

Curriculum Enhancement Internships Project Report 2025/26

Project Title

The Joy Index: Co-Creating an Atlas of Engaging Teaching at LJMU

Project Leader

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Summary

The Joy Index explored where learning at LJMU feels intellectually joyful: moments when something clicks, stretches a student, sparks curiosity or makes them think differently. Rather than treating joy as entertainment or an optional addition to rigorous learning, the project asked what students themselves recognise as engaging, meaningful and energising learning, and what teaching practices make those experiences possible. Six paid student co-researchers, spanning Levels 4–8 and five Schools, worked alongside a cross-University staff team. After ethical approval, students helped define the object of study, challenged and reshaped the language originally proposed by staff, designed ways to gather peer experiences, collected stories through campus pop-ups and multiple media, and created a student zine.

Early analysis has identified four recurring conditions. Joyful learning is active and shared; feels real and connected to practice; involves challenge without fear; and connects with who students are and where they are going, rather than only what they need to pass.

The work is continuing beyond the internship. Student stories are being developed into an Atlas of Joyful Learning and an emerging Joy Index for curriculum reflection and design. Additional £1,500 PRME UK and Ireland seed funding is supporting professional pedagogic resources. Subject to securing further UniTemps funding, an additional cohort of student interns could also extend data collection during this semester, broadening the range of student experiences represented.

Project Methodology

The project used a qualitative, participatory approach grounded in staff–student partnership. A central methodological decision was that students should help determine what counted as joyful learning, how their peers would be invited to talk about it and how those experiences would subsequently be communicated.

The project developed through three connected stages.

The first focused on developing shared meaning. Using LEGO Serious Play, staff and students built and discussed representations of joyful and joyless learning, curiosity, barriers and enabling conditions. This surfaced different assumptions about what "joy" meant and helped the team move away from an abstract, staff-defined account of "intellectual joy". The public-facing description became much more direct: moments when learning *clicks, stretches you, sparks curiosity or makes you think differently*.

The second stage centred the students' own experiences. Co-researchers developed accounts of joyful learning from lectures, workshops, practical activities and other learning settings. These provided both initial data and prototypes for the kinds of stories the project wanted to gather from other students: specific accounts of what happened, how learning felt and what the teaching or learning environment made possible.

The third stage involved peer-to-peer data collection. Student researchers designed campus pop-up activities with several ways to participate, recognising that different students would want different levels of time, visibility and interaction. Participants could contribute through short written responses, post-it notes, an online form, or audio/video conversation. Students also designed a zine to communicate emerging stories and findings in a format intended to feel recognisably student-facing rather than like a conventional institutional research report.

Project Outcomes

The project has produced both tangible outputs and less tangible changes in how the team understands student partnership and engaging teaching.

A significant outcome has been the student-designed research and engagement approach itself. The student researchers created the visual and physical materials used at pop-up data collection points, including banners, prompts, Post-it activities and routes into audio, video and online participation. They also developed a Joy Index student zine, turning student experiences into a creative resource rather than reducing them to survey data.

A growing collection of student stories now forms the basis of the planned Atlas of Joyful Learning. Early analysis across these stories has identified four particularly consistent conditions:

Active and shared learning. Students describe joy when they work things out together, give feedback, solve problems, assume roles, and actively contribute rather than only listen.

Learning that feels real. Students value experiences connected to practices, problems and identities beyond the classroom. In these moments, they describe feeling like writers, practitioners, teammates or problem-solvers rather than simply students completing a task.

Challenge without fear. Intellectual difficulty is not the opposite of joy. Students describe positive experiences of being stretched when it remains safe to be stuck, ask questions, experiment and try again.

Connection to identity and future. Learning becomes more meaningful when students can recognise themselves, their interests, values or possible futures within it, rather than seeing learning solely in relation to assessment and grades.

These remain emerging findings rather than a completed framework, but they are already providing the organising structure for the next stage of analysis and resource development.

Benefit of students working on the project

Student involvement changed both the process and what the project could know.

The original project began with staff language, assumptions and proposed research methods. Working with the interns made it clear that research into student experience could not genuinely centre student voice while leaving staff in control of all the questions, categories, and forms of participation.

The students changed the language. They changed the methods. They designed lower-threshold and more creative ways for peers to contribute. Most importantly, peer-to-peer collection generated precise, situated stories: students often described the particular activity, interaction, or teaching decision that created a joyful learning moment rather than offering only a general judgement about whether a module was "engaging".

Impact and Transferability

An important early impact of the Joy Index is the development of a different language for conversations about engagement. Rather than beginning with attendance, satisfaction or generic claims about "engaging activities", the emerging framework starts with what students describe happening when learning becomes intellectually alive.

The findings are deliberately grounded in examples from different disciplines and levels of study. The emerging conditions – active and shared learning, real-world meaning, challenge without fear, and connection to identity and future – are not tied to a particular subject or teaching method. They therefore offer useful prompts for colleagues considering module design, classroom activity, assessment and the wider learning environment.

The methodology is also transferable. Other subject areas could use versions of the student-led story collection, pop-up approach, creative reflection or zine-making process without reproducing the Joy Index project in full. Of particular value is the principle underpinning the methodology: where a project seeks to understand student experience, students can contribute not only experiences but methodological and interpretive expertise.

The project has also secured £1,500 PRME UK and Ireland Pedagogy Seed Funding, enabling the work to extend beyond LJMU and into responsible management education. This next stage will support professionally produced resources for educators and institutions beyond the original project.

Resources being developed for wider use include:

- the Atlas of Joyful Learning, built from situated examples and stories;
- an emerging Joy Index reflective framework for curriculum and teaching design;
- a professionally designed Joy Index Casebook;
- practical prompts and tools for workshops, programme review and curriculum development;
- accessible digital dissemination materials.

The work is also informing academic dissemination, examining students as co-researchers of their own learning experiences.

Developing Approaches to Intellectually Stimulating and Engaging Teaching

One of the project's most important lessons has been that joy and intellectual challenge should not be positioned as alternatives.

The stories gathered so far repeatedly resist an understanding of engaging teaching as making learning easier, more entertaining or less demanding. Students describe some of their most joyful experiences precisely where they were being stretched: solving problems, testing ideas, receiving feedback, trying something unfamiliar or becoming temporarily stuck. What appears to matter is the environment surrounding that challenge. Difficulty can become intellectually energising when students have enough trust, agency and support to experiment without experiencing uncertainty as failure.

Another lesson concerns engagement itself. Asking whether students are engaged can encourage broad answers. Asking them to tell the story of a moment when learning came alive produces a different type of evidence. It draws attention to what students and educators were actually doing, the relationships and atmosphere surrounding the activity, and why that particular experience mattered.

Finally, the project has made us more cautious about turning joy into another metric. The value of the Joy Index lies in making overlooked experiences visible and discussable, not in producing a score to rank modules or educators. As the framework develops, retaining its reflective and student-centred purpose will be important.

Next Steps and Future Developments

The Curriculum Enhancement Internship has established the co-research model, generated the initial body of student stories and identified emerging conditions associated with joyful learning. The next stage is to deepen rather than prematurely close that analysis.

A particularly valuable development would be to repeat and extend the student-led data collection this semester with a new group of interns, if additional UniTemps funding can be secured. The initial phase demonstrated the value of peer-to-peer collection and of having student researchers from different levels and disciplinary backgrounds. A further cohort would enable the project to gather more stories, reach students who were not represented in the first round of pop-ups, test whether the emerging four conditions continue to hold across a broader dataset, and potentially identify additional or contrasting experiences. This would strengthen both the evidential base of the Joy Index and the student partnership model underpinning it.

Further work will also focus on curating the collected stories into the Atlas of Joyful Learning and developing the emerging Joy Index into a practical reflective resource for educators. Evaluation will consider whether the framework helps staff and students talk more precisely about intellectually stimulating and engaging teaching and whether it can usefully inform curriculum and module design without becoming a reductive measurement tool.

The additional PRME UK and Ireland funding provides an opportunity to translate the research into professionally produced, openly accessible pedagogic resources and to share the work with the wider responsible management education community.

Dissemination and development will include:

- seeking additional UniTemps funding for a further cohort of student co-researchers and an extended round of data collection during the current semester;
- publication of resources through the LJMU Teaching and Learning Academy;
- development of the Joy Index Casebook and related teaching resources;
- conference and PRME network dissemination;
- continued development of academic publications arising from the project;
- further analysis of the student-generated data and conditions of joyful learning;
- exploration of how the approach could be adopted or adapted in other disciplinary and institutional settings.

A further strand of evaluation will examine the partnership methodology itself: what changed because students acted as co-researchers rather than research participants, where meaningful decision-making power was shared, and where structural asymmetries between staff and students remained.