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## PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

### Project Title:

Enhancing student learning, overall experience, and the societal impact of student community projects by refining engagement and feedback tools for students.

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### Project type

**B Innovation Project** (introduction and evaluation of an educational innovation, usually taking a practical approach)

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**Principal Investigator : Dr Andrew Cross**

**Schools/department : GeoSciences**

**Team members (including Schools and Departments) :**

**Ali Grant (GeoSciences)**

**Dr Hannah Cornish (Psychology)**

**Dr Steve Earl (EFI)**

**Dr Jule Hildman (Moray House)**

**Dr Margaret Petrie (Moray House)**

**Dr Marion Smith (Health in Social Sciences)**

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Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project.

Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

### Report (maximum 1500 words)

#### What did you do?

This project focused on community-based service learning and internships, looking at several key issues: e.g. barriers to realising the full potential of these projects (e.g. lack of structured feedback) and measuring the success, sustainability and legacy of these projects, the role of community perspectives in helping to both shape these projects and make them more beneficial to wider communities, alongside their broader relationship with the university. We did this by holding a series of focus groups and interviews to investigate the different types of outputs and associated impact of projects, while exploring the short / long term, quantified or qualified, and limited or extended reach beyond the project partners.

#### What did you find out?

Through the focus groups and interviews we identified 4 key groups / areas where student projects had the clearest impact: Community, Host Organisations, Host Staff, and the University. Across all of these we identified various impacts, alongside key issues and considerations for different stakeholders.



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*Community:*

Placements broaden social networks. Students engaging with those from marginalised groups e.g. those with learning difficulties, HIV etc can be a transformative experience, breaking cycles of stereotypic thinking and increasing understanding between diverse groups. Students as 'persons of knowledge' bring learning into communities which can generate new ideas, facilitate local engagement increase capacity and sense of empowerment. However, learning can also be reciprocal, with community members being placed in the role of 'expert'. Placements involving research investigate areas which may otherwise be overlooked and can involve authentic participants, and students can also act as positive role models, with first-hand knowledge of the university experience and insights into particular career paths. This may mean they are well placed to reach out to more under-representative groups (and placements can expose vulnerable students to vulnerable groups and vice versa.)

Points to reflect on (Practitioners):

- What role do you see for community group members in identifying the impact of a placement or in providing feedback?
- How do you manage the vulnerable student / vulnerable community member relationship?
- How can you best measure social justice impact and what should happen to that information?

Points to reflect on (Students):

- How do you measure the impact that your project has had on the community? Are there more effective ways?
- What strategies do you have when working with vulnerable people for ensuring yours and their wellbeing?

*Host Organisations:*

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Students are at the forefront of learning and can highlight new approaches or models of practice, and working collectively can harness a wide range of skills, often creating a bridge between the corporate and community arenas. As a diverse group, students bring different perspectives and often stay on, widening the demographics of the volunteer pool. Positive placement experiences can lead to students cementing and promoting the good reputation of organisations. Students can also undertake less popular tasks or those requiring a large time commitment, which may otherwise be prohibitive for organisations.

Points to reflect on (Practitioners):

- Students often bring a fresh pair of eyes to an organisation, inadvertently questioning practice. How do you reflect on these conversations?
- Students can be an asset to organisations. What do you do to maintain the balance between the students as learners and students fulfilling tasks as 'unpaid employees'?
- Placements often result in students making recommendations or suggesting innovative ideas. What opportunities and challenges are presented by this?

Points to reflect on (Students)

- Students are 'curious' learners, inadvertently questioning practice. How do you think this is received and what learning can you take from this?
- As a student, you may put forward new ideas or recommendations. How do you feel if these are / aren't put into practice? What impact do these decisions have on potential impact?



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*Host Staff:*

Having students on placement exposes host staff to the latest theory and practice, particularly in relation to the tech landscape. Host staff feel an affinity with students pursuing similar career paths to themselves and the opportunities presented for professional reflective dialogue. It was also recognised that students are often juggling with a range of commitments and demands on their time and placements have to be factored in alongside these.

Points to reflect on (Practitioners):

- What particular aspects of your practice have students had most impact on?
- Many students have competing commitments e.g. P/T work, childcare, course work. How do you ensure that you are sensitive to this, whilst still ensuring that the competencies of the placement are met?
- A number of students present with poor mental health, resulting in host staff performing a dual role of educator and counsellor. How do you ensure your own wellness in this scenario and what would better support you with this?
- Host staff make a significant contribution to students' learning. How valued do you feel and what might improve that?

Points to reflect on (Students)

- How do you maintain a healthy work / life balance and what opportunities and challenges do placements present to this?
- What role can students play in breaking cycles of stereotypic thinking, or to promote social justice?

*University:*

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The University benefits from the authentic knowledge that students are able to immerse themselves whilst out on placement, and the quality and diversity of student placements are integral to the reputation of the University. Initiatives such as the Mastercard programme matches students from Africa with grass-roots organisations in this country, creating a global reach. Students can also leave a legacy at local level whilst also taking learning back to their own communities. The University benefits significantly from the contribution professional placement providers make to student learning, and it was felt that this was not always recognised nor celebrated. Student placements can also contribute to the overall impact the University is potentially able to make with regards to social justice.

Points to reflect on (Practitioners):

- How could placement achievements best be recognised, celebrated and learning disseminated?
- How can social justice outcomes be integrated into a broader framework of to measure and recognise impact across the University as a whole?

Points to reflect on (Students)

- How can students identify and undertake various co/extracurricular opportunities for placement?

**How did you disseminate your findings?**



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The project findings were disseminated through a presentation at the Learning and Teaching conference in 2020, and will be further disseminated through a working paper that is currently being prepared.

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

This project has provided information that is being used to refine existing courses / approaches. By ensuring a better understanding of the relationship with external partners, and how and where students can seek feedback from these partners on the development of projects, we anticipate improvements in both project outputs, and student's experiences.

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

The findings from this project are being used to inform development of new courses. The project lead (Andy Cross) is currently on secondment at EFI helping to develop the undergraduate teaching programme, where there is an emphasis on challenge based experiential learning, and Andy and the team will lean heavily on findings from the project when developing the new programme.

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