

# PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

**Project Title: Can a Pandemic Evidence-Synthesis Group Become a Model for Student Development and Enhanced Learning?**

**Project type:**

- **A Research Project** (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

**Principal Investigator: Ruth McQuillan, Neneh Rowa-Dewar & Emilie McSwiggan**

**Schools/department:** UNCOVER, Usher Institute

**Team members (including Schools and Departments):** Thulani Ashcroft, Damilola Iduye, Ashmika Motee, Farirai (Farrie) Nzvere, Kayla Ostrishko, Jasmin Rostron.

**For further details, please contact:** Neneh Rowa-Dewar ([Neneh.Rowa-Dewar@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Neneh.Rowa-Dewar@ed.ac.uk))

## **Report (1417 of 1500 words)**

We had three goals for our PTAS-funded project:

- (A) to provide opportunities for students to gain experience conducting real-world evidence synthesis, by integrating UNCOVER with undergraduate and postgraduate programmes;
- (B) to co-create a development pathway for UNCOVER's student volunteers; and
- (C) to promote the UNCOVER working model as a meaningful element of the student learning experience at Edinburgh.

We received a grant of £9,852.40. This included funding for a Project Manager (10 hrs/week) to support all three objectives, and 100 hours of student time for Objective B.

We are pleased to report progress against all three objectives. For example, in terms of Objective A, UNCOVER supported a cohort of biomedical sciences students doing COVID-19-related systematic reviews in 2021. Several experienced UNCOVER students became peer mentors, providing valuable assistance and gaining experience as mentors themselves. The model worked well, and we are about to start supporting a second cohort in 2022.

For Objective C, we shared UNCOVER's working model at several conferences. UNCOVER was featured at a recent Postgraduate Open Day, and we were invited to contribute to conversations about Curriculum Transformation at the University.

However, the heart of our PTAS-funded work relates to Objective B: the student-led, co-created development pathway for UNCOVER volunteers. We focus on that for the remainder of our project report, which has been written with contributions from both staff and students.

## **What did you do?**

Six UNCOVER volunteers were invited to form our 'PTAS team' and lead our co-creation work, following a fairly informal but competitive application process. The team included a mix of experienced and new members.

The team held a couple of initial planning workshops, facilitated by NRD and EM, to decide how to focus the project. The team eventually decided to focus on two areas, forming two separate but mutually supportive teams to lead each part:

- **A qualitative study of student and staff experiences**, and
- **The creation of a resource toolkit for new UNCOVER volunteers**

'Learning by doing' is the unofficial UNCOVER slogan. In this spirit, three UNCOVER student members (KO, TA and JR), supported by two staff (NRD and EM), developed a qualitative study to explore the experiences of UNCOVER participants.

The qualitative interview study received ethical approval from the Master of Public Health Ethics Group (MPHEG) and the team recruited eighteen participants (nine students and nine staff) by purposive sampling. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis by the student team.

DO, AM and FN led the creation of a resource toolkit for new UNCOVER volunteers. The aim was to draw together the wide range of resources that already exist in UNCOVER and the wider University context – rather than re-inventing them – in order to answer the questions new volunteers may have, and the skills they may want to develop during their time with UNCOVER.

The toolkit was created in PebblePad as a one-stop-shop for new UNCOVER volunteers. It signposts volunteers to the resources and guidance they are most likely to find useful. The toolkit has a very personal 'voice', with blogs from experienced and newer UNCOVER members sharing their experience, which can help to orientate and reassure new volunteers.

### **What did you find out?**

Themes that emerge from the qualitative study, and from work on the resources toolkit, include: inclusion and respect, community and purpose, developing skills and communication and boundary challenges.

**Inclusion and respect:** At the start of the qualitative study, the team were interested in the notion of 'flattening the hierarchy', and expected participants to talk about this. Although some did, it was more in terms of mentorship and inclusion. Students often felt their contribution was appreciated and their ideas sought. One non-academic member of staff felt that UNCOVER pushed against traditional structural norms in academia, in terms of relationships between staff and students, as well as in welcoming the contributions of non-academic staff, indicating an environment based on mutual respect for all.

**Community and purpose:** Many members expressed gratitude for a sense of community and purpose during a period of great uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Developing skills:** Student participants spoke about developing research but also "softer" communication and teamwork skills. This was also reflected in work on the resources toolkit. Based on feedback from UNCOVER members, the team included a significant 'soft skills' section, covering subjects such as mentoring and leadership, effective communication, teamwork and presentation skills. These skills were felt to be as important for successful participation, as the more technical skills related to systematic reviews.

**Communication and boundary challenges:** The importance of effective communication and boundary-setting was highlighted as an important issue and an ongoing challenge through the qualitative study. This arises particularly in the context of managing workload expectations. It is inherently difficult to estimate the hours of work required for a specific review in advance. Unless this uncertainty is clearly articulated, and workload expectations made explicit, this can lead to students committing significantly more hours to a project than originally anticipated. Here, students and staff have both spoken about the need for an awareness of one's own and others' commitment to a project.

### **How did you disseminate your findings?**

UNCOVER held a second online Conference in October 2021, largely organised by student members of the PTAS team. This was an opportunity to showcase diverse elements of UNCOVER's work, contributing to all three objectives of this PTAS project. The qualitative study team and the resources team both presented, and participated in dialogue with Dr Neneh Rowa-Dewar and Professor Colm Harmon (Vice Principal Students).

UNCOVER's working model has also been shared at the Learning & Teaching Conference, and at the Higher Education Institutional Research Conference, where the qualitative study team presented..

The resources toolkit was developed on PebblePad and will be linked to the UNCOVER website. It will be incorporated in the welcome email for new UNCOVER volunteers, to help them orientate themselves when they first join the group. The qualitative study will be written up in full and published on the UNCOVER website. The team also intend to write paper(s) for publication, exploring the study's findings on co-production between staff and students and/or the methodological approaches used and insights from the process.

### **What have been the benefits to student learning?**

The qualitative research completed by the PTAS students has contributed directly towards quality-of-life changes for students volunteering with UNCOVER, including through the creation of an UNCOVER Charter. The charter draws on discussions at UNCOVER Student Forums, as well as staff and student responses to the qualitative study. This has also led to UNCOVER staff taking responsibility for developing a staff charter, defining their roles, responsibilities and expectations.

The resource toolkit is a welcoming and supportive place for students to begin their UNCOVER journey, signposting new volunteers to information that will be useful at every stage of their involvement with UNCOVER. We hope it will give students more confidence in their skills and their ability to grow and contribute as members of UNCOVER review teams.

The qualitative team have contributed to a seminar for students preparing for their dissertations in the Master of Public Health and MSc Clinical Trials programmes. This seminar will provide students within UNCOVER and beyond an opportunity to gain insight into the practice of qualitative interviewing a population of which the interviewer is a member.

The student teams have also gained valuable learning. For the qualitative team, this includes key skills such as qualitative interviewing, data analysis, preparing an ethics application, interviewing online, interview transcription, undertaking analysis on Nvivo, inductive coding and thematic analysis. The resources team have gained experience designing and delivering

online resources. Both teams have been involved in dissemination efforts, which have developed their presentation and writing skills.

### **How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?**

Networks like UNCOVER, bringing staff and students together to address real-world problems across disciplinary boundaries, could exist across the University. What we think has distinguished UNCOVER so far is the central role which students play in the group, and the value which we place on their contribution.

Our PTAS project has enabled us to understand the student experience much more fully, and address some of the barriers and challenges to participation, so that students can have a more positive all-round experience.

We have shared, and will continue to share, our working model and our learning openly, for others to draw on. We would be delighted if our model were used in different parts of the University, or reflected in Curriculum Transformation plans, as a unique and attractive aspect of the student learning experience.

### **List of Dissemination Materials:**

- UNCOVER Conference 2021 programme: [UNCOVER Online Conference 2021 | The University of Edinburgh](#)
- HEIR Conference – UNCOVER working model presentation (script – Appendix 1)
- UNCOVER Conference 2021: Qualitative Study presentation (slides - Appendix 2)
- UNCOVER Conference 2021: Resources Toolkit presentation (slides - Appendix 3)
- Postgraduate Open Day – UNCOVER session (slides - appendix 4)