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CO-EVALUATION

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Name of Country: United Kingdom

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Please answer the questions below, providing as much detail as you can. Each partner is expected to send their responses to the Yeditepe University Team by <u>October 03, 2022</u>.

1. Expectations at the start of the local process

How did the participants approach your local process? (Prejudice? Enthusiasm? Doubt? Excitement? etc.) What did they expect/anticipate? Please give as much detail as you can, relying on your observations or informal conversations, or formal interviews, focus groups and surveys you may have conducted (~ 400 words).

The UK did not have a 'ready-made' group of young people to invite to the work. Therefore, we compiled and issued a flyer inviting young people in our various networks to email us (at RAPAR) if they were interested in becoming part of the work. The young people who joined us then were from different organisations, different parts of Manchester, and different backgrounds. Some members of the group that formed initially were in the UK seeking asylum, others had been awarded refugee status, and yet others were British-born and first- or second-generation migrants.

We utilised Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodologies from the outset of the project, which meant that the project space was left open to enable us to work alongside the young people to create a project. The only framing that we placed on the project was that we were not seeking to explore access to higher education in conventional terms. In the UK, people who are seeking asylum or who are living without 'legal' status are not legally entitled to work or attend university. Therefore, we immediately eliminated the idea of 'access' to university in the project becoming about enrolling on university courses, and instead decided to challenge the idea of the 'university' conceptually.

Learning from previous projects indicated that young people from marginalised backgrounds, and particularly those living in the UK without status, feel unwelcome in cultural and learning spaces such as art galleries, museums, libraries, and, indeed, universities. This is what led to our decision to begin the project from the starting point that the 'university', in conceptual terms, is part of cultural spaces and sites of learning that are exclusionary and unwelcoming to marginalised groups who have, historically, been 'Othered'. In this way, we sought to explore the meanings that young marginalised people attribute to the university and to other cultural and learning spaces.

At the beginning of the project, then, we shared this starting point with the young people and invited them to explore what such spaces meant to them. Initial discussions were around places they were likely/ less likely to spend time in the city, and where they felt welcome and not so welcome. We also explored particular concepts such as racism, imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, etc., because of their relevance to the exclusion of marginalised groups.

The varied backgrounds of the group members meant that some had experienced similar types of youth-focused participation projects whilst others had not or had only limited experience. This varied experience affected how participants approached the local process, for example, those who were more experienced were able to voice their expectations more clearly, whilst they were also more confident and experienced in putting forward their ideas and communicating their hopes or fears. The young people who were less familiar with youth-focused participation spaces were notably less likely to speak up. Therefore, we had to carefully facilitate the process so that regardless of their starting point, all the young people felt heard and included, and to ensure that we enabled space for those who were less confident to come forward and have the opportunity to influence the direction of the project.

The group ebbed and flowed in terms of attendance and membership as we started the project, and we had to move to online meetings because of COVID-19 and then back to in-person meetings. We refer later to how the group changed and how we, quite by chance, retained those who may not be considered the 'usual suspects' in participation projects; the less experienced in this case. We believe that retaining these young people is a sign of success of the project. We would have liked to retain a greater number of young people but we could not because of factors outside of our control. Reflecting back now, though, we would always favour engaging those who are less likely to participate in such opportunities for they are also the young people most likely to be marginalised.

Eventually, four young people remained in the group for the remainder of the project. The young people, two young women and two young men, were aged 18-28 and were all at further education college. The young people themselves had varied educational experiences and spoke about their frustrations with the range of subjects on offer at college (typically only English and Maths) and

how university felt out of their reach. This alienation speaks to our starting point that talking about 'access' to university was not something that participants felt able to talk about or comfortable talking about because of the unlikelihood of it happening. Such conversations have started to happen organically within the group now, which feels more ethically sound.

2. Evaluating the local process as young people

Overall? Particular phases/aspects of the local process? What did they like?   What did they dislike? Did they have any recommendations? etc.   (~ 800 words)

We have continually tried to build opportunities for reflection with the participants. Above, we noted that they are not, perhaps, the 'usual suspects' in such work and have limited experience of similar projects. They have consistently shown satisfaction and enthusiasm, but they are less likely to reflect on ideas or make recommendations. As part of our aims for the project, we hoped to support a process whereby they felt more comfortable to direct and 'take the reins' of the project rather than having it decided for them. This is itself a difficult process, especially with those who are marginalised or are subject to many systems that are at best overly-directive and at worst harshly punitive. As we noted above, the hostile environment in the UK has contributed to refugees and people seeking asylum living in constant fear and having their rights denied on a daily basis. Supporting reflection and inviting participants to be critical is thus a slow process that, as we have stressed elsewhere, takes time and trust. We have started to see progress in this regard but it is still an early stage with the group.

The first online sessions, and even the online sessions that followed the initial face-to-face sessions, were clearly the least enjoyable moments of the project. They were largely one-sided, with us as facilitators doing most of the talking and trying to generate discussions. Despite trying to find different strategies for the young people to contribute to the session, the uptake was low. This is understandable considering the more impersonal feel of online sessions and the fact that we had not yet built enough rapport. Reflecting with the young people months later, they noted that those sessions were in fact difficult for them and that they felt unsure and shy, lacking the confidence to actively participate.

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The sessions held at the university provided an initial opportunity to get to know each other, but the environment was, in insight, too formal and it was difficult to promote equal relationships. The young people, and we, felt that the university surroundings were too austere and unwelcoming.

During the walks around the city, we were able to really build rapport and create bonds as we explored the city together. Walking through different areas of the city, taking pictures and making videos, 'forced' us to actively interact with these places, and it undoubtedly promoted the building of relationships across everyone involved. The young people were excited to visit new areas or look at familiar areas from a different perspective.

It was perhaps in the sessions held at RAPAR, sitting around the table, drawing, eating, etc., that everyone seemed to feel more relaxed. It was during these sessions that deeper, more open reflections about our sense of belonging to the city and the impact of the project took place. RAPAR is like a living room space and it feels safe and familiar. A key moment during these reflections was understanding that, through the walking tours, young people do feel like Manchester is their city and that they belong. And this sense of belonging and ownership of the city was the motivation for wanting to think of Piccadilly Gardens as a space to (re)appropriate and improve so that it feels more like home.

In all, our time together, and our commitment to working together slowly, allowed us to come together creatively to produce something tangible from our work. We reflect in more detail on the process below, but it is worth noting here that some of the participants gave feedback that they would have liked more guidance on the length of the project, how it would progress, and what it would involve. We recognise the importance of being clear on these expectations and ensuring that young people do not feel obligated to continue to participate. We tried to revisit these expectations and remind the young people regularly that their participation was voluntary. We also tried to explain as part of the PAR methodology that the attempt to transfer power so that participants are able to take the lead can result in the process feeling messy and unpredictable. We would however not want this to be used as an 'excuse' but continue to reflect on how we can mitigate and minimise these sorts of frustrations and anxieties. The learning that results from such processes is complex, fraught with ambivalence and is often agonistic and challenging rather than consensual and normative - much like more radical conceptions of democratic processes. Yet we know that most forms of participation that are favoured, at least in conventional terms, tend to eschew such characteristics. Our involvement in the predecessor H2020 project 'PARTISPACE' advocated forms of participation that recognised young people's styles of participation on their own terms. In this sense, we aimed to foster a space of experimentation in OUYE and to enable 'prefigurative practices' to grow so that we might glimpse at how processes of recognition can be supported for young people living at the margins.

3. Evaluating the local process as facilitators

Participants' attitudes/feelings/concerns/expressed thoughts? Any eureka moments on your part? (~ 800 words)

This section of the evaluation report is perhaps more substantial for the UK team because of how we went about the local process for OUYE. First, we did not collect 'data' with the young people as part of the evaluation; rather we have based this report on our own reflections in the main and some reflections from the young people that we 'picked up' during the process (above). Most of the learning from the local process fits into this section, therefore. Second, we utilisied a co-creative and PAR methodology in the project to, as far as possible, facilitate an equalised space with the young people, and we have reflected at length on this approach. Third, we established a three-way partnership in the project that had not worked together before and came to the project with differing practices and expectations. We have also reflected on those arrangements. Finally, above we noted that we did not think of 'access' to the university in conventional terms (applying to university, enrolling on a university course, etc.), and instead thought of the 'university' conceptually as a site of exclusion where people from marginalised groups are made to feel unwelcome. This early decision in the project guided the work – for better or for worse – and presented, as it turned out, an important opportunity for learning. We turn now to thinking about our learning on these issues in detail, and we will then reflect on what the project became.

Using Participatory Action Research

Utilising a PAR methodology enabled us to provide an open space for exploration with the young people where we could arrive at a project focus over time, together. This process of co-creation was crucial to our project because it is RAPAR's (only) way of working and the method of exploration and learning most frequently utilised by the UK project leads (Rowley and McMahon). Commitment to this method, however, was challenging because of the need to ensure that the time and space were available for trust to be established between group members, that members had the space to develop their ideas and to learn about issues together, and that a meaningful project could be generated from open discussion. Facilitating this approach was difficult at times

because of the ebbs and flows of the group, and the need to move meetings online at points. We became concerned several times that we would struggle to create a project within the timeframe of the work as we wanted to be as genuinely co-creative as we could be. In addition, this approach to learning was previously unknown to the young people and we needed to make time at the start of the project to 'feel our way through' the process of co-learning and reflection. We often felt that the young people were more comfortable with a directive approach where they were 'told' what to do – unusual in PAR. We noted this issue above from the young people's perspective. For example, we had numerous creative sessions in the project where we would suggest an activity for the young people, and they almost always agreed to do it. Indeed, we found that conversation and learning were easier in the group when we were all occupied with an activity as well; exploring ideas more abstractly and spontaneously was less productive in general terms though crucial in terms of maintaining an open space (see the artistic production for O1). We embraced the rhythms of the project throughout but we were aware that our commitment to applying PAR methods as authentically as possible had to be set aside at times to move the project forward.

Building partnership working

A further but related challenge emerged in trying to ensure that the lead university (MMU) and the community partner (RAPAR) could work together and 'from the same page'. While RAPAR had worked with the University of Huddersfield (with McMahon) in the past, its working relationship with MMU was new and unknown. Much of the project planning took place online, by necessity, and we encountered some issues in how we might interpret the project in a way that would fulfil the needs of MMU and the needs of RAPAR.

Deciding upon an interpretation of the project remit was a lengthy process because we recognised that we could not consider access to the university in conventional terms and we needed to consider, imaginatively, as a team what we could explore (see also below). Moving to a more creative interpretation of the project was not an issue, *per se*, and all partners were committed to such an interpretation; nonetheless, balancing the needs of the university (for example, research outputs) with the community partner (for example, campaigning and activism) was delicate. At that stage of the work, there was a second community partner also whose work centered on creative productions, and we needed to work hard to establish connections and a sense of shared practice and ideas in the project, all the while online and aware that the UK project may not 'slot in' so well with the work of our European partners who were focusing on a more traditional idea of access. Utilising PAR methods was a requisite of RAPAR, and the UK project's leads, but PAR was a less familiar way of working for the second community partner. There was a frequent sense that the inherent 'messiness' of PAR approaches and the perennial uncertainty of how a project may

develop using PAR brought about an unease for the partnership that had to be carefully and sympathetically considered.

We also found that a standard and expected practice in RAPAR – that of reimbursing young people who are part of a project for their time and travel (or data) – was difficult to achieve because the costings for human resource in OUYE was limiting. It made all three project partners uncomfortable that we might not be able to apply that principle in the current project and we were concerned about the impact that that would have on relationships with the young people who would, then, have been expected to give of their time for free in a way that the facilitators were not. Eventually, the MMU partners secured a pot of money from the university for this use, which eased tensions and concerns.

In all, considering different partners' expectations and wants, finding the time needed to apply PAR methods, trusting in the process and its 'messiness', and ensuring reimbursement for participants, brought about some difficulties in the partnership working. Thinking back, we realise that it may have been important to go completely back to the 'grassroots' of our working practices and principles, and to think in depth about what we wanted and needed from the project. Those conversations took place but perhaps too infrequently or in insufficient detail.

Thinking of the 'university' conceptually

From the outset of the project we deliberately eschewed talking about the university as we normally would – as a site of higher education learning – and instead explored ideas of exclusion, 'Othering', and elitism. It was noted above that people living in the UK without status and seeking asylum do not have the right to work and cannot attend higher education. This situation necessitated us thinking carefully about what a project focused on 'opening the university' could be – it was vital that we were honest about what the university cannot be for many young people in the UK but that we also moved away from thinking only about that deficit to thinking about such spaces differently. Previous projects helped us to arrive at the starting point where we decided to think of the university conceptually, as part of cultural spaces and spaces of learning that are exclusionary, unwelcoming and often hostile to marginalised groups who have been 'Othered' by the UK's 'hostile environment' for well over a century. By deciding to explore the meanings that young people from marginalised groups attribute to the university and to other cultural and learning spaces, we 'opened the university' in other ways. This process also took time as we explored a range of conceptual ideas with the young people and spent time thinking about ideas of exclusion and isolation. These difficult and often painful conversations needed to be carefully supported, especially as it became clear as we all got to know one another that some of our young people were living very precarious lives.

Deciding, then, to think of the university in a different way was welcome but we were aware that it was 'risky' for the project and that it could have 'failed' in some ways. Failing in a PAR project is not a failure, *per se*, but within the time limits of the OUYE project and the limited monies available for reimbursing the young people, we needed to work carefully and methodically. On reflection, we see now that this early decision was crucial to the success of our project – it did not escape us that even being in the austere university space for the first workshops was much less comfortable for the young people – and for us – than being in the much more convivial RAPAR space. Belonging matters.

Belonging in our city

Despite the challenges set out above, through the efforts of the project team and the commitment of the four young people, we arrived at a project idea that enabled us to visualise a new way of 'belonging' in spaces, at least some of them, where we do not always feel welcome. This central idea came about through our lengthy discussions about our lives and where we feel we belong and do not, and our walking tours of the city where we quickly learned that we cannot just assume that we belong where we live, particularly if where we live is implicitly and explicitly hostile to us.

Establishing the rhythm of weekly meetings with the young people where we would walk together and take photographs, sit somewhere familiar or unfamiliar and talk about that place, and think of our spaces creatively, allowed us to think about belonging (and therefore, not belonging as well). It was in the walking tours and the 'doing' that the group began to develop the camaraderie that was necessary for the project – again, it took time.

It was no coincidence that the project culminated in a design of a Utopian Piccadilly Gardens. The imperfect but free, accessible, busy, welcoming, varied space has long been a gathering place for people from all over the city and is visited especially by marginalised groups who can always be sure that there will be someone there that they know there or groups with which they feel safe. That is not the case in other, expensive, more 'salubrious' parts of Manchester – where traditional cultural spaces are located – that are alienating and exclusionary. The young people's idea to design a Utopian Piccadilly Gardens tapped into feelings of familiarity and safety, alongside feelings of precarity and vulnerability, and a desire to create somewhere where everyone could belong.

It is important to note here again that the four young people who formed the core group of the project were not the 'usual suspects' in participation projects – they may not even have been involved in any such projects before – and they were not familiar with the language or 'rules of the game'. We all had in common, however, that we were all living in Manchester at that point – we

could all speak to that in different, experiential ways, and we had all thought about our belonging there. At times the idea of 'belonging' did not feel 'enough' and we asked ourselves several times if we were focusing on too little in our project. As it turned out, however, focusing on not/belonging opened up the space for many conversations and much learning about living in the UK's hostile environment and feeling excluded from much of life.

4. Concluding thoughts and reflections

What have you learned during and after your local process? Anything that worked great, and you would recommend to other practitioners? Anything you would have done differently if you had to design and carry out your local process all over again? (~ 500 words).

We are aware in the UK project that we did not interrupt or open up the university as our European partners did. At this stage of the OUYE project, we cannot speak to this idea of traditional access to university in any form or in the same way as our partners. Nonetheless, we believe that the piece of work that we did in Manchester was temporally and spatially appropriate – and much more importantly, relevant to the young people's lives in the UK currently.

Sticking with our process was challenging but it proved fulfilling for us and the young people and, we hope, a springboard from which we can develop the seminar/ event series for the OUYE project. Taking what we have learned about young people's interaction with cultural spaces and their sense of not/belonging. We are delighted that as it turned out, the group of young people were not those normally present in such spaces as it speaks to all our commitments to supporting the participation and voice of those most on the margins.