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Welcome days: A step forward for the student community

Student community is one of the key contributors towards student satisfaction. In 2022–2023 the Department of Mathematical Sciences, University of Liverpool, held re-designed welcome day(s) for the new undergraduate students in order to boost student engagement. In this article we reflect on our academic practice based on this project.

Keywords: student community, learning community, welcome event, student experience

Introduction

Learning communities provide a space and a structure for people (students) to align around a shared goal. In the context of a university, student community is what connects students and enables shared learning. It also helps develop a sense of belonging, which is intrinsically linked to success (Thomas, 2012). According to a recent survey (Hayes & Garnett, 2022), student community is the second most important contributor towards student satisfaction. There is no doubt that a good student community should be started from the very first few days at university. Various strategies have been employed around the world to enhance the student friendliness of orientation/welcome events, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie among the students. For instance, the PECS (Purpose–Expectations–Connections–Support) model has been implemented by Cooper (2021), while a 'gamification' approach was adopted in approaches by Fitz-Walter, Tjondronegoro and Wyeth (2012) and Fitz-Walter, Wyeth, Tjondronegoro and Johnson (2014), both aimed at making the orientation event more engaging. Notably, these initiatives were primarily university-wide. However, considering that a student's tertiary journey is predominantly navigated through their respective departments, it is essential to promote a sense of belonging at the departmental level. In 2022–2023 we have contributed to building and improving student community within the Department of Mathematical Sciences, University of Liverpool (UoL), by re-designing and organizing the welcome days for new undergraduate students. It is worth noting that we have adapted some ideas from Cooper (2021), Fitz-Walter et al. (2012) and Fitz-Walter et al. (2014) to create student-oriented activities such as quizzes and the use of digital platforms etc., but importantly, these activities were not generically transferred to the departmental level; instead, they were carefully

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tailored to reflect the unique ethos of the Department of Mathematical Sciences. For this re-designed welcome event project, the author was nominated for the Learning & Teaching and Student Experience Awards from the Faculty of Science and Engineering, UoL.

Reflective account of the project

The event

Unlike in previous years where the welcome day has been mostly lecture-centric, with very few opportunities for students to engage in active participation, in the academic year 2022–2023, the department switched the focus of the welcome days (for undergraduate students) to fostering in-campus activities, in order to boost student engagement. We welcomed the first-year students (180 students) and the second-year XJTLU students (210 students) on two different welcome days.

Focus and highlights

The focus of the re-designed event was to complement the traditional lecture-based welcome event with 'student-centric' activities. The format was the same for both welcome days, and the same activities were scheduled for both days. All the core programme and degree information was delivered in two short talks by an academic from the department. A major part of the event (55% of the total time) consisted of student engagement activities, such as a 'campus hunt', a discussion with senior students, and a group quiz. Students were also provided with networking opportunities over a free lunch (thanks to funding from the Faculty of Science and Engineering), and prizes were given to the winners of the campus hunt and the group quiz (thanks to the Career and Employability team of UoL).

Impact on student interaction

The campus hunt and quiz were group activities. In the former, every group needed to decrypt clues, find places on campus, and then decide their answers. The clues and the activity were designed in a way that encouraged peer discussion among the students; for example, for every question they had to decrypt clues from the campus map and then go to specific places of the campus to find the numbers marked there to work out the final answer. The strategic locations on the campus (like teaching buildings, labs, gardens, etc.) were chosen to foster campus connections. The discussion with senior students was also designed with the same aim; the idea was that students were given opportunities to learn from their seniors, who had already been through the stages that the new students were going to enter.

Impact on campus connections

The campus hunt was also designed to give students an opportunity to appreciate the beautiful campus of the University. The locations were specifically and strategically chosen to ask the students to physically visit the places to find answers for the questions; this gave them an opportunity to get their bearings and become familiar with the campus layout.

Contribution to scholarship and the advancement of educational practice

This project was carried out in the context of scholarship on teaching and learning, specifically in view of student engagement, especially to empower students to engage and to develop a better community (Gunn, 2008).

Educational rationale

A specific educational rationale was considered for planning the activities. To start with, we developed the activities mentioned above keeping three main aims in mind: teamwork, communication, and campus life. The skeleton of the activities (like the clues in the campus hunt, the problems in the group quiz, etc.) were carefully created to connect them to the mathematics department. For example, for the final answer(s) of each activity, students were required to use simple maths. However, it was kept in mind that these should not be too difficult, so that students would persevere with the activity. For example, only very simple high-school mathematics was required, and in all activities, students were allowed to find any part of the answer using any available resources. In addition to the opportunity to learn from senior students (as mentioned above), the discussion session was designed to make new students comfortable with asking questions. The idea was that new students will be more comfortable asking questions to fellow students rather than an academic. Also, instead of them asking directly, we provided the new students with a digital opportunity to put their questions anonymously throughout the event, and those questions were brought to the discussion with the senior students. This activity was also aimed at giving the new students the idea that the department is promoting different peer-support programmes, like Peer Assisted Learning (Sedghi & Lunt, 2015).

Transferability

This project is easily transferable to any department. The information lecture part of the event is easily re-creatable by any department of any university by incorporating the relevant programme-level information. The key part, though, is to make this part of the event short and brief. The student-centric part of the event is also quite flexible.

Creating a campus or treasure-hunt activity is well researched, and various resources are available in the literature (Ronan, 2019). The discussion with senior students is tricky (because it is difficult to encourage new students to ask questions) but is doable. For example, we never asked the new students to speak in front of everyone; rather they posted questions in an electronic platform. While some content of this event had mathematics involved, this can be replaced by department-specific content, although it will require some level of creativity on the part of the academic team to link the activities to department-specific subject material and themes.

Concluding remarks and future plan

The welcome activities went well, the students' (informal) response was positive, and they were appreciative about all the activities. As a result of this success in the academic year 2022–2023, we will be continuing similar (possibly improvised) welcome activities in the academic year 2023–2024. As part of the improvement process, we are planning to introduce more scope for interaction for local and XJTLU students by combining this welcome event with an existing welcome-back event for second-year home students.

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