



Student Voices in Higher Education 2026

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Student Voices

in Higher Education

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PhD Tea and Chat: fostering a peer-led support community to shape PGR student voices at HE institutions

Meher Shiblee & Lezhi Crystal Zhang

Co-Founders of PhD Tea and Chat

PhD Candidates & Associate Lecturers

University of the Arts London

Who We Are

Meher Shiblee

4th Year PhD Candidate at UAL (2021 - Present)

Associate Lecturer at UAL (2022 - Present)

Co-Founder and Co-Lead of PhD Tea and Chat (2021-2025)

PGR Student Representative (2021-2024)

Publishing Editor at Ubiquity Press (2021-2022)

Publishing Assistant at Ubiquity Press (2019-2021)

MA in Shakespeare Studies from King's College London (2017-2018)

BA (Hons) English Literature from Aberystwyth University (2014-2017)



Who We Are

Lezhi (Crystal) Zhang

PhD Candidate (4th Year/Write-up Year) at UAL (2022 - Present)

Associate Lecturer and MA supervisor at CSM and LCC, UAL (2024 - Present)

Co-Founder and Co-Lead of PhD Tea and Chat at UAL (2023-2025)

PGR Student Representative at LCC, UAL (2023-2025)

MA Design for Social Innovation and Sustainable Futures, LCC, UAL

BDes in Industrial Design, Emily Carr University of Art and Design
(Vancouver, CA)



Background: UAL PhD Community

University of the Arts London consists of 6 colleges and 4 Institutes:

1. Camberwell College of Arts
 2. Central Saint Martins
 3. Chelsea College of Arts
 4. London College of Communication
 5. London College of Fashion
 6. Wimbledon College of Arts
-
1. UAL Creative Computing Institute
 2. UAL Decolonising Arts Institute
 3. UAL Fashion Textiles and Technology Institute
 4. AKO Storytelling Institute

Background: UAL PhD Community

- Full time
- Part time
- Home students
- International students
- Remote learning students
- Theory-based PhDs
- Practice-based PhDs
- PhDs by publication
- UAL Partnership University PhDs
- Visiting PhDs

Background: PhD Tea and Chat

- A sociable and supportive peer network
- Created and led by PhD students, for PhD students
- A space to come together as a community: to socialise, study, and support one another throughout the PhD journey
- Established in 2021
- Run on a voluntary basis
- With pastoral support from UAL Research Office teams on occasion.

What We Do

- Discuss a particular topic or address shared concerns
 - General academic process: Application for Registration, Post-Registration Ethics Form, Confirmation, Write-up Stage.
 - Open discussions: Skills Sharing, Presentation Practices, Exhibition and Residency Opportunities.
- Opportunity to network, share your research ideas, discuss your academic progress, and address any challenges that can be supported through **peer-to-peer interaction**.
- An inclusive gathering open to current PhD students and PhD Alumni from ALL colleges and at ALL stages in their research degree.
- Open to join at any point in the year and at any stage of the PhD

How we do it

Regular and Occasional Meetings

- One formal meeting a month, hybrid (in-person and online)
- Held at the UAL Doctoral School
- Dates are set at the start of the year and shared on the UAL PGR Calendar
- Occasional informal meetings outside the university (picnics, gallery visits, exhibitions, etc.)



How we do it

Asynchronous

- WhatsApp Group
- Teams Channel for announcement



Why do we need PhD Tea and Chat

- PhDs can be long and isolating (4-8 years)
- An external source of support
- Peer-led, creating less pressure when asking for help, there are no “stupid” or “silly” questions
- Access to PhD students with a wide range of expertise and experiences
- An opportunity to get to know peers and make friends beyond formal academic events

Why we do it - Peer Learning

- ‘Peer learning’ is a ‘two-way reciprocal learning activity’ (Boud et al., 2001), refers to networks of learning relationships.
- Guided by personal experiences as PGRs, both home and international, with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds
- Focused on sharing and exchanging lived knowledge and experience



Why we do it - PhD Communities

- Fully autonomous, not driven by internal or external pressures or agendas
- Informed by Wenger's (2000; 2009) concept of 'communities of practice'
- Informed by experience as PGR Representatives, drawing on student feedback and committee participation



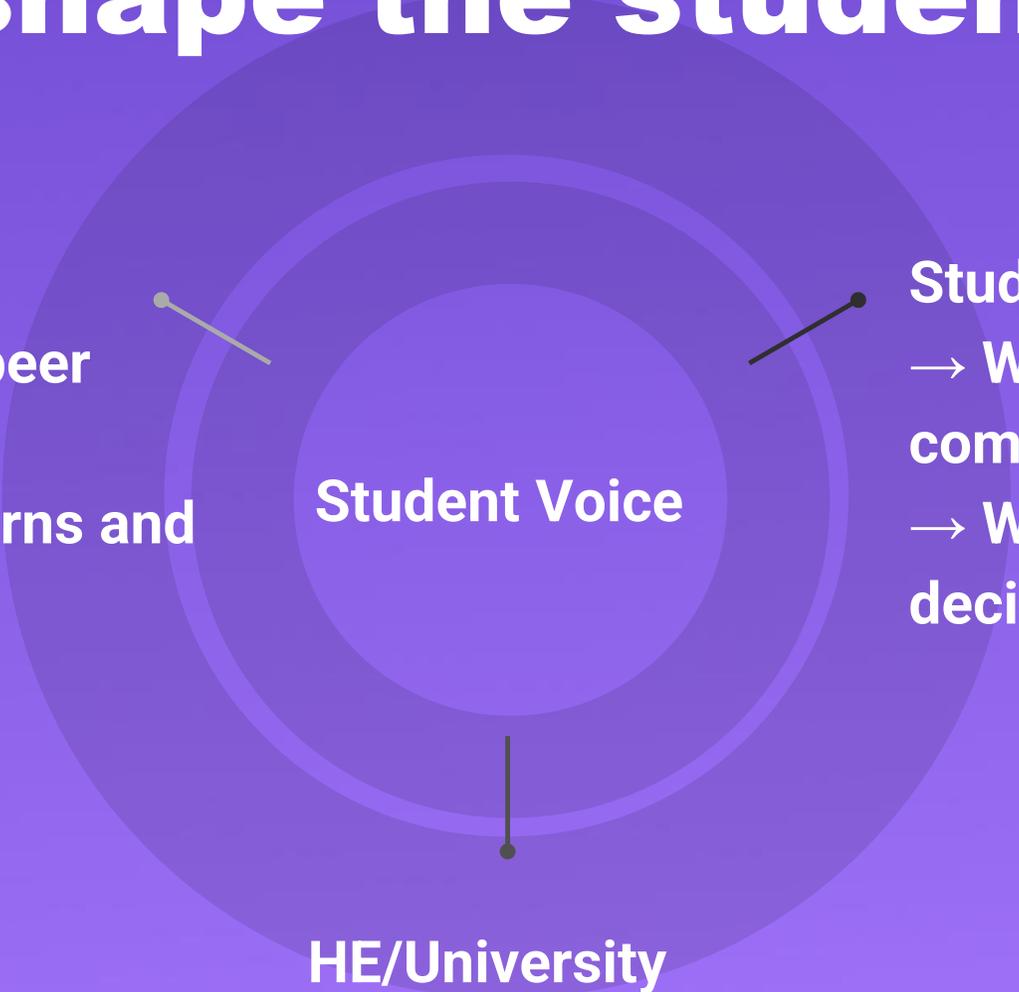
How we shape the student voices?

PhD Tea and Chat

→ We encourage peer dialogue

→ We share concerns and knowledge

Student Voice



Student Representative

→ We raise concerns in committees

→ We influence institutional decisions

HE/University

→ Institutional engagement and support

Impact and Contribution

Short-Term Impact

- Addressed the identified lack of community among PGR students
- Created a supportive, peer-led space for connection and shared experience
- Increased PGR engagement and visibility
- Enabled students to see their perspectives acknowledged and valued within the institution
- Strengthened student voice by providing a consistent, informal space for PGRs to articulate concerns, share experiences, and influence institutional conversations

Impact and Contribution

Long-Term Impact

- Peer Level: Established a sustainable support framework integrating
 - Peer support through the PhD Tea and Chat community
 - Safe spaces for knowledge exchange, mutual care
- Institutional Level: Connections with formal academic and institutional support structures
- Community Development Level: Inspired the formation of PhD-led sub-groups initiated by students, including:
 - Funding support, Parenting support and Reading groups

Key Takeaways

- PhD Tea and Chat itself is **all** about student voices.
- There is value in student-led and student-run organisations when given time, space, and autonomy to grow
- All voices matter within the university, yet PGR/PhD-level students are often sidelined in favour of larger student cohorts (undergraduate and master's levels)

Reference List

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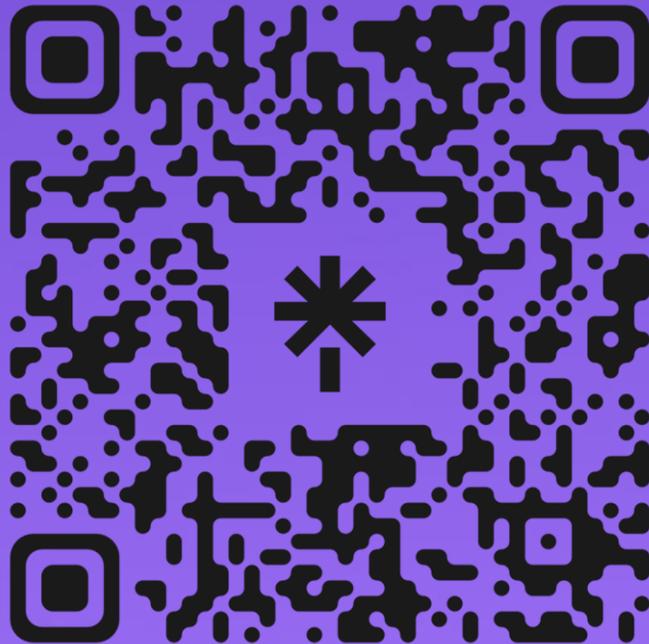
Acknowledge List

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Thank you for your time

Q & A



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