

# **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

Boud , D. , Cohen , R. and Sampson , J. , eds. 2001 . Peer learning in higher education: learning from and with each other , London : Kogan Page .

Wenger, E. (2000) Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization*, 7(2), pp. 225–246.

Wenger, E. (2009) ‘Communities of practice: The key to knowledge strategy’, in Lesser, E.L., Fontaine, M.A. and Slusher, J.A. (eds.) *Knowledge and communities*. Oxford: Routledge, pp. 3–20.

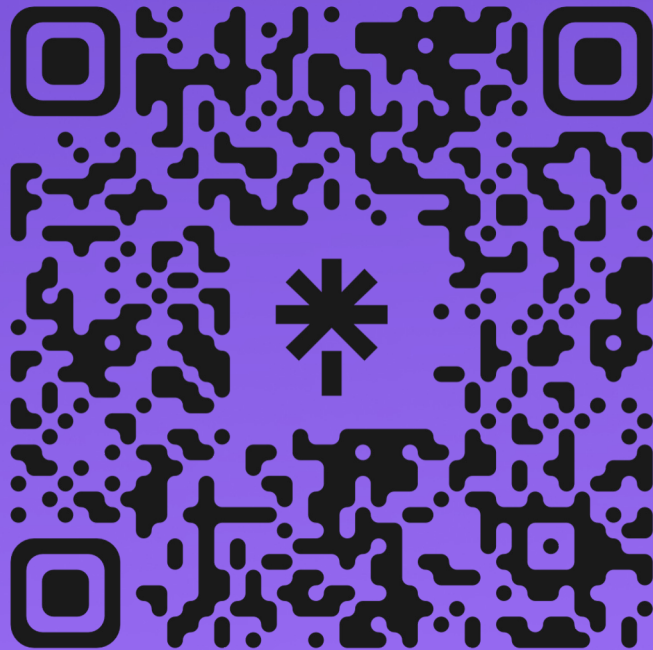
# Acknowledge List

Current Co-leader (2025-2026):  
Dahye Kim, PhD candidate, UAL, LCC  
Xinyu Li, PhD candidate, UAL, LCC

Dr. Alison Green - Director of Doctoral Training and Development in  
the UAL Doctoral School

# Thank you for your time

## Q & A



Meher Shiblee:  
[m.shiblee@arts.ac.uk](mailto:m.shiblee@arts.ac.uk)



Crystal Lezhi Zhang:  
[l.zhang@lcc.arts.ac.uk](mailto:l.zhang@lcc.arts.ac.uk)