



**unicomm**

# **Come for Cookies. Stay for Community**

A Toolbox for Community Building,  
Facilitating Participation, and Enhancing  
Belonging for Higher Education Communities

**INSTITUTIONAL VOICES –  
INSIGHTS FROM EXPERIENCE**

**“Come for Cookies. Stay for Community.”**  
**A Toolbox for Community Building, Facilitating Participation, and Enhancing Belonging for Higher Education Communities**  
**Institutional voices – insights from experience**  
June 2024

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## The UNICOMM Project and the idea behind the Toolbox

The idea of the University Community Active Participation (UNICOMM) Project comes from the belief that higher education institutions (HEIs) are more than academic courses and research, and that all the people who attend these institutions and work within them should be noticed and feel motivated to be engaged in the initiatives that they find important. Recent events, such as the pandemic, have highlighted the importance of relationships and being part of a group, but they also proved that rapidly changing conditions make it difficult to strengthen the bonds and enhance the sense of belonging. Thus, the main aims of the UNICOMM Project are: to identify the patterns and factors that support the incorporation of inclusive and active student participation, to enhance students' competences to allow them to fully participate in the inclusive HEI community, and to create guidelines and recommendations concerning organisational structures of European higher education institutions in the context of uncertain times and rapid changes.

Starting from November 2022, the consortium consisting of the European Students' Union (ESU), the Palacký University Olomouc (UP), the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria (FH OÖ) and the University of Warsaw (UW) as a coordinating institution has been cooperating within the UNICOMM Project focusing on the above-mentioned goals.

The first activity of the consortium, coordinated by the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria, was a survey aiming at the analysis of the bond-building factors between students and higher education institutions, the latter understood as both institutions and communities consisting of various actors. The report entitled [\*University as community: students' perceptions of participation, engagement and belonging at European higher education institutions\*](#) is a summary of the survey results, and also a base for further activities within the UNICOMM Project, such as the present publication *“Come for Cookies. Stay for Community”. A Toolbox for Community Building, Facilitating Participation, and Enhancing Belonging for Higher Education Communities.*

The second stage of the project consisted in the organisation of a series of workshops for students within the consortium institutions. The experience and know-how from the workshops have been collected in this publication, with the aim to serve every higher education institution that works on the topics of community enhancement, as well as soft- and transversal skills training outside the regular curricula or within it.

The consortium's initial assumption was that the shift to online learning caused by the pandemic had reduced opportunities for social interaction and professional development, with students treating HEIs as merely educational providers. This, in consequence, had weakened the bond between students and HEIs. Therefore, the tools and solutions proposed during the UNICOMM Project workshops are flexible and adaptable to not only onsite, but also remote learning without any loss in quality.

The idea for this Toolbox and the workshop curriculum is to provide a variety of adjustable options considering diverse perspectives of:

- institutions – the proposed solutions are conceived to be adaptable to different organisational structures and modalities,
- students – the activities are designed not to put too much pressure on students or be a burden for their tight schedules, but to gradually strengthen their sense of responsibility and self-confidence in action.

One part of this Toolbox describes the background and the frame for the three main modules of the workshop design, along with the details about the workshop organisation within the consortium institutions. As the student experience and perspective are at the centre of the UNICOMM Project, in the course of the workshops, the participants were invited to present their insights in the form of written essays. Therefore, another part of the Toolbox presents the student viewpoint on the most important topics covered during the workshops. The other section of this publication is a summary of the consortium institutions' experience regarding the organisation of the workshops aimed at enhancing the students' sense of belonging and increasing their skill levels. The final part consists of scripts for workshops that can be conducted by HEIs in various forms for diverse audiences in order to enhance the community bonds, gather student opinions on shaping the institutional reality, as well as develop their sense of self-confidence in active participation.

The Toolbox is designed for diverse audiences and practical purposes. There is no specific reading order. You, as the reader, can choose the parts that are most suitable for you.

## **Institutional Voices – insights from experience**



## Institutional Voices – insights from experience

The UNICOMM workshops, based on various tasks and topics centred around the notions of community and belonging, were organised in four consortium members institutions in different modes. The participants' profiles were also diverse. While the ESU's group consisted of experienced student activists, in the other institutions, the degree of experience and engagement varied. Nevertheless, all students' feedback and impressions were very similar, both during and after the workshops, emphasising the importance of building a strong community and skills development. This confirms the need for such events happening at universities, regardless of their profiles or structures. The following part presents the consortium's insights on the topic of institutional approach to supporting student participation and developing soft and transversal skills within the frames of HEIs.

### One sentence about the UNICOMM workshops in your institution:

#### European Students' Union (ESU)

- Student-led pathways for community building for students with special status.

#### University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria (FH OÖ)

- Mental health and coping strategies.

- Instrument for the social integration of beginner students.

#### Palacký University Olomouc (UP)

- Creating new friendships.
- New student perspectives on the initiatives at university.
- Relax, stress relief.

#### University of Warsaw (UW)

- A surprising success :) Engaged students, new perspectives, interesting reflections.

### Pluses of the UNICOMM workshops in your institution (what do you think went good and what were the highlights):

#### ESU

- Creation of roadmaps (*presented in the Tools part of the publication*) that will remain available for students beyond the duration of the project.
- Student solutions to students' issues.
- Bottom-up approaches to HEI community building created by student representatives.
- Creative online facilitation methods, students remained engaged.

#### FH OÖ

- Highlighting the importance of such courses for the institution.
- Building and strengthening friendships and community spirit among participants.

- Sharing personal experiences about procrastination.
- Belonging exercise.

#### UP

- Positive atmosphere and creative environment. Time with no mobile phones and active participation of all participants, including the students with special needs.
- Students' overriding interest in the workshop.

#### UW

- Positive feedback from students and trainers.
- Finishing on time.
- Recruitment process.
- Getting to know students with great potential.
- Getting to know the students' perspective.
- Putting UNICOMM assumptions into practice.
- Engaged group of students.
- Students' responsibility.

### **Deltas of the UNICOMM workshops in your institution (if we were to organise a second round of the workshops, what would you improve/change?):**

#### ESU

- Participants doing more physical activities, rather than focusing on online training.

#### FH OÖ

- (Even) stronger focus on stress management.

- Addressing online/offline balance explicitly, introducing digital hygiene.

#### UP

- To be as practical as it can be. Theory and other resources left for online studying.
- Split the whole workshop into more days (3–4), not only 2. It was very rich in activities, but sometimes challenging for the participants' time.

#### UW

- Better evaluation of skills.
- More time with students. A stage that allows students to complete a task/project together.
- More time for the managing stress and enhancing wellbeing workshop.
- Add more skills training (for sure modules on intercultural communication and managing in-group conflicts).
- More space for participants and engaged students (student experts).

### **Post-workshop observations of the UNICOMM consortium members:**

#### **→ Groups of students participating in the workshops should be diverse.**

- ESU's insight: Given the diverse backgrounds of the participants, this immersive experience not only enabled them to familiarise themselves with community building, but also offered a unique



opportunity to witness it from a multitude of perspectives. Their diverse backgrounds facilitated an exploration of varied realities, unveiling key insights, and shedding light on barriers that can impact community and belonging.

- ESU's insight: The workshop's activities showed us that the participants had not only expanded their understanding of community dynamics, but also cultivated a deeper appreciation for the nuanced challenges and opportunities present in the HE environment. The diversity within the group became an asset, fostering a rich exchange of ideas and experiences that significantly contributed to the collective learning process. Moreover, participants gained valuable insights into the importance of inclusivity and cultural sensitivity in community development. The exploration of different realities highlighted the need for tailored approaches to community building that consider the unique characteristics and needs of various groups within the academic setting.
- UP's insight: The cooperatively-structured icebreaker activities were highlighted as beneficial for facilitating an environment where participants could recognise and appreciate each other's unique perspectives and backgrounds.
- UP's insight: The workshop activities described by the participants not only facilitated skill development in cooperation, communication and trust, but also promoted self-awareness, empathy, and cross-cultural understanding. By engaging in these

activities, participants were able to enhance their critical thinking abilities and cultivate a deeper appreciation for diverse perspectives, ultimately contributing to their personal and professional growth.

**→ Such workshops address the need of students' voices to be heard and included in shaping the community of their HEI. Moreover, institutions should facilitate the expression of these voices and create spaces and means to encourage the students who might be less vocal.**

- ESU's insight: The discussions that took place during the on-site workshop made it clear that while inclusion, community, belonging and student participation are included among most HEI priorities, the challenges and barriers are still many, and in order to tackle them, students need to be consistently heard and included in decision-making processes. The workshop aimed not only at broadening participants' perspectives on community building and belonging, but also at equipping them with practical insights and tools to navigate the complexities of fostering inclusive and supportive communities within the higher education landscape.
- ESU's insight: The outcomes of this initiative surpassed our expectations. The participants not only embraced the challenge, but also demonstrated remarkable dedication in generating innovative ideas for the action plans.

This hands-on approach to engagement proved to be particularly appealing to the students. It instilled in them a sense of co-creation, empowering them to claim ownership of the workshop's success.

→ **More experienced students can co-create the workshops and encourage others to engage. Alongside the facilitators and trainers, more experienced students and peer support of the participants are crucial parts of the workshops.**

- UNICOMM's insight: The report "*University as community: students' perceptions of participation, engagement and belonging at European higher education institutions*" had shown that students are likely to face problems with their peers, and the evaluation of the workshops confirmed that observation. The participants from each institution highlighted how important the networking aspect of the workshop was – the new friends they made, as well as the exchange of ideas between themselves allowed them to train effective communication skills and gain more confidence in their academic life. Thus, it is very important to leave the space and time for mutual exchange and discussions.
- UW's insight: The participants pointed out the fact that during the meetings with representatives of student organisations, they gained more insight into various forms of engagement at the university and realised that they are actually available for every student, and there are no extraordinary requirements

to engage and shape the reality of the academic community. Since student organisations such as student councils might sometimes appear as "exclusive" or unapproachable entities, it is worth it to create peer-motivation opportunities through which more experienced students encourage those who are shy or feel less confident to develop their hidden potential. (*The script for a facilitation of such meeting is presented in the Tools part of the publication*)

- ESU's insight: Our students are also involved in student unions or student representation/movements in general. This allows them to have a more vocal and eloquent voice on the ways that youth participation could affect community and belonging at the university. When it comes to student participation, one of the recurring demands is that students are involved in all decision-making processes and seen as an integral part of the institutional bodies tasked with this mission. Students should be regularly consulted about the policies and decisions that affect their studies and lives within the HEI.
- FH OÖ's insight: In their qualitative feedback on the workshop, the students underlined the main learning effects in the areas of intercultural awareness and communication. Moreover, they stressed the positive social effect of the workshop (i.e. making friends), and some also stated that their self-confidence had increased.

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→ **Following peer support needs and group enhancement goals, one of the main aims of the workshops should be to strengthen the networks within the community, which can be done for instance by trust-building activities and tools.**

*(The script for a facilitation of trust building activities is presented in the Tools part of the publication)*

- UP's insight: The participants also emphasised the value of activities such as the rope game and stress management projects, which required them to work together, communicate openly, and trust one another. Through these experiences, the students gained insights into their own capabilities and limitations, as well as those of their peers, fostering self-reflection and a deeper understanding of group dynamics.

→ **Transversal skills are gaining more importance among students, and workshops organised by HEIs can help in developing these competences outside academic classrooms, as well as creating the sense of belonging.**

- ESU's insight: The majority of the students asked agreed or strongly agreed that participation and community involvement opportunities offered at the university hold the potential for increasing the students' skills beyond the scope of those indicated in their study curricula (transversal skills). [...] the students highlighted a set of skills that they think are crucial for young people and should be cultivated at

the university regardless of the faculty, the level or the object of study. For example, skills such as problem-solving, mental resilience and maintaining personal wellbeing appeared at the top of students' choices. At the same time, critical and ethical thinking, as well as human rights education, stress management and online-offline balance were also underlined as skills that are important for all students, so it should be a priority for the universities to find ways to develop these competences in students.

- UW's insight: When asked what they have learned and what they will tell their friends about the workshops, the participants highlighted the skills that they had had the occasion to train during the workshops, for instance communication based on empathy, creative thinking, and stress management.
- FH OÖ's insight: The workshop pre-evaluation, which served as a tool for student needs assessment, delivered a clear result: what was ranked by far the lowest by students was their ability to deal with procrastination. Therefore, the workshop contents were adapted accordingly, with adding a focus on tackling procrastination to aid students in this area. What is more, other areas rated comparatively low in terms of student self-reported abilities were speaking up in class and holding presentations in front of others.
- FH OÖ's insight: In a fascinating visual depiction of what students thought they needed to belong, the three key aspects (Teamwork → passion, Party →

social, Knowledge → hard work) were connected to the central element needed to succeed:

“Confidence”; the students explained that self-confidence was vital for them to achieve a sense of belonging, highlighting the importance of personal coping strategies and social skills in educational offerings as ways to enable the students to belong.

- UP’s insight: Based on the statements made by the participants, it is evident that the activities designed to foster cooperation, communication and trust were particularly effective in developing critical thinking and self-reflection skills.

→ **When designing workshops, the challenges that the participants might face over the course of participation should be taken into account so as not to overwhelm them. Tackling these challenges, as well as providing skills to face various problems in students’ lives might be included in the workshop curriculum.**

- FH OÖ’s insight: As the workshop extended over an entire (first) semester, its impact on students’ actual skills and problems can only be assessed to a limited extent via pre- and post-self-assessment. During the semester, various new challenges might have arisen for students, and external, non-workshop-related learning experiences could have altered their initial assessment. However, the core topic of the workshop and its specific focus (intercultural awareness, combined with particular topics such as

procrastination) appear to have had a positive impact on students.

→ **Stronger institutional focus on providing skills and tools to improve student wellbeing and mental self-care is beneficial for the academic community.**

- UP’s insight: The workshop provided participants with valuable opportunities for relaxation, with the yoga sessions standing out as the most effective means of achieving this goal. By incorporating activities that promote physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, the workshop not only enhanced the participants’ ability to recharge, but also fostered a sense of community and mutual support. Moving forward, it is important to continue prioritising the integration of relaxation techniques like yoga into workshops and educational settings, recognising their profound impact on the overall wellness and productivity.

**Workshops are not only a place to experiment and work on building belonging with students, but also (maybe even more importantly) a space where this belonging and the sense of community are built organically.**

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THE TOOLBOX!**

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