



‘Getting dissertation ready’ – taking a collaborative and innovative approach to events

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Presentation abstract

This poster (see Figure 1) aimed to illustrate and highlight the collaborative and creative approach we have taken to evolve student engagement through provision of Learning Development events, specifically related to dissertations. The innovative approach has streamlined and enhanced flexibility and accessibility to LD events for our diverse population of students, as well as promoting creative collaboration across a range of expertise within Learning Development (LD), paving the way for new possibilities for future events and collaborations.

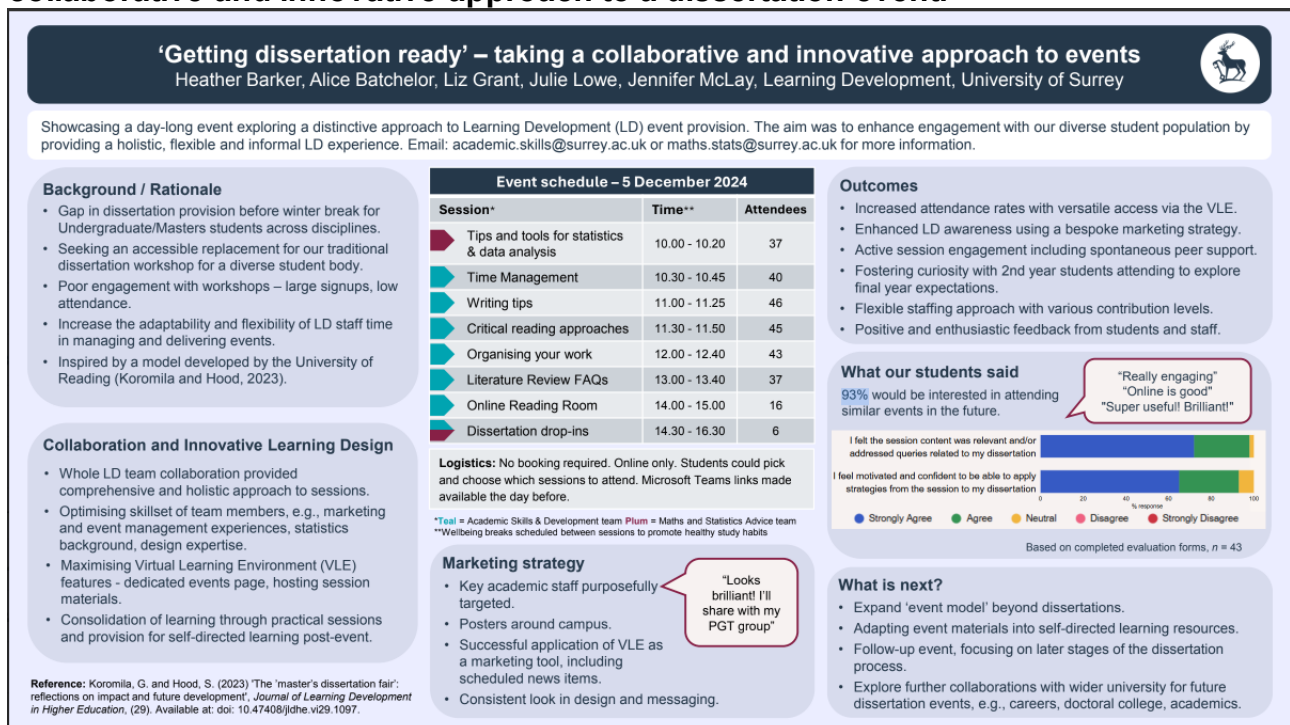
Our ‘Getting dissertation ready’ day-long event built on the success of an earlier pilot event, ‘Mastering your Dissertation’ in June 2024. This week-long programme of dissertation-specific sessions for Master's students was inspired by a model developed by the University of Reading (Koromila and Hood, 2023). Key to the success of this Master's event was the bringing together of the diverse skills and expertise of the LD team (advisers, librarians, maths and statistics specialists, foundation year LD lecturers and a

learning technologist) and careers staff, to successfully provide a range of holistic and bespoke sessions. Reflecting on this experience allowed us to further adapt the approach for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students.

Adapting this to a day-long event involved actively reflecting on and evolving several key factors: analysing and evaluating statistics and student feedback, and utilising, as appropriate, the skillset of LD team members (e.g. applying past marketing and event management experiences, statistics background and design expertise). The poster illustrated our experiences and outcomes from hosting this successful 'Getting dissertation ready' event, a day before the start of winter vacation, which resulted in our highest-ever event attendance by students.

By sharing our experience and findings in this poster, we hoped to inspire and potentially instigate innovation collaborations with our fellow Learning Developers in their provision of events within their own institutions.

Figure 1. Poster outlining the University of Surrey's Learning Development team's collaborative and innovative approach to a dissertation event.



Keywords: dissertation support; events; collaborative learning; holistic; student engagement.

Community response

The poster was well-received by attendees.

A participant, Tanja Tolar, shared their experience of a similar event in their university, with possibilities of further exchange of ideas:

Thank you for presenting your engaging work with dissertation events. We have also developed a week-long event at University of Bradford in 2022, including a panel with experts and academics talking about their dissertation writing. Students loved that but eventually we also decided to run a shortened session - three focused days of online and on-campus sessions, with a lot of recordings available as well. I am inspired by your work to try and develop a focused one-day event too but so far we didn't have the best response to a shorter delivery (we have a Dissertation Lite event with this focus but had very poor or no attendance). Currently, we seem to be having the best attendance in the mid-January slot; due to programmes running fieldwork and clinical work, slots before holidays will likely not have a good attendance for us. I'd be very happy to chat further about the dissertation support if possible, so please reach out.

Other participants found the collaboration aspects interesting and educative:

The collaborative approach taken by the team really stood out to me. I believe such collaborative ways of working are essential in supporting students holistically, utilising a range of skill-sets. How did you manage this collaboration in a practical sense, and would there be any benefit from collaborating with colleagues further beyond the LD team itself?

Author's reflection

It was encouraging to hear of similar innovative approaches being taken at the institutions of the attendees. We hope that by sharing our model, we can bring further inspiration to our Learning Development colleagues. We believe 'no sign-ups' and 'hosting online' is key for the day-long event, providing student autonomy in what they want to commit to, and full control of location to access the online session.

It was interesting to hear that a week-long event worked better than a day event. We acknowledge that the impact of timings can differ according to institutional context. Having a 'panel with experts and academics talking about their dissertation writing' is an

interesting idea and perhaps we could explore this option, as well as providing recordings, as a possible means of enhancing our future event provision.

From a practical perspective, successful collaboration was achieved through frequent communication and clear roles and timelines within the team. Having someone to oversee and facilitate the logistics of the collaboration is essential. Having genuinely supportive relations with colleagues fosters confidence to share and collaborate during sessions naturally. This is based on mutual trust and respect for each other's skills and expertise.

Since this event, we have successfully extended our collaboration beyond the Learning Development team. We have collaborated with Employability and Careers and the Doctoral College to create new sessions which have further enhanced the holistic approach of our events.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Tanja Tolar from the University of Bradford.

The community response was edited by Sriram Rajagopal, who captured the key themes of the community discussion.

References

Koromila, G., and Hood, S. (2023) 'The 'master's dissertation fair': reflections on impact and future development', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 29. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi29.1097>

Author details

Heather Barker manages the University of Surrey's Academic Skills and Development team, comprising Learning Development Advisers and Learning Development Librarians. Her research interests include developing inclusive and holistic Learning Development, which encompasses cognitive, affective and emotional aspects of a learner's journey. Heather is a member of the ALDinHE Professional Recognition and EDI working groups and the CPD Community of Practice.

Alice Batchelor joined the Maths and Statistics Advice team, part of the Learning Development team at the University of Surrey, in 2022. Prior to this, she worked as a statistician in contract research organisations. She delivers embedded maths and statistics teaching across a variety of courses and disciplines, as well as providing one-to-one support. Alice was awarded FHEA status in 2024.

Liz Grant joined the Learning Development team as manager of the Maths and Statistics Advice team in 2022, having previously worked in roles across education, mathematics, and widening participation. She has worked in education for over 16 years and is a qualified teacher of mathematics. Her passion is supporting people to reach their potential, no matter their background.

Julie Lowe joined the University of Surrey's Learning Development team in 2016. In her role as Learning Technologist, Julie brings a wealth of holistic and digital learning design insights to leading and supporting the team's creation of online resources as well as evolving the Learning Development space on the University's virtual learning environment. Julie is a passionate advocate of inclusive and accessible e-learning design and practices.

Jen McLay joined the University of Surrey's Learning Development team in 2017. As a Learning Development Adviser, Jen's role encompasses a diverse range of student-focused activities including events, workshops, resource development, journal club and more recently, academic integrity practices. Jen was awarded FHEA in 2020.

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