

Managing career transitions into post-secondary learning designer jobs: An Australasian perspective

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This semi-structured qualitative study maps out the diversity of career paths of Australian and New Zealand (ANZ) learning designers (LDs) and summarises their career advice for those aspiring to be LDs. It identifies that, among the 92 participants, there were many different pathways into the profession both from an academic and from professional backgrounds. It identified that the most common entry points into the postsecondary LD profession come through previously working: as a primary and secondary teacher; in higher education student services, as an English as a Second Language (ESL) professional, a sessional academic seeking job stability; in private industry, such as in film and television and in the area of training and development. Most career transitions into LD were serendipitous, or a natural progression rather than a deliberate and planned process. The study further identified a paucity of LD and associated professions career information in ANZ public domain, which held some back from entering a Learning Design career earlier. This paper concludes with some recommended strategies to address this, to the extent that it is hoped that this paper will aid aspiring LDs in planning their career transitions more effectively.

Keywords: Learning Designers, Career Advice, Higher Education, Postsecondary Education,

Introduction

Early in 2021 the Minister of Education announced that there will be, 10 million International Students studying with Australian Higher Education by 2030 (Tudge, 2021). As the *thinking industries* move rapidly to the digital space (LaBerge, 2020), and to support this rapid move it has been canvassed that there are distinct career prospects of Learning Designers (Educational Designers, Instructional Designers and titles to that effect) in the future (Decherney & Levander, 2020). As casualisation of the Academic workforce in Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) progresses (Wardale et al., 2019), and the work contracts do not always provide for a desirable level of preparation or professional development in sessional academics (Lama & Joullié, 2015), an increasing reliance on the support provided by Learning Designers can be anticipated.

The [Labour Market Information Portal](#) projects a 12.9% increase in job openings between November 2020 and 2025 for the ANZSCO Code 2324 job category that includes Instructional Designers [232413](#) (*Occupation Projections Five Years to November 2025*, 2020). Therefore, the authors of this paper believe that providing quality career information in the public domain to facilitate transitions into Learning Design roles is of significance going forward. However, to do this the researchers first needed to understand the career pathways Learning Designers were taking into this profession, so as to provide clear guidance. This led to the design of a survey instrument that was sent to members of the learning design profession working in ANZ.

The researchers distributed this survey through the ASCILITE network, as well as through personal networks to ensure that invitation reached as many practicing LDs as possible, including:

- Learning Designers and Educational Designers working in the Higher Education sector
- Instructional Designers (ID) employed in TAFE and RTOs (Registered Training Organisation)
- Learning Designers working in non-university Higher Education outlets or university entities such as: Keypath Education, Online Education Services, Curio, Wiley, Pearson, VU Online, RMIT Online, Swinburne Online, Monash Online, Melbourne Business School, Navitas, Kaplan, as well as Teaching Hospitals.

Literature Review

The ANZ Learning Design community has made a number of attempts to assess the impact of Learning Designers within the postsecondary sector (Bellaby & Sankey, 2020), map out the categories of roles relevant to Learning Design (Mitchell et al., 2017), define (Slade et al., 2018), attract, engage and retain learning design staff (Slade et al., 2019) as well as discuss employability-promoting course design for Learning Design qualifications (Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2021). However, the authors of this study were not able to locate literature in Australia or New Zealand that would help aspiring Learning Designers manage the transition into these types of roles from other professions.

As a result, aspiring LDs are forced to resort to overseas sources (mainly North American) that make no distinction between Instructional Designers and Learning or Educational Designers. In the USA, 'Instructional Designer' is a legacy term originating from the military training ((Reiser, 2001a, 2001b) and is used, in most instances, in lieu of Learning or Education Designer. A number of Instructional Designer practitioners (Peck, 2021) (Lieberman, 2018), (McNeal, 2016) and ID communities (Pappas, 2013, 2014) share careers advice based on their experience, though it is not a result of consultations with a reliably sized sample of ID practitioners. Moreover, their advice, though very valuable, is based on their work experience in various industries other than Higher Education, that are mostly concerned with training rather than education. Only the Intentional Futures (Intentional Futures, 2016) and (Munzenmaier, 2014) touch on some aspects of career advice targeting tertiary education basing on their research.

One of the key differences of the context in which Higher Education Instructional Designers in the USA and Learning Designers in ANZ work, is the sheer size of the market, consisting in the USA of approximately 6500 post-secondary education institutions (NCES, 2021), and an estimated number of ID positions at 13,000 (Intentional Futures, 2016), with many avenues to gain an entry level positions and progress. As a further distinction, the 'Faculty' in the USA is far more casualised in Australia, at some 70% (Hommel & Hommel, 2020) compared to Australia at around 30% (Bare et al., 2020), which, as per conversations conducted with American IDs on an Online Learning Consortium forums, creates abundance of opportunities for Instructional Designers.

Generally speaking, the daily activities of an Instructional or Learning Designer can be divided in the 4 broad categories: Design, Manage, Train and Support (Intentional Futures 2016), which is not dissimilar to the roles in ANZ (Slade 2018, Slade 2019), and as a result, it is the contention of the authors that, the aspiring Learning Designers and Instructional Designers would potentially be well placed for success if they:

- Identify and hone the LD technical and transferable skillset
- Learn the theory by completing a relevant tertiary education course
- Develop a compelling professional portfolio
- Develop the ability to argue their suitability for the job with the hiring managers

The findings in the survey reported in this study are not dissimilar to the above summary, and the respondents have generously shared a wealth of specific advice on how to aim for success.

Methodology

This semi-structured qualitative study was designed to understand the different career pathway into the Learning Design profession and sought advice from those practicing in this profession, that may well be helpful to those aspiring to enter this profession at some point in the future. The data for this study was gathered through an online survey instrument, developed for the purpose of this study, that asked 12 questions – a mix of multiple choice questions pertaining to level of education, gender, qualifications, length of tenure, combined with short answer questions covering participants' professional pathways and advice to aspiring Learning/Educational Designers. The study gained ethics clearance through Charles Darwin University Ethics Committee approval #H21034.

The survey was distributed through multiple channels, including the TELedvisor network, ASCILITE newsletter and through personal contacts within the Learning Design community. At the time of writing there had been 92 responses received. The resultant data was downloaded and thematically analysed in the nVivo software. The major themes that emerged followed the survey open ended questions and included: Progression into the LD

profession, Strategies on transitioning, General wisdom/advice, preparation for the profession, tips on what it took to be a good Learning designer and things they wish they had known beforehand.

The reported results are gained from a mix of multiple choice answers (e.g., ‘key factors that facilitated your progression into a LD role’, qualifications; length of tenure etc.) and open-ended text answers, where the relevant passages have been grouped and coded according to the questions of the survey (e.g., ‘advice’; ‘progression’; ‘strategies’; ‘I wish I’d known’) and analysed using the nVivo qualitative data analysis software to identify recurring themes and sub-themes.

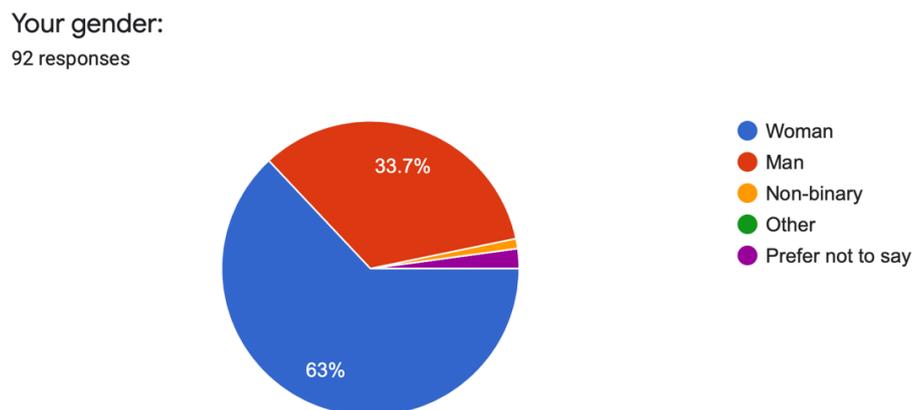
The following analysis and discussion seeks to provide a coherent summary of the main points and later in this paper, based on this summary, there will be an identification of key elements that may be considered as words of advice to those seeking to enter the profession, and presented by the voices of those in the profession.

Analysis and Discussion

Demographics:

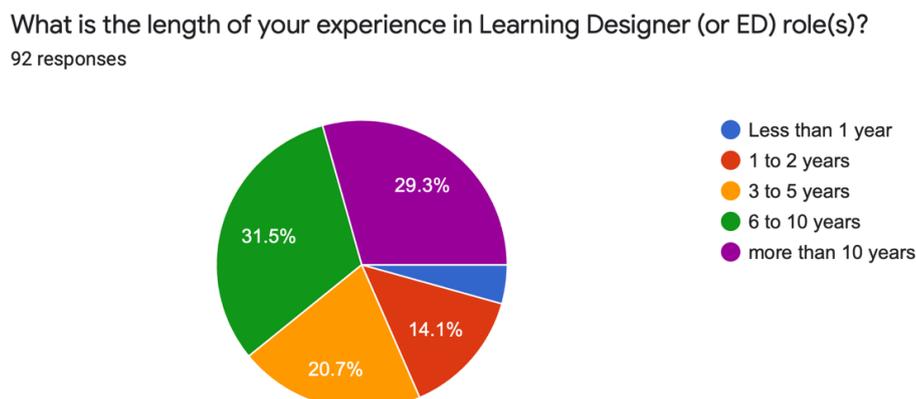
The gender balance of the sample was 63% female 34% male, which is in line with the non-academic staff ratios in Higher Education of 63/37% (Krause et al., n.d.; *Selected Higher Education Statistics 2020 Staff Data*, 2020). The remainder 4% declared a non-binary gender or didn't declare one at all.

Figure 1. Gender make-up of the sample



Another important demographic that has some implications on job mobility and replacement of the profession, is the length of tenure or experience in Learning Design roles. Close to 20% of position holders declared up to 2 years of experience on the job, nearly 40% up to 5, and over 70% no more than 10 years, while the remaining nearly 30% are veterans, with at least 10 years of experience. These figures imply that there is a healthy pipeline of new arrivals into the profession and the prospect of progression through the profession.

Figure 2. The make-up of the sample by total length of tenure in the profession



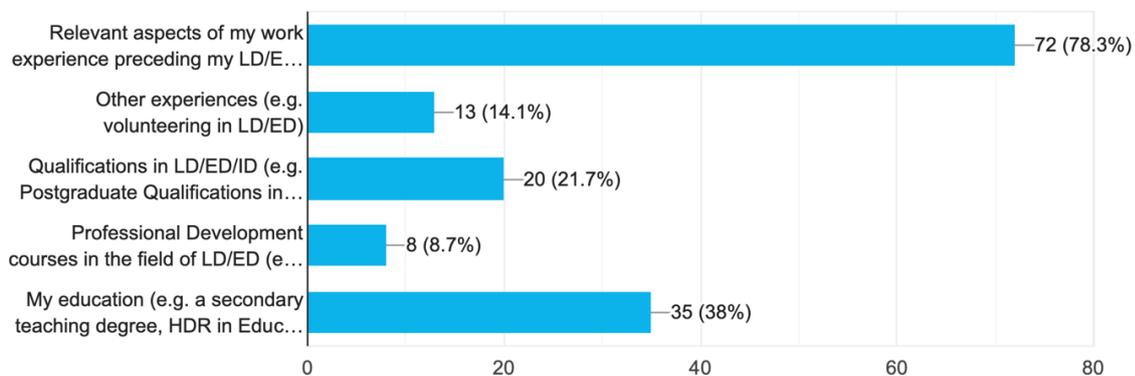
Career Factors:

Seventy eight percent of the respondents (72) indicated learning design skills, and experience developed in their jobs preceding their career move into Learning Designer position as the decisive factor in their ability to secure their first position in Learning Design, as seen in Figure 2. This was followed by their general education 38% (many held degrees in education such as a secondary teaching qualification or higher degrees). Learning Design specific qualification was the third most decisive factor (22%). This highlights (and is supported by open ended comments in the survey) the importance of developing design skills and some form of professional portfolio that makes a point of highlighting the LD experience within one’s current job. This was seen as highly desirable in order to steer oneself towards a career in Learning Design. This is one of recurring themes that will be seen in the open ended survey responses.

Figure 3. Decisive factors in the successful transition into the first LD/ED role

Which of the above factors was in your opinion a decisive factor in your winning your first LD/ED job and/or in your further career progression? Please tick as many as applicable.

92 responses

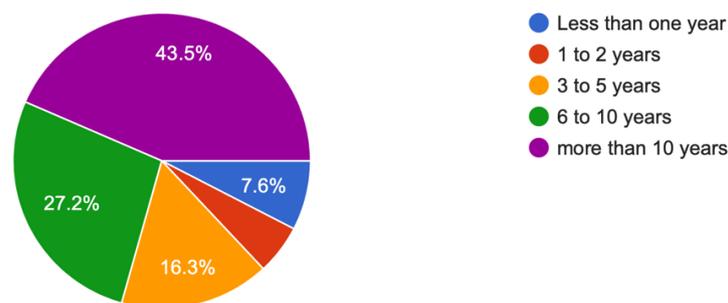


The understandable (in the light of the above data) hiring bias towards individuals with long term involvement in education is further highlighted by the self-reported length of experience in education-related field prior to entering the LD career, being as high as 44% declaring at least 10 years experience (Figure 4). On the other hand, 13% of respondents declared up to 2 years (combining category 1 and 2), and 29% up to 5 years of previous experience in education-related settings. This may indicate a relative difficulty to breaking into the LD profession without a substantial background in education, though clearly this is not an impossibility.

Figure 4. Declared length of experience in educational settings of the sample

What is the length of your experience in an education related field prior to starting your Learning Designer (or ED) role (you will have a chance to explain this further into this survey).

92 responses

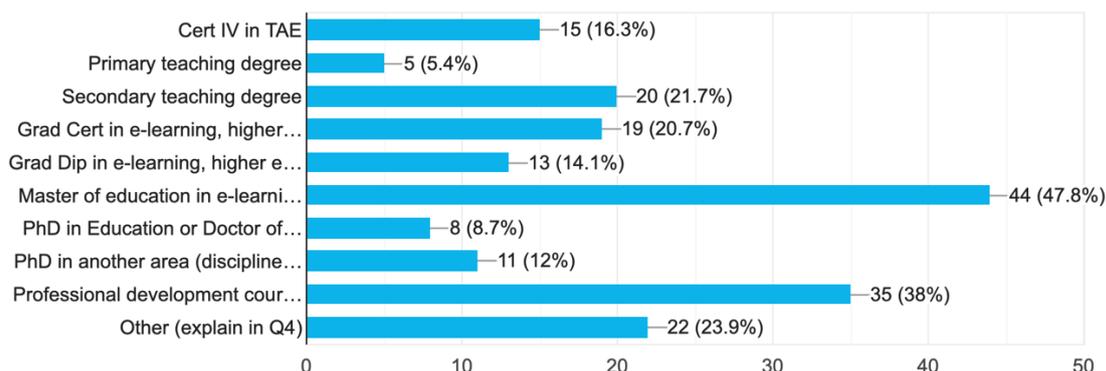


Finally, despite declaring that the non-specifically-LD qualifications were more important to win their first Learning Designer job than a LD-specific qualification, over 80% of respondents do hold a LD-specific qualification (Figure 5), ranging from a Cert IV in TAE (16%), to Graduate Certificate (21%), Graduate Diploma (14%) and Master's (48%). Aligning this to the previous question, it can be implied that some of the higher level LD-specific qualifications were acquired after entering the profession.

Figure 5. LD qualifications prevalence in the sample

Your relevant qualification(s) for your LD/ED role (tick as many as applicable)

92 responses

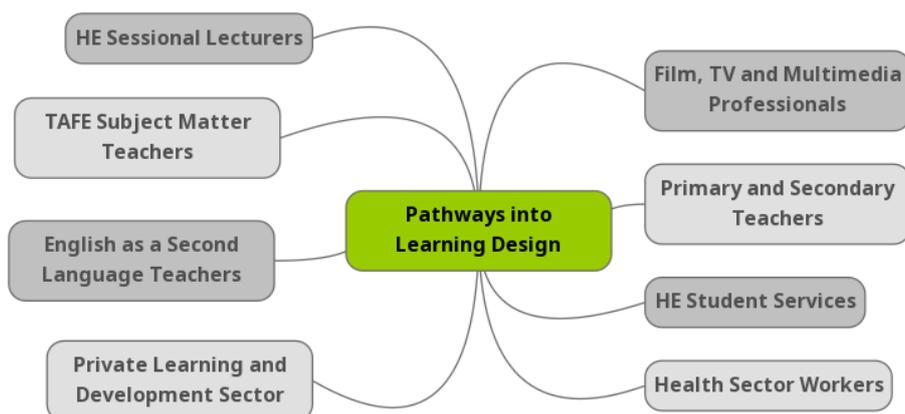


Open-ended Questions

Progression into the LD Profession

After coding the career-path-related responses to the open-ended questions in nVivo, it became apparent, at the higher level, that over 60% of respondents did not deliberately plan their career progression into Learning Designer positions – they either stumbled upon or were encouraged to apply for their first LD job. Many mentioned that they loved the style of work or naturally progressed into these positions. The most common backgrounds of people who progressed into Learning Design positions can be summed up in the following mind map:

Figure 6. Pathways to Learning Design positions.



Strategies

When asked how to strategise a transition into an LD job? The advice provided by the respondents can be summarised in the following main categories:

- Build LD experience in your current job, or seek a job that will cover some of the LD experience (suggested explicitly by 23 respondents)
- Develop a portfolio of your Learning Design work (17 respondents)

- Get an LD Master's degree (suggested explicitly in the advice question by 5 though LD Master's is frequently mentioned in other questions related to what helped the respondents in progressing into an LD role)
- Get involved in mentoring* (12 respondents)

Some of the respondents specified their advice further:

- Ask a candid critical friend with expertise in LD who will critique your portfolio artefacts
- Make sure your portfolio contains only the artefacts that represent you well (not just everything you have ever produced)

*ASCILITE runs a yearly Community Mentoring Program, but you can also develop mentoring relationship with a work colleague who is a Learning Designer

The advice from LDs to those aspiring to enter the profession

The wealth and quality of the advice provided so generously by the respondents is a testament to how friendly, welcoming, inclusive and collaborative the LD industry is. The data has been categorised into areas of advice which includes an attempt to provide as many direct quotes as possible to preserve the richness of participants' voices:

General Wisdom/advice:

'Everything we do in life brings useful skills to the job' - if we need to provide an exegesis of this statement, it would be along the following lines: rather than discounting aspects of your experience that don't have a label '*learning design*' or '*teaching*' on them, spend your energy on appraising your experience in how it can come handy in your dream career. For example, if you have worked in customer service roles, look at how these transferable skills will help you working effectively with the Academic Partners (Faculty).

How to prepare for the profession and make yourself an attractive hire for the hiring managers:

There is no direct path or qualification into LD or LX roles – you just have to prove that you can do the job.

If you can't get on a project, make something yourself – look at something that exists already, find a problem in it and fix it

Identify, review and reflect on the experience, task, skills and achievements related to Learning Design and 'frame it carefully to align with key selection criteria'. Selection panels 'are typically open to applicants from a range of pathways, but the responses to the selection criteria are crucial.

I published a lot of my work, making things Open Access, on the web and available to share (taking the concept of portfolio to the next level)

The above advice highlights the importance of self-appraisal and awareness of what one can bring in to the LD job. It highlights how one's strengths and suitability for an LD job can be articulated based on the entirety of one's professional and life experience. It also highlights the importance of being proactive in seeking or creating skill/portfolio development opportunities for oneself.

Further comments include:

How to be good at LD (and make a point of demonstrating it in your job interviews):

One third to a half of an LD's role is being good at negotiating, influencing, listening, empathising and motivating. It's the soft skills that make a good LD. It's not enough to know your pedagogy, or tech, the soft skills are essential

'Ask people 'why' they want what they want, find out what their problems are and also what they love about what they have, rather than just take what they initially ask for at the face value'

We need to continue to upskill academics rather than doing work for them

The above advice demonstrates the importance of the Emotional Intelligence and people skills in the work of LD as well as critical thinking, inquisitiveness and upholding the professional boundaries. While LD are a service supporting the academics in their work, they do that more through critical analysis of the Academics' needs and supporting their Professional Development than being a "sub-contractor".

Other "miscellaneous" advice includes:

Pedagogy first, technology second

'The experience of being a student is at the heart of LD' including 'how adults learn online', so 'enrolling in a course and critiquing it from a student's perspective' will help you put yourself in student's shoes

Perfectionism is counterproductive to building good learning resources

A set of reminders of good practice related to the importance of keeping the students and their learning at the heart of LD's work. Aiming for 'good enough' rather than 'perfect' is often more effective as it can foster agile and iterative course development and thus effective use of resources and currency of the learning materials.

Keep a log of your professional development

Recurring theme – 'I wish I'd known'

A recurring theme is that many Learning Designers would have liked to make an earlier career transition into postsecondary Learning Design, but they were not aware that such an option existed. Information about the profession, other than through job advertisements, on career options in Learning Design are missing in the public domain. Some universities, particularly those that offer formal qualifications in LD, include some career information in their websites, while others (e.g., James Cook University) include this option in their career snapshots for education students, though most do not.

Peculiar Remarks

While many suggested developing 'patience, a lot of it', some hinted at their frustration born from the peculiarities of individual academics' behaviour that appears not always aligned with the university codes of conduct. This is well illustrated in the following quote:

The notion of academic freedom is not a license to ignore university guidelines, general good practice and student voices.

One interesting piece of advice was to keep one's options open to 'avoid exploitation by the education sector' ('gig-economy employers look caring and sharing in comparison to Higher Education') seems a valid career advice in the face of increasing pressures, outsourcing, commodification of students, staff and education itself as *accountingisation* of postsecondary education (Martin-Sardesai, 2020) progresses.

One theme of interest stems from a number of comments bemoaning persistent glass ceiling, despite over 60% of survey respondents being female. This might suggest the need for research on the perceived and existing barriers to entering and proceeding within the LD and associated professions in HE.

Recommendations

This research not only provided a wealth of advice for individuals, but also made us aware of the gaps in information or services in the public domain that may hamper the development of the Learning Designers profession in the future.

Some universities (JCU Careers Team, 2020) include Learning Designer as a profession in their career snapshots for education students who might be interested in trying alternative career pathways at some stage, though this is not seen in other contexts. Perhaps there is a scope for the LD professionals within universities, to

advocate with their Careers Services to include this information. It would seem appropriate that ASCILITE, one of the main bodies representing this profession, could encourage their members to do this.

Given the projected increased demand (*Multimedia Designers ANZSCO ID 232413*, 2021) and lack of granular enough labour market information, we recommend that ASCILITE include a career guide on their website, and as a longer term goal, advocates with the Government to re-classify the ANZSCO 232413 category Multimedia Designer (*Unit Group 2324 Graphic and Web Designers and Illustrators*, 2021) and redefine it according to the Learning and Instructional Designer job descriptions. Alternatively, better still, create a whole new classification for this LD role. This advocacy should also include the provision of more granular information, included in joboutlook.gov.au (*Multimedia Designers ANZSCO ID 232413*, 2021), as this is the go-to place for career information and is used extensively by Career Advisors and general public across the country (see: <https://joboutlook.gov.au/occupations/multimedia-designers?occupationCode=232413>).

Finally, drawing from the advice shared by the ASCILITE community, we recommend that aspiring Learning Designers, who ‘shop around’ for their professional qualifications in Learning Design, review the course content to ensure their chosen course facilitates creation of artefacts that could be placed in a professional portfolio (e.g., sample assessments, job aids, technology evaluation checklists, mock LMS pages, educational videos etc.). Further, that the course offers a work placement (Work Integrated Learning or WIL) option within a setting that would allow participants to hone their learning and instructional design skills within the real world setting. This could also take the form of a Capstone Unit in which they will design a relevant content or set of artefacts showcasing their knowledge and skills to future employers. The important point to make here is that aspiring LDs need to showcase what they can and have done.

Conclusion

In summary, this research has shed some light on the needs, anxieties, and authentic career planning advice for aspiring postsecondary Learning Designers across Australia and New Zealand. It can be summed up as follows:

- Paucity of readily available LD career information hampers earlier career transitions and development of the LD profession
- Aspiring LDs are encouraged to: be proactive and seek opportunities within their current job (or outside work, for example volunteering) that will help them develop ID/LD skills and experience that may be demonstrated in a portfolio (online)
- Seek practical, real-world LD-specific formal education that covers theory of adult learning, learning design models and the use of technology
- Participate in and thoroughly document PD opportunities
- Network, get involved in the LD community and find a mentor to bounce ideas off, and to learn how to support academic partners in their work in the future

A number of recommendations were also offered in the previous section, to address the common concerns voiced by our survey respondents. They include advocacy of LDs within their own HE organisations and of ASCILITE with the government to make the LD profession more visible to the public as a viable career option.

If implemented, Learning Design related career information would become more widely accessible, allowing informed choices. It is also suggested that aspiring LDs looked for evidence of course design promoting employability when considering their formal Learning Design education.

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