

Recruiting, training and working with PGR student reviewers on an academic journal

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Introduction

Production of an academic journal involves editors, editorial boards, editorial advisory boards and a pool of reviewers who work together to refine the direction of the journal and help to bring coherence to each issue before publication, as clearly illustrated by *The Journal of Higher Education* (2017), *Higher Education* (2017), *Studies in Higher Education* (2017) and *The Review of Higher Education* (2017). Reviewer lists for such journals are also highly likely to be made up of colleagues working within the higher education sector, with many reviewers also sitting on the editorial board. *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*, published by the Educational Development Unit at the University of Greenwich, has, until recently, been no exception. “*Compass* is a peer-reviewed, cross-disciplinary research journal that welcomes articles, case studies and opinion pieces relating to innovative learning, teaching and assessment” (2017a). Though both staff and students are welcome to submit pieces to the journal to be considered for publication, reviewers of submissions were, from the journal’s inception in 2009 until 2017, exclusively lecturers, former colleagues at the university or other full-time teaching staff in the higher education sector. Although postgraduate researchers (PGRs) could submit work for consideration in *Compass*, ownership of the publication process rested with academic staff.

Over time, there has been a rise in the number of submissions to the journal from academics beyond Greenwich. This might suggest that *Compass* is growing and having impact further afield. In terms of authorship and audience, therefore, it has ceased to be the Greenwich-centric publication of 2009. However, has its success inadvertently discouraged PGRs from submitting work to it? Having seen well-known names published in the journal, have they assumed that it will not be interested in reviewing their work? A strong sense of the likely reality of this assumption and an equally powerful determination to improve PGR interaction with *Compass* and so make it more inclusive led to an email invitation to PGRs to act, in collaboration with staff, as student reviewers.

In the introduction to ‘Rethinking the values of higher education - students as change agents?’ Kay *et al.* (2010, 1) comment: “the concept of the student voice can be passive and disempowered, governed and operated by the institution rather than by students themselves”. By contrast, those postgraduate researchers who have now reviewed submissions for *Compass*, and have worked closely with staff, find their voices listened to, respected and engaged with. Healey *et al.* (2014) comment: “A simple distinction may be made between a focus of students as partners on: a) student engagement in learning, teaching and research; [and] b) student engagement in the quality enhancement of learning and teaching practice and policy” (22-23), although they also note that there is overlap between the two. This short case study, based on a very small-scale pilot trial, outlines the recruitment of postgraduate researchers to work as student reviewers and take part in a form of co-creation for *Compass*. Three PGRs carried out reviews for the October 2017 issue of *Compass*. An intern reviewer was also trained at the same time as the other student reviewers but carries out reviews only for the Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership

and Change (JEIPC). Another student reviewer was also trained but has, to date, reviewed only for JEIPC.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education notes, “By working together to a common agreed purpose, steps can be taken that lead to enhancements for all concerned” (QAA B5, 5).

The role which the PGRs play in reviewing situates them where they are both engaging in research, through their reviewing of academic work submitted to the journal, and helping to enhance the quality of teaching and learning practice by giving detailed feedback to authors. However, rather than using the term ‘engaging’, it may be more fitting to say that the PGRs were involved in ‘co-creation’. In the context of *Compass*, this co-creation refers to the coming together of staff and student opinions which are fed back to authors after completion of the blind peer review process. The reviewing process consequently becomes more inclusive of the PGR student voice, as their reviews have significant influence on the final form of authors’ papers for publication’. In addition, working as co-creators of each issue, the student reviewers develop their professional identity and gather clear evidence of impact. Allin (2014, 96) notes: “there seem to be few articles that reflect critically on the extent to which collaborative relations with students are achieved in practice”. This paper outlines the call for student reviewers, the application process and the training provided.

Recruitment and training

Co-creation projects are typically initiated by staff inviting students to join their work (Bovill *et al.*, 2016). “This raises difficult questions of how they determine whom they will invite and which students have the capacity to contribute” (Bovill *et al.*, 2016, 203). In this particular case, an email call was sent to an administrator in the Postgraduate Research Office who then passed on the details to all PGRs in the University, inviting them to apply to become student reviewers for *Compass*. [A copy of this email can be seen in Appendix A.]

Discussing how to enhance inclusivity when it comes to opportunities for student/staff engagement, Felten *et al.* comment (2013, 67): “all students need to be informed of what [scholarship of teaching and learning] is and about the opportunities that exist for involvement in such inquiries”. That the email giving notice about the opportunity went out to *all* PGRs across the institution made the process more inclusive and transparent. Response was limited but additional calls for reviewers were sent – and continue to be sent – to underline that the process of recruiting PGR student reviewers is a rolling call. An application process was and still is implemented as part of the recruitment stage. PGRs had to select a published text from the *Compass* archives and review the piece using a standard review form given to them. PGRs could choose any published text from *Compass*, apart from an opinion piece (owing to the short word length of this genre), to demonstrate in some detail how they would review and comment on the text. [A copy of this review form can be seen in Appendix B.] This part of the process helped to illustrate the high expectations of review quality, a standard which a PGR could then aim to meet in future reviews.

Each application was peer reviewed, the feedback discussed and a decision made as to whether or not an applicant had been successful. The time from submission of reviews to the making of decisions was limited to only a few weeks, to allow opportunity for subsequent training, at which those PGRs notified by the Editor of *Compass* as having been selected were given an overview of their role. (All unsuccessful applicants were notified by email.)

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The training session made more explicit to the PGRs the scope and aims of the journal. Discussion then focused on their previous experiences of reviewing, including the application task, and how they would now approach a typical review. Comparisons were also drawn between the process of reviewing an article and the ways in which PGRs usually examine sources and texts for their own research. It was found that similar questions and methods were used to approach both a typical textual analysis and the review of an article. When discussed as part of reviewer training, such connections, though in some ways obvious, helped to alleviate concerns which the PGRs might have had before the training.

As not all recruited PGRs could attend the face-to-face training, another session was delivered online via Adobe Connect for those who could not make the initial session. Online resources (*Compass*, 2017b) were also created to help support PGRs through the process of becoming new reviewers, who throughout the process could also – if necessary – contact the Editor for mentoring, support and guidance. The latter ensured that lines of communication remained open and accessible, a vital aspect of effective co-creation (Bovill *et al.*, 2016). The training session was also used to clarify what is expected of reviewers. It was noted that PGR reviewers would have their name listed as a ‘Student Reviewer’ only on the online and print issue(s) for which they had carried out reviews. Moreover, for *Compass*, only one student reviewer would be assigned to each peer-reviewed submission, so that there would be a balance of views between staff and student reviewers. This helped to emphasise that the recruitment of student reviewers was not to extend the size of the pool of reviewers, but to increase the participation of PGRs with the journal. It also aimed to reassure the PGRs that their reviews alone would not be the deciding factor for whether a submission was accepted or rejected from the journal, which, if it had happened, might have caused some levels of concern, as the PGRs had very limited prior experience of reviewing academic work in a journal context.

Follow-up and reflections

A follow-up meeting was organised, to touch base with the PGR student reviewers and discuss their experiences and reflections on the process. Since, owing to clashes in timetables, a face-to-face meeting with all the reviewers proved difficult to arrange, a couple of the student reviewers instead joined the Editor for an online (Adobe Connect) meeting, during which they confirmed that they were content with the number of reviews they were being assigned for *Compass* and were pleased that they were participating in the peer review process. They wondered how authors and the Editor were receiving their reviews, being slightly worried about whether their comments were clear and detailed enough. This was an understandable concern, since the reviews are blind; however, had they been able to compare their reviews with others, they might have been reassured, as they acquitted themselves well.

A possible concern about hierarchy and power between staff and students during the process of collaboration has been discussed by Allin (2014). In the context of this case study for *Compass*, the theme of power relations was also raised in discussion. The PGRs sought reassurance that their reviews were of a suitable standard and wanted to know whether they were in line with the thinking of the staff reviewers. Such questions have not been raised by anyone from the traditional pool of staff reviewers. This indication of subtle under-confidence amongst the PGRs suggested that they perceived the reviews of staff as being in some way ‘better’, on account of much greater reviewing experience, even though the PGR student

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reviewers had already completed a successful review as part of the application process and had completed the necessary training. This discussion does point to how increased levels of collaboration and co-creation between staff and students can help to develop the confidence of students in their abilities and skill set. As PGRs can sometimes perceive themselves as straddling the line between staff and student (Compton and Tran, 2017), projects which explicitly value their views and collaboration can also help to enhance their feelings of belonging.

The peer review process for *Compass* arguably helps to eliminate any perceived hierarchy between staff and PGRs, as both staff and student reviewers are assigned to the same article and complete the same task anonymously. As it is currently, the *Compass* blind review process allows only the Editor and Journal Administrator to view the allocation of submissions to reviewers. That even anonymised reviews are invisible on the system to other reviewers prevents any review from influencing another. Diverse review comments certainly enhance the feedback to authors, allowing for balance, range, detail and depth. It may prove useful to select snippets of reviews for stimulating discussion during future training sessions for student reviewers, if only to alleviate their concerns.

During the follow-up meeting online, the Editor reassured the student reviewers that their reviews had been timely, clear and incredibly helpful to the authors receiving them; authors received an amalgamation of anonymised reviewer comments, ensuring that each independent review held the same value. Bovill *et al.* “contend that academic staff should not only consult students but also explore ways for students to become full participants in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula” (2011, 133). Although Bovill *et al.* are not in this statement referring to the context of co-creation for a journal, this “moving away from traditional hierarchical models of expertise” can still be said to come into play here (*ibid.*). What is apparent from this *Compass* pilot is that reviews by well-prepared PGRs achieve parity of quality with those of staff, even though the latter may have much more experience.

Through being student reviewers for *Compass*, PGRs are not only exposed to a new developmental experience, but are able to use the opportunity to enhance transferable skills which may help them to grow as both researchers and professionals. Whilst their primary focus is their doctoral research, any additional teaching roles and reviewing responsibilities which they may take on during this time help them to carve out an identity in the higher education workplace, where they are seen not just as postgraduate researchers but as engaged and involved colleagues in the institution. (These student reviewers were therefore encouraged to list their affiliation with the journal on their curricula vitae.) Such a reviewing role also enhances analytical and written communication skills, highly desirable for any work-based role. By gaining these ‘increased employability skills’ (Jarvis *et al.*, 2013, 223), the PGRs are active in shaping their professional identity. Staff and student partnership in this context results in adding value to the quality and range of feedback authors receive, producing a more inclusive journal and allowing PGRs to evidence their impact. As student reviewers (and PGRs in general) can also submit work to the journal, a published submission would act for them as further evidence of impact.

Conclusion

This pilot of recruiting, training, and working with PGR reviewers has been successful (albeit with a limited sample size). It is apparent from student reviewer comments in their follow-up meetings that future training will need to be enhanced; the current student reviewers nevertheless expressed gratitude for having follow-up opportunity and their voice heard (they felt respected, involved and supported through the reviewing experience); it is obviously important to continue to keep such lines of communication open. As more PGR reviewers join the journal, future meetings bringing together both new and experienced student reviewers will be arranged, so that those who have gone through the process can share their experiences and offer advice to the newcomers. The role of the PGR student reviewer will now also be logged on their Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR at UoG, 2018). The latter acts to formalise their involvement with the journal, highlighting their voluntary critical contribution. With greater emphasis upon how evidence of impact can be achieved and their contributions formalised on their HEAR records, it is hoped that greater numbers of PGRs will be interested in participating as student reviewers.

It is important to disseminate the value to be derived from staff and student collaboration projects. Recently, the recruitment of PGRs as student reviewers for *Compass* was presented as a poster at the Graduate Teaching Assistant Developers Conference: Pathways of Development for Early Career Educators (2017) in Stirling and received positive feedback from peers.¹ Future plans include recruiting more student reviewers to continue to increase the levels of co-creation in the journal. Working with PGRs on the reviewing of submissions for *Compass* during this pilot trial has proved to be a fruitful and developmental experience for all involved - the PGRs, the Editor, and the authors. It is not only course content and the structure of curricula which staff and students can work together on: this pilot trial has shown that other areas of academia can also be used as spaces for co-creation.

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Appendix A

[Below is a copy of the email sent out to all PGRs at the University of Greenwich in February 2017. Additional emails were sent after this time to continue the call for PGR reviewers.]

Subject heading: Opportunity to join the Compass journal as a PGR reviewer

Dear Colleagues,

Hope this finds you well.

You may already be familiar with the university's journal – *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*.

I am Editor of the journal and would very much like to incorporate greater levels of PGR engagement with the journal. One of the ways in which I can try to achieve this is through encouraging you to submit articles/reviews/case studies/reviews etc. to the journal. More information can be found via the link below (including how to subscribe to the journal).

<https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/compass/issue/view/48>

However, another way in which I can build upon PGR engagement is by inviting you to consider the opportunity of joining the journal as a PGR reviewer.

If you would be interested in becoming a PGR reviewer for the journal, we ask that you review a published article in *Compass* (the choice of which article to review is up to you, but please make this clear in your written review, e.g. by including a link to the submission). Your review will then be assessed by the *Compass* team who will get back to you with feedback and a decision. I have attached a copy of the review form which we ask you to use.

If you do become a PGR reviewer, your name would only be listed as a reviewer in the print and online versions of the particular issue which you contribute to. Also, for every

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submission, only one PGR reviewer would be assigned to each peer reviewed submission, so that there is a balance of views.

Any further questions, please do get in touch.

All best wishes,

Appendix B

[Below is the article review form which was sent to PGRs who were interested in applying to be a PGR reviewer for Compass]

Compass article review form

Please rate each of the following components out of 5

To what extent is the article...

(where 1 = low and 4 = high)

Likely to be of interest to readers of the journal?	1	2	3	4
Located within relevant and current literature?	1	2	3	4
Making an original contribution?	1	2	3	4
Presented in a style appropriate for an academic journal?	1	2	3	4
Accurate and up to date?	1	2	3	4
Demonstrating a good standard of argument and analysis?	1	2	3	4

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Appropriately referenced?	1	2	3	4
Of appropriate length for type?	1	2	3	4

Comments for the author(s)

Strengths of the article

Comments for the author(s)

Suggestions for improvement

Any other comments, for the editors only