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Lessons learned from researching, writing and publishing with undergraduate students in Higher Education

Carla Solvason [a], Chloe Roberts [b], Emily Huffer [c], Ryan Careford [d], Lucy Page [e], Emma Parsons [f], Holly Holder [g], Thalia Poppitt [g] and Sarah Watkins [h]

[a]4 Darbys Green, University of Worcester, Worcester, England; [b]Institute of Education, University of Worcester, Wolverhampton, Wombourne, England; [c]Institute of Education, University of Worcester, Stourbridge, West Midlands; [d]Institute of Education, 5 Warwick Road, Hereford, England; [e]Institute of Education, University of Worcester, Hailsham, UK; [f]Institute of Education, University of Worcester, Wollaston, England; [g]Institute of Education, University of Worcester, Pershore, Worcestershire; [h]Institute of Education, University of Worcester, Hereford, England

ABSTRACT

This paper is based upon a collaborative research project with a group of eight second-year students studying on an Early Childhood BA at a Midlands (UK) University. The empirical research project emerged as a response to the concerning levels of disengagement demonstrated by this group post-pandemic. Because the focus of their module was research approaches, as module lead, I took the decision to engage the students in 'real world' research. I reasoned that if the stakes were raised, they might feel more compelled to interact with the content in a meaningful way. An anonymous survey, exploring student health, wellbeing and motivation, was the result. Although the survey added little to the existing discourse concerning the drivers and barriers for Higher Education students in 2023, the process provided an extremely rich learning experience for the students, particularly in relation to the complexity of the ethical decisions required for research and researcher positionality. This article focuses upon the process of the research and the barriers encountered, but it also considers the ethics of using the incidental data that resulted.

KEYWORDS

Student engagement; student research; motivation; ethics; ownership; positionality

Introduction

The research study that forms the basis for this discussion emerged from attempts to turn a negative situation into positive action. Whilst teaching at a University in the Midlands of England with a small group of eight second-year (level 5) BA Early Childhood students (on their preparation for their independent research project the following year), I encountered persistent excuses from them for not completing study activities outside of face-to-face

CONTACT Carla Solvason c.solvason@worc.ac.uk

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sessions. The group were totally demotivated and disengaged with the content, despite the fact that it was crucial for their own independent research the following year. After one particularly frustrating session I made the decision to discard the approaches that had worked well in previous years and, instead, to guide the students through a piece of real-world empirical research. This project, just like the research that they would carry out in settings the following year, would have *real-world consequences* and thus accountability.

In an unapologetically didactic way, I explained to the students what we were going to do, including the topic that we would investigate, which was student motivation and disengagement post-Covid-19. I presented them with my rationale for this research, reasoning that if their tutors in the Institute of Education (IoE) were able to gain a better understanding of the causes of demotivation and the needs of students, then they would be better able to support them. This focus upon a purposeful and meaningful area of investigation, with the potential to collect information that could bring about positive change, set a precedence for their own independent projects that they would carry out in settings the following year. They would learn how to research by doing research (Silverman 2000, 20), with me as the 'tour guide' for this first excursion. The students were sold on the fact that this research would produce results that would then be shared with senior management of the IoE (which they have already been) and would be sent for publication. Extrinsic motivation worked where intrinsic was lacking.

The ethical implications of students carrying out research with their peers, particularly research that asked about mental and physical health, were substantial; therefore, ethical considerations were a key element of this project, as I will discuss shortly. The joy of such a small student group was that it was possible for concepts to be explored and debated as a whole research team, albeit with different priorities. My key aim, as a tutor, was to discover whether this approach might improve student engagement, and my secondary aim was to gain a fuller understanding of disengagement factors post Covid-19. The students were keen to discover what existed, and potentially to increase the support available to them, in terms of their wellbeing. It was also interesting for them to consider how their own experiences compared with others'. These different positions added depth and a wholeness to our investigation, as, in the meeting of our various viewpoints 'understanding bec[ame] illuminated' (Luca 2009, 22) by the others' perception.

All students played a part in the research process, and it all ran reasonably smoothly (or as smoothly as research ever can). We had limited survey responses to our survey, but some very open answers, and we were able to share our findings with the wider IoE of over 80 staff. The report was well received. So far so good. The dilemma was met here, at the point of

publication. Our data were thin and offered very few new discoveries, this meant that to share this experience in a format that would be useful to an academic community, the process, rather than the product would need to take centre stage. And in doing so it required relegating my co-researchers not just back to student, but, to some extent, to research subject. This was not a comfortable switch.

In exploring this research journey, I should forewarn you that I do not offer easy 'answers' to student disengagement, nor do I share the impressive news that this group of students all achieved distinctions in their dissertations (they may yet, but we won't know until this time next year). What you will find instead is a spotlight on the challenges related to power and positionality that arise when tutors research collaboratively with students. I take you for a metaphorical dip in Punch's ethical swamp (Punch 1994, 94); replete with a healthy dose of moral angst. I pose the question of whether carrying out empirical research with a group of students that was engaging, and seemingly effective learning, can justify my then repositioning them, and this activity, for the purpose of academic publication.

In doing so, I do not totally disregard the research findings concerning student wellbeing and motivation, and I do make brief allusion to the findings from both the literature and our data. This is included to demonstrate some of the outcomes of this learning experience and to feature a glimpse of the work of the students. The key focus, however, remains upon the research journey. Although this article revisits the research journey through the lens of module tutor, the whole group, as well as a tutor who supported some of the activities, are still recognised as valuable contributors to the original project.

Approaching the literature review

I have now taught in HE for 15 years. Throughout that time, the reluctance of some students to recognise reading as a fundamental element of their study has been an ongoing challenge. When we started this project, the research group was tasked with reviewing recent literature (2018–2022) relating to student engagement and motivation, using our institute library search engines. They identified their own range of terms for the search, including combinations of: 'College', 'university', 'Higher education', 'Learning', 'Students', 'Mental health', 'COVID-19', 'Lockdown', 'Pandemic', 'Motivation', 'Engagement', 'Stress', 'Emotion' and 'Psychological'. Modest 15 texts were located and reviewed within the seminar and independent study time allocated.

In order for us to draw together the range of sources into a whole the students were asked to identify the descriptors illustrated in Table 1. One student then took on the responsibility of compiling all

Table 1.

Authors/Title/Year	Country	Sample	Data	Overview of topic	Key quotes
The COVID-19 pandemic and students' mental health Soria Horgas,andRoberts 2021	USA (Idaho)	Unknown	Quant and Qual	The statistics of students experiencing poor mental health The significance that the pandemic has had on MH as finances, sleep patterns and general self-care Outlines recommendations moving forward	"The pandemic has had deleterious effects on students' mental health". **Pg 38** "Even **prior** to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were particularly prone to high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression". **Pg 40**
University students' classroom emotional climate and attitudes during and after COVID-19 lockdown McLure Koul,andFraser (2022)	Australia	194 University students	Quant and Qual	Researched different classes throughout the University to compare the emotional climate of classrooms and students' attitudes during and post lockdown	"Students' social and emotional interactions with teachers and peers also influence their level of engagement and, hence their learning outcomes" **Pg3** – could link this into how COVID may have affected this

sources together, and the completed table was shared with the whole group. This table gave us a starting point from which to explore similarities and differences between the texts and what appeared as key points arising. All students, even those that may have contributed least to the selection process, were provided with the opportunity to critically appraise a range of texts; to experience what tackling a 'literature review' was like. The process enabled us to have a fruitful discussion about aspects such as the makeup of the research sample, the way data was collected, the type of data collected and the impact of cultural context. The activity provided opportunity to explore texts in a grounded and purposeful way, to ascertain the rigour of the evidence that we were presented with, and the criticality with which it should be discussed in our literature review.

Some key themes emerged from the review, including the pressures of HE study per se (for example, Soria, Horgos, and Roberts 2021, 40 points out that 'Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were particularly prone to high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression'); the impact of COVID-19 upon students' health and wellbeing in general (Devkota 2021; Gibbons 2022; Gewalt et al. 2022 in particular discuss these aspects, with Donald and Jackson 2022, 19 referring to student mental health as a 'global priority'); how it affected the delivery of their studies (Sanderson et al. 2021; Donald and Jackson 2022 discuss the loss of interaction resulting from the changes in teaching whilst Xerri, Radford, and Shacklock 2018; McLure, Koul, and Fraser 2022, stressed the importance of the social and emotional side of study) as well as what universities might do to alleviate the pressures that students are experiencing (whilst, as Donald and Jackson 2022, point out, Higher Education providers struggle to actually fund the support needed). The literature painted a very similar picture to this group of students' own experiences, providing further gravitas to this area of investigation. We hoped that through our empirical research we might provide a clearer picture of some of these challenges within our own institute and provide food for thought for decision makers.

Ethical approaches to methodology

A purposeful approach to this research was the foundation of our discussions concerning research design. It was important for the research group to be aware of McNiff and Whitehead's (2010) values concerning action research if this was to have a positive impact upon the IoE. Emphasis was placed upon the fact that this would be a collaborative endeavour, between students and tutors, to co-create new knowledge and understanding in the field of HE student health and wellbeing. It was highlighted to the students that being given permission by the Head of Institute to access a large

students group was a significant responsibility. We had done so on the premise that we would 'find new ways for positive change, which support human flourishing and well-being' (Bergmark and Kostenius 2018, 624). However, as we began to discuss the aims of the research, this group's discussions reflected what McNiff (2011) describes as a 'balcony' approach to research, a propensity for some to equate research with looking down upon, finding fault, and identifying what is lacking.

During the research project many gentle nudges were needed to redirect us back to a more positive and meaningful path, reminders that our intention was not to seek out the negative, perpetuating misconceptions that may already exist (Cooperrider 2018, 10), but, to 'apprehend strengths and positive potentials, [to] unite around greater meanings and shared goals' (Cooperrider and Fry 2020, 267). Although the students' module had started, some weeks earlier, by stressing the importance of social research bringing about 'good' (Bloor, 2010) and having a positive social impact, it was disconcerting how quickly this was forgotten as the group went about designing questions aimed at measuring levels of discontent without any effort to find reasons or solutions.

Although this research was a Case Study, in that our decisions were made around a desire to be better informed on the topic of health and wellbeing, and the support in place for it at the university (Stake 1994, 236, refers to a case study as an investigation into a unit of understanding), the nature of the research team meant that we were restricted in the approaches that we might ethically take to the collection of data. As novice researchers with no prior experience of interviewing, it would not have been appropriate for this group to have interviewed their peers on sensitive and personal topics such as their own mental and physical health. As tutors within the institute, we have responsibility to consider the psychological health of our students, and by no means could we ensure that participants' involvement in interviews with inexperienced researchers on sensitive subjects could be carried out within an emotionally 'safe space' (Stoudt 2007). For this reason, we did not include interviews with students.

The student researchers were also limited in both their capacity and jurisdiction to speak with staff across the various university services. It is useful to remember that this was an activity sitting *within* a module, it was not a means of summative assessment. As such, the time that we could dedicate to this project was limited. In consideration of all of these factors an anonymous online survey was deemed the most appropriate approach to the research (providing the least risk conditions for students to share frank responses with us); however, the practicality of this choice also provided a vehicle for extensive and deeply meaningful discussions with this research team about the quality of data that we might have been able to collect

through other forms of data collection, had there been the opportunity to do so. The depth of these discussions would not have been possible without the real-world context in which to ground it.

It was important for the students to recognise that this research had capacity to impact positively or negatively upon all involved, whether researcher, researched or gatekeeper, and that because of this a caring approach, that saw and respected individual's vulnerabilities, was imperative (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). Through the reflective discussions that underpinned the research process, the student researchers were provided opportunity to deepen their understanding that ethical approaches were far more than boxes being ticked, although full approval, based upon BERA (2018) guidelines was also sought from the University Ethics Committee. The process of university ethical approval, as always, was not straightforward. The students' frustration and incredulity at some of the questions asked by the ethics committee, on points that we felt were already very clear, made for a sense of camaraderie, uniting us, as underdogs, against those in the position to enable or prevent our research. Bar-On (1991, 7) discusses how 'Emotion is not a side effect or a pathological consequence of engaging in research; it is central to the project', and it was helpful for these students to experience the highs and lows of this process together, before embarking on independent research the following year.

As a research team, we had lengthy conversations about whom our survey should reach, considering factors such as whether students were full- or part-time, undergraduate or postgraduate, taught at the university or at partner colleges. We also considered the manageability of the sample, finally deciding to focus upon full-time undergraduate students in the Institute of Education that were taught on the university campus, to provide clear parameters. Although we were granted full permission to carry out the research by the head of the Institute of Education (who fed back on our survey and anything that she felt needed adding), rather than by-passing course leaders we placed the ultimate decision about whether their students should take part in their hands. Unfortunately, the sound intent of this, in not wanting course leaders to feel 'done to', somewhat backfired, with very few harried course leaders passing on the email containing the survey information to their students. The busiest courses were not reached. As a result, rather than the survey going out to over a thousand students it went out to approximately two hundred, hence the low number of responses received.

The anonymous survey

Because the aim of the research was to better appreciate the drivers and barriers that students faced whilst studying, we discussed how quantitative results would only give us part of the picture. It was agreed that we should include open-ended questions as 'there are areas of social reality which … statistics cannot measure' (Silverman 2001, 32), however, that did not preclude the use of scales and multiple-choice questions to provide an overview of the frequency of certain actions, situations or perceptions. So, for example, quantitative questions used within the survey included: 'Do you have dependents that you care for outside of your studies?'; 'At the time of this survey, on a scale of 1 to 10, how motivated do you feel to complete your course?'; and 'Do you have to work to support your financial needs whilst studying?'. Whilst examples of more open-ended questions are: 'Can you explain how your peer friendships impact upon your motivation to study?' and 'If your attendance has been poor can you explain why?'.

A link to the anonymous online survey was embedded within a friendly and open email to the students which highlighted the positive intentions of the research and the value of their involvement. For the course leaders, this was preceded by a message to themselves, highlighting the positive intentions of the research but also reassuring them of the anonymity of it, in that students had been instructed not to name specific modules or tutors. Hartman and Schachter (2021, 197) discuss how 'Survey research rarely addresses relational dynamics because it is often assumed that these dynamics can be ignored', yet it would seem that the relational stance between researcher and researched most certainly impacted on the implementation of this research. It was notable that the survey was sent out only by course leaders on the periphery of education, such as early childhood and inclusion, not by those teaching on courses within the focus of Ofsted's critical eye. The involvement of students as researchers may have caused the project to be dismissed as not *real* research, or perhaps seen as less trustworthy. Referring back to Hartman and Schachter (*ibid*), if this had come from the Head of Institute with an instruction to complete then it would have been done, but there was no sense of accountability when sent by a colleague and students. Alternatively, these tutors felt less prepared to risk the accountability of such a survey or perhaps the lack of involvement simply reflected their workload.

Data analysis

We received 20 completed responses. Nineteen of the students were female and one male, and seven of the students had dependants. Just under half (n = 9 students) were 18–25 years old, and just over half (n = 11) were 26–49

years old. The limited amount of data received, a 10% response, was a harsh reality check for this group, and useful preparation for their own future studies. Equally, the underwhelming nature of much of the data, and the trawl to find nuggets of interest in general banality, provided a realistic measure for the quality of the data that they could expect from their own forthcoming projects. On a more positive note, we had a perfectly manageable amount of data for this novice group to work with.

We discussed at length how we, as a group of researchers, brought our own presumptions, particularly around the topics of finances and the impact of COVID-19 to the research, and how this had inevitably influenced the design of our survey. We recognised that this made it vital, when approaching the data, to not only look for evidence in support of our original ideas but equally recognised those that might contradict them. We were guided by the sage words of McNiff (2010, 37), discussed in our very first research seminar, who warns researchers to hold their ideas 'lightly and provisionally' and accept the possibility that they might, after all, be mistaken. We also considered how we, inhabiting our individual positions, would carry out different readings of the data, considering Denzin's (1998, 328) explanation of the process:

> . . . no permanent telling of a story can be given. There are only always different versions of different, not the same stories, even when the same site is studied . . . all texts are biased, reflecting the play of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and culture, suggesting that so-called objective interpretations are impossible.

This multiple positionality was a great strength of this research, as our data was considered from the various perspectives of: younger, older, male and female, those who were or were not parents, those with the responsibility of full-time work, bills and homes and those still looked after by parents, those who suffered with their mental health and those that did not, as well as numerous other differences. The students first considered the data independently, reflecting upon points of interest and what might be emerging themes. Then, through group discussion, we reached agreement on the focus areas for our data reduction, focusing upon those themes with the strongest data to support them. Finally, I took on the responsibility of re-organising these data into themes and then a logical argument (Wellington 2015), feeding the data analysis back to the group for verification.

The key themes identified for discussion were:

- Moving away from home and relationships
- Finances and Work
- Health and Wellbeing
- The impact of COVID-19 (health and teaching).

I present a very brief overview of our findings related to these areas below.

Moving away from home and relationships

It was a surprise to find that of the eight students who indicated that they had moved away from home to study, only one really enjoyed the experience. Of the others, five shared that it was a challenge at first but they'd 'got used to it', one that it was good 'most of the time' and another that they 'were still struggling with it' halfway through the academic year. The overall impression from this data was that students who have moved away to study were 'coping' rather than relishing the experience of independence. This prompted the question of whether more could be done by the university to help students to navigate the many competing demands upon them (which Gibbons 2022, discusses in some depth) during the early days of their move from the security of their family homes.

Although, as our literature had already suggested (for example, McLure, Koul, and Fraser 2022; Xerri, Radford, and Shacklock 2018), most of our respondents did value having a supportive group of peers around them, in our sample there was no clear correlation between friendships and attendance at sessions or enjoyment of the university experience. For instance, a student who was still struggling with moving away from home shared that they had developed a supportive group of friends, whereas two students who had 'got used to' living at university had not developed such friendships. Although one of the students who said that they'd not created friendships had attended less than half of their taught sessions, another without a circle of friends had attended most of them. Although some responses made clear that students felt most support and motivation from their peers, friendship groups were not the deciding factor of a students' content or discontent within this sample.

Finances and Work

18 out of the 20 respondents were in receipt of a student loan. Clearly, they did not find this enough to live off, as 17 respondents felt that they still needed to work to meet their financial needs whilst studying. The anxiety that finances caused was clear in many responses, as students mentioned their difficulties 'juggling' work and study, the 'burn out' they felt as a result and, for some, the impact that this has had upon the social lives of some. Although Gibbons (2022) recognises that needing to pay their own bills would be a struggle for many students newly living alone, and Donald and Jackson (2022, 10), mention the 'loss of earnings' that many experienced during lockdown, very few sources recognise the vast expense of being a student per se, particularly in England. When considering general mental health, it is disconcerting that only a small minority of the students (20%) felt that finances *were not* a worry for them.

Health and wellbeing

Over half of the students (12 out of 20) shared that they had mental health needs, with nine students stating that these challenges impacted upon their ability to study. Half of the sample stated that they had existing mental health needs before starting university. Seven students had received support from the university with those needs with five of those students saying that they had found it helpful. One student commented that it was difficult to get support, and another that the four sessions offered by the university were not enough. The fact that some students are seeking increased social and emotional care from a depleted workforce of university tutors, themselves still recovering from the pandemic, appeared as an issue requiring attention. As Donald and Jackson (2022) report, as much as support for students' mental health is a priority, and as much as research indicates that this is best approached through relationships, universities have also been hit by the pandemic, and funding is scarce.

The impact of COVID-19

It is no surprise that 17 of the 20 of students felt that COVID-19 had impacted negatively upon their wellbeing. Just two students stated that they had experienced some positives from the pandemic. What was important from the university's perspective is that the negative impacts (*all* related to mental health) that the respondents shared were *extreme*, and many were experiencing lasting impacts. Similar to the findings of Gewalt et al. (2022), Soria, Horgos and Roberts (2021) and Donald and Jackson (2022), our respondents mentioned their anxiety going 'through the roof', isolation, depression, breakdowns and *persisting* social anxiety. This may have been exacerbated by the lack of interaction between student and tutor that COVID-19 brought (Gibbons 2022), but it is worth remembering that on some courses with large numbers, interaction between student and tutor will always remain minimal.

Of course, COVID-19 brought with it online teaching, and this is now a facet of our teaching which is likely to stay. Interestingly, preferences for teaching styles were extremely mixed. Exactly half of the sample said that they preferred face-to-face to online teaching. When asked to explain their choice, 12 students explained that they found face-to-face far more motivating and engaging and that they learned far more in face-to-face sessions. However, reasons for appreciating online teaching included a reduction in the 'pressure and expectation' of a classroom and less distractions; less time travelling; those students that simply prefer to study alone; and the greater flexibility of online tutorials. Although one might assume that having dependents would be influential in the preference for working at home,

two of the three respondents who would choose a fully online approach did not have dependents. One student commented that although they preferred face-to-face sessions, being able to join online acted as a 'safety-net' for when suffering with extreme anxiety.

Discussion

It was unclear from the data what might be done to enable students to feel more motivated, this set of responses certainly did not provide an 'answer' to this question. Eight of the 20 respondents made suggestions on this topic, which ranged from clearer aims to more flexibility, from more support from tutors to more support from friends, to studying fully online. In exploring these responses, the students were faced with the reality of the 'murkiness' of data. Far from 'black and white' results, there were numerous shades of grey. In realising that there is no 'typical' student, and that you can only ever please *some of the people some of the time*, this group of students are now better prepared for the data, or lack of it, that their independent studies might produce next year. The range of age, work and care responsibilities, the range of motivators and barriers, the range of responses to the same situations that these data encapsulated, indicated to the students just how impossible it can be to make changes to suit all. Miles (1979) refers to qualitative data as an 'attractive nuisance', discovering individual viewpoints, although fascinating, has a tendency to frustrate far more often than to enlighten. Through carrying out this project, these students came to realise that research is not nearly as formulaic as it appears, and that it is consistently impacted upon by subjectivities. In this section, I would like to finish by summarising the benefits of engaging students' in collaborative research, alongside the challenges, and to make some suggestions for moving forwards.

Benefits

This experience of carrying out joint research within our research methods module, for me, as a tutor, has been a huge success and something that I will most definitely continue. I hope that readers may consider this as a valuable learning activity for undergraduates also. Below I list the reasons why:

- It introduced a level of accountability to students' engagement within the module, rather than it being limited to performing in a final assessment.

- It enabled a deep discussion of literature in terms of context, similarities and differences and appropriateness of sample and research approaches, across a range of texts.
- It allowed students to experience external critique (through responses to the ethical approval application) in the safety of a team led by their tutor. It provided opportunity, as tutor, to model responding to critique.
- The students were able to explore and experience the complexity of ethical decision-making in the real world, with real consequences, but with the support of a tutor (and without the risk).
- The project made this group of students more aware of the wider, diverse community of the university, to which they belonged.
- It provided multiple circumstances where the students were aware of the varied audiences that they were writing for: composing ethical approval forms, the survey, letters and emails. It also gave them opportunity to take on the role of editor for the final report, again, introducing accountability and the need to pay careful attention to detail in one's writing.
- The project provided rich opportunities for discussions about suitable sample, ethics, question formulation, and data analysis at a level not experienced previously with level five students.
- The experience afforded more realistic expectations for the students in relation to their independent research next year, in terms of the complicated challenge of ethics, limited research responses and the quality of data they might collect.

Challenges

The greatest frustration of this experience was that the students remained largely unaware of all of the above. When, in preparation for their assessment at the end of the module, they were asked to reflect on what they had gained through the process of carrying out a research project, many initially drew a blank. It took much prompting for them to recognise the learning that had emerged through this experience. This is an aspect of higher education pedagogy that can be challenging – the difficulty that some students have in recognising the value of process and not product. Somewhat ironically, this group of students identified their respondents' tendency to prioritise the extrinsic rewards of study over valuing the process, blissfully unaware of their own tendency to demonstrate the same behaviours.

Another challenge is the reluctance for some to recognise student research as valuable, or as 'proper research' within the higher education culture. The questions being asked during this research were hugely relevant

to us as an institute, yet not followed up by half of our course leaders. It is *likely* that student involvement devalued the research in my colleagues' eyes, in addition to the fact that a choice was given whether the survey be distributed. If the same survey were sent out via institute 'senior management', with a directive to complete, then we would have received a far greater range of data with which to work. As academics, we all recognise that when overloaded with tasks those that are not deemed as necessary can be quickly dismissed.

The final challenge, as I intimated in the introduction, was writing this article. My aim when embarking on this project was for these students to produce research which was just as important as the research that they accessed through their university library catalogue every day. A restricted amount of literature and data prevented that from being possible. In the process of repositioning this article I have, to some extent, taken back the responsibility that I had originally hoped to engender in my students. The data that we collected was not significant enough to justify an academic article, but the experience of the project was. In the process, the researchers have become the researched, the authors the subject. And that does not sit comfortably, although acknowledging this might encourage academics to recognise and reflect upon similar situations that they find themselves in.

Conclusion

Despite its challenges, the quality of learning that the students experienced through this project was such that, for the foreseeable future at least, it will become an integrated feature of this module. The ultimate aim is that published research reports from previous years are added to the module reading list, providing tangible and motivational examples of what can be achieved through a group effort. The sensitive focus of this years' project restricted our approach to data collection, but in future years we could include interviews in the data collection approaches, widening the range of hands-on experience and the opportunity to learn about research through the process (Phillips and Pugh 2015, 29).

Moving forward, I will discuss access issues with my Head of Institute, who shared our frustration at the lack of response from course leaders. In future years, it may prove necessary to by-pass course leaders after gaining all necessary permissions from the ethics board and the Head of Institute. Not out of disrespect, but recognising that buried within a very long list of priorities, administering research is unlikely to make it to the top.

I still question whether including the group of students as authors of this work nullifies the fact that the experience was re-viewed through my solitary lens. I hope that it goes some way towards doing that. Using this article as a starting point, I will be frank about the publication outcomes of this project

with future groups. I will make clear that in future projects, although we will produce a report to share with the institute, the research may not warrant enough data to produce an article suitable for publication. Or that it may need to be repurposed. That way some ethical angst can be avoided with future groups. Whether student or tutor, every day is a school day. Or, in the words of Einstein, 'If We Knew What We Were Doing, It Would Not Be Called Research, Would It?' (Arvinen-Barrow and Visek 2021).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Carla Solvason http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3072-0079

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