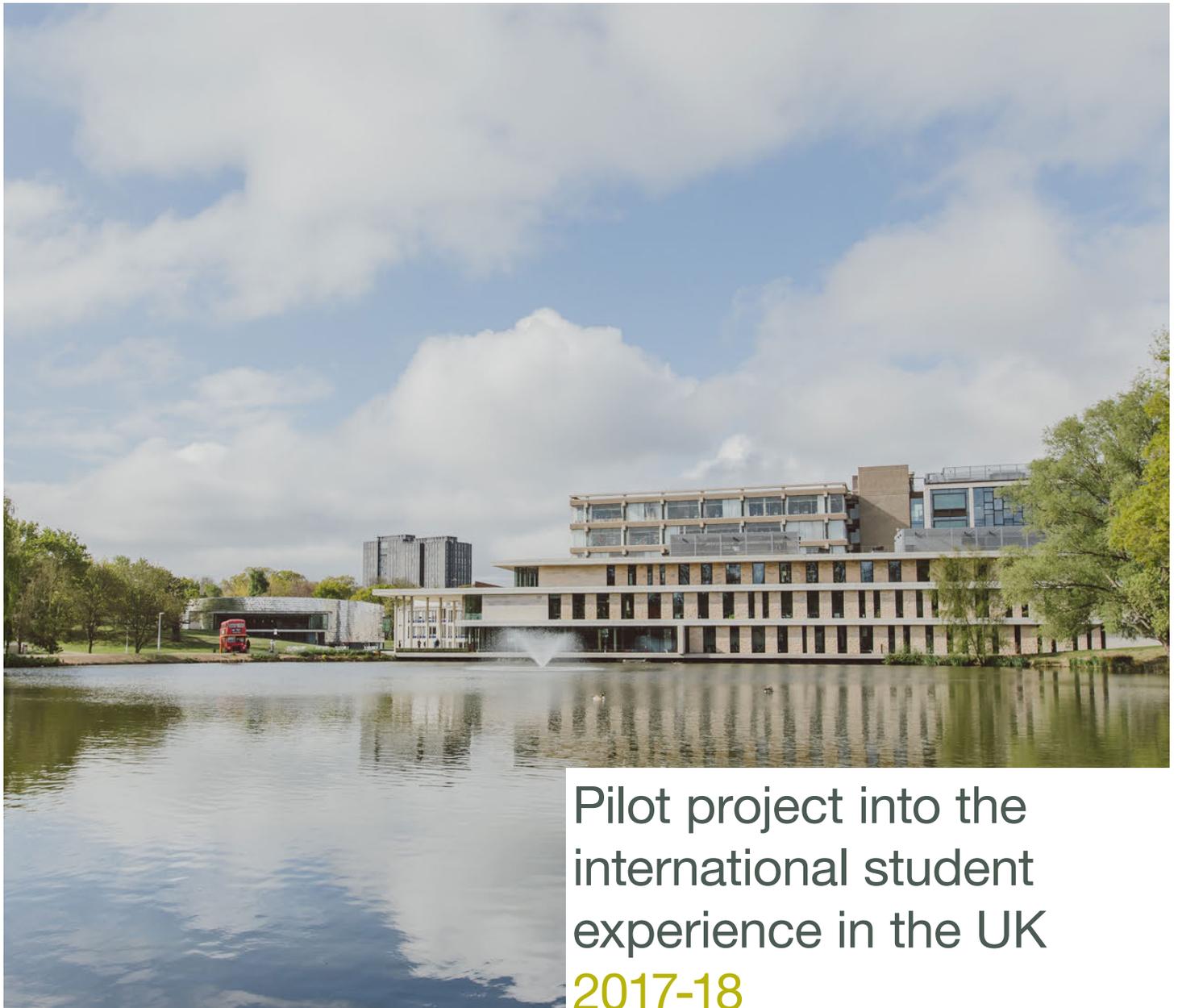


Pilot project

Using Design Thinking to  
enhance the international  
student experience and their  
understanding of employability

University of Essex



Pilot project into the  
international student  
experience in the UK  
**2017-18**

UK Council  
for International  
Student Affairs

**UKCISA**

UKCISA GRANTS SCHEME  
FOR INTERNATIONAL  
EDUCATION

# Using Design Thinking to enhance the international student experience and their understanding of employability

**University of Essex**

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Dr Helen Standage, Senior Employability Education Manager

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## Project aims

This project had two broad aims: 1) to create a space for international students to identify, explore and solve career issues of personal relevance; 2) to use a novel framework to encourage student collaboration, empowerment and problem-solving, thus alleviating personal difficulties typically experienced by international students, such as isolation and lack of confidence.

## Background to the University of Essex

There are 15,000 students at the University of Essex which includes 2,500 postgraduate students (postgraduate research and postgraduate taught).

The University has students from more than 140 countries and 36% of students are international. This makes Essex the most international mainstream university in the UK outside London (The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2018).

## Project outcomes

The project produced a series of workshops underpinned by the principles of Design Thinking. Design Thinking is ordinarily applied to product creation, but Stanford University has used it to produce an innovative teaching method applicable to any subject that involves uncertainty, eg employability and the overall international student experience. This new teaching method is known as Life Design and was applied in this project.

The workshops were aimed at postgraduate research (PGR) students (both home and international). Each workshop series attracted a small number of PGR students from a variety of different backgrounds. The workshops were extremely well-received, so much so, that a Design Thinking community is expanding at the University of Essex. In addition, an abbreviated workshop was developed that illustrated the technique in a condensed format for the purposes of training other staff in higher education (HE) who may want to use it in their own professional areas.

## Design Thinking Methodology

There are five steps to Design Thinking/Life Design

- Empathy
- Definition
- Ideation
- Prototyping
- Test

As previously outlined, these are applicable to both product and personal development. To illustrate, with traditional Design Thinking, the **empathy** step would involve talking to the public about a particular

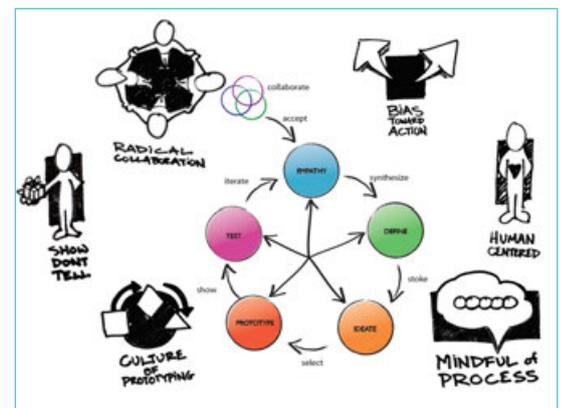
product of interest. With Life Design the individual would **empathise** with themselves and their fellow Life Designers in order to **define** a particular problem and then as a group **ideate**/brainstorm possible “low resource” **prototypes** for individuals to **test** which will provide data from which to work forward. The five steps enable what is known as Wayfinding – the ability to “sneak up on the future”.

In conjunction with the five steps are mindsets:

- human-centred
- radical collaboration
- bias to action
- mindful of process
- culture of prototyping

Such mindsets empower individuals to work as supportive and highly enterprising problem-solving teams. Moreover the template encourages individuals to be kinder to themselves and to others thereby fostering personal resource and social cohesion (see Figure 1).

Fig 1 Life Design steps and mindsets



## Design Thinking workshops

### Workshop preparation

The highly interactive content and activities and the facilitation style were guided by the “Designing Your Life” 2006 publication by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans (founders of Life Design).

The content of the workshops was also informed by a survey (see Appendix B) and focus group examining the needs of PGR students. The findings of this research revealed a strong desire for a cross-disciplinary PGR community whereby exchange of ideas (both intellectual and personal) could reduce the sense of isolation often associated with undertaking a PhD which is often experienced more deeply by international PGR students.

### Workshop promotion

The workshops were promoted through a variety of methods:

- Departmental Graduate Administrators emailed postgraduate students with details and

promoted the workshops on the departmental Facebook and Twitter feeds

- Posters were located across the University to promote the workshops
- Details were sent to postgraduate students in the weekly postgraduate Employability and Careers Centre bulletin
- Through student small ads

All promotional material included an enrolment link.

### Workshop delivery

The workshops were run by Helen Standage, Senior Employability Education Manager and James Rodwell, Employability Tutor. Two workshop series were offered to postgraduate students: one in the autumn term and one in spring. Each workshop comprised five, two-hour sessions spread across two weeks.

Attendance during the pilot was low with four students in the first workshop series and three in the second series. Students who attended came from countries including Jordan, Romania, Netherlands and from a range of academic disciplines including Literature, Sociology, Computer Science and Government.

### Challenges

- Encouraging students to join the workshops. The take-up of the workshop was low, but when students attended, feedback was overwhelmingly positive (see Evaluation below).
- Staff appointed to take on the research had a number of unforeseen difficulties which took them away from their jobs temporarily. On their return they had to 'play catch up' for their core duties and then find extra time to undertake the project and as a result, the project was delayed. In addition, some in-depth analyses had to be substituted with simpler ones.

### Evaluation

PGR students received a short questionnaire (see Appendix C) at the end of the final workshop session. Responses took the form of ratings on a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The feedback was extremely positive, for example the mean score in response to the statement "Overall I believe the workshops have been of value" was 5 out of 5 (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Participant Mean Ratings (out of 5) in Response to Life Design workshops**

	Mean ratings
The workshops were well organised, structured and clear	4.4
The content of the workshops was stimulating	5
The workshops provided a good environment for productive discussion	5
The workshop leaders were good at facilitating the activities	5
The workshops have provided some useful strategies for tackling my future	4.8
I would recommend this series of workshops to other Postgraduate Researchers	5
Overall I believe the workshops have been of value	5

In addition to the quantitative data, the questionnaire allowed for qualitative free text comments:

**"Truly a life-changing experience – very much more hopeful about the future now as I have a plan (or a few!)"**

**"The trainers were excellent – open, approachable, candid, empathetic."**

**"I liked the way it was facilitated, the trainers worked well together, gave a balance of voices and approaches between them, and linked in well the group thus promoting a very good group dynamic within the sessions."**

**"My favourite part was the life plans and the brainstorming session at the end, it was very helpful for me and I felt also helpful for other participants."**

**"I felt very able to explore ideas that I never realised I had and was given the time and space to really develop them."**

### Future projects

The Life Design workshops were highly successful for those that attended, and there has been a request for "follow up" sessions. Moreover, many staff attending the abbreviated workshop for training purposes also expressed a wish for further Life Design interaction. There are also plans for a second project whereby Life Design facilitators go into sixth form schools and colleges and adapt the content to work with Year 12 and Year 13 students.

Life Design is particularly useful when individuals are experiencing significant life change eg, transitioning from compulsory full time education to tertiary study or work. The Life Design movement at Stanford University has also expanded into schools plus other HEIs.

Likewise, the seeds of a Life Design community are beginning to grow at Essex and gain momentum

with staff (both academic and professional) wishing to roll out workshops to undergraduate students. For example, the University's Student Support Centre has preliminary plans to use Life Design as a platform for inclusivity given its integral principles of radical difference, respect and collaboration. There is a view that using the Life Design methodology with UG students from non-traditional backgrounds, in particular the key principle of radical collaboration, may ameliorate feelings of marginalisation.

## Recommendations for other institutions

**Time.** The main challenge for this project was the pressure on staff time due to external circumstances which led to absences from work which delayed the project. It is advisable to have a larger team that can absorb staff absences or a budget to buy out time to allocate more staff to the project.

**Group sizes.** Large group sizes (eg over 25) may result in workshops becoming too impersonal. Small group sizes can be extremely effective but we advise running with a minimum of four students.

## Conclusions

This project has demonstrated that Life Design can be highly successful within a UK HE context. Whilst uptake of the workshops was low, positive response to the quality of the experience was extremely high with all PGR students enjoying the intimacy of the small groups which nurtured trust and mutually-supportive social connections. It seems that Life Design is an excellent problem-solving tool, but more importantly, the essence of Life Design is to work together in an invested group for the purpose of bettering each other's lives.

However, whilst intimate Life Design groups reap personal reward, they are not financially sustainable. To further develop, Life Design needs to be rolled out to larger cohorts and more facilitators trained to work with larger groups.

## References

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## Contact

Dr Helen Standage, Senior Employability Education Manager, University of Essex  
[hjstan@essex.ac.uk](mailto:hjstan@essex.ac.uk)

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The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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UKCISA  
1st Floor, Noble House  
3-5 Islington High Street  
London, N1 9LQ  
T +44 (0)20 7288 4330

[www.ukcisa.org.uk](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk)  
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