



Is this the hardest time to be a student at university?

Rebecca Wilson

University of St Andrews, UK

Presentation abstract

This mini keynote explored the questions: is this the hardest time to be a student at university (at least in a contemporary setting)? What are our roles as educators and Learning Developers in supporting students to navigate these challenges? These questions arose from a myriad of challenges that students are now facing at the same time as accelerated, drastic global changes (Davey and Harney, 2023).

The mini keynote asked if Learning Development is seeing changes during this time, as many of our students are still suffering from the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (UPP Foundation, 2024). In addition to this, we are seeing a mental health crisis coupled with a cost-of-living crisis which has a serious impact on students' university experiences (NUS Scotland, 2024).

These challenges are taking place at the same time as huge global changes such as the climate emergency, and Industry 4.0 with accelerated digitalisation impacting students' education and day-to-day lives, as well as future workplaces (World Economic Forum, 2024). This is coupled with the additional challenge for staff in higher education (HE) to become AI ready (Bobula, 2024).

So, is this the hardest time to be a student or are we just more aware of the challenges students face and how does this impact Learning Development?

Prompt questions:

Is this the hardest time to be a student at university?

How do these outlined challenges impact Learning Development?

What are our roles as educators and Learning Developers in supporting students to navigate these challenges?

Keywords: student-experience; skills for the future; Learning Development.

Community response

This thought-provoking mini-keynote received passionate responses from participants. One attendee reflected on the concluding questions: 'What is university? Who is at university and what is next? At what level should university be hard?' and expressed a wish to hear more on this.

They felt it was a really important conversation and shared their view that it seemed much harder to be a student now than it had been 10–15 years ago. While a lot of the causes for this are structural and therefore difficult to address directly, they felt our role as Learning Developers (LDers) was more important than ever. LDers help students achieve their goals and get to where they want to be, even when it is hard, and that is crucial – not just on an institutional level (in terms of retention, etc.), but also on a moral one.

Another contributor appreciated the time and space the mini-keynote provided to reflect on students' experiences. They noted that the current higher education model was built at a time when many students accessed university for free, and could focus solely on their studies. Now, with tuition fees alone costing £27,750 for a typical three-year undergraduate degree, the need for paid employment while studying had become a necessity, particularly for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. They pointed out that the current HE model was not designed for this reality. While LDers could not fix the system we work within, they noted how valuable it was to have a broader understanding of the challenges students were facing.

Another attendee added that, in their role, they had certainly seen an increase year on year in 'referred' students, usually in relation to adverse personal circumstances, mental health, and/or disability. They echoed the speaker's earlier comments and considered whether this increase was due to an increase in these areas or an increase and/or openness about disclosing them, concluding that both likely played a part. They described this situation as multi-faceted, with no easy answers. What this means in Learning

Development depends on specific roles and institutional structures, but they agreed that it could only benefit all students for LDers to have as full an understanding as possible of the needs of a diverse range of students. They added that we would never be in an ‘arrived’ state in this work – and that practice could always be enhanced and developed. They also believed that widening participation continues to present further barriers and challenges, which only served to exacerbate the issues described above.

Next steps and additional questions

One attendee pertinently commented that this had been such a good session and had made a strong case for systemic change, given the significant changes in student demographics. With more diversity, class, race, gender, care experience, young carers, neurodiversity, poor mental health, part-time workers, they asked: why did we still have a model of education and funding designed for relatively privileged 18-year-old school leavers? They expressed appreciation for some of the initiatives discussed in the session, especially the campus larder (which avoided the ‘food bank’ stigma).

The session also led to discussions around the use of artificial intelligence (AI). The attendee reflected that university was about struggling to become better – and that there had traditionally not been a shortcut to that. They suggested this could impact participation for many students. Yet AI now offered a potential shortcut. They observed that when people (particularly students) were pressured, time-poor, and needed to be efficient, the allure of AI was real. They concluded by asking:

1. Students did not have the same time and freedoms to be curious. How does Learning Development respond to that?

Author's reflection

In this mini keynote, we had a fascinating and thought-provoking conversation about the current student experience, whether the university experience has changed, and how LDers can shape the experience of learners at university. Each of the three mini keynote

discussions was different; however, there were two prominent themes throughout all the conversations.

Firstly, there were great conversations about agency, from both staff and student perspectives. We discussed how student agency is impacted by multiple challenges, such as the legacy of COVID-19, the mental health and cost of living crisis, global challenges and Industry 4.0 with increased digitalisation. Specifically, this led to multiple questions of autonomy, belonging and identity, especially in a diverse student cohort. For example, we discussed what it meant to be an international and/or neurodiverse student navigating these challenges. We also discussed staff agency and how the LDers can support students in challenging times, whilst navigating multiple challenges within HE ourselves.

The second theme explored how and if the challenges had emerged. Specifically, whether these challenges had always existed or whether we are just more aware of them now. We discussed the changing demographic of universities, and how some barriers have been removed, meaning students who previously were unable to access university are now engaging in HE. However, there is a need to ensure that there are systems and support in place to meet the changing needs of students.

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 Hannah Awcock from Edinburgh Napier University, Beverley Hancock-Smith from De Montfort University, Mel Kinchant from Glasgow Caledonian University, and Lee Fallin from the University of Hull. The community response was edited by Buxi Duan, who captured the key themes of the community discussion, under the guidance of Laura Barnett.

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

AI was used in the community response for grammar check. In line with our wider policy, other editorial processes did not use AI.

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Author details

Dr Rebecca Wilson is Head of Student Development at the University of St Andrews. She achieved a PhD in International Relations and holds an ILM Level 3 Certificate in Effective Coaching. She has expertise in university transitions, including the award-winning 'Transitions Toolkit', neurodiversity and skills for the future/ Industry 4.0. Rebecca is a strong advocate for equality and inclusivity in education.

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