



10 Years of Let's Talk About [X]: reflections on the University of Glasgow's multidisciplinary undergraduate research conference

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Presentation abstract

Let's Talk About [X] (LTA[X]) is the University of Glasgow's annual multidisciplinary conference, run by Student Learning Development (SLD). The initiative comprises a two-month training programme, through which participants enhance their multidisciplinary communication and academic presentation skills with the help of learning developers, PhD mentors, and student peers, and a conference event where students showcase their outstanding research to peers and the wider university community. LTA[X] is one of the most ambitious and longest-running events of its kind in the sector, and it has been shortlisted for a Times Higher Education Award.

As LTA[X] reaches the 10-year landmark, we wanted to share our reflections on the process of creating and running this programme with the wider community of learning developers. This presentation traced the history of LTA[X] and detailed what is involved in organising and running the conference yearly, from the selection of participants to the organisation and overseeing of the training and the delivery of the conference itself, including discussion of some of the main hurdles faced by the organising committee. It also offered testimonies from previous years' participants and PhD mentors who each

reflect on their experience of taking part in LTA[X], and on the skills and experience they gained as well as some of the challenges they both encountered. In detailing our processes and experiences over the course of a decade, we seek to encourage and offer proven practical tools to learning developers in other institutions interested in organising similar events or programmes in their institutions.

Keywords: undergraduate students; multidisciplinary; academic research; conference.

Community response

There is so much value in being able to conduct, explore and evaluate a long-term student intervention project, particularly one that is not just a student intervention project but also teaches students about both research and a whole host of other skills and capabilities. To do all of this in such a supportive, stimulating and inspiring environment for ten years, and then expand the project even further into a journal and a postgraduate conference, is incredible.

Session participants agreed, with one commenting that 'I was most impressed by the synergy in benefits that this undergraduate student conference was able to generate for the university community'. Bringing together students, student mentors, and academic and professional services staff in a way that allows all to be enriched through the experience is a very special achievement.

Although the presenters described it as a training programme that supports student employability, the emphasis it places on building confidence and enhancing communication inspired delegates to see it much more as a form of personal rather than professional development. One noted that LTA[X] 'seems to be about the person and how they think about themselves and what they do as much as the subject they are researching. It's great to see the person at the centre of their learning'.

The students themselves also value the opportunity to take part, with an average of 50-60 applicants per year for the 24 presentation slots. Students commented that the multidisciplinary aspect allowed them to learn about completely new subjects, which inspired them to want to learn more. The mentors helped the student presenters to

translate their ideas beyond their subject area to ensure they made sense to a non-specialist audience, and both sides learned a lot from the process. And for staff, it was a chance to build connections and collaborate. One presenter credited his position as a learning developer as being useful for leveraging relationships with academics to encourage students to apply and to raise awareness of the conference generally. Word of mouth and a regular newsletter helped with the rest.

Next steps and additional questions

Student engagement is a perennial issue. How do you reach the point where a positive experience becomes positive word of mouth, and the process is more self-sustaining, particularly for a voluntary activity?

And for those who would like to try something like this themselves but are perhaps a little daunted by the scale, how might we introduce multidisciplinary into our work for our students' benefit – and for ours, too?

Authors' reflection

We are incredibly encouraged by the community response to our presentation and to the Let's Talk About [X] (LTA[X]) initiative. As the team that runs this undergraduate conference and training programme, we are fully aware of the value it brings to both students and the graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) involved. Nevertheless, seeing fellow practitioners praise the initiative gives us renewed energy to continue offering and evolving the programme. In particular, we see the positive response of the community as partly legitimising our plans to increase LTA[X] synergies with our sister project, the journal, [X]position, and to develop a similar conferencing programme for postgraduates in our institution in the near future.

We are also thankful for the community's conceptualisation of LTA[X] as a project focused primarily on personal development, rather than professional, and an example of person-centred learning. This is an angle from which to look at the project that we have not considered before and that will help us moving forward in thinking about and expressing the benefits that taking part in LTA[X] can have for its participants. This view particularly

resonates with our thinking on the value of the project in the current academic landscape. With the advent of AI tools, we will need to develop undergraduates who are not simply able to research and write about their disciplines, but that are fully rounded specialists in their fields, able to carry out high level investigative tasks and then also to adapt and communicate them to wider audiences.

With regard to the first additional question, we would like to highlight that maximising engagement, even with the institutional prestige that the project has attained, is a perennial challenge, and something we work hard on year after year. This is especially true given the increasingly time-poor student population of higher education institutions. Delivering a high-standard conference, from the organisation of the event to the quality of the presentations (which are invariably excellent), has always been and remains our main way of promotion. All students and a wide array of staff are invited to the event and encouraged to attend through free lunch and refreshments. Those who do attend are often inspired and become either future participants or champions of the event in their respective areas. Additionally, we have recently been running information sessions early in the academic year where we demystify the application process for people interested in applying to the programme. This helps build confidence and encourages students to apply.

For those who would like to try something similar in their institutions, our first piece of advice is to start small, especially if nothing similar exists in your university. One way of doing this would be to create an undergraduate conference and training programme within a specific subject area, faculty or school, and promote multidisciplinary exchange of knowledge there with a view to scale it up later. Another would be to concentrate on simply organising a multidisciplinary conference and think about building a training programme in future iterations. LTA[X] followed the latter approach. Its current form and ambition are not the same as when the project was created but have evolved and grown incrementally over the course of the last 10 years (see Bownes, Ramsay and Struan, 2020). Finally, it is also worth mentioning that LTA[X] relies heavily on the support of a fantastic GTA team (in fact, it would not be possible without them). Our GTAs enable us to embed multidisciplinary training in the project due to their various subject backgrounds, and year after year their mentoring receives the highest praise from LTA[X] participants in our yearly evaluation of the project.

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The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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