Co-creating the learning and teaching journey with postgraduate research students who teach

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ABSTRACT

Postgraduate research students (PGRs) often have teaching roles during their studies with little formal training or support (Lueddeke, 1997). Previous support at Edinburgh Napier University consisted of voluntary, unpaid on-campus Learning and Teaching (L&T) training over three days (pre-pandemic). During lock-down, this course transitioned online to a voluntary 3.5-hour workshop and a follow-up Moodle course. To have a student-centred approach (Pedersen & Liu, 2003; Hannafin & Hannafin, 2010) and understand the needs and wants of PGRs who teach, we aimed to co-create with students (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) effective PGR support and evaluate its impact. Students were employed as partners (Dollinger et al., 2022; Matthews 2018) to assess support needs and explore options available for PGRs at 11 other UK Universities. Based on the assessment findings, a new programme was co-designed between the student-partners and L&T academics: three 1-hour online workshops and three corresponding peer-led discussion sessions. The student-partners also created a Microsoft Teams workspace for students to build community: sharing their own L&T experiences, practice, and engagement with relevant theories. These findings support our plans for upcoming mandatory and paid introductory teaching workshops, as a foundation for this longitudinal development of peer-relations and practice. This new structure and format has cultivated a community of practice constructed by students, for students (Wilson et al., 2020). An autoethnographic approach has been taken with the student interns and lecturers as both researchers and participants (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Méndez, 2013; Wall, 2008), by means of writing a narrative based on self-reflection on the process. This will be analysed by thematic coding (Gibbs, 2007) to discuss the experiences, thematic ideas, emotive language, and feelings expressed by students interns and lecturers in this co-creation journey.

Keywords: Co-creation, post-graduate, partners, students, self-reflection

Introduction: National and international context of PGRs who teach

At universities all over the world, postgraduate research students (PGRs) are often expected to teach or are employed as teachers in some capacity; usually this takes the form of a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), tutor, or assistant role. In the US or UK, there are no certificates or training required beyond a high-school diploma and enrollment at a university (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Because of this, many PGRs begin teaching with little to no training or experience with being in a teaching role (Smith & Delgado, 2021). Even when training and development are offered, many PGRs still feel “In at the Deep End” (coincidentally the name of a popular pamphlet for introducing PGRs to teaching; Race, 2009). There are several arguments for assisting PGRs in developing their teaching. First, the undergraduate students who are taught by these PGRs deserve effective, confident teachers who meet their educational expectations and the standards of their university (Kendall & Schussler, 2013; Smith & Delgado, 2021). Second, any PGR who wishes to stay in academia will find more success in a competitive role if they have experience in teaching, which is a better outcome for both the university and the postgraduate student (Homer, 2018). Providing
Co-creating the learning and teaching journey with postgraduate research students who teach

support for PGRs who teach is undoubtedly beneficial, as the outcomes include and extend beyond the confidence and ability of the postgraduate student.

**Context within Edinburgh Napier University**

Previously, there have been several support options available to PGRs who teach at Edinburgh Napier University (ENU). As part of their employment contract, PGRs were expected to attend unpaid training over two days on campus. The COVID pandemic saw these trainings become a single 3.5-hour online workshop with an extended Moodle page for resources. This training included general information and practices in teaching along with some scenario-based discussions, though only one was scheduled per semester. Figure 1 shows the format of the on-campus workshops, until March 2019.

The pre-pandemic programme which consisted of a two-day, in-person workshop introducing pedagogical approaches and some theory such as Kolb’s reflective cycle and active learning.

In the present-day context and transitioning away from online-only has provided an opportunity to evaluate previous support options and provide a novel programme based on PGR student feedback. Our team for this project was composed of Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement (DLTE) staff and four postgraduate student interns from four different schools within the University of Edinburgh Napier. Figure 2 shows the changes in approaches of the new programme in contrast to the previous versions of PGR support.

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Co-creating the learning and teaching journey with postgraduate research students who teach

The new programme has students in the centre of the approach (Hannafin & Hannafin, 2010), with paid interns as equal partners with autonomy and equity in the co-creation process.

Evaluation and Design of New Format

We began the design of a novel support format by gathering evidence in a variety of ways. Intern members of the team had all been new to teaching at ENU within the past one or two years and had some firsthand experiences with the process. Additionally, we constructed a feedback form which gathered responses from 16 PGR students, two other teaching roles, namely associate professor, and senior lecturer, and staff from the career, skills, and placements team (Students Futures). This form contained questions about what kind of support these teachers would like, and whether they knew where to access current information and support. A third benchmark evaluation of support options offered by other UK-based universities was also conducted based on a report and content from 11 universities gathered by the team (QAA Scotland, 2018).

The programme itself was created to meet the requirements of the university, the requests of the students, and the standards of postgraduate teaching training in the UK. Prior to teaching, DLTE staff host two prerequisite workshops for postgraduates who intend to teach (Figure 3). The first, based online, is focused on ‘survival skills’ for beginning teaching; this meeting informs general engagement practice, lesson planning, and teaching philosophy. The second workshop, an in-person meeting, is focused on micro-teaching experiences and reflection.
Co-creating the learning and teaching journey with postgraduate research students who teach

Figure 3. Format of the new programme of a two-hour online introduction to learning and teaching, followed by a two-hour in person microteaching workshop before teaching. Following this, three workshops with peer support sessions in between run during the teaching times for PGRs

Once both are completed, PGRs are equipped with a foundational training basis for their early teaching experiences. Throughout the semester, three additional workshops offer timely support for separate phases of teaching: beginning teaching early in the semester, engagement/reflection mid-semester, and meaningful feedback/marking end of semester. Between each workshop, peer-group discussion meetings are hosted by the DLTE interns to allow for a community outlet for questions or concerns.

Feedback from ENU teachers also indicated that information was often difficult to find, which aligned with the interns’ experiential notes. Similarly, most respondents requested a general overview of the expectations of their role as students who teach, as well as a frequently asked questions (FAQ) list. Some other documents were requested, such as payment information walkthroughs and additional reading lists. These requests for accessible information could be met by hosting documents and informational videos all in one place, and a Microsoft Teams space was chosen for its information repository functionality embedded in a collaborative communicative environment. The Teams space also enabled the use of Padlet for live anonymous question-asking and Calendar integration for dispersing the schedule for online and in-person trainings and peer-group discussions. With this, most of the considerations from the evaluation process were met, and a space for a community of PGRs who teach was created.

**Auto-ethnography as a research approach**

In this paper, we have utilised an autoethnographic methodology. As a qualitative research method, autoethnography combines autobiography and ethnography and involves the interrogation of subjective experiences (Wall, 2008) and self-narrative (Chang, 2008) to gain a greater understanding of the norms and practices of a particular social or cultural group (Adams & Manning., 2015). In this case, the participants are PGR interns and academics involved in the co-creation of the programme - researchers as participants (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Méndez, 2013). We have chosen to use an autoethnographic recording method proposed by Chang (2008) to prompt self-reflection and obtain reflective comments from the PGR students.
and university staff involved in the design and delivery of the programme. As a self-reflexive methodology, autoethnography requires the researcher to adopt the roles of both subject and analyst, by recording and critically examining their own experiences and reflections. The use of this method has enabled us to shed light on our unique perspectives and insights and explore our own subjective experiences within the broader social and cultural contexts. As noted by Adams & Manning, (2015), the nuanced knowledge autoethnography provides always pertains to specific circumstances and experiences, and so cannot necessarily be more widely generalised. However, in sharing our experiences and reflections on the development of this programme, we hope that we might inspire staff at other universities to adopt a similar collaborative approach in the development of their own teacher-training provision for PGR students.

**Methodology**

An auto-ethnographic approach was taken to capture the journeys of both PGR interns and Academics involved in the new programme’s planning, design, and delivery. A detailed ethics application explaining the research project and value of an autoethnographic approach for both lecturers and PGR interns was written and submitted to the University’s ethics committee for review. A data management plan was also created for safe and secure storage of participants’ data. An information sheet and consent form were attached to the collection of self-reflective questions, including the contact name of an external colleague in case there were any issues in the process or for more information regarding the processing of personal data. It was important to include participants’ consent, even though all participants were researchers in the process. This should be considered even when conducting autoethnographic research, depending on the nature of the questions asked and the level of emotional input required for this practice (Miller & Bell, 2002). This allowed for transparency about data processing and to ensure that all participants were happy to take part and understood the implications of the research. The ethics application was accepted by the University’s ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection.

The self-reflective entries were written and submitted by use of a Microsoft Form, taking on average 20 minutes to complete. The following questions were asked:

1. What have been the benefits of the new programme and what was missing from supporting you in your learning and teaching journey prior to the new programme?
2. Did the process of co-creating the new programme challenge any previous assumptions you had about PGR L & T support? If so, what were they, and how did they challenge these assumptions?
3. How have the student-led meetings in between the workshops been for you in terms of collaboration, communication and establishing a community of practice? What have you taken away from them for your own L & T journey? (Not applicable for lecturers- please comment on the workshops instead)
4. Are there any outstanding issues that you feel we still need to address or improve upon in order to improve the PGR experience in L & T?

All four PGR interns and two lead academics in the previous iterations of the programme completed the self-reflection. Upon completion of the forms, the responses were pseudonymised by the lead researcher and data was entered into NVivo qualitative software package for coding. The reflections were analysed using an analytical-interpretive writing style (Chang, 2008), as opposed to confessional-emotive, descriptive-realistic, or imaginative-creative. Initial codes were created, merged, and edited to give rise to
eleven codes, using an inductive coding process (Thomas, 2006) and descriptive coding as identification of the topics (Saldaña, 2016), which aimed to broadly capture experiences of the participants. Following the creation of codes, thematic coding was applied to encapsulate the codes under wider banners, using the process of analytic coding (Gibbs, 2007). From this, four main themes arose.

Results

Through the process of inductive coding, a total of eleven sub-themes emerged, which were grouped into four main themes of collegiality, inclusive approaches, enhancing support and structure and development. Figure 4 shows the themes and sub-themes that emerged in this iterative process.

![Diagram showing the four main themes from an inductive coding process, including eleven sub-themes derived from the self-reflection narratives.](image)

The predominant sub-themes, with the highest coding quantities included a community of practice, co-creation and agency and equity.

**Theme 1: Collegiality**

The theme of collegiality considered the experiences of interns and academic staff working together in the creation of the new programme. It was also discussed what it meant to them being part of a network of PGRs and participating in the peer support sessions. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged: peer support sessions, community of practice, and co-creation.

*Sub-theme: Community of practice*

PGRs underlined how they did not feel part of a community of PGRs prior to the creation of the programme, and the importance for it to keep growing and be active. From both sides, PGRs and academics, it was a moment of sharing practice. PGRs could discuss their experience with other colleagues from different schools, getting innovative ideas and having rich discussions with peers: “I also did not feel
part of a community of PhDs who teach” (Participant 2: PGR). They also expressed the hopefulness of this network expanding and PGRs interacting with the new programme; “...but I hope the community will grow and will become very active” (Participant 2: PGR).

The concept of the community being a ‘self-sustaining site’ for “sharing practice and providing both formal training and PGR support” (Participant 4: Academic) in terms of the virtual space it exists in was mentioned as well as community building in pedagogical knowledge as co-construction of knowledge; “This means continuing to draw from their wider PGR communities, as well as be effectively guiding through the world of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and other means of staying up to date with pedagogical currents” (Participant 4: Academic).

**Sub-theme: Co-Creation**

A strong feeling that came through was the surprise of PGR interns that they were actively involved in the process of designing the new programme and were given a certain autonomy around the planning and approaches taken in this. “I think at first I wasn’t sure if our ideas would have even been integrated or considered much. Then, I noticed that actually they were really keen to get our ideas and that the data we collected was valuable.” (Participant 2: PGR).

A dominant part of this process were the early conversations had with the interns and academics about what the programme should look like and how to create a comprehensive and well supported programme; “The conversations between interns and staff constructed the programme with the balance of pedagogical expectations and real experiences of new teachers in a satisfying way that should be helpful for other new teachers”. (Participant 1: PGR).

Due to the nature of this collaborative process the requirements of PGRs were more accurately met instead of assumptions of what the needs were; “The new structure was co-created with students and so I feel it better reflect their needs, as opposed to what we thought their needs were.” (Participant 3: Academic). Interns enjoyed this interaction and opportunity to have the active student voice involved from the outset, which seemed to be a rarity. “It was very refreshing to see university lecturers invite PGR students to assist in the creation of this new programme.” (Participant 5: PGR).

I had previously assumed that universities would insist on a ‘top-down’ approach to PGR L&T support, where provision would be entirely conceived of and implemented by lecturers. To have PGR students so heavily involved in this process was, in my opinion, an extremely innovate and inclusive approach. (Participant 5: PGR).

**Sub-theme: Peer Support Sessions**

The new format of peer support sessions in between each of the workshops created a space for students to discuss their positions in an informal manner, without any interference. This allowed for a safe space for discussion and sharing of practice.

Despite the peer-group meetings being completely optional, we still have had a pretty good number of attendees so far. Though we were technically ‘discussion leaders,’ we made it clear up front that we were also postgraduates who teach, so it was more of a place to comfortably discuss our positions and ask any questions than a formal discussion group. (Participant 1: PGR)

Students had the opportunity to engage with pedagogical concepts from the workshops run a week prior to each session, embedding a sustainable support system for them.
Co-creating the learning and teaching journey with postgraduate research students who teach

The student led meetings was [sic] a good platform for communication, especially getting some sort of feedback on in-classroom practice and performance. I have noticed that most PGRs who teach at Napier are in a similar situation based on the experiences shared. (Participant 6: PGR).

“I think the student-led meetings were such a needed and important moment for me. On one side it was good to see that what we planned was actually taking place and being appreciated.” (Participant 2: PGR), this was echoed by the academics “(the sessions came as) a bit of a relief as I could see that the previous programme was missing that peer-led part and sustainable support for PGRs”. (Participant 3: Academic).

Theme 2: Inclusive approaches

This main theme involved student agency in the design and running of the new programme, including an equal input to the decision-making processes. The creation of the virtual space allowed for a safe environment for PGRs to discuss their anxieties over teaching to each other and allowed room for personal growth and continuing professional development as students took control of their own learning and teaching journeys.

Sub-theme: Agency and Equity

The sense of equal authority that interns were given in the creation of the programme came up, including the ease of discussion between PGRs in the peer support sessions.

The most surprising aspect of taking part in building the support programme was finding out how much agency we had as interns. We were not there to simply carry out a survey and to give input to the programme but were given equal authority on the design and execution of a support programme that would essentially be for us. (Participant 1: PGR).

The significant amount of practical knowledge the interns brought to the table in representation of the PGR experience was notable; “As paid Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement (DLTE) Interns, studying and teaching in four of the five University’s Schools, the(y) brought a wealth of practical knowledge to represent the experience of Postgraduate Students engaged in teaching”. (Participant 4: Academic).

The incentives for PGRs as having two parts which are mandatory and paid created a value-based system for PGR participation and contributions. “The new programme has incentives for students as it is paid, so they are being valued for their participation and learning.” (Participant 3: Academic).

Sub-theme: Personal Growth and CPD

Working together as a team and collective decision-making was a new practice for some interns, which allowed for personal growth: “I learned the importance of compromise, so that everyone in the team was satisfied with what was covered in the final session.” (Participant 5: PGR). Interns conducted in-depth research into assessing the needs of fellow students, thus identifying limitations of the existing programme. “...(the) interns were able to design and undertake significant research into the training needs of these students, a project which identified the limitations of the current support” (Participant 4: Academic).

Sub-theme: Safe space for discussion

The creation of safe spaces for PGRs to discuss issues with teaching, both in the Teams space and in-person was highlighted as an important part of the new programme and planning of it.
Co-creating the learning and teaching journey with postgraduate research students who teach

.. the in-person discussions have been helpful in building community more. We are able to speak of our concerns and failures and trade anecdotes for things that we’ve tried or changed that have worked, which is rare experience as a post-graduate (Participant 1: PGR), in addition to providing time and attention to listen to each other about challenging experiences “Some of the more difficult situations, such as supervisors that refuse to allow teaching, were given attention and advice in these meetings. In these cases, it was important to have off-record safe places to seek help...” (Participant 1: PGR). The lack of judgement and being understood were also central to this sub-theme: “to have a community of people like me, to have a safe place where I could share negative, embarrassing, difficult moments with others without being judged, and on the contrary, being understood.” (Participant 2: PGR).

**Theme 3: Enhancing support.**

This theme covered the brevity and lack of continued and sustained support for PGRs prior to the new programme, as well as how the new programme made opportunities for improved support and development and understanding of pedagogic practices aimed to enhance PGR’s construction of new knowledge in the application of teaching approaches in their current or future roles.

Prior to the new programme, I felt a bit lost and without the right resources to start my experience in academia as a PhD, I feel we are in this weird space where we are not considered fully students nor fully part of the staff. I took part in a DLTE online 3-hour training a couple of years ago during the first lockdown, which was good, but did not feel it was enough. (Participant 2: PGR)

This lack of continued learning and peer network, exacerbated by the pandemic, was echoed by academics; “Prior to the new programme I did not feel there was a continuation of learning for students or much of a peer support network, particularly when we pivoted online.” (Participant 3; Academic). The isolation of being a PGR was also evident: “It can be a lonely road as a PGR, especially when it comes to learning about teaching, and sharing the practices of this...” (Participant 4: Academic).

The improvements of the new programme have been evident through every stage of the process, strengthening the support for PGR’s, including feedback from the PGR community to make continued improvements; “I underestimated how much students wanted in terms of a diverse range of L & T practice and theory ….. Feedback has been really helpful as we continue to adapt and enhance the workshops” (Participant 3: Academic). “The new programme provides those who are new to teaching at the university with theory, strategies to promote engagement, and advice on how to approach marking and giving feedback.” (Participant 5: PGR). “The new programme has been really great. First, all the information needed for a PhD who starts teaching is saved in one place only.” (Participant 2: PGR).

The pedagogical aspects implemented in the survival skills sessions and the workshops, as well as elements taken in the peer support sessions were viewed as useful and comprehensive; “I think, in terms of content, it was really good, useful, and of high quality.” (Participant 2: PGR). “The workshops have been great as they are little snippets of theory and practice such as feedback, constructive alignment and reflection and it is great to see PGRs so interested and engaged with these areas.” (Participant 3: Academic).
Theme 4: Structure and Development

The current format of the new programme is currently sufficient in the needs of PGR’s, however, there is always re-developing to do, based on feedback, to not overload PGRs with content. Remaining issues are with the onboarding process for new PGRs and advice on how to start teaching.

The new programme should address some of the issues I personally faced, as there are multiple workshops to attend, and a fairly clear structure….. I think the two biggest remaining issues for postgraduates who are new to teaching are the onboarding process for the programme and a clear layout of how to start teaching at the university in general. (Participant 1: PGR).

The Teams space as central place for information was commended as being a very useful and accessible space for new PGRs to gather knowledge about how to approach teaching

One of the most helpful aspects of the new programme is its Teams space being a central hub for information, which should save other new teachers from the hours of seeking sources and University policies from disparate or occasionally inaccessible sources, and provide a designated place to ask questions. (Participant 1: PGR).

The in-person microteaching part was also well-received; however, space logistics and timings are still an issue depending on the numbers of each cohort “The microteaching worked really well, but I think we might require two rooms with a big cohort.” (Participant 3: Academic).

Overall, the multi-modal design of the programme, with online and in-person sessions, co-created by PGR’s, for PGRs has been a success in improving the PGR experience and supporting new PGRs in their learning and teaching journeys.

Discussion: Reflections on the autoethnography and the new programme

Carrying out an autoethnography to reflect upon, assimilate and describe the process of co-creating a new PGR programme was very beneficial. This process allowed all participants to become researchers and think about their own roles in the development of the programme during all stages of the process. As well as providing a deeper insight into the skills acquired in working together as a team, it also highlighted challenges with this kind of project and how to navigate differences of opinion in how to develop and change the existing provision for PGR’s. This approach removed the perceived divide between lecturer and student and allowed for more accuracy in creating something which addressed the wants and needs of PGRs.

The development and delivery of the New to Teaching in Higher Education provision to support PGRs in their early teaching experiences has highlighted the value of an authentic, evidence-informed, community-driven, multimodal approach to engaging PGRs in Learning & Teaching. To date, we have supported 72 PGRs with the new provision, who have expressed gratitude at the opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills, and confidence in their learning & teaching practice, including a key reflective component that will further support their continuing professional development as they enhance their experiences during their studies, all while remaining connected members of a community of PGRs who teach.
A significant factor of the provision’s efficacy – both current and potential future continuation – is that it has been co-created by PGRs for PGRs, establishing an organically-formed community of practice. The staff-student partnership here reflects the qualities of meaningful partnership identified as “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation or analysis” (Cook-Sather, et al., 2014, pp. 5-6).

Utilising technologies to enable multiple means of representation, engagement, action & expression, the provision was designed to be as inclusive as possible from a Universal Design for Learning perspective (CAST, 2018). Moreover, Principles of Respectful Conversation set the tone of each workshop, to foster an inclusive, “comfortable and supportive space” that “ensures everyone has a shared ‘social contract’ to refer and adhere to” to encourage a plurality of voices and contributions from each participant (Smith, 2021). Combined with differentiated approaches that value PGR students’ lived experiences (Lambert, 2018), this design contributed to the enhanced agency and equity of the provision when compared to previous models of PGR support: remunerating the efforts of both interns and participants was cited as a significant factor in the project’s inclusivity. Moreover, the providing a safe space for discussion, most clearly in the peer-led discussion sessions, was cited as an important intervention in existing PGR support around teaching, enabling students to be their full, authentic selves without risk of judgement or repercussions. Not only does this enhance inclusive community building; it is also a vital stage of developing individual confidence and sustainable reflective practice (Marshall et al. 2022).

This foundational inclusivity contributes to the enhancement of support identified in the results, specifically the move from a “weird space” of alienation to a sustainable space of PGR ownership and belonging. While this space is multimodal – connecting in-person experiences across three campuses, all moving through an online community environment on Microsoft Teams – it is unified as a persistent network with multiple points of entry, where any participants missed in one recruitment advertisement can be included at any time. As seen across the themes of Enhancing Support and Structure and Development, work remains to be done to make this process of joining the space a clear part of onboarding in the PGR journey. This would provide timely information for the provision leaders to ensure adequate space, time, and resourcing are available for the in-person sessions, though the online sessions, with their inherent flexibility, continue to provide suitable capacity for both small and large numbers of participants alike.

**Limitations to conducting an autoethnography**

This autoethnography provides deeper insight into the collaborative creation of a support programme between PGR students and staff, however, it may not cover every perspective or aspect of the creation process. For example, descriptions and reflections on the process may be useful for other institutions looking to co-create with students as partners, but the programme creation process described (not the autoethnographic methods themselves) may not be applicable or easily recreated within other universities due to structural or policy differences. Despite this, we feel the insights from this autoethnography may be helpful to inform practice and expectations of student/staff collaborations. There are always limitations to the autoethnographic process itself, with participants as researchers, due to the level of self-reflection required, which could feel uncomfortable for some. However, the responses shown convey a variety of perspectives and viewpoints which make-up an accurate representation of the process for all involved.
Conclusions

The student-partnership approach (Dollinger et al., 2023) to researching the journey of developing, delivering, and evaluating the New to Teaching in Higher Education provision has highlighted the benefits of student voice can “play more active roles in our scholarly understanding of learning success” (Matthews 2018). Exploring our experiences through autoethnographic methods enabled the emergence of a polyphonic yet unified scholastic voice with which to express our thoughts, memories, and reflections as individuals in partnership.

The development of the new programme allowed for a new and improved system to help PGRs with teaching at the University. The auto-ethnographic process created space for self-reflection on the process and awareness of each other’s viewpoints, consolidated in the writing and co-authorship of this paper. Further suggestions to improve PGR support were to start a mentoring programme similar to existing initial teacher training programmes (ITT) at the University. In addition, understanding and knowing the diversity of PGRs for each cohort in order to facilitate and network together was highlighted as important by both the interns and academics. The contracts that the student interns are employed on also need further clarification for those new to the University. New interns will be employed after current interns have completed their studies to sustain the new programme and continue with co-creation, agency and equity and expanding the newly created community of practice established by PGRs for PGRs current and future.

Biographies

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Co-creating the learning and teaching journey with postgraduate research students who teach

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Co-creating the learning and teaching journey with postgraduate research students who teach

