Learning and Teaching Innovation Fund: Final Report

Title of Project: Engaging the postgraduate student voice for enhancement of learning and teaching
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This report is intended to provide an opportunity to reflect on your project, with an emphasis on impact (actual and potential) and also on the process itself. It will be used to inform future developments in learning and teaching stemming from the project and the development of the Innovation Funds generally. Thank you for your work on the project and we look forward to helping you disseminate and build on your findings.

Please return the completed report, either using this form, or if you prefer as a video or audio file, to Marie Graham (marie.graham@northampton.ac.uk) by 30th June 2023. Please also make a copy of the report available on your project blog in your preferred format.

1. Briefly describe your project, with particular reference to the impact on learning and teaching practice – yours, your colleagues and for the wider university. This could be immediate or potential impact.

Background

Postgraduate (PG) courses are undertaken for a variety of reasons and in many different formats across the three faculties (Faculty of Health Education and Society, Faculty of Business and Law and the Faculty of Art, Science and Technology) within the University of Northampton, (UON). PG students' engagement, especially minority groups and part time students, are historically underrepresented with teaching and learning often devolved from undergraduate courses or professional doctorate courses. This underrepresented student body require a stronger network to engage, discuss and target their specific requirements within the university. Dissertation students' satisfaction at UON in the latest PTES, (2022) survey is below the sector average.

Postgraduate studies frequently occur when students are raising families, working full time and busy meeting personal objectives. During this life-phase, engagement with the university community is difficult. However, this student group have skills and knowledge to enhance their own learning and teaching requirements which may strengthen the student experience and promote engagement. Enhancing the student voice within the PG community and across faculties will aid communication and the objectives identified within the Access and Participation Plan (APP) relating to attainment, retention and progression by ethnicity and IMD/POLAR characteristics.

This project concept was developed from the recommendations of a previously successful innovation bid, "Converting Willingness to Engagement" which targeted PG health professionals within FHES. It identified under representation within the professional postgraduate community.

The Postgraduate student voice, particularly at Master's level (L7), has been nationally identified as under-represented (PTES, 2022). This project explored how these students, deemed at risk of

unconscious bias, intersectional students, the ethnical diverse and part time students can create a student voice and provide practical outcomes in terms of recommendations for all faculties.

Method

Project Aim:

To engage specific postgraduate (L7) minority groups at UON to improve inclusivity for enhancement of teaching and learning.

The following objectives were identified:

1. Ensure postgraduate (PG) courses align with student needs and professional agendas
2. Enhance the postgraduate student network through research engagement
3. Increase understanding for retention of PG minority group students
4. Provide targeted courses that meet the professional needs of individual students by listening to their voice and addressing their identified needs
5. Address unconscious bias within identified groups of individuals (BAME, LGBT and disabled) by highlighting their perspectives and intersectionality
6. Develop realistic recommendations for implementation within PG courses at UON

The rational for undertaking this research was to enhance the teaching and learning at UON. Active blended learning (ABL) can arguably be a combination of face to face and online learning, (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). It can also be used to engage students in higher order thinking, to challenge sense making and focus interactions in and outside the classroom (Armellini & Rodrigues, 2021). ABL is the mechanism used to delve into L7 students' experiences and the focus of this Innovation project.

Recruitment:

A purposive sample was sought of specific PG minority groups; in terms of and not inclusive of; those deemed at risk of unconscious bias, intersectional students, ethnical diverse and part time students. A recruitment flyer was shared by members of the team and to other Faculty L7 leads to share through their Master's level NILE sites and sent to the Student Union to share more widely with students. The flyer was also shown on the UON screens across campus to encourage a greater uptake and awareness of the project.

Data collection:

Ethical approval was gained from the FHES Health Research Ethics Committee for this project (FHSHEA000330). Data collection involved two distinct phases:

Phase 1: Three face to face focus group discussions with PG students were planned. The aim had been to run one in each Faculty (FHES, FAST, FBL), however due to the nature of engagement with students and to make the approach more inclusive, the team ran one face to face and two online groups for all those who could attend. These lasted no longer than 1.5hrs. A semi structured guide was developed with questions focusing on experiences of being a Level 7 student. A pre-demographic form to assess the participatory student body and identify those potentially subject to unconscious bias e.g. ethnicity,

and disabled was included, and participants completed this prior to the group starting. Groups were audio recorded and recordings saved to the project SharePoint folder. Consent was gained from all those taking part, with 49 participants taking part in this Phase.

Phase 2: PG students were emailed a padlet with a short video embedded and information was shared via relevant NILE sites. The [video](#) highlighted identified themes, from the focus groups, for discussion. Students who were asked to input their thoughts and feelings on a padlet [link](#). The themes were presented on a short video by a team member. The short video format was designed to engage students through a personalised approach to captivate and involved them. Nine participants took part in this Phase, providing an in-depth and detailed response to the questions posed. The padlet asked 'what was good, what was bad and what would you recommend?'

Analysis: Data obtained via focus groups and padlet were be analysed thematically, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic data analysis (1. Familiarisation; 2. Generation of initial codes; 3. Searching for themes; 4. Reviewing themes; 5. Defining and naming themes; 6. Write-up of themes). The analysis was undertaken by the research project team in pairs on a live document to assist members development and confidence in this process. Arguably, this incorporated a discussion stage within this thematic analysis.

Findings

Demographic profile of participants for Phase 1 – Focus Groups

Three Focus groups took place, with 49 attending. Of those, 31 completed a demographic questionnaire.

Table 1: Date of session and Attendance

Date	No attending
7th Feb 2023	3
21st Feb 2023	21
6th March 2023	25

Those taking part in the focus groups were predominantly from FHES (85%) and were in full time study (69%). Motivations for study were focused on career advancement (85%), to develop their skills and knowledge (42%), and personal interest (38%). See Table 2 for full details.

Table 2: About the study

Faculty	No	%
FHES	24	85.7
FBL	2	7.1
FAST	2	7.1
Total	28	100

Type of study*	No	%
Full time	18	69.2
Part time	3	11.5
Partner organisation	1	3.8
International	8	20.8
Total	30	115.4
Type of Masters	**No**	**%**
MSc	3	11.5
MA	23	88.5
Total	26	100
Motivations for study*	**No**	**%**
Career advancement	22	84.5
Personal interest	10	38.5
Funded by my employer	3	11.5
Develop skills and knowledge	11	42.3
Cultural experience	3	11.5
Study in UK	1	3.8
Total	50	192.3

*Multiple response questions

The students participating were predominantly female (81%) and aged between 25-34 (66%), with only one person aged in the 45-54 age band and with no older students taking part. Over half of the participants were Chinese (52%) and 35% preferred not to say (see Table 3).

Table 3: About the participants

Gender	No	%
Female	22	81.5
Male	5	18.5
Total	27	100
Age	**No**	**%**
18-24	5	18.5
25-34	18	66.7
35-44	3	11.1
45-54	1	3.7
Total	27	100
Disability (limitations to daily life)	**No**	**%**

Yes, limited a little	3	11.1
No	23	85.2
Prefer not to say	1	3.7
Total	27	100
Ethnicity	**No**	**%**
Chinese	16	51.6
White British	4	13.0
Prefer not to say	11	35.5
Total	31	100

Findings from Focus Groups

Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the focus groups; these were relating to **communication, learning to learn** and **sense of belonging**. These themes are explored and now presented.

Communication can be defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning, while learning to learn is the ability to pursue and persist in learning to organise one's own learning, including effective time, communication and information management. A sense of belonging is crucial to our life satisfaction, happiness, mental health, physical health and longevity. Five pillars to belonging: feeling welcomed, known, included, supported and connected, enhanced with effort felt (Pearson & Nelson, 2000).

Communication

Communication was discussed in relation to having clear and detailed information about the study, arriving at the University and accessing course guidance/materials. More clear guidance and instructions before individuals start were also discussed, for example: what to expect, where you are going, where you can park and what day to arrive on.

> *"I just felt like I was missing something because I didn't really know what I was supposed to do on the first day, when I got here…. 'Where do I go? What do I do?' (MSc Advancing Practice)*

> *"Clearly written out so you can read it, understand it and then go and have some idea of what you are doing." (MSc Advancing Practice)*

> *"I think there's also needing to know what day we need to be on uni so I just ended up emailing the lead instead. We'd all applied and had confirmation that we were going and then didn't hear anything again since. Obviously for work we needed to know what day to take off for work as a uni day and things like that." (MSc Advancing Practice)*

> *"At times I don't understand English expressions and British thinking. They don't always translate well" (MA Education)*

Some of the participants from a Chinese background reported that the translation software they use does not always translate correctly, which causes confusion. They also felt that there was a barrier in understanding the British use of language and cultural identifiers.

> *"Sometimes the school software that supports us to complete homework may not be suitable for*
>
> *the network qingkuang in China"*

Learning to Learn

Learning to learn was discussed as the process of learning, from these participants shared how this can be active rather than passive. With learning comes certain pressures to achieve, and this was discussed in relation to the grading of assignments and the drive to succeed.

> *"I learned another way of learning, actively, rather than passively." (MA Education)*

> *"I will be a little nervous about each assignment, worried that I cannot do well through. So, every time I score the homework, I will have some pressure."*

Many of the participants were balancing full-time work with their part-time study. This left little time for additional academic pursuits, especially related to research. Jobs were not the only part of life that intersected with study, many had busy home lives and young children, so finding a balance for their home/work/study was a challenge.

> *"Study and work at same time, very little time for me do research. find resources I need."*

> *"I think it's hard and I think you need to plan a lot more. And even with the best will in the world even if you set yourself a time - I think for me if I set myself a time the kids will be unwell or something like that, so then you lose that and actually you've structured it, 'But I need to get this done' and it's such a tight schedule." (MSc Advancing Practice)*

While many recognised that they were adult learners, they also wanted some guidance through their studies. This guidance was not always thought to be sufficient in helping students to navigate their studies. This was discussed particularly in relation to the level of study and the need for critical thinking. This was thought to be a unique way of undertaking learning, with many students expecting a more traditional exam-based approach.

> *"I know that the level that we are doing it at, we're adult learners and it's got to be independent as well but at the same time we are students, we are here to learn, and we need a teacher to teach us where to go otherwise you just keep going down the same path. Sometimes that guidance is just really lacking." (MSc Public Health)*

> *"Maybe it's because the education method is different, because we are not used to critical thinking, critical analysis and having to write all of that down. Where we come from, we take examinations and then we pass. So, you know that across the board this is this and that's how it is".*

Sense of Belonging

The sense of belonging was explored through the focus groups as feeling a connection with the other students on a course and feeling part of a learning community. This was believed to be possible through more contact with other classmates, one example of achieving this was to set up study groups. However, some participants did not feel the need to be part of a university community, instead expressed that their focus was on gaining a qualification that would enhance their work roles.

> *"Maybe collaboration with my classmates more often"*

> *"Study groups maybe, help each other out" (MA Education)*

> *"I wouldn't say I'm massively fussed by a sense of belonging with the university because the postgrad is now - you are here because you want to do whatever the course is or because you need to do it because of work" (MSc Advancing Practice)*

Some students felt the qualifications they had gained from their home countries were not understood or recognised by UON staff. They felt that a greater recognition of their awards would support their sense of being part of UON and feeling incorporated into the wider landscape of the learning environment.

> *"You can include more information about our nationally recognised qualifications in your introduction, which is more important for Chinese students" (MA Education)*

The sense of belonging was also explored from the perspective of feeling excluded from the wider UON offer. With busy work and family lives, as well as challenging individual circumstances. Those from an international background also expressed this sense of disengagement from UON activities. As they are often working remotely, this sense of community is not prevalent and being included in communications about local social engagement for students could act to alienate these students further.

> *"Sometimes I get emails about events and activities but then that is for people that don't have problems. I have problems and the challenge I'm facing will not even allow me to explore other things. I'm not supposed to come to the University and not explore." (MSc Public Health)*

> *"We don't feel included. I don't know about other people, maybe the home students have a different opinion but for us international students, we don't feel included. The fact that we're miles away from home isn't even helping."*

Findings from Padlet

The themes developed from the focus groups were used in the second phase with the padlet to explore and investigate these PG students understanding on **communication, learning to learn and sense of belonging**. The padlet was designed for the students to engage in their own time and return to as they wished as a live document.

Communication

Communication from module teams was thought to be effective, but challenges were experienced before a course started. Challenges with admissions, registration and enrolment were noted with

participants required to make multiple follow-ups to check the details of their study. The lack of timely communication about study schedules was also difficult for those participants who are working and needed to build in time into busy work roles to attend teaching sessions. This lack of communication at the outset of the study process was considered to be 'incredibly stressful' and described as having 'cast a shadow' over the initial stages of study.

> *"The admissions team seem very slow. I realise I now need to chase up my modules to check I'm even on them… I'm a working student, I need to sort out rotas which ideally needs to be weeks in advance."*

> *"Communication from our lecturers has been seamless, they are always contactable and will answer any queries or concerns at their earliest opportunity"*

The communication about the learning process was also identified as important, with one participant stating that 'for learning outcomes to be achieved there needs to be proper explanation'. Clear communication about module and assignment expectations were highlighted as extremely important to the participants' success.

One participant reported that they felt the mechanisms in place to support peer to peer communication worked well, such as NILE, group projects and virtual classrooms. However, they considered that there was little room for communication with other courses or faculties. They would have welcomed greater opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and cross working.

> *"Collaborate encouraged active participation and allowed for meaningful exchanges of ideas"*

Learning to Learn

Positive aspects of the learning process were noted through the support provided by Library and IT services. Participants reported enjoying their studies, finding them stimulating and a supportive environment. One participant thought the emphasis on independent learning and self-directed learning was a particularly welcomed aspect.

> *"I am enjoying learning again. The subject is stimulating, and the tutors are knowledgeable and supportive. Access to classes/education via teams, access to the library and research online are both great."*

> *"The university provided ample resource and guidance to help students to develop effective learning and study skills."*

However, other aspects were considered more of a challenge. The shift to writing at the appropriate level was reported to be difficult, while the time and commitment required to study was also underestimated. One participant felt that this was on a personal level and employment level, with employers not recognising what is required to study at Level 7.

> *"I think studying later in life whilst maintaining a full-time job is more difficult than I first envisaged… I struggled to get my employers to understand the level of time and commitment   required to meet specific deadlines and learning standards"*

One participant reported that the study materials were not of a good enough quality or accessible. While another was not sufficient extra-curricular activity or resources to support wider learning, and this led to a sense of 'boredom' about their studies.

> "University should ensure that course materials, including textbooks, online resources, and reference materials are readily available to students."

Some participants found the reliance on IT a challenge and did not find it easy to use Pebble or to upload assignments, reporting that this could be 'clunky and disjointed' and 'daunting'.

Sense of Belonging

The sense of belonging to university life was discussed through the personal friendships and module groups that individuals had made. One individual reported that they felt 'older' than many of the other students, while another had a busy family life and therefore did not feel they fitted into much of the social offer by UON. One participant, however, reported that they felt the campus was inclusive and welcoming, providing a 'strong sense of community and acceptance".

Those who reported to have formed a strong peer group within their modules discussed that these enabled a powerful sense of interprofessional working, where they benefitted from a wider range of views and experiences.

> "My course is aimed at those experienced in our field so room is full of like-minded people, but each with something different to offer in terms of experience and background."

An area of improvement was reported as the need to develop a greater sense of integration amongst home and international students. Some international students, it was discussed, can feel isolated and lonely due to cultural and language differences. One recommendation was that UON provide opportunities for more integration through exchange events, a buddy programme, and more 'cross-cultural connections and understanding'.

Learning Outcomes

Several important outcomes have been identified through this project that could impact learning and teaching practice at UON. These are:

- Communication in early stages of the process (recruitment, enrollment)
- Review of provision and accessibility of resources for modules
- Support with understanding the level of study required, how to achieve this level and what time commitments are needed
- Support to liaise with employers to practically support study
- Interdisciplinary options across Level 7 study and faculties
- Greater support for international students (on and off campus), especially to integrate with home students and in overcoming language and cultural barriers
- Building the Post Graduate Community
- Provision of engagement opportunities for those who work or have family commitments
- Reflect what is working well with marketing, e.g. support and a positive learning environment

Conclusion

- Series of Projects aligned to the outcomes
- Value of Outcome
- Hard to reach
- Be inclusive and active
- Collaborative Working
- Positive Alumni

Recommendations

The findings from phase 1 and 2 data collection have been analysed and developed into the following recommendations for future impacts on learning and teaching practice:

Recommendation 1: streamline the registration and enrolment process, communicating schedules with a central point of contact to enable work planning.

Recommendation 2: incorporate translated UON admissions and course information in native languages to correlate with the student group.

Recommendation 3: Incorporate mental health and well-being focused sessions at the start of programmes promoting a manageable and sustainable work-life-study balance.

Recommendation 4: Incorporate regular assignment development time within the timetable to support use of appropriate resources, tutor and peer engagement. To increase the likelihood of timely and successful completion.

Recommendation 5: develop a level 7 academic writing package that provides clear and accessible information all in one place, that is course and assignment specific and focuses on achieving the required level of critical thinking at the required academic level.

Recommendation 6: ensure that all IT packages used have clear and accessible guidance attached (e.g. if you are using package in NILE, ensure the instructions and problem-solving guides are with that package) to promote ease of use and timely problem resolution.

Recommendation 7: review programmes with high numbers of international students and ensure that assessment methods are varied and reflective of those commonly used by international assessments at this academic level.

Recommendation 8: increase communication and engagement opportunities across programme intakes, subject areas and with other faculties and alumni community to promote sense of belonging.

Recommendation 9: ensure that offerings of social activities can be accessible by both home and international students to promote inclusivity.

Recommendation 10: engage employers to understands the time and commitment required to undertake courses to promote allocation for study periods from the workplace.

Z

2. Describe how you have, or intend to, disseminate your findings. What would help you with this activity?

The project team have, and plan to disseminate the findings of the project in a number of different ways. Firstly, the project has been disseminated through regular posts on the [project blog](#). A presentation was also made at the Learning and Teaching conference June 2023.

Future plans include:

- Sharing the findings with L7 leads across the University
- Submission of a peer reviewed paper at X Journal, with a planned submission date in Autumn 2023.

3. Please reflect on the research process. What was most enjoyable and interesting about it? What barriers if any did you encounter? What would have made the project easier to complete? How did the mentoring relationship help and what would make it more useful in future?

- **Enjoyment and Interest:**

One of the most enjoyable aspects of this project has been working in a multi-disciplinary team. It has been very motivational to develop this collaboration. We have learnt from each other as inter-professional colleagues, to the benefit of our own knowledge and to enhance this project. As an example, the nuisances of language became a recurring theme, as professionals with diverse backgrounds each bring our own understanding to certain words or phrases which may not be universally understood. Working across the different areas led to a richer development of our project documents and a reminder that the terminology we use is not always read the same way by everyone.

The benefit of working in a team included being able to rely on each other to meet deadlines amongst various workloads and strive to move the project forward. Each individual member of the team demonstrated their resilience, as we were tested and challenged throughout this project.

Another enjoyable aspect occurred during data collection. Each member of the team took part in either the focus groups/interviews and/or the data analysis and report writing. This promoted shared learning on the research process across the team and assisted each team member to gain insight from each other's perspectives.

The midway project dissemination resulted in helpful discussions and support from fellow Innovation project members with much needed assistance with data collection. This was one of the most successful engagement moments with the faculties of FBL and FAST.

- **Barriers encountered**

Engagement with the PG student body was difficult and time consuming. Reminders were sent frequently, and module leaders were requested to assist with recruitment. Incentifying measures

traditionally used to entice UG students such as pizza/snacks or vouchers were less effective with this student body, they are earning money with family commitments. Instead, PG students were engaged through module leaders or supporting tutors with the cavate they would assist future PG students with learning and teaching as well as assist with streamlining UoN mechanisms.

- **Project easier**

This project's timelines are tight when engaging both Level 7 students undertaking module requirements and academic colleagues' commitments with delivery and marking. This student engagement project would benefit from a full annual cycle to allow the project to roll out over an eighteen-month period. Representatives on the research team from each faculty to ensure engagement with level 7 students would reduce the requirement for frequent reminders. Instead, module leaders could request engagement with students they already have relationships with.

- **Mentoring relationship**

The mentor's role in supporting the project was valuable, and we welcome this as part of future funding. We found that it was a special opportunity to share ideas about the project and question ways to engage this hard-to-reach student group. Sharing our project ideas and plans with Professor Pauline Kneale's was helpful having previously worked with her. Her enthusiasm for the project helped us expand our ideas and challenge identified ways to learn from best practice or highlight our own best practice. We explored ways to disseminate the findings, thinking laterally about approaching journals and strategically planning to increase our outputs. Throughout the project, these sessions enabled the team to reflect on progress and plan for the project's completion and the key messages or recommendations that needed to be shared in the final report and dissemination.

4. What other reflections on the project do you have that will make the scheme better for participants and the university community?

To increase student engagement and data collection, a representative from the student body in each faculty would be beneficial.

When working within a team on an innovation project an experienced researcher is vital as is someone with recent ethics approval or ethics panel experience. The ethics approval process and data collection phases can be seriously underestimated when academics are balancing teaching and research within their portfolio.

A presentation day, perhaps recorded, of all the innovation projects aligned to a UoN event could assist with dissemination and recognition of these important projects.