



Reviewing and optimising the impact of self-selecting Learning Development provision on level 6 undergraduates

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Presentation abstract

Engagement with Learning Development (LD) interventions has been found to have a positive impact on students' academic success, including higher attainment (Nzekwe-Excel, 2014; Coulson, Loddick and Rice, 2021), development of self-regulated learning strategies (Lobos et al., 2021), and increased confidence (Coulson, Loddick and Rice, 2021). Such interventions were shown to positively influence retention for students 'at-risk' (Berry, Mac An Bhaird and O'Shea, 2005). In an analysis of student success strategies at 64 US institutions, monitoring usage of academic support services has been rated as 90% effective in supporting 'student success, retention and completion' (RNL, 2023).

The Learning Services (LS) team at De Montfort University provides a range of self-selecting LD opportunities (workshops, tutorials, and drop-ins) to all students. This presentation shared the findings of a project aimed to review the impact of this provision on level 6 undergraduates. Level 6 students have been selected as the target population based on their high usage of LS provision (approx. 41% in 2022/23), but also because of the higher weighting of level 6 grades in overall degree classification (DMU, 2023).

Using a range of data for the academic year 23/24, the project explored the following questions:

- Is there a relationship between attendance at LS self-selecting sessions and student attainment?
- What type of one-to-one interventions (tutorials/drop-ins) and delivery modes (online/in-person) had the most usage, and which self-selecting workshop topics had the highest attendance rates by level 6 undergraduates?
- How can these findings be used to optimise LD support for level 6 undergraduates?

As an outcome of this project, a range of targeted strategies and resources were developed for optimising the self-selecting LD offer for the target student group. Attendees were invited to feedback on these and consider whether they can be applied to their own context.

Keywords: learning development; student engagement; undergraduate attainment; self-selecting interventions; student success metrics.

Community response

There is a wide-spread culture of evaluating impact across the contemporary higher education sector, as demonstrated by the two most significant evaluation exercises: the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This culture means that Learning Development teams are under growing pressure to demonstrate their contribution to student success. This can be particularly challenging given the diverse and embedded nature of Learning Development work, which often spans both curricular and co-curricular contexts, making it difficult to establish clear causal links.

Against this backdrop, ALDCon 2025's sub-theme on the role of evidence in Learning Development practice was both timely and necessary. This presentation by the Learning Services team at De Montfort University offered a rigorous statistical evaluation of their self-selecting provision. The scale and methodological robustness of the study were praised by conference delegates for offering sector-wide value by substantiating anecdotal reflections with empirical data.

Particularly compelling was the evidence of positive outcomes for students who had declared a disability, who not only engaged more frequently with the service but also achieved higher degree classifications and had lower rates of failure or non-completion. The presentation raised important questions about the nature and positioning of Learning Development support. Might its broad, non-targeted approach be precisely what makes it so accessible and effective for disabled students, by avoiding the stigma or separation that can sometimes accompany specialist provision? At the same time, it prompts reflection on how such support can complement, rather than compete with, specialist services funded through Disabled Students' Allowance.

In sum, the presentation offered a powerful example of how Learning Development teams can engage meaningfully with the sector's culture of evaluation. It demonstrated that with thoughtful design and analytical rigour, it is possible to produce compelling evidence of impact, even in a field where outcomes are often diffuse and context-dependent. The session left participants inspired to explore similar approaches within their own institutions, reinforcing the value of evidence-informed practice in advancing the field.

Next steps and additional questions

Participants offered a range of reflections to deepen their understanding of what the project revealed and how its insights might be applied in their institutional contexts. There was lively discussion about how the approach could be extended to explore further dimensions of Learning Development's impact on students' experiences. As one participant summarised, the project offered:

So many avenues [that] this could go down now – using the same data to explore in more detail another of the factors to gain the same level of understanding you have about the disability factor, or replicating the study with another level to understand similarities and differences.

Another participant emphasised that pursuing these avenues will be key to 'fully illuminate the value of Learning Development work, given its complexity'. They suggested expanding the focus beyond academic performance to consider how engagement with Learning Development provision might shape students' perceptions of their university. For instance, does such engagement help students feel heard and supported? Does it foster a sense of belonging or ownership of their educational experience? Whilst acknowledging the

subjective nature of these questions, the participant argued that exploring them could further demonstrate the impact of Learning Development, especially in relation to university strategies around retention and continuation.

In addition to broader questions about extending the project, some participants reflected on specific findings. One wondered whether disabled students might be drawn to the self-selecting offer, and benefit from it, precisely because it is not explicitly targeted at them, thereby avoiding the feeling of being singled out. Given the positive outcomes for disabled students, this raised a question about whether more targeted support might inadvertently alter those outcomes. They also queried how the provision was distinguished from specialist support funded through Disabled Students' Allowance, such as one-to-one study skills or mentoring, and how the team ensured these services worked together to avoid accidental competition. Looking at the wider student population, another participant questioned whether accessing self-selecting provision is itself part of a student's attainment journey. Are these students already predisposed to succeed, or is it the opportunity for personalised, one-to-one conversation that makes the difference?

Participants' reflections emphasised the benefits of the project and how the engagement with such rich data can be further developed. Whether through replication, expansion, or deeper qualitative exploration, the project identified possible pathways for Learning Development teams to evidence the impact of their work in nuanced and meaningful ways.

Authors' reflections

Completing this project alongside our everyday jobs has proven to be a bit of a rollercoaster, especially during an academic year with multiple changes in our institution and team. Therefore, being able to attend the conference and share the results with such a welcoming audience has felt like an amazing achievement, and so we would like to thank everyone who took their time to share feedback with us or write up their reflections.

We fully agree with the observation that the preliminary findings we have shared merely scratch the surface of the complex impact that LD engagement can have on students. This project has been born as a reaction to requests for evidence of impact, at the institutional and also sector level, in contexts where statistical data are preferred, while impacts based

on students' self-reported feedback are considered 'insufficient' or subjective. Even as we were gathering the data, we realised the limitations of our sample, but also how much more can be teased out, such as by scrutinising specific impacts for cohorts that share certain features. One aspect we could examine is the difference between student cohorts who have also received embedded sessions, and those who did not, though we do not hold the data about individual attendance to specific embedded sessions that have been delivered. We do plan to complement the study with further qualitative research into cohorts with similar features, but we no longer have access to the original sample of students as they have already graduated.

Another aspect of our findings that the community commented on was the impact our support has on disabled students and whether this complements or competes with the support that is available through the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). It was not possible to distinguish in the data which of the students who had declared a disability also accessed DSA. However, even if some students are receiving support from both services, it does not mean they are in competition. Firstly, our Learning Development service offers a wider range of provision than that available through DSA. For instance, students can access support with Maths and Statistics and Drawing and Design, as well as attending study skills workshops on a variety of topics. In addition, many students (including international students) are not eligible for DSA support. Of those who are eligible, many experience delays in receiving support. Department for Education research (Johnson et al., 2019) found that only 40% of students had heard of DSA before starting their course and many students found it hard to get evidence to prove their disability. This means that many students only apply once they arrive at university. The fact that the Learning Development service is open to all means that it can support all students who need it. Anecdotally, we are aware there are a lot of students in this situation, so it is satisfying that the analysis provides some supporting evidence that we can make a difference to this group.

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