



unicomm

Come for Cookies. Stay for Community

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

**PARTICIPANTS' VOICES – HOW THE STUDENTS
THEMSELVES PERCEIVE THE CONTENT AND
THE MAIN THEMES OF THE WORKSHOPS**

“Come for Cookies. Stay for Community.”

A Toolbox for Community Building, Facilitating Participation, and Enhancing Belonging for Higher Education Communities Participants’ voices – how the students themselves perceive the content and the main themes of the workshops

June 2024

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Project coordinator

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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.

**Participants' voices
– how the students
themselves perceive
the content and
the main themes
of the workshops**





Participants' voices – how the students themselves perceive the content and the main themes of the workshops

[Students' testimonials regarding the UNICOMM workshops](#)

One of the central parts of the workshops was the exploration of how the students themselves approach the terms crucial for the UNICOMM Project, namely Community, Belonging, and Participation. *(The quotes below commenting on these three key terms have been adapted from the materials gathered in workshop activities and evaluations.)*

COMMUNITY

As opposed to feeling isolated in a routine of going to school, listening to lectures and then going back home, student life means becoming a member of a broader community of people within the HEI.

[ESU pre-evaluation materials]

A group of people connected by friendly relations focused on creating a comfortable learning environment for all students.

[ESU post-evaluation materials]

COMMUNITY – A group of people connected with common values and purposes which creates space for acceptance and support to achieve the same goal.

[UW pre-evaluation materials]

BELONGING

Belonging is about feeling like you are welcome and appreciated within a community.

[ESU pre-evaluation materials]

Feeling seen and heard, feeling and being included, having the chance to bond with other members of the community through informal activities.

[ESU pre-evaluation materials]

Not feeling like you're just at your HEI to study and be done with it as soon as you're finished, but actually enjoying your time at your HEI.

[ESU pre-evaluation materials]

Being proud of your HEI and willing to defend it for all of its good things.

[ESU post-evaluation materials]

University is a flower and students are bees.

[FH OÖ evaluation materials]

Finding your place academically and personally.

[FH OÖ evaluation materials]

Bonding through mutual struggles.

[FH OÖ evaluation materials]

BELONGING – It is a feeling that you're a part of some community (e.g. family or institution) that you share the same values with. Community members need to take care of each other and create a

sense of loyalty. For each member it is necessary to feel safe, creative and supported in the community.

[UW pre-evaluation materials]

PARTICIPATION

Engaging in student representation, like being in the course/faculty representation, in the university/national council or in board representation.

[ESU pre-evaluation materials]

Being part of one of the student associations, being involved as a stakeholder in designing everything related to HEI life.

[ESU pre-evaluation materials]

PARTICIPATION – It is an activity involving social engagement that creates a sense of belonging while working towards a common goal. It allows you to fulfil your passions and provides you with new experience and knowledge. Participation should happen in an equal and safe environment. :)

[UW pre-evaluation materials]

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION

[The course] Provided a sense of confidence among the participants and created a safe environment, where we could do activities allowing us to be more appreciative of each other's culture.

[FH OÖ evaluation materials]

To adapt and communicate with people from different cultures and norms was my biggest problem. Now I have the courage to communicate with other coursemates without feeling low esteem. I

learned how to interact with people from different cultures, which reduced prejudice. This course [gave me] the opportunity and courage to make new friends to study together, which increased my learning speed.

[FH OÖ evaluation materials]

Some cultures may talk louder than me and others quieter than me. To avoid misunderstandings, I always have to keep this in mind instead of feeling attacked directly.

[FH OÖ evaluation materials]

Some of the participants also shared their reflections and advice for other students and institutions based on their past experiences and observations from the UNICOMM workshops.





Why should active participation matter not only for students, but also for the institution?

Author: Amelia Głowacka,
University of Warsaw

When we were growing up, most of us heard from our parents the saying: “*Being a student at university is the best time of your life*”; however, the reality is somehow not entirely like that. In recent years, it can be seen that a lot of students struggle with loneliness and the lack of feeling of belonging¹, as educational institutions have often become places attended solely for the obligatory classes and for the purpose of acquiring a diploma. In the midst of the pandemic and its repercussions, the social life and the psychological wellbeing of young adults have also worsened. We do not have to go as far with our research and show the statistics – all you have to do is go to the reviews section of your university of choice and see the comments from students often mentioning their saddening experiences like going on through their day at university without saying anything or talking to anyone. All of this leads us to the question of what can be done to change such a situation, and the answer does not have to be difficult, neither out of reach. The

simplest remedy would be the students’ active participation in the university’s community.

The social elements of university life are often neglected, since they are viewed as not equally important as scientific endeavours, which is misleading, to say the least. There are various ways in which students can get engaged, notably joining students’ unions (or similar existing bodies at a given institution), volunteer centres, student associations, social events or science clubs. Such activities are crucial, as they provide opportunities for young people to acquire new skills, knowledge, and friendships, making them feel more connected to the university and the society within it. Moreover, having the knowledge and experience of working within a group is extremely valuable and constitutes a great future advantage. Active participation at the university contributes to the overall wellbeing of students, providing them with new connections and the feeling of belonging. On top of that, increased participation in social activities at universities promotes values such as democracy, cultural diversity and equality.

In my own experience, the first year of my studies was quite difficult. I felt like a complete stranger going to an unfamiliar institution, where I did not really have my place and was just one of the “random students”. After participating in the UNICOMM Masterclasses on Community Building and later becoming part of the International Students’ Union, my experience has changed

¹ More information concerning the topic can be found in the following sources: Hysing, M., Petrie, K. J., Bøe, T., Lønning, K. J., & Sivertsen, B. (2020). Only the lonely: A study of loneliness among university students in Norway. *Clinical Psychology in Europe*, 2(1), 1–16. <https://cpe.psychopen.eu/index.php/cpe/article/view/2781>
Mitchell, N. (2022). University has been a lonely place for students – Survey. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220609110221496>

Zheng, K., Johnson, S., Jarvis, R., Victor, C., Barreto, M., Qualter, P., & Pitman, A. (2023). The experience of loneliness among international students participating in the BBC loneliness experiment: Thematic analysis of qualitative survey data. *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, 4, 100113. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666518223000189>

completely. Now I see the university not only as an abstract concept, but also as a real and dynamic place filled with different cultures, communities, and knowledge. Learning does not only have to take place during the lectures, but it can also happen between the students in a practical manner. After all, being a student is also about personal growth and finding your place in the world. Getting engaged at your university is an amazing way to practise that.



Why should active participation matter not only for students, but also for the institution?

Author: Sofiya Novik,
University of Warsaw

Active participation in university life presents numerous opportunities for both the students and the university. Students' engagement in extracurricular activities provides them with opportunities to gain professional experience and learn how to maintain a work-life-engagement balance. For the institution, it is an opportunity to tap into vast student resources and thus unlock the full potential of the community.

This comes as no surprise that studies are not only about studying. Studying is important, but it is not enough to achieve success in the contemporary world. Such aspects as a proactive approach to life and the spirit of enterprise are of no less significance. Those qualities cannot be developed solely through studying.

What some students may not be well aware of, at least at the beginning of their academic journey, is that university is a place offering all sorts of career opportunities. Students do not have to end up being employed by the institution, although some of them can. This is the place where one can easily get first professional experience and build their CV.

There is another reason for students to engage actively in university life. They become more aware of the rights which they have as students, as well as of the legal sources of those rights. This

accounts for the fact that they can advocate for their interests effectively at the level of institutional legislation.

Another reason for students to get involved in various activities is simply to have fun interacting with fellow students and build a network of contacts, which can be useful, among others, in their professional life. It is during your studies that you can gain precious memories and build lifelong friendships.

Some would claim that active participation in university life is very likely to get in the way of studies. Undoubtedly, it is studying that should be prioritised by students. However, active participation in university life does not have to interfere with one's studies. It is necessary to strike a balance between studying and participating in extracurricular activities. They are an opportunity to learn how to maintain a work-life-engagement balance.

Universities should encourage student engagement as they are interested in students being successful. Extracurricular activities are one of the ways to enhance students' potential and prepare them for different aspects of their professional lives. Students' talents are a huge asset for the development of the institution in various respects, including scientific research. Institutions find it worthwhile to invest in extracurricular activities, as they open the way to find leaders among students who can become potential employees. What is more, engaged students can hold a productive dialogue with the university, which is the only way to effectively adjust institutional policies to meet students' needs.

To sum up, there are plenty of reasons why active participation should matter for both sides of the process – the students and the university. After all, when people get limitless opportunities to fulfil their potential, it is beneficial for the whole society.



Soft and social skills trained during the workshops – what was useful in the student life and why?

Author: Martyna Rosłonkiewicz,
University of Warsaw

As part of the project, we had the opportunity to participate in interesting and inspiring workshops. The practical classes, using such elements as group work, individual work and lectures conducted by specialists in various fields, allowed us to practise skills important in student life. While working in project groups, we had the opportunity to get to know all the workshop participants, thus finding people with similar scientific or hobby-related interests.

Group exercises allow us to fill the roles in which we feel most comfortable. They can also contribute to developing competencies to use, for example, when working on a final project for one of the obligatory courses in our studies.

Creative thinking – The activities during which we had to create something from nothing opened up opportunities for each participant to use their imagination. The final results of our group work and brainstorming sessions exceeded our wildest expectations, proving the fact that group work carries great creative potential.

In addition, the ability to think creatively is the basis for functioning in the student community – a brilliant idea may turn out to be the beginning of a student initiative that will help others with similar passions and interests to get involved in student life.

Time management – a difficult skill, practised during the entire series of workshops, consisting of good time management to be able to attend all workshops, as well as working under time pressure on the tasks carried out in the workshops.

Why is time management an important skill in student life? Because it allows you to study and participate in university initiatives at the same time, and combine your studies with work. It is a skill that is important and useful at every stage of life, not just student life.

Strive for a balance between student life and personal and professional life – a very important issue emphasised at every workshop. There should be time in every student's life for study, relaxation, personal development and taking advantage of the many student initiatives offered at the university. Finding a balance between all these aspects is an extremely important skill in terms of enjoying the full range of opportunities that college offers in addition to studying.

During the course of the workshop, we constantly improved our English – working in an international environment helped us to gradually break down the language barrier. Many of us significantly improved our communication in a foreign language, which will certainly increase our confidence in establishing contacts with foreign students who are present at the university in every field of study. The UNICOMM workshops allowed the participants to improve and discover new skills, and the activities in a varied format were attractive in terms of content and engaging initiatives.



Student belonging and academic community – an international student's perspective. Why is it important for international students to take an active part in the life of the university?

Author: Pantelitsa Stavrou,
Palacký University Olomouc

“International student” – this description has been following my name since 2015, when I first started my university journey studying Biomedical Sciences at the University of Surrey in the UK and now Medicine at the University of Palacký in the Czech Republic. At the beginning of my journey, I set myself a goal. That goal was – and still is – to be involved in academics, in the community, in professional and personal relationships, and to strive towards making changes.

Mahatma Gandhi said famously: *“Be the change you wish to see in the world”*. However, this is not always easy. Being involved and changing a small fragment of the world we live in requires commitment, time, passion, a greater understanding and compromise. As students, we subconsciously prioritise our studies, often overlooking our personal growth. We feel guilty when wanting to do something else apart from studying. I often found myself thinking *“I still haven't finished what I have to do for the day, so I won't go to the gym, or meet with friends, or read a book or go to this seminar on a topic I like.”* Ironically, it was only after participating in the UNICOMM Project that I understood that this was me sabotaging myself.

Sometimes all we need is a push towards the right direction. So, when the email about the UNICOMM Project was sent, I said *“This*

is it! This is my chance!” Judging only from the description of the workshop, I was already looking forward to it. The two days taught me lessons that I will carry with me throughout my life. In only two days, I questioned myself countless times, debated about my outlook on life, met new people, cooperated with them and, more so, trusted them through several team building activities, understood the impact one can have on a community, explored different stress management techniques, improved my self-confidence and brainstormed solutions to problems we all face in our everyday lives.

Active participation in the university life is crucial for various reasons, especially for international students. It gives us a sense of belonging in the academic community and fosters the feeling of appreciation and being more than just a face in the crowd. It exposes us to the local culture and customs, eliminating communication barriers, while simultaneously promoting cross-cultural understanding and integration. It strengthens networking and communications skills, allows the exchange of ideas and collaboration on mutual goals regardless of nationality.

The UNICOMM Project has impacted me profoundly, serving as a pivotal experience in my academic journey. Through my article, I aim to show why this project deserves more attention. It's amazing how much students can benefit from participating in it. I hope to convince more universities to jump on board and see the importance of implementing similar initiatives. After all, it's all about paying it forward to their biggest assets – their students.



Student belonging and academic community – an international student’s perspective. Why is it important for international students to take an active part in the life of the university?

Author: Melis Çelen,
University of Warsaw

I want you to put yourself into a situation for a few minutes. The task is to imagine being an international student in a foreign country. Maybe you have experienced this before. Think about the first weeks – you have just found yourself in a completely different environment, being away from your parents, friends, and loved ones, but you knew that was the cost of choosing a university to study abroad. After this, you start to realise your habits, and your close company is also changing. You feel like you do not belong to any place or any friend circle. Your classmates are becoming the ones with whom you spend most of your time or the ones with whom you share your problems. Until the first month has passed, most probably you have secured your physiological and safety needs. However, when it comes to the sense of belonging, you start to struggle, which is understandable according to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Why does the sense of belonging matter so much?

The sense of belonging is a crucial need in human psychology if you want to live in a healthy state of mind. In this case, it is a point that many foreign students come across in their lifetime. My observations as an international student feeling disconnected due to studying abroad are supported by literature findings. It is found that there is a positive association between the sense of belonging

and participation in community activities (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). Engaging in activities such as volunteering helps students foster the sense of community and belonging, and collective effort for a common goal provides a sense of unity (Klemenčič, 2017). In addition, when individuals feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to actively participate in community activities (Zanbar, 2020).

When I got the first mail from the Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw, I did not even hesitate a second but decided to participate in the UNICOMM Project. It was about teamwork, community, and co-creation with other students, which was a perfect match to what I am looking for. The project focused on the needs of students at European universities, and it was a great occasion to make the voice of students feeling like me heard. After the first project meeting, I felt more at home because I was surrounded by like-minded people who were open to talking about collaboration and creativity, as well as doing good stuff for the wellbeing of university students. Since educational and organisational ties are positively associated with the likelihood of volunteering (Okun & Michel, 2006), I believe that this project – and many others organised by the Volunteer Centre of UW – had a positive impact on many student lives.

I mentioned Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs at the beginning, and I want to bring it up again at this moment. Activities such as the ones proposed within the UNICOMM workshops not only make students feel more rooted in their community, but also help them to excel themselves in speaking in front of many people with confidence and feeling respect from others in the community which helps them grow as persons. Therefore, active participation in these community-based activities is a good start for students to feel more integrated within their new life in a foreign country.

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Work-life-engagement balance – how to be an active student? How can universities support and facilitate student engagement?

Author: Julia Grabska,
University of Warsaw

Work-life-engagement balance is a concept that concerns full-time students working part-time to make a living and gain practical experience, while also engaging in academic activities in student associations, student councils or organisations like volunteering centres, entrepreneurship incubators, dancing/singing groups, etc. Such students have their hands full with a lot of responsibilities and classes, but what is significant for them is eagerness for new experiences and self-development. Hence, if we were to define an engaged student, based for instance on my own example, it would be a person who does not have much time and is trying to “stretch the day”, but somehow always “makes it” thanks to the willingness to gain new skills and meet new like-minded people.

When it comes to the question of how to be an active student, I believe there is no one good answer. However, what is crucial for this type of students is the ability to not only search, but also reach for all the opportunities the university has to offer. Hence, in order to attract the students’ attention and encourage them to get involved in academia activities, they need to hear about the benefits of engagement, possibly from a student who is already involved in a particular organisation and may act as its “ambassador”. A student speaking to a student might be more effective, since both are on the same footing.

Nevertheless, when someone is already a working student engaged in university life, it is crucial to maintain healthy balance between the two spheres. From my observations, being young adults trying to look for the best possible life path, we are more mentally vulnerable to stress and failures than adults who have already settled down.

Therefore, how can the university support and facilitate student engagement?

As a final year student who is working, writing a master’s thesis and seeking to exploit the potential of academia by engaging in various activities, I believe that keeping the work-life-engagement balance would be easier if:

- The professors were more understanding and would give us more time to complete assignments;
- The university provided spaces to study, work remotely or just work on projects with the possibility to charge electronic devices (e.g. having access to certain classrooms);
- The university simplified the process of enrolling in the accelerated degree programme, since now it is very bureaucratised;
- The university provided a scholarship supporting working and engaged students who have significant achievements (now it is only for science and sports)



Safe Space for Student Participation – a comment on a collage made on December 5, 2023 as part of the community building workshop

Author: Krzysztof Niemiec,
University of Warsaw

Ever since the rise of the gay rights movement in the second half of the twentieth century², the term “Safe Space” has captivated the minds tasked with building and nurturing communities around the Western world. It permeates many institutions, ranging from private corporations aiming to improve the mental wellbeing of their workers, to non-governmental organisations wanting to create environments that foster inclusivity. Recently, however, it has gained the most traction at universities.

Just like with any other concept, there is not one set definition of what Safe Space is – at least not one concise enough to satisfy every possible meaning of the phrase. However, this linguistic ambiguity is precisely what allows for considering various applications of Safe Space in real life. This is something that we, students at the Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw, focused on while designing our collage about Safe Space.

As young people with diverse social, cultural, and even ethnic backgrounds – perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not – we didn’t struggle with finding common ground regarding the core assumptions of Safe Space. That is reflected in the composition of our collage: the more universal markers of Safe Space, such as feelings of respect and shared values that bind the group together, are located near the middle of the composition. Other no less important characteristics making Safe Spaces work are the notions that we form communities, and that we need to express ourselves freely within them, knowing that our ideas will not be attacked but welcomed by people who want to give us honest feedback.

This last feature lays the foundations for understanding Safe Space in a way that diverges from the mainstream interpretation of the term, but which we think can be extremely useful when deploying Safe Space tactics within any organisation. Our unique perspective treats Safe Space as a tool that we can use not only to create a feeling of belonging to a community, but also to achieve our shared goals and #Overcome.

(The activity “How do you imagine a safe space for participation?” is presented in the Tools part of the publication.)

² Hall, S. (2010). The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 19(3), 536–562.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40986338>

→ Be Creative, be bold, be flexible
but stick to the goal.



from start to the end
all together!



} shared values
or beliefs that guide us
(and limit our
violent tendencies)



↓
respect each
others borders



↳ Freedom to express
our thoughts and
beliefs with others

↳ feeling of respect
& receiving
feedback



SAFE SPACE

Everyone is involved
in projects and can communicate
their needs and feelings to improve
teamwork. Requires
every part to work
properly



↳ conviction of
common moral
code



↳ positive and
supportive community
that makes you feel
welcomed



↳ Expanding our
knowledge together
as a group

IT'S A TOOL WE USE TO #OVERCOME



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