

**Hope for the Future: A University of Warwick Widening Participation Project Combatting
the 'Lost Generation' Rhetoric**

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The 'Hope for the Future' Project

'Hope for the Future' (HftF) is a project situated within Warwick University's five-year Access and Participation Plan (APP; University of Warwick, 2020). This project is run by the Widening Participation (WP) team at Warwick University who, through outreach and engagement, facilitate social mobility via projects, events, and courses (e.g., A-level bootcamp; Outreach at Warwick, 2022) to help WP students (e.g., students with disabilities, from low-income backgrounds, minority groups, etc) overcome educational inequalities (University of Warwick, 2020).

The purpose of HftF is to promote social mobility through reaching and engaging local 16-18-year-olds on WP programs, in response to young people being branded the 'lost generation' and how the COVID pandemic is greatly compounding the educational inequalities faced by our target audience (TA; UNICEF, 2020; Andrew, Cattan, Costa Dias, Farquharson, Kraftman, Krutikova, & Sevilla, 2020; Lambert, Gupte, Fletcher, Hammond, Lowe, Pelling, & Shanks, 2020). The TA were also chosen because of the educational milestones they have faced, and are about to face (e.g., A-levels, higher education). HftF will take a two-phased approach to achieve its overarching aim of building on the TA's skills from the pandemic and creating relevant resources to better support them.

My Placement

The aim of Phase One was to uncover the current thoughts and feelings of the TA regarding, the pandemic, skills they have gained, what support they received or would have benefited from, and how they feel about the future. This was done through the creation and dissemination of a survey to local schools with students on WP programs.

Firstly, I researched around the project brief (e.g., 'how young people are being impacted by the COVID pandemic'); learning about post-traumatic growth, the importance of emotional creativity and how a creative approach could help participants of HftF challenge the 'lost generation' rhetoric (Zhai, Li, Hu, Cui, Wei, & Zhou, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). The research reinforced this placement's

message that there is HftF and, how co-creation can facilitate personal growth and empowerment (Thiele & Homer, in press). Through “a process and an outcome” approach, the participants will strengthen their emotional creativity (i.e., a set of cognitive abilities and personality traits in relation to the initial emotional experience), by building on and highlighting the growth they have experienced because of the pandemic (Zhai, Li, Hu, Cui, Wei, & Zhou, 2021; UNICEF, 2020; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). The project pitch for potential stakeholders was then written; combining the project’s aims with research, addressed assumptions, and a stakeholder’s empathy map. The stakeholder’s empathy map gave insight into the cognitions and emotions the TA may be experiencing due to the pandemic. An online questionnaire was then developed to gather the TA’s current thoughts and feelings regarding the pandemic, the skills they gained during this time, whether/how they were supported academically and in terms of wellbeing, and what support/resources they would benefit from. The questionnaire consisted of open and closed questions and, where appropriate, some questions used a Likert scale to gather quantitative data to enrich the qualitative data (Axinn, & Pearce, 2006). The questionnaire was disseminated to local WP schools with students on Warwick WP programmes.

Phase Two

To build-on the findings of Phase One and achieve the project aims, Phase Two plans to use co-creation to create resources and a skills showcase. HftF will accomplish its’ aims through combining outreach and engagement which will increase the two-way interaction between our TA and Warwick University, resulting in mutual benefit (Wellcombe Trust, 2011; NCCPE, n.d.).

Theory of Change: 'Hope for the Future' (HftF) Phase Two

For the new outreach and engagement activity, I propose Phase Two consists of a series of workshops, ending with a skills showcase. This proposition is based on Phase One's research and survey responses, and research on co-creation (Thiele & Homer, in press).

Aims & Necessity of Intervention

The overarching aim of Phase Two is to co-create, with the TA, resources that build on and encapsulate the skills the TA have gained during the pandemic. This intervention is necessary to challenge the 'lost generation' branding our TA have received (UNICEF, 2020). It is important that our TA, local 16-18-year-olds on WP programs, are given the opportunity and resources to 'prove themselves' and co-create resources that highlight and build-on the skills they have gained during the pandemic. Co-creation gives the TA an opportunity to influence and be involved in producing relevant resources whilst also giving the institute a chance to use their resources to make a difference in terms of social mobility and supporting the future generation.

Process

From those that registered an interest (via the Phase One survey) in co-creating on Phase Two, ten participants will be selected by their teacher based on who would benefit most from this experience. Phase Two will consist of eight workshops (one per week). Six workshops will build-on and highlight one of the TA's gained skills and a skill the TA would most like to gain. For example, from Phase One's survey, 'resilience' was the most mentioned gained skill and, 'how to look after your mental health' was a skill the TA wanted to gain the most. Each workshop will start with an energiser/collaboration activity to help foster connections within the group (Lacerenza, Marlow, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 2018). It is important that open communication between the co-creators is established and maintained, as this will promote equal contribution from each person and thus, effective teamwork (West, 2012; Lacerenza, Marlow, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 2018). An expert, such

as a wellbeing practitioner, will discuss the workshop topic with the group so the students have topical knowledge to co-produce relevant and effective resources such as, activities and tips on using resilience to positively impact your mental health. Another, workshop, based on Phase One's survey, will be attended by a careers advisor to discuss applications, interviews, and higher education. Each workshop will build on the next to create a distributable pack of resources. Workshops seven and eight will be preparation workshops for the skills showcase. Workshop resources will be provided by the WP team with the help of Warwick University and the HftF budget. Each workshop will end with a ten-minute semi-structured feedback discussion to uncover the strengths and weaknesses of each workshop and what the TA think should happen next. This will capitalise on group interaction as well as inform the workshop facilitators of what future workshops would benefit from in terms of resources and activities (Thiele, Pope, Singleton, & Stanistreet, 2018).

How the desired results will be achieved

The number of students will be capped at ten as this has been found to be the most effective number of students to co-create with on a project of this size and create a pathway of change (Theile & Homer, in press; Anderson, 2009). This will facilitate collaboration, the building/strengthening of social connections and the opportunity to contribute equally across Phase Two, which will encourage effective teamwork and the creation of resources (Lacerenza, Marlow, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 2018). Importantly, students who would benefit most are selected as, it can be assumed that the 'best' students are already engaged and if it was an application process those who would benefit most may not be selected because of selection criteria or they do not feel they are 'good enough' to apply. In addition, by asking the student's teachers to select who would benefit most from this opportunity, this supports Warwick University's goal of facilitating social mobility through recognising and inspiring 'talented students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds' (University of Warwick, 2020).

Preconditions & Outcomes

A short-term outcome, that may become long-term, is the student co-creators learning how to utilise and develop their gained skills. Phase Two will allow the TA to be heard and, have power and influence on the creation of needed resources to support them in their current and future endeavours.

The medium-term impact of phase two will be the presentation of the Skills Showcase to a TA chosen audience such as, local businesspeople, University staff, and/or family. This will be a platform for the TA to express their experiences of the pandemic, Phase Two, and for networking.

The long-term outcome of Phase Two is the development of new skills that will help the TA feel better supported for the future. In addition, participating in Phase Two is an experience that can be mentioned in personal statements, CVs and/or interviews. HftF will also strengthen the relationships between the institution and the involved local WP schools and their students (Anderson, 2009).

Each of these preconditions are necessary to achieve a pathway of change in challenging the rhetoric 'the lost generation' and make a positive impact on the co-creators (Anderson, 2009; UNICEF, 2020).

Phase Two Evaluation Plan

Approach

The impact approach to evaluation will be taken to assess and evaluate how impactful Phase Two has been in challenging the 'lost generation' rhetoric, forming a pathway of change, and whether the TA feel better supported for the future.

Method

A mixed method approach (quantitative data embed within qualitative data) will be used to create a robust evidence source for future co-creation-based outreach and engagement activities (Thiele, Pope, Singleton, & Stanistreet, 2018; Dytham & Hughes, 2017; Hayton & Bengry-Howell,

2016; Gorard & Taylor, 2004). The Access and Participation Plan (APP), end of workshop feedback, and an end of project student participation questionnaire (EPSPQ), will be used to evaluate the success of this Theory of Change activity (University of Warwick, 2020; Axinn, & Pearce, 2006; Anderson, 2009). End of workshop feedback permits continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of each workshop which will aid workshop provision and the meeting of the project aims (Thiele, Pope, Singleton, & Stanistreet, 2018). The EPSPQ, like Phase One's survey, will gather quantitative and qualitative data and will assess conceptual (i.e., feel more knowledgeable, empowered, and/or prepared for their future endeavours) and capacity building impacts (e.g., skills development) experienced by the TA (Anderson, 2009; NCCPE, 2017). Evaluation throughout and after the project will evidence the impact of Phase Two on its TA and demonstrate the project's value to investors and stakeholders (NCCPE, 2020). This evaluation approach also offers an opportunity for participants to critically reflect on what they have learned and what could be improved (NCCPE, 2020).

Challenges & Limitations

A limitation of this approach is how qualitative and quantitative measures are from opposing epistemologies which, some argue, means they cannot be used together (Thiele, Pope, Singleton, & Stanistreet, 2018). A challenge with the co-creation approach is how the number of co-creators is limited to ten which some may argue is not widening participation. COVID could also change how Phase Two is conducted due to possible government restrictions (i.e., whether Phase Two runs online or in-person).

Hope for my Future

'Hope for the Future' perfectly summarises the impact this placement has had, and continues to have, on me and my future. At first, the flexibility within the project worried me, as I was not use to this. However, I quickly learned the value of flexibility as it allowed us to uncover the

TA's current thoughts and feelings. If instead the resources were made based on past research findings and assumptions, they would no longer be relevant due to the ever-changing pandemic picture. I have also gained project management experience; from defining the parameters of the project (e.g., risks, TA) to creating the TA survey. It is partly because of this placement that I am currently applying to conduct my own Public Engagement Project at Warwick University; opening an art hub for those with limited access to art space and equipment. Furthermore, I have learned the practical importance of critical thinking when I was faced with the dilemma of wanting to reach as many people as possible whilst balancing project feasibility, regarding co-creation. This dilemma was resolved through talking to a co-creation facilitator in the WP department and research (Thiele, & Homer, in press). This placement has given me experience in outreach and engagement, confidence in project management, and has given me 'Hope for the Future'!

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