**APPLICATION FOR COLLEGE TEAM TEACHING PRIZE 2022**

**Names and departments of applicants:** Rebecca Johns (Student Engagement Officer), Matthew Searle (Head of Student Engagement), Lucy Thomas (Student Engagement Officer) and Stephanie Anderson (Student Transitions and Events Officer).

**Title of collaborative innovation:**
‘Gaining Confidence and a Growth-Mindset in Preparation for the World of Work’: RH100 Assessment Centres and Training

**If your application is successful, would you like us to add your case study to the Teaching and Learning space?**
Yes

**Please describe how your teaching innovation is distinctive in one sentence:**
Our assessment centres encourage collaboration and ‘lightbulb moments’, while simultaneously preparing candidates for the world of work, allowing individuals – who in light of the pandemic have had little opportunity in the last couple of years to obtain work experience - to demonstrate their innate qualities and grow their skills.

**Please describe how your teaching innovation has a specific focus on inclusivity in one sentence:**
We actively considered introverts and extraverts when designing our inclusive assessment centre by ensuring a mix of networking, group tasks and one to one chats to counter and reframe the idea that assessment centres are ‘intimidating’.

**Please describe and evaluate your collaborative teaching innovation (for example creative, novel, original) in any aspect of course design (teaching, learning, assessment) and include reference to inclusion and engagement. Please write this so that it could be published unaltered on the Teaching and Learning space.**

The RH100 Panel, founded by past colleagues, is a platform for students to help co-design large-scale projects within the College, enabling them to directly influence student life at Royal Holloway. As a newly appointed Student Engagement Team, we have worked to innovate the recruitment process for these panels, using it as an opportunity to prepare students for the world of work, with the hope of widening access, and growing students’ aspirations and confidence.

We did not aim to recruit ‘polished’ candidates, rather we were looking for individuals who were open to imparting their opinions whilst remaining respectful to others. We recognise that each candidate, with their own personal experiences, has the potential to bring something original and valuable to the RH100 Panels. Therefore, our focus was to reward efforts towards effective critical thinking, communication, teamwork, motivation and mutual respect.

The tasks students completed were specifically crafted to provide the panel with a diversity of thought. We aimed to make our tasks inclusive by blending our pedagogical approach to appeal to a range of students, choosing to use both a technical exercise – where there was a ‘correct’ answer - and a more conceptual task – where there was no single definitive answer – to assess our

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candidates. Utilising such tasks meant that we appealed to those who preferred to work under both behaviourist ideals and cognitive/constructivist ideals. Further, students would also have to work under a style which was perhaps more challenging or unfamiliar. This worked towards our overall aim of encouraging growth mindsets, where we carefully balance ‘constructive friction’ (which can encourage growth mindsets) and ‘cognitive overload’ (which can cause fixed mindsets).

In order to limit the chances of students experiencing ‘cognitive overload’, we strove to create a friendly and welcoming environment during the assessment centres. First, as members of staff, we introduced ourselves and shared something unique about or of interest to us as individuals outside of the workplace. By adopting such a humanistic method, we hope that we alleviated some anxieties, which, in turn, enabled candidates to practise deeper learning and critical thinking.

Matthew’s experience in recruitment and our team’s subsequent understanding that many employers look for critical thinkers at interview and/or assessment centres, meant that we strove to create background conditions in which [critical thinking or] lightbulb moments might be more likely’, so that students were able to practise using such a skill. Therefore, in essence our assessment centres are a microcosm for the more competitive external assessment centres and, more broadly, they act as a ‘springboard’ to life outside of Royal Holloway.

As well as utilising group tasks, we also incorporated some one-to-one aspects, which are another element of some external assessment centres. Through a one-to-one discussion with a staff member, we asked each student an open-ended question, which encouraged them to reflect on their part in the group tasks and consider another’s way of thinking. This allowed more introverted students to critically and confidently engage with the assessment process. The majority acknowledged what went well with the tasks, but also recognised that there was a capacity for growth in the tasks and interactions with others. As staff members, we also openly modelled humanistic ideals in that we authentically spoke about our experience of the tasks and what we learnt from observing the students. In creating this two-way conversation at the assessment centre, we built rapport with individuals which extended into the training sessions and, eventually, the panels.

At our training sessions, we openly discussed our expectations, working through any conflicting ideals and coming to compromises where appropriate. Our aim here was to create a collaborative environment conducive to respectfully conveying opinions and fostering critical thinking. Indeed, the RH100 assessment centres and training provides the means for students (and us as staff) ‘to question even our most closely held beliefs […] about ourselves, others,

For background on these pedagogical approaches, see Martyn Stewart, ‘Understanding Learning: Theories and Critique’, in University Teaching in Focus: A Learning-Centred Approach, ed. by Lynne Hunt and Denise Chalmers, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 3-20 (behaviourist, pp. 4-6; cognitivist and constructivist, pp. 6-12).


society and the wider world’ and, as we mature as a department, we will remain flexible and continue to take feedback both in retrospect and at that time, in order to implement changes based on the ever-changing dynamics and needs of our group of students.  

Please describe the actual or potentially beneficial effect on student learning and include discussion of some source of external evaluation and/or (ideally), student feedback.

Please write this so that it could be published unaltered on the Teaching and Learning space.

Following our assessment centres we obtained feedback via an MS Form from just over a third of assessment centre participants, achieving a forty nine as our net promoter score (which is equivalent to Apple’s!). When asked to provide three terms to describe their experience of our assessment centre, the most popular terms were ‘fun’, ‘engaging’, ‘interesting’ and ‘exciting’. There was also an emphasis on the ‘positive’ environment of our assessment centre – that it was ‘calm’, ‘friendly’, ‘well-led’, ‘pleasant’, ‘sociable’ and ‘relaxing’. Although one student did say that they felt ‘anxious’, they grouped it with the terms ‘exciting’ and ‘welcoming’, suggesting that some constructive friction may have been at play here. Further some students described the process as ‘simple and easy’, while others as ‘challenging’, which perhaps demonstrates varying degrees of ‘constructive friction’ at work. Notably, it seems that we did provoke deeper levels of learning in the majority of students as individuals described the process as ‘motivating’, ‘unexpected’, ‘rewarding’, ‘inspiring’, ‘collaborative’, ‘immersive’, ‘creative’, ‘tricky’ and ‘thought-provoking’, ‘entertaining’ and ‘enriching’.

We have also received some verbal feedback from students who thanked us for putting together a unique combination of thought-provoking group tasks. In our one-to-one interactions with candidates, we actively listened to their experience of the group tasks. Another student expressed that she wanted to continue to work on the second conceptual group task, as it had prompted her to think deeply and question her own pre-conceptions, as other group members had made her consider alternative perspectives. Due to our humanistic approach, a further student recognised a company Matthew has worked for in the past and felt confident enough to ask Matthew about his experience of working for and obtaining employment at such a company. In order to ensure that we are inclusive at the panels following the assessment centres, we will continue to observe and revisit student feedback to ensure that we balance both the comfort and challenge-levels experienced by students throughout this project.

Please briefly describe the contributions made by individual team members both to the task and to the effective functioning of the team.

- **Rebecca Johns** created the assessment tasks, focusing on activities that would include diverse groups across the College and set-up assessment centres both in person and online so that everyone was able to attend. Rebecca, Matthew and Lucy worked together to shortlist applicants and invite successful applicants to the interview stage.

- **Matthew Searle** organised the structure of the assessment centre, suggesting the one-on-one interview to include all types of learners as well as a personalised introduction. Matthew guided the questions on the feedback questionnaire to enable us to use the data effectively such as a Net Promoter Score of which we scored 49.

- **Lucy Thomas** co-presented the training sessions and assessment centres with Matthew and Rebecca, interviewing numerous groups as well as organising and creating name badges. She promoted the RH100 assessment centres in the Hall Life newsletter and created the flyers encouraging people to apply.

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- **Stephanie Anderson** supported the team with administrative tasks, always using her initiative. As a new team, she was especially helpful in providing insight into past processes.

Please describe any help which you have received from professional support staff (e.g. Careers, CeDAS, Educational Development) in developing, implementing or evaluating your initiative.

The Educational Development team's courses informed Lucy on the way in which we evaluate our learners' feedback. Informing ourselves on and around the importance of inclusivity, Matt recently attended unconscious bias training with Organisational Development, whilst Rebecca currently works on the Union Black project.