EVALUATION OF BURSARY AND COLLEGE PROJECTS: PRODUCERS OF ENHANCEMENT, EVALUATION AND RESEARCH (PEER)

REPORT

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Evaluation of bursary and college projects: Producers of Enhancement, Evaluation and Research (PEER).

Abstract:

This evaluation examined the Producers of Enhancement, Evaluation and Research (PEER) programme at Sheffield Hallam University. The study aimed to assess the implementation and outcomes of PEER, focusing on the benefits and challenges of staff-student collaboration.

The PEER programme, which has employed nearly 200 students and delivered over 100 projects in three years, aims to enhance student experiences and outcomes through staff-student collaborations. This evaluation involved semi-structured interviews with 10 student researchers and 9 staff project leads, to understand their motivations, experiences, and perceptions of the programme's impacts.

Findings indicate that involvement in PEER has, for some students, led to skills development, with students gaining valuable research experience, as well as the ability to work with staff in open and collaborative ways that may not have been previously experienced. Staff reported benefiting from the insights of students and the opportunity to get to know them in a more personal way.

Challenges identified included communication issues, time constraints, and delays from ethical approval process difficulties. Effective communication and relationship-building between staff and students were important enablers of success.

The study highlights the importance of clear guidance and support from the Student Engagement Evaluation and Research (STEER) team, which facilitated training and regular contact. Recommendations include improving the matching process for staff and student researchers, providing additional ethical support, and ensuring staff and students are clear about roles and expectations for working together.

Overall, the PEER programme has positively impacted student and staff experiences, contributing to the university's strategic objectives and offering insights into the dynamics of student-staff partnerships in higher education.

Evaluation of bursary and college projects: Producers of Enhancement, Evaluation and Research (PEER).

Full Report:

1. Who led on this project?

Claire Wolstenholme and Nathaniel Pickering (STEER).

2. When did it take place?

January 2024 to May 2024.

3. What was the type of evidence?

Empirical: Evidence has been collected which reports that there have been changes in outcomes for those receiving an intervention.

4. Which stage(s) of the student lifecycle did it relate to (if any)?

Success (e.g. retention and attainment).

5. What question(s) was the project attempting to address?

1. How successfully has PEER been implemented?
2. How successfully are the PEER outcomes being met?
3. What are the benefits or challenges of staff and students working alongside each other?

6. What need(s) or issue(s) was this initiative addressing?

Students as Partners (SAPs) emphasises a reciprocal dynamic between students and staff (Mercer-Mapstone, 2017), with the focus being on the process of the collaboration, rather than the potential outcomes (Matthews, 2016), and ultimately aimed at enhancing the learning experience and environment (Lowe and El Hakim, 2020). A recent report on student engagement from the University of Lincoln states that '*Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must provide interaction opportunities by designing curricula and activities that foster engagement*' (Gulko 2024, p8). Engaging students as partners can empower students with a sense of ownership leading to enhanced engagement in university study (Seery et al, 2021) and increased feelings of belonging (Mercer-Mapstone, 2017). SAPs has been much researched and debated in recent years, with varied models and theories postulated (e.g. Healey, Flint, and Harrington, 2014; Holen et al, 2020). Overall positive outcomes for staff and students have been

reported, including, for students increased motivation and skills development (Bovill et al, 2011) and for staff, improved teaching and understanding of student needs (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017). Despite the benefits, the challenges for Higher Education (HE) institutions to undertaking partnership work are numerous, including negotiating power dynamics, resources, time (Seery et al., 2021) and overcoming issues of equity of opportunity (Gulko 2024).

7. What was the aim(s) of the initiative?

The Producers of Enhancement, Evaluation and Research (PEER) programme aimed to facilitate and institutional approach, bringing staff and students together to evaluate and research "what works" to improve outcomes across the student lifecycle.

PEER had three core elements:
- University-funded projects aimed to extend or improve the institution's understanding and knowledge about its students and their barriers or enablers to successful outcomes.
- Hallam staff acting as project leads.
- Students employed as researchers (SRs) to support staff in developing and delivering the projects.

The Student Engagement Evaluation and Research (STEER) team provided both professional services and academic support to the PEER programme. The professional services staff ran the application process and recruitment events for students, including organised monthly student researcher meetings. The STEER academic staff provided project leads and SRs with training on undertaking research projects and support sessions throughout the year on project design, methodology and delivery of projects. STEER staff also kept in contact with project leads to discuss progress and any additional support needs. Funded projects could be applied for through college allocated funding, or through SETL bursaries.
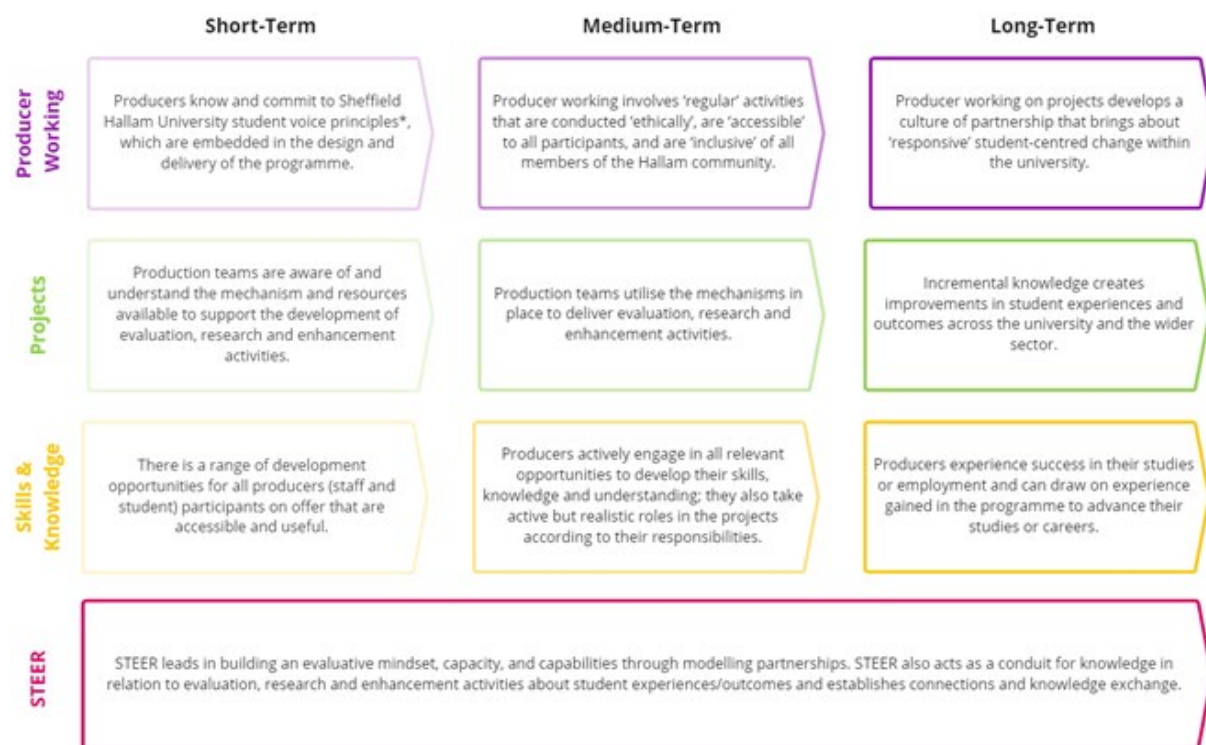
8. What was the rationale of the initiative?

STEER leads in building capacity, capabilities, and an evaluative mindset through modelling partnerships. STEER also acts as a conduit for knowledge in relation to evaluation, research and enhancement activities about student experiences/outcomes and establishes connections and knowledge exchange. The PEER programme aimed to improve students experience of the programme and have a long-term impact on their education and career outcomes. Improvements to PEER should also lead to better and more impactful projects that will enhance student experiences and outcomes. The evaluation also provides the sector with much-needed information about the impact of large-scale cross-institutional student engagement initiatives.

9. What did the initiative involve?

The PEER programme has been running for three years, employed nearly two hundred students, and delivered over a hundred projects. The programme has evolved over this time. STEER has continually reflected on practice, gathering informal and anecdotal evidence about the programme's impact in order to make changes. However, no formal evaluation had previously been undertaken. This evaluation, therefore, aimed to address that gap and assess to what extent the programme meets its outcomes, focusing on short to medium term outcomes initially The outcomes for PEER were developed in partnership with STEER colleagues and SRs. As Figure 1 illustrates, the outcomes are themed around four areas: 'Producer Working' (PW), 'Projects' (P) and 'Skills & Knowledge' (S&K) and STEER.

Figure 1: Outcomes for the PEER programme

	Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
Producer Working	Producers know and commit to Sheffield Hallam University student voice principles*, which are embedded in the design and delivery of the programme.	Producer working involves 'regular' activities that are conducted 'ethically', are 'accessible' to all participants, and are 'inclusive' of all members of the Hallam community.	Producer working on projects develops a culture of partnership that brings about 'responsive' student-centred change within the university.
Projects	Production teams are aware of and understand the mechanism and resources available to support the development of evaluation, research and enhancement activities.	Production teams utilise the mechanisms in place to deliver evaluation, research and enhancement activities.	Incremental knowledge creates improvements in student experiences and outcomes across the university and the wider sector.
Skills & Knowledge	There is a range of development opportunities for all producers (staff and student) participants on offer that are accessible and useful.	Producers actively engage in all relevant opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding; they also take active but realistic roles in the projects according to their responsibilities.	Producers experience success in their studies or employment and can draw on experience gained in the programme to advance their studies or careers.
STEER	STEER leads in building an evaluative mindset, capacity, and capabilities through modelling partnerships. STEER also acts as a conduit for knowledge in relation to evaluation, research and enhancement activities about student experiences/outcomes and establishes connections and knowledge exchange.		

The research and evaluation being undertaken by funded projects in 2023-24 covered areas across the student lifecycle, from widening participation/outreach work, to exploring the foundation year, and looking at the needs of returning students. Areas being explored included mental health, AI in academic work, minoritised student groups, academic advising, and the specific needs of students with learning disabilities.

10. What was the evaluation / research methodology used?

The research was granted ethical approval through Sheffield Hallam's ethical review system.

The research aimed to undertake semi structured interviews with 10 student researchers and 10 staff project leads who had been working on either college or bursary funded projects during the 2023-2024 academic year. An attempt was made to match staff and students working on the same project; however, this was not possible in most cases. Invites were initially sent out to all student researchers who had previously expressed interest in participating in the evaluation, and then to a wider group sampled to achieve variety across college funded and bursary funded projects. Online interviews with 10 student researchers took place from 30th January to the 5th of March 2024. Students were given a £15 Amazon voucher for participation. Following this, staff invites were emailed firstly to match student participants, and then again to a wider group of project leads sampled for diversity of project funding type. Online interviews with 9 staff members took place from the 21st of March to the 24th of April 2024. Interviews were therefore undertaken at times where projects were at different stages of development, with some having only just started, others reaching completion, and others still no longer being undertaken for reasons outlined in the findings section.

Interviewees were asked to reflect on their experiences of working alongside students or staff.

Data was put into Nvivo12 where a thematic codebook analysis was undertaken. Data was analysed deductively using the PEER outcomes as a framework, and inductively for emerging themes not covered by the outcomes. Indicative quotations are used throughout, with pseudonyms given to protect participants identity.

11. What learning, findings and / or recommendations can be shared?

Findings are presented thematically and by research question.

11.1: RQ1. How successfully has PEER been implemented?

The first research question will be answered through addressing the factors that contributed to success in implementation. These are, the motivating factors and initial concerns for staff and students in applying to their role as project lead and student researcher, and the progress of, and student researcher involvement in, the projects at the time of interview. Other indicators of successful implementation are discussed under research question 2, such as the suitability of funding, support from SETL/STEER and outcomes for participants, and research question 3 in relation to specific project enablers and barriers.

a) Motivations to apply.

Staff and students were asked about their motivations for applying for a funded project or becoming a student researcher respectively. For students, motivations predominantly aligned to the individual students' **course and their future career considerations:**

It's experience that I can put on my CV and it's something that I'm quite passionate about... I just thought it would be absolutely perfect, and it's been really good. (Emma, student, college).

I noticed it was a minorities project, I actually noticed it was something within the campus which I might be able to interact with other students...it was always going to be good because of my passion for research. (Elizabeth, student, SETL).

Students described a **desire for experience and knowledge gain** in the area of research, to help them with their current studies, and for their future prospects. One student mentioned the opportunity of a paid position as a motivating factor, and another talked about wanting more involvement with university activities to feel more connection to the institution.

Motivations for staff were slightly more varied and multidimensional. **Gaining student input** was cited by most staff as a key reason to apply to conduct a funded project. For some this was about giving the opportunity to students to undertake this type of work for their learning and future, others stated they wanted students voice and interpretation, and lastly, staff felt it was a way to develop relationships and get to know their students:

It will set them up in such a good place to understand the process and the importance of things like ethics for Level 6. (Kate, staff, college).

Whatever your data is, their interpretation of it and their ideas around methods of how you get good data are, in some ways, more valuable than what staff can tell you ... their insights of it and coming from different backgrounds, I think they can bring really important insights. (Pete, staff, bursary).

I never want to give this up because it's such a rewarding opportunity to get to know our students. (Rachel, staff, college).

Similarly to students, staff were also motivated by **personal and professional intentions.** Staff saw value in their projects to themselves and their career, to enhancing student experiences in their area, and, for some, they could see a direct alignment with a strategic objective in their college or the university. **Gaining funding** was also important for staff, predominantly to incentivise participants to take part in the project, ensuring they were able to recruit, noting difficulties previously where no incentives could be offered.

One interviewee cited the **need for accountability** to make progress with their project. Lastly, a small number of staff interviewees described having had **good previous experiences** undertaking funded projects as a motivating factor to reapply.

b) Initial concerns

Where students had apprehensions about taking on the student researcher role, these were around their **perceived lack of knowledge, or transferable skills,** and for some, **concerns about workload or timing of the work**, however these concerns appeared to be dispelled quickly for most. Staff shared these concerns with regard to taking on the project lead role. A **lack of time to commit** and **concerns over inexperience with research and evaluation** were cited by a small number of interviewees.

c) Project progress, student involvement and co-creation

Owing to the projects being at different stages of development, the project progress and student researcher involvement varied. For most projects, the progress had been roughly as expected, despite some delays for various reasons, including waiting for ethical approval. At least three of the projects that participants were involved in were either 'at risk' of, or unable to continue. Reasons for this were related to difficulties in recruiting participants to projects, and staff members leaving unexpectedly.

Students reported being involved in project meetings, designing data collection tools, and data analysis and presentations:

We are creating the questions and then after that she will have a look. She will be the person to do the final touches on it, but we created it. (Ada, student, college).

Staff also described tasks that had been allocated or carried out by student researchers:

Designing the data collection, tweaking the measurements, the measures, tidying up questionnaires and also creating a Pebble Pad… and a couple of students have come to a presentation with me. (Rachel, staff, college).

They devised a project plan in terms of, 'This is the outcome of the project, and these are the steps we're going to take,' with some timelines and delegation. (Sara, staff, SETL).

They're going to play a big part in actually the delivery and the facilitation of the focus groups, which I think will be a great and exciting opportunity for them. (Tom, staff, bursary).

When asked what advice they had for successful implementation, staff talked about the importance of **building relationships with student researchers**:

For myself, I think having a really clear idea of why you want a student researcher is really important and it takes time to build up that relationship…because there's naturally that power dynamic… you will say, 'You're my co-creator,' that building of trust to make them feel that they can really say what they think, or really be empowered to co-create, that takes some work. (Laura, staff, SETL).

So, it's about saying, 'What do you need?' and, 'How can we work best together?' and then genuinely getting to know each other a bit. (Rachel, staff, college).

In addition, the practical advice was to **start projects in a timely manner**, and to **be organised,** which facilitated both staff and students getting the most out of the experience.

11.2: RQ2. How successfully are the PEER outcomes being met?

This second research question is addressed through alignment with the PEER outcomes outlined in Figure 1.

a) Producer working

The activities that participants were involved in included regular project meetings, often online rather than face to face and a range of intervention, research, and evaluation work, as outlined above. The PEER programme aligns with the Hallam Student voice principles by offering a **formal opportunity for students' voices to be heard as co-creators of research,** and as participants. Where relationships had been successful, student researchers reflected on the opportunity as an indicator of the **university commitment to student experience**:

I think that it just shows as well, like the university does care, definitely does care about the student experience. (James, student).

You also get a chance to interact with academics on a level that's not lecturer and student. (Emma, student, college).

This sentiment was also echoed by a project lead:

That really encourages students and give them a sense of belonging to the institution, but also give them the confidence to be able to have these conversations with people where sometimes they see this hierarchy and this barrier. (Sara, staff, SETL).

Staff discussed how skills and knowledge development, was experienced as **mutually beneficial,** with staff learning from students, both directly and indirectly, and students developing their skills and knowledge around research:

You are learning both ways... [students] have so many skills that we don't possess... (Sara, Staff, SETL).

He's been teaching me (xxx)... I've learnt a huge amount... it's feeding into his MA project, and it's feeding into my REF work, and will feed into my teaching and inform the wider staff team. (Alison, staff, college).

b) Skills and knowledge

Students, as expected, focussed on their own **skills and knowledge development,** which was said to range from networking and communication skills to more practical skills of undertaking literature reviews, qualitative data collection, and statistical analysis:

(It is) the best thing that will happen to you. You will be far above your colleagues and for personal development and skills you will need it. It's not easy for you to have hands-on practical skills, and being a student researcher is where you develop those skills. (Ada, student, college).

I improved my communication skills because I had never done a focus group before. It was a way to practice almost. (Sophia, student, SETL).

The two ladies who I was working with both specialised in statistical analysis...I had lots of stats anxiety, I literally went from doing my first two years of stats and being terrible, to when I was doing my dissertation, I just completely understood what was going on. (Olivia, student, college).

Student researchers were asked about their **involvement in the ethical approval process** for the funded projects they were engaged with. For most, this had been necessarily underway before students had been matched to a project, meaning they had not had the opportunity to be involved. Where this had happened, students reported a missed learning opportunity, noting the potential benefits of being involved:

I think it would provide the student with a better understanding of what actually goes into a project if they have the full hands-on experience and they're involved with the ethics from day dot. (Alicia, student, bursary).

Some student researchers reported that, although the ethics process had happened prior to their allocation to the project, the staff lead had talked through the process, including explaining key ethics documents developed. This was said to have been a benefit for students in their level of ethical knowledge applicable to their course of study.

c) Projects and STEER support

The role of STEER in the funded projects is to firstly ensure the opportunity exists and is accessible, and then to support staff and students with their capabilities to undertake research and evaluation through training opportunities and regular contact. Staff commented on the **ease of application** and the value of the **support offered by the STEER and wider SETL team**:

I love that STEER runs the student researcher team because it does take that pressure off... I don't think STEER can do much else. Every single year it's improved. (Rachel, Staff, college).

The **amount of funding and level of accountability** was also said to be 'perfect' for the intervention and evaluation undertaken by one member of staff. With the level of funding said to be 'not daunting' but with the right level of expectation to fit into an already busy workplan.

The level of ability of the student researchers was praised, and for some this was thought to be, in part resultant from the **training offered**:

They've both been fantastic. I think probably it was potentially quite daunting for them to take the focus groups on...but they've done it really well and I think they've both been amazing. I think it's a testament to their ability, but also how well they're trained. (Pete, staff, bursary).

Students also appeared to value the training opportunities:

I learnt something. I attended all the online training and also the monthly meetings at Owen building. (Jacob, student, college).

One staff member clearly demonstrated the impact of the STEER goal of **building an evaluative mindset** through undertaking a funded project**:**

'It's really shifted my practice at all levels, whether that's in support of staff that I manage, in support of strategic design and re-design of services and interventions and in embedding the value of evaluation in design, even though I have tended to see (evaluation) as an annoyance and an inconvenience previously. My relationship to that has shifted and that's because it now feels accessible, rational and it makes sense and I feel supported in achieving evaluation'. (Tom, staff, bursary).

The above quote illustrates a key outcome of the work of STEER in building the capacity and capability of staff members to undertaken research and evaluation in a supported way.

11.3: RQ3. What are the barriers and enablers of staff and students working alongside each other?

a) Barriers for student researchers

For students, where challengers to working on projects were reported, these were in the main, related to a **lack of communication**, either from the project leads (reported by 3 students), or with the other student researcher(s) working on the projects (reported by 3 students). One student in particular felt that communication had been lacking with the project lead:

We were really disappointed because we felt there wasn't really an interaction between us. With us having to keep emailing them to ask them when we would start to work on the project. (Megan, Student, college).

This student had been told that the future of the project was uncertain due to staff members leaving unexpectedly. Whilst this was understood, the student felt that they should have been reallocated to another project due to depending on the funding for their income.

Students who reported communication issues with the other student researcher(s) on the team, had experienced concerns over potential duplication of work and uncertainties over roles and tasks in the team. It was felt that project leads needed to clearly assign work to each student researcher, and better facilitate communication between them:

The student researchers engaged in the project should not have any communication gaps. They should be introduced to each other, and they should be in regular contact as the project is going on. (Reeva, student, college).

b) Barriers for project leads

Staff reported some frustration in **how student researchers are allocated to projects**. As the below quotation denotes, some staff members were matched with student researchers who ultimately did not commit to the project:

Surely there could be a period where those students can choose which projects they want to do before I'm brought in, because then I'm trying to establish a rapport with someone who is ultimately going to choose something else, and they felt awful. (Amy, staff, bursary).

Sometimes this was due to a lack of interest in the particular project, however a number of other issues were reported, such as students losing interest after time delays, or students workload meaning they could no longer commit. Staff found these issues understandable but were still in a position where they could not continue their project until they were allocated new student researchers and must begin the process again. One member of staff had asked for two student researchers to work on an 18-month project, however, was allocated students in their final year who would consequently only be able to work for a maximum of one academic year:

My bafflement was asking how long your research was going to be, and the options were twelve to eighteen months, and the academic year is basically six months by the time you've started. (Tom, staff, bursary).

Although not conceptualised as a barrier, it was noted by some project leads, that **working with student researchers was more labour intensive,** as time must be built in to build a connection with students, and to mentor them through the experience:

I think there might be a preconception that students will take off some of the workload and, actually, that wasn't my experience, because I think to support them properly, you need to give them the time. (Laura, staff, SETL).

The point was caveated, in that the levels of support needed was dependent on the student researcher(s) involved and their level of study, experience in research, and confidence level.

Staff time in general was described as a barrier by some project leads, who, although highly motivated, felt pulled in many directions and were therefore not giving their project, or the student researchers the time needed. It is important to note that project funding did not cover any costs related to staff time:

I have been crap at communicating with him, just because there's so much going on for us on a daily basis. So, as well as teaching, I'm doing my PhD, I'm involved in another research project as well. (Kate, staff, college).

Lack of time was compounded for some project leads by the current university climate and staff members leaving unexpectedly.

Some staff additionally noted the relatively **small amount of funding provided** as creating challenges, especially where multiple student researchers were involved, as well as incentives or training costs for participants.

Gaining ethical approval was challenging for some staff members. Project leads had varying levels of experience with the ethical approval system, and additionally, their projects varied in the level of risk and therefore ethical scrutiny needed. One staff member for example was said to be 'pleasantly surprised', by the ease of the application, whilst for others, gaining approval caused delays to the project either through completing the application, or waiting for its approval, or both:

I found it challenging just to make sure that I've filled in the right paperwork. (Matt, staff, college).

I love ethics because I really believe in it, but I hate the process. I hate the slowness, the pernickety-ness (Rachel, staff, college).

For two project leads, ethics was reported as a barrier that could potentially prevent projects happening or being successful. For one this was due to their project being ethically particularly complicated:

If I was going to do a project that I wasn't doing anyway... ethics would 100% put me off. (Amy, staff, bursary).

Conversely, the other staff member had an ostensibly low risk project, however, her experience with gaining ethical approval led her to the conclusion that the university ethical approval system was not appropriate for projects outside of science and social science disciplines:

I found ethics quite problematic...I ended up spending several days and writing a huge ethics report for something which was never, on the face of it, going to be unethical....

So, they weren't understanding what creative practice research is. (Alison, staff, college).

The extended time taken to gain ethical approval led to delays of months to this particular project which was said to have hindered the progress and ultimately the outcomes.

Lastly, staff described **challenges with other systems** that cost them time, such as reporting student hours, or ordering vouchers for participant incentives.

c) Enablers for student researchers

Where a lack of communication was reportedly a barrier, **good communication** was highlighted as a key enabler by students. This was described as staff members being **reliable and providing clarity**:

She is fun, she is calm, she comes ready and when I ask a question she answers and then she's very clear with what we want to do. (Ada, Student, college).

Staff being 'on top of their emails' and updating student researchers regularly was particularly praised. Even if only to say there had been no new updates, students appreciated the ongoing communications with the project staff members.

For some students, **the relaxed nature of the** work was an unexpected benefit, with students enjoying the staff members being **open** in their approach to co working**:**

I was blown away slightly by the level of freedom that has been given to me to do stuff and just to import, to create or to shape something and it makes you feel proper. (James, Student, SETL).

[Staff member] said 'If you have any ideas, feel free to come with them'. (Alicia, student, bursary).

This openness to genuine co-creation was echoed by a staff member who had made conscious efforts to adapt this approach:

(I said) 'You can honestly challenge me,' and he did, and it's actually been one of the best collaborations because of that. He's been able to say, 'No. I don't agree with that'. (Rachel, staff, college).

The **flexibility** of the work was also welcomed by student researchers, who found that they could more easily fit this type of work, rather than an external job with set hours, in around their other studies and commitments.

d) Enablers for project leads

The enablers related to STEER outcomes are reported above under research question 2. The following enablers, therefore, are related to working with the student researchers. For project leads, the main enabler to a successful project and working relationship was

having **motivated student researchers.** Student researchers were described by project leads as competent, proactive, engaged, and professional:

I mainly just wanted to say how amazing the student researchers are. (Pete, staff, bursary).

One of the most capable, competent people I have ever worked with. Just an absolute brilliant person, researcher. (Laura, staff, SETL).

Staff members were asked to give advice to potential future project leads, trusting and listening to students, and building a rapport/relationship with students were given as the main answers.

11.4: Conclusion and recommendations

Key findings indicate that the PEER programme has been implemented in a way that enables both staff and students an opportunity to gain experience and contribute to meaningful research and evaluation projects. The programme appears to support the development of staff and student relationships, promoting for some, an increased sense of belonging and mutual learning. Students developed varied skills, from research methodologies to communication, which both enhance their experiences as students and will be beneficial for their academic and professional futures. The evaluation also highlighted several challenges, including communication issues, time constraints, and the complexities of ethical approval processes.

Overall, the PEER programme has supported partnership working between students and staff, contributing to the university's strategic objectives and providing further evidence for the benefits and challenges of student-staff partnerships in higher education.

If the PEER programme was to continue, recommendations would be for STEER to:

- Improve matching processes between staff and students through obtaining more detail of experience, interests, skills and project requirements.
- Provide more support to staff for ethical applications, such as one to one appointment to work through the process.
- Support staff and student communication and relationship building where necessary by for example, attending inception meetings to ensure clarity of roles and expectations for collaboration.

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