

## RAISE Buddy Scheme: A Group Reflection

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### Abstract

This collaborative autoethnography explores the experiences of three Higher Education practitioners participating in the RAISE Buddy Scheme. Initially joining for professional development and potential collaboration, we found that the scheme evolved into a reflective, supportive, and human-centred counter-space within an increasingly metric-driven sector. Through shared dialogue across difference, we cultivated a space of trust, solidarity, and critical friendship that enabled open exploration of identity, belonging, and purpose in academia. Our reflections reveal that the Buddy Scheme offered more than peer support. As a result, this provided a vital site of connection that challenged hierarchical and isolating norms, demonstrating that taking time to “be with others” is both necessary and transformative in contemporary HE.

### Introduction

The RAISE Buddy Scheme, launched in 2023 by the RAISE network (Researching, Advancing & Inspiring Student Engagement), was designed to foster meaningful connections between individuals with a shared interest in student engagement (RAISE 2025). It offered participants the chance to connect across institutions and roles, share experiences, learn from different contexts, and explore collaborative possibilities, including joint writing or small projects. For us, the three authors of this piece, the scheme provided a valuable opportunity to step outside of our immediate professional settings and engage in cross-institutional reflection.

Though we each joined with slightly different expectations—ranging from professional development to possible collaboration—we all hoped to find space for open dialogue and critical learning. What emerged was far more than a networking opportunity. Through regular conversations over the course of the year, we co-created a space rooted in trust, care, and honest exchange. Over time, the space we built took on new meaning. Rather than producing a conventional output related to student engagement, our meetings became a lifeline in a demanding sector—a space to reflect on identity, positionality, and purpose in Higher Education (HE).

This paper offers a collaborative autoethnography of our experience as a Buddy Scheme group. It explores how our shared space—initially formed around professional goals—evolved into a powerful site of belonging, mentorship, and critical friendship. In telling this story, we hope to highlight the importance of human-centred collaboration in HE, especially at a time when many of us are navigating systemic pressures, shifting identities, and the emotional demands of the sector.

Moreover, we aim to encourage more meaningful collaborations across the HE landscape, uniting individuals who are passionate about student engagement and yet feel isolated in their endeavours. Our experience reveals a sense of camaraderie that we nurtured as part of the RAISE Buddy Scheme; we hope this inspires others to connect through similar initiatives.

## **Who We Are**

We came into the RAISE Buddy Scheme from different places: professionally, institutionally, and personally. But each of us shared a commitment to inclusive practice, critical reflection, and student engagement. Our experiences in HE, shaped by our identities and roles, created a rich foundation for honest conversation and mutual learning.

*Tamara:* I am a proud Black British Caribbean queer woman from South London. I work as an educational developer at a post-92 UK university, focusing on student-staff partnerships to support inclusive curriculum development. Although my role sits within professional services, I often find myself navigating the blurred lines between academic and support work. I identify as a third space HE professional, someone whose role involves both academic and professional service responsibilities. It's a space I value, because it offers potential for change, particularly around complex challenges like student success. At the same time, I'm aware that people like me who haven't followed a traditional academic route are often undervalued.

*Kiu:* I'm a non-British-born Chinese woman, working as an early-career academic in nutrition. I often describe myself as "the odd one out," and while that can be isolating, it also makes me think deeply about who I am and what I bring to my work. My academic interests span nutrition and pedagogy, and I hope to bring those together to support inclusive, socially impactful learning. Like many early-career academics, I face pressures to perform, publish, and prove myself. That's why spaces like this matter. What helps me keep going is connection and knowing I'm not alone. This scheme reminded me that identity is not something fixed. It's something we explore and shape over time.

*Ana:* I'm a white woman who grew up in Spain and have spent most of my adult life in the UK. I've worked in British academia for nearly two decades and now identify as a post-Brexit UK national. I speak with a thick Spanish accent and embrace this as a rich, hybrid identity. Despite all the pressures in the sector, I still love my job. For me, the most meaningful moments often happen in student-staff partnerships, especially those developed outside the formal curriculum. I've also become more aware of how HE has changed over time. Increasingly, we are all working in a kind of third space, where we are required to take on roles beyond traditional teaching and research. I find that challenge exciting but also exhausting at times.

Although our journeys into HE have been very different, we came into the Buddy Scheme with a shared desire to connect, reflect, and build something meaningful. We were looking for more than just professional development—we were each seeking something relational, something real. While our paths into the scheme varied, the group we formed gave us the chance to explore who we were in this sector and what mattered most to us in our work. The motivations we brought with us would soon take on a new shape through the conversations that followed, including the third space, which others have explored as a space of potential conflict and loneliness, as well as playful and empowering (Preece et al. 2025).

### **Why We Joined, What We Hoped For**

We each joined the RAISE Buddy Scheme with our own intentions and hopes, shaped by our roles, identities, and the questions we were holding in our professional lives. This, in principle, aligned with the information we received from RAISE, which is also available online:

The RAISE Buddy Scheme aims to facilitate communication and collaboration across our members, as well as offering relevant opportunities for continued professional development and networking (RAISE, 2025).

While our motivations differed in focus, we shared a desire to connect with others who valued student engagement and to find space for reflection and growth beyond the walls of our own institutions.

*Tamara:* I decided to join the RAISE Buddy Scheme for two reasons. First, I was curious to learn more from others about how they... design and evaluate their pedagogy-focused student-staff partnership programmes. As I explained at the time, there is a massive push to evaluate APP (Action and Participation Plan)-related activities to assess their impact. It has been a substantial large challenge for me that I was hoping to overcome in the community. I was also hoping to collaborate with like-minded people to publish something—an article, blog, or other output. As a third space professional, trying to get the time and space to do research and publish work is almost non-existent... Despite having a Master's degree, academic writing is difficult for me, and I thought writing with a group would help encourage me to write and produce something. Especially as I want to start growing the academic portion of my career.

*Ana:* I first heard about the scheme through an email from RAISE in November 2023. I made an effort to engage with the initiative because I have enjoyed their work in the past, and I thought it would be worth the time. At the core of my academic practice is a strong commitment to the philosophy of Students as Partners. I saw the Buddy Scheme as an opportunity to find like-minded colleagues beyond my institution. So, I applied....

*Kiu:* For me, personal and professional growth go hand in hand. Actively seeking out ways to develop both personally and professionally is essential to ensuring

I'm always striving to be the best version of myself. Informal conversations and collaborative initiatives are a key source of inspiration—those light bulb moments when everything suddenly clicks. I've been interested in student engagement since my undergraduate days, when I worked on co-creation projects with staff and peers, and I've continued to build on that work ever since. I joined the scheme for two key reasons. First, I wanted the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues I might not otherwise have interacted with, particularly on topics related to staff-student partnerships and the use of technology in teaching and learning. Second, I was eager to explore new research areas, especially since my formal education had come to an end, and I wasn't sure where to focus my curiosity next.

Even though we entered with different motivations, there were shared threads from the beginning. We all recognised the value of connecting across institutional boundaries, learning from others, and creating space to explore new questions. What we didn't fully expect was how quickly this connection would deepen, or how foundational the space would become to our work and wellbeing.

### **What This Space Meant to Us**

As the year unfolded, it became clear that the space we had created together was unlike anything we had expected and different to most of the professional spaces we usually occupy in HE. Without intending to, we had built something that offered mentorship, critical friendship, emotional honesty, and a deep sense of mutual care. What began as a structured buddy scheme quietly transformed into something relational and grounding. Our initial plan was to meet online every four or six weeks. However, on a few occasions, we felt compelled to cancel our meetings due to other pressing issues. But we kept finding the time to meet online, and even once in person. We spent a whole day together in London, which really helped us shape the content of this article. We realised that the primary outcome of the Buddy Scheme was not to collaborate formally (at least not to start with), but to reflect together on the experience of being buddies.

*Tamara:* This space ended up being very much a space to [be] mentored by my colleagues Kiu and Ana on my work and future career. When we were grouped, I was finishing my Master's, recovering from sickness, and thinking about my next steps. I came in expecting to support, but I found myself receiving support I didn't even know I needed. Being with Ana and Kiu felt like being in a 'sista circle' with two wiser, more experienced women who could offer me help, support, accountability, and encouragement...all things which I have needed this past year. There was something special about the way we held space for one another. We weren't trying to fix things. We were listening, asking questions, and noticing. And that made all the difference.

*Kiu:* These conversations weren't always easy, but they became real, honest exchanges where we could share our struggles and successes without judgement. This safe, open space allowed us to be ourselves and discuss any challenge without fear, knowing that we would support one another in finding solutions. For me, it quickly evolved into a space where we weren't just talking

about HE—we were talking about who we were within it. It became a kind of informal mentorship, but without hierarchy. We were each offering something to each other. I wasn't just learning; I was being listened to.

*Ana:* At some point, I realised this wasn't just about professional development—it was about connection. Even though I am the oldest in the group, and I have been working in HE the longest, I feel we are all at the same level, engaging in a reflective space where we can explore how three people in academia find their own way. This horizontal dynamic was rare. It felt like we were creating the kind of academic space we wished existed more often: one that made space for uncertainty, honesty, and critical reflection, without competition or performance.

It was Tamara who first described our group as a *sista circle* (<https://sistacircle.co.uk/>), drawing on a term rooted in Black feminist practice. *Sista circles* originate from the work of Black Feminist scholars and activists as intentional, identity-affirming spaces where Black women can reflect, resist, and recharge through collective care and listening (Nathan, Love & Carlson, 2023; Palmer & Udoh, 2024). While we came from different cultural and professional backgrounds, the emotional texture of our group—the way we showed up for one another, held space, and challenged one another with care—resonated deeply with this ethos. As a Black woman, Tamara recognised elements of that dynamic in our meetings, even across difference: “Being with Ana and Kiu felt like being in a *sista circle* with two wiser, more experienced women who could offer me help, support, accountability, and encouragement.” The group became a kind of counter-space—reflective, intergenerational, and emotionally honest—even if we did not all share the same lived experience.

What this space meant to us wasn't defined by a product or project. It was determined by how it made us feel: held, heard, and stretched. In a sector that often values speed, output, and certainty, this space gave us time to slow down, reflect, and be in conversation with others who understood.

### **Shifting Expectations and Learning Through Difference**

As we settled into our work together, it became clear that navigating difference was not a side effect of the process—it was the process. We brought different roles, workloads, identities, and institutional realities into the group, which in turn shaped how we communicated, planned, and collaborated. The Buddy Scheme didn't erase those differences; instead, it became a place to recognise and work with them.

*Tamara:* More personally, I think I was expecting to be able to follow rather than negotiate the space. Early on, I assumed I would support whatever direction Kiu and Ana set, given their experience in academic publishing. But that wasn't how the group worked. Ana and Kiu really took time to ensure everyone was being involved and heard... that we could do something that mattered to us all. That meant I had to shift—not just logistically, but mentally. I had to believe that what I brought was valid, even if it didn't always fit traditional academic norms.

*Kiu:* Our roles in the sector shaped what we could realistically contribute. I was working through what it meant to collaborate now that I was outside formal education. I also came from a more structured academic background, and I initially thought we might move faster toward a shared writing output. But time was an issue throughout the process of meeting, reflecting, [and] writing, and I had to let go of the idea that success meant speed. Instead, I began to pay more attention to how we were working together: the pace, the pauses, the generosity. Collaboration looked different here. It was quieter, slower, and more relational than I was used to—and that taught me something about care.

*Ana:* For me, the key learning was about co-responsibility. I've been in HE long enough to know that collaborative projects often rely on someone taking the lead, and I wasn't sure how this would unfold. But this group was different. Even though I am the oldest in the group, and I have been working in HE the longest, I feel we are all at the same level. That wasn't just about hierarchy—it was about emotional responsibility. We weren't just managing tasks. We were making space for each other's needs and constraints, including the reality that some of us didn't have institutional time to write, or hadn't published before, or were navigating burnout.

What made this collaboration work was not that we were the same, but that we stayed in the conversation. We adjusted timelines, rethought what success looked like, and practised patience. We learned to listen not just to each other's words, but to what each of us could hold at any given time. And slowly, the pressure to produce gave way to something more sustainable: a shared sense of care, responsibility, and mutual growth.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting on our experiences within the RAISE Buddy Scheme has revealed the depth and significance of what initially appeared to be a simple professional development initiative. What we found was something far more powerful: an informal yet transformative space for reflection, mentorship, and mutual empowerment.

This space prompted us to reframe our understanding of what constitutes valuable academic work. While our original aim was to write about student engagement, the process of navigating each other's identities, institutional pressures, and career ambitions revealed that we were the subject of inquiry. In this way, our group autoethnography became not only a method, but a message: in a sector increasingly driven by metrics and outputs, taking time to be with others—across difference and in solidarity—is a radical and necessary act of engagement and encouragement.

Our collaborative autoethnography revealed that the Buddy Scheme did not merely facilitate knowledge exchange or peer support. It offered a much-needed counter-space to the often isolating, performative, and hierarchical culture of academia.

Through candid conversations that transcended institutional and disciplinary boundaries, we created a space of trust where identity, vulnerability, and professional challenges could be meaningfully explored. This was particularly impactful for those of

us navigating the “third space” of HE, where professional roles do not always align with traditional academic trajectories, and where contributions are often undervalued or misunderstood.

One of the most significant outcomes of this collaboration has been the emergence of what Tamara described as a *sista circle*—a term grounded in Black feminist scholarship that speaks to the supportive, intergenerational, and identity-affirming nature of our group. While we acknowledge the specific cultural context of this term and its rootedness in Black feminist practice, the ethos of intentional listening, shared accountability, and mutual encouragement resonated deeply across our differences. The group became a site of mentorship and solidarity, where each member’s voice was valued and each journey respected.

Looking ahead, we do not see this collaboration as a one-off encounter but as the beginning of a long-term professional relationship. As we continue to navigate the shifting landscape of HE, we carry forward the insights, trust, and affective bonds formed through this scheme. The experience has reinforced the value of intentional, inclusive, and human-centred spaces in academia—spaces where we are not just colleagues, but co-travellers in a shared journey of growth, resistance, and hope. We presented the content of this paper at the RAISE 2025 conference in Glasgow, where we received very positive feedback. Sharing our experiences in Glasgow and in these pages validates our aim: to encourage others to find partnerships across institutions. We are now planning a new project to promote student-staff partnerships across our respective institutions. We look forward to sharing that in the future.

## References

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