



Strand A Case Study _ Research Culture and Community – Arts and Humanities Faculty PGR Placement

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Setting the scene

Strand A of the Courage Project focused on research culture and community across each of the four faculties at UEA, across the Norwich Bioscience Institutes and at the University of Suffolk. A PGR (or multiple PGRs) were employed as paid placement holders through the project to understand and address research culture and community in their respective faculties. The projects were PGR-led and responsive to the specific needs of PGRs within each of the respective general discipline areas.

In the Arts & Humanities Faculty, PGR workspace has been an ongoing area of concern for many PGRs (and staff). This was a 3 month full-time placement. The PGR placement holder in the HUM Strand A placement explored the psychological evidence behind positive working environments and conducted a piece of qualitative research to understand the views and opinions of PGR working spaces on campus.

The research placement focused on four key areas:

- (1) Understand the literature into space, health and psychologically informed environments
- (2) PGR experiences of 'space' to understand what impact this has on their mental health and wellbeing
- (3) How PGRs attach meaning to the spaces they inhabit
- (4) To provide recommendations for the future provision of spaces of PGRs

Literature review

Space and Health

There is a wealth of literature on that demonstrates people are both happier and healthier when they have a good relationship with their environment (organisational psychology, psychogeography, cognitive and behavioural psychology etc). We build community across the fixed spaces we occupy. When people have control and ownership of their own space they are more likely to feel secure

(important that this space is fixed, own-able, small, and amorphous). However, this literature is overtly tied to productivity which is antithetical to the aims of the Courage Project so will I cannot deploy this literature in the same way in order to understand this research. This placement research sits at the intersection between productivity and good mental health i.e. it is not the intent of Courage to find ways of helping PGRs become more productive (produce more work or to be better producers) but to gain insights into the state of PGR wellbeing, its influencing factors, and to analyse the effectiveness of a variety of interventions with the explicit aim of helping PGRs be more mental well. The fact that happy people with good mental health as also more 'productive' is a side note, rather than the overall aim.

It is enough to say here that the built environment that we surround ourselves in has an impact on our wellbeing, alongside our access/non-access to green spaces. Numerous studies have demonstrated that 'a pleasant view of greenery in a central courtyard can delay the deterioration of mental functioning of people with dementia' (Johnson and Haig, 2010, pp33) and a more recent 2018 study found that greenspace and street greenery could form part of a multi-faceted approach to improve a wide range of health outcomes, including significantly reducing blood-pressure, heart rate, and incidence of diabetes (Twohig-Bennett and Jones, 2018). Not only are these tangible, physical symptoms affected by our environment Woodcock and Gill also suggest in one of their studies that the quality of physical environments 'affects young peoples' emotional wellbeing and shapes their behaviour and expectations...' (2014, pp52).

Having established that our environment has an impact on our mental, physical, and emotional health, the concept of PIEs or 'psychologically informed environment' is discussed, which was a key theory informing this research. The psychologically informed environment (PIE) is a concept used in the health and wellbeing sector and refers to 'supported living environments whose arrangement has been informed by psychological thinking so as to meet the psychological and emotional needs of residents' (Johnson and Haig, quoted in Quinney 2014). Such environments involve the 'conscious application of careful thinking about the psychological and emotional needs – and potential – of the residents' (Johnson, 2010, pp33) or in this case the users of the space – PGRs.

The University as Space

It is important to note that the university is being understood in this placement research and case study as being subject to the economic and political ideals of neoliberalism and marketisation. Neoliberalism assumes that all things can be understood through capital and human wellbeing can be best achieved by prioritising free trade and free markets and private property rights, creating markets in sector where none previously exist (Harvey, 2005). A neoliberal system operates under the assumption that social good can be ensured by the unfettered operation of market forces – we can see this at work through markers of student satisfaction, wherein the student is positioned as a consumer and their degree treated as a product or commodity a commodity that the university provides for the consumption and profit. Worth or worthiness is understood through 'price' and 'value for money'. Both the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) can be understood as initiatives which encourage an alignment to the neoliberal ideals of competition, customer satisfaction, and brand management (Shamir, 2008; Brown 2015; Phipps and Young 2015): 'We now have a higher education system which is overwhelmingly privately financed and increasingly market-driven and an ideological consensus shared by all recent governments that this is both desirable and necessary' (Freedman, 2001, pp5).

In terms of thinking how the university relates to its own understanding of itself but also its situation in a broader social and political context a useful analogy can be drawn from Zygmunt Bauman's

understanding of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). Bauman posits the current state of modernity as one within which social formations melt faster than the rate at which new ones can be cast (*Education in Liquid Modernity*, 2005, p303). The liquidity of the contemporary British University is compounded through the way in which it is (re)produced by the neoliberal social and political discourse previously discussed. Within the contemporary British University this manifests itself as a constant (re)cycling, (re)ordering and (re)using of spaces. This relationship to space was a point of concern expressed by participants.

Student F Group 1: '[We get] Spare chairs that they've just had to pilfer from somewhere that no longer needs them' pg9

Student F Group 1: 'That's one of the problems with PGR spaces – what you get it down to luck, as well as who you get running it' pg13

We can see this analogy to liquid modernity primarily through Bauman's understanding of "empty spaces" which he defines as: *'first and foremost empty of meaning... they carry no meaning, nor are believed to be able to carry one.'* (Bauman, 2000, p103). An "empty space" becomes at once both clinical and homogenised. These spaces, are not given time or mode of usage to become individuated and imbued by users with meaning. Instead the rate of space and student turnover intentionally keeps divest of and resistant to the imprinting of social formations/meanings.

The emptiness brought about by the liquidity of space: how institutions (re)cycle, (re)order and (re)use university spaces leads to a *'collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting: ... making notions such as 'progress', 'career', 'maturation', and 'development' either very short-lived or futile. This, in turn, makes the future, once filled with promise, turn into a major source of apprehension.'* (Sarid, 2017, p464). This feeling was expressed by the PGRs that were interviewed.

We can see this happening in response to practices across space in the university and how it is engaged with: hot desking is only possible with the understanding that space is neutral. However, I would argue that space is far from neutral as it is owned, constructed, and divvied up by particular groups (be they Estates, the Student Union, or university management) and it thus organized in a particular way. Space, therefore, represents an ongoing political discourse between users (PGRs etc.) and managers/owners. Where hot-desking might be seen as an efficient use of a limited resource, PGRs experience it as a practice which is disruptive, intrusive and ultimately isolating as it denies them a 'place' within the institution. However, exploring this is beyond the scope of this report and so 'space' will be taken to be inert/absent of political agenda for the purposes of this research.

Student D Group 2 (p9): '...without [the PGR office], I felt that I was just me [...] That I was just an entity at UEA, full stop.

Student C: And that you don't fit into any particular space.

D: Nowhere.

PGR Focus Groups

Methods

Two focus groups were conducted (n=10) with PGRs representing the two predominant working spaces in the faculty. The focus groups lasted up to one hour and each participant was paid £10 for their time. Ethical approval was granted by the UEA Ethics Board.

Findings

Five key themes emerged from the two focus groups.

- (1) Issues of ownership
- (2) Value
- (3) Associate Tutor issues
- (4) Physicality/materiality of space
- (5) Sense of Belonging

A summary of the key findings is provided:

A sense of belonging to a community (amongst a cohort, of a research community more broadly) and of value or validation (by the institution, by one's peers) went hand-in-hand with PGRs engagement with PGR specific spaces e.g. office spaces in the faculty building.

Associate Tutor (AT) issues also fed into this theme of 'value' as departmental differences in the treatment of its PGR ATs led to the perception that some schools 'valued' their PGRs more than others or that some were better off simply because schools allocated them more resources and therefore had an advantage (real or imagined). As well as this, participants emphasised a real need for distinct, separate AT work-space, as many who undertook AT work experienced 'slippage' between their PhD work and their work as ATs where, lacking space to meet with students privately, many felt forced to meet students in their shared offices or in open spaces such as the hub which could cause difficulties if one needed to speak to a student confidentially. Many PGRs therefore said that they had to combine their PhD and AT work, using the same pc's and desks that they used to carry out their research projects.

In terms of physicality or materiality of spaces, participants emphasised the need to have PGR consultation at the heart of any discussions of future PGR space allocation, as well as the need for a multiplicity of spaces that could serve multiple functions. The PGRs interviewed also expressed a strong desire to have PGR spaces grouped together and rejected the idea of having graduate school offices separated out into schools and departments on separate floors as this demonstrated a furthering of the siloing and isolation that they already experienced within the institution. Rather, they wished to be together to more easily form peer and cohort communities, as well as enabling participation in a broader PGR community culture. Ownership of these spaces was also key to PGRs feeling they had a 'place' in the university and the faculty and helped to dispel the sense of impermanence and isolation faced by many of the students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the literature review and focus groups, a number of key university specific recommendations were made. These recommendations and placement report were used in the consultation of PGRs in the University development processes that were being undertaken during the Courage project for extensive new developments happening on campus.

Key impacts and Outcomes of PGR placement

The findings from this piece of PGR-led research that took place as part of the Strand A Courage Project placement have been presented at multiple graduate forums including Doctoral College Executive and Graduate School Research Student Forums. The findings from this research were presented at the first International Conference on the Mental Health & Wellbeing of Postgraduate Researchers in May 2019. Moreover, the research has been used as part of the PGR consultation for the development of new University buildings and PGR spaces on campus.

This placement is a key example of PGR-leadership during the Courage project and highlights the importance of the inclusion and consultation of PGRs, to understand their experiences and the impacts that these may have of mental health and wellbeing.