

Episode 27: Loretta Anthony-Okeke
Recorded October 2024

Intro: Welcome to the Good Practice in Teaching podcast from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Manchester. Sarah Dyer, our Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning talks to guests about what works well in teaching, assessment and student support.

Minoritised and international students face unique challenges in Higher Education, which can lead to gaps in attainment and employment. The Advance HE project 'Student Knowledge Exchange Re-Imagined' aims to develop strategies that improve student career readiness and respond to industry needs.

In this episode, Sarah speaks to one of the project leads, Loretta Anthony-Okeke to find out more about the project.

Sarah Dyer: Loretta, thank you so much for joining us. I'm really excited to hear about the project that you've been doing as part of an Advance HE Collaborative Development grant.

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: Hi, Sarah. Thanks for having me. Yeah, I'm really excited about the project.

Sarah Dyer: Can you tell us what did you want to achieve? What did you set out to do?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: So, the project was looking at student knowledge exchange and it was all to do with enhancing employability. I worked on it with a fantastic colleague, Charlene Gallery. She's a reader over at the Faculty of Science and Engineering. Absolutely brilliant colleague and academic. I think

one of the things that we've noticed from our conversations, and this was just casual conversations I had with Charlene, challenges within UK HE regarding international students and some of its significant disruptions or challenges that they faced; inclusion in terms of initiatives to support them transitioning from being students to the job market, whether it's in the UK or elsewhere. So I think that was what led us to it is about, okay, these were the challenges that we identified, speaking to some of our students, alumni, and so on. And then wanting to figure out how we can develop a framework to understand that better, to sort of bridge that gap between those academic needs with industry needs as well in order to facilitate or foster employability for these students.

But actually paying closer attention, I think, and this was something that wasn't visible within higher education that we felt, making more visible how these international students, how minoritized students, could leverage sort of their cultural superpowers. We call them cultural superpowers. And how they can leverage that to enable them and help them navigate this whole thing that we call employability.

So yeah, that was what we set out to do. I'd like to think that we achieved that because we did develop a framework in order to set this out clearly. Also developed an impact tool that educators could use. People working with international students, minoritized students could use that impact tool to measure what students were experiencing navigating employability, what they were experiencing navigating careers, services and workshops and so on, and then use the data from that to help prepare their students for what happens after.

Sarah Dyer: Brilliant. So in the project, were you working with your own students?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: So we worked with our students only because they represented a large cohort. A lot of the data that we got were from students who were working within the Faculty of Science and Engineering, mostly

within the Department of Fashion Business, which is where Charlene is based out of, and I had the students from Faculty of Humanities predominantly from the Education programme as well, which is a large cohort.

Sarah Dyer: Fantastic. And it's interesting that you, both of you, had picked up that your students, although they're in very different fields, were experiencing similar challenges and barriers.

So what did your project involve? What did you do?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: It was a mixed methods approach because we had surveys, pre and post surveys, with students to be able to get that initial data mapping, what it was that we're looking for and what were students main concerns.

And then we also had focus groups. I think we had about 80, 85, 87 students who took part with the surveys and the focus groups as well.

So that was interesting, getting those experiences, the experiences behind the data and the numbers. But what was different about this was we also wanted to get the industry and stakeholder perspective as well. So what we did was to have a series of round tables with people working in industry, we had round tables with career and employability leads within our schools and faculties as well.

Sarah Dyer: Yeah, it's so important to get that, that kind of wide view, isn't it, of all of those different people who are involved. And were you working with students in any other way?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: We did have some students who are based with, I think, the Department of Computer Science that helped to design our website.

So we have a website called Student Knowledge Exchange where we put together bits of the project, somewhere where students can go and see the work that we're doing and have them think about it a bit more.

Sarah Dyer: That's wonderful. We can put links to the websites, any other resources in the podcast.

And you've created a framework. Is that available from Advance HE? Is that where people can get hold of it if they're interested?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: Yes, there is a framework that we have. It is embedded within Advance HE. And the framework answers some of those questions that people will probably be asking, okay, what is it about international students? About the challenges that we've identified that they're facing with engaging, navigating employability and so on, and what could be done to mitigate some of those challenges and actually just support them and celebrate the strengths and the superpowers that they have, in order to help them along.

There is an impact tool as well that educators can look and see for themselves how they can measure the broader effects of some of the initiatives that we have. In terms of career services, workshops, initiatives, those sort of things, that help students build confidence, gain knowledge inside and outside the classroom as well.

I would imagine that many colleagues will have access to Advance HE, I think.

Sarah Dyer: It's a membership organization, but currently most UK universities are members.

Could you say a little bit more about what you mean by student knowledge exchange if somebody hasn't come across that term before?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: What we envisioned it to be initially was what it was that students knew about their field or their degree programmes and how that links into the sort of work that they were intending on going into.

But what it was that we found out as we were going ahead with the project, was that there were real world experiences that employers and people in industry were telling us seemed to be lacking within what our students were showing to them, particularly those who had opportunities within their programme, that had industry placements or workplace experiences and so on.

So what we tried to do was develop student knowledge exchange as a framework that provides a model for inclusive, equitable management of students' experiences, students' skills and the knowledge that they bring from what they're learning, theoretically, most times within their programmes, to when they are within these spaces where they're supposed to be experiencing work within an industry that they were interested in going into or whatever.

So bridging that gap between what students know about their subject area and how that is then applied within work, with the support of industry stakeholders and so on.

Sarah Dyer: Is some of that about how well students can narrate their knowledge, how well they can explain it to people in industry?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: Yeah, absolutely, because especially for those students who experience work while they're working with placements that have been embedded within their programmes, there is an element of reflection, which sometimes is formative assessment or summative assessment where they had to write up a report about those experiences that they were having. And some students would have gone on, like education students, for example, in their second year will then go on to develop that into a research proposal, for example. So there was a lot of self-reflection the

students were doing in terms of their awareness of the opportunities within employment, but also limitations or weaknesses that they would have identified within their practice or within that experience with feedback from industry, from their lecturers as well.

Sarah Dyer: And how has your own practice changed after having spoken to all of these people about their experiences?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: For me, and Charlene as well, because we do a lot of teaching and even while employability is embedded within our teaching, we are aware and acknowledge it and we're seeking to address it. I think what this project did was actually open it up a bit more for us in terms of understanding what we're doing. And some of the striking things that we found out that has since helped with the planning that went into preparing for a new semester, for example.

And that was that sort of the identity that students, the international students that we teach have, building this holistic self, who they are, what they value and the important things to them, focusing on their self-efficacy, leveraging those cultural assets that literature would often tell us were, negatives or disadvantages with students. Our students, through the project, showed us that there was more to them, that they had the sense of who they were and how they felt they would have wanted to use that better to help them to navigate employability.

It helped in terms of helping to tailor the advice that we give, because we did have that roundtable with colleagues and teams within careers, employability, and so on. It's about looking intentionally at some of that career guidance, the extent to which cultural responsiveness is within the provisions that we're offering students and then feeding back to curriculum design teams, for example, in terms of inclusive curriculum co-design with industry. And that's something that we are absolutely looking forward to see that, take hold and take root within our various departments. Not just working

in silos but actually co-designing and working with industry, working with employers to be able to do more of bridging that academic and industry gap.

Sarah Dyer: That's fantastic. And there's, there are so many sort-of strands there, aren't there? There's moving away from the deficit model. Then there's also that kind of the need of seeing our students holistically as people who arrive with different knowledge and experience and identities and expectations and fears and hopes and how, actually welcoming all of that into the classroom changes our practice. And then, as you say, that kind of co-designing with industry and creating space for co-designing with students as well.

Are there things that you'd really like other educators to take away from this podcast? That they might put into practice in their own teaching, or with their own students?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: like you say, there is a sort of a deficit model of international students. One of the first things that we do as educators, attend sessions or workshops about how to deal with international students.

And a lot of that is around differences in culture and differences in language and how we can make accommodations for those sorts of things. And perhaps not a lot more being said about how international students and even minoritized students, more broadly possess a resilience. Multilingualism is something that is not quite that I know that as an educator, I don't quite do enough of to nurture and leverage some of those superpowers, their resilience, the multilingualism, the empathy they have because they're coming from contexts where they've lived with people who are perhaps from different ethnic backgrounds or groups or faiths or whatever - that ability to adapt, coming from environments, if they're an international student from miles away to come and do education, or if they're from a minoritized background, they're coming from backgrounds where not a lot of people around them went to higher education and all that.

So they're having to adapt quickly and they're adapting well. And some of these strengths that they have, I feel, should be nurtured and leveraged more, not just as a moral goal that we're trying to achieve, but within the curriculum that we are designing.

Within the small blocks of lectures and seminars that we do, how much and to what extent are we recognizing and nurturing and leveraging these superpowers?

Sarah Dyer: Yeah, I love talking about them as superpowers really puts that into focus, doesn't it? It's a great way of thinking about it.

I can remember a conversation I had with an international student who told me that she'd been told that she needed to be more brave and to speak up in seminars, and she was like, I've come to another country, I'm in my third language, I am so brave, and it's just that sense of actually, we need to really acknowledge that's huge courage, that's huge as you say, resilience, adaptability, all of those things, and to be read and being told, oh, you're not brave, you're not, it's so crushing isn't it?

It's such a kind of misidentification with what's going on for that person. I love that term. I'm going to start talking about these as superpowers because they really are.

It's such a prestigious thing to have funding from Advance HE. If colleagues were thinking about going for the Advance HE Collaborative Grant is there some advice that you'd give them? Is there, are there some things that you learned through the process that you'd have liked to have known at the beginning?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: Oh, absolutely. Because it was absolutely amazing and colleagues that we work with. Oh, I can't remember the names off the top of my head. Stuart Norton was just absolutely brilliant. There's a lot of

support. So my experience with applying for funding from other bodies and all was you submit the proposal, it comes back, yay, you've got the grant and then you work sometimes with your sometimes the research office for your department or your school and then you put the project together.

This was different because we had regular meetings and these meetings were just to check in, to see the progress, if we needed any help or support, whatever it was that we needed and that was for me, amazing. Because I do like to work collaboratively.

One thing that was a bit challenging was obviously because it was an interdisciplinary project. Charlene was all the way in FSE and I was in Humanities. There were issues to do with, okay, where's the funding going to, who has access to it, how do we get access to it and so on. And having different research offices speaking to each other and speaking to Advance HE as well. So that was challenging and we didn't know at first.

We actually literally spent about a couple of weeks chasing down this money, not being sure where it was and then there were obviously things that we should have done beforehand that we didn't do.

That was for me, a lesson in terms of how different funding bodies worked and how research offices worked. Yeah, but other than that, it was a fantastic experience. I think life-changing for me in terms of being able to have that impact, not just within my institution, but having different academics everywhere, just being able to go on and Advance HE and reading the amazing work that we've done.

And other amazing work that we've seen there as well within that funding call last year.

Sarah Dyer: Fantastic. I think it's closed for this coming year. But my memory is that the deadline is around the end of the calendar year, isn't it? And then you're funded from January to June, so it's quite a fast turnaround.

It's got to be quite a kind of well-defined project. But as you say very supported by Advance HE as well, and with that ready audience of the sector.

Brilliant. It's really fantastic. It's such a great project.

Within the university, the Teacher and Learning Conference, you were on the panel, weren't you?

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: Yes, I was, and Charlene was moderating that, and I was there with amazing people, and I think that was important. There were three provocations there, so in terms of attainment gaps, which was one of the things that led us to doing the project in the first place. The fact that, international students seemed to have an attainment gap between them and other students even with everything that we identified as superpowers. And so talk a little bit about how within the various programmes, we're embedding employability and that academic industry link and then the place of AI within that as well. Yeah, it was interesting talking through the impact on students of some of what we found out within the research and what we can do better as academics, as the academy, as it were Higher Education, to be able to do better for our students.

Sarah Dyer: Oh, Loretta, thank you so much for joining us and talking about your project. It's just so interesting to hear about all of that work that's gone into the project. So thank you.

Loretta Anthony-Okeke: Oh, thank you so much, Sarah. Thanks for having me. I really enjoyed talking about it in reflection because when you're going through a project, you have all these dreams and goals that you want to achieve. And then when it's done and then someone's asking you about it, it's

really nice to just go back and reflect on it. So yeah, I've enjoyed speaking to you about it. Thank you so much.

Outro: You've been listening to the Good Practice in Teaching podcast from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Manchester. In the description you'll find links to help you further explore this topic, including a link to the Student Knowledge Exchange Framework.

Links

Student Knowledge Exchange Framework and other project outputs:

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-knowledge-exchange-re-imagined>

Information about the project:

<https://advance-he.ac.uk/membership/collaborative-development-fund-2023-24/student-knowledge-exchange-re-imagined>

Panel discussion 'The Future of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education' featuring Loretta and Charlene:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_vX2au2ZuY

More information about the conference can be found here:

<https://www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/umitl/events/itl-conference/itl-teaching-and-learning-conference-2024/>