Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education ISSN: 1759-667X
Issue 38 December 2025

Identifying typical academic language and learning development practitioner roles and specialisms: an international taxonomy

Steve Briggs
University of Bedfordshire, UK

Ralitsa Kantcheva
University of Bedfordshire, UK

Abstract

Although the higher education 'third space' has become more widely recognised, there is still a prevailing lack of specificity in terms of many associated job roles. In contrast to librarians (CILIP, 2025), there is no formally recognised classification of types of Academic Language and/or Learning Development (ALLD) job roles. In practice, this means that ALLD practitioners with similar job titles often undertake different roles. In the absence of clearly defined job roles, the valuable contributions made by ALLD practitioners and the associated specialist skills and knowledge required are not always widely understood (Bickle, Johnson and White, 2024). This led Briggs (2025a) to propose the need to develop an ALLD role taxonomy. The current article reports results from an international study (primarily comprising of practitioners from UK, Canada, and New Zealand) that sought to establish the principal job responsibilities and specialisms synonymous with working in ALLD. Based on data from 92 respondents, it was possible to develop an ALLD practitioner taxonomy that details the most frequent area(s) of work and specialism(s) reported by ALLD practitioners. Implications for applying the taxonomy are considered from the perspectives of international and national associations, institutions, and individual practitioners.

Keywords: taxonomy; academic language practitioner; learning development practitioner; principal role; role specialism.

Introduction

The ‘third space’ or ‘third spaces’ in higher education (HE) transcend the traditional dichotomy of being either ‘academic’ or ‘non-academic’ spaces (Whitchurch, 2013; Whitchurch and Healy, 2024). In light of how job roles in the HE sector have evolved (Advance HE, 2023a), there are increasing numbers of individuals working within the third space. While such changes have been considered and reflected in the recent update to Advance HE’s (2023b) Professional Standards Framework, establishing trends in the true number of third-space professionals is problematic given that the Higher Education Statistics Association (HESA) continues to categorise roles into the binary of ‘academic’ or ‘non-academic’ (HESA, 2025). This ambiguity in classification helps to explain why third-space job titles are often inconsistent across the sector, meaning they may not clearly reflect the nature of the work undertaken in a particular role. Given the current pressure on the UK HE sector to cut costs and improve efficiency (Kernohan, 2025), such ambiguity should be a serious concern for third-space professionals. It is imperative that research seeks to provide clarity about how the work undertaken by practitioners is framed and articulated.

The field of Learning Development (LD) in HE is often associated with the third space (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2023; Hood, 2023; Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2023). The Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE, 2025, n.p.) states that:

> Learning Developers [and by association related job roles] work with students in an educational bridging role. They mediate between the knowledge and skills which students bring to university and the demands and conventions of academic subjects, guiding students to navigate their university studies.

Internationally, Learning Developers may be described as Academic Language professionals, reflecting the fact that those working in this field will support development of academic language and/or literacy. It can be the case that an Academic Language and/or Learning Development (ALLD) practitioner will be unknowingly working in the HE third space, despite this falling outside the scope of an academic or professional services employment contract.

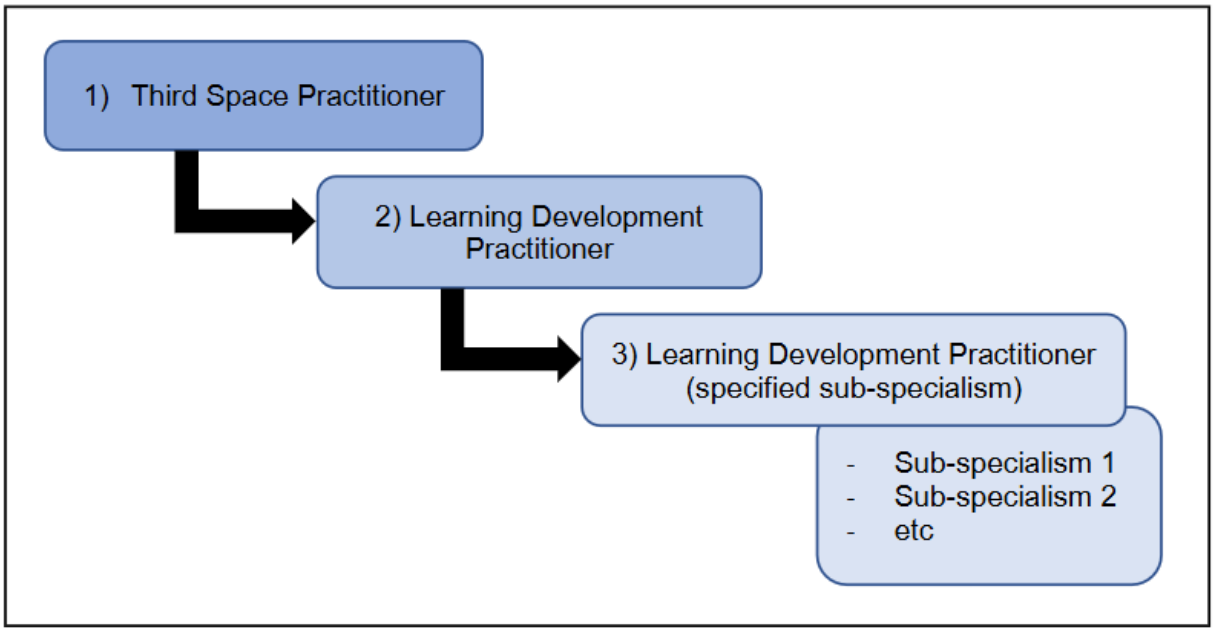
In the UK, institutions use a variety of job titles to describe broadly similar learning development roles, such as LD Tutors (e.g. University of Bedfordshire), Learning Advisors (e.g. University of Leeds), or Academic Skills Advisers (e.g. University of Chichester). During the late 2000s and early 2010s, the term 'Learning Developer' was used as a catch-all to describe those working within this field. This led Briggs (2018a; 2018b) to discuss how such a nebulous descriptor was highly problematic when ensuring and maintaining an appropriate level of recognition of areas of work, expertise, and professional standing. It may also partially explain why there are often concerns expressed around the general awareness of the valuable contribution of LD to student success (Bickle, Johnson and White, 2024). Internationally, other descriptions may be used to define work synonymous with LD, perhaps most commonly 'Academic Language'. In this article, Academic Language and/or Learning Development (ALLD) is used as a catch-all descriptor for those working in this field.

In response to challenges related to the term 'Learning Developer', ALDinHE (2025) introduced a professional recognition scheme for those working within the LD field in the UK. Those who achieved recognition were originally termed 'Certified Practitioners' or 'Certified Leading Practitioners' of LD (see Briggs, 2024a) and more recently this has changed to ALDinHE Fellows or ALDinHE Senior Fellows, respectively. As of February 2025, ALDinHE has recognised 139 individuals. While the ALDinHE scheme serves to ensure that general expertise in LD is formally recognised, it does not specifically address specialisms.

Accordingly, Briggs (2025a) proposed the development of a taxonomy that serves to define the nested nature of LD practitioner work. Figure 1 introduces a nested concept for visualising the role of LD practitioners. It illustrates the potential three-level hierarchy of a LD Practitioner: third-space practitioner, LD Practitioner, and LD Practitioner with specified sub-specialism. This nested approach is in keeping with how the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP, 2025) provide 11 distinct specialist roles undertaken by librarians.[1]

[1] Academic and research librarians, healthcare librarians, public librarians, library managers and assistants, prison librarians, school librarians, cataloguers, subject librarians, government librarians, data librarians, and local studies librarians.

Figure 1. Potential hierarchy for conceptualising the role of LD practitioners (Briggs, 2025a).



The study sought to identify the principal job responsibilities and specialist areas (defined in the results section) of expertise related to working in this field. A taxonomy would serve to provide greater transparency of job function(s) and/or specialism(s) to better illustrate the contributions made and expertise held by those working within this field. In addition to supporting academic skills development, examples of functions undertaken by an ALLD practitioner could include contributing to curriculum development (Briggs, 2024b) or peer-assisted learning. A presentation by the authors (Briggs and Kantcheva, 2025a) at the International Consortium of Academic Language and Learning Developers (ICALLD) Symposium Over-Time 2025 confirmed that the aforementioned issues were common across the UK, Canada, and New Zealand. This initial affirmation is significant given that there are contextual variations across countries that will shape the work of ALLD practitioners. For instance, HE operates on a provincial basis in Canada, therefore an ALLD practitioner may need distinct levels of certification to work in alternative parts of Canada and related roles could be framed differently across provinces. Similarly, in New Zealand the small number of HE institutions means that there are fewer ALLD job opportunities and consequentially a far smaller ALLD community. This article now outlines taxonomy development.

Methods

Data collection

The research required collection of data from as many respondents working in the field of ALLD as possible. Cross-sectional questionnaires provided a data collection method that could be administered internationally and inexpensively (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). This approach received ethical approval from the Institute for Research in Education at the University of Bedfordshire. This study was funded via ALDinHE Research Funding (ALDinHE, 2024), which meant that ethical considerations were also scrutinised by the funding allocation panel.

Accordingly, a cross-sectional questionnaire was designed and distributed to ALLD practitioners based in member countries of ICALLD (see ICALLD, n.d.). This consortium includes the Association for Academic Language and Learning (Australia), ALDinHE (UK), Scottish Higher Education Learner Developers, Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Learning Specialists Association of Canada, and South African Association for Academic Literacy Practitioners. Corresponding association leaders shared the research invitation with their respective memberships through locally managed emailing lists. Anticipating that some ALLD practitioners may specialise in Mathematics and Statistics, the authors arranged for the UK-based sigma National Network for Excellence in Mathematics and Statistics Support to distribute the invitation to their members. The questionnaire was open to anyone who identified as an ALLD practitioner over a three-month period between November 2024 and January 2025 (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the invitation to participate).

Participants

There were 92 responses to the online survey. As shown in Figures 2a and 2b, these were primarily from the UK, Canada, and New Zealand.

Figure 2a. Respondents split by country (number of responses).

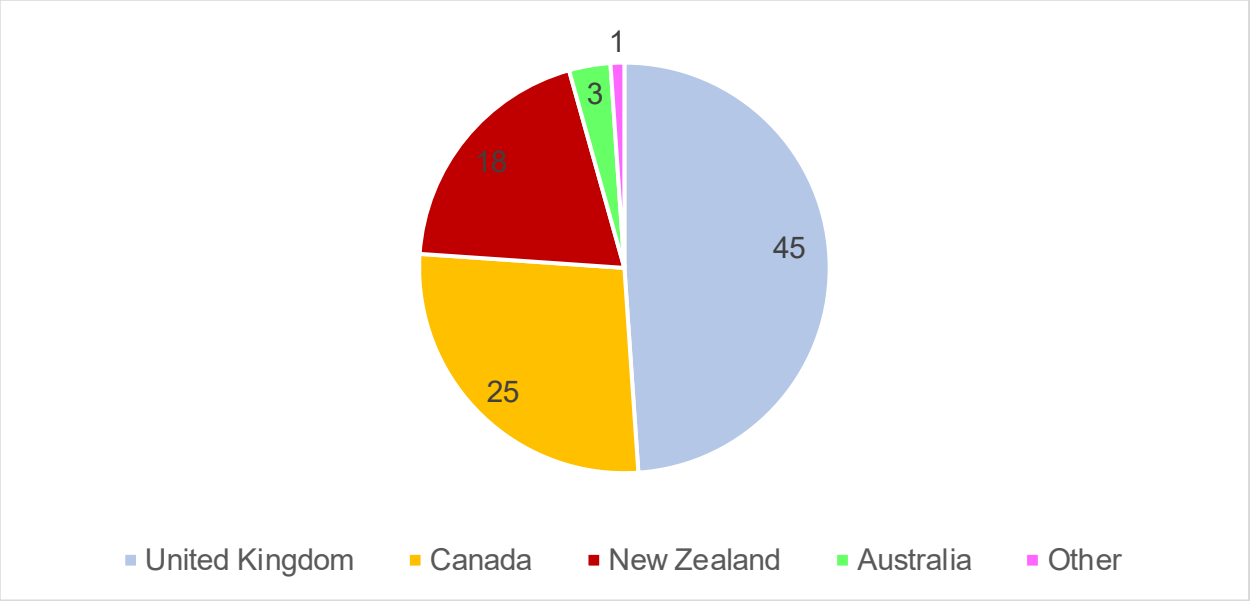
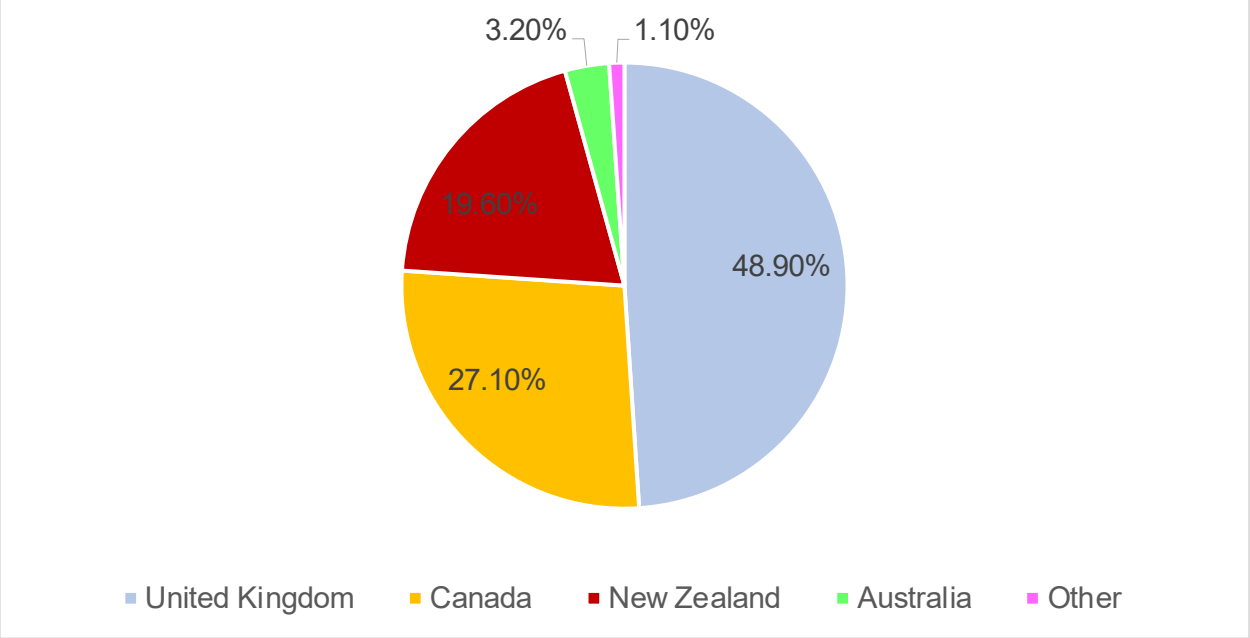


Figure 2b. Respondents split by country (percentage of responses).



Of the 92 respondents, 70.7% (n=65) had worked in an ALLD role for over five years. Most respondents, 78.3% (n=72), worked in a university. Almost half of the respondents, 48.9% (n=45), were based at a medium-sized Higher Education Institution with between 10,000 and 25,000 students. Most respondents, 41.3% (n=38), were based in student support services, while 26.1% (n=24) were based in a university library, and the rest in other locations (including in a teaching and learning unit or faculty/school/academic department). In line with the traditional role dichotomy (HESA, 2025), 58.7% (n=54) of respondents were employed on a professional services contract and 34.8% (n=32) on an

academic contract. The remaining 6.5% (n=6) were employed on other contract types. 50% (n=46) had the highest qualification of a masters and 40.2% (n=37) had a doctorate.

45.6% (n=42) had an Advance HE fellowship and three (3.3%) were Teaching Excellence Award winners. Given that Advance HE recognition has historically been synonymous with the UK, it is perhaps unsurprising that only three respondents with a fellowship were from outside the UK (all from New Zealand). Only 13% (n=12) of respondents had achieved ALDinHE recognition. All but one of these were from the UK, as would be expected given that the ALDinHE scheme is open to those working in ALDinHE member institutions.

Questionnaire

A 20-item online questionnaire was used to collect data (see Appendix 2 for the 14 questions specific to this article). This addressed participant demographics, principal job responsibilities, suitability of job title, area of specialism(s), and access to professional development, recognition, and promotion opportunities. This article addresses responses specifically related to principal job responsibilities and areas of specialism(s). Questions were worded in accordance with principles outlined by Robson (2002, pp.245–246) in his checklist to 'help avoid problems in question wording'. For example, language was simple, double-barrelled questions and questions phrased in the negative were avoided, and leading questions were not used.

Respondents indicated one or more principal job responsibilities from a list of 14 options: academic development; academic leadership; access and outreach activity; educational development; co-curricular student support; digital learning systems coordination; impact evaluation; learning materials authorship; on-course teaching — subject discipline content; on-course teaching — academic skills content; peer-assisted learning coordination; personal academic tutoring; team management; and other (with free text). This list was informed by areas identified by Briggs (2025a), supplemented by the authors' shared experiences in authoring job descriptions for LD roles, providing feedback on draft job descriptions for colleagues, and from routinely reviewing new job advertisements shared via the LDHEN network. An informal review of recent LD-related job descriptions on the jobs.ac.uk website also informed this list.

LearnHigher was used to identify potential ALLD specialisms. LearnHigher is a repository of academic skills teaching and learning resources generated by the ALLD community that is organised into 27 academic skills categories. Accordingly, it provides a good representation of the range of specialisms associated with those working in the ALLD field. As of September 2025, LearnHigher housed 151 resources that have been downloaded over 28,000 times (LearnHigher, 2025). From the list of 27 categories, respondents were asked to report all their specialism(s). For completeness, an 'other' option (with free text) was provided in the questionnaire. Respondents could also indicate if they had no specific specialism. Specialisms were based on self-perception as opposed to an explicit inclusion in a current or previous job description, implications of this are considered in the discussion of study limitations. It was also recognised that some LearnHigher categories are closely related (such as academic writing, writing for university, and report writing). As such, it was anticipated that the final taxonomy would include thematic groupings where possible, based on participants' responses.

Data analysis

A target to recruit at least 30 participants from each country was set to enable statistical analysis between sub-populations (Dekking et al., 2005). Unfortunately, this target was only met for the UK and no inferential statistical analysis could be undertaken. Accordingly, data analysis was limited to identifying response frequencies and percentages.

Results

To inform the development of the ALLD practitioner taxonomy, the authors identified the most typical principal job responsibilities and academic skills specialisms that were reported by survey respondents. This section details respective findings and how these informed the development of the taxonomy.

Principal job responsibilities

Table 1 shows the principal job responsibilities reported by respondents. The most common activity reported across the sample was 'co-curricular student support' (88%),

followed by ‘learning materials authorship’ (75%), and then delivering ‘on-course teaching — academic skills content’ (57.6%). When examining sub-samples, the same trend emerged in the UK (84.4%, 75.6%, and 77.8% respectively) and New Zealand (83.4%, 77.8%, and 61.1% respectively). Canada also featured ‘co-curricular student support’ (96%), followed by ‘learning materials authorship’ (72%), but then deviated, with less ‘on-course teaching — academic skills content’ (24%) as a principal job responsibility, and conversely more reports of ‘peer-assisted learning coordination’ (48%) and ‘team management’ (32%). Responses highlighted in bold in Table 1 indicate over 50% of respondents, while shaded responses indicate between 20% and 49% of respondents.

Table 1. Principal job responsibilities reported by respondents (overall and split by country).

Principal job responsibility	Overall[2] (n=92)	UK (n=45)	Canada (n=25)	New Zealand (n=18)
Co-curricular student support (e.g. 1:1s/workshops/drop-ins)	**81**	**38**	**24**	**15**
	88.0%	**84.4%**	**96.0%**	**83.3%**
Learning materials authorship (e.g. academic skills guides)	**69**	**34**	**18**	**14**
	75.0%	**75.6%**	**72.0%**	**77.8%**
On-course teaching — academic skills content	**53**	**35**	6	**11**
	57.6%	**77.8%**	24.0%	**61.1%**
Academic development (e.g. staff training)	27	13	8	6
	29.3%	28.9%	32.0%	33.3%
Educational development (e.g. curriculum design/assessment design)	24	17	6	1
	26.1%	37.8%	24.0%	5.6%
Personal academic tutoring	22	10	4	6
	23.9%	22.2%	16.0%	33.3%
Peer-assisted learning coordination	20	3	12	5
	21.7%	6.7%	48.0%	27.8%
Team management (e.g. manage a team)	20	9	8	2
	21.7%	20.0%	32.0%	11.1%
Impact evaluation	18	12	3	3
	19.6%	26.7%	12.0%	16.7%

[2] Responses include participants from all countries.

Academic leadership (e.g. module leader/course leader)	13	5	6	2
	14.1%	11.1%	24.0%	11.1%
Access and outreach activity (e.g. working in schools/colleges/community)	9	5	3	1
	9.8%	11.1%	12.0%	5.6%
On-course teaching — subject discipline content	6	4	0	2
	6.5%	8.9%	0%	11.1%
Digital learning systems coordination (e.g. system administrator)	5	2	2	1
	5.4%	4.4%	8.0%	5.6%
Other	9	4	3	2
	9.8%	8.9%	12.0%	11.1%

Examples of reported 'other' principal job responsibilities included duplications/significant overlaps with the categories previously identified. Specific examples include: 'occasional staff training and educational development' (overlapping with academic development and educational development); 'academic development for students' (overlapping with co-curricular student support/on-course teaching — academic skills); 'supervise a team of student leaders' (overlapping with peer-assisted learning coordination); 'learning advice' (overlapping with co-curricular student support); and 'induction and transitions development' (overlapping with on-course teaching — academic skills).

Number of principal job responsibilities

Most respondents reported undertaking multiple responsibilities, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of principal job responsibilities reported by each respondent (overall and split by country).

Number of principal job responsibilities reported	Overall[3] (n=92)	UK (n=45)	Canada (n=25)	New Zealand (n=18)
1	6	1	3	1
	6.5%	2.2%	12.0%	5.6%
2	9	2	3	4
	9.8%	4.4%	12.0%	22.2%
3	22	16	3	1

[3] Responses include participants from all countries.

	23.9%	35.6%	12.0%	5.6%
4	21	10	5	5
	22.8%	22.2%	20.0%	27.8%
5	15	7	4	4
	16.3%	15.6%	16.0%	22.2%
More than 5	19	9	7	3
	20.7%	20.0%	28.0%	16.7%

The authors examined whether it was possible to group principal job responsibilities. Firstly, efforts were made to identify if there were coherent groupings based on reports of performing five, four, or three principal job responsibilities (reflecting that 83.7% of respondents reported having a minimum of three principal job responsibilities). A 'coherent grouping' required a set of job responsibilities to be concurrently reported by 50% or more of the sample and explicitly related activities where there was obvious overlap in the nature of the activity. A coherent grouping for a combination of three principal job responsibilities was identified across over 50% of the overall responses. This comprised 'co-curricular student support', 'learning materials authorship', and 'on-course teaching — academic skills content'. Across those who reported at least one of these principal job responsibilities (six reported none), it was found that 59% (51 of 86) reported performing all three responsibilities and 34% (29 of 86) reported two of the three.

The extent to which the three principal job responsibilities could be combined as an 'academic skills teaching' profile was tested across the UK, Canada, and New Zealand sub-samples. Among the 41 UK respondents who reported at least one of the associated principal job responsibilities (four reported none), 73.2% (30 of 41) reported performing all three, and 14.6% (6 of 41) reported two of the three. A similar pattern emerged among New Zealand respondents. Among the 18 respondents who reported at least one of the associated principal job responsibilities, 47% (8 of 17) reported performing all three and 41.2% (7 of 17) reported two of the three. A different pattern emerged among the Canadian respondents, potentially attributable to the provincial nature of HE in Canada. The coherent group for a combination of three principal job responsibilities in the Canadian sample comprised 'co-curricular student support', 'learning materials authorship', and 'peer-assisted learning co-ordination'. Among the 21 Canadian respondents who reported

at least one of the associated principal job responsibilities (four reported none), 38.0% (8 of 21) reported performing all three and 62.0% (13 of 21) reported two of the three.

Analysis was undertaken to establish if it was possible to identify reporting groupings based on two principal job responsibilities as determined by response rates. Consequently, pairings were examined whereby at least 20% of respondents from two of the three countries reported undertaking that principal job responsibility (see Table 2). This resulted in 10 potential pairings. The top three groupings that emerged were: 'academic development' and 'educational development' (14 respondents reported both and 23 reported one); 'academic development' and 'team management' (11 respondents reported both and 25 reported one); 'educational development' and 'team management' (nine respondents reported both and 26 reported one). Given the limited number of respondents addressed in these pairings, it was determined that no further principal job responsibilities should be grouped together when developing the taxonomy.

Academic skills specialism(s)

In the context of this study, an academic skills specialism related to expertise in a specific area of ALLD skills development. This may or may not be related to a practitioner's current principal job responsibilities. Table 3 shows academic skills specialisms reported by respondents. The most common five were 'academic writing', 'critical thinking and reflection', 'referencing', 'time management', and 'learning at university'. When sub-samples based on respondents from the UK, Canada, and New Zealand were examined, the same trend emerged except for much reduced reporting of 'referencing' among Canadian participants. Overall, a quarter of respondents reported that they did not have a specialism. This was reflected by the inclusion of a 'general practitioner' within the final taxonomy. In such instances, a practitioner may have a working knowledge across the spectrum of academic skills specialisms rather than a mastery of certain skills (see Figure 3). Responses in Table 3 highlighted in bold and highlighted in grey indicate a top 10 specialism response within each cohort.

Table 3. Specialisms reported by respondents (overall and split by country).

Specialism	Overall[4] (n=92)	UK (n=45)	Canada (n=25)	New Zealand (n=18)
No specialism	22	11	8	2
	23.9%	24.4%	32.0%	11.1%
Academic writing	**53**	**26**	**9**	**15**
	57.6%	**57.8%**	**36.0%**	**83.3%**
Critical thinking and reflection	**42**	**23**	**9**	**7**
	45.7%	**51.1%**	**36.0%**	**38.9%**
Referencing	**41**	**22**	5	**11**
	44.6%	**48.9%**	20.0%	**61.1%**
Time management	**41**	**19**	**10**	**9**
	44.6%	**42.2%**	**40.0%**	**50.0%**
Learning at university	**38**	**17**	**12**	**7**
	41.3%	**37.8%**	**48.0%**	**38.9%**
Note-making	**38**	**17**	**10**	**8**
	41.3%	**37.8%**	**40.0%**	**44.4%**
Research skills	**38**	**19**	4	**11**
	41.3%	**42.2%**	16.0%	**61.1%8**
Reading	**35**	**15**	**10**	**7**
	38.0%	**33.3%**	**40.0%**	**38.9%**
Writing for university	**34**	**21**	6	5
	37.0%	**46.7%**	24.0%	27.8%
Report writing	**32**	**15**	4	**9**
	34.8%	**33.3%**	16.0%	**50.0%**
Independent learning	29	12	6	**8**
	31.5%	26.7%	24.0%	**44.4%**
Oral communication	27	7	**9**	**8**
	29.3%	15.6%	**36.0%**	**44.4%**
Transition	26	14	**9**	3
	28.3%	31.1%	**36.0%**	16.7%
Doing research	22	10	4	**7**

[4] Responses include participants from all countries.

	23.9%	22.2%	16.0%	**38.9%**
Group work	22	8	7	5
	23.9%	17.8%	28.0%	27.8%
Listening and interpersonal skills	22	8	6	5
	23.9%	17.8%	24.0%	27.8%
Online learning	22	9	6	4
	23.9%	20.0%	24.0%	22.2%
Information literacy	21	11	2	6
	22.8%	24.4%	8.0%	33.3%
Working with others	20	5	**8**	5
	21.7%	11.1%	**32.0%**	27.8%
Diversity and inclusion	16	9	1	6
	17.4%	20.0%	4.0%	33.3%
Assessment	13	8	0	3
	14.1%	17.8%	0%	16.7%
Artificial intelligence	12	4	3	4
	13.0%	8.9%	12.0%	22.2%
Digital literacy	12	5	2	5
	13.0%	11.1%	8.0%	27.8%
CPD for staff	8	7	0	1
	8.7%	15.6%	0%	5.6%
Numeracy, Mathematics, and Statistics	7	3	1	3
	7.6%	6.7%	4.0%	16.7%
Visual literacy and creativity	7	4	2	0
	7.6%	8.9%	8.0%	0%
Employability	1	1	0	0
	1.1%	2.2%	0%	0%
Other	8	1	6	1
	8.7%	2.2%	24.0%	5.6%

Five of the other responses were judged to be covered by existing LearnHigher categories. For example, ‘paraphrasing; literature review writing’ was reflected in the ‘academic writing’ and ‘writing for university’ LearnHigher categories. Similarly, ‘motivation’ was aligned to the independent learning and transition categories used in LearnHigher.

The remaining three other responses addressed principal accountabilities as per Table 1 (e.g. teaching), working with neurodivergent learners, and operating as a generalist (akin to the no specialism option).

Multiplicity of academic skills specialisms

Most respondents reported having multiple areas of specialism, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Number of specialisms reported by each respondent (overall and split by country).

Number of specialisms	Overall[5] (n=92)	UK (n=45)	Canada (n=25)	New Zealand (n=18)
No specialism	22	11	8	2
	23.9 %	24.4 %	32 %	11.1 %
1	3	3	0	0
	3.3 %	6.7 %	0 %	0%
2	4	3	1	0
	4.4 %	6.7 %	4 %	0 %
3	5	0	3	2
	5.4 %	0 %	12 %	11.1 %
4	5	3	0	2
	5.4 %	6.7 %	0 %	11.1 %
5	5	2	1	2
	5.4 %	4.5 %	4 %	11.1 %
More than 5	48	23	12	10
	52.2 %	51.1 %	48 %	55.6 %

Over half of the sample reported five or more specialisms, with the highest number reported being 23. It was therefore decided that there was a significant degree of overlap between the 27 LearnHigher categories to support development of a concise taxonomy. Accordingly, the authors independently undertook a thematic analysis of LearnHigher categories to identify macro-specialisms. The authors compared their themes and found

[5] Responses include participants from all countries.

these to be consistent, thus resulting in the identification of five macro-specialisms that accounted for 20 of the 27 LearnHigher categories. Definitions are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Macro-specialism definitions.

Macro-specialism	Definitions LearnHigher categories relate to…
Writing	… production of written text.
Self-management	… setting goals and managing time.
Information	… finding and ethically using information.
Interpersonal	… working with others.
Digital	… using digital learning systems and online platforms.

The extent to which participants reported the remaining seven standalone LearnHigher categories was initially re-examined to ascertain if exclusion would result in a significant omission from the taxonomy. A significant omission was defined as more than 25% of respondents reporting a LearnHigher category as a potential specialism. As highlighted in Table 3, 45.7% of respondents reported ‘critical thinking and reflection’ and 29.3% reported ‘oral communication’ as specialisms. Given that these two categories were not captured in a macro-specialism, they were included within the final taxonomy. When a preliminary version of the taxonomy was presented at the ICALLD Symposium Over-Time (Briggs and Kantcheva, 2025a), ‘numeracy’ was identified as a significant academic skills specialism omission (further supported when an updated version was presented at the ALDinHE conference by Briggs and Kantcheva, 2025b). As such, this has been included in the taxonomy despite only 7.6% (n=7) reporting it.

Table 6 shows associated participant reporting of macro-specialisms (respondents were counted when a minimum of 50% of corresponding LearnHigher categories were originally reported).

Table 6. Reporting of macro-specialisms groups.

Macro-specialism cluster (corresponding LearnHigher categories where applicable)	Overall[6] (n=92)	UK (n=45)	Canada (n=25)	New Zealand (n=18)
Writing (academic writing, note-making, writing for university, report writing)	45	24	7	11
	48.9%	53.3%	28.0%	61.1%
Self-management (time management, independent learning, learning at university, transition)	40	17	11	9
	43.5%	37.8%	44.0%	50.0%
Information (research skills, information literacy, referencing, reading, doing research)	34	18	5	8
	37.0%	40.0%	20.0%	44.4%
Interpersonal (group work, listening and interpersonal skills, working with others, diversity and inclusion)	22	8	7	5
	23.9%	17.8%	28.0%	27.8%
Digital (online learning, artificial intelligence, digital literacy)	12	5	3	3
	13.0%	11.1%	12.0%	16.7%
Critical thinking and reflection	42	23	9	7
	45.6%	51.1%	36%	38.9%
Oral communication	27	7	9	8
	29.4%	15.6%	36%	44.4%
Numeracy, Mathematics, and Statistics	7	3	1	3
	7.6%	*6.7%*	*4%*	*16.7%*

Development of the taxonomy

Six primary ALLD principal job responsibilities and eight specialisms were identified. This was not intended to be exhaustive; rather, it represents the most typical principal job responsibilities along with the most commonly reported academic skills specialisms. Figure 3 shows the corresponding taxonomy.

[6] Responses include participants from all countries.

Figure 3. Academic Language and/or Learning Development practitioner taxonomy.

The taxonomy proposes that ALLD practitioners will typically have one or more principal job responsibilities that align with at least one of the six dimensions in the inner circle. These may be supplemented by more secondary functions aligned to other dimensions. As shown in Figure 3, the second circle reflects that all ALLD practitioners will typically support the full range of academic skills to varying degrees — the authors describe this as working as a general practitioner. A dotted or solid second circle is used (as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5) to account for the potential for ALLD practitioners to be at different stages of their careers in terms of working as a general practitioner.

Some ALLD practitioners will have one or more existing specialisms that correspond to the academic skills presented in the grey outer circle. Those who did not report any specific specialism, 23.9 % (n=22) of overall respondents, may only operate as general practitioners or are emergent specialists (i.e. working towards rather than having mastered

specialisms). Directionality of specialism status ('existing' or 'developing') would be indicated by a directional arrow. This is shown in Figure 4 in the example of an existing information specialist (e.g. a librarian) who has moved into an ALLD-focused role and is an emerging general practitioner (and is undertaking academic skills teaching as a principal job responsibility). Conversely, Figure 5 shows the profile of an established general practitioner who is a developing specialist in digital literacy. This individual is undertaking academic skills teaching alongside educational development and academic development activities as principal job responsibilities.

Figure 4. Profile of an existing information specialist who has moved into an ALLD-focused role and is an emerging general practitioner. This individual is undertaking academic skills teaching as a principal job responsibility.

Figure 5. Profile of an established general practitioner who is a developing specialist in digital literacy. This individual is undertaking academic skills teaching alongside educational development and academic development activities as principal job responsibilities.

Discussion

It is anticipated that findings will have applicability at international, national, institutional, and individual levels. From an international perspective, the authors hope their findings will encourage ICALLD to reflect critically on how they support members to better showcase the nature of their ALLD work and specialisms. An immediate priority could be to establish definitions of discrete ALLD job roles and to encourage adoption. This would start to

address issues around ambiguity and inconsistencies associated with role titles (comparable to the UK categorisation of librarians presented by CILIP, 2025).

From a national perspective, associations could focus efforts on enhancing recognition of expertise among ALLD practitioners and streamlining ALLD job role terminology. Using the UK as an example, ALDinHE could expand their recognition scheme (ALDinHE, 2025) to account for individuals working in specific spheres of ALLD. The specifics of such work would need to be progressed via the ALDinHE Professional Recognition Working Group. Likewise, ALDinHE could champion international definitions endorsed through ICALLD so there is consistency and transferability across members. National reporting agencies, such as HESA, could also use this taxonomy (along with other third-space taxonomies such as the aforementioned classification of librarians) to ensure that third-space practitioners are more accurately represented in future institutional data returns. ALDinHE may also wish to revisit the use of categories within LearnHigher, given that findings suggest that there is a high degree of overlap between how these are perceived by practitioners.

From an institutional perspective, ALLD team leaders could use the taxonomy to support staff development activities, including new staff induction and personal development. It could also inform the authorship of job descriptions in terms of what aspects of ALLD practice to include. The taxonomy may support institutional discussions around how an ALLD team is positioned and has the potential for collaboration with other teaching and learning practitioners. The taxonomy could also help to inform the development of more inclusive promotional and/or recognition pathways for individuals working in third-space contexts, including ALLD practitioners.

From an individual perspective, the taxonomy can be used by ALLD practitioners as a career development tool. Through better understanding the breadth of what an ALLD practitioner job role could encompass and the frequency with which specific combinations of duties occur, practitioners will be empowered to instigate discussions about the scope of their existing and future ALLD roles. Better awareness of specific ALLD specialisms means that the taxonomy could also be used to inform personal development planning. This might be through engaging in intentional periods of purposeful CPD that explicitly serve to develop specific specialism(s), in keeping with Briggs' (2025b) notion of pedagogical career eras.

Limitations and future work

The sample size for this study was limited due to the data analysis approaches used. Future work should seek to test the applicability of the taxonomy with larger samples, particularly from participant countries outside of the UK where smaller samples were recruited. Equally, future work could consider other countries or where there may be differences because of institutional factors not yet explored (e.g. HEIs around the world where English is the medium of instruction). Country-specific variations of the taxonomy could then be developed, if appropriate. The support of ICALLD member associations would be pivotal to successfully undertaking such research.

Some responses suggested that not all participants understood the term 'specialism'. In retrospect, this should have been anticipated given the term is defined in different ways, including 'the act of specialising in a particular subject' (Collins Dictionary), 'specialisation in an occupation or branch of learning' (Merrian-Webster), and 'a subject that someone knows a lot about' (Cambridge Dictionary). Individuals who reported a significant number of specialisms might be better considered as 'general practitioners'. Further work could seek to explore how the notion of 'specialism' is understood and used across the international ALLD community. Future investigation could also explore if there are ALLD community preferences around working as a general practitioner relative to being a specialist. Considering such findings, it is proposed that ALDinHE should consider revisiting the self-reported classifications of specialisms used in their networking and expertise directory.

Conclusion

This research was able to successfully develop a nested taxonomy of ALLD practitioner principal job responsibilities and specialisms. This provides a basis from which the historic issues associated with classification of ALLD roles and variation in job titles can be addressed. Specifically, the taxonomy provides a framework by which professional roles and/or specialisms associated with the ALLD field could be categorised. As outlined, there are multiple perspectives from which the taxonomy can be adopted. We now call upon international, national, and institutional leaders to critically reflect on how the taxonomy can enhance third-space, and more specifically ALLD, representation and practices within their respective organisations. From an individual perspective, we encourage ALLD

practitioners to seek to use the taxonomy to guide their career, professional, and personal development planning.

Acknowledgements

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript. The authors would like to extend our thanks to Chad McDonald for his editorial guidance and support.

References

Advance HE (2023a) *Advance HE insight: the changing people needs of higher education in the years ahead*. Available at: https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/changing-people-needs-higher-education-years-ahead (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Advance HE (2023b) *Professional standards framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education 2023*. Available at: https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/PSF%202023%20-%20Screen%20Reader%20Compatible%20-%20final_1675089549.pdf (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

ALDinHE (2024) *Research funding*. Available at: https://aldinhe.ac.uk/research/scholarship-funding/ (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

ALDinHE (2025) *Homepage*. Available at: https://aldinhe.ac.uk/ (Accessed: 6 May 2025).

Bickle, E., Johnson, I. and White, S. (2024) 'Learning development should be at the heart of conversations about academic support', *WONKHE,* 6 December. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/learning-development-should-be-at-the-heart-of-conversations-about-academic-support/ (Accessed: 19 February 2025).

Bishopp-Martin, S. and Johnson, I. (2023) 'Research and scholarship in Learning Development', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education*. London: Routledge, pp.155–163.

Briggs, S. (2018a) 'Moving from Learning Developers to Learning Development Practitioners, *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, 8(3). Available at: https://www.beds.ac.uk/jpd/volume-8-issue-3-november-2018/moving-from-learning-developers-to-learning-development-practitioners (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Briggs, S. (2018b) 'Development of the ALDinHE recognition scheme: certifying the "learning developer" title', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 13. Available at: https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i13.461

Briggs, S. (2024a) 'Professional development and recognition in LD', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp.220–229.

Briggs, S (2024b) 'The benefits of engaging third space practitioners in curriculum development', *Times Higher Education*, 9 October. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/benefits-engaging-third-space-practitioners-curriculum-development (Accessed: 19 February 2025).

Briggs, S. (2025a) 'Redefining the role of learning development practitioners', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 33. Available at: https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi33.1203

Briggs, S, (2025b) 'What are your pedagogic career eras?', *ALDinHE #Take5*, 17 July. Available at: https://aldinhe.ac.uk/take5-133-what-are-your-pedagogic-career-eras/ (Accessed: 31 July 2025).

Briggs, S. and Kantcheva, R. (2025a) *Developing a taxonomy of learning development job roles*. Available at: https://icalld.wordpress.com/events (Accessed: 6 May 2025).

Briggs, S. and Kantcheva, R. (2025b) 'Professional development and recognition opportunities for learning development practitioners: international perspectives', *ALDCon24: The Learning Development Conference*. Online, 13 June.

CILIP (2025) *Librarians and libraries*. Available at: https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/LibrariansandLibraries (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2017) *Research methods in education*. 8th edn. London: Routledge.

Dekking, F.M., Kraaikamp, C., Lopuhaa, H.P. and Meester, L.E. (2005) *A modern introduction to probability and statistics*. London: Springer.

Higher Education Statistics Agency (2025) *Higher education staff statistics: UK, 2023/24*. Available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/28-01-2025/sb270-higher-education-staff-statistics (Accessed: 17 February 2024).

Hood, S. (2023) 'Succeeding at Learning Development', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education*. London: Routledge, pp.195–202.

ICALLD (no date) *ICALLD homepage*. Available at: https://icalld.wordpress.com/ (Accessed: 17 February 2024).

Johnson, I. and Bishopp-Martin, S. (2023) 'Conceptual foundations in Learning Development', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education*, London: Routledge, pp.15–24.

Kernohan, D. (2025) 'An early look at 2023–24 financial returns shows providers working hard to balance the books', *WONKHE*, 27 January. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/an-early-look-at-2023-24-university-finances/ (Accessed: 18 February 2025).

LearnHigher (2025) *LearnHigher Resources.* Available at: https://aldinhe.ac.uk/product-category/learnhigher-resources/ (Accessed: 17 February 2024).

Robson, C. (2002) *Real world research*. 2nd edn. Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing.

Whitchurch, C. (2013) *Reconstructing identities in higher education*. London: Routledge.

Whitchurch, C. and Healy, G. (2024) 'The concept of the third space as an enabler in complex higher education environments', *London Review of Education*, 22(1), p.42. Available at: https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.22.1.42

Author details

Steve Briggs is Director of Learning, Teaching, and Libraries at the University of Bedfordshire. Steve is a former co-chair of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) and currently a member of the Committee for the Association of National Teaching Fellows. He is a Chartered Psychologist, National Teaching Fellow (2020), and Principal Fellow of Advance HE (PFHEA).

Ralitsa Kantcheva is Senior Learning Development Tutor at the University of Bedfordshire. She is a co-chair of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education's (ALDinHE) Research Community of Practice and an active member of the Peer-Mentoring ALDinHE Community of Practice. Ralitsa is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE (SFHEA).

Licence

Appendix 1

Over the last ten years, the range of professional development and recognition routes open to Academic Language and Learning Development practitioners has expanded significantly (see Briggs, 2023). It is our anecdotal experience that access to such opportunities is impacted by both where practitioners work and the nature of their roles. However, to date dedicated research is yet to address this topic. Furthermore, Learning Development practitioners with similar job titles often have quite different roles. This research will also seek to develop a taxonomy of Learning Development roles.

We would therefore like to invite you to participate in our international research study examining professional development, recognition, and promotion opportunities available for Academic Language and Learning Development practitioners. We have been awarded funding by ALDinHE to undertake this international research project with members of ICALLD.

The study has two aims:
1) Establish personal, institutional, national, and international factors that facilitate Learning Development practitioners in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa to engage with professional development, recognition, and promotion opportunities.
2) Develop a thematic taxonomy of Learning Development role types to facilitate meaningful comparisons between respondent sub-groups.

Participation should take around 10 minutes and involves answering a series of questions related to your:
a) Qualifications, professional recognition, and experience
b) Place of work and job role
c) Access to professional development, recognition, and promotion opportunities.

If you would like to take part, please **click here** to open our online survey.

We appreciate your time and consideration. Thank you.

Appendix 2

Part 1: Qualifications, professional recognition and experience

1. What is your highest level of qualification?

- Undergraduate Degree
- Masters
- Doctorate
- Other (free text)

2. What is your current Advance HE fellowship status?

- Associate Fellow Advance HE (AFHEA)
- Fellow Advance HE (FHEA)
- Senior Fellow Advance HE (SFHEA)
- Principal Advance HE (PHEA)
- Not applicable

3. What is your current ALDinHE professional recognition status?

- Certified Practitioner (CeP)
- Certified Leading Practitioner (CeLP)
- Not applicable

4. Indicate any teaching excellence awards you have been awarded

- National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS)
- Collaborative Awards for Teaching & Learning (CATE)
- Other (free text)

5. For how many years have you worked as an academic language or learning development practitioner?

- Less than a year
- 1 year
- 2 years
- 3 years
- 4 years

- 5 years
- Over 5 years

Part 2: Place of work and job role

6. What country do you currently work in?

- Australia
- Canada
- New Zealand
- South Africa
- United Kingdom
- Other (free text)

7. What type of institution do you currently work in?

- College
- Polytechnic
- University
- Other (free text)

8. How many students study at your institution?

- Under 10,000
- 10,000–25,000
- Over 25,000
- Other (free text)

9. Where are you based within your institution?

- Careers service
- Faculty/ school
- Library
- Student support services
- Teaching and learning unit
- Other (free text)

10. What type of contract are you employed on?

- Academic
- Professional services
- Other (free text)

11. What are the principal responsibilities associated with your current job? (select all that apply)

- Academic development (e.g. staff training)
- Academic leadership (e.g. module leader/course leader)
- Access and outreach activity (e.g. working in schools/colleges/community)
- Co-curricular student support (e.g. one-to-ones/workshops/drop-ins)
- Digital learning systems coordination (e.g. system administrator)
- Educational development (e.g. curriculum design/assessment design)
- Impact evaluation
- Learning materials authorship (e.g. academic skills guides)
- On-course teaching — academic skills content
- On-course teaching — subject discipline content
- Peer-assisted learning coordination
- Personal academic tutoring
- Team management (e.g. manage a team)
- Other (free text)

12. Does your current role include a specific academic language or Learning Development specialism(s)? If so, select all that apply:

- No specialism
- Academic writing
- Artificial intelligence
- Assessment
- CPD for staff
- Critical thinking and reflection
- Digital literacy
- Diversity and inclusion
- Doing research

- Employability
- Group work
- Independent learning
- Information literacy
- Learning at university
- Listening and interpersonal skills
- Note-making
- Numeracy, Mathematics, and Statistics
- Online learning
- Oral communication
- Reading
- Referencing
- Report writing
- Research skills
- Time management
- Transition
- Visual literacy and creativity
- Working with others
- Writing for university
- Other (free text)

13. What is your current job title?

14. What do you think should be your current job title?