EXPLORING COURSE LEADERS' REFLECTIONS OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES AT SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

REPORT

Written by: Alan Donnelly, Rachael Parsons and Dan Pearson

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Context

The overarching aim of the project is to explore and capture examples of practices and ideas for success to enhance the course experience for students. There is a particular emphasis on capturing examples of good practice in relation to learning communities, which was an area that received a notable decrease in student satisfaction in the 2021 National Student Survey (NSS). Interviews were carried out with a select group of course leaders to explore their perceptions about 'what works', in addition to any challenges, in relation to learning community, such as: engagement between staff and students; collaborative learning; other informal and formal interactions with peers.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were deemed to be suitable for this research project as they promote an interactional exchange of dialogue, are focused on the interpretation of 'how' and 'why' and enable topics to be covered in a fluid structure (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Furthermore, interviews can be arranged flexibly to fit in with the time availabilities of participants.

The 2021 NSS results were used as criteria to identify a group of courses that had achieved high scores in relation to learning community. Course leaders formed the sample as they have oversight of the course team and the delivery of teaching and learning and a role in ensuring the quality of student experience. Courses which achieved at least a score of 80% on the overall satisfaction question (Q22) and at least a score of 76% on the scale of learning community were selected. A satisfaction percentage of 76% was used as the criterion for the learning community scale as it was 10% above the university's overall score on this scale, which was 66%. A total of 29 courses across all three colleges had been identified.

Course leaders were contacted by email to identify a list of participants who were interested and able to take part. Participants were asked to complete a short form on the Online Surveys platform to indicate their availability for which interview they were able to attend. The participant information sheet was made accessible in promotional material sent out to potential participants, while the research team provided their contact details to help answer any queries. Interview slots were allocated on a first-come first-serve basis. Participants were notified by email whether they had been allocated the slot that they had initially requested. A total of 8 course leaders were interviewed as part of this project.

Each interview took place online via Zoom and they lasted approximately 30 minutes, although the duration of a small number of interviews went beyond this as participants stated that they were happy to continue in order to provide more information.

Ethical guidance about use and storage of data using Zoom was applied, including ensuring that meetings were password protected, applying screening procedures (e.g. the waiting room feature) before each participant joined, and ensuring that all recordings were saved on the Q drive and not within Zoom.

Ethical approval for this evaluation was granted at Sheffield Hallam. All data collection during the evaluation was conducted within defined parameters of confidentiality, with no data being reported that could identify a participant. Consent was sought from all respondents at each data collection point.

It is important to highlight the limitations of this evaluation, and their potential impact on the findings reported in this research. There is the risk that the responses of the eight participants are not reflective of the perspectives of other courses. Subsequently, the aim of this research is to highlight practices that were deemed to be effective, and those that were less effective, on a small sample of courses. The aim is not to generalise findings to other courses at Sheffield Hallam. Nevertheless, the data collected within this project has been triangulated with practices identified as having impact in projects and research across the sector in order to provide more robustness to the research process (Parsons, 2017).

Analysis and findings

The evidence used in this evaluation was analysed using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical process was designed to be deductive, with prior literature and research being used to generate a set of initial codes (e.g. Thomas, 2012). These codes were used to create a pre-existing coding framework to highlight aspects that were relevant.

Various examples of practices and ideas for success to enhance the course experience for students in relation to the area of learning communities were identified, while a number of challenges were also outlined. These are highlighted in Table 1 in the appendix. For many course leaders, establishing connections with students and building a course identity was deemed to be a starting point for helping students in an academic context. The practices identified by course leaders are consistent with practices identified in relevant literature (Austen et al., 2021; Thomas, 2012, 2017).

Staff-student relationships

The notion of staff being approachable and available to support students was mentioned by several course leaders. Some participants encouraged students to seek help if they had concerns, and to reject any thinking that asking for support was a sign of weakness. Examples of practices that helped course teams to create this notion of approachability and availability include: proactively communicating with students and checking in on their progress; embedding time in and outside of class to address questions, such as through drop in sessions; encouraging students to ask questions, especially in their first year. In existing literature, recommendations have also suggested that staff should: view students as individuals and value their contributions (Thomas, 2012, 2017); discuss their own motivations with students and share their experiences of aspects of education that they have found challenging (Hubbard et al., 2020); and disclose their own 'trajectory' into their role as teachers (Jones-Devitt et al, 2020).

A few course leaders referred to the support that staff provide on the course as being a blend of "pastoral and professional". These participants outlined that part of their role was to offer guidance for academic-related issues in addition to those matters "outside of the university". In many cases, this required staff members to signpost students to other staff or relevant services within the institution. By understanding students' personal situations and their journeys into higher education, staff felt better prepared to provide specific and appropriate support. In relation to academic-related matters, course leaders described their position as a role that involved "mentoring", "questioning students perpetually", and encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning. Course leaders described the importance of clarifying students' expectations when they enrol at university, such as in relation to self-directed study. When discussing learning communities, Academic Advising was referred to in the responses of a few course leaders, who had mixed perceptions about its effectiveness for supporting students with academic progression and development.

The cohort or class size was identified as a key factor by participants that enabled them to forge close relationships with their students. Several course leaders described their courses as being smaller than other courses within the university, which they thought made it more feasible to "know all students on a one-to-one basis". There was a perception that it is "different on big courses", and one participant expressed the view that the university "shouldn't throw people into biggest lecture theatre" as it was not conducive for learning. Literature has highlighted students' preference for smaller groups in lectures and seminars to encourage opportunities for academic and peer interaction (Barber, 2021). A literature review by Jerez and colleagues (2021) identified five key factors for facilitating the effectiveness of large group learning activities which improve outcomes for

students: 1) interaction, such as between students and staff members; 2) active teaching and learning methods, such as peer-assisted learning; 3) classroom management; 4) students' motivation and engagement; and 5) use of information and communications technologies.

The strong relationships established between staff and students on some courses, which was founded on principles of honesty, trust and clear communication, was identified as being helpful for managing students' expectations, particularly during Covid-19. One course leader accredited the "relationship [with students] over the previous two years" for "getting us over the line" in reference to their high NSS scores. A few module leaders alluded to the importance of acknowledging and listening to their concerns and, where possible, "telling the students what is happening" and "talking about what is going on in the background" and how they are affected. There was a perception that not including students in discussions risks creating confusion. In one course, the leader and staff tried to forewarn their students about the different eventualities that may occur, in terms of students being able to access labs to conduct practical projects. When this did not materialise, plans had to be adapted but staff stressed to students the value and application of the skills they were learning, even if it was being done differently.

Course leaders frequently referred to the role of activities outside of the classroom as a means of promoting learning communities on their courses, and particularly for helping to build staff and student relationships. For one course leader, the opportunities "to do something outside of teaching", rather than the curriculum design, was deemed to be pivotal. Social occasions can allow core teaching staff to meet students to talk about aspects that are "not work or university [related], it's just having fun". Although it was described as a social setting, it was perceived to have "other benefits", by helping to establish a connection between different staff and students, and both groups responded positively to the event. Other examples consisted of competitions set up between staff and students, some of which were carried out face-to face while others were more recently online.

A recent literature review on student access, retention, attainment and progression (Austen et al., 2021) highlighted evidence showing how students' academic interaction can be supported through social events, and how social integration can be supported through academic activities. Faculty interactions, which are defined as the interactions that students have with academic staff, were associated with students feeling valued and, subsequently, higher levels of integration and persistence.

Staff in professional services were accredited with helping to provide additional support to students, for example, those based in the library, student support services and the careers centre. Individual staff members and, more broadly, services were identified who proactively worked with courses to encourage students to approach them for advice. This was deemed to be particularly evident through the Covid-19 pandemic, when many courses had to adapt their curriculum delivery and, in some cases, students had to learn different skills. Course leaders praised the efforts and work of the staff in the library support team for "getting all the books we needed digitally so that students could do their coursework". Staff in the skills centre were acknowledged for their roles in helping students to review essays and guidance on presentations. There was some recognition that professional services need to be integrated into the planning and delivery of course activities for their services to be utilised effectively.

Curriculum content and pedagogy

There was some evidence of courses using active teaching and learning, which is defined as approaches that focus on 'problem-solving and enquiry-based activities'. These approaches can involve a combination of 'group work, immediate feedback, flipped learning, peer teaching, and teacher-facilitated discussion and debate' (Warwick Economics & Development, 2020, p. 18). Some courses adopted problem-based learning and set assessments and learning activities that replicated knowledge and skills needed in real life situations. Examples focused on activities where students were required to work together to create websites and blogs, carry out demonstrations and identify solutions to scenarios presented in case studies. Some activities set on courses also included elements of peer review. These tasks were perceived to help students engage in their work as they understood its relevance and it created opportunities for them to receive ongoing feedback. Designing the curriculum to provide space for students to explore their own particular interests was also highlighted.

Group-based activities were used by many courses in varying formats and the collaborative elements were valued by some staff for encouraging students to share their ideas and experiences with their peers. One course leader stated that they used group tasks as a means of a "powerful" formative assessment from "induction week onwards" in order to progressively build students' confidence. A few participants highlighted a preference for using group work on 'low stake' assessments or formative tasks to help encourage cooperation. However, it was noted that, at times, students do not enjoy group work and this form of collaboration was made more challenging in an online environment. This is consistent with findings reported in a QAA collaborative project that students found group work difficult, primarily due to a lack of communication from other students online (Dunbar-Morris et al., 2021).

Research has shown that pedagogical approaches involving active and experiential learning can have a positive impact on attainment (Austen et al., 2021) and benefit underrepresented groups (Warwick Economics & Development, 2020). However, changes to teaching and learning need to be resourced, in terms of staff preparation and training, and evaluation strategies need a commitment to long-term evidence generation (Austen et al., 2021), as pedagogical innovations may require multiple iterations before having their desired impact. Group work and collaborative learning needs to be planned carefully, as it may exclude some student groups, such as those with particular disabilities, if it is not scaffolded and introduced appropriately (Hughes, 2020; Warwick Economics & Development, 2020). Other recommendations relating to pedagogical design include providing early opportunities for assessment to develop students' self-efficacy (Austen et al., 2021).

Field trips were regarded as providing further opportunities to promote academic and social integration, for example, activities on the trip were linked to assessments on modules but they were supplemented by other activities beyond teaching, such as quizzes. One course leader stressed the importance of creating these opportunities "in the first year [of study] early on" to ensure that students are aware of the staff on the module and to build an identity on the course. The absence of field trips due to Covid-19 was considered to have a negative impact on the learning experience for students and staff.

Peer networks and relationships
There was evidence that opportunities were created to encourage peer networks and supportive relationships between students to be formed. Among the examples provided, there was a focus on using more senior students to help newer students, such as those in their first year, to aid their transition to university and to attempt to instil a sense of community. One course held a student-led 'meet and greet' event during Welcome Week where level four students are introduced to other students in a staggered manner. Initially, students meet their peers who are studying at the same level, in addition to staff who teach on the course, before meeting level five students to discuss their experiences. The same then takes place with students at level six who discuss their dissertations. Elsewhere, other courses similarly invited previous students to share their own experiences about a range of topics, such as expectations on modules and workload, with one course using recorded videos. Messages from previous students were perceived to "resonate more". Nevertheless, this was not the case on one course, with the course leader stating that students at different year groups had a desire that "isn't as strong as would be expected" in helping those in other year groups.

None of the course leaders specifically referred to formal mentoring schemes that were used on their courses. One course leader stated that they had considered setting up a mentorship programme for level four students, who would be supported by mentors at level six. However, level six students deemed there to be a lack of incentive as there was

no recognition or certification planned for those who would assume the role of being mentors. Relevant literature has highlighted the link between positive peer interactions and the creation of learning communities, which in turn had a positive impact on retention (Austen et al., 2021). Peer mentoring also made students feel valued and validated and enhance their efficacy and belonging.

A few course leaders highlighted the role of student-led groups on numerous social media platforms as being helpful for social purposes. The establishment of these groups were encouraged within courses, and in one case there was networking that occurred across different year groups and levels of study.

Supportive relationships between staff members
A characteristic identified by many course leaders as being essential to fostering a learning community was having a supportive and open approach to communication across all staff on course teams. Instilling an ethos of teaching and learning being a shared responsibility was apparent, but there were warnings that this trust needs to be developed gradually and that it requires buy-in from all staff, otherwise it could lead to distrust. A few participants stated that any curriculum planning is carried out together so it is clear "what is happening and who is doing what". There was recognition from these participants that it would not be possible to make improvements if there was a "blame game" placed on individual staff members. One course leader described how discussion between staff was central to the "identification of problems" and building trust on their course, which made it easier to have sometimes difficult conversations about improving practices and in challenging behaviours of staff in a constructive manner.

Societies and external networks
Many of the courses used guest speakers to "cultivate industry connections", provide students with additional access to information and bring alternative perspectives on topics. Course leaders were proactive in connecting students on their course with internal and external networks. The potential for societies within and beyond the university to promote opportunities for students to further develop their community was recognised. Societies provided professional development opportunities for students outside of their course, such as workshops. However, existing literature has highlighted how the 'hidden costs' of some extra curricula activities, such as membership fees or monetary costs incurred from participating, can lead to students being excluded, and there have been recommendations to embed these activities within courses (Jones-Devitt et al., 2020).

Course leaders reported varied experiences in terms of their perceptions of how successful societies run within the university were. In the case of a few courses, participants stated that there was a desire to create a society but a number of barriers were identified. A key issue related to inconsistent levels of engagement and participation year-on-year in student groups, which meant that their effectiveness varied. An obstacle mentioned by a couple of course leaders focused on the lack of proactive promotion of activities in societies by the Students' Union, which meant that there was often insufficient time for staff on courses to circulate information.

Knowing 'what works'

As part of the interview, course leaders were asked about the kinds of evidence that they drew on to inform their understanding of how effective their practices were. The following examples were provided:

- Informal discussions with students
- In-class feedback
- Student experience surveys (e.g. NSS, Module Evaluation Questionnaires)
- Focus groups and interviews with students
- Attendance at events
- Discussions with colleagues and mentoring
- Feedback from student representatives
- Research into own learning and teaching
- Inspirational teaching awards
- Work with external organisations, and benchmarking what employers want in a particular field

Table 1 – Overview of findings and recommendations from the interviews with course leaders and from relevant literature about learning community

Theme	Interviews with course leaders	Relevant literature
Staff-student relationships	- Encourage students to ask questions and seek support, especially in their first year, while drop-in sessions and 'office hours' can provide informal support. - Understanding students' personal situations and their journeys into higher education can help staff provide specific and appropriate support. - Simultaneously acknowledge and listen to students' concerns and talk to them about what is happening on the course and how they are affected. - The ability to provide effective pastoral support, and implement some changes to courses, can be hindered by a lack of resource and capacity among staff. - Students' academic interaction can be supported through social events, and social integration can be supported through academic-related activities. - Small groups or cohorts were deemed to be more conducive for encouraging academic and peer interaction. - Activities outside of the classroom are helpful in establishing learning communities on courses. - Staff in professional services were accredited with helping to provide additional support to students.	- Students may find it challenging to approach academic members of staff, and taking a proactive approach to engaging with students is valuable (Thomas, 2012). - Staff-student relationships can be helped by staff: responding to students contact in a timely and appropriate manner (Thomas, 2012); discussing their own motivations with students and sharing their experiences of aspects of education that they have found challenging (Hubbard et al., 2020; Jones-Devitt et al., 2020); and disclosing their own 'trajectory' into their role as teachers (Jones-Devitt et al, 2020). - Faculty interactions, which are defined as the interactions that students have with academic staff, were associated with students feeling valued and, subsequently, higher levels of integration and persistence (Austen et al., 2021). - Students tend to prefer smaller groups in their lectures and seminars as it is easier to interact with other students and staff (Barber, 2021), but the following factors have been identified for helping to ensure that large group learning activities are effective: 1) student–teacher and student–student interaction, 2) implementation of active learning strategies, 3) classroom management, 4) students' motivation and commitment, and 5) the use of online teaching resources (Jerez et al., 2021).

Theme	Interviews with course leaders	Relevant literature
Curriculum content and pedagogy	• Some courses adopted problem-based learning and set assessments and learning activities that replicated knowledge and skills needed in real life situations, for example, to create websites and work on case studies. Some activities set on courses also included elements of peer review. • The collaborative nature of group-based activities was valued for encouraging students to share their ideas and experiences. However, some course leaders identified issues with embedding group work into summative assessment, in part due to students' dislike, and group work was used more commonly for 'low stakes' summative assessments or for formative purposes. • Field trips were regarded as effective for promoting academic and social integration.	• Evidence suggests that pedagogical approaches involving active and experiential learning can have a positive impact on attainment (Austen et al., 2021) and benefit underrepresented groups (Warwick Economics & Development, 2020), but resourcing and long-term planning is required to support staff. Pedagogical innovations may require multiple iterations before having their desired impact (Austen et al., 2021). • Collaborative learning may not always 'work for students with particular physical or mental health disabilities', and it may exclude students if engagement is not scaffolded (Warwick Economics & Development, 2020). • Some students do not find group work valuable, particularly in an online environment where there can be a lack of communication from other students (Dunbar-Morris et al., 2021) • Early opportunities for assessment have been identified as being influential (Austen et al., 2021).

Theme	Interviews with course leaders	Relevant literature
Peer networks and supportive relationships	• There was a focus on using more senior students to help newer students, such as those in their first year, to aid their transition to university and to attempt to instil a sense of community. There were examples reported of students who were introduced to peers in other years of study as part of the induction process, or inviting students to share their own experiences. • Students created student-led groups on social media platforms. Although courses did not claim credit for this, a few did encourage students to set these groups up.	• Induction activities should be run by course teams and provide opportunities for students to meet other students, staff and to learn about their course (Thomas, 2012). • Evidence has highlighted that peer interactions, such as through mentoring and collaborative learning, are positively associated with retention (Austen et al., 2021). Mentoring schemes have shown that they can help students transition to higher education, make students feel valued and validated and enhance their efficacy and belonging (Austen et al., 2021; Thomas, 2012). • Assumptions that all students will make friends at university needs to be challenged (Hubbard et al., 2020).
Supportive relationships between staff members	• A characteristic identified as being essential to fostering a learning community was having a supportive and open approach to communication across all staff on course teams. • Instilling an ethos of teaching and learning being a shared responsibility was apparent, but this trust has to be gradually built and buy-in from all members of staff is needed.	

Theme	Interviews with course leaders	Relevant literature
Societies and external networks	• Guest speakers were used to "cultivate industry connections", provide students with additional access to information and bring alternative perspectives on topics. • Course leaders were proactive in connecting students on their course with internal and external networks. • The potential for societies within and beyond the university to promote opportunities for students to further develop their community was recognised. Participation by students may vary year-on-year, and activities need to be planned and promoted in plenty of time.	• Extra-curricular activities should be embedded within a course, rather than being an 'add on', to ensure that these opportunities are equitable and to prevent students from being subtly excluded due to any 'hidden costs', such as membership fees or monetary costs incurred from participation (Jones-Devitt et al., 2020).

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