

Reflections of mature students for inclusive social justice pedagogies in HE: The Community Engaged Learning Ambassadors Project

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Abstract

At University College London (UCL), Community Engaged Learning (CEL) is defined as experiential learning where students collaborate with external partners to address real-world challenges and opportunities as part of their assignments and research. To understand how CEL, as a social justice pedagogy, can be an inclusive approach for diverse student groups in HEIs that aligns with the ethos of social justice, a staff-student partnership project was set up exploring students' lived experiences and identities through self and group reflection. This case study specifically focuses on the reflections and recommendations of mature students on ways to enhance their sense of belonging and student experience through CEL. Mature students have been chosen for this case study as they remain an underexplored student group in HE scholarship. The methodology of the staff-student partnership project and its impact on student learning is also discussed. This case study aspires to inform the practice of educators who engage with social justice pedagogies such as CEL as well as enrich the literature on mature students in HE from the perspective of students' positionality and lived experience.

Introduction

Setting the scene: The Community Engaged Learning (CEL) Ambassadors Project

University College London (UCL) is committed to connecting students with the wider world as part of their teaching and learning experience (Fung and Carnell, 2017). One of the ways to achieve this is by embedding Community Engaged Learning (CEL) in UCL curricula. [CEL is a pedagogical approach with a strong experiential learning focus](#) where students collaborate with external partners to address real-world challenges and opportunities as part of their assignments. CEL marries community engagement scholarship with pedagogical theories and tools such as experiential learning, service-learning, authentic learning, community-based research, project-based learning and problem-based learning. External partners can be any partner that enables teaching staff to meet their learning outcomes, varying from grassroots organisations to public and corporate bodies.

The [Community Engaged Learning Service \(CELS\)](#) was established in 2018 to enable UCL staff to embed CEL into their teaching practice in order to enhance the experience of their students. CELS is a cross-institutional consultancy service and a partnership between the academic development unit (UCL Arena) and the public engagement team (UCL Public Engagement), offering advice, training, funding opportunities and support to teaching staff across UCL. Student and community voice have been central to a service which has organised a series of curriculum co-design workshops with students, academics, and external partners.

For the academic year 2020-21, CELS launched a staff-student partnership project called The Community Engaged Learning Ambassadors Project. The aim was to enable reflection amongst groups of students with common positionalities, i.e., Black, Asian, and Mature students. Students reflected on their lived experiences and made recommendations on how their curriculum could be more inclusive through CEL, in turn enhancing institutional understanding of inclusive CEL practices. The Community Engaged Learning Ambassadors Project is part of UCL's [Student Quality Reviewers programme](#), where students receive training and support to work with departments across UCL to examine different areas of academic practice and make recommendations to enhance teaching.

This case study discusses the methodology of the CEL Ambassadors staff-student partnership project, the reflections and recommendations of mature students on inclusive curricula, and the impact of the CEL Ambassadors project on student experience. The case study aspires to enrich the scarce literature on the positionality and needs of mature students in higher education.


CEL Ambassadors Project: Reflective workshops

Project methodology

A series of reflective workshops were organised by the CELS team and served as a safe space for the student Ambassadors to reflect on their lived experience and personal background. The workshops were for three separate student groups: Black students from Africa and the Caribbean; Asian students (various Asian countries); and Mature students. This case study focuses on mature students as they remain an underexplored student group in HE scholarship, but the methodology was the same across the three student groups. Each group was comprised of five students from various disciplines and levels, with students self-nominating to participate. The groups attended four consecutive workshops with scaffolded activities that were designed by the CELS team. Due to the pandemic, all workshops took place online with the use of MS Teams. All students received training on key CEL pedagogical principles before their workshop participation. Each Ambassador received a stipend for their participation in the project.

During the first workshop, group reflection on students' personal identity and positionality was prompted with the use of a semi-structured questionnaire, in addition to the identity boxes technique which gave students the opportunity to talk about their positionality through their favourite objects (Brown, 2019). A flexible approach which allowed for the students to make their voices heard was the central concept of this workshop. The second workshop allowed students to reflect on the Community Engaged Learning Benchmark (figure 1) that was used as a guide for teaching staff and administrators to include CEL elements in their curricula. The idea was to make the benchmark more inclusive by embedding the voices and recommendations of mature students. The benchmark has been co-designed the previous year with students of different levels and disciplines, community partners and UCL educators.

COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING AT UCL
Co-designed Curriculum Design Framework for Community Engaged Learning
UCL CULTURE AND UCL ARENA



This is a Co-designed Curriculum Design Framework developed by students and partners. This Framework aims to enable academic and professional staff develop curricula with strong Community Engaged Learning elements. The Framework reflects the needs and thinking of students and partners allowing for the development of more inclusive and relevant curricula. To be used in conjunction with [Five steps to developing a Community Engaged Learning programme, module or project](#) and [How to build partnerships with external partners to enhance learning](#).

1. Learning Outcomes (Skills)

The below are skills that students and partners identified as important. These skills could be developed as part of a programme/module with CEL elements.


- Ability to engage with a diverse range of communities and stakeholders;
- Knowledge of local community makeup, i.e., assets, challenges, structures, policies and processes;
- Knowledge of different cultures and cultural sensitivity;
- Knowledge and understanding of the global scholarly work and research emerging from different underrepresented cultural communities including languages, non-Western heritage, different cultural and ethnic backgrounds;
- Communication and presentation skills;
- Interpersonal, listening and networking skills;
- Ability to conduct research;
- Ability to evaluate projects;
- Knowledge of IT and Administration skills;
- General professional attributes, i.e. openness, proactivity, innovation, adaptability;
- Planning and management skills, including time management;
- Problem-solving and creativity skills.

2. Teaching and Learning Activities

The below are some of the Teaching and Learning Activities that students and partners identified as interesting for when they collaborate in teaching.

- Community-based research projects
- Community-based consultancy projects
- Community-based design thinking projects
- Placements
- Shadowing of partners within an organization
- Students to deliver teaching, workshops and training for/with partners
- Students to co-design and co-deliver exhibitions and art projects

Tip: Consider the makeup of your class regarding students' individual identities, backgrounds, experiences, and the reasons for enrolling in the programme.



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Figure 1: Excerpt from the co-designed CEL Benchmark at UCL.

During the third and fourth workshops, the Ambassadors used the updated CEL Benchmark to audit their own programme, evaluate learning materials such as reading lists, and make recommendations on how their programme could be made more inclusive CEL activities. Each workshop lasted between two to three hours. The CELS team developed the scaffolding for student group work, including setting up channels in MS Teams, and demonstrating ways to collaborate online, i.e., students working on a presentation together and multimodal materials via MS Teams. Templates and resources were also developed to accommodate student work. Students were strongly encouraged to collaborate, assume leadership roles, and make recommendations. Given that there were clear deliverables each week, students stayed focussed and felt empowered, as evidenced by the fact that there were no dropouts during the project. The final output was a group report that summarised the Ambassadors' reflections and recommendations and included the updated CEL benchmark as well as the findings of the curriculum audit. The report was submitted to the CELS team to inform institutional understanding on inclusive CEL practices.

Positionality of mature students

Defining mature students' identity

The reflections of mature students included their own coining of the term "mature student" to encompass numerous identities, such as that of the student parent "who is caught in a bind of conflicting expectations and juggles academic career and family, while negotiating the high cultural expectations of 'serious' scholar and 'good' mother (or father)." (Baker, 2014).

According to the CEL Ambassadors, mature students are:

"Students aged 25 and over, often having caring responsibilities, such as towards children or the elderly, and previous work experience. They usually join higher education institutions after they have a wealth of life experience in different

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professional and personal paths and in different social and cultural contexts, and who could be practitioners, caretakers, or individuals who spent a lengthy period outside the realms of education. They also often choose to come back to higher education after a certain time of engagement with other forms of activities and they represent national, international, multicultural, and multiple ethnicities, faiths, and linguistic backgrounds.”

Challenges inside and outside the classroom

Students reflected on the obstacles they experience as mature students, such as financial and cultural adaptation problems (Reay, 2002; Brooks, 2012; Boeren, 2017; Venegas-Muggli, 2020; Hubble and Bolton, 2021) and the fact that they often feel excluded from academic activities.

The most common challenges students identified are:

- Time-management
- Financial constraints
- Finding support networks
- Mental health issues and anxiety
- Having more responsibilities than their peers
- Adaptation to new technologies (for older students)
- Age difference between themselves and members of their cohort; hence the difficulty in building relationships with younger peers

This list is not exhaustive as different circumstances might bring extra demands and responsibilities. For instance, student-parents often feel torn between their work and their families, and especially student-mothers might feel the urge to surrender completely to motherhood (Baker, 2014). Research also shows that mature students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, and/or ethnic groups which are less well represented in higher education face more obstacles when adapting to higher education, given the fact they experience greater financial and cultural adaptation problems (Boeren, 2017; Reay, 2002; Hubble and Bolton, 2021).

Mature students and pedagogical discussion

Mature students value CEL as a key component in the learning outcomes of their programme. One CEL Ambassador explains how CEL can positively contribute to their learning experience and lead to academic achievement:

“Currently, the academic environment does not feel welcoming for me as a mature students; it does not feel like our experiences are valued or needed. Therefore, many mature students refrain from sharing their experiences and disengage with their modules. A way to improve this would be allowing mature students to engage with a wide range of communities and stakeholders. For instance, they could be partnered with organisations for their assessments, and base their assignments on the organisation’s needs. This could result in having impact on their own field.”

Mature students indicated that by engaging in CEL activities, they can benefit by:

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- Gaining access to external partners, which might help their research
- Learning practical applications of a field
- Building a reputation for themselves as well as the university
- Discovering potential avenues for further research
- Enhancing their learning experience, valuing their programme more, and feeling empowered to have impact

Students also reflected on their own skills and on the fact that they can be the “bridge” between other students and external partners, due to their maturity and existing professional experience.

The main assets which mature students could contribute to the academic community include:

- Efficient project/people-management skills
- Multi-tasking experience
- Dedication
- Resilience
- Empathy
- Effective communication skills
- Flexibility and adaptability to new situations

Peers in the classroom can benefit from the experience and knowledge of mature students in numerous ways. A CEL Ambassador said:

“If a mature student has a professional background and network, s/he can share her/his insights and contribute to teaching and learning activities in the classroom, such as when students need to learn more about how to navigate the job market and social life with practical applications and skills.”

For mature students to feel more included, they would like for their tutors to:

- Recognise their value by approaching teaching sessions with an ethos of partnership, where both students and staff are seen as belonging to a community of learners
- Provide opportunities in group tasks for mature students to demonstrate their experience and expertise (where this is relevant to the programme)
- Consider the ways in which the programme links their previous work experiences with current studies
- Develop collegial and personal connections that are particularly empowering for female academics (Summers and Clarke, 2015)
- Engage mature students with relevant student-led societies and research groups across different departments (Richardson, 1994)

Implementing inclusive programme design for mature students

Designing mandatory modules with CEL elements

Mature students commented on the fact that academic modules are mainly theory-heavy and do not allow for engagement with real-world partners that would give them the opportunity to use more of their skills.

According to a CEL Ambassador:

“The modules offered are usually theoretical in nature, highly-structured and demanding. While these are helpful and offer a foundation in research knowledge, they are condensed in terms of content and expectations, and do not allow the space and the time to mature students who also encounter other responsibilities or challenges.”

Mature students suggested having more mandatory modules with CEL elements (as CEL modules are usually optional) to give them the opportunity to network and contribute their professional and project management skills to their peers and partners. The students also suggested spreading mandatory modules (content and assessments) over a longer period, so they get the chance to enjoy and benefit from the content and resources as well as the interaction with the partners.

Embedding more blended learning opportunities

Students also discussed the importance of offering audio or video recordings from events and activities to mature students who have fewer opportunities to engage with all the curricular and enrichment activities. A CEL Ambassador highlights the importance of alternative means of delivery for the engagement of mature students:

“The online delivery of activities and events (internal or external) during the pandemic has created a space for mature students where they can engage more actively with their peers, faculty and external partners.”

Project-Based Learning opportunities with partners

Mature students with prior management experience might benefit more from project-based activities rather than activities with a shorter span and pressing deadlines:

“Most of the assignments of core modules are written, whereas there are no project-based assignments. This does not help mature students showcase their project-management skills. Therefore, it might be viewed positively by mature students and other students alike if a wider range of activities and (assessment) outputs were introduced.”

Students emphasised their desire to engage in projects with real-world partners. They also suggested that they would like to be offered a variety of learning activities and platforms to choose from, and more ways to utilise their existing skills and knowledge.

Authentic assessment and formative feedback

Besides offering students Project-Based Learning opportunities and a variety of assessment outputs, mature students discussed how their tutors should consider whether, and how, the assessment and feedback foster their employability skills, given their special circumstances (e.g., student-parents), backgrounds (e.g., international students), and the job market. Mature students suggested linking their previous experiences with their current studies, which they expect to lead to skills building, community engagement, and practical experience which they can draw on in their job seeking journey:

“Students can practice writing research reports, conducting small qualitative or quantitative research, writing project proposals, or working on group projects. However, these projects do not always give mature students the chance to make links with their previous work and experience. The knowledge and connections of mature students could be used to develop CEL projects, and the students could be assessed for their skills and experiences that are relevant to their (future) professional identity.”

In addition to creating connections, students want to engage with various public groups, receive formative feedback from external partners on their assignments and projects, and reflect on their progress:

It could equally benefit the university and the students if assessments were accessible by partner organisations and if the students were provided with public engagement opportunities. It could be beneficial to give a CEL element to the modules by providing placement and networking opportunities to students, which would allow them to interact with external partners and potential employers and receive feedback on their assignments and practice.

Evaluation of the CEL Ambassadors Project

Student empowerment and impact

To understand the impact of the CEL Ambassadors Project on student learning and development, an evaluation survey was completed by the CEL Ambassadors after the completion of the project. Students felt that they were able to convey students' voices during their role as CEL Ambassadors. Students from minority groups also felt that their suggestions were representative of the way that many of the ethnic minorities at UCL feel about their programmes. They also indicated that they were able as a group to come up with practical solutions to some of the challenges faced by various groups of students and focus on ways to improve student engagement and inclusivity. A CEL Ambassador said:

“I think that our reports will be read; after our presentation, I felt like the university was truly paying attention to us and all of our comments, which coming from a student perspective, I think can give module leaders a sense of what students could and would do in terms of Community Engaged Learning.”

Development of Skills

The CEL Ambassadors Project enabled students to develop skills and knowledge relevant to their future aspirations and career paths. Some of the skills are:

- Working in large and smaller teams, and collaborating with colleagues from diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise
- Being reflective
- Communicating ideas and attentively listening to others
- Giving constructive feedback and dealing effectively with feedback received
- Collaborating online
- Project management skills
- IT skills
- Time management and organisational skills
- Presenting to different audiences
- Report writing
- Thinking critically about the content, delivery, and design of programmes



Figure 2: Key skills developed by the CEL Ambassadors

A CEL Ambassador said:

“I found this whole experience to be extremely rewarding. As a CEL Ambassador, I was able to critically review my module, and highlight any areas of improvement. I was able to work in a group setting and as a result improve my teamworking abilities. Another positive aspect about being a CEL Ambassador was the sense of companionship I felt by voicing out my opinions with my fellow team members. All in all, it was a really fun experience as well as a nice way to obtain more social interaction.”

Feedback on the Staff-Student Partnership Project

CEL Ambassadors received scaffolded support to participate in the project and they were approached with openness throughout the project. The students were encouraged to take on

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leadership roles and challenge the information and resources they were given. Students also received training on CEL pedagogical principles which they found helpful and accessible. Throughout their partnership with the staff, student Ambassadors were able to express their opinions and recount experiences comfortably. They also agreed that the staff provided timely support, guidance, and clear explanations in each stage of their work.

“CELS Team really made me feel heard and they made me feel like none of the questions that I was asking were stupid or laughable (even though sometimes I felt that they were). They calmly explained every detail and listened to all our concerns, which is something I highly appreciated. I truly enjoyed working with them!”



Figure 3: CEL Ambassadors' thoughts on the benefits of the Partnership

From the above, it becomes obvious that the methodology and approach of the CEL Ambassadors' staff-student partnership project actually enhanced student experience. Despite the mainly positive feedback, the Ambassadors commented on occasionally wanting to work in smaller groups for easier online communication and collaboration, considering that they hadn't worked with peers online before. This feedback will be taken into account in the future iterations of the project.

Future steps

The mature students' reflections and recommendations have informed UCL's institutional understanding of how to develop pedagogically inclusive CEL activities and projects, considering the needs and expectations of mature students. The authentic input of mature students enriches existing pedagogical research with the reflections and voices of the mature students themselves, something which the discipline is currently lacking. An aspiration of the CELS team is to gain greater understanding of the identities of mature students – in particular student-carers and students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, and/or ethnic groups which are less well represented in higher education.

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