

RAISE Special Interest Groups (Early Career Researchers and Research & Evaluation) Collaboration: A Case Study

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Abstract:

In the academic year 2022/23, the RAISE Special Interest Groups for Early Career Researchers and Research & Evaluation collaboratively developed a professional development programme for Higher Education colleagues new to writing about student engagement. The diverse audience ranged from Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to colleagues new to academic writing, including those interested in writing about Student Engagement. The programme featured three online events (alongside virtual on-demand support) covering themes around barriers and challenges to publication; enabling collaboration and co-creation across institutional/disciplinary contexts and the opportunity to participate in an academic writing workshop. This case study will present an account of the process and experiences of delivering these events looking into the barriers/challenges experienced by ECRs, the community-based, peer-learning approach adopted Communities of Practice to address these with the aim to facilitate the publication process and make it more inclusive and accessible for a diverse range of participants. The example is framed and contextualised through relevant literature and a wider higher education backdrop of work-life balance, principles of staff-student partnership and a 'publish or perish' culture.

Introduction

This case study presents the process, experiences, and initial findings of delivering a bespoke development programme which was advertised last autumn (initially as one support session) to the RAISE community and wider colleagues from the Higher Education (HE) sector (nationally and globally). The initial idea, to undertake collaborative activities delivered by two RAISE Special Interest Groups (SIG) for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and Research & Evaluation emerged in 2022 as a response to the oftentimes unique set of barriers and challenges to publication faced by Early Career Researchers (ECRs), novice journal authors and all those who are interested in researching and publishing in the distinct field of student engagement. Hence, the main purpose of the programme was to offer a collaborative, learning environment aimed at guiding a diverse set of colleagues through the process of publishing academic outputs. This resulted in a "journey to publication" with the opportunity for the group members to contribute to this Student Engagement in Higher Education (SEHEJ) Special Issue.

Each event was designed with two main elements in mind; activities to clarify, unpack and enable a better understanding of the publication process in general and to aid participants' in identifying and then overcome experienced challenges. Secondly, the intention was to enable co-creation among participants to form partnerships including collaborations outside their usual institutional/disciplinary contexts and circles. For the purpose of creating an accessible and impactful series of events, participants' needs and preferences were pro-actively taken into consideration by incorporating regular opportunities to feed back before, during and in between the participatory workshop sessions. All SIG group convenors met virtually on a regular basis to discuss and map out the next step in the iteration of the series and delegated various aspects of organising and delivering the programme among themselves. Elements of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) have been adopted as an ethos for delivery and to enhance collaborations/teamworking between participants on a continuous basis.

Methods

A call was made to the RAISE network jiscmail advertising this collaborative writing development initiative. Prospective participants were asked to complete a form with some personal information about their motivations for taking part, their prior experience of publication and the areas they would like to focus on.

Respondents were asked if they were members of any of the following groups; Undergraduate Students, Postgraduate Students, Academic Staff, Professional Services Staff and/or Student Union staff/officer. This was to ensure that the coordinators achieved our aim of reaching a broader audience than those typically associated with publishing academic research (namely academic staff). Respondents were able to select multiple roles from these options (i.e. being an academic staff member and a postgraduate student). A limitation of this approach was that we were unable to identify further detail about the roles, for example which the individual may have considered their 'main role'.

Likert scales (range 1-10) were used to capture information about self-perceived experience of the respondents. Both questions encouraged reflection on experience ("*1 is not at all experienced, and 10 is very experienced*") with one question about publication ("*How would you rate your experience of publishing research/evaluations?*") and another about researching student engagement specifically ("*How would you rate your experience of undertaking student engagement research?*"). This programme was open to people who may have experience in publication (i.e. an academic publishing in their discipline area) but not necessarily in the topic of student engagement.

There were also opportunities for open text responses to unpack the areas of research interest, what barriers individuals face and what support is needed. We placed no restrictions around this, asking as an open text question on the application form for respondents to identify what barriers they face and what interests they have. Generating qualitative data, these were analysed inductively, with themes of barriers

emerging from the comments received. Some respondents identified multiple barriers and interests in these responses. Each of these were categorised as an individual barrier, as such the number of examples of the total themes exceeds that of the respondents.

We received 40 responses, as this information was collected for the purpose of planning and organising the workshop participants were given the opportunity to refuse consent for the information to be used for other purposes. As such, the results will feature responses from 34 of the respondents who consented for their information to be used.

Who is part of this group?

While this is a relatively small group, one of the interesting aspects is that this is not just restricted to academic staff. While SEHEJ welcomes authors who are not academic staff, this is not common in other journals. Table 1. shows the participants based on their role at their institution. Please note, eight participants recorded that they were also engaged in postgraduate study, for clarity this table only includes PG student respondents who identified this as their sole role.

Table 1: Participants’ role in institution as proportion of all registered participants

Role	Number (proportion of all in %)
Professional Services	13 (32.5%)
Academic	17 (42.5%)
Student Union Office/Staff	2 (5%)
PG Student	2 (5%)

The large number of participants who are Professional Services staff is perhaps indicative of the fact this is a group that often received very little support around research (Holmes, A. 2020). However, such staff are often in student facing roles with an opportunity to have a clear influence on student engagement while also facing challenges such as a lack of a defined cohort (George, 2023). Despite RAISE having a wide reach with students and staff, there were no undergraduate students who registered for the workshop.

What stops people from publishing about student engagement?

When invited to share their barriers to getting published, The responses were wide-ranging and a mixture of practical, experiential and perception barriers as Table 2 shows.

Table 2: Barrier categories and example quotes

Category	Number of mentions	Example quotes
Time (inc. allocation)	19	“Time allocation - being allocated the time to undertake research” “time is limited for us all but if I can set up a clear plan then I can find the time. I am not great at breaking the task down to get it done”
Lack of experience in publication	17	“Where to start, how to make work that is at the quality needed to publish. Academic Writing is new to me outside of my degree, so confidence is a big issue.” “where to begin, where to publish, which conference to attend”
Lack of experience in the area	7	“my research is more science-based, so I find navigating this type of work and language difficult at times” “I am having difficulty finding the right journal to publish my research”
Confidence	3	“Academic Writing is new to me outside of my degree so confidence is a big issue” “I have no experience of writing to publish. Lack of confidence”
Need collaborators	3	“knowing what others are working on - I'd love to find someone who was working in a similar area, so that we could collaborate on a project together” “network of colleagues with similar research interests”

Overwhelmingly, barriers related to time pressures were the most commonly mentioned. This included both the challenges in prioritising research against a busy workload as well as time management skills. These types of concerns are also emphasised in several studies (i.e. Myers 2020 & Herman et al 2021) which investigated the unprecedented challenges (in most times exacerbated especially post covid-19) faced by ECRs and novice researchers.

Aydin A. et al (2023) emphasise in their study, institutional and individual barriers connected to academic writing which relate to the most prominent barriers “lack of time” and “time management” mentioned by participants in our group. General institutional support available and the time allocated to do research might be limited due to increased workload particularly teaching commitments and/or delivering busy administrative activities/duties. A combination of these barriers might also apply to all those participants in our programme who would not classify/see themselves as academic researchers in the closest sense.

The next most common issues related in different ways to the publication process itself. Whether this was finding the process of publication itself too opaque, not knowing where to start or being unclear about what the required standard was. Other

barriers were related to this lack of awareness but more internalised, for example respondents cited lacking confidence or feeling that a certain level of status is required to publish. Similar obstacles in terms of individual attributes such as the level of confidence and self-belief are also outlined by Drosou et al. (2020) in their study looking at reflections from ECRs on their challenges in journal publishing. Opportunities to identify and express these were modelled into the activities to allow participants to develop an informal peer support network to be able to recognise and overcome these challenges.

Informal peer support networks and collaborations pertain to the fifth prominent category of challenges within our group. Opportunities to engage and foster collaborations among participants and establishing networks among colleagues with a shared research interest appeared to be vital for the programme. However, structural factors such as the lack of institutional support and culture (lack of recognition to this area) could be an inhibiting factor when connecting with peers, sharing experiences, and seeking guidance from those who had to navigate similar challenges. Pannell’s et al. (2019) paper highlights both several beneficial aspects of collaborative activities in research but also potential threats. Easy access on the one side and the risk of unequal access/participation in (online) communities on the other hand requires creating inclusive approaches in terms of access, and navigation so that all participants are able to utilise these spaces most effectively regardless of personal characteristics or barriers someone might face. This particularly relates to online communities including those from the programme.

Post Covid research further suggests that some of the named challenges appear to have been exacerbated by the pandemic as having a negative impact on research activity, development and prospects including well-being (Lokhtina et al. 2022 & Herman et al. 2021). This is particularly pertinent for those who consider themselves academia beginners or with a lack of exposure to researching/publishing in a distinct field [e.g. Hemmings, B. 2012]. This is to be seen as the difficult context that this group faces alongside multiple uncertainties due to their oftentimes precarious work positions.

Table 3: Most frequent barriers to publication by participant role

Role	Time (inc. allocation)	Confidence	Lack of experience in publication	Lack of experience in the area	Need collaborators
Academic Staff	12	1	5	6	1
Other roles	7	2	12	1	3
Total	19	3	17	7	4

Time barriers in their various guises affect all groups. Perhaps unsurprisingly, academic respondents seem broadly more confident about the principle of publication and are see the specific area of publishing about student engagement as a barrier. Whereas professional services colleagues were more likely to report that they generally lack experience in publication. It is worth recognising that research around the experiences of Professional Services staff in this area appeared rather limited as

these jobs tend to exclude or limit involvement/conducting research within their own distinct professional areas.

However, when asked to rate their level of experience with publishing (not just on student engagement) there was quite a wide range of responses, particularly among academic staff as table 4 shows:

Table 4: How would you rate your experience of publishing research/evaluations? (1= not all experienced, 10= very experienced)

		1-3 (1= Not all experienced)	4-6	7-10 (10= very experienced)
Role	Professional Services	12	0	1
	Academic	6	8	3
	Student Union Office/Staff	2	0	0
	PG Student	1	1	0
Total		21	9	4

Those not in academic roles tended to report very limited experience in publishing, with most professional services respondents responding three or below. With the purpose of this activity being to support those struggling to get published, it is not surprising that the responses tend to cluster towards the lower scores here. On a similar vein, no-one gave a response higher than 8 to this question. Only academic respondents reported anything over 5. This is perhaps to be expected giving the longer-standard expectation of academic staff to engage in dissemination of their research and practice. A limitation of this data is that we did not collect any information about the length of time in which people had occupied different roles.

However, the picture becomes more complex when we consider the level of experience of researching the area of student engagement as shown in Table 5 which provides an overview of the responses to this question organised across the scale and roles.

Table 5: How would you rate your experience of undertaking student engagement research? (1 is not at all experienced, and 10 is very experienced)

		1-3 (1= Not all experienced)	4-6	7-10 (10= very experienced)
Role	Professional Services	3	7	3
	Academic	5	10	2

	Student Officer/Staff	Union	0	2	0
	PG Student		2	0	0
Total			10	19	5

As Table 5 shows, there is quite a range of different levels of experiences across all role types that does not line up with the responses outlined in Table 4. This suggests that even colleagues (whether Professional, Academic, SU or Student) who are quite experienced in research are struggling to publish. Namely, this is not just a challenge for novice or early career researchers.

These insights were used to address the needs and preferences of attendees by developing targeted activities and opportunities to receive support which are outlined below.

Support offered

Based on the feedback given by participants, the following topics were decided for the session. All of these were supported by the facilitators throughout giving their own experience of publication and the barriers they have faced. Because of the mixed nature of experience in the group, and the respondents who reported low confidence, the following ground rules were established:

- People may be at different stages of the process, so please don't share anything you hear today about projects beyond the meeting ('Chatham House' rules)
- You will get out what you put in! So while we expect full engagement but no-one is obligated to do anything they don't want
- We are setting out proposed goals, but these will naturally be individual
- We are here to support, help and facilitate so do tell us what you need!

Step 1: Demystifying the publication process

A short training session designed to get input from the audience about their knowledge of some of the explicit and implicit barriers to publication. This was designed with peer input in mind, where members of the cohort with different levels of experience would contribute their experience and understanding. Areas covered included the following:

- Peer Review
- Impact Factor
- How to submit an article
- Editorial processes
- Outcomes and revisions

Each of these involved group discussions where participants were invited to define these key areas and share their experiences to allow some peer learning. This section of the workshop took around 30 minutes.

Step 2: Chance to meet others interested in areas you are

In order to address the respondents reporting that a key barrier was needing collaborators and developing confidence, the next step was to allow attendees the opportunity to network informally with colleagues with similar interests. This was facilitated through grouping participants based on their loose interest in broad themes proposed for research activity that were identified in the initial submission process. Grouping together responses, the proposed groupings were:

1. Under-representation (includes Widening participation, Marginalised students, Disadvantaged students)
2. Digital/online engagement (includes Digital co-creation, Online rapport)
3. Community (includes Communities of practice, Learning communities, Online communities, Connected curriculum)
4. Co-creation (includes Students as producer, Staff-student partnership)
5. Mentorship (includes buddying, peer support)
6. Employability (includes Professional Development, Placements, Business partnerships)

This allowed participants to exchange expertise/challenges experienced with each other by considering personal work contexts and the commonalities of interests they pursued. Participants were asked to join a group based on one of these six areas of interest. Interestingly, in spite of these groups being generated by the areas of interest of the attendees, the themes suggested in group 2,3 & 5 did not attract any members. This is likely due to participants being able to choose multiple themes in their application.

Forming bonds, nurturing relationships and building trust in the process, followed by the sharing of (tacit) knowledge(s) and experiences together with and among group members appeared to be essential elements to consider and apply to our approach. This was aimed at helping participants to develop creative approaches to co-writing and producing contributions for this journal as distinct groups of writers.

Step 3- Space to write and plan

Once these new groups were formed informally, they were set the task of introducing themselves to their group members and sharing what attracted them to the group. They were then set 30 minutes to find over-lapping interested to develop into a project. Each group was supported by a member of the organising group to keep this focused and share their experience. After this initial phase, all groups came back together and shared progress.

Step 4- Abstract development

Finally, attendees were then tasked with writing an abstract to summarise and shape the direction of their project. Once this was complete, the final stage was to agree next steps (including sharing contact details with the other group members).

Unstructured support

A handful of participants already had well developed projects and just requested the structured time to write. These participants were grouped together and given structure and instructions to support their writing (e.g. Please set yourself a clear goal, which you share with the group such as '*I will complete writing my literature review*'). While the coordinators checked in from time to time, this group was largely left to complete writing themselves.

Evaluative reflections and conclusion

This practice example helped to explore common barriers and challenges experienced by different groups of staff engaged in academic publishing around student engagement. The combination of training and engagement activities included in this development programme appeared to have provided a learning space to collaboratively address the reported barriers and enabled participants to form cross-institutional collaborations to unpack and engage with the process of publication. This extends to both of the SIG group convenors involved in the process and prompted reflections with our own practice and professional development.

Even though the programme has not been formally evaluated, the responses gathered from the group of participants suggests that there is a distinct need for support for colleagues in publishing about student engagement. This is independent of prior experience with publication or the type of role. The support required might be quite similar irrespective of roles, as some of the fundamental challenges (i.e. finding the right journal) were reported by both groups. Further research about what support colleagues in different roles require and corresponding barriers they face around publication will be needed to build on this initial discussion and case study example.

Overall, it can be noted that we received a healthy number of contributions to this Special Issue from academic colleagues, professional services staff, and students who engaged in the programme. Out of initially 30 submissions more than half were considered and form part of the issue. However, the approach followed in this programme also shines a light for possible future developments which involves gathering more nuanced feedback on the benefits experienced by participants to inform future delivery.

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