



LearnHigher

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

**Fourth annual self-evaluation report September
2009**

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1. Executive summary

1.1 LearnHigher is a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) involving 16 English universities and covering 20 learning development areas. Among other purposes it aims to share learning development resources, some specifically created under the LearnHigher banner, and build an evidence base for enhancing the effectiveness of students' study practices, academics' teaching practices and of organizational structures and processes.

1.2 LearnHigher is structured as a collaborative arrangement of Learning Area Co-ordinators (LACs) who take responsibility for their learning areas in addition to their mainstream roles within their universities. LearnHigher is therefore a collaborative network striving to identify and disseminate excellence in its approach to learning development. It is not a project team.

1.3 LearnHigher has adopted an externally mediated critical self-evaluation approach to its evaluation effort and has this year worked with Professor Paul Trowler as its external evaluator and critical friend. Regional clusters evaluate the work of learning areas in each region and peer evaluation processes occur in addition to this. LACs provide an annual formal evaluation report to LearnHigher manager at Liverpool Hope University and to the external evaluator and critical friend.

1.4 LearnHigher as a funded CETL is now entering its final year: funding ends in July 2010. The continuation strategy has now been agreed and planning for this is at a well-developed stage. LearnHigher will merge with ALDinHE after the end of its funding, the current plan being for it to retain a distinctive character within ALDinHE.

1.5 The collaborative partnership of LearnHigher continues to work well, with good attendance at meetings, excellent internal communication and a network of engagement across the CETL on different projects. The tendency towards entropy of a large network such as this has not occurred due to the enthusiasm and commitment of partners.

1.6 There has been a broad range of activities and outputs this year addressing the key aims of LearnHigher. These include the continuing development of learning development guides for students and staff as well as other resources, face-to-face engagement with a variety of groups, improved engagement with host institutions, activities to develop knowledge and understanding of learning development among a variety of interested groups as well as further development of already-established successful initiatives such as the Maths Cafe.

1.7 A valuable overview of the various research projects undertaken by LearnHigher partners has been published and some large-scale resources, such as WrAssE (Writing for Assignments Electronic Library), have been launched this year as well as a number of other smaller scale ones. The LearnHigher website was launched in its updated form and continuing developments have been made to it. Plans for further developments next year are in place.

1.8 While there has again been an impressive level of activity and production of outputs across LearnHigher as a whole, there have been variations in this among the different learning areas. The effects of these activities and outputs continue to be difficult to establish, but some attempts have been made at this. It is clear that there have been unanticipated effects of LearnHigher's activities for its partners, particularly the development of a strong and effective community of practice.

1.9 Changes have occurred in the positioning of the learning development function and

LearnHigher activities within a number of host institutions, and these have sometimes had deleterious effects on the ability of learning areas to achieve their aims. In other cases the changes have been beneficial.

1.10 In the final year of activity it is very important that LearnHigher continues to devote itself to demonstrating that the public funds spent on it have yielded good and lasting value. Three areas for attention in this regard are identified in this report: improving the LearnHigher website; the nature of the relationship between LearnHigher and ALDinHE; the nature of the continuing engagement with learning developers outside of LearnHigher.

2. Introduction

2.1 Purposes and audiences

The LearnHigher CETL (Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) is now in its final year, to July 2010, and it is clear that there will be no further HEFCE funding to continue in its present form as a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. This is the case for all 74 CETLs. With a consciousness that the five year project was entering its final phase, last year's report, the third, began to shift the evaluation focus from a backward-facing one towards the future, and simultaneously sought to widen the audiences for the report to include other learning developers, managers, change-agents and policy-makers. Thus it focused on the question of a sustainable legacy of LearnHigher, and included case studies and analyses of learning development interventions as part of the report. This year's report continues that future-facing shift, focusing on the priorities for the coming year, given the point LearnHigher had reached by September 2009.

Because of this very specific purpose, the audience for the report this year has narrowed and is mainly LearnHigher partners themselves, together with funders and institutional hosts. For this reason detailed recommendations concerning the three areas listed under section 4 have been included as a separate document for consideration by LearnHigher partners.

LearnHigher has now begun to grasp the challenge of moving from an innovation to a dissemination phase which last year's report identified as necessary. Much has already been achieved in this regard, including a publication pulling together the findings of research projects that LearnHigher partners have undertaken as well as the other activities in train among the LearnHigher partners that will address dissemination, including an edited book and a final conference.

2.2 Evidence used in compiling this report

This report was written by LearnHigher's evaluator and critical friend, Professor Paul Trowler. Paul attended a number of meetings, including a two-day writing event, a steering group meeting and a development day. Conversations were had with members of the LearnHigher Steering Group and leaders of the each of the 16 centres. There were a number of meetings with the LearnHigher Manager. Reports of meetings not attended were studied. Electronic discussions were followed and the email trail among LearnHigher partners reviewed. 18 of the 20 learning area annual self-evaluation reports were available for analysis in compiling this overview annual evaluation. Some data from pilot interviews conducted for the *Lessons Learned* project (see below) were used. Finally, the LearnHigher website was critically reviewed.

Michelle Verity, LearnHigher's manager, left the CETL for a senior post elsewhere in August 2009. To that point she gave considerable assistance in facilitating Paul's role as evaluator and critical friend. All members of LearnHigher have appreciated over the years the insightful contributions she always made to debates, her ability to be both facilitative and collegial while ensuring strength of direction, and her ability to give attention to detail while not losing sight of the bigger picture. Her role in overseeing the work of LearnHigher is now in the capable hands of Dr Ged Hall.

Next year's report will take a different form to the preceding four and, on current HEFCE plans, will

be published after the LearnHigher CETL has come to an end. Rather than being based on the types of evidence detailed above it will collect evidence from the CETL and beyond to pull together the lessons learned from the LearnHigher CETL about learning development, its processes and products, more generally. It is therefore referred to as the *Lessons Learned* project and report rather than being an evaluation of the final year of the CETL. Its anticipated audience will be a wider one also. This project was discussed and approved at the LearnHigher Steering Group meeting, 9/10 June 2009 where the data collection design was discussed. The final form of the project and its outputs will depend on HEFCE's requirements, to be published in October 2009.

2.3 Background

LearnHigher is a collaborative CETL involving sixteen English Universities. As one of the 74 CETLs it has the overall aim to "reward excellent teaching practice and to increase and deepen its impact across a wider teaching and learning community" (HEFCE). It is concerned with the area of 'learning development', which it has come to describe in the following way:

'Learning Development' is an emergent and increasingly recognised field of practice in higher education in the UK. Those who identify with the term are principally involved in areas of work focussing on student learning, working directly with students and in a consultative capacity with other HE staff. This work is sometimes referred to as 'learning support' or 'study skills', but most LD practitioners reject the remedial implications that such terms may carry.

The main aim of LD work is the empowerment of students through the enhancement of their academic practices □ such as skills for research, communication, self□awareness and critical thinking □ in order that they may benefit as fully as possible from their experiences of, and life beyond, higher education. (Hilsdon, Ridley and Sinfield, 2008)

Across the sixteen universities involved in LearnHigher there are twenty learning development areas, detailed in Table 1.

TABLE 1 – PARTNER INSTITUTIONS AND LEARNING AREAS

Partner Institution	Learning Area/s
Bournemouth	Personal development planning
Brighton	Visual practices
Brunel	1 Numeracy, maths and stats. 2 Oral communication
Bradford	1 Group work. 2 Referencing
Kent	Assessment
Lincoln	Doing research
Liverpool	Understanding organizations
Liverpool Hope (co-ordination role)	Mobile learning (m-learning)
London Met	1 Notemaking. 2 Reading
Leeds	Listening and interpersonal skills (LIPS)
Manchester	Independent learning/self-directed study
Manchester Met	Information literacy
Nottingham Trent	Academic writing

Plymouth	Critical thinking and reflection
Reading	1 Time management. 2 Report writing.
Worcester	Learning for all (inclusivity)

LearnHigher's website is at www.learnhigher.ac.uk

3. Achievements

3.1 Activities and outputs

LearnHigher set out with a set of broad aims and associated objectives (see Table 2) and each year specific objectives for the learning areas have been set against these. For year 4 the 20 learning areas set their own objectives within this broad structure and reported on these in their annual self-evaluation.

TABLE 2 – LEARNHIGHER AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aims	Objectives
Building mechanisms for sharing excellent materials and resources	Share existing good materials, identify or develop new learning development materials and resources for learners and staff.
	Surface and share our knowledge about the effective use of resources in supporting learning
Building capacity in the LearnHigher Network	Build practitioner capacity across the LearnHigher network in terms of broadening expertise and staff skills.
Creating institutional impact	Develop the use of the LearnHigher spaces in new ways that promote learning development.
	Raise the profile of LearnHigher work within the HEIs for greater institutional impact.
Evaluation	Develop effective monitoring strategies for use of the resources within learning development
Developing a research base	Building a research community and portfolio of evidence-based research that helps develop our understanding of effective strategies for supporting learners into new areas of higher education study.
Dissemination	Raise awareness of LearnHigher CETL.
	Engaging others in LearnHigher sub-networks that are creating excellent materials, undertaking research or involved in embedding in their own institutions.

A summary of activities (what was done) and outputs (what was produced) is set out next, with examples of the learning areas involved in brackets. This is not an exhaustive list of achievements this year, but a summary of some of those mentioned in reports. The outcomes, or effects, of these are harder to capture.

1. Guides for students and staff

Links to relevant websites and resources, sometimes annotated. Placed on LearnHigher website (Several learning areas)

Guides and tips, survival kits, toolkits placed on LearnHigher website (assessment, critical thinking, learning for all, LIPS, reading, notemaking, time management, report writing, visual practices,)

2. Resource development

Electronic resources, eg WrAsSE (<http://www.learningdevelopment.plymouth.ac.uk/wrasse/>), LIPS, reading, notemaking, visual practices, groupwork, m-learning)

Literature reviews (LIPS and several others)

Materials development for delivery by others (time management, report writing, understanding organizations, notemaking, group work, LIPS and others)

Expand LearnHigher space use (assessment and several others)

(Resources on group work and delivering student workshops were top-three shortlisted for the Jorum Learning & Teaching Competition - the *Making Groupwork Work* resource for staff won both the Jorum and Epigeum competitions)

3. Face to face engagement

Workshop sessions for students (assessment, information literacy, time management, report writing, groupwork, academic writing, oral communication)

Extended resource for student support (maths, stats and numeracy – the 'Maths Cafe' and others, often using LearnHigher spaces)

Workshop sessions for staff (assessment, critical thinking, learning for all, LIPS, reading, notemaking, time management, report writing, visual practices, groupwork, academic writing. M-learning delivered a high-profile and successful m-posium hosted by Manchester Metropolitan University)

Conference presentations (critical thinking, learning for all, LIPS, time management, report writing, visual practices)

Organizing conference (LIPS, reading, notemaking, visual practices)

Networking to share knowledge (most learning areas)

4. Institutional engagement

Manage enhancement theme in own institution (assessment)

Fund relevant work by staff (assessment, reading, notemaking)

Curriculum development (reading, notemaking, time management, report writing, visual practices, 'Collect this' module development almost complete - information literacy and others)

Further development of connections across host institutions (groupwork, academic writing and others)

5. Increases in knowledge and understanding

Evaluate use of LearnHigher resources and its activities (assessment, independent learning, LIPS, time management, report writing, information literacy)

Audit and evaluate other resources and activities (learning for all, visual practices)

Research and meta research, academic publications (LIPS, information literacy, reading, notemaking, referencing (the 'Students' perceptions of referencing' project). Most LACs involved in Palgrave book *Learning Development in Higher Education*)

One very significant development in terms of this category has been the overview of LearnHigher research completed this year, published as:

Shahabudin, K. (2009) *Investigating effective resources to enhance student learning*. Available at: <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/Download-document/846-investigating-effective-resources-to-enhance-student-learning.htm> [last accessed 8.8.09]

Kim Shahabudin at Reading University compiled an overview of LearnHigher research conducted between 2005 and 2008 by collating and organising evidence from the research of individual LearnHigher partners. The aim was “to locate and expand on key insights, innovative research and areas that may merit closer investigation in the final stages of the CETL and beyond.” (p 4). LearnHigher partners' research findings and issues associated with them are reviewed under the following headings:

- student needs, preferences and practices
- effectiveness of resources and interventions
- the use of learning spaces
- the role of learning developers
- interactions between learning developers and subject academics

This is a valuable resource for learning developers and others. It offers a guide to the research that has been conducted by LearnHigher (original documents are available at: <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/Main-Content/LearnHigher-Contents/researchreports.htm>). It does achieve its aim very effectively, pointing the way for the future in terms of pedagogical research.

6. Special project development

LearnHigher Development Funding of £60,000 was provided to fund a call for development projects of up to £4,000 each. A key aim of this initiative was to extend the activities of LearnHigher across a wider community of learning developers. In total 29 projects were received from members of the Learning Development in Higher Education Network, these were peer reviewed and 13 were funded as follows:

NTU looking at independent learning

Kingston looking at mobile learning and twitter

Leeds looking at video e-resources for maths students

Belfast looking at evaluation of learning support

Surrey looking at Maths podcasts

Aston looking at work based learning

TVU looking at involving students in learning development and collaborative development of information literacy

UoA London developing a version of Stepping Stones 2HE for Arts students

Bournemouth University looking at e-Peer Assisted Learning

Salford developing Web2 Technology to support numeracy skills of nurses

UoA looking at Layers of Language

University College Falmouth (details of project not available)

Staffordshire University (details of project not available)

3.2 Commentary

3.2.1 Commentary against last year's annual evaluation

The executive summary of last year's annual evaluation identified some key issues to address in 2008-2009:

1. being more involved in engagement with host institutions and beyond
2. switching from innovation to consolidation and dissemination
3. making decisions and taking actions related to the legacy of the LearnHigher CETL after its funding ceases in 2010.

This year there has been a more deliberate focus on engagement strategies and, in most learning areas, good levels of engagement with the host institution and beyond it. The second recommendation has also been addressed. The highly innovative phase has now passed and there is a focus now on completing projects, refining them and launching/disseminating them to a wider audience.

As to the third recommendation for focus in 2008-9, the legacy, LearnHigher was able to come to a consensus about its future and make plans for this. There will be integration into the Association of Learning Developers in Higher Education (ALDinHE) with a joint conference in 2010. A planning group is continuing to work on the details of this arrangement. LearnHigher and ALDinHE are to be congratulated on the consensual but efficient way it determined this course of action and on the business-like way it has set about making arrangements for a smooth transition when funding for the CETL ends in July 2010. This will ensure a continuing, sustainable legacy for its work. As the LearnHigher CETL comes to an end, the edited book to be published in 2010 by Palgrave, the joint conference and a series of other events will ensure that its new incarnation within ALDinHE will be launched with a flourish. Meanwhile a new journal for learning developers, *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* (<http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/ojs/index.php?journal=jldhe>) published its first number in February 2009. This is another significant marker of a likely phase change in learning development practice, at least in the UK.

LearnHigher partners and ALDinHE are also to be congratulated on their formulation of an agreed account of the role and purposes of learning development, the need for which has been stressed by annual evaluation reports since LearnHigher's inception. It is quoted above. This will no doubt undergo review in the future, and rightly so in a changing environment, but for the moment it represents a good marker for learning developers and others.

3.2.2 Commentary against this year's activities, outputs and outcomes

There is further evidence this year of working with other institutions, including those outside the LearnHigher network, on projects and workshops. There is also more evidence of sharing learning and learning from other centres in a more deliberate way. For example the assessment area has worked with Brighton and Falmouth, Staffordshire and MMU. A good range of activities, as summarised above, has been engaged in with a good range of discussion around the strategy for LearnHigher as the end of its funding approaches as well as making cases for continuation of learning areas within single institutions.

3.3 Commentary on other issues

3.3.1 Organizational location

The organizational location of the learning development function is an important factor in conditioning its effectiveness and there is some evidence of internal reorganization of that function in a number of host institutions this year. For example at one university learning development is now part of the teaching and learning directorate, and it is expected that this will provide flexibility to develop and focus on pedagogic research and development projects within the LD sector. At another university institutional reorganization has meant a better 'fit' too, especially in terms of improved communication. At a third, though, institutional reorganization has had a somewhat negative impact on the profile of the CETL internally, while at a fourth there was no-one in the institution with learning development work with students generally as part of their role description.. Elsewhere learning development lies separate from related units, for example at a fifth university where it is not integrated into the Student Learning support areas and does not report to any committees or steering group. At a sixth university LearnHigher and some other learning development functions are located in a central unit devoted to student learning, but this unit itself appears to be somewhat off the radar of institutional strategic planning. Sometimes, then, internal organization and reorganization has helped and sometimes hindered LearnHigher in achieving its aims and objectives.

3.3.2 The added value of LearnHigher

One partner said:

“Involvement in the CETL has raised the profile of LD at [xxx institution]. It has enabled the team to develop its profile and achieve representation on influential university bodies. CETL funding has made a number of projects possible and supported LD team members’ attendance at conferences. As a result of LearnHigher, LD team members have been able to demonstrate that their work represents a significant field of practice, of relevance to the whole HE sector, and countering the view that we are a ‘remedial’ service.”

Another said:

“Involvement in LH has enabled us to considerably expand our range of working contacts, not least simply because we have had sufficient staffing to go beyond ‘firefighting’. In particular, it has facilitated more contacts with senior figures in the institution, including Pro-Vice Chancellors, leaders of Directorates and Faculty Directors of Teaching and Learning.”

All partners agree the value of developing a community of practice of learning developers through collaboration in LearnHigher. This has been one of the beneficial unintended consequences. However there may be negative dimensions to this. One, identified by partners themselves, is the potential loss of self-criticality, and measure have been taken to address this danger, for example in

evaluation of other partners' websites. Another potential issue to be alert to is any sense of exclusion among learning developers who are not involved, and again LearnHigher partners have taken action to address this, for example by inviting involvement from the wider LD community. This latter is elaborated upon below.

3.3.3 Establishing effects

Establishing effects of activities and outputs is difficult to do, but partners have made some progress in this area in the fourth year of operation. Monitoring of website hits and taking evaluation from website users, as done by referencing, is one form of measuring effects. Other effects have been identified in terms of changed curriculum design and increased staffing for the learning development function. A number of partners have used innovative ways to establish effects, for example LIPS has conducted student focus groups while the time management learning area has evaluated the use of the LearnHigher space at Reading and evaluation of the effects of the CETL on assessment practices has been undertaken at Kent.

3.3.4 Different levels of activity across the learning areas

Reading the reports it is clear that some of the learning areas have been exceptionally active, while others have been less so. In the latter case particular circumstances such as organizational restructuring or staffing difficulties have been identified as significant issues. Where activity has been dynamic there have usually been scaffolding factors to facilitate this.

4. Issues for consideration for the final year of LearnHigher

Three linked key issues are apparent as LearnHigher enters its final phase in its current form. They are:

1. Improving the LearnHigher website to ensure a strong legacy here
2. LearnHigher within ALDinHE to ensure good integration
3. Engagement with learning developers to enhance the function nationally, even globally

These arise both from discussions within LearnHigher, particularly the need to develop the website, as well as from pilot data-gathering for the *Lessons Learned* project, including an extended interview with a non-LearnHigher learning developer, email exchanges with others and an initial review of relevant literature. A separate appendix to this report with detailed comments on the above three areas has been provided to LearnHigher partners to assist in their strategic planning and operation in the final year.

5. Conclusion

LearnHigher has been an extremely effective collaborative network during the four years of its life so far, making a real difference to students, staff and institutions in a cost effective way. In its final year LearnHigher needs to give attention to demonstrating unequivocally to the HE community that the public expenditure directed to it has been good value for money and that learning development is a well-founded and valuable function in HE. As the CETL framework comes to an end in a context of stringent budgetary constraints the temptation will be for institutions to look for savings. The danger is that they will seek these in the area of the learning development function in general at the same time as their giving consideration to the ending of the CETL and the matched funding

which institutions committed to supplying. LearnHigher needs to be ready to counter this potential danger to both its legacy and to learning development generally in any ways it can.

Reference

Hilsdon, J., Ridley, P. and Sinfield, S. (2008) "Defining LD" email correspondence, Learning Development in Higher Education Network, 24.09.08 online www.jiscmail.ac.uk/learnhigher [last accessed 16.9.09]

Glossary

ALDinHE: Association for Learning Development in Higher Education. (The membership association for subscribers to LDHEN)

CETL: Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. 74 funded centres tasked to "reward excellent teaching practice and to ...increase and deepen its impact across a wider teaching and learning community" (HEFCE)

LACs: Learning Area Co-ordinators: the individuals responsible for each of the 20 learning areas in LearnHigher.

LIPS: Listening and Interpersonal Skills

LDHEN: Learning Development in Higher Education Network. (A JISCmail list)