



Courage Wellbeing Project Strand A HUM Report

Andrea James

PGR placement working on Courage Project Strand A:
Building Community and Research Culture in HUM

Introduction

This report was written as part of my placement as part of Strand A of the Courage project. This strand focuses on building research culture and community across UEA's four faculties as well as within the University of Suffolk and NBI. This report addresses the key stakeholders for this project: Postgraduate researchers, academic staff, university management, university estates, the students union as well as UEA's student population at large. The concept of space sits across all of these contexts and this report draws a distinction between the people who use the space, the service users i.e. PGRs, and the people who manage the space or the 'service providers' i.e. university management, the SU and estates. This report focuses on PGR experiences of 'space' as service users in order to understand what impact this has on their mental health and wellbeing as well as how PGRs attach meaning to the spaces they inhabit. More specifically it will provide recommendations for the future provision of spaces of PGRs.

Student C Group 1: '...we don't want some kind of homogenous, clinical, every single space looks the same etc. It's good that we've got grad bar for one kind of use...and then other spaces for other kinds of uses. Like when we say we need space for associate tutoring stuff, we need spaces for meetings and group work, spaces for socializing, spaces for interdisciplinary work. You know how we talk about how grad bar has a lot of use; I think the other spaces need to be multifunctional and non-identical.' P13

I will first set out the context for this report and where it sits within the courage project itself and in terms of the UEA 2030 plan along with the current ongoing trends within the higher education sector to show its utility in improving PGR mental health. I will then go on to review the literature surrounding the connections between health and environment. Then I will set out the methodology used to conduct the research before analysing in more detail the key themes that emerged which were: ownership, value, Associate Tutor issues, materiality of space, and belonging.

Finally, I will set out some recommendations for the provision of future PGR Space.

Context

The Courage project is supported as part of a much broader initiative at UEA looking at supporting the prevention of, early intervention in and cultural change around mental health and

wellbeing (Watson and Turnpenny, 2019). This project is part of broader sector wide concerns, both nationally and internationally, about student mental health and wellbeing in universities but research up until this point has largely focused on the undergraduate population. The Courage Wellbeing Project thus focuses on supporting PGRs mental health and is one of 17 initiatives being carried out in UK universities funded by HEFCE Catalyst fund addressing PGR wellbeing (HEFCE, 2018). At UEA, this was also supported by the Honest Project in 2015 undertaken by the SU which sought to investigate the state of PGR wellbeing.

It is also important to note the broader UEA specific context, for example the UEA 2030 plan and UEA's continuing investment in buildings such as Building Zero (Sky House)¹ which is in turn shaped by sector wide trends concerning the neoliberalisation and marketisation of universities themselves and the privatisation of university spaces. Policy changes such as the Higher Education Bill and the Auger Review should also be considered as influencing factors.

This context is important to understand the report which seeks to demonstrate how PGRs sit within and understand their relationship to the university and university spaces. Throughout the literature and this research specifically PGRs expressed anxieties about access to space and the prevailing discourse that space is constantly under threat and linking this with the year on year rise in student numbers without corresponding investment in teaching staff etc. More specifically they expressed reservations about moving into Sky House and university investment more generally. Therefore, this report is particularly appropriate because new spaces becoming available for post grads and this report suggests what post grads want and need from that space.

Literature review

Space and health

There is a wealth of literature on that demonstrates people are both happier and healthier when they have a good relationship with their environment (organisational psychology, psychogeography, cognitive and behavioural psychology etc). We build community across the fixed spaces we occupy. When people have control and ownership of their own space they are more likely to feel secure (important that this space is fixed, ownable, small, and amorphous). However, this literature is overtly tied to productivity which is antithetical to the aims of the Courage Project so will I cannot deploy this literature in the same way in order to understand this research. This report sits at the intersection between productivity and good mental health

¹ <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/estates/improving-your-campus/skyhouse>

i.e. it is not the intent of Courage to find ways of helping PGRs become more productive (produce more work or to be better producers) but to gain insights into the state of PGR wellbeing, its influencing factors, and to analyse the effectiveness of a variety of interventions with the explicit aim of helping PGRs be more mental well. The fact that happy people with good mental health as also more 'productive' is a side note, rather than the overall aim.

It is enough to say here that the built environment that we surround ourselves in has an impact on our wellbeing, alongside our access/non-access to green spaces. Numerous studies have demonstrated that 'a pleasant view of greenery in a central courtyard can delay the deterioration of mental functioning of people with dementia' (Johnson and Haig, 2010, pp33) and a more recent 2018 study found that greenspace and street greenery could form part of a multi-faceted approach to improve a wide range of health outcomes, including significantly reducing blood-pressure, heart rate, and incidence of diabetes (Twohig-Bennett and Jones, 2018). Not only are these tangible, physical symptoms affected by our environment Woodcock and Gill also suggest in one of their studies that the quality of physical environments 'affects young peoples' emotional wellbeing and shapes their behaviour and expectations...' (2014, pp52).

Having established that our environment has an impact on our mental, physical, and emotional health, I shall move on to discuss the concept of PIEs or 'psychologically informed environment' which was a key theory informing this research. The psychologically informed environment (PIE) is a concept used in the health and wellbeing sector and refers to 'supported living environments whose arrangement has been informed by psychological thinking so as to meet the psychological and emotional needs of residents' (Johnson and Haig, quoted in Quinney 2014). Such environments involve the 'conscious application of careful thinking about the psychological and emotional needs – and potential – of the residents' (Johnson, 2010, pp33) or in this case the users of the space – PGRs.

The University as Space

It is important to note that the university is being understood in this report as being subject to the economic and political ideals of neoliberalism and marketisation. Neoliberalism assumes that all things can be understood through capital and human wellbeing can be best achieved by prioritising free trade and free markets and private property rights, creating markets in sector where none previously exist (Harvey, 2005). A neoliberal system operates under the assumption that social good can be ensured by the unfettered operation of market forces – we

can see this at work through markers of student satisfaction, wherein the student is positioned as a consumer and their degree treated as a product or commodity a commodity that the university provides for the consumption and profit. Worth or worthiness is understood through 'price' and 'value for money'. Both the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) can be understood as initiatives which encourage an alignment to the neoliberal ideals of competition, customer satisfaction, and brand management (Shamir, 2008; Brown 2015; Phipps and Young 2015): 'We now have a higher education system which is overwhelmingly privately financed and increasingly market-driven and an ideological consensus shared by all recent governments that this is both desirable and necessary' (Freedman, 2001, pp5).

In terms of thinking how the university relates to its own understanding of itself but also its situation in a broader social and political context a useful analogy can be drawn from Zygmunt Bauman's understanding of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). Bauman posits the current state of modernity as one within which social formations melt faster than the rate at which new ones can be cast (*Education in Liquid Modernity*, 2005, p303). The liquidity of the contemporary British University is compounded through the way in which it is (re)produced by the neoliberal social and political discourse I discussed earlier. Within the contemporary British University this manifests itself as a constant (re)cycling, (re)ordering and (re)using of spaces. This relationship to space was a point of concern expressed by participants.

Student F Group 1: '[We get] Spare chairs that they've just had to pilfer from somewhere that no longer needs them' pg9

Student F Group 1: 'That's one of the problems with PGR spaces – what you get it down to luck, as well as who you get running it' pg13

We can see this analogy to liquid modernity primarily through Bauman's understanding of "empty spaces" which he defines as: *'first and foremost empty of meaning... they carry no meaning, nor are believed to be able to carry one.'* (Bauman, 2000, p103). An "empty space" becomes at once both clinical and homogenised. These spaces, for example a PhD office at UEA and Kent are not given time or mode of usage to become individuated and imbued by users with meaning. Instead

the rate of space and student turnover intentionally keeps divest of and resistant to the imprinting of social formations/meanings.

I contend that the emptiness brought about by the liquidity of space: how institutions (re)cycle, (re)order and (re)use university spaces leads to a *'collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting: ... making notions such as 'progress', 'career', 'maturation', and 'development' either very short-lived or futile. This, in turn, makes the future, once filled with promise, turn into a major source of apprehension.'* (Sarid, 2017, p464). This feeling was expressed by the PGR students I interviewed.

We can see this happening in response to practices across space in the university and how it is engaged with: hot desking is only possible with the understanding that space is neutral. However, I would argue that space is far from neutral as it is owned, constructed, and divvied up by particular groups (be they Estates, the Student Union, or university management) and it thus organized in a particular way. Space, therefore, represents an ongoing political discourse between users (PGRs etc.) and managers/owners. Where hot-desking might be seen as an efficient use of a limited resource, PGRs experience it as a practice which is disruptive, intrusive and ultimately isolating as it denies them a 'place' within the institution. However, exploring this is beyond the scope of this report and so 'space' will be taken to be inert/absent of political agenda for the purposes of this research.

Student D Group 2 (p9): '...without [the PGR office], I felt that I was just me [...] That I was just an entity at UEA, full stop.

Student C: And that you don't fit into any particular space.

D: Nowhere.

Methodology

In order to carry out this research, I recruited postgraduate research students within the HUM faculty to participate in two focus groups. Each focus group lasted for an hour and each student was paid £10 for their time. The groups were organised around the two PGR Offices within the arts building, room 0.69 and room 01.06. This is because anecdotal evidence suggested that

these offices represented two distinct working cultures and communities. The purpose of this was to understand the perceptions of space and how it affected the two perceived different cultures to receive recommendations of best practice from those who were using the spaces. Students from these offices were self-selected, with the focus groups being advertised through posters, flyers, school email bulletins and word of mouth. There were 10 students who attended over both groups with 6 from 0.69 and 4 from 01.06. The office manager from 0.69 estimated that there were 24 desks of which 12 users turned up regularly. Thus the 6 participants of the first focus group represented 50% of the PGRs in that office who demonstrated regular engagement with their study space.

I created a list of questions based on the findings from the literature review and PGR experience and submitted them for ethical approval. I ran the group as a moderator using the same questions to structure the group discussion allowing a comparison across the groups. Due to the small data pool, these findings are limited implying the need for further study which speaks to the central theme throughout the literature of the inherently difficult task of engaging PGR's. I then did a thematic analysis, coding the data with the themes of ownership, value, Associate tutor issues, physicality and belonging.

Analysis

When analysing the data collected from my focus groups, five main themes emerged:

1. Issues of ownership
2. Value
3. Associate Tutor issues
4. Physicality/materiality of space
5. Sense of Belonging

These are of course only initial findings and the data bears further scrutiny, however this set of interconnected themes were overwhelming apparent throughout the data.

Physicality and Materiality of Spaces

One of the most prevalent themes that emerged from the focus groups was the materiality of PGR spaces themselves: what the space looks like (materially and physically) and its impact on PGRs, particularly in terms of mental health and wellbeing.

Student D Group 2: '[...] initially it was a cold space, literally and metaphorically. It is still cold.'

P3

Drawing back on the literature around “empty” spaces we can see how the constant (re)cycling, (re)using and (re)ordering of space leaves students feeling alienated from the space. Spaces appear clinical and homogeneous. This, as mentioned earlier, is found across the sector and highlights the way in which spaces become indistinguishable and interchangeable (Donovan, 2009; Buchanan, 1999; Augé, 2009). The vast, cavernous, dungeon-like PGR Office becomes not only an empty-space but a non-space. A space which is, by design, unable to be inscribed with any particular meaning by the students that work in. There is an impossibility of the space transforming into place. Student feedback has recognized the “coldness” by virtue of its emptiness. Both in terms of students using the space but also its resistance to the inscription of social meaning.

In response to this modality of space students requested a space which is “defensible”. A space which is small enough that it can be owned, organized and extricated from the Universities (re)using, (re)cycling and (re)ordering. Such a space enables the students to perform an ownership of the space and as such inscribe it with meaning. Through this inscription social formation and community building becomes possible. Through continued shared engagement and transformation of space bonds of social solidarity can be formed and communities can be drawn together amongst students engaging in the space. This can enable students produce an ameliorating effect, against the roiling tumult of the Universities constant desire for (re)use, (re)cycling and (re)ordering, which is beneficial for their well-being and resilience.

Student D Group 2: 'Obviously 01 is a bigger room and you don't expect everyone to be [want to build community] but we do have groups here and there.' P3

Student D Group 2: 'It's inevitable that you are not [going to have much community], it's a big space.' P4

Associate Tutor Space

Exploring Associate Tutor rights for PGRs is beyond the scope of this report, however participants made it very clear that lack of appropriate space and resources for ATs was deeply impactful on the PGR community and their own individual wellbeing but specifically, AT work often encroached onto PGR space. The lack of appropriate space to conduct office hours and meetings with students meant that many PhDs undertaking AT work had to use shared office space to meet students and struggled to separate their part-time, paid work from their research. They also pointed to departmental inequalities in terms of support and provision for ATs which resulted in some PGRs feeling more/less valued by their school or department, negatively impacting on their mental health and wellbeing.

Sense of Value, Belonging, and Ownership

Long term, bookable desks meant that PGRs could make their work spaces more 'homely', as well as finding it easier to feel part of a community, building comradery with others because they would see the same people every day whereas hot desking areas in the library did not allow for this and made them feel isolated. This sense of personal and communal belonging works hand-in-hand with ideas of 'value' for PGRs.

Departmental and school differences in terms of their treatment of PGRs was cited as a key site of value for participants. Different schools allocated different amounts of space and resources for their ATs (of which, depending on the school, were heavily made up of PGRs), and PGR specific events such as research seminars were not run equally across the faculty. This feeds into themes of lack of investment in postgraduate research students, combined with shoddy work and social spaces filled with unwanted, left-over furniture, which made participants feel that they were an afterthought for the university: neither worthy of investment in terms of furniture or in terms of the time it takes to provide a series of research seminars. This in turn becomes an isolating factor by preventing PGRs from being fully engaged in the university's scholarly community – without inclusion, PGRs experience feelings of isolation which are specifically related to their status as PGRs, as they neither hold the status (or value) of an

undergraduate student around whom the university culture is catered to, nor are they members of staff and value as 'legitimate' members of the university's research culture.

On the theme of belonging (both individual and communal) participants emphasised that PGR space should be self-policing, where office and communal space managers are also PGR students, lending a sense of autonomy and ownership of their surroundings. This was vitally important when we consider how participants framed their 'fight' for space and recognition. The spaces therefore feel like spaces they the PGRs have carved out for themselves and their community through persistent and hard advocacy. Theories of territoriality and natural surveillance can be used to understand how important a sense of ownership of space is for PGRs for example Yi-Fu Tuan's exploration of space/place: 'What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value...The ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa.' (1977, p6).

Space becomes place when we attach meaning to the spaces we inhabit, be they work, social, or communal. A sense of place can center us, make us feel included in a community, 'a part' of something such as an institution or a cohort. To ignore such territorial boundaries that PGRs put into being as attempts to embed themselves in their institutional homes would be not only disruptive but represents a violation of personal/owned spaces, as well as to belittle hard-won feelings of value and autonomy.

Student B Group 2 'Why would you sit on someone else's desk when their stuff is obviously there? It's such an invasion, you know?'

Recommendations

Based on my findings I submit the following recommendations for the future use and organization of PGR space which is particularly pertinent to any decisions made in relation to the current Sky House project:

1. The university should ensure that all PGR workspace is run and organised by PGR students who use the space. The university should provide adequate resourcing to facilitate PGR running and development on the spaces.
2. The university should ensure that PGR consultation is central to the development of any future space which will be primarily for the use of PGR students.
3. PGR office space should be bookable for extended periods of time (i.e. not based on a hot-desking system), should not be dependent on large open-plan offices but rather smaller offices seating 20-25 PGRs. PGR space should not just be designed specifically to increase output/production but designed around building community.
4. The university should ensure that there is provision for two distinct working styles: silent and not-silent PGR offices (such as the two PGR offices currently existing in the Arts building).
5. The university should ensure that PGR office space in the Sky House project will not be segregated by school as PGRs prefer to be in offices which are multi-disciplinary (this includes graduate schools).
6. The university should ensure that PGR spaces are put together in one block e.g. a PGR study centre to provide PGRs with a strong sense of 'place' within the building, rather than feeling dispersed amongst many floors and rooms.
7. The university should ensure that separate and distinct Associate Tutor space exists for PGRs without impinging on PGR specific space (associate tutor work should be kept separate from PhD work).
8. The university must recognise the differences between PGR and undergraduate engagement schedules and that PGRs study and work year-round, including outside of undergraduate term time. Therefore, PGR spaces must be accessible and useable outside of these times (throughout holidays, weekends, etc.).

Summary

From my research into how HUM PGRs at UEA engaged with space, several key themes emerged. These were:

1. Issues of ownership
2. Value
3. Associate Tutor issues
4. Physicality/materiality of space
5. Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging to a community (amongst a cohort, of a research community more broadly) and of value or validation (by the institution, by one's peers) went hand-in-hand with PGRs engagement with PGR specific spaces e.g. office spaces in the Arts building. Associate Tutor issues also fed into this theme of 'value' as departmental differences in the treatment of its PGR ATs led to the perception that some schools 'valued' their PGRs more than others or that some were better of simply because schools allocated them more resources and therefore had an advantage (real or imagined). As well as this, participants emphasised a real need for distinct, separate AT work-space, as many who undertook AT work experienced 'slippage' between their PhD work and their work as ATs where, lacking space to meet with students privately, many felt forced to meet students in their shared offices or in open spaces such as the hub which could cause difficulties if one needed to speak to a student confidentially. Many PGRs therefore said that they had to combine their PhD and AT work, using the same pc's and desks that they used to carry out their research projects.

In terms of physicality or materiality of spaces, participants emphasised the need to have PGR consultation at the heart of any discussions of future PGR space allocation, as well as the need for a multiplicity of spaces that could serve multiple functions. The PGRs I interviewed also expressed a strong desire to have PGR spaces grouped together and rejected the idea of having graduate school offices separated out into schools and departments on separate floors as this demonstrated a furthering of the siloing and isolation that they already experienced within the institution. Rather, they wished to be together to more easily form peer and cohort communities, as well as enabling participation in a broader PGR community culture. Ownership of these spaces was also key to PGRs feeling they had a 'place' in the university and the faculty and helped to dispel the sense of impermanence and isolation faced by many of the students.

These are only preliminary findings and the subject of PGR space calls for further, more in depth research. Ultimately however, the PGRs I spoke to expressed the deeply held need for spaces which felt owned, individually and communally, and which were unique and malleable to their needs and requirements and I believe to be the most important takeaway for any future discussions on PGR spaces.

Bibliography

- Augé, M. (2009) *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso
- Bailey, M. and Freedman, D. eds. (2011) *The Assault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance*. London: Pluto Press
- Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. London: Polity Press
- Bauman, Z. (2005) 'Education in Liquid Modernity,' *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, vol. 28(4), pp.303-317
- Brown, W. (2015) *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press
- Buchanan, I. (1999) 'Non-Places: Space in the Age of Supermodernity,' *Social Semiotics*, vol. 9(3), pp. 393-395
- Donovan, K. (2009) 'Building Supermodernity: The Architecture of Supermodernism,' *Irish Journal of French Studies*, vol. 9, pp. 115-140,
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- HEFCE (2018) [online] available at:
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405121723/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/funding/catalyst/pgr-wellbeing/> [accessed: 26/06/2019]
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. (1974) *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Twohig-Bennett, C. and Jones, A. (2018) "The health benefits of the great outdoors: a systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes", *Environmental Research*, vol. 166, pp628-637
- Johnson, R. and Haig, R. (2010) "Social psychiatry and social policy for the 21st century- new concepts for new needs: the 'psychologically informed environment'", *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, vol. 14(4), pp30-35
- Johnson, R. and Haig, R. (2011) "Social psychiatry and social policy for the 21st century: new concepts and new needs – the 'Enabling Environments' initiative", *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, vol. 15(1), pp17-23
- Phipps, A. and Young, I. (2015) "Neoliberalisation and 'lad cultures' in higher education", *Sociology*, vol. 49(2), pp305-322
- Quinney, S. and Richardson, L. (2014) "Organisational development, appreciative inquiry and the development of Psychologically Informed Environments (PIEs). Part I: a positive psychology approach", *Housing, Care, and Support*, vol. 17(2), pp95-102

Sarid, A. (2017) 'Self-Critical Appropriation: An Assessment of Baunman's View of Education in Liquid Modernity,' *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 49(5) pp. 462-472

Schein, E. H. (1990) "Organizational Culture", *American Psychologist*, vol. 45(2), pp109-119

Shamir, R. (2008) "The age of responsabilization: on market-embedded morality", *Economy and Society*, vol. 37(1), pp1-19

UEA (2018) *The Sky House – UEA*, [online] available at: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/estates/improving-your-campus/skyhouse> [accessed: 20/06/2019]

UEA SU, (2015) *The Honesty Project: Postgraduate Research Mental Health at UEA* [online] Available at: <https://www.uea.su/pageassets/postgraduate/thehonestyproject/Honesty-Project-Report.pdf> [accessed: 21/06/2019]

Watson, D. and Turnpenny, J. (2019). *Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Postgraduate Research students: A rapid review.*

Woodcock, J. and Gill, J. (2014) "Implementing a psychologically informed environment in a service for homeless young people", *Housing, Care and Support*, vol. 17(1), pp48-57