The Big Read collaboration between Kingston University, The University of Wolverhampton, Edge Hill University and the University of the West of Scotland (UWS), 2018-19

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Abstract

This paper outlines the experience of four universities who collaborated on a pre-arrival shared-reading project, The Big Read, in 2018/19. They did so primarily to promote student engagement and retention at their respective institutions but also to ease transition into higher education, particularly for first generation students, to promote staff connectedness and to provide a USP for their institution. The paper covers all the associated processes from isolating the respective aims of the collaborators to the choosing and sharing of a single agreed title. In analysing the outcomes, recommendations for future such projects of cross-institutional participation are made.

Introduction and aims of the paper

The original Big Read project was launched by Kingston University in 2015/16 and has run there every year since. As word has spread, other institutions have asked to collaborate, and this was first tried in 2016/17 when Kingston collaborated with Edinburgh Napier (Baverstock et al, 2019). 2018/19 was a record year in terms of collaborators (four) and books distributed (20,000 copies of *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman).

Kingston shared with collaborators their previous experience and provided a supporting manual for effective project management. They also co-ordinated publication of the different editions of the chosen book (a bespoke version for each university involved) and the author's visit to each institution. All other aspects of project delivery were devolved to the other institutions involved.

Year	Institutions	Book	Publisher	Year of first publication
2015	Kingston	*About a Boy* (Nick Hornby)	Penguin	1998
2016	Kingston Edinburgh Napier	*The Humans* (Matt Haig)	Canongate	2013
2017	Kingston Wolverhampton	*My Name is Leon* (Kit de Waal)	Penguin	2016
2018	Kingston Wolverhampton Edge Hill University University of West Scotland	*Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (Gail Honeyman)	Harper Collins	2017

Figure 1: Collaborators in the Big Read Project and the chosen book each year

This paper aims to provide an account of the processes involved in the collaboration and the various models used for project delivery, to consider the value and outcomes of the project to the institutions, to identify the best practices and to consider potential for improvement. It is hoped that the paper will be of particular use to other universities and institutions interested in participating in

shared-reading, whether cross-institutional or not, and to wider consideration of how information is shared within the academic community.

Specifically the paper will consider:

- The initial decision to participate/collaborate: how the universities found out about and researched the scheme, and their aims in deciding to participate
- The implementation of the project: including the organisational structure of the Big Read team within each university, the selection of the participating student population, how the book was chosen, book distribution
- The reading of the book: when it was read, the extent to which it was formally embedded in tuition, other activities (including author visits)
- The verdict on the book and the initiative from the perspective of readers
- The verdict on the initiative from the perspective of the institutions
- Learnings about best practice and potential for project improvement

Background and how the partners found out about the scheme
The Big Read project was launched by Kingston University in 2015-16 following research into how pre-arrival shared-reading is used within US universities to help create a community among new students, offering them something in common before they reach their new institution. Investigation into how the practice works in the US, where it is very widespread with around 800 universities taking part (Baverstock, 2018; Baverstock 2020) showed that although pre-arrival shared reading is widely used in the US, it is relatively little analysed; the process is more usually described by staff within university marketing, communications and student experience teams. Within associated reflection on the projects however, it is widely assumed to be beneficial in terms of giving students common ground for conversations and helping them feel more connected in their new homes. (Laufgraben, 2006; Ferguson, 2006; Twiton, 2007; Golden, 2012).

Given this lack of available analysis, Kingston sought from the outset to embed research within the project, so that outcomes could be tracked and analysed and cross-institutional comparisons made. As the project was reported in papers and conferences and awareness spread, it attracted requests from other institutions to participate.

The first request to join the scheme came from Edinburgh Napier University who learned about it at the Higher Education Institutional Research Conference (HEIR) of 2016. In 2016-17 the two universities successfully collaborated on the Big Read (Baverstock et al, 2019). However, for budgetary reasons, the following year Napier decided to continue with shared-reading but to use a title that was already out of copyright, thereby reducing costs as no author royalties would be payable.

An HEIR conference was also the catalyst for interest from the University of Wolverhampton and UWS, with each following up their interest with visits to Kingston (Figure 2). This resulted in the Faculty of Science and Engineering at the University of Wolverhampton becoming a collaborative partner in the Big Read, running the project in both 2017 and 2018. It was Wolverhampton's Science and Engineering faculty Dean, Professor Nazira Karodia, who spread word about the scheme to Edge Hill University, as she was their external examiner. Edge Hill joined The Big Read in 2017-18, the same year that UWS became a collaborator as a result of a chance meeting at the HEIR Conference,. The project was initiated by Professor Claire Carney, Vice-Principal for Learning and Teaching, and targeted a cohort of 500 Business students.

Kingston University made their experience available to all partners, providing advice on project implementation both verbally and through written guides. The Director of Kingston's Big Read made

presentations within the institutional/faculty Learning and Teaching days at both Edge Hill and Wolverhampton and visited the UWS staff delivering the scheme. All the 2018/19 partners played an active role in book selection and their press offices collaborated on press information and messaging.

Edinburgh Napier University	
Sept 2015	HEIR conference
University of Wolverhampton	
Sept 2015	HEIR conference
June 2016	Exploratory visit to Kingston University by Learning Resource Centre Director to find out more/shadow KU Big Read team/attend a project presentation to a faculty management group.
October 2016	Visit by Acting Dean of Faculty of Science and Engineering to KU as part of Kingston's Inclusive Curriculum project in which she presented on recent research into opportunities and barriers to recruiting locally and the outcomes from research into the attitudes and processes of schools in the area towards HE and their local university. Whilst visiting she learned more about KUBR and subsequently asked whether Wolverhampton's Science Faculty could join.
Edge Hill	
	Direct approach from the university to Kingston's Big Read. Exploratory visit and request to join from Director of Student Experience, Sara Crowley.
UWS	
Sept 2017	HEIR conference, PVC for Education attended paper on KU/Napier collaboration. Visit by UWS Library Services Manager, Jeanette Castle to Kingston to discuss participation.

Figure 2: Path taken by each of the collaborators to join the Big Read

Objectives of each institution in participating in the Big Read
The four institutions had broadly overlapping objectives for participating in the scheme though with varying degrees of emphasis. These included the aims to:

- **make students feel welcome/promote an inclusive feeling/ease their transition into university life/improve the student experience in the critical early days** by providing them with a shared experience. For example, UWS hoped that by providing the students with something in common before they arrived they would feel 'you belong before you get here'. Edge Hill sought a deeper social engagement of the students through a pre-arrival shared activity.
- **provide specific support to first-generation students** who have no family experience of higher education on which to draw
- **provide support for those who arrive late**, and who have thus missed the initial welcome activities
- **widen an understanding of what the library can do for students**. UWS felt this particularly important as 90% of student contacts with the library are self-service; so taking the opportunity for personal contact to explain what else is on offer is valuable
- **encourage student wellbeing.** Encouraging students to read for pleasure, and in the process improve their literacy, is very important for study in HE. There is also significant evidence of the effects of reading for pleasure on positive mental health, a particular and growing concern within higher education.

- **support the development of essential skills that students will need throughout their studies.** UWS itemised in particular the development of academic writing, critiquing and referencing. Academics at Kingston have deconstructed different editions of The Big Read to consider how to present a research narrative within dissertations and theses.
- **encourage students to engage beyond their course.** Wolverhampton were particularly keen on encouraging students to participate with the university and its wider environment, their VC has commented on the importance of encouraging them to participate locally and become good citizens.
- **support retention.** This was a key aim for all the universities. For example, in presenting their initial business case for the project to the institutional directorate, Edge Hill's Director of Student Experience argued that there was evidence that shared-reading schemes can contribute to developing community, a sense of belonging and improved retention (Baverstock et al, 2016). She quoted both accompanying coverage in the HE press as well as other retention-related research e.g. that involvement of students in non-curricular activities adds value to their overall student experience(e.g. Bender, 2008; Simmons, Creamer, and Yu 2017), and that cumulatively this evidence made a compelling case for the introduction of shared-reading.
- **increase recruitment** and impact on those wavering about a decision.
- **provide a sense of connectedness for admin/academic staff** which could be particularly important at a time of change
- **provide opportunities for staff for academic research** around the benefits and impact of shared-reading. This was viewed as an opportunity for the inclusion of students and colleagues in institutional research and within a wider variety of roles than has traditionally been possible
- **provide opportunities for staff in administrative as well as academic roles to gain** HEA accreditation, with the possibility for associated references to come from an external institution. Both UWS and Edge Hill were particularly keen on this, Kingston having already provided associated references for Big Read colleagues at Napier.
- **support outreach programmes,** to reach out into the wider community. For example, at UWS this was part of the UWS RAPS policy (Recruitment, Admissions, Participation and Service)
- **headline the good things that are going on within the university** highlighting the organisational reputation as a kind and thoughtful institution.

Target Readers for the Big Read

All the universities involved targeted new students as their primary focus, though the extent to which they were university-wide or from a particular department/faculty is summarised in Figure 4.

Students	
Kingston	All new undergraduate and postgraduate students
Wolverhampton	All new level 3 and 4 students in the Faculty of Science and Engineering
Edge Hill	All first year undergraduate students
UWS	All new BA Business students
Staff	
Kingston	All administrative and academic staff (own copy available)
Edge Hill	All staff (sharing the books)
Wolverhampton	All academic and administrative staff in Science Faculty (sharing the books)
	All staff Business School staff were targeted to support the project
UWS	cohort (sharing the books)
Other Cohorts	

Kingston	Guests/staff at Joel Community Centre (which supports those experiencing temporary homelessness); local libraries; local government and the Mayor's Office; University of the Third Age
Wolverhampton	Sixth formers at a local school
Edge Hill	Not circulated more widely; might consider wider community involvement in future
UWS	Library Staff at the academic library were targeted as were public library staff in Renfrewshire Libraries, who shared fiction collections with Paisley campus library to support the Big Read and took part in the initial student fair

Figure 4: Target readership for the Big Read scheme

In the case of UWS, to pay for involvement in the Big Read, funding was sought and secured from the Scottish Library and Information Council, Innovation and Development Fund. The project was encouraged by the Steering Group of Scottish Book Trust, but this brought no associated financial support. The Vice Principal for Learning and Teaching and the Library Services manager therefore decided that the book should be made available to a specific course at the university for which retention was an issue. An invitation to be the sponsored course was then circulated within the whole university via the PVC Education's monthly meeting with the Associate Deans for Education.

The offer made to programme leaders was for the Big Read to be used in an enhancement-focussed initiative, to see whether involving the students in pre-arrival shared-reading would impact on their general engagement and the retention rate.

There were applications from all the faculties, and the course chosen was BA Business, which operates over three sites (Paisley, Lanarkshire and Dumfries), hence there are difficulties in ensuring a uniform experience. Students come to this programme through different routes (including direct entry) and the cohort is international, with various levels of linguistic fluency. This is the largest course in the university but has a less than optimum retention rate and some NSS issues. The Programme Leader, Richard Jeffries, was enthusiastic to embed the book within the course, along with a summative assignment, and to observe outcomes. The proposal to work in this way was seen as a developmental experiment for the course and staff involved. PVC for Teaching and Learning, Professor Clare Carney, confirmed that this was 'resolutely not a deficit model of retention but rather an experiment in growing our way out of it; based on 'cornerstone neuroscience'. This connects with research into social deprivation and correlating reduced brain connectivity within infants denied social interaction, as seen in Romanian orphans (Chugani, H.T. et al, 2001; Eluvathingal et al, 2006; Perry Avery, J. 2013; Bates, J. 2013, Bergland, C. 2014 and Parker, H. 2018).

Staff were also an important target with all universities supplying books for both academic and administrative staff, at least on a sharing basis. Returning the titles to the student offices/libraries/administrative hubs provided further opportunities for book-related conversations.

Structure – How Big Read project delivery was sited within each of the collaborating universities
The internal structure for project delivery varied in each university according to its own structures, financing arrangements and target students.

The location and siting was largely to do with who had first become aware of the project and pursued involvement. Within Kingston, it was significant that the project was developed within an academic context (The Department of Journalism and Publishing within the Faculty of Arts and Social Science) and so the embedding of research within project confines was facilitated. In the US, which had provided the initial inspiration for the project (Grenier, 2006) pre-arrival shared reading was

much more commonly organised within marketing and communications departments and hence more reported and described than analysed. In every institution, the Learning Resource Centre/University Library played a significant part.

Kingston	• Project Director Alison Baverstock, Course Leader for MA Publishing, with an administrative assistant and student support from the MA Publishing course. All the research has been directed by Jackie Steinitz. Other contributors were representatives nominated by individual departments. When the project was put forward for Kingston's annual staff award scheme, The Rose Award, the team included representatives from Design and Print, Reception and postal services, Library, Professional Services and Technical Demonstrators.
Wolverhampton	• Overall project management within the Faculty of Science, led by the Dean, Professor Nazira Karodia, who was also a member of the university's senior leadership team.
Edge Hill	• Managed at Director level, led by Sara Crowley, Head of Student Experience • Managed within the Student Experience team, who sit within Strategic Induction under Student Success, led by Alison Clark
UWS	• Overall project lead: Claire Carney, Associate Vice Principal (Education) within the Directorate of Academic Life • Big Read Project Manager: Jeanette Castle, Library Services Manager • Other departments involved: Widening Participation, Student Services UWS also established a **Big Read Project Group** to communicate and deliver the project which included: • Jeannette Castle, Head of Library Services • Jenny Morton, Library Customer Services Manager (her role is to work across library services to promote both student understanding of the support available and more active engagement with it) • Fiona Garry and Jane Kerr, Student Enhancement Developers within the Business School (their role is to develop the link between academic performance and retention/pastoral student support) • Ania Moron, Liaison Librarian for the Business School • Kirsty Kelly, Student Counsellor (part of Student Services, with an aim to promote general wellbeing rather than crisis management) • A Business Student – a volunteer who received all the paperwork to comment on but did not become an active participant in the project • Other representation to be invited as needed, e.g. from central marketing and other corporate services. This group met fortnightly for a scheduled hour's discussion about current delivery and future plans for the scheme.

Figure 5: How the Big Read was sited within each of the participating universities

How the project was announced/shared
How the scheme is announced is of great importance to its future success. In the experience of Kingston, it is important for endorsement to come from the highest levels within the institution and for there to be cross-organisational cooperation in its delivery. Within the context of hierarchical

structures of UK universities, this is challenging (Baverstock, 2016) and Kingston noted a difference between ease of establishment and delivery of shared-reading within secondary schools and within higher education (Baverstock, Steinitz, Fenwick and Morris, 2018). For academics, choosing their own reading lists is a fundamental part of academic independence, and responses to staff questionnaires early in the life of the Kingston Big Read showed that the preservation of academic independence impacted on the early willingness of academic colleagues to become involved.

Each of the collaborating universities followed a different approach according to their specific needs and the group of students targeted by the initiative (described in the next section)

Kingston	- Now in its fourth year, Kingston has changed the administration process by which The KU Big Read is administered and managed. - Initially funded directly by the VC's office, and delivered by an academic with some administrative support, it is now under joint management, administered and funded from within the Directorate for Student Achievement (DfSA) and delivered by the same academic member of staff, as a fractional part of her contract, again with administrative support. - The academic reports to the DfSA on the administrative part of the role and to her academic line manager for the research part of the role. This arrangement enables the project to benefit from administrative processes already established and to further embed the Big Read university-wide.
Wolverhampton	- Initially shared through regular Science and Engineering Faculty Assembly (June 2017) where all ideas are presented and discussed with staff - Followed up by specific regular sessions organised by Marie Bagley, Marketing, Recruitment and Outreach Coordinator, the front-facing member of staff for the scheme from the start - Further discussed at Marketing, Recruitment and Outreach Committee meetings (monthly during teaching weeks and with representation from all academic departments within the Faculty as well as technical staff and External Relations). - Staff-wide communication covering social media coverage and how staff could get a copy of the book (July 2017) - Meeting to brief Library staff and student ambassadors from the Library with information also appearing on the university website (August) - Email sent by Dean of Student Experience to all faculty staff with information on how students and staff could access the book, and how the author would be coming to speak. A power-point was attached to form the basis of discussion with the students. In addition, to get the project better known, emails were sent to all staff, announcements were made at faculty assemblies; line managers were encouraged to bring this scheme to attention of their staff. Other meetings and presentations followed throughout the term and the author visited during Careers Week in February 2018, her visit was promoted in *WLV Insider*, the university-wide staff newsletter. - As the semester progressed, attendance at these sessions reduced, although those who kept coming were particularly engaged. It was notable that over the same period the engagement of administrative staff with the project strengthened and that of academic staff lessened, but the book did continue to offer common ground, and remained a topic of conversation between staff all term.

Edge Hill	• A university-wide working group with around 20 participants from academic and professional services developed a programme of activity supported by the Student Experience team throughout the year. • Senior management were extremely supportive and excited to see the project develop. The VC chaired the welcome for the author. • The book was launched at the annual staff Teaching and Learning Conference, Alison Baverstock attended and delivered two interactive sessions, which helped underpin the scheme with research and context.
UWS	• The university and faculty communications team were fully engaged in announcing involvement in the scheme • Information was shared early, across the institution, via the intranet and the weekly staff ebulletin. The scheme was outlined on the university website, in university-wide communications. It was also shared via UWS social media and cross-posted through various forums, e.g. Twitter and Facebook. Staff involved commented: 'Nothing like this had been done before and staff have read communications and responded very positively'. The scheme is seen as 'unusual' and 'quirky'. • Copies of the book were made available to all teaching staff involved in the scheme via BA Business, and to other support staff likely to be working with them.

Figure 6: How the Big Read was communicated to staff

Choosing the book
With such diverse range of readers it was not easy to find a book that would appeal to all. The aims therefore were to find a book that could be read with interest by all and would provide a good balance between themes for discussion and accessibility.

Details on the method for choosing a book are outlined in an academic paper (Baverstock et al, 2017). But to summarise how it worked across four institutions, a longlist of potential titles was generated by inviting suggestions from staff and students at the participating universities. Institutions joining for the first time in 2018 (Edge Hill and UWS) brainstormed possible titles for consideration at their associated meetings and fed these back to Kingston.

The longlist was reduced to a shortlist of six using a combination of an algorithm involving thirteen factors (such as a gender-neutral cover, book size, an arresting start, etc.) identified as particularly relevant and then discussions between the universities at a meeting hosted in Kingston but which others joined either in person or by Skype. Copies of the shortlist titles were then sent to all participating institutions. The final choice was made by a panel, open to all the universities involved, who each read the six books on the shortlist and chose the winner over two (passionate) meetings. Feedback from those on the panel was enthusiastic with many comments that it had been an enjoyable experience.

How project impact was to be measured
Where possible both formal and informal methods were used to measure project impact.

Formal methods included specific online surveys circulated to students and staff and, for UWS, additional question(s) on the annual library survey and module evaluation forms. Edge Hill also included feedback on the Big Read in their e-journal project whereby they recruited students and asked them to complete an e-journal over the course of an 8-week period. 74 students participated

in the project from four cohorts of students who have traditionally not thrived at university: commuting students; mature students; white males from low socio-economic backgrounds and Black, Asian and minority ethic students. Week Four of the project focussed on the Big Read and sought to establish both their engagement levels and their thoughts on the project.

Informal methods included measuring attendance at events, tracking social media, measuring footfall and noting comments made at the Freshers' Fair, and observing how quickly the book was picked up.

Book Production and Distribution
A former publisher, and co-founder of Publishing Studies at Kingston University, Alison Baverstock managed all the relationships with the publishers. Having established the shortlist of six titles each publisher was contacted to find out if they were willing to have their author and title included. Specifications included being willing to encourage the author to visit the universities involved, make stock available in special editions (with the institution's branding on the front) and generally supporting the title as a Big Read through marketing and social media communications. Within the 2017-18 selection process, and for the first time, one publishing house declined the opportunity to be involved, feeling that it was the wrong time for this kind of marketing effort on behalf of this particular author, and another title was therefore selected from the algorithm's top titles in its place.

Twenty copies of each of the six shortlisted titles were secured (requested gratis from large publishing houses, requested at a trade discount from smaller publishing houses) and they were then packaged up into packs of six, and sent to each member of the Selection Panel (which included representation from each participating institution).

Once the selection of a book to share had been made, Kingston coordinated the specific organisational branding of copies for each participating university. This included front-cover badging with a version of the Big Read logo for their institution, a line of copy on the back cover, a signed letter of welcome from their VC on the inside front cover and then three pages of common content about the Big Read to follow on from this. This customisation was of benefit to both publishers and collaborators. The book industry works on the basis that stock is effectively loaned to bookshops and thus wares that do not sell can be returned for credit. The customised Big Read books are thus non-returnable and constitute firm sales – in significant quantities. The process both boosts author reputation and can lead to a 'halo' of sales for the author, as readers of the specified title move on to read their other titles.

The books were delivered directly from the printers to the universities involved. This involved colleagues exploring areas of institutional operation about which they were previously unfamiliar, for example appropriate (primarily dry) storage facilities, forklift truck availability (impacts on the printers' wrapping of books and pallet use), delivery addresses (access for trucks) and relevant contact details. A delivery cannot be executed without all of this information.

Distribution to Students
A key decision for each institution was whether to post the book or hand it out. Sending was considered beneficial for recruitment/retention as it offered an early and physical welcome to students, but was obviously the more expensive option. In the end, all the institutions elected to post. Kingston, UWS and Wolverhampton all sent it from the same mailing house using a polylope envelope (a recyclable one in 2019). UWS sent a text message to each recipient beforehand to tell them to look out for it. Students at UWS who registered late (e.g. late confirmations or those taking a place through clearing) were told they could pick up a copy on arrival. These were to be hand-delivered to classes early in the academic year, with short presentations to the class from members

of the Big Read Project Group.

Edge Hill included the book in its Welcome Pack, sent out to students before they arrived and including various information relating to their imminent transition. Students were generally very positive about the Welcome Box commenting that it made them feel 'excited about coming to university', 'special', 'welcomed by the university', and 'part of the university community'.

Distribution to Staff

At Kingston, copies were made available at reception desks and within LRCs throughout the university and staff were encouraged to pick up a copy. As this was the fourth time the scheme had been run, there were regular reports of staff turning up and asking if 'the next one' was available.

At Wolverhampton, copies of the book were provided within the Learning Centres for any member

of staff or student to borrow and also made available in the staff common room and Student Offices in both the city centre and Telford campuses. With not enough copies for every staff member to have their own, staff were encouraged to carry it around with them while they were reading it, but return it once they had read the book. Those who returned the book to the faculty office after reading it tended to have a chat about the book at the same time, or discuss it in the common room.
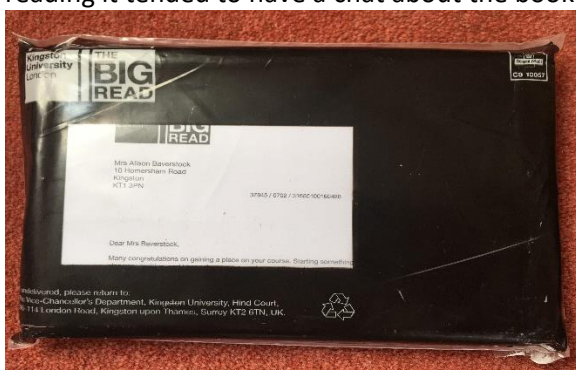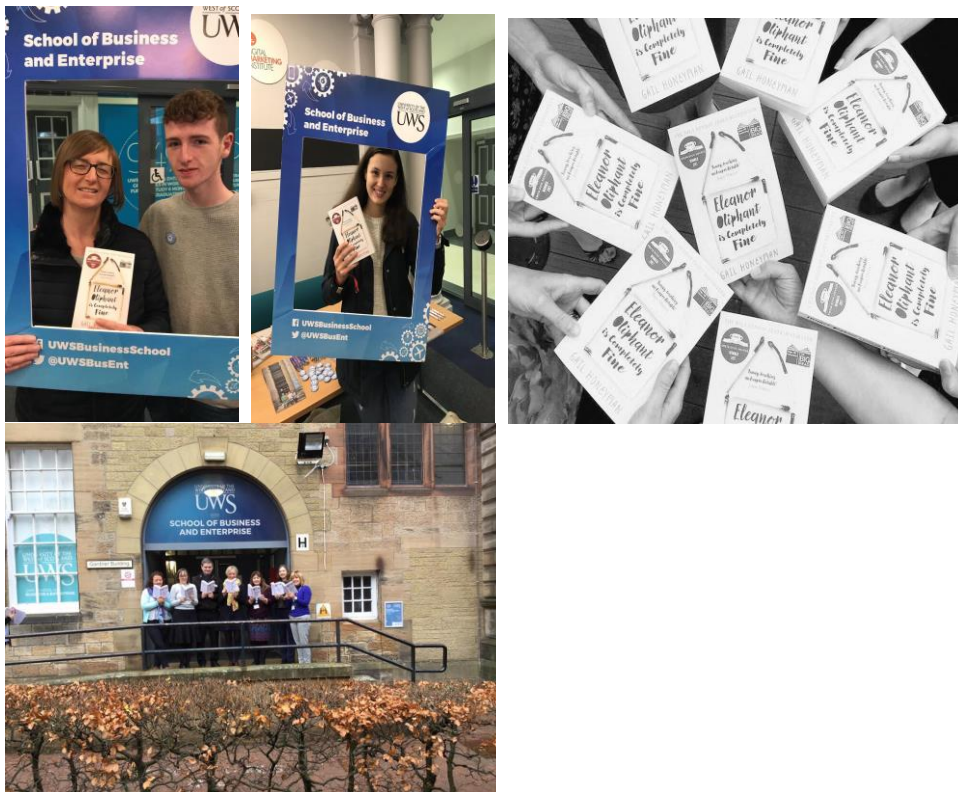

Figure 8: Front and back of the Kingston mailing package

Comments on how students felt about reading the book are included later in this paper, in the section on the verdict on the scheme. It will be seen that a majority thought it was a very welcoming gesture that made them feel more positive about the university for which they were heading. From anecdotal comments and the opportunity to add additional information within the survey options, in some cases receipt of the book 'sealed the deal' in helping students decide on their university choice.

In addition to bespoke editions of the book, the publisher provided the institutions with special badges ('I am completely fine!' in the typeface used on the jacket cover) and a competition (advertised on postcards) to promote coverage on social media. The badges were extremely well received and are still highly visible around the campus; the legend is frequently used in conversations. The competition drew much less response; perhaps because students are more used to responding to digital communications than printed postcards, however attractive. EHU produced a range of promotional items distributed to students and staff at events throughout the year, including pens, car screen scrapers, mint tins, bubble bottles and key-rings.

Reading the book and informal discussions of it
Pictures from social media and elsewhere show that the book was read in many unusual places

Figure 9: Reading the book

Professor Nazira Karodia, Dean of the Science Faculty at the University of Wolverhampton, with two of her students

The surveys showed that a significant proportion of student respondents (40%+) started to read the book before arriving at university (and it is important to bear this in mind when choosing the book as there are implications for what kind of book should be chosen for an 'unsupported' read before arrival). Welcome Week was also another key time for reading.

Post-project surveys also showed that the majority of respondents, both students and staff, discussed the book with others. Wolverhampton students and staff survey datasets were unfortunately muddled and cannot be disentangled, and UWS had a low number of responses but the other two institutions reported as follows.

	Kingston	Edge Hill
Staff		
Discussed with someone	90%	86%
Family and Friends (outside university)	69%	75%
Work colleagues	65%	68%
Students	17%	16%
Did not discuss with anyone	10%	14%
Students		

Discussed with someone	85%	73%
Family	52%	35%
Friends outside the university	48%	17%
Student in my department	36%	20%
Other students	34%	17%
Academic Staff	19%	7%
Student I live with	12%	20%
Library or admin staff	6%	2%
Other		5%
Did not discuss with anyone	15%	27%

Q: Did you discuss the book with anyone. Please tick all that apply

Figure 10: Discussion of the Big Read Book. Source formal surveys by Kingston and Edge Hill
n (KU students= 154, KU staff= 220; EH students= 108, EH staff =73)

Use of the Big Read within academic courses/extent to which it was formally embedded
Each year since the project began, Kingston has provided a resource guide about the shared-book, and encouraged the title's adoption within teaching, but left staff individually to decide whether or not to include the book in their modules. There have been some interesting and innovative examples of its use. For example, Associate Professor of Nursing, Carmel Blackie, used the book within sessions designed to build empathy and Associate Professor Marina Lambrou used the book within Welcome Week activities for Linguistics students. The books are used within special cohorts attending the university on short courses (e.g. Polish and Chinese English teachers).

Wolverhampton was the first institution to formally embed the book for academic use by all new students. This was within the Faculty for Science and Engineering and it was incorporated into a core Communications Skills module of a level three Foundation course for first-year students run by Dr Rebecca Butler. She assigned each student a separate chapter and required them to deliver a presentation on a theme relating to the book, in the process not only demonstrating that they had read the book but also their thinking about why it had been given to them. They were encouraged to think about the title's wider context and how to manage change. This is her feedback:

> 'The specific context for delivery at Wolverhampton was within the module I ran for the Science Faculty and it has impacted positively on NSS reporting and retention rates. Progression and continuation from Level 3 to Level 4 was better compared to the previous year. The idea of the shared reading was received well by FSE colleagues (academic/admin/technical) when it was introduced.

> The book was embedded into the first year (S1) teaching of the Communications Module. The focus of the module was to highlight and practice all styles of communication that students might have to emulate in future, but when I took the module over it was not engaging students effectively.

> Book reviews, and writing in the style of a newspaper is something I felt was an important aspect of the module and the use of the shared book fitted into this well as the assessment was aligned to them writing a short review of the book in the style of *The Guardian*. The Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) responsible for the presentation part of the assessment thought the book would be a good focus, and as we had lots of little assessments (each student was allocated a different chapter of the book to work on) this was an effective way of limiting each student's workload. I think it would have been difficult to embed the book into a subject-based module; the format of the Communications Module for the First Year allowed this to be effectively incorporated.

The assessments aligned to the book were in teams. This meant that students did not have to read the whole book if they did not enjoy it, but there was sufficient cross-sharing of knowledge and the students did work together to complete the assignments. It was great to see the active participation of team members.

An unanticipated outcome was when we carried out the presentation assessments. The questioning at the end of the presentations often facilitated very open conversations about race and ethnicity that came directly from the book. The cohort was very diverse and they had very clear thoughts about what had changed since the 1980s (when the book was set) and how while progress had been made, there was much left to do to reach true equality. As a white person, I find it can be challenging to have conversations like this (especially if you don't know the person very well) but this created what felt like quite a safe space to discuss these huge issues. I imagine the book the following year would have facilitated conversations about mental health.

Another unanticipated outcome is that reading this book reignited my own engagement with reading for pleasure. I now commute on the train and have read many books since this one (including books about race, classics, pop-lit and non-fiction).

Looking wider, I know that the English department was very keen on the project but I am not sure in the first year there was enough publicity within the wider University to engage people. For me, I think this project should continue and spread wider than just the Science Faculty. Reading for pleasure can be very helpful to manage stress and these benefits (especially for staff) could be promoted.'

Similarly, Edge Hill, following collaboration with colleagues, sought to weave the book's themes into both academic and social calendars. For example, Health and Social Science students used Eleanor's interactions with her social worker as a case study. Business students used the book to study the impact of mental health in the workplace and English students have compared Eleanor to *Jane Eyre*. Eleanor's reach was wide both on and off campus and a variety of monitoring mechanisms were established to track how the book was received and associated impact.

At UWS the book was embedded within the assessment for the 'Introducing People Management' module which was core for all L7 (1st Year) BA Business students. The students had a written assessment to complete and a choice of three questions was given, one of which was based on the Big Read title:

'Considering the case of Eleanor Oliphant, what HR methods were in place and working effectively to support Eleanor? What HR methods could have been in place to support her further within the workplace?'

Unfortunately, there was minimal uptake of this option with only three students choosing to undertake their coursework using the Eleanor Oliphant case. The students who did use the case showed insight into the case demonstrating a real connection with the book and understanding of the content of the module that they were studying. On reflection, further embedding of the text within the course content, e.g. using examples from the book within classes may have contributed to a higher level of engagement with the book and the Big Read project in general, and this will be considered for any future involvement/similar projects.

Activities and Author Visit
- Gail Honeyman visited all four universities and at each she gave a well-attended presentation followed by an extensive Q&A session and book-signing.

Figure 11: Photo of Gail Honeyman presenting at the University of the West of Scotland and Wolverhampton University

The project was also the basis for a wide range of other activities, mainly for students, but which also drew staff members. The table below reveals the various activities involved.

Student activities	
Kingston	Programming included inclusion within the Welcome Week activities, both general sessions for all students and specific discipline events, within early semester teaching and within general shared teaching for example within academic skills workshops and reading groups. The book and shared reading featured within Mental Health Awareness Week and Volunteering Week. There were talks within local libraries and the book has formed the basis of an exchange programme between academic and public librarians at Kingston. Other uses of the book have been within discussion platforms for staff – staff engagement meetings and also informal staff groupings over lunch and in the coffee room.
Wolverhampton	Photographic competition which prompted strong interest. A new 'Reading for Pleasure' section was established in the library and offered over 600 fiction titles encouraging students and staff to read for pleasure.

Edge Hill	An imaginative programme of events coordinated included: a celebration of Eleanor's birthday (12th July); featuring the book within Mental Health Awareness Day (as part of a 'Be more like Raymond' theme, promoting random acts of kindness); the launch of a student book club during National Libraries Week (October 2018); featuring the book within the Volunteering Fair (November 2018); as part of a Big Read Warm event (charitable collection to support the homeless, November2018); within a Staff Christmas Quiz (December), within Corporate Staff Induction and within a Health Book Club for Nursing and OPD new starters. Edge Hill launched a Big Read Design a Book Cover competition in association with the World Illustration Awards exhibition at Chapel Gallery, local West Lancashire Arts Centre. Additional Eleanor/Edge Hill branded items were given out at the Big Read stands at various events around campus.
UWS	Social Media platforms were an important part of the initiative with a separate Facebook page and featured on the @uwslib twitter account. This was done as the first batch of books was distributed to the pilot cohort of students. Significant input at Fresher's Fairs and Induction events across the university. Partnerships built with Renfrewshire Public Libraries and Renfrewshire School Libraries, to share fiction. This has resulted in a further project with Renfrewshire schools building collaboration around information literacy and further shared reading and visits to the university library, and a student and pupil book café. A variety of promotional materials such as badges, pens and stickers were distributed to raise awareness of the BigRead and the 'I am completely Fine' badges provided by the publishers were widely seen across campus.
Staff	
Kingston	Several departments used the book as the basis of shared-reading to promote team-building and better communication. This was mainly within administrative and professional staff groups for example, HR, IT and Finance. The shared-reading scheme was also presented at staff teaching and learning opportunities across the institution.
Wolverhampton	Session facilitated by Dr Butler with other level 3/4 coordinators which aimed at describing how to set up the scheme and embed it within teaching. Attendance was low but with those present there was a very engaged discussion and likely further embedding of the book and shared reading within early teaching and assessment. The project also coincided with an organisational restructure, relocating services staff, who had been centrally positioned, but with a faculty responsibility, into the faculties they work for. This had involved the merger of two teams. The Faculty Registrar, Sheila Hind, had mentioned the book at the first meeting of the new administrative staff group and encouraged everyone to read it, using it as a tool to get people talking to each other. Reviewing the position three months on, it appeared that both the amalgamated staff were working very well together and that communication within the Science Faculty was better than in other faculties; that staff felt a strong sense of belonging to the faculty and that morale was high. It was thought that the book and shared-reading may have contributed to this.

	The book has also played a part in institutional diplomacy, being handed out to international visitors and mentioned to overseas institutions with which they have established relationships, as a way of developing and improving their English before they arrive. Arriving international students had the book made available to them, before taking science modules in the next semester. The international partners are hosted from within the Faculty of Social Sciences and so them adopting the book used by the Faculty of Science is a helpful initiative. It was also thought that the book had played a part in improving communications between the three campuses of the university, which can feel quite separate. The Big Read was used as the basis of a session on retention at a staff away-day by the Faculty of Science and Engineering
Edge Hill	The book was popular with staff with copies being shared in order for as many people to read as possible. Some of the communication initiatives resulted from staff involvements, e.g. tent cards in the cafes on which catering staff commented on their favourite part of the book and could be discussed in the queue. 500 staff books were distributed at the annual staff barbeque, an additional 200 books were sent directly to staff on request. The book was included in the staff book club, and a Big Read stand was hosted at the quarterly University Induction Days, explaining the programme and giving out books. A Big Read prize was added to the annual staff raffle at Christmas.
UWS	Staff from across the institution were kept informed about the BigRead and there was a real sense of enthusiasm from staff across UWS. There seems to be an element of further developing a reading culture across staff and associated plans to build on this by embedding the project within staff reading groups alongside student reading groups. Fiona and Jane, the Learning Enhancement Developers in the School of Business, delivered embedded learning sessions across the school, bringing out themes in the book and relating them to the professional practice across the business cohort, with which students engaged.

Figure 12: Events run in connection with the Big Read

Verdict on the initiative
Feedback from the student and staff participants in the project was remarkably consistent across all four institutions and mostly very positive, albeit with some suggestions for how things might be organised next time.

1. Feedback from students

Students at all the universities were generally very pleased to receive the book: At Kingston, for example, 79% of student respondents in the survey reported feeling 'very pleased', selecting one of the top two boxes on a seven-point scale. Just 7% of respondents were 'indifferent' (bottom two boxes).

Typical feedback from all the universities about the reaction to receiving the book included 'welcomed', 'valued', 'intrigued', 'excited', 'involved', 'nice touch', 'happy', 'surprised', 'thoughtful',

'pleased to have a conversation starter' and 'an incentive to get back into reading'. Longer comments included:

> 'Quite unbelievable. It was my first experience of receiving a free book' (Kingston student)

> 'It made me feel warm and welcome. And eased some feelings about going to uni. I felt no matter what happened I could always rely on talking about the book. It made me think I had picked the right Uni.' (Kingston student)

> 'I felt welcome, motivated and as if I am already in University. It was an exciting moment I will never forget.' (Kingston student)

> 'A really nice gift and a surprise to ease nerves of coming to uni. Great icebreaker idea and I've already spoke with a few people about the book so a great starter. Thanks so much' (Edge Hill student)

> 'I loved receiving a book from EHU. The book is very relevant to uni students and I found it funny and relatable which was bonus. I'd love to get more involved in reading for pleasure opportunities.'

> 'Exciting. Different to what friends were received from universities they had decided to go to. I had already heard about the book so was intriguing to finally read it.' (Edge Hill student)

> 'It was very exciting to receive a welcome box, it felt like Edge Hill really cared' (Edge Hill student)

> 'Sending books to international students is a big step in welcoming us, and although I know that it was sent to maybe a hundred other students as well, it made me feel specially looked after and that just gave more courage to come to a whole new country.' (Wolverhampton Student)

> 'you find common ground to talk about during the first days of university for me it gave comfort in my comfort zone of reading and the big read event gave me good networking opportunity.'(UWS student)

2. Feedback on the choice of book

Again there were consistent themes across the comments from all four institutions. Many readers commented on the capacity of the book to raise themes of relevance to new students, including loneliness, the benefits of being kind to others who may be different or have difficult backgrounds and general wellbeing. Students may not realise they are lonely – loneliness is not often spoken about among young people – but the book opens the mind to that possibility.

> 'I think it was a great book for reminding anyone that people all have stories that you can never guess at, and for showing that a little kindness, showing some humanity can really go a long way, especially for those who don't have social skills or who appear to be very awkward or different. Powerful stuff.' (Kingston staff)

> 'One of the best books I've read in a long time. So thought provoking and emotive. You really cared about Eleanor and wanted to know her story. What an amazing book for celebrating it being ok to be different and not quite fit in at work/home or wider society but still have such a valuable part to play.' (Kingston staff)

> 'A cracking read but also raised so many interesting and difficult issues, which I think engage people of all ages/backgrounds.' (Kingston staff)

'This book changed my life. I now make more effort to take an interest in other people's lives.' (Edge Hill student)

'I noticed that my personality is close to that of Eleanor and it made me feel like it was ok to be different from everyone else since everyone has their own little quirks, so I wouldn't need to worry about starting university.' (Edge Hill student)

'I was really nervous about starting uni because I would be so far from home in a new environment and was worried about feeling lonely as back home I was always surrounded by my family, but it was nice to be able to read a book about a girl dealing with struggles and loneliness and get through it with a massive amount of courage as I could apply it to my own life even if the situation was not exactly the same.' (Edge Hill student)

'…gives a great insight into loneliness and how a simple friendship can be so valuable' (Edge Hill staff)

'I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. It explored themes of loneliness and friendship which I think was really relevant to a student like me just about to start at university and made me feel more confident about meeting new people.' (Wolverhampton student)

'in the weeks leading up to starting my time at the University of Wolverhampton, I was feeling quite nervous as I had no idea what to expect. I had never heard of The Big Read project so when I received a book in the post from the university it was a big surprise. It made me feel really welcome and I began to be excited about the beginning of my course rather than anxious. (Wolverhampton student)

'It depicts real life issues that one would normally not think about .It was good reading it and is an eye opener' (UWS student)

Other common comments on the book were that it was easy to read, witty, enjoyable, insightful, inspiring and easy to relate to. The following are all comments from students:

'I was just happy' (Kingston)

'To be honest, I couldn't stop laughing. I sat on my settee almost all day reading it and just wanted to know what was going to happen next. That book is the first book I've completed in 2½ days in my whole life.' (Kingston)

'Loved the book. It's not the kind of thing I would normally read so I'm pleased it was chosen for the Big Read, as this made me more inclined to read it. I passed the book on to my mum and she enjoyed it too, which led to lots of conversations about the themes and characters. think the story is something everyone can relate to, and it's a fairly easy read.' (Kingston)

'Some people might not like reading or have difficulties in reading and might find it embarrassing to show that they have a disability and cannot enjoy what others seem to be enjoying. Maybe the book could come in other form so as to cover everyone. I am saying this from the point of view of a high school teacher who is also studying inclusive education.' (UWS student).

The importance of the book to one student was evident in a discussion held at the Big Read stand at World Mental Health day at Edge Hill. The student said that they identified with Eleanor, particularly the way Eleanor followed a certain routine, and that they greatly valued both the event and the

book as 'I have dyscalculia which means I struggle with maths and numbers, so at school I followed a routine where I bought the same lunch every day because I knew how much it would cost and therefore reduce my anxiety'.

At UWS lots of students (including those not formally part of the scheme, which was limited to one course) reported having read the book already, and recognising a book they had already read was seen as affirming of their own reading habits. The book's bestseller status presented the university as up to date. There was a very positive response to the book being by a local author; readers reported being able to visualise where it was set.

While the vast majority of comments from students and staff were positive there were some requests for a more light-hearted book next year and some who found the book chosen (though not the scheme in general) 'not for them'. But as a librarian at UWS commented, 'at least they had tried it, and it is impossible to find a book everyone will like – the aim is rather to find one that everyone can read with interest.'

The issue of how many books could be available to the institutions involved was raised by Wolverhampton. Their Reading Committee was made up of 3 admin/3 academic staff and next year they planned to have student volunteers join the committee. Pairing each person with a reading partner, they would still need 4-5 copies of the 6 shortlisted titles. At Kingston these had been bought by the university library, and a similar route was recommended.

3. How readers responded to The Big Read
Results from Kingston show that in 2018 72% of students and 57% of staff considered the initiative 'very helpful' for new students, and that the proportion doing so has increased each year. Only 3% of both student and staff respondents rated it as not helpful at all.

	Students				Staff			
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2015	2016	2017	2018
Very helpful	52%	58%	65%	72%	30%	51%	45%	57%
Somewhat helpful	40%	35%	25%	26%	54%	40%	44%	40%
Not helpful at all	8%	7%	10%	3%	16%	9%	11%	3%
Average score	5.3	5.5	5.7	6.0	4.4	5.1	5.0	5.5
n	149	230	62	137	197	202	80	207

Q (Staff): Do you think The KU Big Read initiative is helpful for new students at the university?
Q (Students): Whether or not you liked the book this year, do you think The KU Big Read initiative is helpful for new students at the university?

Figure 13: Student and staff rating of the helpfulness of the Big Read for new students at the university

There were many comments from all universities on the value of shared-reading:

> 'This is another great way to bring people together! Especially the students who are just starting university, what a great way to meet people, being able to bond over a fantastic book.' (Edge Hill student.)

> 'It is a great initiative sending the same novel to every student. It is particularly helpful when starting uni you have a topic to discuss with other students. If you are feeling nervous you know you have some kind of common ground with other students. It is a great talking point to hear other people's views on the novel and engaging in discussions with students from

other courses.' (Edge Hill student)

'It helps build a community' (Edge Hill student)

Some students commented on the wider influence of the initiative upon them in encouraging them to develop a broader approach to learning:

'It wasn't the genre of book that I would normally choose, however I really enjoyed it and will try and read a wider range of literature from now on.' (Wolverhampton student).

Students identified how being involved in the Big Read provided them with greater confidence with their English:

'I'm an international student, this book helped me to get a good English knowledge.' (Wolverhampton student)

'I felt that I became an important person.' (Wolverhampton student)

'it made me feel the school is not only about my specific subject of study, but a wide range of learning and interests.' (Wolverhampton student)

A few students also remarked that the book had encouraged them to get back into reading:

'I think that the big read initiative is an amazing idea as reading is important. We're all more than likely to stop reading as we grow up as life gets in the way. I know that this has unfortunately been the case for me. I used to read every single night but now life just seems to get in the way. It has helped me realise this and miss reading so I am going to try and read more' (Edge Hill student)

'I feel like the Big Read initiative is an excellent idea and should certainly continue in the future for many years coming because it encourages student from all different backgrounds to read but also I think they should send the book to second and third years as well as reading is an amazing stress reliever which is very important during third year dissertation time.' (Edge Hill student)

'I loved the idea of everyone reading the same book and having something in common. It was a nice surprise and it definitely did get me reading again.' (Wolverhampton student)

Replies to a question about the perceived benefits and barriers for students to participate in the Big Read are summarised in Figure 14. These are amalgamated from responses across the four universities involved.

Perceived Benefits	Perceived Barriers
Conversation starter/ ice-breaker	Time/pressure of University work/other things
Feeling of advance welcome	Book length/size
Feeling of belonging to the University	Language barrier
Brings people together/Provides common	Shyness/embarrassment
ground for students and staff/ Reduces	Some students don't like reading
alienation/ Chance to meet similar people/	Genre of books chosen for the project
Opportunity for networking	Perceived lack of availability of other formats
Thought provoking/stimulating	Perception that it is obligatory to read book

Reading helps prepare for University Encourages students to read more/read more widely	Perceived lack of relevance to degree course

Figure 14: Perceived benefits and barriers by students to participating in the Big Read

Verdicts from individual institutions
While there was much in common in the feedback from the staff and student readers across the four universities, there were some outcomes that were institution-specific.

Wolverhampton Big Reads 2017 and 2018
At Wolverhampton, where the scheme was delivered just within one faculty, the Big Read prompted wider interest across the university, with colleagues in other faculties waiting to hear outcomes and whether there was any correlation with changes to student enrolment, engagement and retention rates. The indications were that only a handful of scheduled students did not enrol, so it was thought likely that the book had an impact.

Some of the staff reported that it reignited their own engagement with reading for pleasure, with some going on to read Kingston's previous Big Read books (donated by Kingston). A significant outcome of the initiative was the establishment of a 'Reading for Pleasure' section within the Harrison Learning Library (the library of the science faculty) where students and staff can now borrow from a selection of over 600 fiction titles. This section is located near the front door and prompts regular comment. Staff can see what is available from the online database and they have been ordering titles and coming in to collect them – and talking to library staff at the same time. This is a change in their usual behaviour and prompts face recognition and positive relationships between LRC/academic staff.

The scheme was also beneficial for increasing connectedness across the university, across teams, between staff and students and across campuses. For example, a copy of the book was given to all administrative staff providing a starting point for conversations with people seen reading it in the library, the coffee shop, the staff room and elsewhere. It also stimulated conversations between students coming into the offices, seeing the book in the reception area and recognising it as the one they had received at home. The book was put on the agenda at the second joint Registry staff meeting. Where the first meeting had concentrated on house-keeping/introductions the 20 minutes on the book in the second meeting drew out animated contributions from those who don't always speak in meetings.

The university has over 60 administrative staff spread over three sites in Wolverhampton, Stafford and Telford and there was a perception that the shared book had prompted a feeling of connectedness. Although in general staff had initially seen the book as something for the students, (it had been presented to them as a means of making the students feel more welcome), most administrative staff read it – especially when others were talking about it. This then strengthened the connection between the administrative staff and the students and would work with academics to resolve difficulties they were experiencing. It was felt that sometimes the administrators had a better route into getting the students to talk about what was bothering them; students have different types of conversations with administrators than with academics, and often a less formal way of dealing with student problems. The book had played a part in creating common ground and helping create a joined up approach to supporting their pastoral needs.

The Big Read played a part in creating a more collaborative and sharing environment amongst a range of administrative staff, including technicians, coffee shop staff and caretaking staff. Amongst

academics, the take up was not as high as hoped but there were plans to build on this in future years.

The Wolverhampton VC is keen on initiatives that encourage students to engage beyond their course, with the university and its wider environment, in the process encouraging them to participate locally and become good citizens of Wolverhampton. So for him, the choice of a non-STEM book for shared-reading within the Faculty of Science and Engineering was particularly interesting. He read the book, had it on his desk, and was very open to the senior management team learning from what was achieved. There is associated discussion about whether this should just be for new students, and it has been suggested that the business case needs to be made for rolling out to all students and possibly impacting on retention throughout the institution. The book and its role in promoting improved communication within Wolverhampton was discussed within the bi-weekly meeting between deans from across the institution.

Wolverhampton are planning links to a funded HEA retention project, enabling the business case to be written up for continued involvement. After a year of encouraging staff to take part and use the book, in future Faculty management hope to be more forceful in encouraging its incorporation, particularly as an activity likely to promote engagement. If they are not using the book, the Dean is planning to ask colleagues what are their other plans for engaging the students? The message will be that here is a ready-made opportunity, please develop it unless you have something else you want to do instead.

Edge Hill

The specific context for delivery at Edge Hill was within initiatives to widen participation and promote inclusion. It was also hoped that the project would prompt better turn-up rates in the September following the delivery of the Welcome pack (which included the free book) and improved level 4 retention; both of these occurred.

There were also learnings related to wider institutional involvement, particularly among administrative, professional and support staff. Student Engagement was enhanced with interactions from EHU Hospitality Staff and FM teams who had read the book and used it to chat to students. The promotional badges particularly prompted conversations and helped on-going relationships develop. The Starbucks team championed the search for a new book title, using tent cards to get title recommendations.

A further significant outcome came from the development of satisfying relationships within the Student Experience Team who had been working on the book and had found the project brought them together.

An unanticipated outcome included much higher demand for the book than anticipated and the potential challenge of how to follow this having had such a popular book for the first year of the project.

Edge Hill established a working party for The Big Read with project leads taking on key themes and organising activity. In some areas this worked really well, in others most of the additional activity was taken up by the Student Experience team which is now seen as the natural home for the project. It is anticipated that in the year ahead the focus will be on a smaller team to organise activity and events and a larger interest group. There is also an aim to develop more academic links, in particular through analysing and reflecting on project outcomes.

Looking forward, in the year ahead the team would like to see more academic involvement in project delivery, a tentative link with pre-arrival but with the aim of encouraging students before they arrive, and seeking to grow the Big Read into an institutional tradition.

UWS

UWS project attractiveness can be perceived in the fact that the courses who had applied to be stakeholders in the scheme, but had not been selected, were disappointed. Looking ahead, further analysis should be possible between engagement/retention levels on these courses in comparison with the chosen course. Advertising possibilities for participation arguably also spread a greater enthusiasm for positive interventions within the institution, on which management can build.

Members of the Project Team established reported various benefits, notably:
- Being part of a 'greater good'; doing something really positive for the institution – this having the added benefit of 'making you feel good about yourself'
- 'It's been good to be involved with something that will have a lasting effect, and last well beyond the current cohort'
- 'Widening our horizons – encouraging staff to think about the students and the issues they face'
- Fit with the first 'UWS truth' (the institution has nine, which are widely advertised around the campuses): 'We are here for the students'
- 'Giving students a freebie that really means something' and may build a longer term positive relationship with the institution
- 'Building relationships with colleagues not worked with previously e.g. learning more about what each other do, in an unstructured setting. For example library core staff had not had much contact before with either the Business School or Student Counselling; they learned more about what they do and how they can collaborate in order to build a more joined up experience for the students.'
- Promoting reading – a long-term positive for everyone.
- 'The sheer pleasure of talking about a book.' The book chosen had been really engaging and had prompted detailed conversations with colleagues with whom there had previously been very little interaction.
- Many more staff than anticipated had got involved in reading the Big Read shortlist.

Kingston

With 2018 the fourth year of running a Big Read at the University there continues to be an ever-widening understanding of the project which is reflected in more positive feedback in the research. There was a palpable sense of greater awareness and enthusiasm and it became common for receptionists and librarians to report that colleagues would turn up seeking 'the new book'. The project has now won two awards; The Rose Award for Kingston University's Best project of the year (2016) and the *Times Higher Education* Award for Widening Participation or Outreach Initiative of the Year (2017).

In 2018 the project expanded to cover more outreach within the wider community. This was the third year of involvement with the Joel Community Centre, which supports those experiencing temporary homelessness. Copies of the books were again gifted to guests and staff and there was an invitation to come to the university and meet the author when she came to Kingston.[1] In addition to shared-reading, the project developed into weekly creative writing classes led by a member of LRC

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[1] This delivered one particularly precious moment, when a Kingston colleague assumed a Joel resident was a staff member; eloquently making the point that the homeless are not different from the rest of society.

staff, who received a Joel Award for her ongoing commitment.

The project also expanded to explore the use of shared-reading within the transition from junior to secondary school, and this was recorded, analysed and published in an educational journal (Baverstock, Steinitz, Fenwick and Morris, 2018). There is currently speculation about taking this borough-wide, with strong interest from junior and secondary schools and the local government (the Royal Borough of Kingston) in support. In 2018 there was also an expanded relationship with the local library service, with more events in a wider range of institutions. Talks attracted strong audiences and local interest, again from local government and the Mayor's office.

The main difficulty experienced by Kingston in the 2018 Big Read was running out of books. The university had made many more firm offers of places than had been appreciated, and there were not enough copies to go around, with no option for a reprint. This situation was complicated by the immense popularity of the title chosen, and the temptation for staff to take more than one (and to make multiple bookings for the author event on behalf of their book groups). For the future, Library and Reception staff handing out books will be asked to remind colleagues that it's one copy per person and only available to institutional staff – not friends and family.

The popularity of the book choice created difficulties in the management of the author visit. It was again made available to members of the wider community, but there were responses from whole book groups to attend, and much higher numbers than had been anticipated. The solution was to live stream to another lecture theatre and then allow those in the second venue to come and join a shared signing session (which consequently lasted much longer than expected). An invitation to a local bookseller to sell stock was taken up, but did not prove particularly profitable for them. Most people had already bought the author's book and there were no backlist titles to make available as well. A request, via her publishers, for her to provide a list of her own favourite books for the shop to stock had not been responded to. The author's hectic publicity schedule, and her publishers' need for her to get on with writing her next book, also impacted on her availability. While she generously attended all four institutions, there was less social media involvement than had been experienced in previous years.

Initiatives run in conjunction with the publisher had mixed success. While the badges proved popular (see page 11) an invitation from the publisher to collaborate on the creation of point of sale for the author's Christmas promotion, in return for £250 worth of Waterstones tokens and an (unpaid) placement, was much less successful. While the offer was passed on within Kingston and to colleagues in Design within the other universities involved, not all the institutions involved had art and design courses, and most were far from London so taking up the placement would have been very difficult – and expensive. There were also some institutional policies regarding unpaid placements.

On reflection, today's students, who often have part-time jobs, generally stick to assignments that are formally assessed, rather than taking up additional opportunities. Given the very long lead times needed for the establishment of new, assessed course-work, which has to be approved by external examiners and accompanied by learning outcomes and marking criteria, this was not a good match for the industry's quick turnaround times. An unpaid placement, which meant missing two weeks of their course, was not an appealing option to the students but explaining these factors to the publisher proved very difficult. In conclusion, and with hindsight, it would have been better to turn this opportunity down. It had previously been concluded that the project provided insufficient time for a special cover to be created for The Big Read title (in addition to not wishing to take away the retail recognition/value statement of the existing cover), and the same logic should have been extended to the offer of a student competition.

Summary and Conclusions

The paper has summarised the experience of a shared reading project with different delivery models but similar outcomes across four institutions. Key conclusions are:

1. **It was considered a very positive scheme**

All four institutions reported that taking part has been a very positive experience; the scheme was easy to understand and relatively straightforward to implement. The feedback gathered by each institution was strongly positive with a majority of students and staff respondents considering the scheme to be helpful/very helpful. Students and staff reporting many interactions as a result of their shared reading; discussing the scheme and the book widely, with each other and with family, friends and the wider community.

2. **The book had a high perceived value**

Students at all the institutions were very pleased to receive the book. Several students reported a sense of pride that 'their' university had its own printing house. The Big Read badge was particularly popular. Librarians at Kingston pointed out that no copies of a special edition book were ever found in waste-bins (unlike other printed university communications) or being used as coffee mats. Kingston has twice had to print more stock as demand has consistently outpaced supply, and more copies were needed – largely for staff. Additional copies were also needed on site for students who left their book at home/claimed not to have received one/joined the university after they were sent out (e.g. through clearing). Students given a digital copy due to their specific educational needs (e.g. dyslexia) still wanted a hard copy 'to keep'.

3. **The collaboration demonstrated that the Big Read can successfully be sited across a variety of institutional locations**

Project-hosting varied significantly between the institutions involved (led by the Dean of the Faculty of Science and Engineering at Wolverhampton, by the Head of Student Engagement at Edge Hill and by the PVC for Education of UWS, all members of their institution's Senior Management). In each case, senior staff sought the buy in of their colleagues, thus delivering a strong message that the scheme was part of a developmental programme towards improved performance.

While it might be assumed that the project would sit more naturally within Humanities/English the enthusiasm of perhaps unanticipated disciplines/locations builds on Kingston's earliest findings, that whereas positivity towards the scheme was general across the university, the (marginally) strongest responses came from the faculties of Science, Engineering and Computing and Business and Law.

This emphasises the value of involvement in reading for pleasure across disciplines and the wider life-enhancing benefits of reading (there is some academic research into this, notably from The Reading Agency and the National Literacy Trust). It is not the case that reading for pleasure and shared-reading are only of interest within the Humanities. Indeed, the experience of comparing processes and outcomes with similar structures at the University of Mississippi would imply that those who study fiction may prefer to mediate the choice on behalf of the whole institution, and find challenges within cross-disciplinary involvement in book-selection. (Baverstock, 2020).

4. **The scheme can be piloted within a single department or faculty, though the experience of the two universities who did this was that others asked to join**

In both the universities where the 2018 Big Read was offered to only some of the new students (Wolverhampton within the Faculty of Science and Engineering, UWS within BA Business) the project was used as a model for possible wider future adaptation across the whole institution.

UWS set up a prominent presence within the Freshers' Fair on each of their five campuses, advertising the scheme even though it was unavailable to the vast majority of the university.

This makes an interesting comparison with Edinburgh Napier (with whom Kingston worked in 2015-16, see Baverstock et al 2019) where colleagues had thought that the book should not be released until all previous year students had gone, to avoid anyone feeling they had missed out. UWS only offered the scheme to one course, but found students quick to perceive the benefits for their successors/fellow students and thought it a good idea for the university as a whole, so the project had a wider awareness than just among those who received the book.

Within Wolverhampton, the book was only available within the Faculty of Science and Engineering but the project was closely monitored by management across the institution as a whole, with requests from other departments to participate.

5. **Enthusiasm is a key starting point for initiating a shared-reading project**

In 'How to work across a university' (Baverstock, 2016) the value of seeking out and involving those with a tendency to volunteer, outside their usual role, was noted. This was reflected in the experience of the collaborators. Professor Clare Carney of UWS commented: 'You just need to think about the best people to involve, for both their professional role and personal interests.' At Wolverhampton the project team took a pragmatic approach to seeking to embed the books in the learning. While they sought to selected modules with a 'study skills' focus to allow tutors to use the book for a range of exercises such as learning how to summarise paragraphs, identifying themes etc. in reality the modules selected were based on whichever teaching staff were most willing to support the initiative.

6. **Embedding a project of such size and potential reach takes time and staffing**

All the institutions involved commented on the time and energy needed to get the project going. Edge Hill has employed students on paid placements to work on the scheme, and at Kingston an international MA Publishing student was similarly seconded. At Kingston it was only in the third year that it was widely seen as 'part of what Kingston does', with staff turning up in Reception to pick up 'the new one'.

7. **The library plays a key role in implementing the scheme**

Early analysis of the Big Read drew attention to the immense importance of librarians in getting shared-reading going. This was particularly important in the early stages of the project, when accessing agenda time within meetings was difficult; the library's pre-existing slot on all agendas meant the project could be discussed.

At Kingston the LRC appointed a KUBR Library Champion who managed Big Read communications across the library/institution. This library reliance was replicated in the experience of the 2018-19 collaborators. At UWS the role of the Customer Services Manager was particularly important[2] and at Wolverhampton project championing by LRC staff was important.

The project also played a part in annual inter-campus library competitiveness. At Kingston the different campus libraries were very aware of who had circulated most books, and among UWS Staff

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[2] This was a new role, appointed two years ago, to work across library staff, making students and staff aware of the range of services available to support student wellbeing and how to access them (e.g. disability and mental health support, locations for silent study; spaces for group project work).

the project played a part in the annual library competition which encourages students to sign up. At UWS members of the Big Read Project Group are planning pop-up libraries around campus, within social spaces (not academic; but not for eating). Similarly, Wolverhampton established a reading for pleasure section within the Science faculty library, with resulting much improved relationships between LRC staff and faculty colleagues. Kingston's LRC bought copies of all the shortlisted books and made them available on prominent displays throughout the five campuses.

8. The Big Read fits well within literacy projects to support learning
The project also fits well within wider consideration of how literacy impacts on learning and teaching in general; at Kingston the scheme has been used to promote the value of literacy in general and the development of a strong skillset for success in an academic environment. For example, the shared book is featured within Kingston's Written and Oral Skills Workshops (WOS) and CASE (Centre for Academic Support and Employability). There is relevant research about involvement in reading for pleasure developing wider skills, and its particular relevance within HE (e.g. Kuczera et al, 2018).

9. The Big Read also fits well with supporting positive mental health for students
The project also built on a now widely acknowledged link between reading and positive mental health. All participating universities are aware of the significant increase in students reporting mental health problems, and the shared-read is seen as an important part of institutional support, including more open discussion about mental health issues, particularly among the young, and the promotion of wellbeing through reading rather than through last resort support. This links to The Reading Agency's *Reading Well* https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-well/. At both Kingston and Edge Hill presentations on the project were delivered within Mental Health Awareness Week.

10. **Turn up and retention rates improved at the institutions though it is not possible to isolate the extent to which the Big Read contributed towards this**
Care must be taken in interpreting correlations between institutional enrolment and retention and the installation of schemes of pre-arrival shared-reading. The context is always wider, within an environment where pre-existing structures supporting enrolment and retention are well developed. Thus it is difficult to establish the extent to which shared-reading can add rather than cause significant change. But it is notable that Kingston's drop-out rate fell significantly the first year the scheme was introduced (by 24%) and has continued to fall. General feedback was that it is hard to link directly to the Big Read as it is part of a package of interventions.

11. **While aimed primarily at students the project also offers benefits and connectedness for staff**
Staff involvement in the scheme ranged from librarians and academics to administrative and professional staff (e.g. reception, catering and security, technical demonstrating). In general, there was a stronger and more sustained positive response to the scheme among administrative than academic colleagues. There was widespread reporting from all institutions of a greater sense of staff engagement, inclusion, involvement and collegiality. Carney further commented that the project was: 'promoting wellbeing and a connection with those you don't normally talk to.'

At Kingston the book had played a significant part in making academics more aware of the role administrative and professional staff play in the lives of students – and how much contact there is between them; in particular librarians and reception staff were noted as having much greater contact with students than academics tend to assume.

The project also offered benefits to staff during times of organisational change. This was noted within KU, Wolverhampton and UWS. Kingston's work with a local secondary school in the use of shared-reading to promote effective transition at 11 had shown shared-reading proved to be an

effective vehicle for keeping communication going during periods of change for staff and parents as well as pupils.

12. Shared-reading can be used to support wider civic engagement

All the universities involved recognise the need for effective civic engagement, both as part of their widening participation endeavours and now a countable activity within HE, and the Big Read has proven to be an ideal project for development/demonstration of institutional priorities.

At Kingston the project had also been used to promote involvement between the university and local libraries; as a direct result, at Kingston there are now twice yearly seminars to share good practice. UWS took this further by getting local public librarians to be part of their presentation at their Freshers' Fayre and jointly encouraging wider reading for pleasure. Noting this, Kingston asked The Royal Borough of Kingston (RBK; their local library authority) if they would like to be similarly involved.

As a direct consequence of the Big Read, Kingston has seen the launch and development of town/gown book groups to sustain the habit of reading for pleasure more widely, both within the universities and local public libraries. These are variously a library book group, a diversity book group in support of the University's Access Agreement and, most recently, a Faith and Spirituality book-group set up by the University's Faith Advisor.

At Kingston this has led into events organised within the community through libraries. There was initial surprise at how many people turned up, but conversations with the audience showed that opportunities for involvement with the local university are often appreciated and that perhaps those working in a university don't always appreciate how highly valued is their role. Kingston-sponsored shared reading with a hostel for the homeless has generated an oft-reported pride in the university's involvement in such worthwhile activity and having piloted in a boys school (Baverstock, Steinitz, Morris and Fenwick, 2018) shared-reading is now being piloted across the Royal Borough of Kingston at 11 to ease transition to secondary schools. At UWS the project directly linked to a greater and wider partnership. They are currently (2020) delivering a Virtual Reality programme with two public library services and a 'school to HE' transition project with Renfrewshire School Libraries.

At Wolverhampton, Local schools were invited to attend the author's talk when Gail Honeyman visited the University of Wolverhampton. Schoolchildren were delighted to meet the author and actively participated in the Q&A session

13. Shared-reading can offer colleagues involvement in associated research

Across the various institutions involved, colleagues have become aware that this project operates within a research gap. 'Common-reading' is much used within the US universities but as it is generally delivered under the umbrella of marketing and communications; it is under-analysed, with little related published research. In the US there are an estimated 700 institutions[3] offering pre-arrival shared-reading and almost no associated analysis (Baverstock, 2018). At Kingston, the project's initial housing within an academic department, and its later transition to a combined oversight that maintained academic involvement was significant, and enabled the project's research trajectory to continue. Within the collaborating universities, a commitment to researching the project was similarly important, but the various project-sitings offered opportunities for different sorts of investigation, mostly clustered around institutional research and often relating to staff involvement in HEA-related research involvement.

Feedback from reviewers on papers submitted in connection with the Kingston scheme, and now Kingston's collaboration with Edinburgh Napier (2015-16) has been very positive. Four papers have

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[3] Conference of First Year Experience, Texas, 2018

now been published; a fifth is in review, with others in the pipeline. All collaborators are keen to see this extended, and to formalise through publication their institutional involvement. Kingston will continue to lead on this, with other institutions being asked to circulate surveys and contribute feedback on the processes of delivery and general engagement levels. The comparative analysis of data will be at Kingston with the circulation of outline/draft papers to all involved.

There are also new opportunities for research that come from working with a wider range of collaborators. For example, working with Wolverhampton in 2017, created the opportunity for Kingston to work with an expert in the analysis of social media relating to the project by sharing hashtags. Collaboration with Edge Hill brought opportunities for involvement in sustained initiatives to promote organisational cohesion, with a wide range of different staff involved including a newly arrived faculty research manager with a background in fast-moving consumer goods. At UWS, delivery within a single course was a significant opportunity to learn more about project effectiveness. Both Edge Hill and Wolverhampton included invited presentations from Kingston on the project within their staff training/end of academic year away-days.

14. It is possible to attract external funding for a Big Read
UWS have demonstrated that it is possible to get external funding for shared-reading, by building an alliance within their local community of interested parties. Similarly, the secondary school with which Kingston worked (Baverstock et al, 2018) got sponsorship for the books handed out to arriving secondary pupils, and Kingston Farmers Market funded books for a reading initiative within a local project to support those experiencing homelessness. These are all significant for project development and sustenance.

15. Ideally, partner institutions in a shared reading scheme should have similar values and priorities
Previously the Big Read had operated across two universities (Kingston-Edinburgh Napier in 2016 and Kingston-Wolverhampton in 2017). A move to four was a significant jump, undertaken in order to increase the scale and impact of the project and to explore the effectiveness of shared-reading within a variety of different academic circumstances.

In order to harmonise project aims and delivery, and promote effective collaboration, it was important to have institutions in overall sympathy with each others' values and priorities. All the institutions involved in 2018 were committed to widening access and, in particular, to benefitting the groups Kingston had first sought to target (Baverstock et al, 2016). Within this understanding however, geographical distance did matter; institutions were comfortable to collaborate because they were not competing in each others' local hinterlands; all were using the project to promote institutional distinctiveness.

16. Working across four institutions brought some challenges, particularly as it added pressures to an annual schedule which was already tight. However the challenges of working across four institutions were far outweighed by the benefits
Four versions of the book, and the specific changes required by each institution, taxed Kingston's design department and also created issues for the external supplier managing fulfilment and delivery for three of the four (Edge Hill despatched their own books). Similarly, lack of understanding about industry processes and schedules within publishing across partner institutions led to a few issues of difficulty, highlighting the importance of clear communication. For example, prices for books are dependent on number ordered and so late decisions to amend print runs, in order to meet institutional goals relating to the minimising of paper, had last-minute impacts on project deliverability.

Kingston has had ongoing enquiries from other institutions about joining the initiative but has so far concluded that four is the most that can be effectively managed. Along similar lines, Kingston initially considered organising a conference to share thinking about shared-reading but has concluded that this can best be communicated by contributing to the associated literature, which is very sparse, and encouraging enquirers to read that.

A project that is delivered annually has a significant momentum. For The Big Read, the need to choose a different book every year brings tight production schedules and the project can be under pressure to move more quickly than the accompanying paperwork and its accompanying approval processes. Across all collaborators there were issues in accessing colleagues for decisions which needed to be made more quickly than was permitted by the diary-access to very senior staff. Associated paperwork, including research agreements, took a long time to finalise.

An awareness of project origination also needed to be maintained. It was understood that each university branded the book as their own initiative, but difficult to keep track of how it was more widely presented within conferences and the media. The extent to which the project's Kingston origins were acknowledged, agreed processes stuck to and associated paperwork maintained, impacted on both shared delivery and associated satisfaction.

Institutional learnings from the project
Each institution has been able to identify interesting examples of best practice from other collaborators.

Learnings for Kingston
On the basis that a 'boundaried', or overly owned, project was less likely to be taken up and developed, the Big Read has been consistently and openly shared at Kingston University. This arguably promoted the variety of situations in which it was used, from within individual courses/modules to within staff team-building. During the academic year 2018-19, Kingston's Big Read was repositioned under the shared management of the Directorate for Student Achievement (delivery) and the Kingston School of Art (evaluation).

Within our partner institutions, in each case project implementation and delivery had a more linear structure, and established associated processes, more quickly than at Kingston; this enabled ongoing and useful points of comparison and prompted strategic thinking. For example, it was only after the re-siting of Kingston's Big Read, in 2018, that a steering committee for project oversight was established; significantly, all the other collaborators reached this position independently and earlier. Kingston also learned from the additional materials produced by project collaborators. Edge Hill were particularly proactive, developing a range of merchandising badged with the Big Read logo (e.g. bubble pots, car-scrapers, tee-shirts for staff taking part and 'tent-cards'[4] allowing staff to write and display their personal responses to the books). Edinburgh Napier similarly produced bright red tee-shirts and dump bins to advertise the books, which attracted significant positive attention.

Given that the scheme now has a track record across five institutions, with a varying delivery mode in each (4 years at KU, 2 years at Wolverhampton, 1 year at each of Edinburgh Napier, Edge Hill and UWS) it would seem there are few barriers to establishing shared-reading within UK higher education, and no single preferred method of delivery.

Learnings for Wolverhampton

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[44] As used in Waterstones and other booksellers, for handwritten and personal recommendations – generally highly effective marketing

Wolverhampton were taking part in the project for the second time, and found that institutional questions about the nature of the book (a general title, not one specifically relevant to the science faculty that were hosting the project) were less relevant when the project was seen across the whole of three partnering institutions. They were gratified that the creation of a reading for pleasure section within their science faculty library had proven particularly influential to other partners.

The collaborative project placed a clear focus on incoming students and a sense of excitement at their arrival was shared across professional services and academic staff. It served as a conversation starter and a community builder. This shared reading experience was further enhanced by embedding the book in teaching with the aim of supporting students' academic skills development and increasing their sense of belonging.

Learnings for UWS

UWS learned so much from working with such valuable partners and would love to see a UK wide network of HE shared reading practice. Given that the neuroscience behind reading for pleasure is immense, they concluded that this should be a core part of academic libraries' delivery. They had found that the experience of Big Read involvement fed directly into the ongoing development of their library strategy.

A key aspiration of project had been to improve retention levels amongst the pilot cohort. While it had not been possible to prove that this had happened at this stage, due to the levels of feedback to the survey, there had been engagement with the Facebook page and working in partnership with wellbeing colleagues in Student Services, they are currently assessing interest in the next stage of the project and in students becoming involved in delivering cultural and reading activity across their campuses.

The project had led to the creation of a supportive shared-reading network across the university, Students Association (SAUWS) and partner libraries as well as in local communities. The response from staff both academic and professional, had resulted in actions to set up book groups across the campuses. This will provide the foundation of a network of reading champions across school and professional services.

A series of displays and reading events across libraries in the university, had been delivered with a focus on leisure and in particular fiction reading. Usage is currently being assessed and collections have been enhanced with fiction loans from Renfrewshire Libraries. Funding for a resulting transition project with Renfrewshire school libraries, has successfully been obtained and this will ensure that information literacy delivery from school and academic librarians will be dovetailed as fiction reading will be shared across the two sectors, to enhance the welcome to higher education when senior pupils make the transition.

The UWS Big Read has significantly broadened the opportunities to increase partnership working across library sectors in the Renfrewshire area with the UWS Library Service now being involved in collaborative projects including:

- *Virtually Together* - VR Delivery in public libraries in collaboration with UWS (led by East Renfrewshire and partnering with Renfrewshire Libraries and UWS)
- *Envisioning the Paisley Book Festival* – stakeholder with Renfrewshire Libraries
- *Library Transitions for Senior Pupils to Higher Education* (Andrew Givan project manager)

Learnings for Edge Hill

Working with project partners also brought opportunities for Edge Hill students. Big Read applications were made to their University Student Opportunity Fund to support three students to attend Big Read book selection events in London and to work on the Book Cover competition. Students gained valuable work experience and employability skills form liaising with project partners.

Conclusion

The harnessing of four separate HE institutions into a single and concurrent project, involving a body of bespoke printed materials specific to each university within a very tight time frame, is a very significant, if not remarkable, achievement. In particular, seeking to harvest feedback from each institution, and compressing this within a comparable format, has been challenging.

Overall, from feedback and post-delivery monitoring, the four-institution Big Read can be perceived to have had a strong impact on the student body, across staff of all roles and responsibilities, and (where involved) the wider community. From this, it can be concluded that pre-arrival shared-reading is worth doing, as a means of promoting both student and staff engagement. An Edge Hill comment summed up a collective response:

> The project brought new students and staff together forging a greater sense of community and building relationships at induction and beyond. While the nature of the book did not appeal to every student, the Big Read initiative gained momentum on campus with an emphasis on creating a strong welcome, ongoing activity promoting reading for pleasure and a sense of belonging.

> As an institution new to the partnership, we benefited immensely from the prior experience and support from experienced colleagues, the receipt of books in alternative formats, additional support information and links with publishers. We were also pleased to share details of our activities, events and distribution methods.

Looking wider, supporting the recruitment and retention of those who have not previously flourished within higher education is a laudable sector aim, promoting both better outcomes for students and greater institutional financial security. As a collaborative venture to promote literacy, leading to shared-learning about the most effective means of delivery within a specific period of student contact, this has a strong value. Analysing the processes and outcomes, and publishing associated papers, is making a significant contribution to the literature, likely to benefit both universities and wider communities involved in regional and city shared-reads in future.

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