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# Using pre-arrival shared reading to promote a sense of community - between 30,000 students, 10,000 staff and over 450 miles. A case study across two institutions

Alison Baverstock, Jackie Steinitz, Brian Webster-Henderson, Laura Bryars, Sandra Cairncross, Laura Ennis, Wendy Morris, Avril Gray and Connie McLuckie

## Abstract

Seeking to improve student enrolment, engagement and retention, Kingston University began a pre-arrival shared reading scheme in 2014-15, sending a free book to every student about to start at the university and making copies available to staff in all roles and departments across the institution. A number of associated events were organised and outcomes monitored through a variety of project-specific and institutional metrics. Continuing with the scheme in 2015-16 Kingston University were joined by Edinburgh Napier University as research partners. Edinburgh Napier, having participated in the process of choosing a book for all to read, made the same single title available to their students and staff. In this paper the processes and outcomes of the collaboration are reported, including the differences between project implementation between the two institutions and what they learned from each other. Recommendations are made for how universities can work together on projects of mutual desirability, what are the particular associated sensitivities, in this case when managing a long-distance collaboration – and what can be learned for the future.

## Introduction

In the UK shared reading has grown notably in recent years; within cities (e.g. Cityread<sup>1</sup>), within the workplace (e.g. The Pigeonhole<sup>2</sup>) and within other specific communities such as prisons or youth offender institutions (e.g. The Reader<sup>3</sup>). In the US, shared reading is also relatively common within universities, usually organised pre-arrival, and those running these 'Common Reads' (as they are often known) find that they promote a sense of community pre-arrival and ease freshers' nerves about transferring to a new stage of life.

But while pre-arrival shared reading is relatively common in the US it is also relatively unanalysed; generally organised within university marketing and communication departments rather than as institutional research.

Kingston first established a whole institution pre-arrival shared-reading scheme in 2015, but from the outset it was developed as an improved institutional welcome and as a research-based initiative; seeking to monitor processes and analyse associated outcomes. The project was developed through the university's SADRAS<sup>4</sup> scheme; a student-staff research project designed to investigate an issue or area likely to prove beneficial to the student experience, particularly those sectors of the student population whose transition into higher education has traditionally been less successful, notably BAME students, carers/students from a care background, commuters and mature students.

The project began in 2014 with research into likely student attitudes to pre-arrival shared-reading; surveying the largest first-year cohort in each faculty and asking about how they spent their leisure time, the part played by reading for pleasure and whether the opportunity for involvement in pre-arrival shared reading, as outlined, would be appreciated. The responses were overwhelmingly

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<sup>1</sup> <http://cityread.london/>

<sup>2</sup> [www.pigeonhole.com](http://www.pigeonhole.com)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thereader.org.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kingstonstudents.net/articles/sadras-get-paid-to-research-for-change>

positive, with much more interest in both reading and pre-arrival shared reading as outlined than had been anticipated. The university consequently went ahead in 2015 with the production and circulation of a customised edition of Nick Hornby's *About a Boy*, subsequently surveying all first year students and all staff about their responses to the scheme, as well as using a variety of other metrics to evaluate opinions and consider what to do next.

An early thought was to share the project with another HE institution, in order to compare both delivery and outcomes. In 2016 a second Big Read was organised, this time involving Kingston University and Edinburgh Napier University, each having their own bespoke edition of the title they agreed to share with arriving students and existing staff. The choice of partner was carefully considered, building as it did upon pre-existing disciplinary connections, pedagogical approaches and institutional aims.

## Literature review

The literature relating to pre-arrival shared reading is not extensive; such developments have generally been reported or described as part of the institutional narrative or organisational welcome rather than extensively analysed or evaluated (e.g. Varquez 2005; Laufgraben, 2006; Ferguson, 2006; Grenier, 2006; Twiton, 2017; Golden, 2012; Greatrix, 2016). There is also however an interesting parallel between the book as a shared item to ease nervousness in a new situation and Winnicott's theory of the 'transitional object' (Winnicott, 1953).

The widespread literature relating to the general benefits of reading for pleasure has been reported in previous papers relating to this project (Baverstock et al, 2016 and 2017) and in several associated blogs (Baverstock, 2016a and b; 2017). To summarise, the literature reports consistent beneficial outcomes associated with reading for pleasure, notably through significant research carried out by The National Literacy Trust and The Reading Agency, much of it in conjunction with Sheffield Hallam University.

Links have also been made with work relating to strategies for improving student engagement and retention, particularly among vulnerable communities (e.g. Astin, 1984; Baron and Corbin, 2012; Gibbs, 2014; Kuh, 2008; Tienda, 2013 and Tinto, 1975, 1993) and in particular to work by Associate Professor Annie Hughes at Kingston (Hughes, 2015, 2016), relating to Kingston University's long-time commitment to inclusion, adding social value and transforming life chances.

Partnering with Edinburgh Napier University also provided the opportunity for The Big Read to be utilised within Edinburgh Napier's particular approach to 'transitions'. The Quality Assurance Agency in Scotland has been active in working across the higher education sector, around a focused approach to quality enhancement in education. This has historically concentrated on a sector-based theme and at the time of engaging with the Edinburgh Napier University the focus was on student transitions. It is acknowledged that student transitions are under-theorized (Gail and Parker 2014, Donnell, Kean, & Stevens, 2016). Gale and Parker (2014) define 'transitions' as 'change navigated by students in their movement within and through formal education' (p.737). Yet it is the nature of the change and of the pattern and purpose of the movement through education which encourages different ways of conceiving, managing and planning for effective transitions into HE. The Big Read innovation provided a further platform for Edinburgh Napier University to deliver a student-centred approach to the transition from one environment to a University environment, whilst working in partnership with colleagues at Kingston University. Whilst the partnership brought about a number of benefits, the literature also identifies that collaborative research can also face a number of challenges. Kaye et al (2015) identify some of these around communication, research approaches, timeframes and maintaining relationships during the research process. Johnston et al (2003) also identify that greater success can be achieved by participating partners having a greater appreciation of each other's values, ideologies and cultures. Within this partnership the project leads in each

organisation were mindful of the need for ease of communication and an understanding of challenges facing each organisation; these were eased by meaningful communication and a shared appreciation of the value inherent in the project to benefit of the student experience.

## **Collaboration with Edinburgh Napier University**

### **How the link with Edinburgh Napier arose**

This collaboration arose from a chance meeting. The Principal of Edinburgh Napier University, Professor Andrea Nolan, was scheduled to give the keynote address at the HEIR conference at University of the West of Scotland in September 2015. Associate Professor Alison Baverstock was presenting a paper at the same conference on *The KU Big Read*, along with students who had been involved in the SADRAS project. Both arrived early and met in the refreshments tent over coffee. Dr Baverstock outlined the project and Professor Nolan said immediately that she would like Edinburgh Napier to be part of the project too. She made the connections between Dr Baverstock and Professor Brian Webster-Henderson, University Dean of Teaching and Learning and Dr Sandra Cairncross, Assistant Principal for The Student Experience, both of Edinburgh Napier.

The two institutions already had much in common. Both are post-1992 institutions which recruit heavily from their local population of largely first generation students, many of whom live at home. They share a broad disciplinary profile, with many profession-orientated disciplines on offer – but not medicine.

They also however have significant differences. In Scotland student fees are still paid for by the government. As both a city and a student population, the ethnic mix of Edinburgh Napier is much less diverse than in Kingston (which includes over 150 different nationalities). Many of the Edinburgh Napier students also begin their university education at an earlier age as Scottish students have the option to leave school after taking their Highers (i.e. not staying on for Sixth Year Studies), so it's a regular occurrence for students to enter HE at the age of 17 rather than 18. Finally the timings of the academic year are different, with Edinburgh Napier (and generally Scottish) students beginning their course in early September (early October more common in England) and hence the timings for coordinated delivery between the two institutions could not be exact.

### **Why did Edinburgh Napier want to take part?**

In addition to finding the scheme appealing in its own right, Edinburgh Napier University and Kingston have a history of collaboration, most recently over the re-working of their staff promotion schemes. Avril Gray was instantly attracted to the initiative. 'It was a perfect linkage – I've known Alison for some time, both personally and professionally. We are both Programme Leaders of a postgraduate Publishing programme and I wanted to work with her on this. Also, at Edinburgh Napier, we have a history of bringing books to new readers, although we have never analysed the impact of this work in the way that Kingston did. I was excited to be part of a project that would take a shared reading scheme a new dimension, an initiative that really involved students, and one that had so many possibilities for connecting with people both inside and outside the University.'

Laura Ennis, Edinburgh Napier Librarian was on a fact-finding mission to Kingston for something completely unrelated when her visit was spotted in the LRC diary by Wendy Morris, the Kingston Big Read Champion. Wendy made a time to sit down with Laura while she was there, to tell her about the project. She admits to some initial scepticism, but was quickly won over by Wendy's passion and enthusiasm.

The two senior staff at Edinburgh Napier University immediately identified the potential benefit for their students as a welcome to the University which was also in line with the literature on transitions, i.e. supporting the move and engagement to a new environment. Dr Cairncross led on

the implementation of the project at Edinburgh Napier, whilst Professor Webster-Henderson led on the research. The approach at both institutions was very much one of inclusivity, with staff at Edinburgh Napier University partner invited to attend a briefing by Alison Baverstock. From that initial call, a dedicated group was established.

As the programme leader for the Bachelor of Midwifery in the School of Health and Social Care at Edinburgh Napier, Connie McLuckie was delighted to participate in a literary project that 'made no reference to *Call the Midwife*'. Aware that commencing a programme of learning is a challenge for many students, Connie recognised that the experience of shared reading (or even being given a book) would provide some valuable common ground for discussion.

### **Project collaboration between the two institutions**

Joining an initiative that is already established is not easy but from the outset Kingston sought to involve their research partners, inviting them to Kingston to be part of the process of choosing the shared book and to speak at the launch of the newly arrived books at a faculty awayday in June 2016. The PR and internal communications teams in both institutions were formally introduced and a joint press release was issued. Kingston provided Edinburgh Napier with a complete guide to running a Big Read and the Kingston Design team prepared bespoke editions of the chosen book for both Kingston and Edinburgh Napier, with separate opening page letters from their respective organisational heads and badged covers.

### **Experience carried forward from 2015**

The 2016 project also benefitted from the practice as research experience of Kingston's first Big Read in 2015; reported in the media and sector blogs, in academic papers and the aforementioned guide to the project. This experience included understanding that:

1. Strong student engagement could be expected from those living at home. In both the pre-project research, and feedback from the 2015 delivery, living at home correlated with high levels of project appreciation. For example, a copy of the book served as an identifier on public transport and helped those not living in halls of residence feel they had something in common with other students. This was a good match for both institutions, as both have many students who live at home.
2. It was better to involve staff by encouraging them to take the initiative to secure their own copy of the book rather than distribute it directly to them. Arrangements made with Kingston's LRC and Reception desks had proved effective in both offering distribution points for the book and encouraging conversations between academic and professional/administrative staff.
3. The organisational library offered a capillary network of access and information points right across the university. As universities are generally hierarchical organisations, working across the institution can be difficult. It was found that the active involvement of the LRC enabled the project to reach all parts of the institution. So if resistance was encountered to presenting the project, perhaps due to a prearranged and hence inflexible agenda, or long list of other items to be discussed, the project could still be aired by presentation through the library's official allocation of time.
4. The response from administrative and professional staff was particularly positive, and the book had to be reprinted twice to meet demand. In addition to use by academic staff responsible for the first year experience, the book was used for staff team-building within several departments, within the HR induction process for new staff, and by colleagues in development and alumni relations for building relationships.
5. The project invites engagement. Even those who do did not like the book chosen, or felt the project was not useful, still talked about it – thus providing a source of common ground and a means of engagement. It became a water-cooler project. Widely discussed – even by those not taking part! This anecdotal feedback was reinforced in responses to the post-project surveys,

where discussion with multiple categories of individual (family, friends, colleagues, neighbours) was widely reported. In Kingston's case involvement was developed further through working with the local community.

## **Early project development**

### **Establishing a working relationship**

Dr Baverstock made a presentation to Edinburgh Napier staff in January 2016 and after an initial agreement to collaborate, Kingston provided Edinburgh Napier with a full guide to how to run a Big Read. Attempts were made to introduce colleagues doing similar jobs in both universities, to create a collaboration that did not just rely on the agreement signatories and to build effective collaboration. In particular library staff worked very well together.

### **Choosing a book to suit two institutions**

There was also consideration of whether it would be possible to choose a book to suit the two institutions, and whether a Scottish book would always be preferable for a Scottish university.

In the end, and somewhat by chance, there was a Scottish theme to both the books in the shortlist (which featured books from two Scottish authors; Ali Smith and Jackie Kay) and in the publisher for the chosen book. *The Humans* was published by Canongate, an Edinburgh based publisher.

Wendy Morris, Senior Information Advisor at Kingston University commented:

'A complex algorithm resulted in a shortlist of six titles – multiple copies of which were to be made available for loan in all campus libraries five minutes after it was made official. Ordering, invoicing, accessioning, cataloguing and labelling all needed to be done in advance with no-one outside of the inner circle finding out which books were on the shortlist. Much use of secret passwords and cataloguing at home at weekends resulted in a successful launch with no premature leaks to spoil the excitement. The rest of the academic community of course took this for granted and didn't appear in the least surprised that they could borrow all the shortlisted titles from the LRCs as soon as the VC announced the list, in one of his monthly emails to staff.'

Laura Ennis, Specialist Librarian at Edinburgh Napier commented:

'The shortlist of six books was sent to us and we moved them around between colleagues, but Edinburgh Napier library did not buy stock. Two members of Edinburgh Napier staff came to Kingston for the two final selection meetings, and in each case toured their respective disciplinary departments and had a developmental day which was much appreciated (Midwifery and Publishing Studies). I think if we'd been closer geographically there could have been a lot we could have collaborated on events-wise. It would have been nice to visit the campus at Kingston to see the activities and promotion in person – sometimes our best ideas are those that are "borrowed" from elsewhere.'

The issue of whether the book was an appropriate match to the disciplines taught in the two universities was largely overcome through their being a similar disciplinary spread, and the book's role to reach across both communities and be shared for mutual enjoyment rather than relating to any specific subject.

Participation in this part of the project was an exciting time for those involved from Edinburgh Napier. Connie McLuckie, commented that 'for those who are involved in professional programmes that are heavily constrained by statutory and regulatory directives, the contrast in content was refreshing.' She felt it gave a different lens through which to think about reading and its significance in learning and teaching. It also prompted discussions of those aspects of beginning university life that might be challenging and somewhat neglected, for example the isolation and loneliness of being away from home for the first time.

Throughout the project, parity of experience was sought and when Matt Haig's *The Humans* was chosen and an approach made to his publishers, he was asked to commit to author events at both Kingston and Edinburgh.

### **Areas of project development in which Edinburgh Napier did not get involved**

The academic year of 2016-17 was Kingston's second organisation of a Big Read, and Edinburgh's first, hence whereas Edinburgh was focussed on project delivery within their institution, at Kingston involvement in the project spread out more widely.

In their second year Kingston sought to involve their local community; selling books to local government (The Council of the Royal Borough of Kingston) through making an arrangement with the Department of Libraries, Museums and Archives which led to a shared seminar between professional staff from libraries in both the university and public libraries. They also worked with a shelter for the homeless, another for refugees, and the local branch of the University of the Third Age. Working with the local homeless had a strong impact within the institution and was very helpful in getting the project better known within Kingston. Edinburgh Napier, still in their first year, were interested in these developments but decided to postpone similar action until the scheme was more established. Avril Gray commented: 'After the initial momentum, the staff included in the selection process were not involved in how the chosen book was actually promoted to staff and students. In hindsight, we could have done more in the form of wider promotion, although many staff did use the book in classroom activities.'

### **Points of difference emerge**

Specific points of difference between delivery in the two universities emerged relatively quickly.

#### **Legal formalities**

An early hitch arose which identified the different legal structures of the two organisations: Kingston has internal legal advisors while Edinburgh Napier relies on external staff as and when needed. This arose when Dr Baverstock was alerted to Edinburgh Napier's legal advisors asking for a clause be inserted into the contract that if book stock were lost in transit, Kingston should be liable – which given that Edinburgh Napier were not being charged for the project was immediately flagged to senior management at Kingston. The issue was dealt with but it did highlight significant operational differences which needed to be anticipated and worked around.

#### **Staffing and resource allocation**

At Kingston the project was allocated within an academic department, thus both project and associated research monitoring fell within the same departmental structure. Within Edinburgh the project was split between the Directorate of Student Engagement (project administration) and the Directorate of Learning and Teaching (associated project research).

The allocation of associated resources to the project in both Kingston and Edinburgh Napier initially included money but not staffing. For most of its initial development phase The Kingston Big Read was managed in the 'spare time' of academic staff supported by the involvement of the students

who had taken part in the associated SADRAS project. It was not until December 2015 that a half-time administrative support post was created, and January 2016 that the half-time KU Big Read Director post was created. The role of Big Read management at Edinburgh Napier was allocated to Dr Cairncross and her Personal Assistant to manage alongside their existing commitments, with part-time administrative support being temporarily allocated from May 2016. Participation in the selection process by Edinburgh Napier staff members was very much supported and a small workload allocation was made available in respect of this. The experience of attending the selection panel, and having Kingston University as a host was for Connie McLuckie 'a really lovely, affirming experience. Everyone made me feel very welcome and very much part of the team'.

### **Timing of project announcement**

Edinburgh Napier took the decision not to distribute project information or books within the institution until the students of the academic year 2015-16 had departed, this to avoid disappointment from existing students about the next intake receiving benefits unavailable to them.

This is a familiar issue within higher education, in that development plans for universities invariably involve changing, and generally augmenting, the institutional offer to new arrivals. Kingston's advice, based on first-hand feedback from existing students in 2015-16, was that existing students would be generous in acknowledging a new idea rather than resentful that the scheme had not been available to them. Edinburgh Napier's delayed announcement of the scheme also made it difficult to spread information amongst staff in the remaining time available, given that many academics are away from the institution during the summer – and disengaged from emails – the time to share information in any case being shortened by the earlier commencement of the academic year in Scotland.

Kingston meanwhile involved the wider institution early in the project, sharing debates about the title to be shared, announcing the shortlist via the university intranet, making the shortlisted titles available for reading in LRCs across the institution (through enlisting the support of the library) and featuring staff and student debate on social media.

### **The number of books needed**

The number of books needed for arriving students was another issue that emerged. Kingston's experience had been of significant churn in the student numbers, and that more books might hence be needed than anticipated. It had been found that whereas the number of those who had accepted places, and the number who turned up, might be the same, before the start of term considerable churn had taken place and so if every potential student was to receive a book, a greater number than the number of final arrivals would be needed.

This was complicated by funding issues in that the book had cost more than anticipated. When presenting the project to Edinburgh Napier in 2015 a guideline price was presented. It was subsequently difficult to accurately predict the associated costs of involvement, as it depended on the deal Kingston was able to secure from the publishers of the chosen book, it having been decided to choose the title on the basis of its suitability for purpose rather than the publisher able to offer the lowest possible price. Kingston was anxious to stick to its ethical terms of business and to avoid naming a price for the publisher to match, and in particular wanted to ensure that the author royalty would be paid; seeking to avoid the reported practice within large retailers of ordering a product and then renegotiating an agreed price post-delivery. The price outlined to Edinburgh Napier was based on its 2015 delivery, with associated warnings that this was based on the experience of working with one publisher and could not therefore be guaranteed.



The Big Read title in the first year had been provided by Penguin Random House, the largest UK publishing house. The chosen title in the second year came from Canongate, a small independent publishing house whose financial structures and organisational margins meant that they were unable to match the low prices offered by Penguin. In the end, and after extensive briefing and collaborator involvement throughout the negotiations, the approximate price quoted to Edinburgh Napier, was exceeded. Choosing to order the number of books to match final anticipated student numbers, rather than allowing for the anticipated churn, also meant Edinburgh Napier subsequently needed a reprint of 1,000 copies, which inevitably cost more per unit than the initial run (short run reprints always cost more than longer runs due to the set up costs being a lower percentage of the overall printing costs). Avril Gray later commented, 'Again, the complexities of Publishing were more easily navigated by Kingston due to Alison Baverstock's expertise. Unfortunately I was not party to these critical negotiations. This is another reason that I was keen to be more involved in the process going forward; the goal being to negate any financial barrier to future participation.'

While the book was still developed by Kingston as a bespoke Edinburgh Napier edition, at less than half the cover price, both these issues regrettably resulted in higher costs than had been anticipated. As a result, to ensure the project stayed within the budget allocated, Edinburgh Napier decided to hand out books to international students on arrival rather than mail them, which also fitted the shorter time available before they arrived allowing for international delivery.

For all other students the bespoke edition of both the Kingston and Edinburgh Napier books were despatched to prospective students in three mailings: to those with firm offers of places; to those who met their offers once their exam results were confirmed; to those accepted a place through clearing.

## Post-delivery analysis

### Research methodology for the post-project survey

Both institutions sought to measure involvement through a variety of informal measures such as observing the reactions on social media, counting those who turned up for events and monitoring the collection of books from libraries (Baverstock, Steinitz and Bryars, 2017).

Additionally a survey was conducted at both universities on staff and students using the same questionnaire as the one used by Kingston after the 2015 Big Read so that results could be tracked with the previous year and comparisons could be made across the two universities. The questionnaires were set up in Kingston's case on Survey Monkey and for Edinburgh Napier on Novi.

### Figure 1: Topics included in the staff and student surveys

(Topics only. Not the precise question wording)

	Staff	Students
How heard about the Big Read?	How did you hear about it? Did you get enough information?	
Book distribution	Did you get a book? Where from? Easy to get a copy?	How did you get your book? How did you feel about it? Ebook?
Reading the book	How much did you read? What prompted you to start?	How much did you read? What prompted you to start?
Discussion of the book	Discussed with anyone? Who? Did you give your copy to anyone?	Discussed with anyone? Who? Discussions enjoyable?
Using the book in teaching sessions	Did you get the presentation? How useful was it? Did you use the book in class? How?	Did any of your classes/tutorials use the book?

Events Verdict on the book	Attend any? Was it a good choice?	Attend any? Enjoyable? Did you enjoy the book? Was it a good choice?
Verdict on the big read	How useful for new students?	How useful for new students? Perceived benefits and barriers. How much, if anything, should students pay for the book.
Next year?	How interested in taking part? Suggestions for improvements. Suggestions for book/book type	Suggestions for improvements. Suggestions for book/book type
Demographics	Enjoy reading? Gender/Age/Faculty/Role?	Enjoy reading? Gender/Age/Faculty/Role? Type of residence? Ethnicity? Education break? International?

## Survey outcomes

### Staff Survey

In total 232 staff responded from Kingston and 119 from Edinburgh Napier. The profiles of staff responders from the two universities were generally similar; well spread across the age groups and roles though both with more female respondents than males.

### Figure 2: The profiles of respondents to the Kingston and Edinburgh Napier staff surveys were similar

% of respondents

n (KU 2015)=229, N(KU 2016)=232, n (Edinburgh Napier)=119

	Kingston		Edinburgh Napier
	2015	2016	2016
Male	33	31	30
Female	64	66	66
Prefer not to say	3	4	3
Under 30	10	12	10
31-40	27	23	23
41-50	24	27	31
51-60	33	30	31
60+	6	9	4
Administrative staff	33	33	39
Academic staff	39	33	29
LRC staff	10	16	3
Contracted staff	7	5	10
Other	12	14	19

Staff at both universities learned about the Big Read in a number of ways, with many learning about it from more than one source. At Kingston the most common method was the Staff intranet while at Edinburgh Napier it was from a general email.

**Figure 3: How staff learned about the Big Read**

% of respondents, multiple responses allowed

n (KU 2015) =211, n (KU 2016) =215, n (Edinburgh Napier) =102

	Kingston		Edinburgh Napier
	2015	2016	2016
Coverage on Staff intranet	60	49	Na
General email from an organizer	47	44	49
Mention in VC's monthly newsletter	42	31	13
Casual conversation with administrative staff	12	17	16
Heard of it at a staff meeting	11	16	12
Targeted email to you, from an organiser	9	14	7
Casual conversation with academic colleagues	7	9	12
Info from faculty colleagues	6	8	6
Info from head of department	10	6	14
Info from senior faculty management	7	5	7
Via a Kingston External Events Calendar	3	4	Na

84% of the Kingston respondents felt that they had received the right amount of information with the remainder split almost equally between those thinking too much and too little. There was a reduction in the proportion from 2015 thinking they had not received enough information. At Edinburgh Napier the majority would have liked to have had more information.

**Figure 4: Did you get sufficient information on the Big Read?**

% of respondents

(KU 2015)=230, n (KU 2016) =233, n (Edinburgh Napier) = 114

	Kingston		Edinburgh Napier
	2015	2016	2016
Too much information	6	7	2
About Right	79	84	24
Too little	15	9	75

In both institutions staff generally found it easy to obtain a copy of the book, (84% of staff responders in Kingston and 69% in Edinburgh Napier). There were many comments from both institutions about receptionists and librarians being a ready source of books, and positivity of the receptionists at Kingston drew significant praise. Feedback from Kingston's staff survey included:

'I liked the say that LRC and reception staff were so keen to engage people in the scheme.'

‘It is a fantastic idea to have books distributed at university reception and libraries. You’re really going to reach most people that way.’

‘Perfect placement’

Delayed circulation of information about the scheme at Edinburgh Napier (as reported above) may account for lower penetration of the scheme.

Staff in both universities read similar amounts of the book, with Edinburgh Napier staff slightly more committed than those in Kingston.

**Figure 5 – How much staff read of the book**

% of respondents

n (KU 2015) =218, n (KU 2016) =232, n (Edinburgh Napier) = 118

	Kingston		Edinburgh Napier
	2015	2016	2016
Finished it	51	64	66
Half or more	8	5	6
Less than half	10	12	6
None	31	19	21

A notable feature of the scheme at Kingston in the first year was that the book and the project in general had been widely discussed with family, friends and colleagues – with 60% of staff discussing it with someone. In 2016 the figure rose to 75% at Kingston, the same figure reported by Edinburgh Napier.

**Figure 6 - Staff discussion of the book with others**

% of respondents, multiple responses allowed

n (KU 2015) = 219, n (KU 2016) = 228, n (Edinburgh Napier) = 118

	Kingston		Edinburgh Napier
	2015	2016	2016
Discussed it with work colleagues	33	53	60
Discussed it with family and friends	20	53	37
Discussed it with students	6	15	14
Did not discuss it	40	25	25

When it came to asking if staff would be interested in taking part in the scheme again, the Edinburgh Napier response was more enthusiastic than Kingston.

**Figure 7 – Interest expressed by staff in taking part in the Big Read next year?**

% of respondents, 5 point scale

n (KU 2015) = 217, n (KU 2016) = 225, n (Edinburgh Napier) = 127

	Kingston		Edinburgh Napier
	2015	2016	2016
Very interested (top 2 boxes)	40	54	57
Fairly interested (middle box)	36	29	24

Not interested (bottom 2 boxes)	24	16	20
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### Student Survey

While it was a pity that student data was not obtained by Edinburgh Napier, it should be noted that the responses on other metrics from Kingston and Edinburgh Napier students were similar. From informal project feedback from Edinburgh students, particularly in libraries, and turnout at associated events, it is reasonable to assume the response of Edinburgh Napier students to the scheme was similar to that observed from students in Kingston. Key results from Kingston included:

- 71% of student respondents were very pleased to receive the book (top 2 boxes out of 7)
- 78% discussed it with someone
- 54% finished the book, and 81% read at least some of it
- 58% thought the scheme very helpful for new students at the university

### What the two institutions gained from working together

Having a research partner from another HE institution significantly benefitted project development at both Kingston and Edinburgh Napier. For Kingston, being able to demonstrate that another institution was willing to invest time and resources in the shared development of a project helped support internal perceptions of both project profile and associated prestige. Edinburgh Napier received a pre-tested project throughout which they received supported delivery, with no development costs themselves. Applications to conferences and associated media management were made on behalf of the project by Kingston and the associated project profile was high.

### Shared experience

In both organisations, the library played a very strategic role, as a central hub and collection point for books and as a centre for enthusiasm and project sharing which offered opportunities to network the project across the organisation through library access to institutional committee structure and a lively associated presence on social media. In both institutions the library was strongly behind targeted outreach work. In part library enthusiasm can be credited to their natural empathy with a project that stressed the value of books and reading (at Kingston 31 – a third of the library staff – read the entire shortlist), but it also chimed within the library's practical willingness to use their institutional network on behalf of the project both internally and externally, as part of their wider strategic goals.

### What Kingston learned from Edinburgh Napier

Although the Kingston *Guide to Managing The Big Read* had been sent to Edinburgh Napier as soon as the initial agreement to collaborate had been made, Edinburgh Napier impressed Kingston with the quality and depth of its project dissemination and swift progress in involving academics in delivery. Edinburgh Napier ran a number of promotional events and worked both the book, and its associated themes, into several pieces of coursework and lectures. These included: a collaborative art project based on the book cover, which asked students to offer a piece of advice to other humans; use of *The Humans* at the Association of University Administrators Book Group; a lecture on prime numbers, a Maths challenge run by the School of Engineering and Built Environment; a 'LibGuide', and a group discussion of social alienation within the School of Health and Social Care.

On-campus activities at Edinburgh Napier were supplemented with digital outreach to other collaborating institutions, as the university runs courses not just in Scotland, but also in Singapore,

Switzerland, China, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Twitter competitions were held over the summer, and people were encouraged to share their 'shelfies' for prizes.

A series of digital posters was prepared for use throughout university's various campus libraries. Preparation of these took longer than expected as library colleagues implementing weren't allowed to use unofficial artwork, and Edinburgh Napier's communications team were not willing to share the original project files with them. While the constraints of copyright materials and how they can be shared naturally need to be observed, the licence under which they could have been used within partner institution was flexible. As Laura Ennis of Edinburgh Napier's LRC commented: 'The wider point is that if an institution wants staff to become involved and proactive on behalf of a project, it is important to either allocate staff who can extend project across an institution or enable wider colleagues to take the project further. There's a lesson to be learned here – if you want people to be creative, you need to relinquish control!' This chimes with Kingston's experience, where The Big Read was never boundaried within its place of origin and colleagues across the university were encouraged to take the project further (Baverstock, 2016, THE) and included in nominations for awards and organisational credit. Professor Webster-Henderson of Edinburgh Napier commented: 'We are continually developing our outreach plan and evaluation methodology; seeking to develop a model which is scalable and replicable to demonstrate engagement and impact with diverse audiences.'

Another key learning from Edinburgh Napier by Kingston was the optimum timing for the author event. This happened by accident. The Scottish academic year begins sooner than that of the one in England, thus timing of despatch it a key issue. The book was despatched to anticipated students of both institutions, but for prospective Edinburgh Napier students there was a shorter window in which the book could arrive and hence be read. The timing of the author event was altered to suit Edinburgh Napier, with the author being available mid-semester instead of during Freshers' Week. But this turned out to be a better solution – Freshers' Week is very busy and many students at Kingston were disappointed to find the author visit had already taken place. So for the KU Big Read 2017, Kingston organised the author visit in October, four weeks into the first semester.

### **What Edinburgh Napier learned from Kingston**

Within Edinburgh Napier, staff were conscious of the range of other initiatives going on in the University and were therefore keen both not to overburden colleagues but also to make a success of the Big Read Project. Kingston University had helpfully provided a range of reflective feedback that they had gained from their first year at rolling out the Big Read which was helpful and constructive. Engagement with staff, as highlighted in the data, is pivotal to a successful project to ensure that staff can encourage discussion with their students, utilise the themes and messages from the book to stimulate conversation, thinking and reflection.

Professor Webster-Henderson commented: 'At Edinburgh Napier University we had a number of key staff who were pivotal to this project in terms of their motivation, commitment and enthusiasm. However, having a 'champion' in each School or department would have given the project much more gravitas, aided by stronger and wider communication and perhaps enhanced the overall experience for both staff and students.'

'Edinburgh Napier University has three campuses in different parts of the city, each surrounded by different communities in terms of socio-economic demographics. It is our view that engagement with the external community could have been strategically beneficial to enhancing and strengthening relationships with the local communities and could have supported the university's drive on citizenship.'

## **Next steps: issues for consideration before further collaboration on project development**

On the basis of an initial expression of interest in a refreshment tent, and no previous financial collaboration, a significant project was effected and delivered across two universities 450 miles apart involving 30,000 students, 10,000 staff and a print run of 26,000 books. Two bespoke editions of the shared book were created, many readers engaged, a jointly managed communications campaign was delivered which resulted in a high profile project for which the expressed satisfaction levels from both students and staff were consistently high and associated behaviour ongoingly positive. Both students and staff reported high levels of associated discussion, whether or not they had read the book, the project was seen to be a positive and cross-organisational one that improved internal communication. The project also correlates with a reduction in the first year student drop-out rate within both institutions. In Kingston it went down by 15% in academic year 2016-17 (it was down by 24% in 2015-16) and at Edinburgh Napier it went down by 3% in 2016-17.

The project is based on practice as research, and so while this paper has necessarily sought to identify the associated challenges, in order to learn from the experience and promote enhanced delivery in future, the overall project success from a standing start should be emphasised. The following thoughts are offered in the hope of consolidating learning and for the benefit of those considering cross-institutional initiatives in future, and it is hoped they will be read in this constructive light.

### **1. The level of data achieved**

It was disappointing that the project did not yield meaningful data within the student population at Edinburgh Napier to enable effective comparisons between the two populations. Although effective conclusions could be drawn from studying staff responses in both institutions, and deductions made about the student responses, the lack of feedback from Edinburgh Napier students compromised the project overall.

### **2. Future funding**

How to fund the project was an issue for both institutions, and in particular whether both were able to continue to fund future collaboration.

At Edinburgh Napier the project was allocated to the Directorate of Student Experience, and for the second year of potential collaboration both the overall university budget, and that of the specific directorate, were cut. Edinburgh Napier determined early that there needed to be an overall reduction in project costs. Various suggestions were considered, including not despatching the book by post and having students collect it on arrival. While this would cut the need for postage and delivery costs, it would offer no pre-arrival impact, which could impact on students' decision to enrol.

Another option put forward was to use a book that was out of copyright (hence no author royalty payable), and on which the MA Publishing students had already worked, thus easing the transition to book development as title existed, with cover and typesetting, so needed just the 'Big Read' characteristics to be added (logo on front; front page letter from Principal; explanatory copy for the early pages). While this yielded a cost-effective solution, and potentially provided a title whose impact could be measured and compared with the results for the previous year, the significant postponement of the associated decision (informed April 2017, just as the Kingston new book choice was made) meant that the two projects were no longer running within the same time period and requiring the involvement of a new collaborator at Edinburgh Napier to make the associated changes to the book (the previous edition had been produced by Kingston). It also introduced a further separation in project delivery in that no author would be available at Edinburgh Napier to talk about their book and boost engagement, which Kingston saw this as a key part of the project.

With the language of a book out of copyright (70 years since the author's death) it was also potentially less likely to be less easily absorbable across the organisation as a whole. Trying to encourage all disciplines and roles to get involved was perhaps best promoted through the sharing of an engaging and contemporary text.

Avril Gray comments: 'Home producing our own book gave Napier Publishing students a valuable real-life experience of working within a literacy/widening access/literacy project. This was seized upon with great enthusiasm by Napier students, and the project developed in unexpected directions, notably into an offshoot to offer books to the homeless within Edinburgh, associated placements in publishing companies interested in expanding their events provision – and even one student getting a job as a direct result of their Big Read involvement. While there were delays in finalising the book (eventually launched on 15<sup>th</sup> March) which could have been avoided had we been part of the wider momentum towards a shared publication date, our second Big Read certainly felt more 'home grown' as a Napier project, which benefitted community cohesion.

From Kingston's point of view, while budgetary considerations are of course important, concentration on the financial proposition alone was frustrating. The project has so many opportunities arising from it: a research collaboration between two institutions between staff from a variety of disciplines and roles; an opportunity for staff to work across an organisation; opportunities for administrative and academic collaboration and inter-disciplinary and inter-professional education; opportunities for staff involved in HEA and other professional accreditation to demonstrate their effectiveness and build their profile.

Not using the same book also throws up potential associated issues of copyright and licence. The initial legal agreement had provided for Edinburgh Napier to be full partners in the project, sharing information and being offered full support, but this on the basis that the project's Kingston origins be 'fully and generously acknowledged, without being reminded'. As Edinburgh Napier wished to continue in a second year using a different book, then the badging of the book and the introductory sections explaining project origins still needed to be in place, and arrangements for comparing outcomes still available. As the two outputs were starting to look so different, this might prove difficult.

### **Issues around project management and delivery**

A project that is agreed on at the highest levels within the organisation, but is then allocated to others to implement and fund in future is not ideal. Senior staff who already have full time jobs may not share the vision but still be allocated responsibility, and not necessarily have time for the additional administration to be added to their role. This occurred both within Edinburgh Napier and Kingston.

At Kingston, the project had been enthusiastically backed by the VC Professor Julius Weinberg, and funded out of his departmental allocation. But after his departure in September 2016 a new structure was needed, and it was then transferred to the tutelage of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. While this made logistical sense, in that Big Read Project Director was already part of this faculty, and so the project could progress as a faculty research project and impact case study, it did not help the presentation of the project as university-wide and genuinely open to all for involvement and participation. A suggestion was made that henceforth key figures within the faculty of Arts and Social Sciences should curate the book choice on behalf of the organisation as a whole, but the Director put the case that if the project was to continue to operate institution-wide, then encouraging a sense of ownership across the whole institution was vital, and a role in choosing the book was a key part of such involvement. Similarly at Edinburgh Napier, the role of project coordination was managed within the Directorate of Student Engagement while the associated



research project was allocated to the PVC for Teaching and Learning. With hindsight, separating project delivery from project study within two different departments/reporting staff was not the optimum solution for a project based on practice as research.

### **The dissemination of research findings**

Wider project dissemination also needs consideration. Kingston and Edinburgh Napier co-wrote several applications to co-present the project at academic conferences, and these were jointly delivered at the London International Book Fair (March, 2016), the QAA Conference in Glasgow (May 2017), the HEA Conference in Manchester (July 2017) and Higher Education Institutional Research Conference (September 2017). It was anticipated that associated academic papers would be written and published, of which this is the first.

### **Awards**

By the time Edinburgh Napier joined the scheme it had already won its category within Kingston's Rose Award, the university's internal staff recognition scheme ('Best project of the year') and been covered widely in the press. The Kingston/Edinburgh Napier collaboration was put forward for a variety of prizes. Edinburgh Napier put it forward for the Herald Higher Education Awards, acknowledging the project's origins at Kingston and hosting a representative from Kingston at the dinner at which the project was on the shortlist for 'Best Marketing Campaign', but the project did not win overall. Kingston nominated the project within both *The Bookseller* Nibbies, *The Guardian* and the *Times Higher Education* (THE) Awards, within the context of the project as a whole but fully acknowledging Edinburgh Napier's contribution in year 2016-17. The project won the prestigious THE Award for 'Best Outreach/Widening Participation' initiative for 2017.

### **New partnerships in future**

Within Kingston, there is disappointment that the project is not going to be run in the same way by both institutions for a second year, particularly given the strong feedback from Edinburgh Napier staff of associated enthusiasm. The difference between the cost of Edinburgh Napier using the same book as Kingston and using their own book were relatively marginal within the size of the project as a whole, and it is disappointing not to have built on the experience of sharing from the first year and so to be able to compare data over three years in two institutions.

Given that one of the aims of institutional collaboration was the sharing of research outcomes, it follows that new research partnerships will be sought and sensitivity will be needed around both involving new partners and acknowledging previous collaboration. In 2017 Kingston is collaborating with the University of Wolverhampton (who have adopted the same book for comparison of outcomes within a specific faculty) and with the universities of Malmo and North Florida for project operation within organisational staff, with a view to their participation next year. Project outlines of progress to date will continue to feature the contribution of Edinburgh Napier.

## **Conclusions**

When seeking to create a research collaboration with another organisation it is important to:

1. Isolate, clarify and revisit shared goals, structures and timeframes, exploring and acknowledging differences within the institutions involved.
2. Ensure shared commitment to the project. Even if the project originated within one institution, it needs to feel actively owned by all involved.
3. Ensure transparency of process.
4. Commit to shared monitoring of progress, schedules and a shared commitment to effective feedback.

5. Allocate corresponding and confirmed resources, in personnel and funding. In particular, and given that universities are very hierarchical organisations, establish supporting hierarchies and institutional commitment of similar seniority within the collaborating organisations, so those involved share an understanding of the project's internal institutional value and wider significance.
6. Create links across both organisations at a variety of levels, so the project is not reliant on only the principal appointees. Communicate at regular intervals through a variety of methods to build levels of cooperation, but ensure this includes regular face-to-face contact.
7. From the outset, celebrate project milestones and achievements, ensuring that credit is shared.

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