Rethinking Transformative Education

The IGP Dissertation Workshop: Research as a Community Practice

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Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

Paulo Freire

Introduction

This case study, which introduces The IGP Dissertation Workshop: Research as a Community Practice, is the result of our observations and reflections during a University College London (UCL) ChangeMakers project, where students and staff from the Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) planned and developed a series of activities to improve research training as well as the academic and emotional support students receive during their dissertation period. The project's reflections enriched previous conversations on module and program improvements and the conviction that an authentic transformative education needs to be grounded on a constant horizontal dialogue between staff and students. This dialogical process enables a turn from dominant models of education where students are passive receivers of knowledge, which Paulo Freire (1970) called the "banking concept of education", and walks together towards a learning process where both students and academics teach and are taught, while being co-responsible for their growth and transformation.

UCL is committed to advancing a culture of student engagement in all areas of the university and the learning process. As stated in its Education Strategy, student-staff partnerships and engagement are essential for the enhancement of student experience, and the constant improvement and innovation of education, along with the development of a sense of community at UCL (UCL, 2018). Opportunities for student engagement range from feedback surveys throughout the year, student representation on teaching and staff-student

consultative committees, faculty/college level committees, Student's Union engagement, as well as co-developing ChangeMakers departmental projects.

UCL ChangeMakers is a programme that supports the development of staff-student collaborative projects looking to drive change and innovation towards enhancing the student learning experience at a departmental level. Students can lead or partner with staff by joining a proposed project. Upon revision, seed funds are allocated to support project improvements driven by collaborative student-staff partnerships (UCL, 2022). UCL ChangeMakers projects create opportunities for staff-student conversations while co-designing change (UCL, 2021). By complementing the experience and perspective of both, while recognising the diversity of the UCL community, these kinds of initiatives contribute to creating a sense of belonging by facilitating connections and encouraging students to play active roles in the interests, quality, and characteristics of their learning communities.

The IGP promotes the idea that innovation can serve social justice and equality and that different communities have different aspirations and understandings of prosperity. Prosperity is about an active co-production of flourishing futures that recognise and develop inclusive, plural and diverse communities and institutions (Moore, 2015; Mintchev and Moore, 2018). Building authentic prosperous futures towards improving people's lives requires working collaboratively to understand problems and co-design change through participatory and plural mechanisms or methodologies that allow the co-creation of shared purpose and solidarity. As Moore and Mintchev (2021) argue, context-sensitive understandings of prosperity start with a dialogue around people's hopes, challenges and opportunities for a prosperous life. As a research and teaching institute with a growing, vibrant community, a dialogue to understand what prosperity means for the communities we work with and the community we are part of, becomes crucial.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the motivations of students and staff for developing this partnership, as well as its impact on participants' experiences and learning during the dissertation journey at IGP. Furthermore, this case study will critically reflect on the project experience to inform a continuous evaluation and improvement of the dissertation module with, and for, students, staff and alumni. The paper starts by describing the specifications of the project and its pedagogy practice. Next, the paper presents details on its implementation and concludes by elaborating on the project evaluation and the lessons learnt from student partners and teaching staff.

Specifications of the Project

Our project, "The Dissertation Workshop: Research as a Community Practice", builds on a conversation at IGP's Staff Student Consultative (SSCC) meetings, where students gave feedback to the IGP staff on improving research methods training and the support they get during the dissertation period. The IGP promotes the idea that innovation can serve social

justice and equity and that different communities might have different dreams and understandings of what prosperity means. With this project, we engaged in active and reflective communication with our student community to explore what prosperity and innovation would look like in the dissertation journey, and aimed to co-create a learning community with, and for, students to improve the support and the sense of belonging during the dissertation journey. The project engaged well with the Institute for Global Prosperity ethos and its commitment to transdisciplinary approaches to create more prosperous futures for all.

Table 1 Project Key Aspects

| Co-create a learning community	Evaluate Research Methods and Dissertation Modules	Make the case for Transformation
✓ Support students' dissertation projects ✓ Build a collaborative learning community. ✓ Strengthen a sense of belonging to IGP ✓ Continuous development of research skills	✓ Evaluate content and teaching delivery of research modules ✓ Evaluate dissertation module activities and components ✓ Identify elements to strengthen research modules	✓ Identify strategies to consolidate skills and experience of IGP students ✓ Present proposals to IGP leadership team ✓ Evaluate ChangeMakers project

Pedagogic Approach

As an early career academic, it was also important for the project facilitator to build a teaching practice in constant dialogue with students and actively promote the co-development of learning communities. As bell hooks reminds us, "when everyone in the classroom, teacher and students, recognises that they are responsible for creating a learning community together, learning is at its most meaningful and useful" (hooks, 2010). This collective approach, and a constant and honest dialogue, allowed us to overcome the hierarchical teacher-student relationship and to develop a space where authentic research and knowledge co-creation took place. In these kinds of pedagogical approaches, the teacher is no longer the only one who teaches, nor are students the only ones who learn. On the contrary, these spaces allow for what Paulo Freire called the existence of teacher-students and students-teachers, where "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (Freire, 1970, p. 53).

Case studies

Inspired by the legacies of critical and feminist educators, and in recognition of the diverse disciplinary and intersectional backgrounds, we invited our community to see "the classroom" as the space of possibility where the community we are building and the active participation of all in the learning process can pave the way to more inclusive learning spaces. Concurrently, these approaches recognise participants as beings in the process of becoming, beings willing to acknowledge what they know and don't know, beings that recognise that knowledge is in constant change and that the learning communities we are part of might differ and that we need to constantly adapt, reinvent and reconceptualise our teaching-learning practices (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994, 2010).

Implementation

As can be observed in Figure 1, the idea and need for this project started at an SSC meeting between staff and students. Once the project funding was approved by UCL ChangeMakers, in collaboration with student representatives, we launched an internal call for students to express their interest in engaging in the co-development of the IGP Learning Community planning workshop and to lead in the subsequent activities that will involve the wider student community at the institute. Five students (three from MSc Prosperity, Innovation and Entrepreneurship and two from MSc Global Prosperity) were involved in the core team as student partners. These students became the main liaisons with the student group for the project development and co-facilitated the different activities. This collaboration also allowed for constant feedback and adaptation of activities throughout the duration of the project.
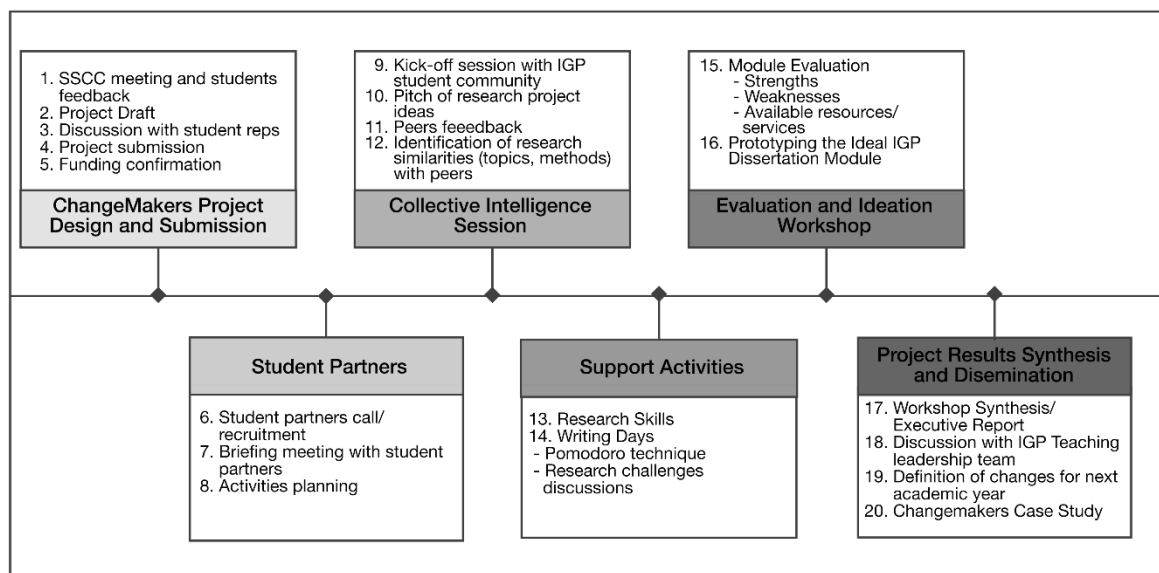
Figure 1. IGP Dissertation workshop. Project stages and activities

We started early in term 3 by identifying activities that might benefit students' stressful dissertation period. We were looking for activities that could bring people together in what

tends to be a very solitary period. We developed a collective intelligence workshop where students pitched their research projects and received feedback and ideas from peers. This exercise also helped them identify peers working on similar topics or methods so that they could collaborate or solve doubts. We also started 'writing mornings' where we would get together to write and share some time. This was also a moment to get close to staff and solve doubts in the students' projects development. During the planning stage, we thought that developing this community and identifying needs and support activities for students could improve their experience and development, as well as create a more strategic relationship with the supervisory team. Overall, this project aimed to create a collaborative learning community where students are active participants, supporting and providing a sense of belonging for IGP MSc students during their time at IGP and beyond. The project prioritised flexibility, in order to be able to define (and redesign) the activities during the project duration, based on what worked, what didn't work and the new needs that emerged in the process. This fundamental approach allowed us to have a constant dialogue and reflective process to innovate and explore models of future teaching practices that improve the belonging and well-being of our community, and to reflect on how this can open the door to an authentic transformative education.

Beyond the support activities we developed during the summer of 2022, we also developed a participatory evaluation of the dissertation module, as represented in Figure 2, and the connected research methods modules (from skills to experience and wellbeing), aiming to improve the dissertation process and experience for future students. The results of this process then benefited not only students in the 2021-22 academic year, but also created a legacy for future students at IGP by prototyping "the ideal IGP Dissertation Module" (Figure 3) from the student's perspective. Results were presented to the IGP leadership team and most of the proposed changes started to take place in the 2022-23 academic year. The new IGP Dissertation Module will support students in developing the knowledge, skills and management practices to design and develop research that pushes the boundaries of our understanding of prosperity, both intellectually and practically. Students will learn academic and real-world skills necessary to design, manage and conduct problem-solving research and will become active participants in their learning process and the characteristics of their learning community.
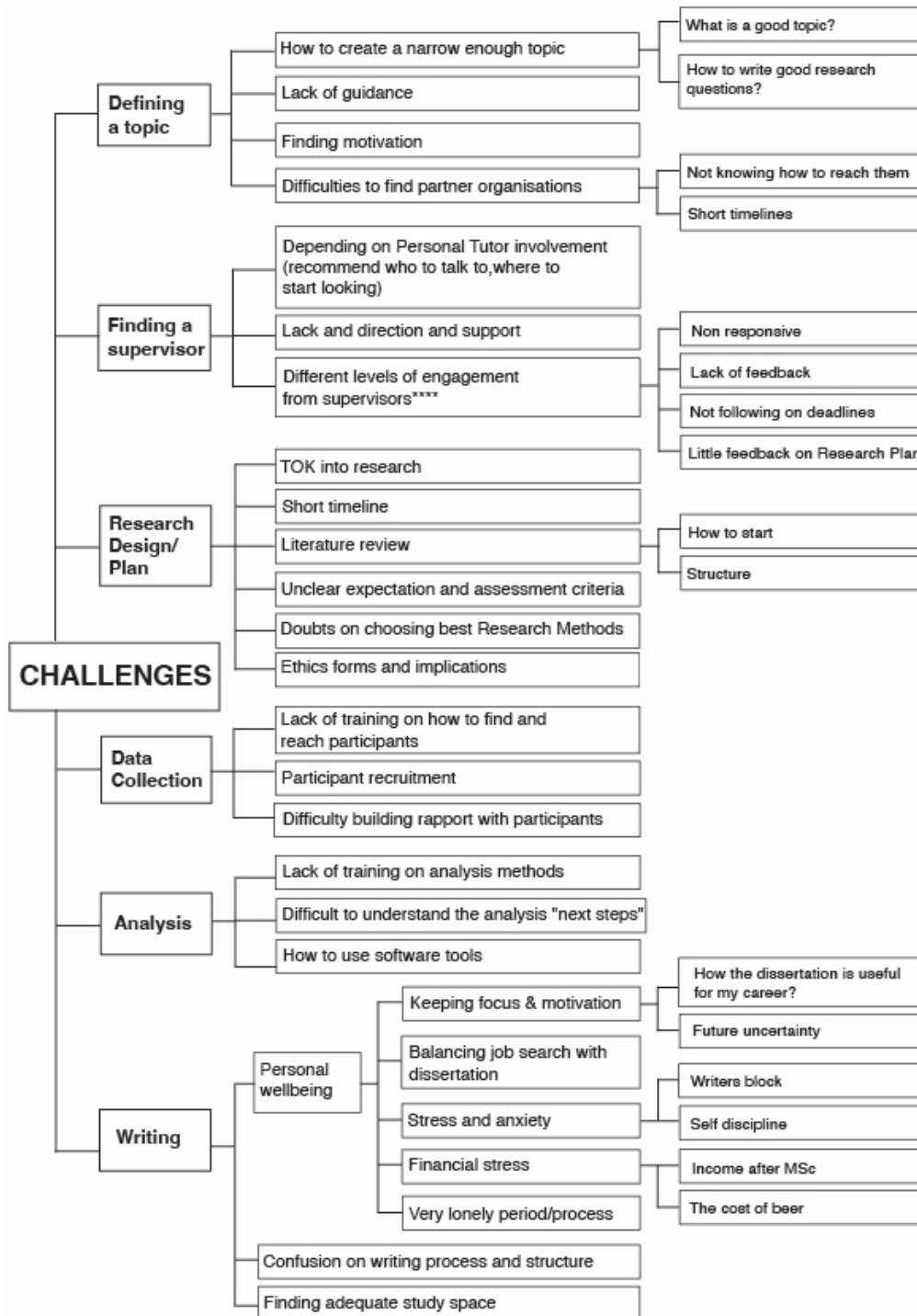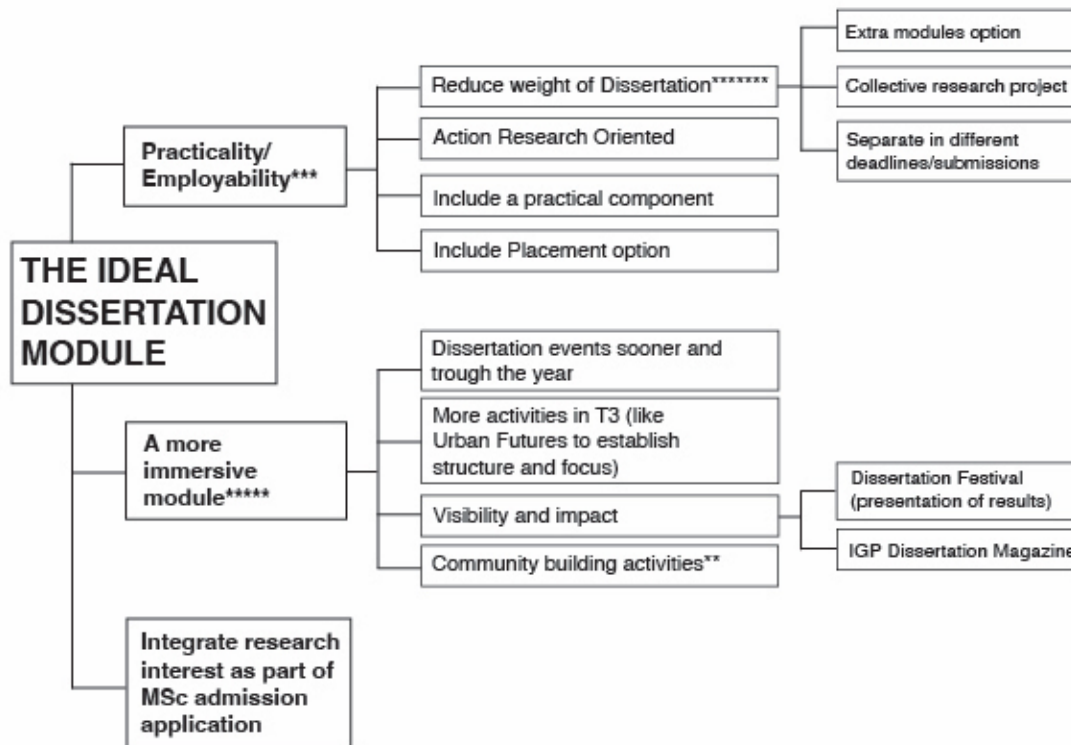
Figure 2. Student challenges during the dissertation period

Figure 3. The Ideal IGP Dissertation Module

Note: *Represents votes in terms of the relevance of the topic for students. Ideas in bold font are elements that have been addressed in the 2022-23 academic year. For an interactive view of the workshop results, please visit: https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVPNPNLSA=/?share_link_id=372647746812

Evaluation and Lessons Learned

IGP Student Community

The IGP community is one of the most diverse groups of people. Students from around the world with different backgrounds and experiences give various perspectives in discussions on any topic. The wonderful thing was that they were all united by the idea of learning about the new concept of prosperity and well-being and therefore were very open to sharing and learning from each other.

However, with a diverse group of people comes different personalities, preferred ways of social interactions, cultural customs and religious preferences, accessibility issues, and many other factors. Some people can easily get inspiration when working in a group and talking with other people, whilst some prefer to observe then work alone in a space that is familiar and comfortable to them. We think that a sense of inclusivity can come from many aspects and that knowledge and resources should be available to both types of people.

After the collective intelligence workshop attended by 16 students, we received 14 anonymous feedback responses, resulting in a Net Promoter Score (NPS) of 7.2. Given the question "How likely are you to recommend this session to a classmate?", eleven students

were promoters (entered 9 or 10 as the score), two students were passives (entered 8 as the score), and one student was detractor (entered 6 as the score).

When asked "How could the workshop be improved?", most respondents commented on the structure, such as having a moderator to organise the discussions, making longer sessions to give students more space to explain the research project and receive feedback, and providing guidelines of the pitch content to give better clarity for the audience. Furthermore, over 50% of students recognised the learning community during the dissertation period as a positive feature in their process in the acknowledgement sections of their dissertations.

The biggest challenge related to students' expectations was considering the emotional state of the students who participated in the research project pitch. As one participant commented, "I feel people came with an expectation of appreciation for their project and also seeking direction through feedback and inputs. I believe these elements could definitely be improved and made more visible in the next sessions to follow". We particularly highlighted this suggestion for future improvement because we wanted to avoid the thoughts "that feedback can potentially develop doubts and insecurity in relation to the whole research project instead of providing tools to gain clarity", as quoted by another participant. Rather, we aimed to create a safe space for the IGP students who were passionate about their chosen topics.

Additionally, the writing sessions became the avenue to meet other students who were in the same situations and gather for social activities afterwards, which I think is important to help students be reminded that prosperity for us, after all, is not only about academic accomplishments but also about building human connections with others in the community.

Student Partners

As mentioned earlier, this project was a collective effort of students as partners, as well as participants, and staff as facilitators. In the following section, we will narrate the lessons learned from the student partners' perspectives.

Being involved in the ChangeMakers project as students at the time, we reflected that asking and listening to what other people in the community think and feel is important. Most of us had never received any academic research training and faced tremendous challenges when doing the dissertation which generated feelings of anxiety and frustration, as well as recognising the disadvantages we had in developing our research projects.

"Within the educational system in the country where I came from, I was taught to believe every theory and knowledge that was given by teachers without questioning. As well, my bachelor's degree in entrepreneurship and my entrepreneurship experience in the creative sector that followed, have built my mindset to be practical and results-oriented, rather than

analytical and process-focused, two qualities that I consider important in research. These thoughts lingered and created self-limiting beliefs and became my progress blocker."
(Participant, 2022)

Coming together regularly facilitated support and personalised informal feedback from peers and the learning facilitator. The possibility of accessing an academic researcher and Research Method lecturer with a professional teaching background in a safe and informal space helped us a lot throughout our writing journeys.

"I recalled the three factors that kept me moving forward with my dissertation: being asked 'How are you doing?', the genuine interest in my topic showed by an active invitation to show my work and some actionable feedback given afterwards, and some positive affirmations like 'You will do fine.' These points, in the end, circled back to the two elements mentioned in the previous section: appreciation and direction." (Participant, 2022)

Furthermore, students (already alumni at the time of writing this paper), are strategic partners for developing a continuing alumni engagement and a critical perspective in the overall programme structure and content. Alumni can also become a liaison with the most up-to-date information on sector recruiting processes and needs, and a critical bridge for the development of future collaborations that look to tackle grand challenges at the local level. Through students and academic staff working together to improve the prosperity of our community and the communities where we come from, we can open the door for more engaged and critical university programmes.

Learning Facilitator

Evaluating the process and outcome of this project from several points of view is beneficial to create the best improvement plan. This particular part will develop the perspective of the project leader as a learning facilitator.

My role as the facilitator allowed me to continue a conversation that students brought to the table at one of our SSCC meetings. Students' experiences, perspectives and leadership remained at the core of the project from start to finish. My biggest lesson was that if we follow up on students' comments and feedback, students are eager to engage if they are given a chance. Allowing students to lead activities is not only a way to guarantee their engagement but also a learning activity in itself. Students are real experts and innovators, and they can drive change if we are willing to listen. Sometimes, the biggest innovations come from the subtlest changes. Changes for the 2022-23 academic year were based on the

priorities established in Figure 3 and timeline possibilities according to UCL regulations. These can be seen in the elements described in Table 2.

Table 2. Dissertation Module Redevelopment

Student Priorities for change	Module adjustments	ChangeMakers project relationship
Practicality and Employability	✓ Continuing engagement with UCLU Community Research Initiative ✓ Piloting community-based projects in alumni countries/communities	▪ Continuous development of research skills

An Immersive Module	✓ Year-long module
	  ○ Term 1. Kickstarting academic writing
	  ○ Term 2. Designing research project
	  ○ Term 3. Managing, conducting, and writing research
		▪ Support students' dissertation projects

Visibility and Impact	✓ Dissertation Project Fair and networking event ✓ Involve IGP alumni in networking and dissertation module workshops ✓ The Research Pitch. A collective intelligence workshop (peer-feedback focused)	▪ Build a collaborative learning community. ▪ Strengthen a sense of belonging to IGP

A challenge to keep in mind in future efforts is to find ways to bring more people together and to create spaces for different working/learning approaches for a more inclusive community. The project was also impacted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in an academic year that started remotely, some students even completed the course online and faced difficulties and anxieties while getting together.

Having a constant and open dialogue with the team and the larger student community allowed me to respond to challenges quickly and identify new ideas or adjustments to improve engagement and participation. Flexibility and uncertainty tolerance towards the project development were critical elements that made the process less stressful and more enjoyable for the team. Authentic co-creation cannot take place in projects where all ideas are set in stone from the beginning.

Recognising the need for practical models based on new forms of collaboration and innovation in highly diverse communities such as the one at IGP, are not only subjects of research enquiry but authentic opportunities for transformation. There is a natural opportunity for engaged pedagogies and co-development of pathways for more prosperous

communities in our universities and learning spaces. Students and academics collaborating in their teaching-learning/learning-teaching journeys open the door to reflective processes that bring innovation, and explore models of future teaching practices that improve the belonging and well-being of our community, reflecting on how this can open the door to an authentic transformative education.

Next Steps

This project became the evaluation and prototyping stage of an authentic co-development of a dissertation module that responds to the skills and belonging needs of students while maintaining strong academic rigour. In 2022-23 we plan to re-evaluate the project with the new cohort and to redesign the module with the consequent academic requirements from the University. Given the ongoing support from students of the 2021-22 cohort, the initial student partners of the project, we are planning to explore a more active engagement with the alumni network in the identification of organisations and communities willing to engage in research co-development for our next round of dissertations.

By developing a ChangeMakers project, we created a space to ask our students what prosperity and innovation would look like in a student's dissertation module, while reflecting on the challenges and opportunities to nourish equity and inclusion in their learning journey. The project engaged well with IGP's ethos and its commitment to transdisciplinary approaches to create more prosperous futures for all. As well, it allowed us to actively engage in a dialogue to reflect on our postgraduate degrees and to collectively co-design programs that can contribute to global and local prosperity challenges.

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