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Fellowship snapshot: The Enhancement of
the pedagogic practice at the University of
Leeds through the engagement of
Postgraduate Research Students in teaching

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Project Snapshot

1/10/2020-1/10/2021



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Project Overview

The project was motivated by a wish to understand if and how Postgraduate Research students (PGRs) engaged in teaching can influence and improve the pedagogic practices at the University of Leeds. According to the [Code of Practice](#), PGRs undertaking teaching must receive appropriate training from the relevant Faculties/Schools. PGRs are strongly encouraged to also attend Organisational Development and Professional Learning (OD&PL) training for teaching. This should ensure that the PGRs are provided with all the information for the modules on which they are teaching and equipped with the required pedagogic knowledge to start their teaching journey.

The PGRs build up a teaching experience portfolio, very useful when entering into an academic career. However, the project aimed to investigate what the academic staff can learn from PGRs with teaching roles and responsibilities. Tutors' ability to be present and deeply connected to their students, is not a fixed condition, but a state that needs renegotiation, with the context and challenges of teaching life. PGRs can, therefore, act as the middle person between undergraduates and academic staff thanks to their recent experience of undergraduate learning.

This project took the stance that the more senior member of staff is the one looking for 'a fresh outlook' and can achieve this by working in collaboration with PGRs.

Project Objectives

- Review the literature on research methods in education, PhD tutors and junior tutors, reverse mentoring, teaching observation and effective teaching
- Identify stakeholders at the University of Leeds as well as in other institutions and create a network to initiate a conversation on PGRs who teach, to have a better understanding of the benefits of engaging PGRs in teaching activities, and to discuss best ways to support their professional development
- Understand the different practices to support PGRs who teach across the University of Leeds and identify possible models of good practice to disseminate across the institution
- Evaluate current teaching practices across the University of Leeds through the active engagement of undergraduates (UGs), PGRs and academic staff
- Evaluate the enhancements to standard academic teaching practice that PGRs can bring, to inform future PGR training as well as staff who want to use PGRs to teach in their modules

Methodology

The project had a research phase, a data collection phase and a data analysis phase. In the research phase, a literature review was carried out on:

- effective and innovative teaching
- research methods in education
- class observation



In the data collection phase, extensive data were gathered through cross-university focus groups, electronic surveys and teaching observation of both PGRs and academic staff.

Four focus groups with undergraduate students were conducted, with a total of 15 participants (from four faculties). The role of the UG students focus group was to gain a better understanding, both of how UG students value their learning experience at Leeds, and how PGRs contribute to the enhancements of academic teaching practice.

Six focus groups with PGRs were conducted, with a total of 22 participants (from the same four faculties as the UG participants). Focus groups with PGRs served the purpose of gaining a better understanding of their teaching experience at The University of Leeds and of how they feel supported in their teaching practice.

Four focus groups with academic staff were conducted, with a total of 15 participants (again, from the same four faculties). Focus groups with academic staff aimed to gain a better understanding of their experience of working with PGRs and if/how teaching delivered by PGRs can enhance academic teaching practice.

Following the focus groups, online surveys were distributed to the three different groups. 264 UGs (from across the university), 113 PGRs (from across the university) and 76 academics (from across the university) took part in the survey.

Finally, teaching observation of staff and PGRs was carried out. Nineteen teaching observations of PGRs were carried out (from the Faculties of Art, Humanities and Cultures, Environment, Biological Sciences, Engineering and Physical Sciences). Thirteen teaching observations of academic staff were carried out (from the Faculties of Art, Humanities and Cultures, Environment, Engineering and Physical Sciences). Qualitative and quantitative data from surveys and teaching observation were analysed.

Key findings

- PGR TAs are a great asset for The University of Leeds and can influence and improve pedagogic practices. Data gathered during my LITE fellowship show that PGR TAs were especially praised by undergraduates and academic staff for creating online materials and differentiated resources, for engaging students in active learning activities. Undergraduates also appreciated their approachability and understanding of the undergraduate learning experience. Furthermore, academic staff appreciated the cutting-edge research PGRs bring into the classroom and the workload relief they provide.
- Staff, PGRs and undergraduate students can all benefit from the engagement of Postgraduate Research Students in Teaching: staff are exposed to a fresh approach and perspective, undergraduates experience a different type of teaching from that of the lecturer, PGRs gain professional development opportunities.
- My data show that practices in PGR recruitment and training were inconsistent across the university. Therefore, a transparent approach to recruitment, consistent training, oversight



and structured support for PGR TAs are needed to ensure the quality of teaching and of UG experiences across the university.

- PGR TAs can help to facilitate the connection between research and education, between UGs and academic staff, therefore it is important to empower them, to give them the opportunity to explore scholarship, and to connect their research with research around education.

Outcomes

In July 2021, as part of the Leeds Doctorate Festival, I held a Day Conference with the theme of 'PGR Teaching Experiences: What we can learn from them'. The recording is available [here](#).

The presentation was structured in three parts:

1. I presented the findings and learning that emerged from the project;
2. A roundtable discussion with guest speakers from different parts of The University of Leeds. The aim was to share a diversity of perspectives on PGR contribution to teaching and PGR professional development
3. A number PGRs presentationed on an aspect of their teaching experience. This session was about celebrating the teaching experience of PGRs and their contribution to teaching at Leeds.

The recording of the PGRs' presentations is used as learning material on the Academic English pre-session course for international PGRs. The presentations as used as part of their training and as a source of inspiration and empowerment to teach once they start their PhD.

Building on the success of the event, I am in the process of submitting a proposal for a special issue of the Journal of Education 'Postgraduate Pedagogies'

<https://journals.studentengagement.org.uk/index.php/gtateach/about>

The title of the volume is: Digital learning experiences and COVID 19: Insights and perspectives from GTAs. This volume is a response to the findings of this project and will showcase the essential contribution that PGR TAs make to the successful delivery of university teaching, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In November 2021, I presented the findings on Leeds University Business School (LUBS) in the LUBS DSE Forum and in January 2022, I presented the findings on Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures (AHC) in the AHC DSE Forum. The SEC 2022 provided another opportunity for dissemination and for discussing the project findings from a different dimension: how PGR engagement in pedagogic practices can enhance/build learning communities.

One of the aims of the project was to assess whether the PGR TAs at The University of Leeds are engaging in "effective teaching". Literature proposes some key characteristics of effective teaching, highlighting that it is oriented to and focused on students and their learning. I therefore created a [teaching observation form](#) to identify teaching methods and behavioural factors to deliver effective and inspirational teaching and a [set of statements](#) to assess effective teaching from an undergraduate perspective. The teaching observation form and the set of statements will be submitted as [TIPS Blog](#)



articles to allow colleagues to access these examples of authentic and innovative practice in student education and encourage their use in their own practice.

Challenges

Recruiting participants for the focus groups and surveys was quite a lengthy process. Potential UG participants had to express their interest in participation and initiate contact with the investigator. Also, it took longer than expected to recruit staff, since the transition to online teaching, due to the COVID 19 pandemic, was a priority for everybody.

Another challenge was to understand how each School/Faculty operates in terms of roles at both administrative and academic level.

The creation of a teaching observation form was quite challenging as it had to be used to observe teaching across the University, for both STEM and Humanities subjects. Therefore, it took some time to elaborate principles of effective teaching that would go beyond the subject-specific level and could be applied across the different disciplines.

The COVID pandemic disrupted the plans for face-to-face teaching observation. However, with online learning and teaching likely to become an important part of institutional provision, this project was very timely and produced meaningful data in and for a blended learning environment. Focus groups/interviews were carried out on Teams, to avoid the problem of social distancing and this arrangement worked well.

Having a research assistant was very beneficial, as it provided the opportunity to discuss ideas and exchange views as well as to get support during strategic phases of the project.

Next steps

To strengthen the collaboration with the Doctoral College and Organisational Development and Professional Learning (OD&PL) and to carry on planning future events and activities aimed at the professional development of PGR TAs at Leeds.

To establish a network of academics to exchange ideas and good practice on PGR teaching. Contacts with Coventry University and King's College London have already been established and a first initial meeting is planned in the academic year 2021-22.

To share the learning that emerges from my project by presenting in national teaching and learning conferences and workshops such as the conferences regularly organised by Advance HE or national and international staff development sessions. Another possibility will be to present at the UK Council for Graduate Education annual conference.



To ensure long-term impact and sustainability by publishing in peer-reviewed journals such as Language Teaching Research or Postgraduate Pedagogies. I envisage one publication with a more specific focus, such as the impact of my project within Modern Languages. Moreover, a second publication reporting the findings from the focus groups, survey and teaching observation would be an effective way of making my research more visible with internal and external stakeholders.

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