

## **A contribution to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee inquiry: “Students and Universities” from the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE)**

### **1.0 Summary**

The following response has been prepared by the Steering Group of ALDinHE. The Association exists to represent the views of professionals working directly with students and academics to promote effective learning in Higher Education.

- Admissions and transitions to Higher Education are points of fundamental importance for students. Support for entering and engaging with HE and disciplinary cultures is needed. A ‘Learning Development’ (LD) approach provides effective support for students and therefore needs to be recognised and better resourced within HEIs. Pre-entry, induction and first year experience initiatives with an LD focus will support retention and progression for the diverse range of new learners.
- Research is a key aspect of learning. LD professionals are well-placed to support the government’s agenda for higher level skills through working with students in all learning contexts. Research can be undertaken from the start of HE through making links to work-based learning, professional placements or other external activities such as volunteering.
- In considering the issues of degree classification, LD professionals can help the sector by offering a perspective based on valuing the full range of students’ achievements and experience through processes such as PDP.
- As an approach to student support and engagement, LD calls for students’ experience of their learning to be brought to the centre. LD shows that skills are best learned when embedded in subject context. The HE sector as a whole would benefit significantly by having sufficient LD professionals working alongside other academics and students to achieve more effective learning outcomes.

### **2.0 Introduction**

ALDinHE is the association for Learning Development professionals which has grown out of the JISCmail discussion list, the Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN – see [www.jiscmail.ac.uk/ldhen/](http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/ldhen/) ). Participants in both LDHEN and ALDinHE are united by their interest in and commitment to the development of student learning and the provision of opportunities for students to develop their skills for study and their awareness of academic practices. (See <http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/> for more information about the work of the Association)

The membership of ALDinHE is drawn from learning development and study support units in over forty HE institutions, while the wider LDHE Network represents almost all of the UK's universities and higher education institutions. The group also has subscribers beyond the UK, in countries such as Ireland, Hong Kong, Germany, Belgium and Australia. An early achievement of the network was the successful bid for a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the sixteen institution partnership, 'LearnHigher'.

The work we refer to as 'Learning Development' (LD) is an increasingly recognised field of practice in higher education in the UK. It focuses on the skills for learning that students require to complete successfully their programmes of study; specifically how students learn in their subject context, what they find problematic, and the potential barriers to successful learning that may arise from current structures, teaching and support practices. LD therefore concentrates on situated skills for written and oral communication, information management, analysis, critical thinking and creativity. We emphasise the importance of consultative work with subject specialists and other HE staff to embed skills for learning in the curriculum.

### **3.0 Admissions**

We argue that the transitions associated with entry to HE programmes often represent a 'make or break' experience for students. It is therefore vital that HEIs in general take full account of the wide range of entry qualifications and pre-HE learning experiences which potential students are now likely to present.

- Students are entering HE with a wide range of educational experiences and approaches to learning. It is important to ensure that admissions policies and procedures take account of this in order to provide wider and more equitable access to HE for those with the ability to benefit. This will guard against the perpetuation of disadvantage for those without traditional qualifications and avoid unduly favouring the A-level route. More active awareness of this diversity will enable those responsible for programmes of study to accommodate and build upon the full range of students' learning experiences.
- Targeted pre-entry LD initiatives run in conjunction with admissions departments could help prospective students gain a better understanding of, and preparation for the unique character of learning at HE level. Such work is also likely to underpin better rates of retention throughout programmes. Appropriate learning support around transition can also help to pre-empt any unforeseen additional pressures on learning support services.
- Examples of appropriate initiatives related to admissions could include:

- creating more opportunities for school pupils to shadow university students
- providing taster sessions of university learning
- visits by student ambassadors to schools
- online collaboration between university students and local schools

#### ***4.0 The balance between teaching and research***

- LD aims to help students to understand that universities are dedicated to the creation of new and applied knowledge, as well as the transmission of existing knowledge. Curriculum design that enables undergraduates to participate actively in research from the start of their degree fosters this awareness and increases student motivation and achievement.
- Rather than an overly instrumental or surface-level approach to study, an LD perspective seeks to encourage a deep engagement with learning by inducting students into their 'communities of practice'. LD recognises that both research and work experience can help to fulfil these functions. This in turn helps students to understand and more effectively navigate HE.
- CPD and initial teacher training programmes for teaching and learning support staff in HE contribute to and draw upon the growing body of research into the student experience. Ongoing CPD supports effective LD in building both the capacity for research into learning as well as learning through research.
- LD professionals are in a good position to support the government's agenda for higher level skills through integrating subject knowledge with the skills gained through research, dissemination, innovation and cross-disciplinary collaboration (e.g. in extended group-work).

#### ***5.0 Degree classification***

- We would encourage better representation of the skills gained through the HE experience than is currently evidenced by the degree classification system. We would endorse a re-opening of the debate on degree classification in order to demonstrate how the graduate identity encompasses the skills that employers and society require. Improved integration of personal development planning (PDP) into the curriculum provides opportunities to do this.
- Plagiarism often results from instrumental approaches to learning and a misunderstanding of the aims of higher education. It can be driven by assessment practices where students' induction into academic conventions

is incomplete. As learning developers we seek to refocus the debate to concentrate on strategies which address the potentially alienating effect of an unfamiliar culture. LD therefore emphasises the importance of improved opportunities for explicit skills development in areas such as referencing and information literacy.

## **6.0 Student support and engagement**

Student support is the area to which the LD community can make the greatest contribution in support of the Committee's inquiry. The main aim of LD work is the enhancement of students' higher skills, giving students enhanced employability and life chances beyond university study. Skills for research, communication, self-awareness and critical thinking ensure that students benefit as fully as possible from their experiences of, and employment beyond, higher education. We subscribe to the UNESCO statement of 2002:

*“Higher education must place students at the centre of its focus within a lifelong learning perspective so that they are fully integrated into the global knowledge society of the twenty-first century. Students must be considered as equal and fundamental partners and stakeholders in their own education, we believe that students need to be seen as equal partners in their own learning”.*  
(UNESCO, 2002)

### **6.1 *The effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed***

A number of small-scale studies have been undertaken into the impact of LD, and the LDHEN JISCmail discussion provides rich qualitative evidence that LD work is effective. A current review is examining the impact on retention of different approaches to supporting students through study advice and personal development planning. We believe, however that it would be useful to undertake more systematic research to determine how LD can best serve student support and engagement in higher level learning.

### **6.2 *How the student experience differs in public and private universities***

We have no information to offer in direct response to this question

### **6.3 *Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students***

In our collective experience non-completion is a complex and many-faceted phenomenon, but evidence suggests (e.g. Tinto, 2006, Yorke 2000) that

explicit support for students in developing skills for study as part of their programmes can have a positive impact on retention and completion of university study. Such initiatives are most likely to be successful when learning developers work collaboratively with subject specialists to embed support within programmes. Ample evidence for this is available from the LDHEN and the LearnHigher CETL, with a rich variety of examples of support, especially in pre-entry and first year contexts (e.g. the 'Stepping Stones' programme at Bournemouth and 'SAPRA' in Bradford). Other interventions known to be effective are those concentrating on formative assessment, and initiatives which familiarise students with examples of successful study practices and assignment work by other students – e.g. in peer learning or 'PALS' schemes. At the University of Plymouth the 'WrAssE' project is building an online library of examples of successful student assignments for use in learning about academic writing.

*6.4 The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

Significant concern has been expressed by LDHEN members over the last few years about the long-lasting impact of debt upon students, both in their increasingly instrumental attitudes to higher education generally, and their ability to devote sufficient time to study whilst simultaneously working to supplement their incomes.

*6.5 Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

To build on the UK's world-class higher educational experience, we think that considerably more could be done to encourage HEIs to offer systematic and effective support for learning. A learning development approach suggests that such work should be seen as central to university learning rather than peripheral, 'bolt-on' or remedial. Engagement with inquiry into their own learning processes is valuable for students within any subject curriculum, and underpins knowledge acquisition and application for lifelong learning.

As a community of practice with over 350 subscribers to our JISCmail list, we can draw on the collective experience of our members in delivering direct and indirect forms of student support. ALDinHE is therefore in a position to provide the Committee with further information and examples of successful models of LD across the HE sector as and when required. Finally, we recommend that the committee reviews the UNESCO document referred to above ("The role of student affairs and services in higher education") as a useful resource in relation to the issues of supporting and

engaging students in HE institutions. (UNESCO (2002) [ONLINE]  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001281/128118e.pdf>

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