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Institute of Teaching and Learning

DR KAREN LANDER

**A FOCUS ON
CONTINUING:
SUPPORTING
STUDENTS WITH
RESITS AND
INTERRUPTION**

**ITL FELLOWSHIP 2024-25
PROJECT
REPORT**

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ITL Fellow 2024-25

KAREN LANDER PFHEA



Karen has worked at the University of Manchester since 2002 and is a Senior Lecturer in the Division of Psychology, Communication and Human Neuroscience (PCHN). She is Director of Education for PCHN. Whilst Karen very much enjoys researching face perception and recognition, she is also enthusiastic about, and has a track-record in, developing initiatives to improve the teaching, learning and student experience both within and

outside the University of Manchester. Examples include developing and shaping two new MRes Psychology programmes, creating an academic advising programme for BSc Hons Psychology students, embedding public engagement in psychology at the University of Manchester (funded by the Social Curriculum Fund) and working as External Examiner for a number of UG and PG courses. Karen is a member of Senate and belongs to several working groups focussed on curriculum and assessment design within the Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health. She is also a Principal Fellow of Advance HE (PFHEA).

Fellowship Student Partner Interns

CAITLIN HUNTER

RUBY PRIOR

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Contexts and objectives

As resits provide 'a second chance' for students (Ricketts, 2010, p.351), it is essential that we support our students to make the most of that chance as part of an inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

Having failed the original assessments, students with resits may lack academic confidence, they may find it difficult to admit failure and may not seek advice on how to turn failure into success. Similarly, students who interrupt their courses, typically have assessments that they need to catch up on and obstacles to overcome, before they can continue their academic study. Thus, students who have interrupted also often lack academic confidence, having been away from the University and the academic environment. Resits and interruption are a significant problem and barrier to continuation and the University plays a critical role in providing external support to these students.

Social cognitive theory draws attention to the importance of self-belief and efficacy in an individual's learning and development (Bandura, 1999). Students are seen as powerful agents who can see an improvement in their academic performance, because of their own self-reflection and confidence to act. Learning is therefore not dictated only by the external environment but also internally through self-belief. Indeed 'there is evidence (Bandura, 1997) that self-efficacious students participate more readily, work harder, persist longer, and have fewer adverse emotional reactions when they encounter difficulties than do those who doubt their capabilities' (Zimmerman, 2000, p.86). Self-efficacy has been related to a student's positive emotional state (that helps engagement) and self-confidence (belief they can do it) and is an important asset for students to develop.

The aims of this project were

- To explore the experiences of students during resit preparation.
- To explore the support received by students following periods of interruption.
- To outline recommendations for good practice in terms of university-based support and consider ways to help students to improve their self-efficacy.

Activities

Working with a team of student partners to conduct a series of focus groups with students from across the University of Manchester, we gathered data about the differential types of support available to students during resits and following periods of interruption. We also asked focus group attendees to list any other types of support they would like to be available.

A number of focus groups were conducted (up to 10 attendees per group). Student partners took notes on the discussions and together we identified common themes and sources of support through qualitative thematic analysis (Lochmiller, 2021). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) involves ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (page 79). Key themes were identified that mapped onto issues concerning contact, content and communication. Findings suggested that increased contact during resit periods and following interruption may help increase student engagement. Further help with unit content and understanding may assist student confidence especially during resit periods. Finally, generic strategies to improve student confidence may aid student engagement and the development of self-efficacy strategies.

We identified examples of good practice and produced a series of suggestions for best practice that may be applicable sector-wide, about how Universities can effectively support students during resit periods and following interruption.

Challenges faced

The main challenge to this project was gaining ethical approval for it. This took rather longer than initially proposed, pushing back the timing for the work undertaken. The University’s Research Ethics panel were keen to ensure that students participating in the proposed research were adequately protected.

The Student Partner Interns (SPI) were considered more approachable and less intimidating; hence focus group attendees were considered more

approachable and less intimidating; hence focus group attendees were considered more relaxed and open to engaging in the activities when focus groups were facilitated by them. To further protect participants, focus group attendees were not asked to detail their own personal experiences of resits or interruption but rather we asked to consider in a more generic manner the possible sources of support available to students in these circumstances.

Student partnership

With this being a project focused on improving student support, the importance of collaboration with the SPI was clear at the initial project planning stage. A key point was that focus groups were organised and run by student partners (required by ethics). The SPIs helped me recruit a further six psychology students to help, who were working on a 30-hour placement to gain experience. Caitlin and Ruby (the SPIs) were enthusiastic and quick off the mark and presented the results of their focus groups quickly and succinctly. They also provided valuable perspectives on students' perception of support and examples of good practice from their lecturers, with some consideration about how these may evolve within different disciplines.

Collaborative work

This project was supported by:

- **Emma Sanders**, Teaching and Learning Officer (Teaching Excellence) who helped make links to the academic and administrative staff and advised on managing my SPI and my budget/resources to organise training and student mentors' celebration events.
- **Holly Dewsnip**, Teaching and Learning Officer (Teaching Excellence), who helped facilitate the practical aspects of the project (paying participants etc) and has always been super supportive and efficient whenever asked.

- **Genevieve Pridham**, Research Ethics Manager, who helped discuss the UREC ethics application and reworking it so that the project successfully achieved ethics approval.
 - Previous **Institute of Teaching and Learning Fellows** (for example, **Nicholas Weise**) who provided beneficial suggestions, networks and materials to help this project
 - The **Senior Academic Advisors Network** at the University of Manchester, who provided useful feedback on the nature and scope of the project near the start.
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Outputs

I have presented my findings at a number of conferences and workshops with other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as follows:

- Lander, K. Supporting students with resit assessments. Advance HE Assessment and Feedback Symposium. Online, Nov 2024. This presentation has been written up as an Advance HE Case Study, due to be published in September 2025.
- Lander, K. & Prior, R. 'Exploring ways to support and engage students during resits and following interruption', *RAISE (Researching, Advancing & Inspiring Student Engagement) Annual Conference*, University of Leicester, UK/Online. 11-12 September 2024.
- Lander, K. & Prior, R. 'Exploring ways to support and engage students during resits and following interruption'. *The University of Manchester Annual Teaching and Learning conference*, The University of Manchester, UK. 26-27 June 2024.
- Lander, K. & Prior, R. 'Exploring the best ways to support students through resits and following interruption'. *Edulearn*, Palma, Spain. 1-3 July 2024.

- Lander, K. & Hunter, C. 'Supporting students with resits and interruptions'. *Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) International Research Conference*, Aston University, Birmingham, UK/Online. 4, 6-8 December 2023.
- Lander, K. & Hunter, C. '[Supporting students with resits and interruptions: Challenges for student engagement](#)'. *International Conference on Education, Research and Innovation (ICERI)*, Online. 7-9 November 2023.

All of these conferences and the other events I attended highlighted the open door to re-thinking about support in different ways, whilst highlighting challenges and opportunities for both external and internal support mechanisms. I was also able to gather understanding of what the current international thinking was about support and engagement mechanisms for students.

Impact

Impact on students

Students who attended focus groups had excellent engagement in the activities and found it interesting and useful to feedback their comments about possible sources and mechanisms of support. Student partners also established a good bond and connection through the work undertaken during this project. We also hope that work undertaken will benefit future students, by developing support mechanisms in place at the University of Manchester, ensuring a basic level of support across the university.

Impact on the University of Manchester

The immediate impact of my project has mostly benefited the endeavour to change support mechanisms within the University of Manchester. By focussing literature searching and scanning the global HE sector, for resources for alternative support mechanisms, I am knowledgeable about practices that already exist and have been trialled at different institutions.

I presented the proposed project and interim results to the School of Health Sciences Senior Academic Advisors network group and colleagues commented favourably on the project, suggesting that it is an excellent example of support for students. The project was listed as an example of good practice within the TEF framework documentation for the University of Manchester.

Impact for me

The Fellowship has opened the doors to involvement in other projects and working groups in my faculty and at a university level. Indeed, I have become Director of Education in the Division of Psychology, Communication and Human Neuroscience. This affords me the opportunity to use the extensive knowledge I've compiled to influence discussions surrounding support mechanisms that are in place. I hope that this will enable me to make an impact across the University. Membership of key University working groups will provide a platform to steer the development of support related strategies, which is something I am very keen to be part of.

Reflection

In general, the project has gone well, with some very useful information gathered from the focus groups. The willingness and enthusiasm of colleagues and students to get involved and support the project has been brilliant. Project delays due to ethics approval hampered our initial progress, coupled with perhaps over ambitious plans to start with, meant that we have not yet collected quantitative data on the proposed support mechanisms. This could be achieved in the future, rolling the project forward.

Next steps

Consistent support mechanisms need to be put in place for students undergoing resits and following a period of interruption as the current

provision is mixed – there is evidence of some excellent practice and some areas that need support. Once the feasibility of the proposed support mechanisms developed is assessed, then we can work to implement these strategies across the university and evaluate their usefulness to students in these difficult circumstances – maximising support for all.