refers to the specific mechanisms through which language performs this as 'reality-building tasks'.

Goodfellow (2005, p.487) finds three of Gee's 'building tasks' particularly relevant to his analysis of student reflections on online engagement. These categories refer to how students use their words to enact (1) 'identities', or their self-views, (2) 'social goods', that is individuals and networks associated with status and power, and (3) 'sign systems and knowledge', which include any language varieties or claims to knowledge that are privileged over others.

By adopting these focal points, Goodfellow's approach is able to move beyond the surface dimensions of engagement and into the subtle drivers and belief systems that underpin its subtler dimensions – the cognitive and the emotional. Therefore, this study relies on a framework adapted from Goodfellow's work to tease out the relationships between:

1) Students' communication of their own identities as learners.
2) Their positioning within a set of academic power structures.
3) Their perspectives on academic literacies and knowledge systems.

In unpicking these categories, the study also makes reference to a further 'building task' of language borrowed from Gee (2005, p.32), that of 'significance', which refers to the way in which words are used to render certain aspects of experience more significant than others.

Methods

The study used a mixed methods approach, consisting of an online survey and an online interview. The survey was created and distributed using Microsoft Forms and included both closed and open-ended questions. Online interviews with a duration of approximately 15 minutes were conducted, recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams. Automatically generated transcripts were then manually checked and anonymised. A semi-structured interview format was used to provide participants with the opportunity to provide more in-depth responses to the project's research questions. It was hoped that by deploying a simple, partly quantitative, questionnaire, the research would overcome issues around survey fatigue (Van Mol, 2017), whereas the qualitative tools will provide the opportunity to collect richer data from those respondents willing to engage.

Context and recruitment

LD services are available to all registered students and alumni at this UK university. At the time the study was conducted, the LD tutorial offer consisted of 30-minute individual online appointments to support with 'writing, study skills and academic practice', as advertised via the library website. Users could opt for an 'email tutorial', with written feedback to be provided within 24 hours, or a 'live online tutorial', with feedback provided synchronously. The criterion for inclusion in the study was users having booked an LD tutorial within a 7-month period (October 2020-April 2021).

According to data extracted from tutorial booking forms, during this period, 1,080 bookings were made by 390 individual users, who were emailed an invitation to complete an online survey and/or take part in an online interview. The data collection window remained open for approximately 6 weeks from the date of the initial invitation, and a reminder was

emailed before the closing date, a technique which has been proven effective in boosting response rates (Van Mol, 2017).

The online survey recorded a total of 43 responses, and six users responded to the invitation to take part in an interview (See Appendix 1 for demographic data). One participant withdrew after their interview was scheduled, without providing a reason. Therefore, the final interview sample consisted of five participants.

Generalisability

To interrogate the generalisability of findings, the demographic characteristics of the study sample were compared to those of the LD user population at this institution (Appendix 1). The validity of this comparison is limited by the fact that, on account of institutional processes and data protection procedures, the most recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) verified data available at the time of writing reflected the academic year 2017/18. However, a 5-year overview of retrospective data (2013-2018) showed consistent trends with regard to the selected characteristics.

The average age of respondents in the study sample was higher than that of LD self-selecting users at this institution, including a significantly higher percentage of students in the over-24 age group. The study sample also had a larger proportion of postgraduate research students, which correlates with this age range. This suggests caution needs to be taken when extending study findings to younger students. While a much smaller number of males than females were included in both the survey and interview samples, a similar gender bias is reflected in the broader population of LD users. This gender distribution aligns with previous research findings that females are more likely than males to seek LD support (Reeves, 2018). As regards the characteristic of disability, while a number of participants reported one or more disabilities, the corresponding percentage is slightly lower in the sample than in the LD user population.

These limitations of the study sample, and in particular the low response rate and age bias, should be taken into account when considering these findings in the context of the wider student population. Generalisability is further limited by the fact that the study is

based exclusively on voluntary participation and self-reporting. While the recruitment invitation was emailed to all users booking an LD tutorial within a 7-month period, no incentives were offered for participation other than the opportunity to potentially inform future provision, so it was interesting to note the higher response rate from the over-24 age group. This could indicate that more mature students are less likely to be affected by survey fatigue, and more likely to take a proactive attitude towards shaping teaching and learning. Despite these limitations, the data collected provide a valuable insight into the online learning experiences of respondents.

Data analysis

The quantitative data collected through the survey were extracted and investigated using Microsoft Excel tools. The qualitative data from both survey and interviews were coded using the NVivo 12 Pro software. In stage one of data analysis, a thematic approach was used to identify self-reported motivations for engagement in online LD tutorials. In stage two, a discourse analysis framework (adapted from Goodfellow, 2005 and Gee, 2005) was applied to further probe the factors underpinning student-identified motivations.

Ethical considerations

The project received ethical approval from the university HLS Research Ethics Committee. Participation in the research was voluntary, and the recruitment email was accompanied by a Participant Information Sheet. As the online survey was fully anonymous, consent was collected through the first survey question (mandatory). Interview participants were asked to sign and return a Participant Consent Form. The research also protects participant confidentiality by presenting the data collected in a fully anonymised form.

Results and discussion

The survey began with a multiple-choice question on motivations for tutorial booking, therefore likely to elicit initial reflections on behavioural dimensions of engagement. Respondents were instructed to select all applicable answers (Table 1):

Table 1. Top drivers for booking a tutorial (n=43, multiple options allowed).

1. I was looking to improve my writing	38
2. I was looking to improve my grades	26
3. Feedback received on my work	26
4. Advice from LD/Library staff	16
5. Advice from module lecturer or similar	14
6. I needed support with my disability or learning difference	6

All survey participants who reported a disability or learning difference highlighted disability support as part of their motivation for booking a tutorial. In a follow-up open-ended question, respondents were asked to indicate the most important of the options previously selected, which was expected to stimulate references to other dimensions of engagement. The majority of respondents opted for either 'looking to improve my writing' or 'looking to improve my grades'. One participant explained how these two aspects are correlated:

> The most important is looking to improve my grades. With this mindset, everything else will follow. If you want to improve your grades, you would find ways to improve your writing and clarify feedback received on my work. (survey)

This confirms suggestions from previous literature that 'the development of a student's writing ability has come to be seen as practically synonymous with the acquisition of knowledge' (Goodfellow, 2005). One participant explicitly related their seeking support to a lack of confidence about the standard of work produced:

> To get feedback on the current standard of my work, it is very hard to know where you are at and how to improve it. (survey)

These responses unequivocally illustrate how student support-seeking behaviour is complexly supported by a nexus of interlinked emotional and cognitive motivations. More specific areas for support seeking (Table 2) broadly correlate to domains of LD provision mapped in previous studies (e.g. Gibbs, 2009):

Table 2. Key areas of support seeking (n=43, multiple options allowed).

1. Structure	34
2. Criticality	27
3. Academic style	25
4. Proofreading/grammar	20
5. Research methods	14
6. Avoiding plagiarism	9

Similar reasons for booking tutorials were reported by interview participants, with some additionally mentioning anxieties around having English as a second language. Most interview participants referred in some detail to lack of confidence in the standard of writing produced, with one participant reflecting that 'sometimes I don't know what I don't know' (Interview 2), which is why she valued the support from the LD tutor in helping identify any problem areas. All of these engagement stimuli hint at the role of LD in helping students 'make sense of learning activities and academic practices' (Hilsdon, 2011, p.14). Furthermore, motivations referencing disabilities or limited exposure to academic culture foreground the potential of LD provision to support students with 'marginal learner identities' in achieving their goals in HE (McIntosh and Barden, 2019, p.4).

Perceived impact

Most survey respondents and all interview participants further motivated their engagement through qualitative comments on the positive impact of LD online tutorials. 38 out of 43 survey respondents described this impact in generic terms, using words such as 'helpful/helped' (22 references), 'useful' (4 references), 'efficient' (3 references), 'excellent' (3 references), or even 'perfect' (2 references):

> I've been out of education for over 20 years, each session has provided me with some useful support information. (survey)

Impact on learning was explicitly referenced in all five interviews and by five out of 43 survey participants:

> I learned many, many things which I didn't know before. If I didn't attend… tutorial, I wouldn't know even 5% of what I learned. I am so grateful for this… support…It is so…perfect. (Interview 2)

Confidence boosting was also explicitly referenced by four interview and three survey respondents:

> It was easy to understand how to improve and gave me confidence to write better. (survey)

One survey participant further stated that tutorial attendance had a positive impact on their wellbeing, describing the time spent in tutorials as 'therapeutic'.

Impact on attainment

While feedback was not explicitly sought on the impact of tutorial engagement on academic outcomes, attainment was mentioned as one of the main motivations for booking a tutorial. Consequently, the generic impact statements outlined above can arguably provide some evidence of respondent perception that tutorials had a positive effect on their academic attainment. Five respondents (one interview, four survey) explicitly reported that LD support helped improve their grades:

> All of my lecturers provided me good feedback that helped me improve my papers or assessments. I learned new things along the way and I received good marks from the subjects I sought advise. (survey)

Furthermore, 90% of survey respondents agreed that, based on their current experience of online tutorials, they were either very likely (80%) or likely (10%) to book another tutorial. 88% of survey respondents rated their overall experience as Excellent (59%) or Good (29%), with the remaining 12% selecting a rating of 'average'.

Feedback

Feedback has long been acknowledged to be a crucial teaching and learning tool (Biggs and Tang, 2007), implying that perceived quality of feedback can, in turn, influence student engagement. 38 out of 43 survey respondents, and all interview respondents, provided comments on the quality of tutorial feedback, which all included positive generic evaluations. A number of respondents identified specific features of feedback such as 'constructive' (2 references), 'clear/easy to understand' (2 references) and 'relevant' (1 reference). These features are recognised in the literature as the key characteristics of effective feedback (e.g. Brookhart, 2008; Gikandi et al., 2011).

LD lecturers were described using words such as 'supportive' (5 references), 'knowledgeable' (2 references) and 'non-judgmental' (1 reference):

> I honestly think all… are excellent-ever so ready to reach out to offer help and support beyond one's expectations. (survey)

In terms of specific approaches to feedback, one interview respondent linked the effectiveness of tutorials to tutors' ability to highlight strengths as well as areas for improvement. Two other interviewees referred to learning by example/tutor modelling the revision of drafts as highly effective tutoring tools. The benefits of being provided with a tutor-written record of feedback were highlighted by one survey and two interview respondents. One survey respondent was highly appreciative of video feedback.

The main suggestion for improvement was that more time was needed for concerns to be explained and fully addressed in tutorials (eight references). One interview respondent suggested that tutorial time would be used more efficiently if tutors reviewed the work submitted in advance and used the live tutorials only to share and discuss feedback. One survey respondent indicated their preference for more detailed rather than synoptic feedback.

These findings clearly indicate a need for flexibility in the tutorial encounter, in acknowledgement of learners' diverse needs and preferences; consequently, a genuinely effective, inclusive LD provision would need to include multiple forms of feedback and/or

delivery, as well as the opportunity for flexible timing. Whilst meeting all these criteria could potentially require considerable resources, the student voices in this research suggest that impact would also be significant, covering a range of key areas of learner development, from enhanced academic outcomes to heightened wellbeing.

Barriers to engagement

The main barriers to engagement reported by both survey and interview participants were availability and convenience of tutorial slots. With regard to delivery mode, a greater number of survey participants stated that they prefer online tutorials to face-to-face tutorials (Table 3). Interview participants used the opportunity to express more nuanced preferences, acknowledging the benefits of both options. Of these, one remote-learning participant expressed a decisive preference for online delivery, whereas three others stated a preference for face-to-face tutorials.

Table 3. Delivery preference (survey data).

Prefer online tutorials	18 (42%)
Prefer face to face tutorials	13 (30%)
No preference	9 (21%)
No answer	3 (7%)

The main extrinsic benefits of online tutorials were seen as access and convenience, including overcoming barriers to behavioural engagement such as distance learning, commuting, work commitments, health problems and caring responsibilities. Some respondents referred to the specific benefits of online learning in the context of the pandemic, such as feeling 'safer' (survey) and avoiding travel, with one participant highlighting that online tutorials have been a 'lifeline' during the coronavirus lockdown (Interview 5). Intrinsic advantages described by some participants included improved clarity and efficiency, due to being 'shown everything clearly online' (survey) or having a tutor-produced record of feedback, which was regarded as an effective learning tool as well as time-saving.

The participants also identified barriers to engagement in online tutorials that can be linked to behavioural as well as cognitive dimensions. The most important of these were connection issues and being more easily distracted.

Benefits of in-person tutorials focused in particular on emotional engagement, including 'better communication and clarity' (survey) through interpersonal contact, use of facial expressions and body language. A survey participant justified their preference for in-person tutorials by the fact that 'direct talking to a person is more natural than using technology'. An interview participant explained their preference in terms of their temperament, describing themselves as a 'people's person' (Interview 5). Another interview participant alluded to the potential of in-person tutorials to build a better rapport with the tutor, which she linked to the concept of 'social capital'. Interestingly enough, participants who reported reluctance to engage in face-to-face tutorials also referred to emotional dimensions of support seeking, such as being 'embarrassed' and 'shy' (survey).

A number of participants stated that the quality of LD tutorials remained the same, or improved, with the transition to online delivery:

> Right now it's just excellent… I really like everything that the library or you offered for this online. Even during the lockdown, I still feel it's very efficient. It doesn't make any differences in terms of the time, the waiting time or… the support or the efficiency during the session. It's all worked very well. (Interview 3)

Alternatively, some participants stated they had not experienced a face-to-face tutorial, which arguably limits their ability to provide a reliable comparative perspective between online and in-person delivery. Notwithstanding, these responses clearly suggest the potential of online delivery modes to enhance inclusivity and thus address some gaps of in-person LD provision.

Discourse analysis framework findings

A discourse analysis framework can shed further light on the engagement dimensions outlined above, by scanning the language used by participants for traces of the subtler

mechanisms that triggered their choices. This framework is particularly pertinent to the analysis of interview data, where respondents were involved in a spontaneous conversational exchange, but the qualitative survey data were also included. Yet, it should be pointed out that the more rigid nature of the survey form may have inhibited choice of vocabulary and linguistic structures, which would limit the relevance of analysis. As previously stated in the Methods section, the analysis centred around three discursive categories: learner identity, perceptions of authority and power, and representations of academic literacies and disciplinary knowledge.

Learner identities

Most participants represented their own identity as learners in negative terms, as lacking in confidence, ability and knowledge. One interview participant expressed this as 'I don't know what I don't know' (Interview 2). Interestingly, in reference to the impact of tutorials, most participants were able to refer to their learning in positive terms, such as having learned 'many many things (Interview 2)', as well as developing understanding, confidence and skills during their learning journey:

> really I can say you really helped me to understand how to articulate my writing. Especially how to …what to put in a paragraph… things like that… when I came at [university name] I really didn't know very well how to do it. (Interview 3)

It was concerning to note that the study sample, which included a significant proportion of advanced level students (postgraduate research), persistently conveyed associations between support seeking and weakness or deficit:

> I didn't have any reason to book a [LD] tutorial…until I was advised because of my poor academic writing. (Interview 5)

Over the past decade, LD scholars have consistently worked to disassociate LD from deficit discourses, instead promoting its developmental dimension, focused on mediating learner independence (e.g. Hilsdon, 2011; McIntosh and Barden, 2019). However, these debates have been carried out predominantly from an institutional or disciplinary

perspective. These findings suggest that to address this goal, further attention needs be paid to students' perception of LD support.

Power structures

A significant number of survey respondents linked their engagement in LD tutorials to advice from markers/disciplinary lecturers and library/LD staff (see Table 1 above). The input of the supervisor was mentioned by one interview respondent:

> the reason I booked a [LD] tutorial was following supervision during the Covid period. And [supervisor] suggested because of my academic writing is weak. (Interview 5)

The extract above illustrates how, in the process of referral or signposting, staff come to be seen as authority figures, with an impact on students' perceptions of themselves, their abilities and their needs. A similar process is depicted by another respondent in relation to a writing development consultant:

> I remember one of the ladies, she'd had an American education, and she explained to me … American writing style or American phrases or even spelling, it's not recognised here, and I think because she understands where I came from and that made me feel I wanted to master my British vocabulary. (Interview 3)

At the same time, some comments on the rapport built with the LD tutor showed evidence of a more balanced power dynamic, as represented by such phrases as 'share all my problems' (survey), have a 'conversation' (survey), 'mutual understanding' (survey), 'share all my thoughts and feelings and points of view' (Interview 5).

Whilst one of the main goals of LD remains supporting students to 'make sense of academic and professional practices' (McIntosh and Barden, 2019), this goal can be at risk if students fail to see the role of LD staff as facilitators of teaching and learning, regarding them instead as academic gatekeepers. This theme prompts the need for learning developers to actively reflect on our position within a concatenation of institutional power structures and consistently work on empowering learners to become partners in teaching

and learning. One way in which this can be achieved is by developing not just students' awareness of, but also critical engagement with, different knowledge systems and associated writing practices.

Knowledge systems

Respondents referred to a range of features which they represented as 'significant' (Gee, 2005, p.32) markers of good quality academic writing. This theme was more prevalent in the interview than the survey data, potentially due to the fact that the interview format is conducive to richer information sharing. Features that were portrayed as most significant included critical analysis (4 references), using evidence (3 references), appropriate structure (3 references), relevance to set purpose (2 references), style (2 references) and flow (2 references). Two participants shared their understanding and application of 'critical writing':

> giving evidence and analyse… it. So I think I understand critical writing (Interview 2)

> but now when I'm writing I would say what is the topic sentence? What is the voice of …experts? Where is my comments? Conclusion? (Interview 4)

While the Interview 2 extract explains the structure of critical writing by resorting to widely-used terms such as description and analysis, the Interview 4 extract makes some recognisable references to an in-house model which relies on three components, or 'voices': (1) The Tour Guide Voice (introducing the topic of discussion); (2) The Expert Voice (integrating evidence from literature), and (3) The Critical Voice (critical comments on this evidence/concluding remarks). The language used indicates the respondents regard these approaches as significant in the development of good quality writing, as well as feeling confident in explaining them back to the interviewer, who is also a member of the LD team.

One participant regarded competent use of British academic language as a significant marker of successful transition from an American to a UK higher education context:

> British words and phrases. That's the classical beautiful language that I want to master. (Interview 3)

Overall, this theme evidenced that most participants were able to identify key academic writing expectations for their level and context but had limited level of confidence in applying these conventions in their own writing practice, and/or independently evaluating their outputs. This resonates with all three dimensions of engagement – cognitive, emotional and behavioural – and can potentially be sustained through an emphasis on active writing and hands-on approaches in LD sessions. At the same time, such a practical focus could encourage students towards a more critical engagement with academic and disciplinary conventions, which, as previously stated, could, in turn, boost their confidence and independence.

Conclusion

Overall, the study participants reported that the main driver for behavioural engagement in LD tutorials was lack of confidence in their academic writing abilities, which were perceived as interlinked with overall academic attainment. This corroborates suggestions from previous literature that writing skills have come to dominate UK HE assessment (Goodfellow, 2005). Both survey and interview participants further explained their motivation for tutorial engagement through reference to a range of positive learning impacts, including better understanding of academic writing conventions, enhanced levels of confidence, and improved academic outcomes. Therefore, the data collected provide compelling evidence of the role of one-to-one LD tutorials in supporting students in feeling 'engaged and empowered in their learning community', which Bond et al. (2020, p.3) describe as a core element of engagement as well as a key predictor of both short and long-term achievement.

To maximise this impact as well as bolster learner independence, the most popular areas of support seeking identified (see Table 2) can be used to inform the organisation and more effective promotion of the LD self-study provision. These priority areas could also be relevant to the design of curricular as well as co-curricular teaching and learning activities.

The data collected also indicate a generally positive response to online delivery. This provides a different perspective to a number of early Covid-era studies (Bao, 2020; Tang et al., 2020), which identified widespread negative attitudes to online delivery among their student samples. In the current project, qualitative comments clearly show a preoccupation with the availability and effectiveness of support rather than the delivery mode *per se*. Both survey and interview respondents associated online delivery with a range of intrinsic as well as extrinsic benefits, with 42% of survey respondents identifying online delivery as their preferred tutorial method, and further 21% showing no delivery preference. These findings support the view that an enhanced level of online tutorial delivery (as compared to pre-Covid provision) can complement and enhance in-person delivery. In particular, online delivery can be effective in removing access barriers for students with a preference for remote study due to location, complex commitments or health conditions.

Scrutinising these data through a discourse analysis framework further revealed that LD engagement is frequently mediated by academic authority figures, who can exert a significant impact on learner confidence and autonomy. Therefore, the most challenging task for learning developers remains to sustain flexible, learner-responsive provision, underpinned by effective partnerships with both learners and staff stakeholders, and consistently informed by the developmental dimensions of LD. In view of the study limitations, in particular sample bias and reliance on student self-reported data, further research focused on alternative samples and methods would be beneficial in endorsing and refining these findings.

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Appendix 1: demographic data

1.a Age

Age	Under 18	18-24	Over 25
Survey	1 (2%)	10 (23%)	31 (75%)
Interview	Not collected		
LD Self-selecting (2017/18*)	5 (0.2%)	1560 (70%)	668 (29.8%)

1.b Gender distribution

Gender	Female	Male	Other
Survey	34 (81%)	8 (19%)	0
Interview	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	0

LD self-selecting (2017/18*)	1708 (77%)	525 (23%)	N/A

1.c Disability profile

Disability	Yes	No disability reported	Prefer not to say
Survey	6 (14%)	35 (81%)	2(5%)
Interview	1 (20%)	4 (80%)	0
LD Self-selecting (2017/18*)	648 (29%)	1585 (71%)	N/A

Disability type	Dyslexia/SpLD	Medical condition	Other
Survey	3 (7%)	3 (7%)	0
Interview	0	0	1 (20%)
LD Self-selecting (2017-18*)	348 (15.5%)	51 (2.3%)	249 (11.2%)

1.d Level of study

Level	Undergraduate	PG taught	Research
Survey	34 (79%)	6 (14%)	3 (7%)
Interview	3 (60%)	0	2 (40%)
LD Self-selecting (2017-18*)	1919 (86%)	252 (11%)	65 (3%)

*Self-selecting LD data are collected, processed and then HESA-verified, a process which has been delayed during the Covid-19 crisis; data were extracted from the most recently available dashboards at the time of writing:

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