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UNICOMM HintBook: BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Tools and Ideas for Navigating Student
Engagement in a Changing World**

**UNICOMM HintBook: Building Stronger Communities in Higher Education.
Tools and Ideas for Navigating Student Engagement in a Changing World**
May 2025

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The UNICOMM Project and the idea behind the HintBook

The UNICOMM Project, initiated in November 2022, aims to enhance student engagement and a sense of belonging in higher education institutions (HEIs). It recognises that the potential of HEIs extends beyond research and education and includes a strong community focus. The Project was conceived by a consortium comprised of the European Students' Union, the Palacký University Olomouc, the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria, and the University of Warsaw. The main goals of the Project included identifying factors supporting inclusive student participation and improving student skills related to active engagement in the academic community. Another rationale was to address challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which had weakened the bond between students and HEIs. The activities carried out as part of the Project have produced a variety of outputs, including a report, a toolbox, podcasts, video tutorials, and infographics – all of which will be described in more detail in the ensuing publication.

The present HintBook stands as the final outcome of the UNICOMM Project. It consolidates the key findings and conclusions developed by the consortium throughout the course of the Project. The main objective of this publication is to offer guidelines and solutions for the development and enhancement of university communities in the context of uncertain times and rapid changes. The hints presented here are meant to be flexible yet reliable for European HEIs, taking into account the diversity of organisational structures, cultures, and

various modes of teaching and learning. Special attention is given to student groups with fewer opportunities to engage in community life outside the regular study program, such as international students and working students.

This HintBook is neither a checklist nor an academic publication; it is a source of inspiration, from which anyone can take what they currently need or what they can realistically implement at their institution. The purpose of the publication is to serve the practical and meaningful strengthening of academic communities where everyone feels heard, seen, and valued.

Before diving into practice, let us begin with defining some key terms that play a crucial role in the UNICOMM Project.

ENGAGEMENT and PARTICIPATION

The foundational definition of the two terms comes from the European STEP Project:

There is no unique terminology for “engagement” at the European level. Some countries will rather speak about “volunteering”, “commitment” or “active participation”. Thus, student engagement is understood here in a broad sense to refer to students’ involvement in citizenship-related and volunteering activities, their political and associative commitment as well as their involvement within their universities and campuses.¹

Additionally, in the course of the Project, participants were invited to share their understanding of the terms during some activities, which yielded the following results:

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

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

*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.*

(Further discussion of the topic can be found in [“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](#))

BELONGING

Manja Klemenčič's (2015, pp. 537-538) definition of students' sense of belonging to the institution was a starting point for developing the activities in the UNICOMM Project:

Belonging refers to students’ perceptions of intimate association with the university as demonstrated through perceived insider status, psychological ownership and organisational identification. Students who have come to feel a strong sense of insider status perceive that they are a central and important part of the university (‘I am an important part of my university’) (cf. Stamper and Masterson, 2002). This sense fills human needs for inclusion, agency, and control, consequently increases students’ sense of responsibility to be involved in and support university functions (cf.

¹ Animafac (n.d.), *European STEP – Student engagement*. Retrieved February 14, 2025, from www.animafac.net/european-step_en/

Stamper and Masterson, 2002). Psychological ownership is when students have come to feel a strong sense of ownership of their university and perceive it as 'my university' ('I own my university'), which fulfils their need for efficacy and the sense of place, and consequently leads to an expectation of having more voice in institutional processes and structures (cf. Stamper and Masterson, 2002). Organisational identification - when students define themselves in terms of their university ('I am defined by my university') (cf. Stamper and Masterson, 2002) - is especially strong when students perceive their university as distinct (fulfilling [a] particular purpose) and/or prestigious.²

During the Project, participants could also share their perception of the sense of belonging:

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

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

*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.*

² Klemenčič, M. (2015). Student Involvement in University Quality Enhancement. In J. Huisman, H. de Boer, D. Dill & M. Souto-Otero (Eds.), *The Handbook of Higher Education Policy and Governance* (pp. 526-543). Palgrave Macmillan.

Finding your place academically and personally.

*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**.*

(Further discussion of the topic can be found in ["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](#))

In higher education, there is no belonging without community. Therefore, the HintBook explores the key findings and results of the UNICOMM Project on how HEIs can strengthen their communities.

HINT 1. Cooperation instead of Competition

Internal cooperation in the institution is a driving force for the community.

During [the three-day study visit at the Palacký University](#), the UNICOMM consortium arrived at one of the crucial conclusions of the Project, namely that cooperation among university units and departments is very important for both the initiatives and the individuals they involve. It facilitates community building as well as creates a natural space for fostering a sense of belonging among all the engaged actors of the academia.

Various offices and units within the university bring a wealth of expertise across different areas. Tapping into this collective body of knowledge and skills can be incredibly valuable when planning initiatives that are meant to be inclusive and suitable to meet diverse student needs.

Welcome Offices, Disability Support Services, Counselling Centres, Volunteer Centres, Student Life Offices, and other relevant departments should collaborate closely – not only with each other, but also with Student Councils and Student Organisations. Such a network of shared experiences, knowledge, and ideas allows for the full development of institutional potential in terms of community enhancement, while also reaching wider audiences.

If cooperation within the institution is not developing organically, some useful initiatives can facilitate the process, for example internal brainstorming and networking sessions, workshops for staff and students, or online asynchronous exchanges of ideas and initiatives between institutional units.



HINT 2. Caffeine and Sugar: Fuel for the Community

While research and teaching are the core priorities in academia, HEIs are also places for socialising and building lifelong relationships.

According to the [*University as community: students' perceptions of participation, engagement and belonging at European higher education institutions UNICOMM Report*](#) coordinated by the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria, one of the main reasons why students engage in academic life is the opportunity to connect with others ("Meeting people/making friends" was the most popular answer to the question about students' motivation for participating in extracurricular activities, see p. 17 of the Report). Therefore, creating a welcoming and open atmosphere is key, yet it does not necessarily need to require a huge budget or a lot of effort – when it comes to attracting students, free coffee and snacks can go a long way. As trivial as it may sound, coffee breaks should not be underestimated or overlooked, as they facilitate micro-interactions, which are often crucial for comfortable teamwork. In these difficult times, marked by the consequences of lockdowns which stripped away many natural spaces for young people to socialise, having institutional initiatives to help re-establish these spaces is more important than ever. Such initiatives can serve as a starting point for students to meet like-minded peers and form meaningful connections that will naturally enhance the sense of community and belonging.

Coffee and snacks do not have to be the main focus here; they can simply accompany goal-oriented initiatives such as community-building activities or practical workshops, some examples of which are presented and ready to use in our Toolbox – NB with the illustrative title [*"Come for Cookies stay for Community"*](#).

Food can be a great social glue for the academic community even in online settings. A notable example supporting this statement is the [*Student Cookbook*](#) – devised by the University of Warsaw community during lockdown, its creation was accompanied by online meetings where participants tried the selected recipes together. In conclusion, never underestimate the power of a nice snack in creating the sense of belonging!



HINT 3. Not Only Learning and Development, but also Crafts and Crocheting

By facilitating activities that nurture both mind and body, HEIs create spaces where students can thrive together.

One of the key topics that came up during the development of the UNICOMM Project is student well-being and the support provided by HEIs in this area. Martyna and Julia, students at the University of Warsaw, highlight in the [UNICOMM Student Voice podcast](#) created by ESU how important it is to remember to take care of yourself and your needs when being a busy student. Besides providing high-quality education, practical training, workshops, and development-focused events, it is also vital that HEIs invest resources in activities allowing students to relax and 'clear their minds' without the constant pressure of self-improvement. In the busy student life, it is the role of institutions to signal that it is okay to pause, do something for yourself, and simply be present together in the moment.

A series of workshops organised by UNICOMM at the consortium member institutions showed that students really appreciate activities helping them develop non-academic interests. They are also eager to take part in initiatives that teach them how to take care of their well-being, set boundaries, and not get lost in the complexities and challenges of the modern world. The Palacký

University organised a lot of outdoor team building activities connected with sport, whereas the University of Warsaw introduced a workshop series on "Self-care and Stress Management in the Context of Student Life and Active Participation". Also, the [Summer Academy on Student Participation](#) organised at the University of Warsaw offered yoga classes in the agenda.

Initiatives centred around well-being are especially important for international students, who often face challenges when trying to settle into a new place and are thus looking for support within the university. The activities offered by HEIs may have multifaceted goals: they can focus on the well-being of the students themselves, or – if organised in collaboration with external institutions – on benefiting society beyond the university walls. Of course, both approaches can be pursued simultaneously.

An example of the first approach, yet from beyond the scope of the UNICOMM Project, could be the workshops organised at the Palacký University in Olomouc under the name "[Welcome to Well-being – A Journey to Your Mental Harmony](#)". The seminar series was initiated due to a significant increase of international students experiencing mental health difficulties. Its primary goal was to teach students how to cope with challenging stress-related situations in their university life. Additionally, the lectures introduced the topics of effective study strategies and mindfulness. Students were also taught the techniques of time management, successful planning, and the basics of relaxation, which they can apply independently whenever they experience increased tension. The program also included two lectures focusing on Eastern theories such as Yin-Yang and Wuxing (the Five Elements Theory), which form the

foundation of Chinese medicine philosophy. The seminars attracted a large number of international students, who later expressed very positive opinions about each course.

Inspiration for activities related to collaboration with the local community can be found in the initiatives of the Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw (VC UW) carried out aside UNICOMM but involving many Project participants. The VC UW regularly cooperates with the [Intergenerational Local Activity Centre in Warsaw](#) organising activities during which students and seniors work together on crafts and seasonal decorations. Additionally, a VC UW representative is always present on-site to offer support and assistance. Without the collaboration between the University of Warsaw and the institution specialised in senior activation, many students would never have had the chance to participate in intergenerational activities, as they learn about such opportunities through university channels.



HINT 4. A Higher Education Institution is Like an Airbag

The metaphor of an airbag has accompanied the UNICOMM Project from the very beginning, as it illustrates well the role of institutions in empowering students.

An airbag activates when needed, and knowing it is always there in case of unexpected situations provides a greater sense of safety and peace of mind. HEIs can support student initiatives in a similar way. The awareness that students can grow, develop their ideas, and – most importantly – make mistakes, learn from them, and prepare for professional and social life while receiving support and guidance from the institution creates a sense of comfort and boosts young people's confidence. This is especially true for international students, who often have fewer opportunities to bring their ideas to life outside the university due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with the local environment, and cultural differences. For many students, university life becomes the foundation for building a new identity and personal development.

³ Pantelitsa Stavrou, "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?" in [*"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*](#), p. 14.

As Pantelitsa Stavrou, student at the Palacký University, wrote in her article on the international students' engagement in university life³: *Sometimes all we need is a push towards the right direction.* Hence, when planning extracurricular activities, it is valuable to leave space for students' creativity, ideas, and initiative, rather than tailor everything down to the smallest detail. Importantly, however, providing guidance and support from university staff and/or more experienced students is still essential. This approach creates space for growth for students just starting their academic journey, who, later along the way, often become leaders actively participating in the life of the institution and supporting others. An example of such a development path is provided in the article on the importance of student engagement⁴ by Amelia Głowacka, student at the University of Warsaw: *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 changed 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.*

⁴ Amelia Głowacka, "Why should active participation matter not only for students, but also for the institution?" in [*"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*](#), p. 11.

(More student insights regarding the sense of belonging in the context of institutional support can be found in the [UNICOMM's Student Voice podcast](#) series.)



HINT 5. Flexibility in Many Forms

Initiatives and projects need to be flexible in multiple ways to include students who are at risk of being left behind in terms of community engagement.

A lot has been said recently about the importance of the so-called 'flexible approach'. However, this term can sometimes seem unsuitable in the academic context, as HEIs are often seen as traditional, hierarchical, and bound by procedures, leaving little room for flexibility. Fortunately, the UNICOMM Project has shown that there *is* space for flexibility at HEIs, especially when it comes to fostering a sense of belonging. There are many areas where it can be introduced without compromising the quality of activities or facing significant challenges.

Organising events that do not require fluent knowledge of any language (such as crocheting mentioned in HINT 3, making toys for shelter animals, or even walking shelter dogs) can be a great way to foster a sense of belonging for international students, creating a space for integration through shared activities. The flexibility of such initiatives is also manifested through the fact that it is the participants themselves who decide how much they want to socialise. Naturally, more outgoing individuals tend to spend more time interacting with others, while those who need more time to open up or simply prefer not to engage in intense social exchanges can simply focus on the task and the theme of the event, yet still being in the company of others.

To ensure that students who work or are juggling multiple responsibilities can also participate in the proposed activities, offering flexible timing and formats could be a solution to follow. Not all events need to be held in person – some can be conducted in a hybrid or an asynchronous format, or entirely online. One of the parts of the UNICOMM Toolbox provides workshop scenarios with tips on how to run them online: [The Tools – workshop scripts](#). Before planning a long-term initiative, it is also worth checking with students whether they prefer regular activities at the same time on the same days, or if they would rather agree on dates on a case-by-case basis, without always sticking to the same time slots. As mentioned in the [UNICOMM Student Voice podcast](#), another helpful but more systematic solution could be an individual class schedule, which helps working students who want to be involved in community life to balance their classes with other tasks.

A flexible approach also allows for addressing diverse motivations behind student engagement. It is vital to remember that students are not a homogenous group, so their reasons for engaging in extracurricular activities will vary. Motivations such as the desire to meet new people, spend time meaningfully, or enhance their CV (and many others, some of which are presented in the [UNICOMM video tutorial on motivations](#)) drive students to get involved in campus life. A flexible approach to organising initiatives enables the institution to respond to these varied student motivations without focusing solely on one particular group.

Another solution that institutions can implement instead of following a one-size-fits-all strategy is recognising student engagement in various ways and allowing students to choose the most suitable one

for themselves. For working students, integrating different projects into the course schedule makes participation easier, while for those who do not wish to, or cannot, earn ECTS, providing certificates or personalised references could be a good alternative.

Even the deliverables of the UNICOMM Project were created with the flexible approach and diverse preferences in mind. For instance, the aforementioned Toolbox can be explored in any order, depending on the reader's current needs or interests. And in case of limited time availability, they can always refer to UNICOMM podcasts or video tutorials.



HINT 6. Supporting the Staff: A Key Investment in Community Building

Supporting the well-being of HEIs' staff is essential for creating a thriving academic community where everyone can grow and contribute.

In these complex times, uncertain and challenging for all societies, it is important to nurture the humanistic dimension of relationships within the academic community. As Weronika Gajda from the University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, stated in the [UNICOMM Staff Podcast](#) (ep. 2): *So they [students] know that I'm also a human, not a robot or a horrifying teacher that they have to be scared of, and it's important for them to know that they can talk to me like a human.* This approach does not rule out building relationships based on authority or institutional hierarchy but fosters trust within the community and provides a sense of belonging for everyone involved in academic interactions.

The aforementioned UNICOMM's Staff Podcast series, designed and coordinated by the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria, highlights the well-being of institutional staff, who are often overloaded with responsibilities and duties. It is no surprise that when these individuals are burdened with many tasks, it becomes difficult for them to consider the diverse needs of students and to voluntarily participate in the areas of institutional life that are beyond their core job responsibilities.

One of the key roles of HEIs in building a sense of community is supporting the well-being of not only students, but also staff members. This involves listening and responding to their needs as much as the institutional resources and possibilities allow it. The results of the UNICOMM Project show that in order to improve the well-being of the staff supporting student engagement, it is key to ensure a good division of roles within the team as relying on just one person can lead to overload. As highlighted in HINT 1, effective internal communication and clear information about the responsibilities and roles of other staff members and offices benefits both the staff and the students. When staff members know where to direct students with specific questions or issues, they feel less burdened. However, it is essential to avoid creating a “passing the buck” culture and to make sure that issues falling within the responsibilities of a specific office are properly addressed.

Mutual support and exchange of experiences among the staff can greatly improve individual well-being. A good example of this is the experience of the [Peer Coaching Group](#) within the UNICOMM Project, which was initially planned to operate from late April to the beginning of June 2024, but continues its activities (as of April 2025) in an organically organised way. Regular monthly online meetings provide a platform for the HEI staff members to share their experiences and find common solutions to challenges that often turn out to be quite similar, regardless of institution or country. Such an initiative based on the network of support could also be a great way to provide mutual encouragement among the staff within a single institution.

Another means of supporting staff well-being is through appropriate recognition, which does not always have to mean financial benefits. Recognising and celebrating the efforts of those who contribute to the academic community boosts motivation and can encourage others to get involved, helping to build the institution's social capital. It is also important for the institutions to create space where students can show their appreciation for both academic and administrative staff. Whether formal or informal, recognition plays a key role in fostering a sense of community. While an institution may not be able to address every aspect of an individual's well-being, it can organise events and initiatives where staff can learn how to take care of their own well-being and leverage their strengths. An excellent illustration of this is the individual coaching program oriented towards university employees mentioned by Dominique Sundt from the University of Vienna in the UNICOMM Staff Podcast⁵.

Additionally, all staff members can benefit from the tips and ideas shared in the [infographics](#) developed as a common effort of the UNICOMM Peer Coaching Group.

⁵ The topic of well-being and skill development for the staff supporting student engagement and the growth of the university community has been explored in the [UNICOMM Staff Podcast](#) series.

► Boost your self-confidence and self-care to support student engagement better

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Tips from and for the university staff



HINT 7. Communication as a Bridge to Student Engagement

Effective communication goes beyond sharing information; it is about creating an inclusive environment, understanding student needs, and motivating active participation.

During the [UNICOMM's Online Symposium](#), Karol Leja from the Tampere University reported the findings of his research in the presentation "[Student Participation in the Governance of European University Alliances](#)". When asked about what he believes is a key factor in engaging students, he pointed to the connection between students and university staff based on effective communication, especially when it comes to topics concerning student impact and active contribution to university life.

At the [Summer Academy on Student Participation](#), the first principle of successful group collaboration – as proposed by participants – was related to language. *Let's all use English, even if some people in the group share a common language. Please use English so that others won't feel excluded from the communication*, argued Göktuğ Donk, student from the University of Warsaw. The topic turned out to be so prominent that it also became the theme of one of the [UNICOMM video tutorials on student engagement](#). Naturally, when a group includes people sharing the same native language, it is easier and faster to discuss things in that language. This is usually not meant to exclude those who do not speak it, but rather to improve communication. Unintentionally, though, it can create

exclusionary mechanisms (e.g., for international students), making some group members feel insecure or uncomfortable. In diverse environments, it is worth putting in the effort to communicate in a language everyone understands. Additionally, communication should be kept simple and understandable. While using complex or technical language is common in academia, we need to ensure that community projects and actions are organised in a way that even students with limited proficiency in English (or any other language in use) can participate, while also improving their language skills. The UNICOMM activities have repeatedly shown that focusing on clarity over linguistic perfection makes everyone feel equally included and motivated to participate.

When communicating with students, institutions need to keep their messages both informative and considerate. In other words, it is beneficial to outline what can be expected from a particular initiative because some aspects that seem obvious to the sender may be unclear to the recipient, potentially creating barriers to participation later. It is essential to mention interactive activities in larger groups, the presence of loud sounds (e.g., moving chairs and tables), or stronger lighting in the space, as well as any other relevant details. Also, for more intense activities, it is a good idea to create, if possible, a designated quiet space and mention it in the information about the event. In summary, this type of communication allows students to prepare for participation and signals that the organiser cares about their comfort from the planning stage. Such an approach also helps engage a larger group of students, not just those who are naturally very active.



HINT 8. Multiple Vectors of Learning and Teaching

Creating spaces for mutual learning, where knowledge flows in all directions, fosters deeper connections and sparks the kind of collaboration that transforms student engagement into a shared empowering experience.

The UNICOMM Summer Academy on Student Participation was attended by both staff and students from the consortium member institutions. For five days, everyone – regardless of their usual role at university – worked side by side on the topic of institutional support for student engagement, creating an atmosphere that was conducive to creative involvement and made each participant feel they had an impact on the outcomes of the workshops. This sentiment was evident, for example, during the heated discussions concerning the choice of topics for the UNICOMM video tutorials. The value of student expertise can be further evidenced by the fact that the evaluation of the Summer Academy on Student Participation showed that according to the majority of participants, the third most useful topic of the entire five-day event was “Campaign 101” – a module led by ESU student representatives (following the topics such as Team Building and Psychological Safety in Teamwork). Thus, when it comes to fostering active student engagement and enhancing a sense of belonging, it is pivotal to treat students as partners in our initiatives, not just passive ‘recipients’. Moreover, drawing on their knowledge and experiences, they can also be positioned as experts.

Another example of multi-vector learning were the [Masterclass Workshops on Community Building](#) held at the University of Warsaw as part of the UNICOMM Project. The exploratory module, described in the [Toolbox](#), showed that students are eager to learn from each other and share their experiences. The Masterclass participants had the opportunity to meet four student experts experienced in student union representation, activism, volunteering, and running their own NGO, who were invited to talk about their experience balancing active engagement with student life. Weeks later, when evaluating the Masterclass, many participants mentioned that these meetings inspired them to get involved in various activities, for instance joining the commissions of the Student Union at the University of Warsaw. Without the Masterclass programme, these students likely would not have had the chance to meet and learn about such engagement opportunities. This shows that institutions can play a key role in creating spaces to initiate conversations between different students. It is not always necessary to set up specific mentoring programs (although these can also be very valuable, not all students have the time and the courage to get involved) or fixed paths for action. Sometimes, it is worth letting students learn and exchange ideas without any specific aims in mind apart from inspiring each other.

Another example of role exchange can be found in the Peer Coaching meetings that evolved from the UNICOMM Project. Depending on the session and the topic, one participant might act as a facilitator, another as an expert or recipient etc. This approach aligns with the main idea of HINT 5 (Flexibility in Many Forms), because not only does it create a space for mutual learning, but

also helps participants develop flexibility and gain new perspectives.

Finally, exchanging roles fosters an atmosphere of companionship and valuable feedback, both crucial for community building, as highlighted by Weronika Wardzyńska from Collegium Civitas in her article in this HintBook (see pp. 25-26).



HINT 9. Creating Spaces Where Everyone Belongs

HEIs can cultivate a sense of belonging by creating spaces where diverse voices come together, working toward shared goals in a safe and inclusive environment.

The key aspect of belonging that quickly emerged in the UNICOMM Project was the creation of safer spaces within academia, where community members could develop their self-confidence and build a sense of agency. In a rapidly changing and uncertain reality of modern times, it is crucial to establish spaces and create opportunities where students and staff can feel “at ease”, regardless of daily challenges. While in HINT 4 we conceptualised the role of the institution as an airbag, in this section we can use the metaphor of a “safer space”, meaning one where individuals can anchor themselves.

As stated in HINT 1, HEIs often possess the resources, the knowledge, and the experience that enable them to create initiatives engaging as many people as possible. Bringing together different experts creates a sense of security not only for participants, but also for organisers. It is important to make use of that network already at the planning stage to design initiatives that are genuinely inclusive, without asking any sort of eligibility questions or emphasising that a particular project is for group X, while another might be more suited for group Y. Of course, activities targeted at specific groups are extremely important for increasing

their visibility and agency, but it is equally essential to create initiatives connecting diverse participants. In this way, we can somewhat counteract the formation of social bubbles within the institution and establish networks between individuals who normally would never have met. Moreover, when inviting students to participate in UNICOMM activities, we did not inquire about their background, sexual orientation, level of education, or other personal matters (and if such questions were asked, it was only for statistical purposes). Instead, the main criterion for participation was the willingness to engage and contribute. As a result, this approach allowed us to create an incredibly diverse community working towards shared goals.

One of the earliest discoveries of the Project, based on the results of the [UNICOMM Report](#), was that a “low threshold for entry” can increase the engagement of various groups that statistically participate in extracurricular activities less frequently. Indeed, some initiatives within academia can give the impression of being exclusive and setting very high standards, which is, of course, appropriate in certain contexts, considering the quality of research and education. However, it is key to remember that initiatives where everyone can easily fit in and no one feels “inferior” boost motivation for development, leading to participation in more advanced projects later on. In fact, one of the recommendations put forward in the Report (p. 21) suggests that the more experience a participant gains, the more responsibility they can be entrusted. This, in turn, helps to build a sense of ownership of the initiative safely from its very outset and prevents the imposition of a competitive and stressful atmosphere.

The topic of establishing a safer space for participation within the HEIs was explored in the UNICOMM Toolbox – the section on “Participants’ voices – how the students themselves perceive the content and the main themes of the workshop”⁷ and in one of the [UNICOMM video tutorials](#).

6 Melis Çelen, 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? in *"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*, p. 16.



⁷ Krzysztof Niemiec, Safe Space for Student Participation – a comment on a collage made on December 5, 2023 as part of the community building workshop in *"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*, pp. 18-19.

HINT 10. Active Community of Values and Goals

A shared identity built through the sense of belonging to an institution helps establish agency despite challenges and divisive differences.

When asked about their top associations with the word “values”, the respondents in the [UNICOMM Report](#) (p. 43) highlighted the following: family, respect, honesty, friends, freedom, equality, knowledge, love, and health. This list may serve as a valid signpost for the European HEIs, as well as an apt conclusion of the UNICOMM Project. Focusing on creating a culture founded on respect, honesty, equality, and freedom, while also promoting a supportive and inclusive community facilitates relationship building and intellectual growth among students. Emphasising these values not only strengthens the sense of belonging but also helps cultivate well-developed, socially conscious individuals ready to engage meaningfully.

The UNICOMM experiences show that collectivity is formed around shared values and goals. Indeed, throughout the course of the Project, a community has been formed consisting of students from the consortium member institutions, as well as engaged staff and

students from the outside. What served as a foundation for this unity was a common identity shaped by UNICOMM activities. Such a “label” can contribute to building a diverse community focused not on differences, but on principles and aims guiding each institution.

In a broader perspective, engaging students in creating their own reality within academia, combined with various tips from this HintBook, can help them prepare for “the life after studies”. In the context of these challenging times, HEIs can serve as a counterbalance to the feeling of uncertainty brought up so frequently in the UNICOMM Project. The academia can thus be a space where people build their sense of responsibility for the community and are not afraid to #overcome⁸ various obstacles together.

⁸ Reference to Krzysztof Niemiec's article in the UNICOMM Toolbox – the part dedicated to [“Participants’ voices – how the students themselves perceive the content and the main themes of the workshops”](#) (p. 18)



Contract of cooperation

- ✓ BORA-BORA rule – “speak English, please”
- ✓ Don't be boring
- ✓ Be mindful of inclusive language
- ✓ Don't judge the ideas, try to understand
- ✓ Try to draw conclusions
- ✓ Use open communication
- ✓ Appreciate differences, use our talents
- ✓ Be punctual
- ✓ BE KIND
- ✓ Be ready to respectfully disagree
- ✓ Every day ask someone how they are and thank someone
- ✓ Respect boundaries
- ✓ Think in colours
- ✓ Participate actively
- ✓ Don't discriminate
- ✓ Give space and let everyone speak
- ✓ Avoid criticism, provide feedback
- ✓ Don't be scared to try – mistakes are OK, we are learning
- ✓ Know when to talk and when to listen
- ✓ Give priority to personal skills and preferences (in task division)
- ✓ Help each other
- ✓ Communicate your needs
- ✓ Don't kill the idea but brainstorm on it
- ✓ Be responsible but also have fun!
- ✓ Offer gifts for the group members
- ✓ As a wise leader in the group, understand both “coconuts” and “peaches”⁹

⁹ For reference, check the UNICOMM Toolbox – the part entitled [“The Tools – workshop scripts”](#), pp. 10-11.



Contract of cooperation

This component of the HintBook presents the guidelines for successful cooperation proposed by students during the [UNICOMM Summer Academy of Student Participation](#) and the [Masterclasses on Community Building](#). The list can serve as a guide to understanding what students need in order to thrive and feel safe while working together on community activities in diverse teams.

Inspirational voices connected with the UNICOMM Project

This section of the HintBook contains three articles authored by participants of the UNICOMM Peer Coaching Group and Online Symposium. These texts are included in the HintBook to inspire community activities within HEIs across Europe and to present voices that broaden the Project's perspective with concrete, practical examples of actions.

Weronika Wardzyńska, Collegium Civitas, Poland

The Power of a Supportive Peer Group

Who I am and what I do on a daily basis

I work as a Welcome Point Coordinator at Collegium Civitas, a private university in Warsaw. My responsibilities include preparing integration and adaptation activities for students and coordinating the activities of student organisations at the university. I provide individual counselling related to functioning in a new academic environment and finding one's way in Warsaw, especially when it comes to issues related to the legalisation of stay in Poland. Apart from that, I organise additional events to support the smooth functioning of newcomers at the university and to leverage the potential of diversity in the academic community that we can derive from working with people from different countries and cultures.

What motivated me to join the Peer Coaching Group

I applied to the Peer Coaching Group because I was looking for an opportunity to talk to someone who might have similar experiences and be able to relate to the context in which I operate, i.e., the specifics of the activities carried out in a higher education institution. I do not have a team of my own; I work alone on a daily basis, so such a chance for networking seemed very promising to me. Also, I hoped that cooperating with others would be a source of inspiration and an impulse to reflect on my way of thinking about student engagement. Taking part in the project met my expectations and even exceeded them.

What Peer Coaching Group meetings gave (and still give) me

On the one hand, I appreciate the sense of belonging to a group of people for whom values such as sharing knowledge, finding solutions to empower students, and caring for their safety and well-being are important. On the other hand, I enjoy being in a place where I can develop my skills by taking on new challenges such as running a short workshop on self-care techniques. The Peer Coaching Group is a good platform for trying new things because you can count on a lot of openness and kind feedback from other participants, and this atmosphere is very conducive to my own learning. Besides, it is always nice to see that people want to do extra things for each other; it somehow fills me with optimism and encouragement.

What I would suggest to colleagues who face similar challenges in their work

I would advise them to look for solutions not only *for* the students, but mostly *with* them. Listen to what they say, try new formats. Even if it does not work out, the students will see that you have the courage and willingness to put their ideas into practice and together verify what works. Besides, be honest – also about your limitations due to your role or the resources you have at your disposal. Admit your own mistakes and misconceptions. This attitude builds trust and shows the students that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process.

Jorge A. Ribeiro Pereira, University of Beira Interior, Portugal

Empowering Students: A Practical Approach to Student Rights Awareness in Higher Education

Higher education institutions across the European Higher Education Area continuously seek ways to enhance student engagement and well-being. One example of an innovative initiative in this domain is the **Student Rights Workshops** developed at the Student Ombudsman office at the **University of Beira Interior (UBI), Portugal**, during the 1st semester of 2022/2023, under the leadership of the Student Ombudsman, **Jorge A. Ribeiro Pereira**. This initiative serves as a **practical model** that universities can replicate to foster student empowerment and self-advocacy.

Why focus on student rights

A significant challenge identified by the Student Ombudsman office at UBI was that **students seeking support were unaware of their rights, duties and available institutional policies**. However, the feedback gathered after the Student Rights Workshops showed that **once informed, students were able to solve challenges independently**, reducing the need for third-party intervention.

How the initiative works

The Student Rights Workshops follow a four-step approach:

1. **Higher Education Framework** – a short overview of the concept and principles of Higher Education was provided to frame the topic of students' rights and duties.
2. **Anonymous Inquiry** – following an interactive approach inspired by the **Gapminder method**, students anonymously answer questions about student rights to gauge their knowledge gaps.
3. **Review & Clarification** – the collected responses are analysed, and key student concerns are addressed.
4. **Discussion Session** – students engage in discussions where they can share their experiences and receive expert insights.

As evidenced by the first edition of the Workshops, such a formula fosters an atmosphere where students support one another, creating a culture of **self-advocacy and constructive dialogue**.

Impact and expansion

The initiative gained traction thanks to the success of an earlier seminar on mental health promotion organised for the UBI Students' Union. This encouraged a **medical students' council to request another workshop on student rights and duties**, and soon, **other student councils followed**, demonstrating a strong demand for structured, practical guidance on student rights. The Workshop was led either in-person or online.

Lessons for EU Higher Education Institutions

This initiative highlights how **a proactive, student-centred approach** can foster engagement, **build trust between students and institutions**, and equip young people with the **confidence to navigate academic life independently**. Universities across Europe can adapt this model to their specific legal frameworks and institutional cultures.

By integrating similar workshops, they can cultivate **informed, proactive, and empowered student communities**, which contributes to strengthening the democratic and participatory character of higher education environments.

Dr Lorraine Tansey, Student Volunteer Ireland, and Olasumbo Ajisafe, Student Advisory Group, Ireland

Online Platform for Mobilising and Recognising Student Volunteering

Student Volunteer Ireland leads **StudentVolunteer.ie** – a dynamic online platform that connects students from Irish higher education institutions with community groups, charities, and NGOs across Ireland. This initiative aims to foster a culture of volunteerism among students, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to society while gaining valuable skills and experiences.

Collaboration

StudentVolunteer.ie represents a collaborative effort among various Irish higher education institutions. By pooling resources and expertise, they create a robust support system for student volunteers, ensuring that volunteering opportunities are accessible. The platform serves as a centralised hub where students can find offers that align with their interests and gain recognition for their engagement through university campus awards.

Student Voice in Decision-Making

The key aspect of StudentVolunteer.ie is its emphasis on student voice in decision-making processes. Through the Student & Community Advisory Panel, the platform actively involves students in shaping volunteer programmes and policies, recognising that their insights and experiences are invaluable. Opportunities for

gathering student voices are provided through online workshops and in-person conferences.

The StudentVolunteer.ie platform proved successful in launching various forms of student-community action at partner universities, among others:

- **Student Environmental Action:** Student volunteers are concerned about climate change and really want to be part of practical, hands-on projects that make a difference. At the University of Galway, student volunteers established the “Glassary” project to gather donations from student residences when international students move home at the end of the academic semester. Through circle-economy principles, student volunteers re-directed household goods from landfill directly into local charities and community groups focused on family support, homelessness assistance and youth initiatives.
- **Student Intergenerational Action:** Student Volunteers at the University of Limerick may choose to volunteer at “Hi Digital” – a step-by-step course aimed at elderly members of the community or those who need a bit of help in developing their digital skills. Through introductory workshops, student volunteers are trained to deliver the programme within the local city community centres. What they might find especially motivating is the ability to see the ‘real’ impact they have on the increasing levels of digital literacy among the course participants, who begin to use online tools to connect with essential services and to engage socially with friends and family.

- **Student Leadership roles:** In the words of Olasumbo Ajisafe from the Student Advisory Group: *“Volunteering as Co-auditor of UCD World Aid society has taught me so much about advocating for others. Additionally, participation in the [Una Europa Student Project Incubator](#) has allowed me to explore my skills in innovation which led me to receive a grant for my group project focused on immigration in Europe.”* Olasumbo’s personal reflection indicates that a sense of ownership is important for student volunteers, and providing leadership opportunities and training can motivate and inspire them to engage even further!

Tips for student volunteers:

- Put yourself out there and apply even when you doubt your résumé/CV.
- Try to learn to organise your time because overexerting yourself will negatively affect all you do.
- Be open to the experiences that come with volunteering.

In summary, StudentVolunteer.ie exemplifies the power of national collaboration and the importance of student voice in decision-making. By engaging students as active partners in volunteerism, the platform not only enhances their educational experience but also drives positive change in communities across Ireland.

The final statement of the UNICOMM Project can be summarised with the positive observation that many HEIs in Europe are actively supporting their thriving communities and eagerly develop and share their experiences with others. Still, there is significant potential for improvement and collaboration in setting standards and implementing applicable solutions. One of the contributions in this regard is this HintBook. The UNICOMM consortium looks forward to staying in touch and discovering further insights on the topic of active student engagement and belonging!





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