



## What should high-quality research look like in Learning Development?

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### ***Presentation abstract***

High-quality teaching in contemporary universities is increasingly recognised through evidence of its reach, value, and impact. Previous ALDCon presentations (e.g. White and Webster, 2023) have highlighted the importance of Learning Developers—and the wider field of Learning Development—in ensuring our work engages with broader conversations around high-quality teaching and learning. Evans et al. (2021) emphasise that quality emerges through the integration of pedagogical practice and research. But what does ‘quality’ mean for Learning Developers and other third space professionals? How can we showcase our practice through our research? This workshop investigated how quality is understood and evidenced in Learning Development research. Editors from the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE)* collaborated with delegates in a Consensus Workshop (Stanfield, 2002) to explore how quality might be conceptualised and evidenced in our scholarly outputs. Through taking a broad and inclusive approach to research, the session acknowledged the need for Learning Development to actively and continually write itself into existence (Syska and Buckley, 2023) to demonstrate its impact. The outcomes of the workshop were designed to inform *JLDHE*’s editorial practices and enhance its support for Learning Developers at all career stages. Ultimately, the workshop fostered a deeper understanding of quality in Learning Development research, empowering delegates to strengthen their pedagogical practice through meaningful and impactful scholarship.

**Keywords:** learning development; pedagogic research; research quality; scholarship of teaching and learning; consensus workshop.

## ***The workshop***

During this in-person session at ALDCon 2025, participants were invited to explore their perspectives on what constitutes high-quality research within Learning Development as a distinct academic and professional field. The session was convened in response to ongoing conversations within the community about how to define and support high-quality research in a field that is developing its own distinctive scholarly voice. The workshop aimed to help participants articulate a shared understanding of 'quality' and identify strategies for producing impactful research that enhances practice and positions Learning Development within sector-wide conversations around teaching and learning.

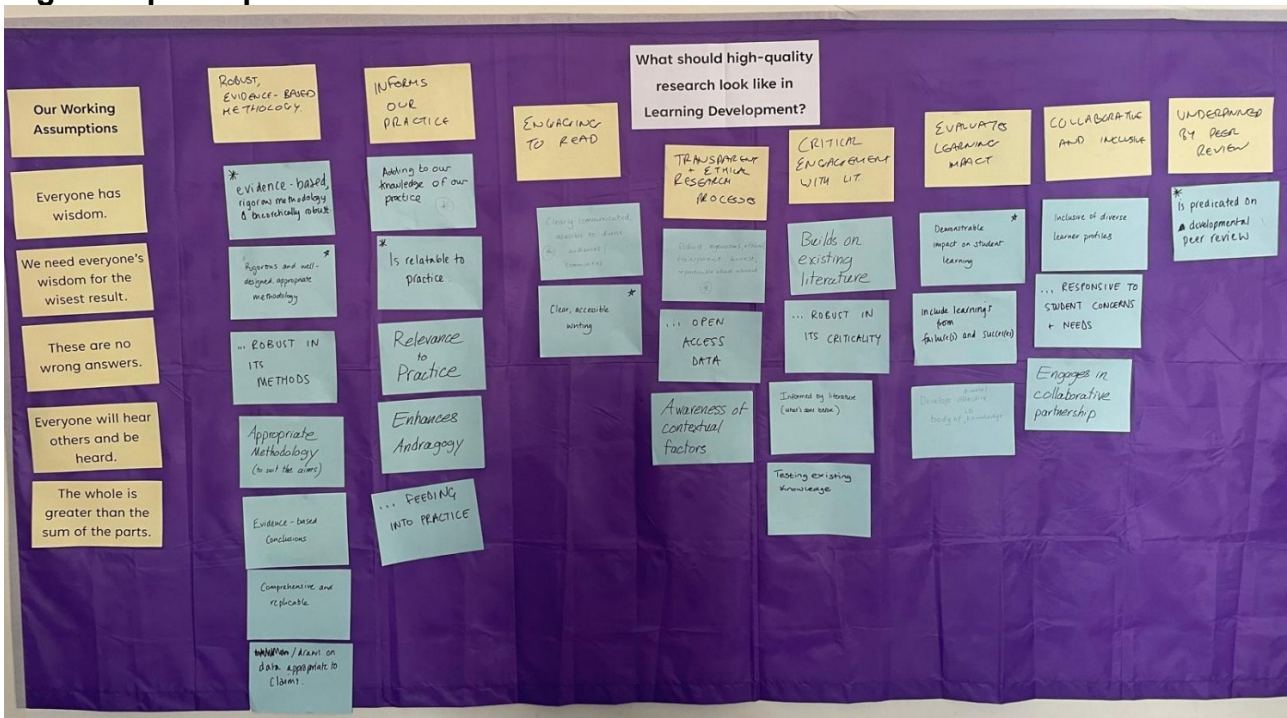
In supporting this exploration, editors from *JLDHE* facilitated the session using the Institute of Cultural Affairs' (ICA) Consensus Workshop methodology (Stanfield, 2002). Through five structured stages, participants worked to develop a shared understanding of quality in Learning Development research. The stages were:

1. **Context:** outline the workshop process and intended outcome.
2. **Brainstorming:** gather relevant ideas through individual and group work.
3. **Clustering:** group ideas from participants to create related categories.
4. **Naming:** give names to each cluster to agree a response to the focus question.
5. **Resolving:** discuss the next steps based on the outcome of the workshop.

The workshop brought together a diverse group of Learning Developers, researchers, and other third space practitioners from across the higher education sector. It built on a similar session that was held with the *JLDHE* Editorial Board in January 2025, allowing for comparison between community and editorial perspectives on what constitutes high-quality research in Learning Development.

A key facilitation tool used during the workshop was a 'sticky wall', which enabled participants to visually organise and interact with ideas throughout the session. This tactile and flexible approach was especially effective during the clustering and naming stages, helping the group co-create a response to the session's overarching focus question: what should high-quality research look like in Learning Development? Figure 1 shows the sticky wall in use during the workshop, capturing the dynamic and participatory nature of the approach.

**Figure 1. The sticky wall used during the ALDCon 2025 Consensus Workshop to organise participants' contributions.**



To support meaningful collaboration, the workshop was grounded in a series of working assumptions that shaped participants' engagement:

1. Everyone has wisdom.
2. We need everyone's wisdom for the wisest result.
3. There are no wrong answers.
4. Everyone will hear others and be heard.
5. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

These working assumptions were designed to foster a space where all contributions were valued, dialogue was open and constructive, and collective insight could emerge through genuine collaboration. This inclusive environment was crucial for surfacing nuanced and diverse perspectives on what might constitute high-quality research in Learning Development.

## ***Community response***

This well-attended session sparked thought-provoking discussions during and after the conference. Steve Rooney, who chaired the workshop, described it as ‘a really engaging, productive, and beautifully managed session’, reflecting the strength of the facilitation and the collaborative spirit among the participants. Reaching consensus can be challenging, especially when exploring a topic that holds personal and professional significance, but the community responded positively and welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with peers. As one participant reflected:

The facilitation of the workshop was excellent: getting us to come to a consensus really helped identify what was at the heart of the question. Consensus certainly wasn't easy for our table—at several points we had some very distinct opinions that we found all but impossible to reconcile. I was impressed, though, by how, after pulling all the groups together, the main themes still emerged.

Despite initial reservations, even sceptics were impressed with the facilitation and outcome of the workshop:

I spent a fair portion of this workshop marvelling at how artfully it was facilitated. I guess that's in part a tacit admission of a certain scepticism regarding the likelihood of developing any kind of working consensus, in response to such a vast and contested question, in the time available. I was delighted, not to mention extremely impressed, to be proven completely wrong on this!

Table 1 presents the final output of the Consensus Workshop, capturing the collective insights generated through collaborative participant engagement. The underpinning ideas emerged from individual reflections and small-group discussions held during the workshop. These contributions were organised into eight thematic clusters on the sticky wall, following ICA's methodology. The titles of each cluster were agreed collectively by participants, representing a shared understanding of what constitutes high-quality research in Learning Development. Together, these clusters reflect a multifaceted understanding of research quality, encompassing methodological rigour, practical relevance, ethical transparency, and inclusive collaboration.

**Table 1. Collaborative output from the ALDCon 2025 Consensus Workshop.**

<b>Thematic cluster</b>	<b>Underpinning ideas</b>
<b>Robust, evidence-based methodology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence-based, rigorous methodology and theoretically robust.</li> <li>• Rigorous and well-designed, appropriate methodology.</li> <li>• Robust in its methods.</li> <li>• Appropriate methodology (to suit the aims).</li> <li>• Evidence-based conclusions.</li> <li>• Comprehensive and replicable.</li> <li>• Draws on data appropriate to claims.</li> </ul>
<b>Informs our practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adding to our knowledge of our practice.</li> <li>• Is relatable to practice.</li> <li>• Relevance to practice.</li> <li>• Enhances andragogy.</li> <li>• Feeding into practice.</li> </ul>
<b>Engaging to read</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly communicated, accessible to diverse audiences and communities.</li> <li>• Clear, accessible writing.</li> </ul>
<b>Transparent and ethical research process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robust, ethical, transparent, honest, reproducible where relevant.</li> <li>• Open access data.</li> <li>• Awareness of contextual factors.</li> </ul>
<b>Critical engagement with literature</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Builds on existing literature.</li> <li>• Robust in its criticality.</li> <li>• Informed by literature (what's been done before).</li> <li>• Testing existing knowledge.</li> </ul>
<b>Evaluates learning impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrable impact on student learning.</li> <li>• Include learnings from failure(s) and success(es).</li> <li>• Develops a diverse/collective body of LD knowledge.</li> </ul>
<b>Collaborative and inclusive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive of diverse learner profiles.</li> <li>• Responsive to student concerns and needs.</li> <li>• Engages in collaborative partnership.</li> </ul>
<b>Underpinned by peer review</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is predicated on developmental peer review.</li> </ul>

A recurring theme throughout the workshop was the distinction between high-quality research within Learning Development and high-quality research more broadly. Although Table 1 shows that some consensus was reached on this question, participants felt that further opportunities to explore diverse perspectives would be beneficial:

One interesting discussion we had at our table was whether we were working to identify the hallmarks of high-quality research in general, or those of research in Learning Development in particular. We didn't get the opportunity to discuss in much depth what the differences might be, but we identified that elements such as 'rigorous methodology' are likely to be common to all research, while 'student-centred' is more related to LD (rather than, say, biology!)

Building on this point, one participant suggested a way to support further discussion in future iterations of the workshop:

I wonder whether there could be some foundation or direction guiding the overall discussion—ALDinHE's definition of Learning Development, or some statement of the aim of Learning Development? By this I mean, we start with a premise—if we agree that the aim of Learning Development is X, then what does high-quality research look like in this field?

The workshop prompted valuable discussion, and even without a shared definition, some consensus was reached. Still, the question of how high-quality Learning Development research might differ from broader conceptions of research quality remains a compelling area for continued dialogue:

I'm interested in the community's and editorial team's take on this: were we looking for traits of high-quality research in general, or of Learning Development research in particular? Are they different, and if so, how and why?

This question, along with others raised during the workshop, reflects the depth of engagement and the appetite for further discussion within the community. Taken together, the responses illustrate how the workshop fostered meaningful enquiry, critical reflection, and shared learning. Participants felt safe to challenge assumptions and explore new ways of thinking, which surfaced key themes and raised thoughtful questions. The workshop reaffirmed the value of collaborative dialogue in shaping a shared understanding of research quality within Learning Development.

## Next steps and additional questions

The workshop generated rich discussion and surfaced key themes around what constitutes high-quality research, while also leaving space for further exploration. It marked a key moment in the journal's ongoing efforts to engage the Learning Development community in developing shared standards and expectations for high-quality research in the field. Lee Fallin, who participated in the Editorial Board's Consensus Workshop earlier in the year, reflected on the experience in his role as a Section Editor for *JLDHE*:

It was fascinating to see the responses from the community for this activity, having previously participated in this same workshop as a member of the Editorial Board. For this reason, I intentionally checked in asynchronously as opposed to taking part again. As editors, we had a range of ideas and I can see key crossovers in (1) advancing the field, (2) being transparent and ethical, (3) being written for the reader, (4) robust method(ology), and (5) engaging in peer-review.

It was striking to see that as editors, we had focused upon productive provocation and explicit openness to feedback—perhaps reflecting the nature of some of the work we undertake. It is, however, somewhat reassuring to see so much common ground on how quality is determined. I'm also thrilled to see we've not surfaced our own work. After all, this must be a community initiative, and it is great to see this workshop taking it forward. I can't wait to see where this goes next.

Moving forward, participants expressed interest in how insights from both the ALDCon workshop and the earlier one with the Editorial Board might inform future developments at *JLDHE*. One suggestion was to translate these outcomes into practical guidance for researchers and authors:

I wonder if the insights from the workshop could be developed into a form of feedforward guidance—either for authors submitting to the journal or for researchers in the planning stages of their work. This could help ensure stronger alignment between research design, evidence, and conclusions.

Overall, the workshop provided a valuable foundation for informing future research practices and advancing Learning Development scholarship. As conversations continue—within the community and through the journal—there is clear potential to develop these insights into practical guidance to support research and publication. The collaborative spirit of the workshop, and the shared commitment to shaping the field, suggest that this is only

the beginning of a wider dialogue about what quality means in Learning Development research—and how we might continue to define it together.

### ***Authors' reflections***

The workshop was grounded in the premise that high-quality research is crucial for enhancing teaching and learning across the higher education sector. This is especially true in Learning Development, where evidence-based pedagogies underpin the effectiveness of student-centred practice. At the same time, we were mindful that tensions exist within the very definition of 'quality research', a term that is strongly contested within pedagogic research (Evans et al., 2021). While core principles such as rigour, relevance, and transparency are widely accepted—as reflected in our Editorial Board's discussions—we were especially interested in how the values-based ethos of Learning Development (ALDinHE, no date) shapes practitioners' understanding of quality.

The community's ethos, which foregrounds inclusivity, collaboration, and responsiveness to student needs, provided a meaningful lens through which to explore the concept of research quality. In this workshop, we found that the key dimensions and characteristics of 'quality' we valued as editors largely aligned with what the participants collectively negotiated in a series of guided tasks and discussions. This reflection compares these results to create clear guidelines for *JLDHE* that support and enhance the journal's peer-review process.

The outcomes of both workshops, summarised in Tables 1 and 2, demonstrate a strong consensus between the *JLDHE* Editorial Board and the wider community on what constitutes high-quality research in Learning Development. Both groups identified several core principles, including robust methodology, readability, relevance and impact, and ethical transparency, as well as the need to engage with and build upon existing knowledge. These similarities are reassuring and align with broader criteria for quality in research (Evans et al., 2021).

**Table 2. Collaborative output from the *JLDHE* Editorial Board Consensus Workshop held in January 2025.**

Thematic cluster	Underpinning ideas
<b>Advances the field</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showcase of strong and compelling evidence.</li> <li>• Evidence is current and considers sector context.</li> <li>• Commonality of methodology benchmarking (e.g. TASO).</li> <li>• Has clear relevance to LD.</li> <li>• Advances the field of LD (e.g. conversation starter).</li> <li>• Transferability of ideas.</li> <li>• Grounded in the literature to take the field forward.</li> <li>• Clear takeaways that readers can use.</li> </ul>
<b>Demonstrates robust research design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robust methodology that is aware of limitations.</li> <li>• Aligned: aims, methodology, conclusions, and advocates humbly.</li> <li>• Has a balance of theory and practice.</li> <li>• Robust ethics in research and writing.</li> <li>• Focus: clarity and purpose.</li> </ul>
<b>Makes a productive provocation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes risks – responsibly.</li> <li>• Fresh, new, and inspiring perspective.</li> <li>• Makes you go ooooo(h)...</li> <li>• Fearless with thinking.</li> <li>• Contributes something new.</li> <li>• Creativity and bravery in approach.</li> <li>• Ignites an LD spark.</li> </ul>
<b>Open to developmental feedback</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engages dialogically with editorial feedback.</li> <li>• Active willingness to engage in the review process.</li> </ul>
<b>Recognises and respects the positionality of self and others</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognises privilege in the literature.</li> <li>• Thoroughly integrates international (and historical?) literature.</li> <li>• International readership is always considered.</li> </ul>
<b>Written for the readers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear articulation of ideas.</li> <li>• Information is made accessible through multimodality.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible writing style.</li> <li>• Uses the right words to convey meaning.</li> <li>• Accessible and respectful of the audience.</li> <li>• Inclusive, accessible use of language.</li> <li>• Focused on the reader.</li> <li>• Gleaming narrative thread.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Acts on aims and guidelines</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meets submission criteria.</li> <li>• Follows submission guidelines vigorously.</li> <li>• Transparency in ethics, positionality, AI, and authorship.</li> <li>• Catchy title and clear abstract.</li> </ul>

Notably, each group brought distinct emphases to the discussion, reflecting the diverse roles and priorities within Learning Development as it evolves into a distinct academic and professional field. In the area of peer review and feedback, for example, the community highlighted the importance of research being ‘underpinned by peer review’, while the Editorial Board emphasised being ‘open to developmental feedback’, engaging ‘dialogically with editorial feedback’, and demonstrating an ‘active willingness to engage in the review process’. The community also introduced a new category: ‘Collaborative and Inclusive’, characterised by a focus on being ‘inclusive of diverse learner profiles’ and engaging in ‘collaborative partnership’. These themes were less explicit in the Editorial Board’s discussion, which instead prioritised originality, risk-taking, and provocation. Finally, while the community noted that quality research should ‘enhance andragogy’, the Editorial Board focused on providing ‘clear takeaways that readers can use’.

The similarities and differences between the two groups’ approaches to defining high-quality research in Learning Development suggest a common foundation in understanding the fundamentals of good research, while also pointing to some distinct perspectives stemming from specific roles and the different priorities of each group. We were perhaps most surprised by the community’s primary concern with maintaining academic standards—a view perhaps underpinned by the perception of the journal as a curator and gatekeeper to knowledge in the field. The Editorial Board, by contrast, focused more on the act of research itself and the journey of the researcher, encouraging ‘provocations’, ‘risks’, and even ‘fearlessness with thinking’. While the shared beliefs reaffirmed our commitment to academic rigour and our role in ensuring that research is credible, useful,

and responsibly conducted, the differences added unexpected value to this dialogic understanding.

To support alignment between community and editorial perspectives, we have used the findings from each workshop to develop a revised framework for peer review. This framework is designed to enhance our peer-review process by embedding shared principles of quality into the assessment of submissions to our journal. Table 3 collates the editors' and community's responses into four overarching categories: contribution, design/rigour, positioning, and engagement. These areas will form the foundation of *JLDHE*'s new peer-review criteria. They reflect the methodological rigour and values-driven ethos of Learning Development, supporting a peer-review process that is inclusive, responsive, and held to high scholarly standards.

**Table 3. Revised peer-review assessment criteria for *JLDHE*, synthesised from the outcomes of the ALDCon 2025 and Editorial Board Consensus Workshops.**

Peer-review area	From the Editorial Board	From the community
<b>Contribution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advances the field.</li> <li>Makes a productive provocation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informs our practice.</li> <li>Evaluates learning impact.</li> </ul>
<b>Design/Rigour</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrates robust research design.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transparent and ethical research process.</li> <li>Robust, evidence-based methodology.</li> </ul>
<b>Positioning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognises and respects the positionality of self and others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critical engagement with literature.</li> <li>Collaborative and inclusive.</li> </ul>
<b>Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Written for the readers.</li> <li>Acts on aims and guidelines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engaging to read.</li> </ul>

Building on these categories, the *JLDHE* Editorial Board will devise prompt questions that reviewers are asked to consider within each of the four peer-review areas. The revised criteria will guide reviewers in assessing submissions not only for methodological rigour and relevance to practice, but also for qualities such as accessibility, inclusivity, and impact. These qualities mirror the criteria we use to select our Article of the Year award—

originality, creativity, methodological innovation, clarity of voice, and excellence in scholarship—ensuring consistency between our review process and our recognition of outstanding contributions. By embedding these principles into our review process, we aim to support authors in producing work that pushes the boundaries of the field, engages diverse audiences, and contributes meaningfully to Learning Development scholarship.

For us as editors, this workshop has helped us take a significant step toward our goal of grounding our editorial practices in community dialogue and shared understanding. Working with the community offered a powerful reminder of the value of collaboration in shaping the future of Learning Development research. We were delighted that it created space for meaningful dialogue between editors and practitioners, surfacing shared principles and uncovering new perspectives that have directly informed the development of clearer, community-rooted guidance for peer review. The resulting peer-review criteria are more than a tool; instead, they reflect the field's collective wisdom and commitment to inclusive, impactful scholarship. We are excited to use these insights to support submissions that not only meet these criteria but also embody the collaborative ethos at the heart of Learning Development.

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