



Evaluating our ‘impact’: reflections from the personal learning advice service

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Presentation abstract

The neoliberalisation of higher education in the UK has placed greater pressure on Learning Development units to demonstrate impact. Together with increased regulatory scrutiny from bodies such as the Office for Students in England (and the monitoring of B3 thresholds, awarding gaps, the Teaching Excellence Framework, and other measures), rigorous evaluation is arguably more crucial than ever. In this workshop, we offered reflections and learning from the evaluation of the four-year Personal Learning Advice Service pilot at the Open University (UK).

The Personal Learning Advice (PLA) Service project is an Access and Participation Plan initiative which has delivered a one-to-one and group coaching and mentoring service (Clay et al., 2023) for students from disadvantaged backgrounds since January 2021 (Lochtie and Hillman, 2023). Coaching and mentoring approaches have been used by our team to support students' learning and study habits, wellbeing, and help-seeking behaviours (Hillman et al., in press). In the first part of this workshop, we shared learning from approaches used to evaluate the work of the service – from narrative and empirical evidence to causal evaluation in randomised controlled trials (TASO, 2022) – and situated this in the wider literature on evaluation in HE (Sabri, 2023). We shared findings from our work and reflected on the standards of evidence in HE (OfS, 2019). In the second part of the workshop, we invited delegates to consider how they measure and evaluate impact in their own context. We also explored relevant LD scholarship and publications.

Our presentation aligned with the ALDcon24 theme 'Building Learning Development for the Future', and we sought to invite discussion about the way we demonstrate 'impact' as Learning Developers.

Keywords: access; participation; coaching; mentoring; evaluation; impact.

Introduction

This workshop detailed how a centralised advising service provided targeted one-to-one and group coaching and mentoring to students at the Open University, identified in the institution's Access and Participation Plan, seeking to address institutional awarding gaps.

The Personal Learning Advisor (PLA) service was created in 2021 and will run until December 2024. Our largest projects have supported Black students, seeking to address an institutional deficit, rather than an individual deficit caused by the student, by removing barriers to their success. Eligibility is identified via the use of a pass probability percentage model built upon 70 factors, including engagement levels, previous studies and qualifications, and demographic data, including ethnicity.

The lessons learned are transferable to the sector in terms of the direct benefits to students (those who were engaged completed and passed modules at a statistically significantly higher rate than those who were not), and also the insights that students shared in the 'safe space' we created for them about the challenges they faced in their studies. This workshop detailed our journey and student feedback, as well as lessons learned.

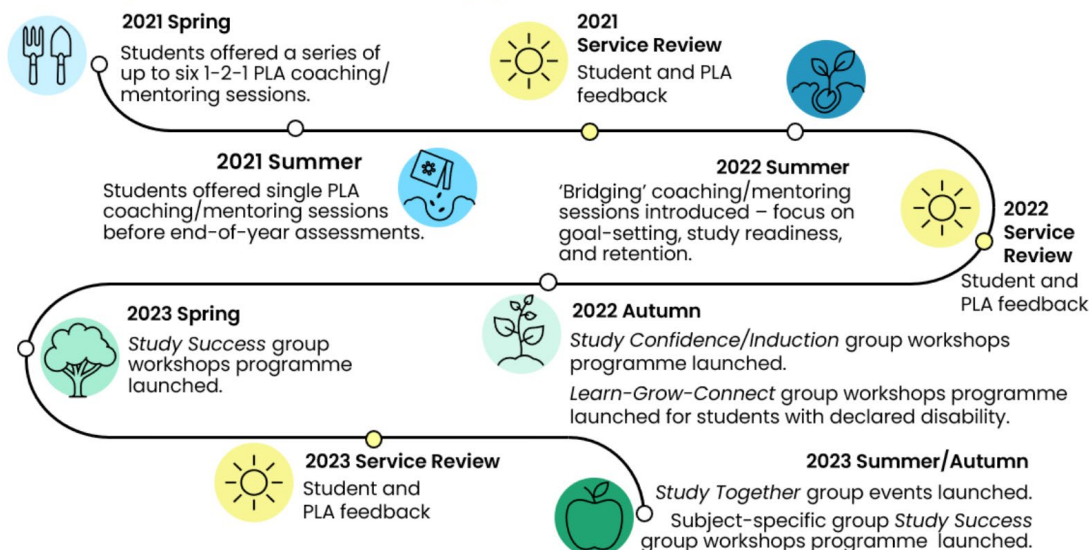
Community response

The workshop format of this session proved excellent in facilitating discussion around the topics raised, with many voices adding to the debate via chat and commentary in the reflective document. Given the commonality of evaluation approaches around Learning Development interventions and how best to measure and demonstrate 'impact', this was a lively and engaging session.

During the first part of the session, participants heard about the development of the PLA service at the Open University and how this has evolved over time to support students under the University's Access and Participation Plan.

Figure 1. Slide from presentation: Development of PLA support (created by Enya-Marie Clay, Personal Learning Advisor).

Development of PLA support to meet student needs



Given the pilot nature of the service, the session moved on to cover approaches used to evaluate the PLA offer, contextualising the need for evaluation using examples of HE regulation. Detailed methods were presented on how PLA evaluation took place, with participants pausing for thought on how TASO's (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education) Research Ethics Guidance (TASO, 2022) impacts the best methods to apply in evaluation of this kind.

Commentary from participants highlighted experiences of including suggested TASO questions appropriately within evaluation exercises and challenges of identifying the best methods to capture impact. Two comments included below help to summarise:

These are the key challenges of following the TASO recommendations on conducting evaluations. It makes it really challenging to capture a full, true and accurate picture over a period of time.

I'm all for data driven decision making, but the complexity and nuances behind the results at any one time (a snap shot) need to really be understood.

One comment signposted delegates to the Post-entry Mapping Outcomes and Activities Tool (MOAT) (TASO, 2024): 'Not sure if the recorded webinars are all available, but this TASO Post-Entry mapping tool is rather cool ... It's a great fit for mapping out interventions LDs are leading'.

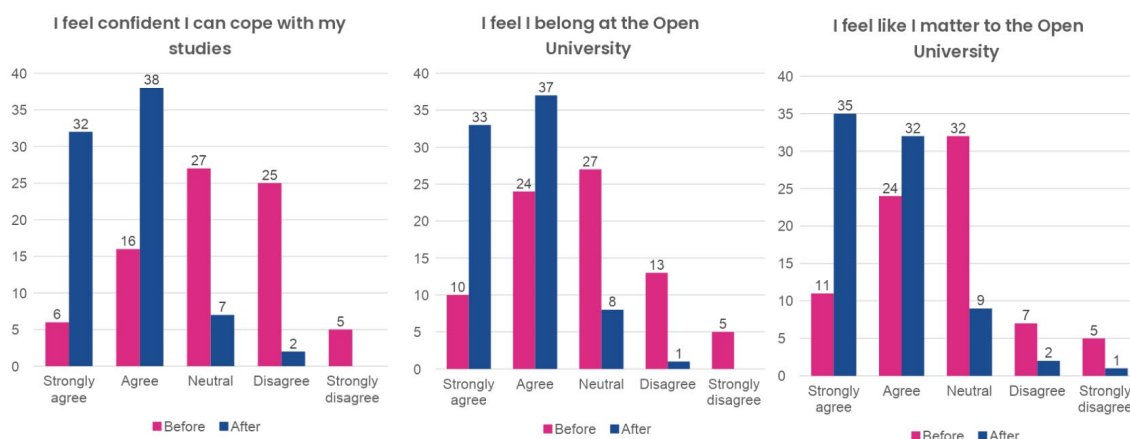
Presenters then described the qualitative evaluation conducted through questionnaires in which four key themes identified the ways students described working with a PLA at the Open University:

1. PLA support enhanced confidence and self-efficacy.
2. PLA support increased proactive help-seeking.
3. PLA support strengthened student sense of achievement.
4. PLA support enriched the OU student experience.

One participant commented on use of language for these themes: 'I love "enhanced, increased, strengthened, enriched". So much of the discourse around our role can be negative e.g. about struggles, challenge, problems, etc'.

Quantitative feedback was also presented in the session, providing positive results on the impact the service had had on students.

Figure 2. Slide from presentation: Student Feedback 2022-23.
Student Feedback 2022-23



The first half of the session concluded with presenters reflecting on the discontinuation of the project and the complexities in evaluating transformational value to students. On hearing the project had been discontinued, there was surprise from participants that it did

not meet standards to continue. One particular comment within the chat resonated with participants at this point in the session:

Probably a very naïve comment but seems so hard to weigh up value on a transactional level of resources in/results out compared to transformational value of differences made to individual students and differences they then make in their own lives and communities thanks to transformational experience of working with PLAs.

An example of two responses:

This issue is dear to my heart, but is the difference between measuring 'value' (subjective, qualitative) and 'impact' (usually measurable and quantitative). HEIs usually want 'impact', but 'value' seems more in line with an LD way of working ... I think we can make a case for evaluation including both, but need to play the game a bit by including something tangible on input, to also allow us to push our voice about value.

Something that's quite revolutionary to me from this session is that maybe we don't need to have 'value' (qualitative) and 'impact' (quantitative) as a dichotomy, but evaluate our services in terms of both. 'Impact' to speak our institutional stakeholders' language, 'value' to push the approach LD seems to want to articulate about itself (and indeed, students and staff do).

This was a pertinent point in the discussion; commentary on value vs. impact continued to recur in the second half of the workshop as participants were posed a series of questions to consider how to evaluate 'impact' in their Learning Development context:

1. What has your experience been?
2. What have you learned?
3. How will you seek to evaluate impact in the future?
4. What can we do to address these challenges as LDs/as a sector?

A lively discussion was had while participants considered evaluation in their own institutions. Many left commentary reflecting on their own experiences of evaluation, use of TASO questions, and limitations of survey evaluations. Two comments are included below:

As I attended this session, I was keenly aware of my own sense of anxiety mounting, mounting, mounting as the slides delved into the nitty-gritty statistical/methodological aspects of demonstrating impact ... I began to consider how powerful it is to consider my intense anxiety in this arena as a mirror toward, or vessel for, empathy in regards to how my students might be feeling when they come to chat with me about academic writing: that is, are essays doing to them

what all this talk of control groups and matching and statistical relevance is doing to me? So perhaps what I'm taking away from this session is a reminder-to-self to be gentle and proactive in taking myself on this journey: old dogs can learn new tricks, and we learning developers can upskill in reliable evaluation techniques if we're granted the time and resources to do so.

After attending this session, I agree that we need to try and capture BOTH value and impact - but not at the detriment of our core focus which should be developing the learning of our students, i.e. helping. I have been involved with the review process at UWE to incorporate the TASO questions – Cognition, Metacognition and Belonging – into our existing evaluation – of both central and embedded work – and I am concerned about the extra burden that it places on staff to reconsider the appropriateness of these questions each time.

Next steps and additional questions

There was discussion from participants on the discontinuation of the project and the impact this had on the target student cohort used for the project. Have you had any feedback from these students on hearing the project failed to meet standards required? The amount of evaluative feedback we ask of students was also an area of questioning emerging in the chat during the session, given that students are constantly being asked for feedback – does feedback fatigue hamper evaluation?

Conclusion

Interjections from attendees at our workshop (and in the collaborative writing space afterwards) has continued to extend our own thinking with regards to the evaluation of Learning Development work. For us, the important distinction between 'value' and 'impact' highlighted and developed in conversation with workshop attendees gets to the crux of the issue: if students are telling us something is valuable for them (transformative, even, for their learning), what other 'impact' do we need to demonstrate? These are two seemingly innocuous words, but they are bound up with very different strategic agendas. They neatly capture many of the challenges we have experienced evaluating the PLA Service pilot.

Evaluation is likely to continue to be at the forefront of discussions on student outcomes and equity as the new Access and Participation Plan cycles begin. Evaluation should be rigorous; how else will we know what is working to close awarding gaps, support student retention and progression, and take down the barriers that cause inequity? Yet as

discussed, there are significant ethical considerations when repeatedly surveying/interviewing/evaluating (the often time-poor) students who we support. We hope, and recommend, that ALDinHE and our LD community of practice continues to be active in the discussions around evaluation in the year ahead.

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