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Come for Cookies. Stay for Community

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

VARIOUS SOLUTIONS FOR VARIOUS INSTITUTIONS

"Come for Cookies. Stay for Community."
A Toolbox for Community Building, Facilitating Participation, and Enhancing Belonging for Higher Education Communities
Various solutions for various institutions
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Project partners
University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria; Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic; European Students' Union, Belgium

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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.

Various solutions for various institutions – how the workshops were designed and conducted within the UNICOMM consortium

The already-mentioned report *University as community: students' perceptions of participation, engagement and belonging at European higher education institutions* proved to be invaluable in gaining more insight into the student needs and expectations regarding participation in the life of the academic community. The conclusions drawn from the report allowed the UNICOMM consortium to adjust the workshop curricula to their target audience, i.e. students. In the survey conducted for the purposes of the report, the most frequent answers provided by the students to the question "Why do you engage in these (extracurricular) activities?" were as follows:

➔ Meeting people/making friends
➔ Skills development
➔ Spending my time in a meaningful way
➔ Interest in the topic

Therefore, the workshop curricula were centred primarily on the social (community building) aspect, secondarily on students' skills development, and last, but not least, they had to be interesting and engaging for the participants.

The report also highlighted the importance of students' personal wellbeing. Taking into account the fact that one of the main student motivations is socialisation, and the main topic of interest is mental health and personal wellbeing, a lot of attention in the workshop design was focused on creating a welcoming atmosphere.

The UNICOMM Project is especially focused on two groups that often have fewer chances of being active members of the academic community and participating in activities outside the classroom – international students and working students.

International students and working students

The international students who took part in the survey often highlighted cultural and language barriers as obstacles to engage. A lot of them also claimed that approaching and making friends with non-international/local students is hard, and so half of the report's respondents identifying as international students agreed with the statement that they usually stick with other international students throughout their course of study.

Another identified disadvantaged group are students working over 20 hours per week. More than a half of such respondents agreed that they have difficulties in combining their studies with work, which is why it might be even harder for them to also include extracurricular activities in their schedules.

Thus, the consortium's goal was to design inclusive and flexible workshop curricula in order to reduce the number of obstacles for international and working students, as well as enhance the community feeling for groups that have different cultural backgrounds and more limited time resources.

Module framework

Based on the UNICOMM consortium members' knowledge coming from research and experience, combined with the results from the report, the consortium designed three workshop modules that were further developed in the form of workshops for students. All three modules can be conducted as one coherent course. However, taking into account different institutional structures, educational approaches and student needs, the modules can be also conducted as separate courses (adjusting the number of hours according to the needs, resources, and circumstances in the particular institution).

UNICOMM Masterclass Workshops on Community Building: participants and trainer after the first meeting

Social Module: focused on group integration, getting to know each other, learning how to work together, relationship building, and effective communication. The aim of this module is to establish bonds between participants, help them to learn how to cooperate, while also creating a solid basis and good atmosphere for further modules.

The activities within this module should be centred on in-group-community building.
Topics proposed within this module:

➔ Group relationship building (networking activities, networking and community building activities)
➔ Integration: team building, community building, etc. (cooking, outdoor activities such as hiking, nature trips, cultural ventures such as visiting a museum or some other interesting places in the 'university city' – e.g. historical monuments might be a good idea)
➔ Dealing with conflict and crisis in the group, counteracting fears and insecurities
➔ Effective team and interpersonal communication (NVC – nonviolent communication webinar and practical tools might be a good idea)
➔ Intercultural integration and team building *(if the group is international)*

Palacký University students during a workshop within the UNICOMM Project

Exploratory Module: centred around enhancing the institutional community and developing participants' sense of agency and confidence. The idea behind this module is, on the one hand, to gain more insight into institutional organisation and students ideas and needs regarding this topic and, on the other hand, to inspire and empower individual participants through peer relations.

Track 1 (institutional)

1. University onboarding – presentation of units that support students, showing where and how students can get support in various areas of student life. *(Might be especially useful for the newcomers).* Why is it worth using institutional support? *This part can be run in the form of a presentation or an interactive task (for instance, scavenger hunt) for students to do inter-institutional research and then compare the results with the presentation.*

Track 2 (peer-based)

1. Presentation of initiatives led by students who are already actively engaged. Individual student perspective of why and how it is important.
2. Interactive part with more experienced and engaged students sharing insights into how to find work-study-engagement-life balance and space for self-development in extracurricular activities at university.

Self-care in the Life of a University Student

This module could cover various essential topics, such as:
➔ effective learning strategies,
➔ efficient planning,
➔ time management,
➔ overcoming procrastination,
➔ finding motivation for studying,
➔ improving text comprehension skills.

Developmental Workshop *(based on the outcomes of Track 1 or 2, or both)***:**

a) Interactive part where students try to identify what types of institutional support are the most important, what else is needed in this context, what is missing, etc. *(This could be done in the World Café setting.)*
b) Student engagement: Participants search for solutions on how to create a safe and open space for participation in a way that it is not perceived as another obligation or duty for the student, and what to do to encourage other students to be more active outside their regular academic classes. *(The group can work on all the questions or only one topic might be addressed.)*

(Design thinking methods and/or brainstorming could be useful methods in both parts a and b.)

Possible outcomes of this module created by participants:
→ a guide booklet / "welcome pack guide" for newcoming students (/international students),
→ a toolkit on student engagement or forms of engagement (e.g. how to organise a movie night, etc.),
→ a guide on how to be an engaged student,
→ a 'first aid' guide for self-care in the context of a university student's life prepared for other students.

Skills Development Module: focused on participants' practical and personal skills development with a view to increasing their self-confidence and developing experience in various areas.

The Masterclasses within this module can be chosen by facilitators/trainers according to available resources or selected by the group of participants as the most useful ones from their perspective. These classes can be run as online webinars followed by online cooperation, or as interactive in-class activities.

Topics proposed within this module:
➔ Effective feedback-giving and receiving
➔ Offline-online balance
➔ Ethical and critical thinking (how to spot fake news)
➔ Time management
➔ Problem-solving
➔ Mindfulness
➔ Mental resilience and personal wellbeing
➔ Dealing with stress
➔ Healthy lifestyle and sport (e.g. yoga exercises and breathing techniques to help alleviate stress)
➔ Health support and prevention
➔ Working with minorities (with disabilities, social disadvantages, etc.)
➔ Environmental protection – ecology and social ecology, connecting nature and society
➔ Responsible and effective volunteering
➔ Intercultural communication

Workshop organisation details in the UNICOMM consortium members

European Students Union (ESU):

Duration: 18/09/2023, 4–5/12/2023, asynchronous learning (three sessions, approximately 30 teaching hours in total)
Number of participants: 15
Recognition: UNICOMM certificates for each participant awarded by ESU
Percentage of international student participants: 60%
Percentage of working student participants: 45%
Workshop mode: hybrid – onsite, online and asynchronous

University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria (FH OÖ):

Duration: The course consisted of 5x6 (30) hours of workshop participation (face-to-face) and a reflective exercise (amounting to additional 7.5 hours of asynchronous work) over one semester
Recognition: 1.5 ECTS and UNICOMM certificates for each participant
Number of participants: 30
The course was carried out in two groups of 17 students each (with 14 and 16 completing the course, respectively).
The participants were all international students (100%); by the end of the semester, 5 of the 30 participants (17%) had taken on a job and were working students.
Workshops mode: onsite, asynchronous

Palacký University Olomouc (UP):

Duration: 4–5/11/2023 (15 teaching hours divided into two-day workshops simultaneously conducted for two groups)
Number of participants: 30
Recognition: 2 ECTS and UNICOMM certificates for each participant
Percentage of international student participants: 60%
Percentage of working student participants: 43.33%
Workshop mode: onsite

University of Warsaw (UW):

Duration: 21/10/2023–5/12/2023 (30 teaching hours)
Number of participants: 19
Recognition: UNICOMM certificates and personalised reference letters for each participant (some of the participants chose to receive 2 ECTS as an elective course)
Percentage of international students participants: 60%
Percentage of working students participants: 45%
Workshops mode: hybrid – onsite, online and asynchronous

CLICK HERE AND CHECK OUT THE NEXT PARTS OF THE TOOLBOX!