

## **CHAPTER 13: The View From Over Here: What the students think about learning development**

### **Introduction**

Overall, it's been very positive because, you know, they're that bit further along than you are in the academic journey and they've been where you are as well. So they kind of know what it is that you're going through and, kind of, I guess, know how to get the best out of you (Creative Arts undergraduate student)

University can be both a wonderful and a confusing place for students (Burns & Sinfield, 2022) and Learning Development is there to work alongside them to help them decode, critique and succeed in HE. Learning Development (LD) broadly includes personal academic tutors, Learning Developers, academic mentors, peer coaches, student union advisors and heads of student experience. Whilst this plethora of support might be designed with the best of intentions, how is the time-poor student (Tones, Fraser & White 2009) meant to discover, value and harness this support? And how do students perceive LD roles and systems in relation to their learning, within their discipline or with respect to higher education as a whole?

In this chapter, we consider LD from the student perspective, by speaking with students about their experiences of working with Learning Developers and asking them to reflect on the value of these interactions. We are just as interested in why students might not

interact with these services as this will seed the opportunity to rethink current LD provision across the sector. Of course we interviewed and co-authored this chapter with students who had engaged, but they revealed the reasons they were hesitant in the first place, which throws light on this issue.

## **Method**

We adopted a qualitative approach and engaged in opportunity sampling (Bell and Waters, 2018) - harnessing existing staff-student networks, inviting conversations with students who may have engaged across a range of LD offerings.

In practice we invited students at undergraduate and postgraduate level, across two universities (one Oxbridge and one widening participation [WP]) and from a range of disciplines including social sciences, the sciences and the creative arts, to reflect upon their experiences with Learning Development. Key questions covered in the interviews included:

How did your university welcome you, draw you in and make you feel part of the academic community (and was this a successful strategy)?

How did your university flag up that there was additional support available to you (and was that a successful strategy)?

What is your experience as a student of working with Learning Developers?

What are your and other students' perceptions of its value for your learning?

Why do you and your peers engage - or not - with Learning Development?

What do you value in Learning Development and how would you remake Learning Development?

What would you like Learning Developers to know about your student perspective?

We used the questions as prompts to initiate conversations, encouraging students to describe their engagement with Learning Developers and Learning Development within their daily student lives (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). To analyse the data, we took a thematic analysis approach (Lyons & Coyle, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2022) and then explored with the students the descriptions given.

Thus, we worked with the students as partners in this research, inviting them to be both participants and co-authors (Bowstead, 2011), in an effort to break down institutional hierarchies and facilitate a transformative knowledge experience between ourselves and our students (Molinari, 2022). The students gave informed consent and had the right to withdraw from the project at any time - without reason.

The limitations of this study is the small sample spanning two institutions, therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to make a definitive claim. What it does offer is an insight to students' experiences of LD. The collaborative nature of the exercise also presents one example of students as partners in research and writing as good practice when eliciting students' feedback on LD.

## How did your university welcome you?

It was, I think, a really successful way of us having a lot of fun, being able to experiment a lot in terms of how we were interacting with the lectures, with the lab content, because we knew it didn't count for our assessments. Then, you know, later on in the degree when it came to choosing supervisors for various presentations or for things like my Masters project, you know, you had just from that original four weeks a much better idea, I think of the variety of research that was going on in Oxford than we would have had otherwise. (Sciences postgraduate student)

The ways in which students are welcomed into a range of academic communities are important, impacting on cohort identity and retention (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Arthur & Huda, 2023). Students are typically acutely aware of not knowing anyone on arrival at university and how this might impact on them and their progress (Burns & Sinfield, 2022). We discovered 'welcome' strategies that are diverse, and they also vary in terms of their perceived success. These strategies are also bound up in the contemporary socio-economic climate of HE, with its emphasis on academic continuation and progression.

The Oxbridge example was perhaps the most surprising for LD who work in WP institutions. Alongside dinners and quiz nights with personal and subject tutors within induction week, an active and integrative 'welcome', the building of belonging, College

and cohort identity, and the integration of academic development in the curriculum, were all emphasised the moment a prospective student accepted a place at the University. Typically two first year students from different disciplines are paired up to 'parent' two incoming students from those same disciplines: writing to them, cooking for them and taking them on tours around the University. Meanwhile the first half of the first term was dedicated to a creative introduction to their studies.

All our participants positively identified with social approaches to welcome, including interactions with teaching staff, course-based social events, and being invited to get involved in learning support communities. These social approaches invited students to feel included within their subject, School or College: they belonged (Arthur & Huda, 2023).

### **The value of working with Learning Developers**

...they just knew what they were doing. And had the right answers and things that I wanted to hear, but I didn't know what I needed to hear before I spoke to them (Creative Arts undergraduate student).

It was clear to all of our students that there was a range of support on offer. Students identified peers, the student union, academic mentors/learning developers, PhD students integrated into classes, and Writing Fellows as providing Learning

Development. There was also a sense that this support was embodied - there was a person that could be contacted - thereby establishing a social relationship within their particular academic community.

The value of these interactions was threefold. One was the opportunity for a 'fresh pair of eyes' on their current academic capabilities - for example essay writing guidance from Academic Mentors or Writing Fellows was seen as especially useful. Another was being invited to share academic experiences, abstract or literal, and the third was a chance to develop meta-cognition and make pedagogical connections in their own learning whilst in the very process of learning:

It's almost like playing piano whilst you're playing piano. Everything else will improve, not just how you perform on the song, but actually how you make a garment because everything is connected... (Creative Arts undergraduate student)

At the same time, the students pointed out the challenges of navigating their new academic communities when they felt they had very little previous experience on the one hand whilst on the other they were being encouraged to be independent and self-reliant when it came to academic engagement. This contradiction meant that students were unsure about what support they were 'allowed' to access amongst all the developmental opportunities available to them. This then evoked concerns about belonging and academic entitlement.

Overall, their experiences were very positive, regardless of how they came to work with LD in the first place. For example, some students were referred to LD provision while other students were seamlessly offered support by more experienced peers within their teaching spaces. Students frequently mentioned the positive impact of interactions with their peers where everyone was able to practise together academic specific skills such as reading, drafting and editing assignments. Activities that foster positive relationships with peers were recommended, whether that be orientation programmes, group presentations, buddy schemes between different levels or an emphasis on interaction within the teaching spaces.

### **(Dis) engaging with Learning Development**

The complexity of all these different aspects is what makes it sometimes challenging for people to come and say “I need help” or “ I don’t even know where I need help”... I’m only more recently starting to realise where there may be gaps in my learning and understanding and how that is having an effect on me now. But then, how do I move past that? How do I fill in those gaps? Where do I find the time to fill in those gaps? How do I articulate that? (Education undergraduate student)

Students perceived a 'gap' in their learning and acknowledged that if they were able to reflect upon why this might be, they would be in a better position to address their anxieties. However, the experience of not knowing felt lonely and scary. Students noted

that it takes a certain level of confidence to be able to approach LD services. This confidence is informed by an ability to reflect on their learning needs in order to clearly articulate, to LD staff, what it is that they want.

Disengagement with LD seemed to be strongly associated with individual anxieties about academic proficiency, such as the quality of their written outputs, the level of knowledge and application concerning their subject area. Some students suggested that this 'general fear' might only be addressed by pastoral services, rather than those concerned with LD. Several students observed that the support for academic writing, for example, was not sufficient to overcome their procrastination and a heavy reliance on mitigation processes. Others suggested that their anxiety was also linked to negotiating ways of thinking where there are no definitive answers, whether this be in relation to assessments or even forms of support on offer.

One student mentioned how previous educational experience can have a bearing on the extent to which a new student might engage with Learning Development. For example, a school leaver may feel less autonomous than a mature student who has spent several years working before starting university. This will frame their attitude towards the academic support on offer and their ability to cross the threshold in order to access it. At the same time, they noted that students are not always certain of what they are allowed to have and this includes being able to enquire about it in the first place. These reflections do suggest that there may be more work to be done on how to create awareness around LD, that it offers a 'third space' where students can 'themselves' find

their emerging academic self, develop confidence, self-awareness and academic literacy (Gutiérrez, 2008), in order to feel entitled to LD and, arguably, develop a stronger sense of belonging within the university.

### *Sometimes you just need a hug*

When you think about all the things, there's the learning side and then there's just the personality fear side and the university gives a lot of resources, but it's like people need people to come and hug them and there's something there that's a little different. (Education undergraduate student)

From a student's perspective, support should span a range from academic needs to emotional wellbeing. For students, studying is bound in emotional responses and perhaps this is what students need to see emphasised in university LD services: developmental work will improve self-efficacy and self-belief and thus well being (Gutiérrez, 2008).

The notion of compassion was acknowledged and attributed to individual members of staff but there also seemed to be a desire for that compassion to be integrated seamlessly throughout the services provided; a compassionate pedagogy (Gilbert, 2017). nuanced, reflexive and humane in its response to complex needs (Abegglen et al, 2020).

### **Don't mention the pandemic**

I think they could have helped with that by encouraging talking/on screen cameras. I know there's been chat about actually, uh, you know, inclusiveness or inclusivity about having the screens on. But I remember always thinking that was an issue and I would take the initiative and put my screen on and when I talked, I did a lot of talking. (Education undergraduate student)

Engagement and the extent to which this happens was often associated with the students' experience of technology, which makes sense given that these students arrived at university during a global pandemic where face to face contact was almost entirely replaced with online interaction. New students were faced with the challenges of navigating an unfamiliar environment and doing so through the use of remote technology, adding further stress in transitioning to the role of being a new student. Whilst efforts were made to create a sense of community online, the experiences were patchy for students.

### **Recommendations for remaking Learning Development**

I think when we engage, it's an aspect of fun. Of a kind of real enjoyment of it. I think the parts which may be slightly more dry or maybe less interactive, are harder to engage with. When we're kind of being included as being able to shape what that looks like for ourselves, I think that's kind of much more engaging (Creative Arts undergraduate student))

Reasons for engaging with Learning Development included the quality of the experience, peer engagement, building self-efficacy, and the impact it would have on

their assessments. Students described how activities that were fun, which created opportunities for different perspectives or approaches, led to more engagement on their part.

Overall, students felt that academic support was not only comprehensive but also available at any given time. One student described this as an atmosphere where *'you can always ask someone and you're never in anyone's way.'* Their suggestions for a revised approach focused on clarity around what and when they could expect support.

They also suggested that more integrated, in-class sessions at specific times in the academic year would be an improvement, offering the opportunity to learn socially and build networks. It would also highlight that Learning Development is beneficial for all students, not just those who might have a specific issue or perceived 'gap'.

Students also wanted more involving, active and interactive learning, where the emphasis in learning and assessment was on their exploration of and reflection on subject material rather than the tutor's judgement of the student's capabilities. Here the students' desires are in line with ALDinHE values: Working alongside students to make sense of and get the most out of HE learning; partnership working and collaboration; critical self-reflection and on-going learning.

Whereas an over-competitive more individualistic classroom space can shut down that love of learning:

Um [big big pause] I think sometimes the environment can be... a little bit competitive or it can make you feel like there's a pressure I guess to perform and so that can maybe make you a bit less willing to make mistakes or to try, try something a bit different or try a different way. In case that, you know, it goes wrong and then either you feel like I made a mistake or I don't want to answer a question again...

(Sciences postgraduate student)

A key issue to accessing LD is time, and students have recommended more integrated LD. With the Oxbridge example, we saw this integration across the first half of the first term. Students were given time for a creative and engaging introduction to the University, to the spaces, places and people with whom it is connected, who make the place so special - and from where future research collaboration and collaborators might emerge:

We got to talk to the heads of those stations, the principal investigators about their research and what they were doing and that then culminated at the end of this four week period in a mini project that we did (Postgraduate sciences student).

The students appreciated this four-week playful space where they were encouraged to develop friendships alongside their subject interests without the pressure of it being formally assessed. Where they got to experience the whole of what their University offered and had the time to explore, reflect and grow. Ironically, at WP universities this is

typically not made available in the same way. WP students are acutely aware that they need time and space to engage with and reflect on their learning if they are to feel confident enough to thrive - and to access the resources available to them. Typically, time poverty is their reality.

## **Conclusion**

Being connected to others in order to feel self-confident. Modelling the learning i.e. stages of writing practice; stages of research - is really appreciated, especially when done by the teachers. (Sciences postgraduate student)

From the various conversations that we had with our students, there is no doubt that they are under immense pressure to quickly achieve academic success in a range of social contexts. These include their course, their subject area, their campus and their university. And, all of this happens through their personhood, both historical and present. As a result, the academic experience is inherently overwhelming so it feels like there is never enough time or space to reach out for support. Students noted how important it was to know an LD by name and face, someone whom they could directly contact about their concerns or questions. Being able to identify a person, rather than a service, allowed them to overcome reservations and insecurities and access support more quickly.

Several barriers persist to accessing support in a widening participation institution. Whilst they believed that a student was responsible for developing their learning, not least managing their assessments in terms of organising their time and effort, students report responsibilities outside of their university studies, termed 'time poverty', as a barrier to accessing support. Thus they valued LD integrated into the curriculum in various and creative ways, highlighting that this also facilitated peer to peer learning, a more active and interactive classroom and a de-stigmatising of LD. Of course sometimes LD is only offered to those with 'real needs', the students in this study emphasised that LD should be open to all. To navigate use of LD, we would argue LD would greatly benefit from involving students as partners in the devising, delivery and reflection on LD - as here in this chapter, where the student participants are also co-authors.

It is interesting that on the whole students did not seem to perceive well-being as emerging from engagement with Learning Development services - that is, the benefit of LD was cognitive and effective rather than emotional and affective . At the same time, it was clear overall that students conceptualised LD as perhaps more integral to the learning and teaching experience than we are in practice. It was assumed that we could influence the development of engaging and sustained welcome experiences, that we could promote active learning and dialogic teaching - and more creative and authentic assessments. Addressing this lays at the heart of LD philosophy and practice: we are there to work with and alongside students to make university more meaningful. Many times it is LD that has to recognize student needs - and argue for a compassionate and

critical pedagogy, driven by our values, competences, aptitudes and capacities. It is LD that is diverse, responsive and flexible - and, yes, we do want to lobby for an LD-shaped university.

## References

Abegglen, S., Burns, T., Maier, S. and Sinfield, S., 2020. Global university, local issues: Taking a creative and humane approach to learning and teaching. In *Improving Classroom Engagement and International Development Programs: International Perspectives on Humanizing Higher Education*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Arthur, R. and Huda, N. (2023) 'Coming in Together: Staff-student collaboration in a 'Decolonizing' Induction Process', in Abegglen, S.; Burns, T.; and Sinfield, S. (ed.) *Collaboration in Higher Education: A New Ecology of Practice*. London. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 167-172.

Bell, J. and Waters, S. (2018) *Doing Your Research Project. A Guide for First Time Researchers*. 7th Edition. London: Open University Press.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022). <https://www.thematicanalysis.net/>

Burns, T & Sinfield, S., (2022). *Essential Study Skills: The complete guide to success at university*. London; Sage

Bowstead, H. (2011) "Coming to writing", *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (3). doi: 10.47408/jldhe.v0i3.128.

Gilbert, T. (2017). When looking is allowed: what compassionate group work looks like in a UK university. *The pedagogy of compassion at the heart of higher education*, 189-202.

Gutiérrez, K. D. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading research quarterly*, 43(2), 148-164.

Leathwood, C., & O'Connell, P. (2003). 'It's a struggle': the construction of the 'new student' in higher education. *J. Education Policy*, 18(6), 597-615.

Lyons, E. E., & Coyle, A. E. (2007). *Analysing qualitative data in psychology*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Molinari, J. (2022). *What makes writing academic: Rethinking theory for practice*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Tones, Fraser and White (2009). Supporting mature-aged students from a socioeconomic background. *Higher Education*, 58, 505-529