



## PhDiggers and UEA Silent Space project

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### A) Overview

PhDiggers is the allotment and gardening group set up as a low-commitment activity within the Courage project, with all levels of abilities and previous experience or knowledge welcomed. A number of key challenges were addressed through this intervention, including finding ways to tackle loneliness and isolation, being a valued part of a community, low-commitment physical and social activity, contribution to the university community and creating a setting where mental health and wellbeing during a PhD can be discussed in a shoulder-to-shoulder, rather than face-to-face approach. Over 50 PGRs from across the university are involved in the different projects (*Vitae Indicator 0.11 PGRs involved in the project*). The PhDiggers worked on two key projects during Courage: the UEA Silent Space and PhDigger allotments.

### B) Action taken

#### UEA Silent Space

Silent Space (<https://silentspace.org.uk>) is a national, not-for-profit project that has been running since 2016. The development of UEA Silent Space was a collaborative project between University of East Anglia Students' Union, UEA Estates Team and the Silent Space organisation (*Vitae Indicator 0.14 involvement of other institutional staff and 0.15 wider engagement of the PGR community internally and externally*). Support and buy-in from each of the stakeholders was assured through a 'win-win' approach for all parties involved:

1. The Courage Project and UEA Students' Union could provide a low-commitment activity for PGRs, spending time outside with their peers with an opportunity to discuss wellbeing and mental health and contributing to a permanent space for the UEA community.
2. The Estates Team could build on the ongoing work towards the UEA Green Impact Programme and the Green Flag Award.
3. Silent Space could work within a university setting for the first time, contribute towards a wellbeing and mental health project and create a silent space for the first time in East Anglia.

The space is based in the grounds of Earlham Hall on the UEA campus. The 'Dutch Garden' is a formal box hedge garden, surrounded by gravel paths and walls on three sides. The space is open to all across the university and the public.



1 The Dutch Garden, prior to the Silent Space development Earlham Hall, University of East Anglia January 2019

Four clearing, preparing and planting days were held in May 2019, where postgraduate researchers, staff from the Students' Union, UEA Estates and Silent Space joined together to develop the space and plant new plants in the flower beds. *Engagement with stakeholders across the University (Vitae Indicator 0.14 involvement of other institutional staff and 0.15 wider engagement of the PGR community internally and externally)*

*"But folks, escaping from the stresses of a rubbish week by spending a few hours focusing on digging up mud felt pretty good. And maybe spending some time destroying poisonous weeds so that something new and nice can be cultivated and grown in the Dutch Garden is the first step to that process beginning elsewhere, too." PhDiggers Silent Space Lakeside View blog post*

The Courage Project team and UEA Estates held a 'Walk and Talk' event as part of the University Learning and Teaching Day (May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2019). University staff were invited to attend a walk to the Silent Space, spend time there, and reflect on how the space could be used for reflective teaching and education practice.

The UEA Silent Space was officially launched on August 14<sup>th</sup> 2019, an event that brought together postgraduate researchers (the PhDiggers), Students' Union staff and student officers, University lecturers, researchers and professional services staff, UEA Estates Team, Silent Space and the University Executive Team (*Vitae Indicator 0.1 Senior Commitment to PGR mental Health*).

This event provided a platform to launch the space, but also to create an open conversation about the importance of shoulder-to-shoulder approaches when planning wellbeing and mental health

‘interventions’. Doing an activity, alongside having a chat about the postgraduate research experience, often broke down barriers and destigmatised the discussion around individual circumstances and struggles. An ethos that continued into the PhDiggers allotment project.



*2 UEA Silent Space Launch Event August 2019, The Dutch Garden, Earlham Hall*

## PhDiggers allotment project

The PhDiggers allotment project launched in June 2019. The PhDiggers collaboratively work to run a community allotment, all levels of experience are welcome, there is no long-term commitment expectation and everyone is able to come along when they can and are not pressured to come to every session. This flexible approach is important. The group meet every week and have been working together to create spaces to grow fruits and vegetables.

*3 PhDiggers continue developing the UEA allotments, October 2019*



### Key Impacts and Outcomes

These quotes from some of the PhDiggers exemplify their experience of being part of this group (*Vitae Indicator 1.1 PGR find interventions useful*). Being active, feeling part of a community, helping to settle into the university and a place to feel accomplished and relieve stress.

*“Getting to know other students, especially from outside my school. Learning new things about horticulture. Having a break from the desk and being outside. I’m a new student this year and it’s helped me feel like a part of the University.”*

*“I love having an outdoor space away from the main campus that takes you away from whatever stress you might be dealing with. Whilst you’re digging you can’t touch your phone so it*

*focuses your attention on the task at hand and takes your mind off emails and work. Also it’s so satisfying to see the physical progress you’ve made; a couple of hours of clearing the plot can leave you feeling like you’ve really accomplished something. You can then take this motivation back to your desk and apply it to your work! Everyone is so friendly, I feel comfortable sharing any problems I’m experiencing and know I will receive reassuring advice from other members & Bryony [PGR Mental Health Coordinator].”*

PhDiggers supported postgraduate researchers to pay attention to their wellbeing and mental health (*Vitae Indicator 1.2 PGRs more likely to pay attention to wellbeing and mental health*):

*“It’s actually very social so provides a positive place to talk with other students at different stages. It provides a space/activity away from Uni work to reflect on things and get a break from working”*

*“By taking yourself out of the office setting without distractions there is time to reflect on how you’re feeling and think about things that could potentially help your wellbeing.”*

PhDiggers has been set up with two members of staff from the Students' Union working on the project to enable the group get things off the ground. The group will continue to run as a self-sustaining initiative.

### **Transferring to other university contexts**

- Shoulder-to-shoulder (doing an activity) approaches to early intervention and prevention provide a platform for discussing mental health and wellbeing in an informal and low-pressure environment. PhDiggers has provided more than a means of physical and outdoor activity. Importantly it has provided a place for people to discuss their challenges and find means of accessing support.
- Whilst access to outdoor spaces is not always easy in other universities, local councils may be interested in collaborating to develop other public spaces or contacting local allotment groups and areas.
- Smaller planters may be useful in outdoor spaces in and around university buildings. They could be used to grow a few flowers or vegetables on a smaller scale and in accessible spaces.
- Collaboration and buy-in from different areas of the university is important in supporting the use of university outdoor spaces for mental health and wellbeing projects. Involvement of the Grounds or Estates teams was integral in the success of these projects, with their extensive knowledge and passion for the outdoor spaces of the UEA campus.



*4 PhDiggers visiting their allotments, November 2019*

## **Further information**

More information can be found on the Silent Space webpages here

<https://silentspace.org.uk/garden/earlham-hall-university-of-east-anglia/>

You can read a blog post by a postgraduate researcher who was involved in the Silent Space project here <https://www.uea.su/blogs/blog/lakesideview/2019/05/15/PhDiggers-digging-yourself-out-of-a-hole/>

*Silent Space Launch event*

You can read more about the launch of the event in this Lakeside View Blog post

<https://www.uea.su/blogs/blog/lakesideview/2019/08/06/Silence-is-Golden-Official-Launch-of-UEA-Silent-Space/>

UEA Silent Space Launch Event Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHEjxdm-sJw>