Article

The Role of Appreciative Inquiry to Supporting Students' Healthy Transition into the Post-Graduate World: A Case Study at the University of Malta

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore ways to integrate student self-development into preparation for a post-graduate internship. The research problem to be investigated is the identified gap in support services for student wellbeing and self-esteem alongside academic development prior to entering the professional sphere. The Faculty for the Built Environment within the University of Malta conducted this as a pilot study in collaboration with the Counselling Services Unit to support students in finding ways to improve their work/study balance. The methodology used was an appreciative inquiry through workshops and focus groups over two academic years. The main findings suggest that students requested time management and resilience techniques to strengthen their study–work–life balance and develop an improved work ethic once university life is complete. Students who felt valued throughout the study period appreciated their ideas and self-identity more than others. Results were presented to the faculty staff who suggested an action–response approach to transition management. Conclusions indicated that the strength of the approach undertaken served to manage students' transition from academic life to career entry, conduct a gap analysis to identify issues between students and staff, and facilitate a discussion of values and ethics in preparation for post-graduation career performance.

Keywords: appreciative inquiry; action research; work–life balance; university student; transition management

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Faculty for the Built Environment within the University of Malta has incorporated the teaching of values and ethical practice. While students appreciated this contribution, they expressed their concerns about the integration of ethics and values into their professional lives given the constant reports of malpractice in the construction sector. Examples of malpractice in the construction sector can leave an impression on young graduates, especially when such practices are not addressed through a proper legal system. In Malta, the construction industry is one of the main pillars of the country's economy. In fact, the construction and real estate industries contributed to 13.5% of the total gross value added in 2016 [1]. In this regard, graduates are exposed to a rapidly growing sector upon entering professional practice and preparation was deemed essential to maintain ethical practice in the years following graduation.

The Faculty for the Built Environment benefited from further study of the impact of teaching values and ethics to students, identifying issues students face prior to entering the profession and resources needed to integrate education into their professional practice. This facilitated the faculty staff to provide appropriate support. The authors, based in the Faculty for the Built Environment and Counselling Services Unit in the Health and

Wellness Centre, respectively, pointed out that previous studies at the University of Malta had quantitatively investigated students' physical-mental health and available psycho-social–emotional support [2], as well as the impact on students and staff of the measures taken by the University to continue academic training during the pandemic COVID-19 [3].

2. Research Gap

Dickerson and Helm-Stevens (2011) [4] highlight how the success of educational institutions is influenced by healthy interactions between the institution, students/families, and the community. Students are essential stakeholders who could inform these institutions on what interventions could better support them. Their involvement in creating a positive environment that provides them with resources and structure is therefore essential. For this to actualize, the support of institutional leaders is also needed. Effective leadership enhances faculty learning through communities that focus on improving student learning by engaging in open learning conversations. These concepts highlight the role of educational leaders in fostering the creation of a learning community that focuses on the relationship between what is taught, what is learned [5], and how this is practiced. In this manner, students learn how to learn [6], a skill they may carry into their post-graduate professional life which would support them to adapt to the construction field while retaining the values and ethics embraced during their university course.

The authors were motivated to explore the lived experience of students who, having received an education in values and ethics, are now preparing to enter the workforce. During the study, they assessed students' strengths and needs, what strategies students used to integrate the values and ethics taught into their professional practice, and what resources they needed to facilitate this integration. The findings and insights gained were shared with faculty staff to inform future training. The fusion of the approaches chosen—thematic analysis, appreciative inquiry, and action research—supported the process. The use of contemporary management techniques while maintaining a democratic, bottom-up perspective gave students a voice. No similar studies have previously been conducted at the University of Malta. As part of the research process, student feedback was collected between 2019 and 2021.

3. Rationale of this Research

Quantitative studies regarding student wellbeing were carried out at the University of Malta in 2009 [2] and in 2020 [3]. The former study indicated that 65% of the students felt regularly satisfied and confident in terms of their wellbeing, 35% felt so occasionally and 5% did not feel the above. The latter percentage consisted mainly of first-year and single students. Over 50% of the students reported feeling regularly overwhelmed, exhausted and stressed. Third- and fifth-year students tended to feel more stressed and overwhelmed than first-year or single students.

The authors observed that first, third, and final-year students tend to be students in transition. First-year students are in transition from college school to university, third-year students decide to pursue a post-graduate degree or employment, while final-year students move into professional practice. In total, 40% of the students surveyed said that they find it difficult to discuss problems with anyone, including family and friends. Only 28% of student respondents reported feeling actively involved in courses, with 25% stating that they were encouraged to actively contribute their ideas during lectures. Half of the students surveyed felt that both academic and nonacademic staff were unsupportive. It is therefore not surprising that 96% of the students surveyed found university life very stressful, with exams and assignments being the biggest source of stress.

Cefai and Camilleri (2009) [2], while providing valid recommendations on how the university could support its students, recommend that further studies are carried out in collaboration with student bodies, taking into account students' views on this issue, particularly the avoidance of professional help due to stigma.

The Salt survey (2020) [3], which explored the wellbeing of students and staff during COVID-19, found that 66% of students who responded were dissatisfied with how the change from face-to-face teaching to online teaching was communicated and delivered. Conversely, academics were generally satisfied with the transition to distance learning. Students expressed high levels of concern about the physical health, safety, and wellbeing of their loved ones (47%) and their own mental and emotional wellbeing (32%). While students welcomed the idea of conducting future tests/examination sessions using distance learning modalities, academic staff expressed dissatisfaction regarding the increase in their workload and level of connectedness with students.

Both studies seemed to indicate that students and academics had differing opinions and were not sufficiently engaged in conversations about a mutually beneficial path forward. The authors felt that this conversation was necessary to create a healthy environment for students to remain and support them in their respective transitions. The way forward was to give students a voice, particularly those in their third and final years of study, and to try to provide the interventions they wanted. This was seen as a means of motivating students, enhancing their wellbeing and supporting them to continue to practice the values and ethics they had been taught in their professional practice.

Therefore, the aim of this research was to analyze students' perspectives and needs in self-development. In doing so, the research presents a pilot study to establish a model for the sustainable implementation of preparatory pathways prior to students' entry into the professional sphere. The research pathway comprised two phases. The first phase consisted of an appreciative inquiry using thematic analysis to analyze discussions, and the second phase consisted of an action research component. The collaborative project between the Faculty for the Built Environment and Counselling Services Unit raised awareness at three levels: student level, faculty staff, and at a university-wide approach to change. The paper is organized as follows. A review is provided of the major literature that has been used to identify intervention models and supportive practices in the delivery of services to meet student needs. An overview of the qualitative data collection and analysis conducted follows. Key findings derived from the observation process with students are presented along with conclusions and recommendations to overcome existing challenges and future research directions. The study was conducted in accordance with the faculty research ethics committee of the University of Malta. UREC FORM ID Code (7954_01032021). The university benefited from understanding students' lived experiences and needs from a multifaceted perspective in order to implement appropriate supportive interventions. If self-management and critical, self-reflective skills were adopted by young professionals charged with designing built environments, it could improve ethical implementation and enable change in the country's building policies and standards. Self-development of future professionals could improve leadership in the built environment [7].

4. Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of this appreciative inquiry was to:

(a)　Increase understanding of the lived experience of students in their final year of study as they prepare to enter the world of work;
(b)　Gain insights into the strategies used and resources required by students to better manage the impending role and identity change;
(c)　Support the emergence of themes that identify ways to facilitate a healthy transition.

5. Literature Review

Universities play a vital role in supporting national development by offering undergraduate and graduate students training at a cognitive-psycho-social-spiritual level. Thereby, students may become open-minded, active citizens, generating equality and inclusion, and possibly developing into political leaders [8]. In this sense, tertiary institutions play a change-agency role, catalyzing the enhancement of individuals' quality of life, improving decision-making and social mobility [9]. In universities, faculties fre-

quently attempt to improve service provision by introducing new evidence-based best practices to cater for shifts in the students' needs, while maintaining sustainability and increasing accountability [10]. However, as highlighted during the Joint Action on Mental Health and Well Being: Driving Mental Health at Work Conference held in Berlin in 2014, though policy is drawn following professional research and interventions, respecting ethical evidence-based practice, implementation is not straightforward. Given their central role as culture carriers, academics and research leaders are meant to become the first to lead change and then to engage in the kind of intersubjective dialogue, which is essential to support students' self-development [11]. If change was to begin with the academic and research leaders, this would focus on self-knowledge, awareness of the field and the interaction between the two [12]. Research and work-based experience, however, indicates that change is perceived as a frequently undesired adaptation to external events, jolting leaders into awareness [13,14]. A permanent change could be experienced as a shift in personal identity, involving shifts in underlying processes, leading to the modification of self-perception. Change implementation studies, therefore, need to focus on processes, eliciting how stakeholders reacting to organizational interventions may generate collective action and social movements [15]. A paper published by [16], Waters and White (2015), outlines a process for creating positive school change designed to foster citizenship, virtue and wellbeing in students.

Students in final-year university programs find themselves at the threshold of a significant shift. They need tutor leaders who equip them for their upcoming professional start. Students in their final years transition from passive recipients to independent, autonomous learners and this gap has been identified, providing the motivation to initiate the research. The key argument of this study is that final-year preparation, which entails the application of academic values built through the years, constitutes a powerful influencer in the student's post-graduate life. However, this has been largely neglected, particularly from the student's point of view. Furthermore, this highlights the necessity to direct the research study towards a specific cohort, that requires a different tuition experience to students in lower years. In creating such an environment, the student–teacher experience can be unique, built on trust and feedback exchange, thus allowing for the exploration of emergent student needs and requirements as part of the preparatory exercise. This presents a topic of interest to new future teachers, academic bodies, and heads of schools in preparing high quality careers.

5.1. Managing Change

Delivery in nonroutine or time-urgent situations requires an approach to achieving balance between control and autonomy within a constant demand for satisfactory output performance [17]. In a top-down approach to change, management, command and the launching of change comes from the strategic apex of the organization and usually involves a cycle of change determined by top-management [18]. Since the 1980s, planned change faced increasing levels of criticism due to its perceived inability to cope with radical, coercive change situations [19]. Pettigrew (1990) [20] argued that the planned approach was too prescriptive and did not pay enough attention to the need to analyze and conceptualize organizational change [21]. The approach does not allow scope for widespread consultation or involvement and presumes that all stakeholders in a change project are willing and interested in implementing it [22].

Alternatively, an emergent approach to change implementation means that a model for change is built on a continuous process [22] and nonlinear thinking forms the basis for emergent approaches to change [23]. Emergent can be understood as an individual or organization responding to the opportunities and threats in the environment (ibid) and responding and adapting to the changes that are constantly emerging. This method ensures that the design of a response to change is appropriate for the current contextual change in the environment and addresses the functions that a service delivery could provide to meet the emerging needs. In this regard, Reynolds [23] (2004) argues that when school

change is approached as both a top-down and bottom-up approach, the bottom-up process involves diagnosis and action, while the top-down process provides direction and goals. Approaching the bottom-up approach leads to a strengthening of the possibilities of an inclusion process for generating ideas and perspectives, which can then be transferred to hierarchical levels in the school structure. Furthermore, Copland [24] (2004) adds that what facilitates successful change in schools is the use of an inquiry process that is central to building capacity for school improvement. Implementing change and introducing change management into school environments through this process is what empowers students to identify, learn, evaluate and contribute directly, while the researchers of the process have a direct hand in shaping and building the processes that will bring about the relevant change.

5.2. Managing Transition

While change is visible and consciously experienced, transition, the process underlying it, is often unconscious and requires a process of investigation to become visible. Sometimes transition is seen as a process that occurs after the change has been implemented and refers to "letting go of the old ... identity ... focused ... it starts with an ending" ([13], p. 7). Transition is more likely to occur when stakeholders/students/staff perceive that the university has created a positive holding environment, while organizational development is more likely to occur when leaders/staff are motivated, professionally mature, and have developed most forms of intelligence.

Theoretically, the lived experience of transition during an institutional change may develop as follows: Stakeholders (management/staff/students) become aware that habitual interventions are not achieving expected outcomes [2,3]. This awareness may precipitate inner crises, as stakeholders observe that they need to change their mindsets and the way they feel about things if they are to achieve their goals. Stakeholders, encountering an undesired need to change, may initially experience shock, leading to anger, bargaining, stress, anxiety and confusion. For positive outcomes, they require support [25,26], otherwise they will continue using past effective coping mechanisms that are no longer appropriate [27]. If at this stage stakeholders embark on a process of self-awareness and re-evaluation by questioning the expected outcomes, transition may begin within "the neutral zone ... a psychological no man's land between the old and new reality" ([13], p.8). Remaining in this zone is the hardest part of transition, wherein creative innovation may occur, leading to reorientation. By increasing the reacting agent's awareness about one's reaction to change, the agent's emotions, cognitions, and behavior would be impacted. If one could reach such insight, one might find it easier to accept and participate in the change [28]. Outcomes would include learning resulting in self-growth, insight, working through, resolving the problem, and achieving mastery [29]. The process could be facilitated by awareness of one's possible self, as this accelerates recognition of a desired identity and sense of self [30].

5.3. Underlying Processes

In the process of inquiry, self-development results from the conscious experience that arises from the mutual interaction between one's sensorimotor abilities and the environment [31]. Assimilation and accommodation of experience leads to adjustment, which cannot necessarily be verbalized but is experienced implicitly. After reflection, the change can be explicitly verbalized and consciously registered. At this stage, a patterning of habits and values occurs, and the process involves awareness, intuitive insight, and cognition. A holistic understanding of how meanings emerge during interactions is offered by the psychotherapeutic perspective, which explains how the inner dialogue between the various selves and/or partial functions of the self clarifies the person's needs, desires, and goals [32]. Three questions are asked by the three subfunctions of the self:

- Id function: what are my needs? Current or due to unresolved past issues;
- Ego function: what do I want? Cognitive part of the decision-making process;
- Personality: who am I/who do I need to become? To meet the needs of the ego.

Leaders' awareness of the need for change develops in the interaction between their personality functions and the organizational field. It is through the interaction between its subfunctions that the self decides that change is needed and that this change needs to evolve and commit [11,33]. This occurs during the accommodation phase of the transition process. The organizational conditions in which self-development occurs include the balance between the empowering and constraining organizational environments that provide the background for its emergence, and the simultaneous interaction between the stakeholders: management, students, and staff.

In order to facilitate organizational change, it is important to understand how the group/organization arrived at its current situation. Individuals, groups, and organizations need to resolve unfinished business, give new meaning to core beliefs, and create positive intermember communication [34].

The literature review informed the choice of methodology. For students to assimilate and accommodate the values and ethics imparted during their training and retain them during their professional lives, they need to achieve a permanent change in their role/identity/sense of self. If students could self-reflect, increasing their self-awareness, awareness of the field and the interaction between the two [12], they might be able to uphold imparted values and ethics in their professional lives. This involves shifts in underlying processes leading to the modification of self-perception. This reorientation of one's outlook on life is accessible only through students' stories regarding this experience [35]. The methodology is needed to commence a conversation between stakeholders so as to increase the university's knowledge about the needs, wants and resources of the students. This information needs to be obtained from the students themselves, giving them a voice in chapter, and possibly commencing a social movement [15].

6. Methodology

Informed by the literature review and work-based experiences, within the local context, the authors focused on the lived experiences of students. Their voices became the core of this study. From this perspective, a quantitative methodology was considered inappropriate as structured approaches do not acknowledge the individuality/autonomy of human nature and provide overly simplistic information. Furthermore, two such studies have already been conducted by the university. The methodology needed to respect the underlying processes influencing respondents and their understanding of personal/sociocultural circumstances. Qualitative methodology provides space for meanings about human interactions while acknowledging the existence of different realities [36–38].

Due to the focus on raising awareness of positive aspects and initiating social movements, appreciative inquiry and action research approaches were deemed appropriate for this project [39–42]. This encouraged wider participation in the findings and led to higher levels of engagement in both the successful completion of the study and the implementation of the findings. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the stories and texts of the participating students as they told them during the focus groups [36,38]. The lived experience was considered an important source of data-rich information [43]. Triangulation of data sources was used, with data coming from: (a) the students' narratives during the focus groups; (b) the authors' observations of participants during the university-based interventions; (c) feedback from the faculty members with whom the findings were discussed. The presence of the authors as insiders turned researchers raised ethical concerns as this could have implications for the study in terms of bracketing. Personal integrity and its ethical expression were achieved by introducing a heuristic approach to the study [37].

The methodology was divided into two phases:

Phase 1: An appreciative inquiry approach was used. This approach is based on the principle that positive organizational change can be achieved through collective involvement [15], with stakeholders focusing "on human ideals . . . peak experiences and best practices . . . " ([16], p. 2) rather than problem-solving. Conversations, supported by open-ended questions within unstructured interviews, became the means of creating

shared meaning/role/identity [44], providing stakeholders with an opportunity for dialogue and inquiry, supporting the development of relationships and trust; giving a voice and empowering participants to become part of the proposed changes. This sustained the elevation of the human potential, personally and collectively by regarding study/work as a way of learning and growing [6,31]. Thus, solutions emerged spontaneously, supporting the planning of what could be further improved [9,39]. Three focus groups were held at T1-T2–T3 (T1—time of first meeting with focus group; T2—time of second meeting; T3—time of third meeting).

In the focus group held at T1, volunteering undergraduates were offered a safe space wherein to freely express their needs and concerns. Students voiced the need to clarify their identities as they transited from undergraduates to post-graduates/professionals and their need for support while doing so. These concerns were addressed during the second focus group held at T2. A presentation was used as a platform for discussion, during which undergraduates: described how positive experiences supported their sense of self-actualization; deemed that their lived experience required improving; deemed that some of the strategies they used to cope with the transition from undergraduate to post-graduate lives worked while others did not; described lacking sufficient inner resources to cope with this transition. These insights became the research questions:

- Mention three things you deem are going well for you.
- Mention three things you deem need improvement.
- Mention three strategies you are using to improve them.
- Mention three resources you require to be better able to achieve your goals.

During the focus group held at T3 the research questions were discussed with the volunteering undergraduates. Themes were allowed to emerge spontaneously from these discussions.

Phase 2: An action-research approach was used, consisting of plan–act–reflect cycle [39]. Given the need to raise awareness through critical self-reflection, [12] Barber's (2012) model was adopted, comprising the stages of change: precontact, orientation, identification, exploration and resolution. Within this cycle, action and reflection were present throughout: (a) precontact: awareness of micro-/macroinfluences, conscious/unconscious processes, different levels of experience and personal politics; (b) orientation/contract: facilitators and participants agree on goals and logistics, prepare activities, iron out difficulties; (c) identification/listening: problems are identified, interpersonal and environmental issues observed, remedies discussed and solutions attempted; (d) exploration/action: impact of implementation of plans/strategies on participants and facilitators is observed and evaluated; (e) review/resolution: measures of success, termination of alliance and final reflections on processes take place. The action-research cycle: focus groups were conducted during the orientation/contract phase in which both researchers acted as mentors. One researcher took on the role of an advisory mentor, facilitating self-exploration, raising self-awareness and awareness of psycho-emotional needs, and addressing the personal self. The other researcher assumed an academic mentoring role that bridged academic course concerns and career pathway knowledge. During an informal conversation, students expressed the need to: (a) engage and discuss their potential concerns about their course; (b) reflect on their lives outside of university (work–study–life balance); (c) reflect on their qualities as architects, areas that worked well for them and areas that needed improvement.

During the identification/listening phase, five one-and-a-half-hour focus groups were conducted with 10–12 final year students, once per group in April 2020. Through the focus groups, students learned more about themselves, their identities, and their value in the context of the architectural practice in which they grew up [33,34]. Each focus group consisted of three parts: (a) an ice breaker, (b) a presentation titled "Self-Identity and Self-Realisation", and (c) a final exercise in which participants described what they learned from the workshop.

Informed by feedback received for longer groups in a more informal setting, a subsequent identification/listening phase took place in November 2020. Students who had

participated in the previous phases were invited. The students learned about their role in their family, identity growth, values in architectural practice, family dynamics, and growing into a whole person. Six focus groups were conducted, each consisting of approximately 6 students. The presentation was replaced with four appreciative inquiry research questions: What is going well for you? What needs to be improved in your life? What strategies do you use to achieve this goal? What resources do you have/what resources would you need to achieve this goal? Care was taken to ensure that the sessions did not clash with lectures. The sessions took place on a web-based platform called Zoom. A report of the results was provided to the faculty members for feedback.

During the exploration/action phase, the results of these discussions were implemented. Three one-and-a-half-hour focus groups were held for an average of 5 to 6 third-year students. These sessions followed the approach of appreciative inquiry and covered the research questions previously listed.

Sample and participants: the population was accessible. In this case, since data from the entire academic year of the students were to be analyzed, the data set of the entire population was used. Data were needed from each member of the population in this case. To ensure internal consistency, two groups were used over a two-year period. Precontact phase: students first approached the researchers and expressed concern for their wellbeing and asked for support. This was followed by a discussion about how to manage the transition between final year and starting a career.

Data collection: During data collection, the author of the Counselling Services Unit took notes on various aspects of the focus groups, including the room, the people involved, and the events recounted. Students' responses to the icebreaker and the research questions were transcribed verbatim, keeping in mind that a transcript never quite faithfully captures the fluidity of the gestures relative to the words uttered. As insiders, the authors did their best to maintain a researcher identity and made every effort to bracket what they knew about the university in order to keep an open mind and listen to the students without bias or prejudice [44]. *The focus groups:* Following the initial interventions—ice-breaker/presentation or research questions—the focus groups took the form of long conversations during, with customary turn-taking rules applied, although students' interventions were more extended than usual given the context.

Thematic analyses: Phenomenological reduction was adopted to elicit the themes. This consists of description, horizontalization, and verification. Through horizontalization, a hierarchy of patterns would be allowed to emerge spontaneously from obtained data, verifying emergent themes through all the phases. Thus, the invariant meaning upon which all would agree would be allowed to emerge spontaneously, while appreciating what fell out of the pattern and working with both [45]. As themes were identified, transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to ensure that one did not move beyond the state of affairs. Once sufficient information was available, insights were gained into what this meant to students. Reflection was carried out in its context with intentionality, content and direction. Interpretation followed, common patterns of meaning and invariant structures were identified, while what came out of these patterns was appreciated and work was carried out with both. Interpretation of the transcribed material explored the conversational dynamics of the language by focusing on content and function and being sensitive to particular themes. Reflection was made on what was said and how it was said, with the how grounding the what. Thus, a thematic map was created [38]. The weight of each theme was determined by the number of occurrences in a conversation or by its frequency among participants [43].

Empirical credibility, reliability and validity were built into this approach as follows: results emerged through a bottom-up, top-down interaction; Beer (2001) [43] argues that the combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies is essential to address the important failure rates of change initiatives that are reported in the organizational change literature; through participant feedback, it was ensured that the process was correctly understood. Evidence shows that the quality of feedback has a huge impact on students learning and

motivation, which presents an important reason to provide feedback to teachers, i.e., so awareness is obtained, thus building teacher realization to meet learning needs (Mag, 2019) [25]. The interventions carried out were in real life situations; hence, the mentors in the project were directly involved. This ensured students were familiar with the members of staff involved in this research project. The adoption of a phenomenological approach was appropriate, as the study of consciousness and direct, lived experience became the overarching orientation of this inquiry. This approach holds that since participants actively construct meaning from their experiences, the interpretation of the arising phenomena from what the participants are saying stays close to the lived experiences of the person's complex human nature in the world. The validity of analytical/ethical knowledge is assessed from the integrated perspectives of the researcher, participants, and readers [36,37,45].

Positionality of the researchers: Adopting Langdridge's (2009) [45] approach to reflexive criticism, the authors hermeneutically acknowledged the impact their lived experiences and theoretical orientations had on themselves, before commencing the interviews with the participants. Gadamer's (2004) [44] hermeneutic of suspicion indicated that a researcher could never be sure of having totally understood what participants were saying, as there was usually a gap between what was said and what was appropriated. During the researcher–participant interactions, meanings could be challenged and new ones more consonant with the circumstances that could arise, which participants could adopt or otherwise, as meanings change dynamically since they are not objectively real. Therefore, a psychotherapeutic approach was adopted during the focus groups to critically balance out the authors' constructs as researchers [37].

Limitations of the study: Due to the small sample size, the generalizability of the results is limited. The study was conducted on a purposive population at the University of Malta, an island in the heart of the Mediterranean, with a very distinct history and socio-cultural climate.

The research took place in the midst of a pandemic that brought unexpected and unprecedented changes, which exacerbated the sense of stress and lack of safety experienced by the students during the research. The interviews were not entirely unstructured as students were not used to talking about themselves in a free-flowing process. The personalities of the authors and their professional roles within the university, as well as their roles as researcher-practitioners, all impacted on the cocreation of meaning, particularly in acquiring student participants and the focus group process itself.

7. Results

All groups reported concerns about current practices in their profession and the impact on their careers. They expressed concerns about ethics and post-graduate education and recognized the need to act as change agents. Some felt that the university had not adequately prepared them for this role, others felt that the relevant authority had not taken this form of intervention into account, stating that "the training has changed but the warrant remained the same", and others did not relate the role of architect to that of a change agent—"this is not what I signed up for" and, furthermore, "if I do not do the work, (the builders) will find someone else to do it" and "I need to make a living".

Gender issue concerns were voiced by some young female students reporting apprehension regarding how acting as change agents amongst male counterparts would impact their work:

"*I do not think (the constructors) will respect me because I am a woman. They do not respect the men at times either*".

The author from the CSU observed a parallel process between this comment passed by a female built environment student and that of a Head of Department (HOD) in another study she had carried out within the Maltese National Healthcare Services, whereby it had been difficult for the female HOD to: "gain respect of the tough man (medical consultants) in the clinic and they do not trust a woman" (Session #5, line 104) [46].

7.1. Orientation/Contractual Phase Results Gave Rise to Themes Mirroring the Conversation between the Three Partial Functions of the Self

The Orientation/Contractual phase results gave rise to themes mirroring the conversation between the Three Partial Functions of the Self: (a) Needs, (b) Wants, and (c) Identity (Table 1 below).

Table 1. Students' replies categorized according to the partial functions of the self.

Needs
Safety: Most students voiced the need for their profession to be safeguarded. They reported the need for safety and empathy until they are strong enough to stand on their own two feet. Concerns about financial stability were noted. "the law, its application, simple activities of daily living –we are not taught these things". "We need ethics but also practical applicability–too much academia."
Emotional-transferential support-empathy: Most students voiced the need for support to retain good mental health and freedom from anxiety. Students acknowledged that it is habitual to feel stressed due to exams and thesis projects. They requested improved communication means. Students noted time pressures. "I procrastinate but design takes a long time, exams come straight after. We need time." "A lot of work and at times the teachers explain in a way that they think we know everything."

Wants
Respect: Most students desired respect for their profession and discussed how they could act to concretely achieve this. "I would like to make a name for myself." "Integrity is being true to yourself. To garner respect, honour regardless of what it is."
Creativity: Some students noted the impact of design creativity in the community. They reported that they would produce better designs if they had less contextual constraints on their creativity. "Being creative can get muffed out there at work." "I need much more place to be creative."
Peer support: Others noted the need for the introduction of group work. They reported that, for this to happen, they had to become better team players. "Yes it's nice to work in groups–if you can trust." "In group work you compare with others what you do, but"

Identity
The students reported issues related to identity. Most expressed reluctance to assume the role and identity of change agents for various reasons including that: "it was not what they signed up for"; they just wanted a "peaceful working life"; given the current construction ambience reigning in Malta, they were concerned about their appreciation in the field as young graduate architects upholding strong ethical values; "this was not what people wanted": "if you do not do what the contractor wants he will find someone else". On the other hand, some students also noted that one should "not settle. Aim higher, improve yourself personally so you improve yourself professionally".

This set of results indicates that the students need to make their voices heard and to be allowed to be more creative. They expressed feeling unsafe in the construction field and unsupported to engage in change agency. They needed more support from the university. If the university provided a healthy holding environment and supported the development of trust/peer support, they would be better equipped to face the field of construction and retain the imparted ethics and values. These results were substantiated further by the following indicators. Participants requested that more sessions akin to this are a requisite and should be held earlier in the course sessions in a more informal space and should be longer. During future sessions, more time should be dedicated to individual feelings rather than be related to the course—"It is important to talk about something like this and understand that you are not alone in your thoughts and actions". Discussions would preferably focus on university life rather than the future. Current issues would be more relevant.

The evaluation exercise collated at the end of the session presented the following results as indicated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Synthesis of the evaluation form.

	Very	Moderately	Not at All	Do Not Know
How relevant was this exercise to you?	11	5		
How engaged did you feel in this exercise?	10	6		
How would you rate the facilitation style?	6	9	1	
Would you recommend this event to colleagues in other courses?	12	3	1	

The workshop participants reported feeling happy about being given this opportunity. These results indicated that when students are interpolated and their voices are heard they engage to a greater extent than when imparting knowledge is top-down, as indicated by the 28% engagement rate in the study conducted by Cefai and Camilleri (2009) [2].

7.2. Identification Phase Results Informed by the Results Obtained during the Orientation Phase

The appreciative inquiry/action research intervention moved on to the identification phase, wherein the task became that of eliciting more in-depth discussions with the participants about more personal experiences and self-perceptions. Three support groups of, on average, five students each were held. During the sessions, which lasted about an hour and a quarter, the students were introduced to the session with an explanation of the purpose of holding the discussions. They were then asked in an informal manner, as per their request, to reflect on resources required to carry out the above.

- Things that are going well at the moment;
- Things that need improving;
- Strategies to improve them;
- Which resources they had ad which they required to be rendered available

To achieve this goal, a support group approach was utilized, wherein the sessions intended to support engagement and participation by providing students with an opportunity to voice their views and opinions on their experiences on campus and outside of university.

Their contributions and feedback were noted and transcribed. Table 3 below demonstrates a summary of the issues collected from the students' concerns in the support group.

The summary of the results described in Table 2 indicates the emergence of the following themes under the umbrella of research questions. These results also show the extent to which students' mood was affected by the COVID -19 pandemic and the lockdown taking place at the time of the research. The students' voices are represented through their verbatim responses which underpin the themes:

Things that are going well (each student was asked to list 3):

- The family is the main source of support for the students.
- Students' life has slowed down due to COVID-19 lockdown.
- Students reported requiring less travelling time.
- In some students, less travelling resulted in increased focus. Students noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also before that, what was going on well for them was "receiving help from your colleagues and vice versa", "being happy enjoying my course", and being keen on "my subjects because they are new and exciting" It was the "connection with their other students, having my interests seen to, which help me feel I am at University". One student was appreciative of the Science Students Society which "helped me remain in touch with University". "Exercise cheered" them up, as also did "having more time with my pets".

Table 3. Summary of results.

3 Things Going Well	No. (Number of Times the Theme Recurred During the Conversation)	3 Things Needing Improvement	No.	3 Strategies Used	No.	3 Resources Required	No.
Less travel/slower process	6	Time mgmt. vs. procrastination	9	Better time management to include structuring the day and activities, taking weekends off	14	Peer support/mutual confrontation–work in a group	8
Family support	5	Healthier lifestyle/diet/ exercise	5	Extracurricular activities: pets/hobbies/exercise. Preparing more for tutorials, which became a presentation rather than a discussion.	4	Support from family/friends	3
Peer/social support	3	Working from safe space	5		3	Physical touch	3
Being more focused	3	Nee to be even more focuses	5	Having values	2	Work environs need screening	3
Tutorials more manage-able/less nervous easier to talk.	2	More socialization	5	Self-observation	2	Yoga/meditation	2
Extracurricular activities; Pets/Hobbies/ Exercise	3	More validation from tutors/others. Currently they had less time with tutor and they cannot sketch online.	5	Communication issues	1	Extracurricular activities: Pets/Baking/Exercise	2
Time management	2	Self-discipline and self-validation	4	More teamwork opportunities	1	Focus on clients' needs/empathy	1
Me time/Sleep more	2	Stress management	4	Increase self-esteem	1	Being pragmatic	1
		More working on site/ IT skills	2	Professional support	1	Normalization—I am like others	1

Things that need improving:

- Initially, staying at home felt like being on holiday, with quite a few students noting that they "took procrastination to the next level".
- Other students reported needing to be more focused as the family distracted them.
- Working from home did not necessarily imply working from a safe space.
- Sitting in front of the PC led to their missing extracurricular activities, precipitated boredom, unhealthy eating habits and lack of exercise.
- On an equal level, the students reported requiring less critical and more validating lecturers and tutors.
- Students missed being at university and "needed to meet their peers" and have "better social interactions". They felt "too secluded" indoors. "Socialisation suffered" as students had to stay at home "ruminating over what they would be doing if they were at University". Some noted that this had turned them into "workaholics". Though they regularly had lectures online they had not apparently thought to use this medium to meet informally for an "e-coffee break". Needing less time to commute due to the partial COVID-19 lockdown had translated itself into more "free time" but students needed to "learn to make time for study". The issue of lack of time management arose frequently during the discussions. A significant comment was that "at home you do not know when to stop . . . you get tired and procrastinate".

Strategies suggested:

- The great majority of students noted that they required better time management and scheduling for their work.

- Tutorials had become a well thought out presentation rather than a discussion. Students especially missed the open-format period where a new idea could emerge during a creative interaction with the tutor.
- Students noted that they needed to develop the ability to observe themselves rather than live in repetitive patterns.
- Students noted that lecturers' communication skills needed enhancement.
- Contextual values also need to develop. Students suggested that lectures could "start fifteen minutes before" so they would have time to speak to each other. On the other hand, some students noted that they "kept the camera off" as they would still "be in their pajamas". Other students suggested that they required "more feedback" and that "feedback on my progress needs to be given to me". Students suggested that study groups could be set up as such interactions would "support my mental health. I feel isolated". Few students felt they could take the initiative with words such as "the University should . . . " the "tutors ought to . . . " and we "need to make time for . . . but" forming the introduction to many of the suggested strategies.

  Resources required:
- Students highlighted that peer support and working in a group could be healthy resources. Such encounters would support them to confront their abilities with those of others. Trust and respect of intellectual property was required for this to happen.
- More support from family and friends was required in areas that were not necessarily university related. For instance, some students reported missing friends' physical touch.
- Students reported that some places offering remunerated internship made them feel irrelevant. Smaller and younger firms tended to be more supportive.

Students noted that they wanted "to make new friends", to "be listened to more", and "to find ways of reaching out". They also expressed the need for "more time for myself", and "more time to sleep". Life–work balance was required, and for this students requested being taught "coping mechanisms . . . I am a deep thinker and at times this makes me procrastinate and I feel guilty", "time management because I am a perfectionist and my brain does not stop", and how to better focus on what they were doing as "if I work in the here-and-now I would be more consistent". Students also requested to be "given more experience during the course" so they could be better supported to learn what they had to do at the place work once they were employed in the construction market.

8. Discussion and Post Hoc Reflections

During the discussion, students and authors found themselves reflecting and verbalizing their reflections, rendering them conscious and acknowledging them [47]. Although at some moments this led to them coming to grips with their problems, at other moments it led to insight and self-growth. An example of such a moment was when a student reflected that "you're not who you are if you do not do what you want to do", thus linking identity and agency. Focus groups conducted within an appreciative inquiry approach and within an action research framework could be a way in which change can be explicitly verbalized, consciously registered, owned and acted upon. Stern (2003: 28) [47] calls it a "moment of encounter". Presumably, this is not the norm. Informed by this observation, the authors reflected that the focus groups had enabled students to be motivated to reflect and that the appreciative inquiry approach had opened the door for the conversation between students and staff to begin. It is possible that the authors were able to become the bridge between students and faculty when they discussed their findings with faculty members. The authors also observed that meeting students in this way greatly reduced the tension present when staff solicited feedback from students in traditional ways.

The results of this study confirmed that students face a major transition during their final year at university as they prepare to move from students to professionals. They recognized that in order to maintain the ethics and values instilled in them during their university years, they must automatically assume the identity of change agents to work

within the structure of their society. Some students distanced themselves from taking such a position, while those who wanted to continue upholding these values expressed anxiety and inner conflict as they felt unprepared to do so. They expressed that they needed the following elements in order to apply the theoretical values and ethics in practice: *Respect*: students expressed a desire for more respect for their profession and discussed how they could achieve this specifically. *Creativity*: students expressed a desire to create healthier living spaces for themselves and others and emphasized that they could produce better designs if they had fewer constraints on their creativity. Peer support: the need to introduce group work would help students become better team players. *Identity* development: students reported that they were hesitant to identify with some of the architects who represented their profession in the field. Most expressed reluctance to take on the role and identity of change agents for a variety of reasons: they simply wanted to lead a quiet working life; given the current atmosphere in the construction industry in Malta, they were afraid that people would not recognize them as professionals if they adhered to ethical practices, as this was not what people wanted. All groups reported fears about how current practices in the profession would affect their careers. Students expressed fear that in order to remain ethical and maintain training, they would automatically become change agents without training.

The students realized that if they became professionals, they would become the culture bearers in their field. Students reported experiencing an internal struggle as they imagined trying to maintain the values and ethics they had internalized during their formative years at the university in a consumerist and hostile marketplace. If they wanted to bring about culture change, they would be affected by the process of change implementation.

Research enabled the strength of the current academic system and the alienation and demotivation process that students went through when they had to choose between gaining financial independence and working within their own ethical parameters. Scholarship, technology, and industry coexisted with feelings of shame and the annihilation of individuality. A labor-intensive construction sector was seen as male-archetypal oriented, with men as leaders and women as followers, with creativity suppressed in favor of mass production of concrete structures and speed of construction bringing more financial gain to those involved [12,47]. The students still lacked the courage to face their problems, but slowly a thought process began. These feelings were exacerbated by the fear and apathy caused by the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Way Forward and Recommendations

The study showed that students need a more positive environment that promotes feelings of trust with each other and with faculty. If change is to be brought about, they would need to continue to support each other as professionals. The study also revealed that students need training in self-reflection to support their self-actualization. Armsby (2013) [48] highlights that the integration of professional and academic identities is beneficial as one identity supports the other. This step would include knowledge building to enable students turned professionals to bring about policy change. Change management through transition leadership adopting an appreciative inquiry approach could prove a useful tool within the university setting and beyond. Following the discussion with faculty members, some became interested in investing in a mentoring skills course which has now become an ongoing event.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, Faculty for the Built Environment, University of Malta (Unique form id. 7954_01032021 date of approval 24 March 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Passive (opt-out) consent was made possible to all participants.

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