The University of Edinburgh
Principal's Teaching Award Scheme

PTAS Project Report   (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

Key Information

Project Title: **Personal Values in Postgraduate University Student Engagement: a Creative Participatory Action Research Project.**

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Final Report

Grant recipients are expected to submit a brief report **within 4 months of** the conclusion of their project which outlines briefly the following: nature of work completed; outcomes; benefits to student learning/student experience; dissemination activity (where relevant – actual and planned) and how the activity could inform future work or be transferred to other subject areas in the University. The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages. Suggested word count is 1500-2000 words.

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.

What did you do?
This research project explored the role of values within the context of higher education. Asking the question: What is the experience of students who adopt a values-based approach when it comes to engagement with the university community during times of adversity? It should be noted that our initial project idea did not take into account the role of an online community, but the element of adversity and need for creative engagement online emerged as a result of the pandemic.

In our initial idea, it was proposed that university is a developmental phase that provides an opportunity for identification of and reflection on one's values; supporting students to relate to their education in a personally meaningful manner respects their diverse, individual contexts. Therefore, the project aims were to have student participants/co-researchers:

1. Reflect on personal values in higher education and identify, clarify, and prioritise them.
2. Highlight any changes, alterations in behaviour, and impact on personal and educational

development.
3. Learn to adopt a values-based approach to education and life.
4. Meet other people and discuss their values together as a university community.

The project culminated in June of 2021, after a year of online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of 11 postgraduate students in the University of Edinburgh's School of Health in Social Science signed up to be participatory researchers in the final stage. In 2021 the Values Project ran over 3 distinct stages.

Stage 1 involved activities around orientating students to the project. This included an introductory workshop and description of research project. This initial welcoming stage set the foundation for the duration of the project. It introduced the project to participants, the participants to project coordinators and the participants to each other. In addition, it is during this stage that participants identified their core values, so they could reflect on them at the end of the project.

Stage Goals:
- Present the project to participants in detail
- Agree on expectations about the project
- Introduce participants to each other
- Start the reflective process of identifying values in life
- Clarify participants' academic motivation
- Set positive, inclusive, supportive culture within the group

Stage 2 involved a reflective project utilising photo voice a way for participants to take part in the project to reflect their values and interact with the reflections of others. This was the main stage of the values project. The participants embarked on a reflective journey about their values in life, their academic motivation, and how they apply their values in education.
The main goals were:
- Participants experience a reflective journey
- Participants experience clarification of values
- Participants gain an understanding of their values in education
- Create supportive group culture
- Participants feel part of a community

Photovoice project
We asked participants to capture photographs that symbolised their values and write a narrative to explain what the image means to them. After an initial training, participants had an online discussion using Yammer, providing a mechanism for both discussion and exhibition of photos. (For examples see attached report). This staged involved regular group sessions discussing values through weekly set times for the group to come together and discuss their progress in identifying their values and applying them to education. In addition there were online regular social events to help the group feel more comfortable in sharing their personal reflections on their values. Through the use of the online platform Yammer, participants had a safe space to share their reflections as they occur, and comment on others' reflections.

The final stage 3 involved translating learning into action. In this final data collection phase, participants shared their experiences of the project and captured suggested changes to be made. A focus group (n=11) was held using a semi-structured format to provide more formal feedback

Key points:
- What we did: Created online community of students to explore personal values in education
- Results: Overall positive experience which clarified values and helped create a sense of community
- What we will do next: Creation of a resource to develop future Values Project

What did you find out?

We created an online community, which followed a photovoice methodology combined with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)'s exercises and investigated how one's personal values can guide their academic motivation. Participants highlighted their involvement in the project as a positive experience that helped them clarify and gain a deeper understanding of their values. Their reflections and insights were thematically analysed and informed the creation of a curricular resource aiming to support university students to identify, develop and eventually experience their academic journey based on their values.

Research Question 1: What was the experience of participating in the Values Project?

Four related but distinct themes emerged from the data regarding the first research question. It should be acknowledged that whilst the first three themes, "Positive Experiences of the Values Project", "Challenging Aspects of the Values Project", "Developing Further Comprehension of Values", emerged in rich detail with little prompting from the facilitator, the fourth theme "Meaning of University Community" was more directed by the facilitator's questions.

Theme 1: Positive Experiences of the Values Project

One of the most prominent themes in the focus group discussion was that the Values Project was a positive experience. A key aspect of this positive experience for participants was the clarity they gained from understanding their values in education. Some participants felt the project helped them discover new values or values they had not acknowledged before, whereas other participants gained a deeper understanding of values they had already identified:

"It really helped me identify other ones that I wasn't thinking about.", "the project as a catalyst it allowed me to solidify them [the values] even more"

This clarity and deeper understanding of personal values was valued by participants as a tool to aid a more comprehensive understanding of their academic motivation, as one of the participants noted:

"So it made me actually really think about what was my kind of motivation for learning?".

Participants also applied this deeper understanding of values to wellbeing. They appreciated the Values Project for helping them to disentangle the complex nature of their values, and how they can be forces both for positive motivation, and negative pressure,

"I definitely reflected on the fact that it can be both a good thing a bad thing for me and it's like a kind of spectrum?"

A final key aspect of the positive experiences of participants related was the sense of connection and community that participants gained from the group. It was acknowledged that the COVID-19 restrictions this year made it challenging to develop connections. The Values Project, alongside other collaborative projects with a higher purpose, were referenced as important for feeling connected to the university community

"It felt like it did nurture this kind of community within our, you know, I feel like this little group is probably the most connection I felt with any group this year."

Participants felt that the project could help to break down barriers within the university community. The experience of being participatory action researchers, rather than only being involved as passive participants, and feeling on one level with staff taking part in the project, was noted as important to this process:

"It gives a bit more of the idea and understanding that lecturers tutors staff, they're also people. They have their values. They have their lives… So I think this, could also give them more. Like more, the more feeling of an actual community."

Theme 2: Challenging Aspects of the Values Project

Alongside these positive experiences of the Values Project, participants also identified several aspects of the Project that they found challenging. The modality of the photovoice stage of the project, and in particular the need to obtain consent for any photos of people was highlighted as limiting, "trying to do it with inanimate objects I found really challenging". In addition, some participants felt less comfortable with the Yammer platform feeling like social media. However, most participants did not feel this was a significant barrier once the supportive nature of the group became apparent. There was agreement amongst the group that the initial exercise which asked participants to narrow down their values to three was challenging but helpful. Participants commented that they have more than three values, however, the challenge of choosing a top three to focus on was also beneficial to active engagement in reflection on values. This reflects a wider recognition amongst participants that applying values to education is difficult conceptually, but a rewarding reflective process, nevertheless:

The pressure of just narrowing it down to three? I think that was in a way sort of create this kind of uhm filtering mechanism where you felt ok uhm which ones are really important?", "I knew that they were my values but I struggled to try and express them in a way that was kind of relevant academically".

In conjunction with these challenges from the way the Values Project was run, participants also reflected on the challenge of their own reaction to the Project. Participants felt a desire to complete the Project "correctly" and felt some pressure to portray the "right" values in the group, despite understanding that there are no 'correct' values, according to the aims of the Project. Additionally, participants reflected that the process of identifying their values and in particular of presenting their values publicly created an internal pressure to be loyal to their values in their behaviours.

"I think from the moment you talk about your resilience, your conscientiousness, and you're really clear about them then you have to have loyalty to your own value. So I think insidiously that adds pressure".

Theme 3: Developing Further Comprehension of Values

The Developing Further Comprehension of Values theme encompassed the experience that participants had of developing a clearer understanding of values. The participants noted that they were aware of their values prior to the project but tried to discover the way they are applied in an academic environment:

"I knew that the values that I was gonna try and talk about I knew that they were my values".

They acknowledged that "[values]'re maybe not as important depending on whether it's in a kind of personal relationship setting or a professional setting or an academic setting or whatever."

During the introductory workshop of the project (stage 1), the research team had provided a conceptual working definition of "Values" in the project (See Appendix A) (i.e., "Values are guiding principles for our behaviour; there are how you want to behave or act on an ongoing basis and to treat yourself, others, the world around you; there are the types of strengths and qualities we hope to develop. However, they are not something you can obtain nor a goal. There is no such thing as 'right values' or 'wrong values'.") . Hence, the focus group discussion circled more around an individual's meaning of specific values, as:

"The same named value can mean quite different things for different people, like quite a few of us put up the same value but with quite different explanations.". Interestingly participants highlighted the need to define values as concepts and not as individual words because words carry specific meanings, which can lead to misconceptions "I used more than one word to describe them [my values] cause for me it was hard to find just one word to describe cause I was more thinking of a concept than just like a pre-made word that has a meaning."

Another key point of the focus group discussion was whether values are a constant or an evolving concept in one's life. This part included two prominent discussion areas: the project's role and age's role. Participants underlined the role that the project played in the way they generally understand what a value is:

"My understanding of what values are just generally has changed from this project rather than seeing them as a kind of- like a rule book to live by it more of an awareness of what underpins me as a person", "I don't feel that […] they are a rule of my life or anything like that. But, a guide like a conceptual guide". The second area of vibrant discussion was whether age or/and level of education play a part in the values' change over time, where participants noted that their values do not change but the understanding of them develops, "I would say that my values are definitely intact but […] I keep on redefining resilience as my value."

Theme 4: Meaning of Academic/University Community

As aforementioned the Meaning of Academic/University Community theme developed due to the questions of the facilitator and did not occur spontaneously during the focus group discussion. It highlights the apparent uncertainty and confusion among students and universities around the term 'academic or university community'. Participants raised questions around the people that should be included when the academic university community is described:

"If someone's part of the university, are they automatically part of the academic community?". In contrast, there was more certainty regarding why the academic/university community is important personally."

Participants felt that community is important for feeling part of a group that fosters helpful discussions, and helps to not feel alone:

"Academic community for me is that sense that of belonging, like the opposite to isolation, which is a deeply psychological thing rather than physical", "community is being part of a group not being alone.", "the creative process that allows it be bouncing off each other and you". Lastly, there was evident uncertainty over the importance of physical proximity to an academic community, "I think for me the community part had to do a lot with people and not and a bit with the buildings. So actually when I saw the buildings it made it a bit better."

Research Question 2: What were Participants' Insights for Future Values Project Developments?

Two related but distinct themes emerged from the data regarding the second research question: "What were Participants' Insights for Future Values Project Developments?".

Theme 5: Reasons for Project Success

The Reasons for Project Success theme offers a comprehensive view of the mechanisms behind the positive experiences felt by participants. Participants felt the project group had a supportive culture and this was highlighted as an important reason for each success:

"The only reason that that's been positive for me is because of the community of people that were commenting", "it was really quite a kind of supportive and encouraging environment.". This was also observed in the group dynamics during the focus group, with participants regularly endorsing others' points, " I was just going to say I really like that point from (Participant_1)", "Really] interesting (Participant_3)".

Another key point for the project's success, emphasised by the majority of the participants, was the voluntary nature of the project, as it prepared them to be vulnerable and intimate as members of the group:

"The way I've experienced it now for me and what (Participant_1) says has worked because it's voluntary. It's optional, it was intimate". Although being vulnerable was challenging and risky for the participants, they were on the same page and demonstrated genuine engagement with each other posts during the photovoice stage. Hence, they felt that the project was offering an environment that fostered active reflection over their values helping them to construct a more in-depth understanding of them, "Once you've signed up for it and we're all in, and I think that's one kind of expectation that I had with going into this […] I think with that commitment it sort of opens up more kind of discussions and more ehm kind of connections between the community".

Theme 6: Future Project Implementation

Participants were proactive in making direct suggestions for how the project could be better implemented in the future. One commonly discussed topic in this theme was who should be invited to take part in the project, which participants connected to their uncertainty over who is included in a definition of the academic university community. There was consensus that offering this project to a wider variety of people, across staff and students and across academic schools, would be beneficial:

It's pretty clear everyone can value from that. So in the in the bigger picture I think. Yeah, if that can be expanded to every sector of life, that's amazing". The timing and mode of delivery were also recognised as important aspects of future iterations: "I think it would be well placed if it was halfway through the year", "I think if you were to move it forward, having a multi-platform approach would be really beneficial for people".

Some suggestions are linked closely to reasons for the success of the project. For example, participants agreed that it is important to clearly explain the project at the start of any future iterations, to aid the creation of a similarly supportive, close group:

"That could work really well if. The values of the value project are explicitly explained and actually you know promoted as the forefront of the whole project. If the intimacy we have now is prioritized".

Similarly, there was concern that including the project as part of any curriculum would undermine the benefits of voluntary participation that were strongly recognised by the group. Therefore, participants recommended that the project continue to be offered as a voluntary group activity:

"The way I've experienced it now for me and what (Participant_1) says has worked because it's voluntary. It's optional, it was intimate. It was it was in you and I feel that if you start mainstreaming things they lose their initial energy".
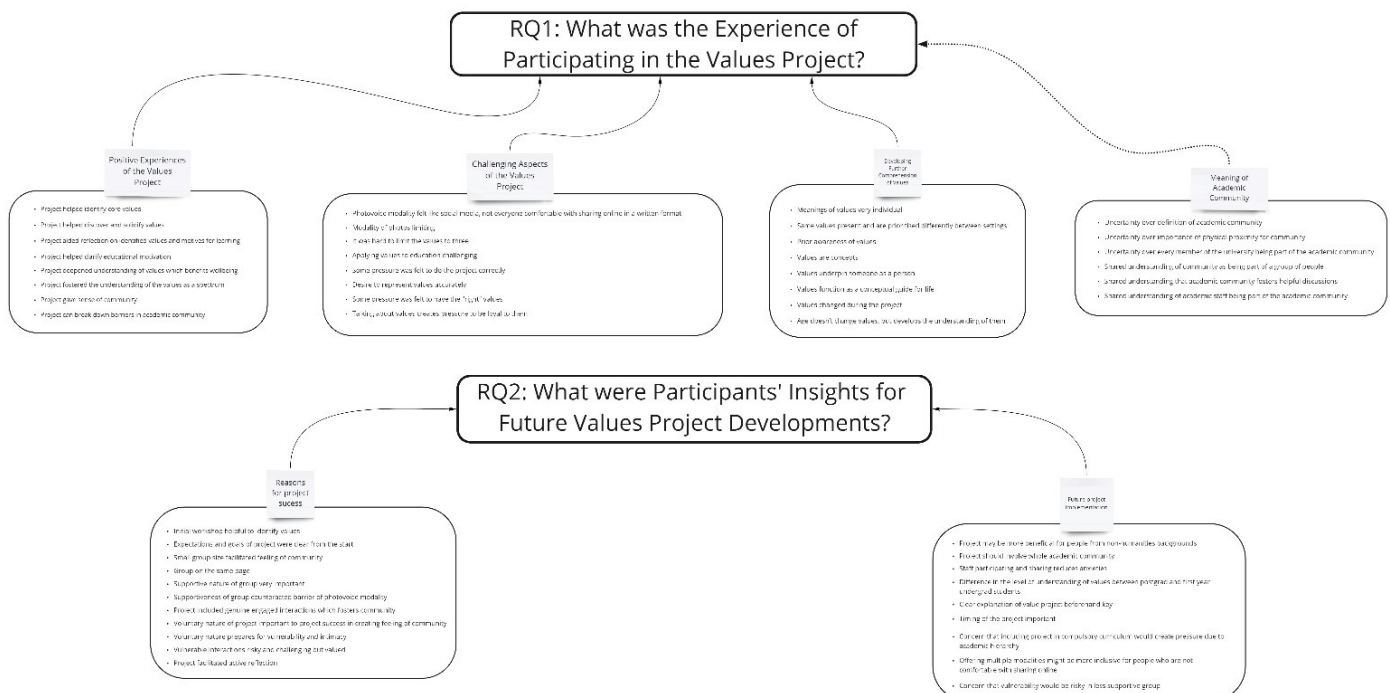
What have been the benefits to student learning?

This experience was valued as a tool to aid a more comprehensive understanding of their academic motivation and was referenced as important for feeling connected to the university community. We believe this project shows that when universities allow students to identify their

own values, it helps them have a greater experience of engagement. By capturing the voice of participants, this project demonstrates that students appreciated the opportunity to reflect on values. As higher education slowly emerges from the pandemic, we can be open to way to draw students into a more meaningful experience of learning.

In an ever demanding world, our long-term desired qualities of life often take a backseat to more pressing goals (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Luoma, & Lillis, 2006). This is true for many higher education students. Increased competition in the job market may lead students to feel pressure to distinguish themselves, striving for exemplary grades and establishing a track record of successful achievements during their time at university. With their ardent focus on goals, it is easy for students' values to be lost in the fray. Values can be broadly classified into three types: personal values – those that define who we are, what we want, and why we think the way we do; social values – those that govern our social connections and interpersonal bonds; and universal values – those that influence spiritual thought, cultural standards, and acceptance of life experiences (Hansen & Leuty, 2012). Our personal values are guiding principles for our behaviour (Hayes et al, 2006); they represent how we want to engage with the world and the types of strengths and qualities we hope to develop (Harris, 2009). Personal values provide us with a sense of direction and purpose in life, which is considered key to happiness and healthy functioning (Bronk, 2013). Within the context of higher education, students who adopt a values-based approach have been shown to have improved grade point average (Chase et al, 2013) and elevated commitment to projects when faced with adversity (Lydon & Zanna, 1990). In addition, when personal characteristics are paired with mastery and performance, we see a positive relationship with academic performance and a negative one with performance avoidance (Mohebbi, Shahany, & Sharifi, 2014; Synder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams, & Wiklund, 2002; Pintrich, 2000).

University is a developmental phase during which students not only develop their academic skills but also contemplate their identity, career plans, and place in society. To support optimal outcomes, their decisions and consequent actions should be directed by their own personal values (Hayes et al, 2006). Furthermore, recent studies at universities have shown that the use of ACT interventions delivered in various formats (online and in-person) improved student's psychosocial flexibility, mental health, wellbeing, and engagement in higher education (Asikainen et al., 2018; Grégoire et al., 2018; Räsänen et al.,2016). Thus, the use of ACT encourages students to adopt a values-based living in their academic life and improve their general wellbeing during their experience at university.

University, therefore, presents an opportune moment for identification of and reflection on one's values. Supporting students to relate to their education in a personally meaningful manner respects the diverse, individual contexts of our students. The current project focused on a designed participatory method to support students to identify their personal values, connecting these with their education experience, and produce a personal image-based narrative of this journey. This project culminated with the student-led development of a curriculum resource targeted at helping students clarify and embed their personal values within their wider educational experience. In line with recent studies, universities have shown that the use of values-focused interventions delivered in various formats (online and in-person) improved student's psychosocial flexibility, mental health, wellbeing, and engagement in higher education (Asikainen et al., 2018; Grégoire et al., 2018; Räsänen et al.,2016). Thus, the use of values activities encourages students to adopt a values-based living in their academic life and improve their general wellbeing during their experience at university. The project culminated with student-led development of a curriculum resource targeted at helping students clarify and embed their personal values within their wider educational experience.

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How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?
In our report attached in appendix A; we describe how this project could be replicated in other parts of the university. This could be done as a within-curricular or extra-curricular activity.

How did you disseminate your findings?
We presented at two conferences and are preparing a final draft to be submitted for publication.
   1. 2022 PORTO 31st International Conference on "Literature, Social Sciences and Education" PLSSE-22. Portugal*

   2. 2022 Global Education Conference. University of Riverside. California, USA.

Our presentation won "Best Oral Paper"

Where can we find more information on your project?
Please provide links to dissemination of final results and findings. You may do so using an appendix, an attachment, or a permanent url.
Please see appendix A; publication pending

Appendix A
(see attached PDF):

Institute for Academic Development

Financial statement (please delete as appropriate):

Either
This project has utilised the funding awarded to it by the PTAS Committee and the Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trust who may require it for auditing purposes.

Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:
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Institute for Academic Development