

A PROCESS AND IMPACT EVALUATION OF THE PGCERT/MA STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Acknowledgements

- Thanks are given to the Programme Team of the PGCert/MA Student Engagement in Higher Education for commissioning this evaluation, and to all participants (current students, graduates and the Programme Team) who gave up their time to report their experiences and insights. Special thanks are given to the 10 members of the Advisory Group who were instrumental in the co-creation of the evaluation. The members of the Advisory Group who wished to be named on this report are: Josh Armstrong; Aimee Cuthbert; Helen Kirby-Hawkins; Gloria Laurini; Kevin McStravock; and Jeff Saddington-Wiltshire.

1.2 Brief

- The project aimed to evaluate the processes and impact of the PGCert/MA Student Engagement in Higher Education programme (2018-2022) at the University of Winchester.
- The MA Student Engagement in Higher Education, and embedded PGCert, was created to focus on student engagement practices, policies and partnerships in UK Higher Education. The students on the course were, generally, simultaneously working as staff in Higher Education within institutions, sector agencies and other organisations.
- During this report, the students on the course are generally referred to as 'practitioners', although those currently studying on the course are specifically named as 'current learners' and those who have completed the course are referred to as 'graduates'.
- A Theory of Change led evaluation was adopted to extend exploration of impact beyond traditional measures of course evaluation.

1.3 Methodology

- A mixed-methods, predominantly qualitative, post-test design was used to evaluate the processes and impact of the course on practitioners and other groups, such as practitioners' institutions or organisations of employment.
- The project applied principles from participatory research to establish an Advisory Group of 10 current learners and graduates who co-created the Theory of Change, designed the methods of data gathering and reflected on emerging findings.
- The project intended to collect the viewpoints of practitioners at different points in their study. Current learners and graduates were invited to take part in interviews and/or reflective activities on Padlet. These interviews were peer-led, advocated by the Advisory Group due to its alignment with student engagement practices and principles, or individual interviews as needed. Practitioners who had started but withdrew from the course were asked to take part in interviews to explore a counterfactual perspective.
- All staff members who currently teach on the course were invited to take part in the evidence collection as participants by completing activities on a Padlet site. Evidence from documentary sources and discussions from the Advisory Group meetings were also used for the evaluation.
- There were 16 practitioners who engaged in interviews and/or reflective activities on Padlet. None of the small number of practitioners who withdrew from the course expressed an interest in taking part resulting in a gap in the evaluative findings. Across all the primary evidence collected, there was representation from 14 current learners, eight graduates and seven members of the Programme Team.
- The evaluation obtained ethical approval from the University of Winchester and Sheffield Hallam University. This commissioned project is an example of an independent evaluation conducted by known and trusted colleagues who are distanced from the activity being evaluated whilst having some pre-existing awareness on the identified context.

1.4 Findings

- Within the process outcomes, there was evidence that: the learning environment provides effective access to course materials; the course provides effective spaces to enable practitioners to learn and interact; the curriculum, assessment and feedback is well designed; the Programme Team brings expertise, a range of perspectives and networks; evaluation processes are in place to ensure the course is achieving the outcomes; the Programme Team and support services within the host university are available and accessible for individual support; the Programme Team models student engagement practices in their own pedagogy.
- For the short-term outcomes, there was evidence of practitioners: gaining understanding of student engagement theory, literature, policies and practice; developing their critical thinking skills; developing their research and evaluation skills; gaining confidence in practice and other skills and competencies; having increased opportunities for sharing and learning with others and accessing a network; being satisfied with their learning experience; developing an ability to influence within the context of their professional role (short-medium term outcome).
- For the medium-term outcomes, there was evidence of: practitioners' application of their knowledge in practice and transfer of knowledge to new contexts; practitioners being supported to disseminate the outcomes of their work; practitioners contributing to the development of others in relation to student engagement; practitioners continuing to develop their network of contacts; practitioners experiencing professional and personal success (medium-long term outcome). There were perceptions expressed that the course had a positive impact on students, such as those located at practitioners' institutions or organisations of employment (medium-long term outcome), but some deemed this link to be indirect or difficult to measure.
- For the long-term outcomes, there was evidence that: practitioners foster and champion professional or personal development and model and support practices in student engagement; there is enhanced dialogue, capability and capacity of student engagement in the practitioner's home institution / organisation.
- An exploration of the mechanisms of change highlighted personal motivations, cohort size, connections, trust and support, interest and enthusiasm, balancing work-life commitments, costs and organisational contexts as enablers and barriers to achieving the aforementioned outcomes.

1.5 Conclusions

- The report concluded that the PGCert/MA Student Engagement in Higher Education had a positive impact on practitioners while they studied on the course and afterwards and this impact was extended to other individuals and groups, including within practitioners' organisations of employment.
- The blended delivery of the course enabled individuals to study on the course alongside their professional roles and the effectiveness of these processes facilitated the impact outcomes.
- Recommendations have been made for student engagement practitioners, those delivering the PGCert/MA in the future, those evaluating the processes and impact of taught courses and those sustaining the scholarship of student engagement.
- This evaluation also demonstrated the potential of using a Theory of Change approach to structure the planning and design of evaluations of a programme of study. Suggestions for further application of this approach are included.



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