

“Be Wise and Participate”: Introducing Student-led Cross-Disciplinary Peer Support for Masters Students

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Abstract

The most recent Norwegian Students’ Health and Satisfaction Surveys in 2021 and 2022 had concerning statistics about student well-being, particularly at Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) where more than a third of students often felt lonely, excluded or isolated. Studies show that a lack of contact with peers can affect motivation and therefore study progression negatively. Peer support mechanisms have proven successful in altering this pattern. To address these concerns at the postgraduate level, the Faculty of Social Sciences piloted a cross-disciplinary conference for Master students, giving them an opportunity to present their research, interact with peers from different disciplines, and receive feedback. Responses after the event indicated that introducing a new opportunity for students to meet and network with peers from different academic disciplines helped students feel included, valued and able to connect to a larger network.

Introduction

The aftermath of the pandemic in many ways has been as challenging for postgraduate students as the pandemic itself. While the lockdown in 2020 and 2021 impacted on levels of loneliness due to isolation, a return to campus demonstrated that too much virtual learning had led to fatigue and diminished competencies to interact and connect with peers in a physical environment. To complicate the issue, peer mentoring schemes introduced during the lockdown (similar to those described by Bruce et al., 2023 and Gillani et al., 2022) were discontinued in the (mis)belief that a return to campus would remedy concerns regarding social well-being. At the end of 2022, it was clear that new interventions were needed, and so a student-led cross-disciplinary peer support event for Master students was introduced for the first time at Oslo Metropolitan University in 2023.

Loneliness, Exclusion and Isolation

Every four years, the Norwegian health services and student unions administer a national survey to assess students’ mental, social and physical health. The Students’ Health and Satisfaction Survey (SHoT) uses the Three-Item Loneliness Scale (T-ILS), a short version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, to assess social well-being (SHoT, 2021a, 2022a). Due to concerns about the effects of the pandemic in 2020-2021, an additional survey was conducted one year later. Around one-third of Norwegian students reported feeling lonely or excluded. Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) scored above the national average.

In some ways, this was to be expected. OsloMet is an urban university in the capital city of Norway, in the centre of town, and offers study places to approximately 23 000 students. As one of three universities in Oslo, it attracts students from all over the country. A recent study showed that in the Faculty of Social Sciences, for example, less than a third of Master students had been raised and attended school in the capital city, and fewer came from the surrounding region (Hundebo, 2023, p.149-73). The high percentage of loneliness during the pandemic (54% - ShoT, 2021b, p.26) was therefore affected by students stuck in small apartments in an unfamiliar city, unable to travel home to join their families or to see friends. Yet, even with a return to the 'new normal', responses in 2022 remained at 30% (ShoT, 2022b, p. 42). Possibly the 'cohort rule' (where people could only meet and mingle with small, specified groups) at the end of the lockdown meant that the silo effect (referring to the tendency of academic disciplines to stay within their own areas of specialty and not cooperate with others) was more entrenched than ever.

While these statistics echo those gathered from around the world across the same time period (2018-2022) (Crisp et al., 2020; Richard et al., 2022; Pointon-Haas et al., 2024), they are worrying – and it is not difficult to determine that certain years or levels of study tend to create more space for loneliness or isolation than others. In Norway, most Master studies are offered over two years. Normally students will complete coursework in the first 12 to 18 months and then use the remaining time to concentrate on researching and writing their thesis. Since Master students write the thesis either by themselves or as a pair, it is understandable that they may feel increasingly isolated and distant from the greater academic community at a time when more guidance and comradery may be desired. It is therefore not surprising that there is a tendency to lose momentum and motivation during the thesis phase, which may result in delays to completing their studies or eventual drop-out. Given this, and the fact that many intervention programmes are usually aimed at first year students (as supported by a review conducted by Pointon-Haas et al., 2024), a new peer support initiative was introduced focusing exclusively on postgraduate students.

There is a wealth of literature and research on the value of including student peer support mechanisms in tertiary education that cite benefits including improved engagement and completion rates, a sense of inclusion that enhances satisfaction levels and persistence to perform, and the development of important communication skills (Kuh et al., 2021; Pardo et al., 2021; Richard et al., 2022; Kyte, 2024; Pointon-Haas et al., 2024; Sitzmann & Radcliff, 2024). In addition, student-led conferences offer students the possibility to take responsibility for planning and implementing an event with minimal to moderate mentorship from faculty members. This helps students develop organizational competencies and leadership skills through interprofessional learning and connection with others (Leadbeatter & Gao, 2019; Pardo et al., 2021). It provides both ownership and responsibility. As part of this, it has been argued that to harness the best experience, interactions should be well planned and effectively implemented (Leadbeatter & Gao, 2019; Kuh et al., 2021). Aspects of the student-led conference model suggested by Leadbeatter and Gao (2019) were adopted in the design of the event, especially those regarding the

importance of empowering students throughout the process (trust, collaboration, initiative and student autonomy). Based on these insights, a student-led cross-disciplinary postgraduate conference was piloted at OsloMet in 2023.

The Project Overview

In 2022/23, *Den gode studentopplevelser* (DGS – The good student experience), a programme established to improve the learning experience of students returning to campus, awarded a grant to enable the Faculty of Social Sciences to pilot a student-led cross-disciplinary event at the master's level (DGS 2024). The aim of the project was to encourage students to network and participate in groups across degrees as this would be a good environment to discover how best to communicate ideas to people outside one's immediate academic discipline - an important skill in the contemporary workplace where teams are often comprised of members from different units or competencies.

Named the *Kløkt* (meaning: 'wise') Master Conference by the first team of student facilitators, two one-day events took place on 10 March 2023 and 20 October 2023. They included a total of thirty-seven second year Master students representing more than eight education programmes across four faculties. In addition to the Master students who would participate as delegates, this project recruited seven student facilitators who were responsible for: planning and organising of the conference; information on the website; calls for participation; conference arrangements; as well as acting as facilitators in the parallel sessions. Since the conference was not embedded in respective programmes, but was designed to be cross-disciplinary, it was designated as a faculty activity relying on voluntary participation, and the Vice Dean of Education was appointed as the faculty mentor for the student facilitators. During the planning of the event, it was decided that participants would be placed in intentionally diverse, interdisciplinary groups. Each session was assigned a student facilitator who would oversee the programme and guide the participants – although at the students' request, due to fears of uncertainty or potential unruliness (that fortunately never manifested) an academic staff member joined each group as an observer and co-discussant. The academic staff members and student facilitators were recruited from different Master programmes to allow for academic diversity.

On the day, each event started with a keynote speaker from one of the university's research institutions who presented data relevant to Master students entering the job market after graduation. Students were then taken by the facilitators to their respective sessions for the presentations to start. Each student had an opportunity to present their research idea and ask the group for suggestions on how it could be improved. The group participants were provided with a guide (compiled by the student facilitators) on how to give constructive feedback and were asked to model their responses accordingly. This helped to create a positive learning culture where everyone had a role in each session and throughout the day. Refreshments were provided, and the conference culminated in a certificate ceremony as the student facilitators felt that this would make participation more attractive.

Challenges: Recruitment

There were some challenges at the start. It was surprisingly difficult to appoint student facilitators, even though these were paid positions. It was too new and an 'unknown'. It was only after the direct intervention by programme coordinators that students applied. Academic staff were also initially slow to support it as they were unsure of the benefits of having students from a variety of educations in the same room. Some were concerned that it would undermine the supervision process. It was therefore important to assure staff that the conference did not in any way supplement or compete with the supervisory process.

In August, when the announcement for student facilitators for the second event was posted, a new challenge was identified. Since the event catered exclusively to Master students in the thesis phase, all the previous student assistants had graduated. This meant that there were no 'experienced' assistants to continue and guide the next group, and that the new organising committee would need to start from scratch to build up awareness of the event for the next cohort.

For both events, distributing invitations through the official OsloMet channels had minimal effect. As soon as the organising committee of student facilitators started to use non-formal channels of communication via social media to encourage participation, registration doubled in a period of twenty-four hours. This was supported by responses in the registration process: 59% indicated they had heard about the event from friends and colleagues; 29% received the news from the university website.

However, despite these obstacles, students who attended the events were overwhelmingly positive about the experience and agreed that it had served its purpose of building new networks and making them feel more motivated to continue with their research. The second event also demonstrated the dexterity of this structure, as it was apparent that it could be applied either at the start or towards the end of the research process. The aim of the conference was of course slightly different in terms of what research could be presented at the two different stages but remained the same in terms of improving social interaction around research, networking and inclusion.

Evaluation: It is Wise to Participate

Participants were invited to respond to a survey of two questions at the end of both events: (1) what did you enjoy the most about the conference?; and (2) what could have been improved? Responses were submitted anonymously, and thirty of the thirty-seven students (81%) provided comments. Special mention was made about: the professionalism of the event; that the mix of study programmes had kept it interesting for everyone; the quality of constructive feedback from others; renewed motivation to complete their studies; and the appreciation of recognition at the end of the event (certificate ceremony).

While perhaps disappointing that the conference did not attract more students, the lower participation did have one very clear positive outcome: the groups were smaller (7-8 participants) which meant that each student had more time to present and discuss their feedback. This turned out to be greatly appreciated and many agreed that it would have been difficult to achieve the same level of interest and engagement had the groups been bigger and the programme faster:

- *I enjoyed the small groups for discussion, it was very well organized.*
- *Having it in small groups was great to feel more comfortable.*

To ensure that a safe and trusting environment was created at the start, each session started with the student facilitator presenting their own work for feedback. This was a good way to both demonstrate the mechanisms of the conference, as well as include the student facilitator's research in the programme. At the end, many delegates stated that this had helped them relax as the first presenters were confident and calm:

- *I was a bit unsure at the start. Not really sure what to present. But after hearing the first, I got inspired.*

Many students – and all academic staff - expressed surprise that such educationally-diverse groups were so effective in eliciting constructive and helpful feedback for the respective studies:

- *Feedback from people with different education, this helps to see another perspective and also to learn new parts. Good place to connect and gain new knowledge.*
- *The very idea of sharing our ideas with a diverse public is great for practicing our communication skills.*
- *It was helpful for us to reflect on our own projects when we needed to present it to students from other disciplines. (translated)*

The most important feedback was that, at least for that day, students felt included and motivated to share their research with others:

- *It was clearly a day for me*
- *Everyone had a part.*

Notably, all participants stayed the entire day. No one left at lunch or slipped out of any of the sessions. This is evidence that everyone felt that they were an important part of the group and could participate meaningfully. This was supported by the fact that all would recommend the event to others, and a few even suggested it should become a compulsory part of their master's programme:

- *The project should recruit more students because this format is well suited for most*

master students

- *Perhaps this could be mandatory or recognized as part of our coursework*

Most importantly, it was clear that the main objective of making people feel included, while renewing enthusiasm for their research process, had been achieved.

Reflections: The Importance of Participation and Peer Support

The *Kløkt* Master Conference reaffirmed findings of previous studies that peer support in key moments can have a positive effect on mental health and increase self-confidence and a feeling of being able to cope (Richard et al., 2022). If even for a short time, students were able to meet people who shared a similar experience and could share knowledge for mutual gain. However, it is important to acknowledge that the long-term benefits of these type of interventions are less clear, as previous research around peer-led support groups have had mixed findings. Much has to do with the objective of the exercise and the dynamics between, and characteristics of, those involved.

In this respect, the student facilitators were, and are, key. The student-led process placed them firmly at the heart of the entire process. Fortunately, all seven student facilitators were extraordinary in meeting challenges, thinking proactively, and being willing to try new things. They were dedicated to keeping the student at the centre, and would often reflect on the next step or the best way forward by asking themselves: Why would I want to do this? What would get me excited about this? What would I expect from participating? It was rewarding to see how they supported each other and the participants, and by extension developed leadership and communication practices that will put them in good stead in the future.

While the event was effective in meeting the needs of its target audience and greatly enjoyed by those in attendance, the challenge remains that most participants (and student facilitators) will always be in their last year of study. This means that each event will cater to a new cohort with no prior knowledge or experience. One way to address this in Norway would be to include a first-year Master student in the team on the understanding that they would join the organizing committee the next time to ensure continuity and knowledge sharing. In countries with one-year programmes, it may be important to invite a past assistant back to do a hand-over.

It will also continue to be a marketing challenge until the event is established in the university annual activity calendar. The incorporation of the event in programmes' curricula would, of course, address the questions of marketing and recruitment. However, it may not solve the logistical challenge of trying to coordinate an event across different education programmes and faculties as related courses may not necessarily overlap.

Similarly to Crisp et al.'s (2020) study of peer facilitators, due to the small sample and short time span of the intervention, one must acknowledge that it is difficult to generalise the

findings and experience of this event to a larger context. It takes time for such an event to become established, and so ongoing reflection and documentation is needed to better understand the long-term impact. That said, this model is very easy to implement and up-scale, provided some structure is in place.

Conclusion: Planning for Future Events

For the purposes of this pilot, the limited number of clear objectives were met. The *Kløkt* Master Conference did indeed allow students to demonstrate and build on their research competencies with the support of peers whom they otherwise would probably have never met, and while doing that were able to feel included, valued and part of a larger network.

For the planning of similar student-led cross-disciplinary conferences, the following four aspects should be taken into consideration:

1. Involve student organisers actively from the start
 - a. Encourage students to participate in meaningful planning tasks such as marketing of the event, logistics, and facilitation. Allow students to shape the event based on their own needs and experiences.
2. Use informal communication channels in addition to university channels
 - a. Encouraged student organisers to promote the event via social media platforms students already use (e.g., Instagram, WhatsApp etc.).
3. Prioritize small, diverse, and inclusive groups
 - a. Keep conference groups small (around 7–8 participants) and intentionally mix students from different programmes. Have the student organisers present first to model behaviour and reduce anxiety about participation.
4. Plan for continuity between cohorts
 - a. If it is not possible to include this event as part of the various educations' year-plan: for two-year degrees, include first-year Master's students in the planning team with the understanding that they will help lead the next event; for one-year degrees, include a hand-over between past and current student facilitators. This builds continuity and strengthens long-term sustainability.

Author Bio

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