

Q&As - A Conversation with the Editors

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Introduction

This special SEHEJ issue is themed not by topic but by its authors, many of whom are publishing in this area for the first time. However, it is also the product of a unique collaborative process developed by the guest editorial team (Kiu Sum, John Lean, Stuart Sims and Wilko Luebsen). Recognising the challenges that Early Career Researchers (ECRs) face in publishing, we fostered a collaborative and supportive environment, facilitating effective teamwork and idea-sharing among the participants. Furthermore, we complemented the writing process with tailored workshops that offered valuable insights into the publishing process. In doing this, we aim to provide a new platform for new voices in HE research and practice, and to remove some of the uncertainty that often comes with publishing in a new area.

This "Q&A - A Conversation with the Editors" is presented as an interview with ourselves as guest editors, reflecting on the process of putting the special issue together and providing some context and lessons learned. In addition, we have included a separate short methodological article (see the other paper contributed to this journal issue) on the process of developing the collaborative groups, with some insight into the authors' motivations and how we designed the process to address these.

For the conversation below, the authors' initials are as follows: Kiu Sum (KS), John Lean (JL), Stuart Sims (SS) and Wilko Luebsen (WL).

What has motivated us to start this journal collaboration?

KS: This started with a conversation in one of the Student Engagement in Higher Education's Editorial Board meetings (disclaimer: I sit on the board). The conversation discussed how best to develop and support colleagues looking to publish via the [Developmental Route](#). As I also convene the Early Career Researcher (ECR) SIG group, to my naivness, I suggested, "What if the ECR SIG can do something to support this?" Subsequently, that led to an agreement from the meeting to explore this idea further with a proposed idea of a publication workshop. This led to an email to John (the other ECR convenor) and Stuart and Wilko (Convenors from Research and Evaluation SIG) on a potential collaboration about this idea. But one idea soon turned into another, and that's how this Special Issue evolved. From an ECR SIG perspective,

this was an exciting opportunity to support colleagues who are either new(ish) to publishing in student engagement or are early career individuals. Following our initial SIG meeting, one of the aims that colleagues wanted was the opportunity to engage in the publication processes by either sharing their student engagement research or developing their experiences. As a result, collaborating with Stuart and Wilko meant we could bring together interests in student engagement research with the ECR group and achieve our SIG's aim.

SS: Having worked in educational development for many years, I've always been enthusiastic about supporting colleagues with good learning and teaching practices. However, some hidden barriers (real or perceived) often exist for colleagues publishing work in this area. These can be for many reasons, including lack of experience, being in a role that doesn't support or prioritise this work or lack of time. Supporting colleagues to overcome these barriers is a driving force for my involvement in the Research & Evaluation SIG in the first place. Having sat on the same editorial board as Kiu mentioned above, a joint SIG collaboration seemed to present itself organically as an obvious next step to try and get new authors involved in SEHEJ.

WL: I really enjoyed working together with the convenors of the ECR SIG group and co-developing this exciting programme as a collaborative activity this academic year. The idea of collaboration and forming partnerships truly reflects one of my personal ambitions to understand how colleagues and institutions (especially within the UK HE context) can effectively share and collaborate, leveraging each other's knowledge and experiences to attain common objectives. Upon reflection, this collaboration between our two SIG groups appeared to be an excellent opportunity to support individual colleagues and develop a more comprehensive understanding of suitable approaches for facilitating such support. This consideration extends to the diverse range of roles, responsibilities, and experience levels of all colleagues who participated.

How did you feel during the process of working together as guest editors and convenors from two separate Special Interest Groups?

KS: I'm surprised that John, Stuart and Wilko are still in the process from that initial email from April 2022! So surely this whole process hasn't been *that* painful... But the whole journey has been a positive experience. Sowing and watering a seed with our motivation was wonderful to see it flourishing. My highlight has been the enthusiasm from colleagues in the sector, both from professional services and in academia/research, wanting to be part of this community and experience, but most importantly, trusting us as we went into this journey together. Working with John, Stuart and Wilko through our dialogues was also an eye-opener. With the four of us from different backgrounds and responsibilities in our institutions, you might think this would be an unconventional collaboration outside of RAISE. But our interest in student engagement and research united and supported our connection throughout this

journey. Personally, this project has been a professional development for me. It was pushing myself out of my comfort zone and collaborating with colleagues outside my discipline while developing my interest in my academic career. Again, this highlights that academia is not just becoming a lecturer, but rather is the "other stuff" that continues my motivation to work (and hopefully stay) in higher education. It is fostering my academic identity of how I fit into my discipline, institution and the wider community.

JL: From my perspective, I really tried to treat this process as a form of pedagogy in its own right. We needed to ask ourselves what support students would need if we were asking them to produce similar outputs. Given this, surveying students' needs, organising expert workshops to assist with this, and developing a supporting environment to develop their ideas seem obvious. However, these aspects are often forgotten, given that authors are supposed to be 'experts'. Taking part in this process also seemed to help ECRs understand their own motivations for getting involved. It perhaps brought to the surface self-imposed limits and barriers that they might not have had the motivation to address otherwise. For example, we often talk about how time is a limited resource. However, this act of participating in this group helped people recognise this and deliberately put aside time to dedicate to writing. Again, this reflects good pedagogy; if we want to supercharge learning, we don't just think about what we learn but how we do it to learn more effectively in the future. Similarly, by confronting some of the challenges of writing for publication, our authors set themselves up to be more successful outside the life of this project.

WL: For me personally, it has been both a great learning experience overall and also enabled me to reflect on how we engage with each other in educational spaces. Furthermore, it facilitates how we can shape our educational spaces in the future to be continuously beneficial for a variety of participants with different skill sets, interests and motivations. The diversity of colleagues from both groups allowed us to explore various challenges and experiences in the writing and publication process. It enhanced cross-institutional connections between participants who share a common interest in Student Engagement as a concept. To combine the interests of both our Special Interest Groups, we had several planning meetings and continuous exchanges as a team. In hindsight, this helped to develop a mutual understanding of our common journey as two separate groups but also supported us in mapping out the next steps of the programme and effectively delegating responsibilities to arrange activities alongside our busy work schedules.

SS: The impact is almost self-evident by having a special issue as the final output of the combined SIG support. We set out to demystify publication and facilitate colleagues who normally haven't had the opportunity to publish work on student engagement. The proof is in the pudding that the issue exists. But this does overlook those who didn't end up making it to that final stage....

Now that you've completed the whole process of producing this collaborative special journal issue, were there any surprises during the process? Did you achieve what you set out to do? More importantly, what are the future plans?

KS: I admire the variety of colleagues in the sector through this process. It is the opportunity to go outside your "normal" group and do something that explores my interests and see where that network and collaboration takes me. But from that initial conversation and email, it is great to see that this process is on its way to achieving our ECR SIG aim. It is only the first step, but we will get there one day. This collaboration is only the start and offers many more future partnerships between colleagues from different disciplines and experiences to work on projects that matter and interest them. Thus, the future of the ECR SIG? Well, we hope this has inspired colleagues, no matter how "early" you are in your career, to make those unconventional conversations and start on collaborations that can take you to exciting and unexpected journeys ahead.

JL: I was surprised by how many new people I met as part of the process, including colleagues from my own institution whom I would not have had an excuse to talk to otherwise! I hope that the connections I developed with others will lead to further collaborations, as it was difficult to contain potential ideas within the scope of our discussions. In addition, this experience has brought home to me one of the unique qualities of the ECR SIG, in that our definition of 'ECR' is necessarily broad. Along with including those within 5 years of starting their academic career more broadly, we include those new to working in student engagement. Having a journal article as an end goal gave our ECRs something to work together and focus on and a way to mobilise their shared identity as ECRs, which might otherwise be defined by a deficit or a vague sense of a more nebulous future career goal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as guest editors of this Special Issue, we have embarked on a reflective journey, examining our collaborative work in producing this journal issue. This conversation is a neat distillation of reflective ones we have had over emails and Teams over the past year, and in writing it up, we have gained valuable insights into the process, lessons learned, and strategies for fostering ongoing collaboration. Recognising the importance of supporting early career researchers (ECRs), we emphasise the significance of initiatives like the RAISE Network ECR Special Interest Group, which brings colleagues together through various activities to promote professional development. Furthermore, we stress the need for continuous reflection and evaluation in our daily responsibilities, supported by the Research & Evaluation SIG, to share best practices and engage in peer conversations that encourage collaborative pedagogy. By embracing reflection and fostering collaboration, we can create a nurturing environment that empowers ECRs and advances research and education.