

Case Study: A Belonging and Engagement Project in English

Dr Melissa Raines (English), written up by Dr Sam Saunders

Summary

This project consisted of the conceptualisation and delivery of a suite of activities that were designed to develop a sense of community and belonging among English students as they entered and engaged with their programme(s). The idea was to firstly explore the sense of community and connection students had with their course and their peers via a data-gathering exercise that was student-led, and then use that data to create activities and events that were meant to help improve the sense of community among students and enhance their overall sense of connection to their discipline, course and the university.

Please briefly describe the activity undertaken for the case study

Rather than it being a single activity, this project actually consisted of a suite of activities and events that were designed to both determine, and subsequently increase, the sense of community and belonging among English students at the University of Liverpool. The entire project – from the data gathering and analysis phase to the design, delivery and evaluation of events that took place afterwards – were entirely student-led. The project was designed and implemented in particular response to reduced NSS scores in this area. The initiative firstly determined exactly how students were feeling in terms of their connection with both their course and their course-mates, and then implemented a number of events and activities designed to help improve students' sense of belonging.

How was the activity implemented?

The project had two phases – a data gathering, and an activity-implementation phase. In the data-gathering phase, both a questionnaire and a set of focus groups were designed by, and disseminated to, students. These were designed to determine the current levels of 'belonging' among English students, and also sought to find out what particular activities would help reinforce or strengthen this. The data analysis phase was also student-led, and determined that students in English already felt quite strongly connected to their programme and the university, but that this was disparate across different groups of students. It also determined that departmental events that had a conscious, but not essential, connection to the programme of study were also the most popular idea for reinforcing community and belonging; for example, film screenings of texts under study on particular modules, which are naturally relevant for students, but which are not essential for successful completion. A programme of events was therefore developed, which were both connected to the curriculum and also to the wider aspects of the

department. For example, a 'meet the course reps' event took place in the students' common room, which raised awareness of both the presence and purpose of course reps, and the common room itself. Other initiatives also implemented included greater visibility of contact details on Canvas pages/in module handbooks, and an increased social media presence to help connect students to their department, both in response to student feedback.

Has this activity improved programme provision and student experience, and if so, how?

Student feedback has been very positive, attendance at these events has been generally high, and awareness of some of the wider aspects of the departmental offering has also increased. There is a greater communal sense of belonging among a wider body of students, too, as opposed to individualised perceived connections with a community. In short, it has created a community, rather than a series of individual relationships with an unseen entity.

Did you experience any challenges in implementation, and if so how did you overcome these?

In terms of structural challenges, obtaining ethical approval for the project was tricky, as was ensuring that the activities were implemented in timely ways so that they had the maximum impact. Ensuring that students were fully aware of the events taking place, and making it appealing enough for students to actually engage with them, was also difficult. Finally, resourcing the events was also particularly tough, as these were extra-curricular events and added to both staff and student workloads.

How does this case study relate to the Hallmarks and Attributes that you have selected?

This case study relates most to the Global Citizenship and Confidence attributes. It intends to develop students' confidence to interact with both their course and their course-mates, and to feel more confident in their own ability to complete their programmes. These events also provide opportunities for students to interact with others, helping them to develop as global citizens.

How could this case study be transferred to other disciplines?

This initiative is not particularly discipline-specific, and others can easily set up their own version by following a similar process – performing a data-gathering exercise to determine how well-connected to each other, their programme, and the university their students feel, and then implementing a set of activities designed to improve these.

If someone else were to implement the activity within our case study, what advice would you give them?

Ensure that the activities that are designed and run are adequately connected to the programme(s) of study to ensure that they are perceived as relevant, but also not so essential that students who don't attend them would feel disadvantaged. Ensure that there is variety in them, too, to prevent them feeling repetitive or tokenistic. It is also worth accepting that some students may not wish to be engaged in this way and should not be forced to do so.

