

Supporting autonomy and empowering the student UG research journey

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Background

I believe that independent learning offers a route to lifelong learning. My vision is to deliver innovations that support students in becoming confident, autonomous and critical thinking learners.

I have had a sustained impact on the practice of both students and staff:

"Thank you for being a brilliant lecturer whose lectures inspire students to learn and read more."(Student)

"Stephany's experience and scholarship in academic literacies at Northumbria have enabled me to begin to consider my own practices when providing feedback on style and critical analysis"(Staff)

All my projects have the student experience at their heart. I seek to enhance support for student learning through a respect for the diversity of the student body while creating a sense of equality to 1) support the development of independence and confidence 2) Improve academic experience and 3) enhance graduate characteristics and thus employability.

S Veuger 2019-2020 Rewarding Excellence and Innovation in teaching :Students as Partners Feedback : *Strong evidence of regular individual impact on student achievement across the series of projects.*

Through my early experiences as an associate lecturer, I became passionate about supporting student skill development through innovations that increase attainment for ALL. I began by integrating writing with the subject as a means of 'writing to learn'. To enable students to both aspire to and achieve higher grades, I designed and delivered scientific writing workshops to large programmes of UG bioscience students and rolled these out at 2 institutions.

"I learned so much about my research area because the journals meant something, I could understand how to critically appraise them and use them to write a good report!"(Student)

Student impact in the final year project (59% to 67% mean) was attributed to engagement with the workshops and lead to a request for me to develop a tranche of level specific guides (x14) tailored to programmes of study covering student transition, engagement with assessment, critical thinking and scientific writing skills.

Thank you for providing us with tailored guides which has helped me get through my assignments. I personally think you are the best lecturer on my course".(Student)

This case study showcases a sustained piece of action research where I have made the strategic objectives of research rich learning a lived reality through staff-student partnerships (>50 student partners). This exciting participatory research project sought to improve UG supervision quality, enhance student satisfaction and skills development by developing students' abilities to direct their own learning and evaluate their progress through the development of independence in thinking.

Healey, Flint and Harrington's conceptual framework helped me locate my research as "co-researching and co-inquiring" (Healey *et al* 2014). The enhancements in teaching and learning described here highlight the potential of collaborative pedagogical research to change the nature of the staff-student relationship and develop a culture of partnership.

Rationale

The UG project is considered a journey towards independent thought achieved through a shift in focus from teacher-directed to self-directed learning. It embodies my vision, offering the potential for further development of graduate attributes and skills (Healey 2014).

The innovations explored in this case study came about in response to several experiences I had; PhD supervision had shown me the importance of setting clear expectations between supervisor and student and discussion with staff and students about the skills guides I had written showed that the most widely accessed guide was 'demystifying dissertations'. Anecdotally, supervisors distinguish supervision from other forms of teaching. As a new lecturer, I had been unsure how to organise, plan and support UG research and have since seen numerous new staff struggle with the same dilemmas that include fitting into local policy and getting the level of support right. Students hinted to me about issues of consistency with students perceiving supervisors taking different approaches and opinions on what is important. This highlighted a perceived inequality in student experience of this high stakes terminal assessment which is often highlighted by student comments, resulting in weaker NSS scores within the assessment and feedback category.

The goal of the project was to provide structure and support to dissertation students and supervisors alike by developing research informed resources that are accessible, engaging and student centred. Project evolution was led through student involvement in all aspects.

Strand 1 : Students as change agents and equal partners carried out research to understand the UG dissertation experience from the perspective of students and supervisors.

Taking responsibility for their 'own' learning creates uncertainty and many students question their capacity to conduct independent research (Fig 1).

The 'team' used the emergent themes to develop a widely applicable toolkit of resources.

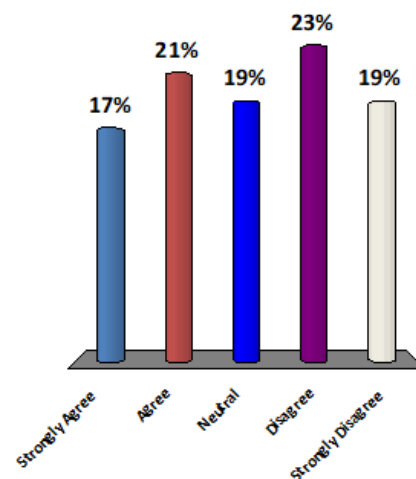


Figure 1 Student confidence in undertaking research before the UG project is mixed

1) Generation of evidence including both student and supervisor “voice”

Narratives around the experiences and expectations of UG research project supervision, the developing identity of students as researchers and evidence for the importance of the student –supervisor partnership (Figure 2)

Three themes were regularly identified; education, practical and emotional support.

A key finding was that the student-supervisor relationship is central to student experience, satisfaction and success (Figure 3)

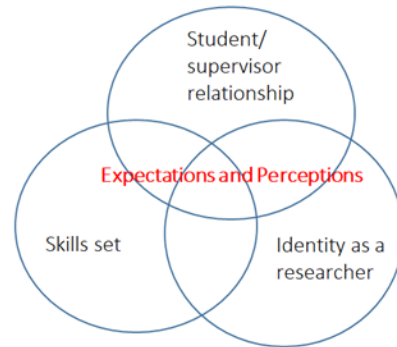
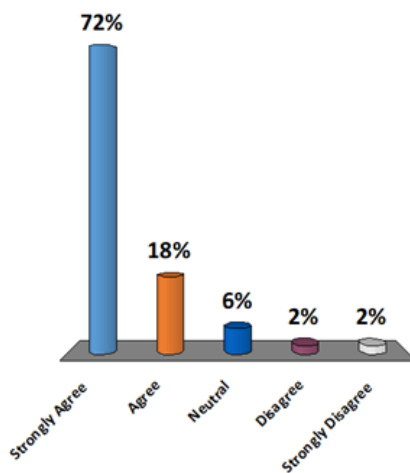


Figure 2 Uncovering expectations and perceptions of the UG project. Student researchers developed questionnaires which were followed up by semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of their identity as a researcher and their real and expected relationship with their supervisor



The student-supervisor relationship strongly influences student experience, satisfaction and success

Figure 3a
72 % of students strongly agree that a good student/supervisor partnership positively affects the success of the final project

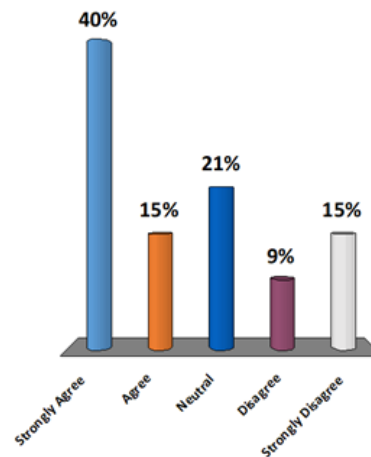


Figure 3 b
Only 40 % felt strongly that they had managed to build a partnership with their supervisor

2) Making supervision work resources

An important output from strand 1 is a 'making supervision work leaflet' which contains; A visual model of how the student-supervisor partnership can be fostered and support the development of skills and progression towards independence (Figure 4) and a list of 'discussion points' (Figure 5) aimed at making supervision more effective without being prescriptive by ensuring that expectations are clarified and realistic targets set at the beginning of the project

(Findings published in Veuger *et al* 2018 with students as authors)

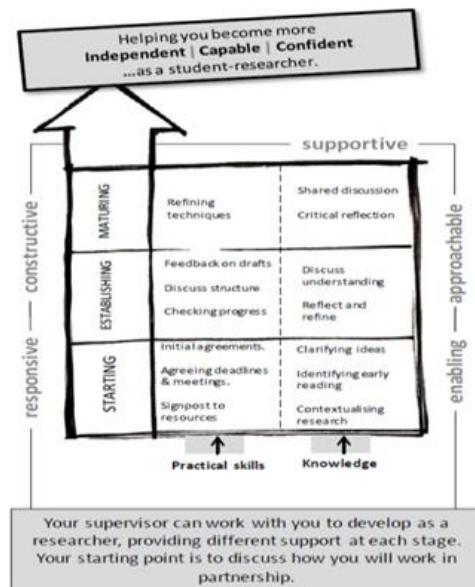


Figure 4

The visual model is designed to highlight the changing nature of supervisor role from tutor through mentor through to peer. The model makes explicit the level of support students can expect at each stage enabling staff to build on their supervision style as well as enabling students to consider their roles in the research project.

Artwork designed by Dr Ian Robson

Points for discussion

- Who will be responsible for arranging contact?
- How will we communicate?
- When will our meetings be?
- Who will keep a record of the meetings?
- What do we expect from the meetings?
- How will we set targets?
- What are the learning outcomes of the project?
- What resources will be provided?
- When will drafts be submitted?
- How and when will feedback be provided?
- What will help us both to make this a positive partnership?

Figure 5 Points for discussion.

The answers will be personal to each supervisor/student pair but the use of a standard set of discussion points provides parity, clarity and structure.

The toolkit has been used in different programmes, departments (x5) and faculties at Northumbria University across 2 campuses, and is being trialled nationally as well as internationally at partner institutes. This work has been disseminated at faculty showcases, teaching and learning days both to promote staff engagement and as an example of successful funded pedagogical work with students as partners. Student researchers co-presented posters both institutionally and nationally at advance HE meetings (2018, 2019).

I have further disseminated this work through oral presentation nationally (2021), internationally (2018, 2019) and through publication.

Strand 2 Student researchers were supported to reflexively consider how participation in this small scale participatory project developed their identity and skills (Figure 6).

Comments fell under the broad themes of leadership, analytical skills, knowledge gained and responsibility.

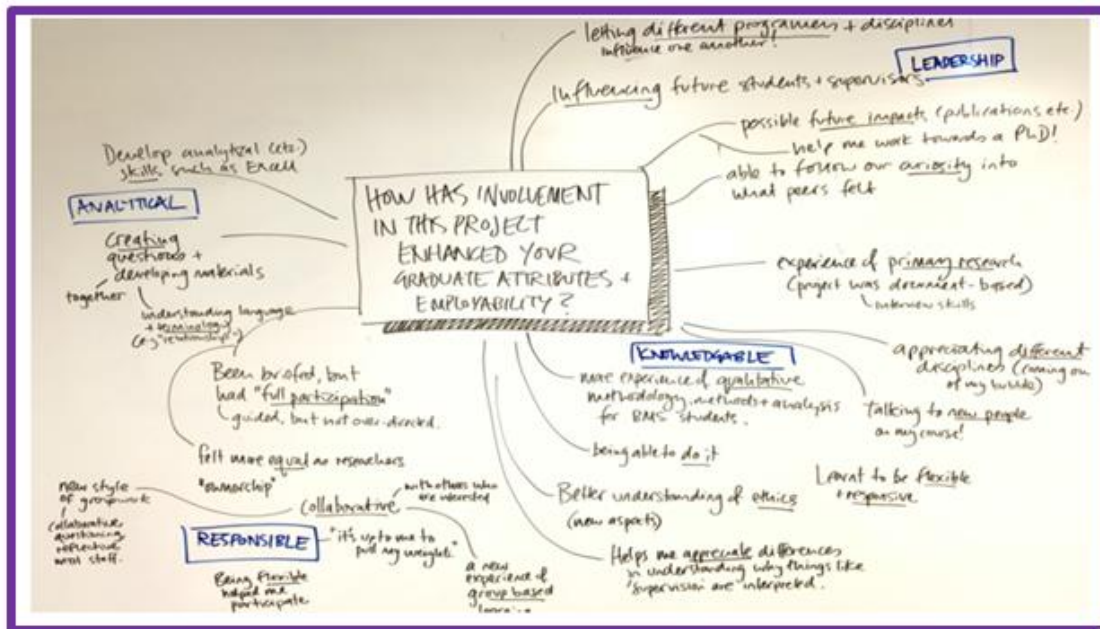


Figure 6 Reflective commentary of the educational impact of student participation in the scholarship of teaching and learning

3) Good practice guidance and transferrable recommendations

Evidence based recommendations for staff in order to ;

- Enable staff to build on their supervision style as well as enabling students to consider their roles in the research project
- Increase the inclusion of students as equal partners in pedagogic research. Benefits for academic practice, student learning and development of graduate attributes

Strand 3: A number of smaller but effective innovations have sprung from this work. Of note are UG project conferences where L6 students present their top tips to level 4 and 5 students. (Published in Racey and Veuger 2019). One of the Alumni has presented at faculty showcases and has promoted the benefits of the conferences as a peer support mechanism to the Northumbria University peer support working group.

Staff perspective

The diversity of supervisory styles is a key strength of project modules but is a source of student perceived inequality of experience in a high stakes terminal assessment. 'Prescriptive' innovations in education can be met with resistance from lectures and students because they have been imposed on them. Here, collective efforts were used to drive meaningful change : co-created resources are inclusive and student-centred.

The model and discussion points are simple yet effective whilst being non-prescriptive and can be easily adapted, >50 staff in HLS agree they would use the resource in future rounds of supervision.

This work has enhanced my own practice, I was nominated for best supervisor in 2018.

Feedback from staff shows that supervision practice has been changed as a result of this participatory project

“The exercise helped me better understand the students’ needs and styles. Thus I could support them more effectively. “

I was invited to discuss my research on supervision practice with new staff from across the university who undertake a PGCAP course.

“One of the most transformative PGCAP sessions was on the importance of managing expectations in supervision. We were given a handout on points for discussion on how to work together, which my new PhD student and I went through to agree on how we would work together for a positive partnership...I can't wait to trial this with my UG students”

Student perspective

Feedback from >500 students shows this work has transformed those involved in the research and those who have used the resources. Students described enhanced confidence, improvement of graduate attributes including independence of thought and action, curiosity and critical thinking. Therefore, employability outcomes were enhanced.

“I just wanted to say thank you so much to you all.....It has allayed a lot of my fears about research”

“I believe I did so much better thanks to the ability to talk through the supervisory approach because I felt much less anxious”(Figure 7)

Student commentary on the resource .
“.....allowed me to identify what emotional, educational and practical expectations I had from my supervisor and vice versa which helped me adapt my learning experience.”

Student researchers unanimously feel they have benefited from their involvement in this project. They developed a range of desirable skills; including relationship building skills, communication skills, 'learning to learn' skills and underpinning these, a sense of growing personal confidence.

Student researchers were able to rethink theoretical concepts and practical issues in ways they had not considered before. All researchers believe they are more employable.

“Working alongside students with experience in a different subject area, helped me develop as a researcher.....”

“being able to work with staff and students as peers to carry out the project was greatly beneficial and increased confidence in my ability to research and communicate.”

“I personally got a huge boost in confidence. It has given me an insight into working with other people on a professional manner which is a great thing to take away “.

Reflections

With inclusivity and partnership in mind, my work has impacted on student learning, supported colleagues and contributes towards my ongoing professional development. I was awarded an MA in Education Leadership in 2018 for my work in supporting the UG project.

This scalable project will support the practice of future project students and supervisors and the development of graduates that are distinguished by their intellectual expertise and employability.

There are limitations to the approach taken including power relationships, the motivation of students to get involved, their ability and the research has been limited to some departments. However, the aim was to develop resources through the process of action research and the leaflet and 10 questions serve as a starting point for individual departments who can then decide how to build on these findings.

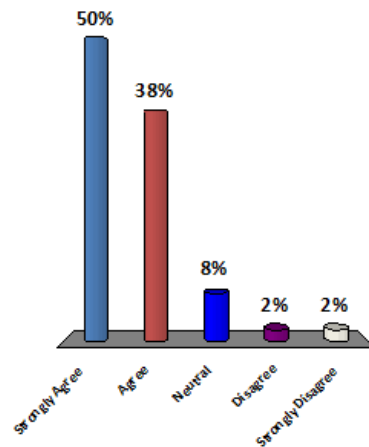


Figure 7 88% of students agree that the 'points of discussion' supported the development of a student supervisor partnership

References

- Healey, M., 2014. Students as change agents in learning and teaching in higher education.
- Healey, M., Flint, A. and Harrington, K., 2014. Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education. Heslington, UK: The Higher Education Academy.
- **Veuger. S.**, Gallagher. S., Creighton, H., Robson, I., Ridley, M. and Cookson, L., (2018). *Uncovering expectations and perceptions of the final year UG dissertation - supporting the student research journey and enhancing their graduate attributes*, International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences pp.76-100
- **Veuger, S.** and Racey, S. (2019). *Students as partners :on developing a student led conference to enhance the skills of UG project students*, International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences. pp 173-192

Education conference Presentations (last 5 years)

- Derby online learning summit. (2021) Pedagogic research for online learning : Impacting student experience. COVID 19 – using digital technology to support skills development in a flexible way
- Lightning talk . HUBS 'Enhancing Teaching and Learning Through Learning Partnerships' workshop (2021), Students as partners: towards uncovering expectations and perceptions of the final year UG dissertation and enhancing graduates.
- Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference (2019) Northumbria University, Uncovering Expectations and Supporting the Dissertation Journey of Final Year Applied Science Undergraduate Students
- 7th Teaching & Education Conference, International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences. London. (2019) Speaker : Students as partners in the UG research project journey : developing graduate attributes.
- 3 Rivers Conference (2018) Newcastle University. Uncovering expectations and perceptions of the final year UG dissertation.
- 5th Teaching & Education Conference, International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences Amsterdam (2018). Speaker: Uncovering expectations and perceptions of the final year UG dissertation - supporting the student research journey and enhancing their graduate attributes.
- Advance HE Generation TEF Teaching in the spotlight (2017), STEM strand. Uncovering Expectations and supporting the final year dissertation journey of final year applied science undergraduate students.
- Bioscience Teaching conference (2016) Newcastle University. Speaker: Developing an eLearning module to provide supported open learning.

Grants Awarded (Teaching quality enhancement fund).

- **S Veuger**, I Robson, L Cookson 2015-2016 £2,000 Uncovering expectations and supporting the dissertation journey of final year applied science undergraduate students
- **S Veuger**, H Hooper 2016-2017 £2,000 Exploring the assessment expectations, preferences and experiences of first year University students.
- **S Veuger** L Cookson, I Robson, L Allin, B Lovell, G Case, 2017-2018 £4880 Strategic grant Enhancing the undergraduate dissertation experience through students as partners in pedagogical research
- **S Veuger**, S Racey, L Allin, C Bruce, G Case 2018-2019 £3840 Strategic grant Enhancing the undergraduate dissertation experience through students as partners in pedagogical research: A focus on graduate attributes

Qualifications

- 2021 SI PASS training in peer mentoring. Lund University (Sweden)
- 2018 MA in Education Leadership (Commendation). Northumbria University
- 2016 Postgraduate Diploma in Education Leadership (Distinction) Northumbria University
- 2012 Certificate in advanced studies of academic practice (Distinction). Newcastle University
- 2011 Newcastle Teaching Award (Distinction). Newcastle University.