

A Sense of Belonging: creating a community of staff and students

Introduction

This paper looks at strategies for the creation of a sense of community within academic programmes. It is intended to complement university Welcome and Induction activity and will therefore concentrate on what can be done after the students have started their studies.

Ways students make social contacts/networks

Although this paper concentrates on work within programmes it is important to recognise that there are multiple ways that friendships form at university. Some can be facilitated and supported by the university and others are a natural consequence of putting people together in the same physical or virtual space. An institutional approach to developing a culture of belonging to the university should be the starting point for any work at programme level.

- During university welcome/induction activities that may take place pre-arrival, including bridging or formal transition courses, or in the first weeks – at the SU, the library session etc. These provide a shared experience for the new students as well as their basic function of preparing them for life at the university. They can, and should, also include existing students in their facilitation to provide links to the wider community and can include online communities. There is also a role for bridging/transition activity
- In halls/shared accommodation. Accommodation and Residential Life teams do a lot of work around community building.
- Clubs, societies etc: mainly but not exclusively organised by the SU. Academic societies are also important in building communities linked to programmes.
- Events organised by the university: International Office events, shared experiences linked to welcome and induction, food fairs, bands and social trips. Anything that throws people together in a shared experience will provide an opportunity for social contact. These should recognise the multiple identities held by students outside of the programme that they follow – international, ethnicity, age, sexuality etc
- Through work/volunteering: on or off campus. More campus-based employment opportunities are welcomed (as per many US universities) although there are multiple ambassadorial and mentoring schemes beginning to emerge.
- Serendipity: liking the same bands or football clubs, standing in the queue for food etc. This can be improved if by making the campus 'stickier' with opportunities and spaces in which to socialise.
- Community reinforced by university or professional codes and dress eg Paramedics, Police, sports kit, but also UON merchandise and branding – hoodies, scarfs etc. These are sold by the SU and from other commercial outlets.

Successful strategies for in-programme socialisation

To some extent the 'normal' academic experience of a programme, especially using ABL, will facilitate a community among staff and students. The nature of ABL, in all its forms, should facilitate a closer working relationship between both staff and student and between the students. Working in groups (or bubbles) on shared tasks (assessed or otherwise), gamification etc may help friendships form. However, it shouldn't be taken for granted and time needs to be taken within programmes to facilitate peer support and group work, including the setting of clear expectations and boundaries. For example, setting tasks that get people talking, use of emotive topics, within safe spaces, to

facilitate interaction, introducing light-hearted elements to quizzes or classroom (physical or virtual) activities were all cited by Programme Leaders as important in bringing students together.

The following examples of successful strategies come from programmes which scored highly on Q21 in the NSS. Most are applicable to both f2f and online delivery.

- Much of what was said by successful Programme Leaders was relatively simple and perhaps should be a given. Doing the basics right – simple, good customer service: taking feedback, academic integrity and the management of group work seriously (the community needs to have boundaries), responding to issues raised (you said, we did), keeping students updated on developments in the course (one course cited a regular Bulletin) being accessible, answering emails, responding to queries in a timely manner, providing opportunities for ‘drop ins- or chat-ins’, e.g. “X in his kitchen”. Drop-ins could also include online briefing sessions and catch-ups on placements, module choices or assessment briefings. Treating students as individuals and communicating with them as such, so use individual email addresses as well as the NILE blanket announcements. Using social media to acknowledge the value of their lives outside of academia (especially highlighted in the arts where exhibitions, awards etc are celebrated) and to highlight academic research. The potential of good Personal Tutors was highlighted in this context too. However, this does not mean being available 24/7 and concern was raised about fracturing of the academic community when individuals seem to do this.

However, there were also examples of specific initiatives that would be worth disseminating more widely:

- The teaching team need to operate as an overtly unified community themselves and exhibit a strong team ethos. This has a ‘halo’ effect on the students. The opposite is also true, especially if staff are seen to be in competition with each other in any way. Facilitating this team cohesion is more difficult in non-studio based courses but not impossible. Daily team catch-ups and check-ins were effective during lockdown and have been continued in some teams post-return to campus. However, the programme leader should meet all of the students even if not teaching them directly and all should boost the ego of students. Make them feel that they are an elite, that you have to be good to do this course at this university. Highlight and celebrate the research done by our academics to show that we are at the forefront of the subject. There are excellent examples of involving students in research too – from URB@N/PURB@N to involvement in Research Conferences (eg. Psychology)
- Bring year groups together. For example, the use of 2nd and 3rd years to act as mentors or even hourly paid classroom assistants (offering physical and virtual opportunities for additional support). The 2nd year slump has been noticed in several areas (especially with the class of 2020) and involving them early in community building activities is important. Have whole programme field trips (in one case a week-long EU cultural event). An arts course brings year groups together for a ‘crit’ (seminar where students present their illustration work to each other and students from the year above and give a critical appraisal of how the work answers the brief). A health course uses students in recruitment activity (on interview and open days but also as participants in promotional videos or school liaison events). These activities create a more holistic community within programmes. Reinforce this with group photos and whole programme social events – pubs, picnics, walks were all cited and the Waterside Restaurant and/or The Hide were noted as good event spaces.

- Use alumni to encourage students to see themselves as part of a professional community as well as a student one. Examples included bringing in graduates or practitioners as role-models to talk about their jobs and turning this into a social event, regularly communicating employment related opportunities (and following them up with candidates) or embedding accreditation awards to add-value to final year students, for instance the Digital Marketing Institute (DMI) Certificate awarded to final year Marketing students. The students talked about these events long after they'd ended, including on LinkedIn. Using and cultivating alumni and students in LinkedIn had also worked to reinforce a community that was wider than the course itself (Geography)
- Use workshops and activities to help students to understand themselves and others within the group. These can be organised across year groups like FAST's cultural integration workshops or be run simply within the classroom such as exploring significant turning points in your life or an exercise in education involving origami with a paper heart. The common theme is understanding which leads to stronger bonds.
- Facilitate, and fund where necessary, Academic Societies – there are several exemplars (History, Computing, Psychology) but they are by no means universal. They also depend on a rotating set of officers and therefore need nurturing and maintaining without taking them over. Where they do work well they involve staff, students and alumni, attract students from other disciplines and are a mix of subject, pastoral (wellbeing) and social events. Although not strictly an Academic Society there are also good examples of academic focussed events that draw students together for example reading groups or theatre trips (English) and debating (Psychology in the Pub). These work best when explicitly linked to the course. Do be careful not to 'force' students into social events though, especially if they contain alcohol. People don't need to be active in a community to feel part of it.