engag**Ed** in...
community building

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

For students, feeling part of an inclusive, welcoming and supportive community is key to fostering a strong sense of belonging at our University. This is crucial to students' enjoyment, wellbeing and success during their time with us. Community and a sense of belonging are cultivated through positive relationships and mutual support. It is, therefore, important that we all take action to provide opportunities for students to foster meaningful connections with their peers and staff, and enable them to feel valued, supported, and included – to feel they belong.

See the University's statement on Community and Belonging.

This guide provides students and staff with information on the importance of community building together with examples and practical hints and tips of how to cultivate communities. The initial outline for the guide was developed by Yi Li and Qianyu Yang, Enhancement Themes PhD Interns 2023, and therefore provides a very important and powerful student perspective on key community building activities.

Why is community building important?

The University of Edinburgh is a large and inclusive community for everyone who studies and works here. It also contains a variety of smaller communities which celebrate differences and diversity. It is important for everyone to feel a sense of belonging and engagement in the University environment.

Community building is an ongoing process that requires adaptability and responsiveness to changing needs and dynamics. By sharing this guide as a resource to explore and guide future directions, our University can create more inclusive, engaging and vibrant communities that nurture a strong sense of belonging among students and staff.

Community building plays a key role in student engagement and wellbeing, and can be built both inside classrooms (whether on campus, online or hybrid), as well as outside of class. Feeling part of a community is a key contributor to students feeling that they belong and matter at university. Thomas (2012) argued that belonging and student engagement are nurtured through mainstream activities with an overt academic purpose, in which all students participate. Much of this sense of belonging is developed through strong relationships between staff and students, and between students and their peers (Bovill, 2020; Carruthers-Thomas 2019; Thomas, 2012). Many young people define community

> " **not only as a geographical or spatial entity but as an emotive, knowledge-based and imagined understanding that is grounded in shared knowledge, social learning and shared experience.**
> **(Moran et al., 2017: 288)** "

Students get involved in university life through diverse activities and experience support from different communities. The University is also able to hear and respond to students' voices from different communities. Communities are therefore essential spaces for students to enjoy their student life and can inspire positive outcomes for students.

In this large and vibrant environment, the University and the Students' Association are working together to help build up and support communities of students from different backgrounds. As a resource which celebrates the diversity of our University community, this guide aims to provide a map of community building for everyone.

Read about what Yi and Quianyu learned about community building during their PhD Internships.

Examples of community building activities

Community Champions

Being part of a community is key to students' feeling a strong sense of belonging, connection with their peers and their academic environment, and is linked to student success. However, becoming part of a community can be a challenge for many of our students, particularly new students, who find themselves navigating unfamiliar territories, whilst juggling academic responsibilities, in a University that is large and diverse in culture, population and estate.

Students often need a helping hand to find their community. A pilot scheme in Moray House School of Education demonstrated the benefit of student Community Champion roles in fostering connections with and among students and staff, and developing a supportive, engaging and inclusive community.

Building on this successful pilot, their aim is to encourage and support all Schools/Deaneries to develop such roles.

edin.ac/3HeCRF3

Student-led community building across programmes

Moray House School of Education and Sports introduced the idea of Community champions in 2021-22. The primary focus was on building community across programmes via events, news roundups, social media and other communications all led by students. Students set the agendas and themes and were given small budgets to work from. The budget in the second year was £1500.

One successful sub-project was 'Happy Birthday' in which students submitted their birthdays to the Champions group and 3 were picked randomly to receive a personalised birthday card from the School and a voucher to use at Levels café. The students also got involved as a group in external events such as Pride Edinburgh, designing t-shirts and attending together. The project was promoted in lectures and tutorials with slides, shoutouts and in Cohort Leads group meetings.

⭐ Teaching Matters Blog

The Teaching Matters blog is where ideas and approaches to learning, teaching and the student experience are shared across the University: edin.ac/2zjBTUY

All blog posts are tagged and there are many examples relating to academic community and community including:

- Belonging in the new Biology curriculum: a rethink of the entire first year Biology curriculum around community, inclusion and belonging edin.ac/3M8M6JH

- Bringing together an Engagement and Inclusivity group, an initiative to promote a sense of belonging and a space to enable friendly connections for Year 1 Medical students edin.ac/45Hrlff

- Encouraging student and staff informal interaction in Biomedical Sciences to build academic community edin.ac/46xShiK

- The importance of checking in: how checking-in can purposefully provide some space for student reflection, and engender wellbeing, playfulness and trust in the classroom edin.ac/4080gR9

- Simple and highly effective tips on how to build and support academic communities for students studying online edin.ac/3rWctfh

- The Chaplaincy run a PhD Book Club which is open to all PhD students edin.ac/3BhsoXV

- Research Bow, a postgraduate research blog from and for the postgraduate researchers of the School of Health in Social Science edin.ac/3of3f8o

- How the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences create a PhD student community edin.ac/3cduXQc

⭐ Cohort Leads

Cohort Leads are academic members of staff whose role it is to create a sense of community within programmes for undergraduate and taught postgraduate students through activities and events. Cohort Leads are part of student support arrangements at the University edin.ac/44w7KOs

The resources and activities guide has ideas to help Cohort Leads plan activities suitable for their cohort edin.ac/3Fq6pi4

⭐ Online students

Community building for online students needs to consider the size and scheduling needs of the cohort. Some online programmes spend a lot of time in the early weeks of semester to actively build good relationships and hospitality between staff and students. These colleagues recognise the importance of taking time to build an online community, where students might not ever see each other, or the University campus, in person. The resources and activities guide from the Student Support team also has some ideas for running successful online events edin.ac/3Fq6pi4

⭐ Postgraduate researchers

The Doctoral College collates information on postgraduate research societies, groups and peer support structures from across the University that can all contribute to enhancing a sense of community edin.ac/402NeEw

⭐ **Edinburgh University Students' Association**

There are many opportunities for students to get involved alongside their studies or research. The opportunities can be found across different student societies, peer learning and support, international student activities and community volunteering.

edin.ac/33ltkvM

Case study: Global Buddies

Global Buddies is a peer support scheme helping incoming international students settle into their studies and the University community by pairing them with experienced "buddies" who can offer guidance, advice, and friendship. It is a volunteer initiative run by a student committee with support from the Students' Association. The buddies are usually assigned based on shared interests, academic disciplines, or cultural backgrounds, providing an opportunity for meaningful connections and mutual support edin.ac/3M4IlFq

⭐ **Student representation**

The Students' Association supports over 1300 student representatives, who mainly work on relaying student voice to decision-makers. The acts of volunteering as a representative or standing for election can themselves build community as prospective student representatives campaign and meet with their fellow students.

Once in post, student representatives are also encouraged to undertake community building activity in their programmes, Schools, Colleges, and wider communities. This may be by, for example, organising social events for marginalised students, or working in partnership with staff to arrange social events, or often subject-specific academic events – building a greater sense of community and belonging in the process.

Students: top tips for building community

1 Ask staff

There are lots of community building activities taking place across the University and Students' Association and staff will be able to advise you about what is available. In Schools, Cohort Leads are people who can offer information about local community building events or opportunities for undergraduate and taught postgraduate students.

2 Look for funding

The **Student Partnership Agreement** states how the Students' Association and the University are working in partnership to enhance the student experience. To support the Student Partnership Agreement, **funding** is provided each year for student-staff collaborative projects.

- The Students' Association has details of **available funding opportunities**, including the Student Opportunities Development Fund.

- **Student Experience Grants** are one-off contributions to support innovative projects and initiatives that will enhance students' social, academic, entrepreneurial, sporting or cultural development. The grants are not specific to community building, but can include community building activities as part of supporting developments that allow students to make the most of their time at university.

- Funding may also be available in Schools to support community building.

Case study:

The Institute of Molecular Plant Sciences (IMPS) Sports Day

An inclusive community-building project for all staff and students who work in the Daniel Rutherford building, where IMPS is housed. This was no ordinary sports day: it included games that required technical skills of a scientist, such as measuring accuracy, speed calculation, and many more games involving scientific skills. The event was aimed to help integrate students from all years of study and staff, of all ages and ethnicities, into the community in a fun way that created memorable experiences and helped to (re)create a resilient community, particularly in post Covid-19 times. The project won the Student Partnership in Quality Scotland (sparqs) **award for a new initiative in partnership** in October 2023.

Book a study space or room as a group

Students can **book a study space** and EUSA or EUSU registered student groups can **book a room** where students can come together to form study communities.

Staff: top tips for building community

❯ **Fostering a sense of belonging**

The guide for Schools, developed by the Sense of Belonging Task Group, provides a framework and practical suggestions for promoting a sense of belonging amongst students in Schools or units.

❯ **Small things make a big difference**

Organising social events and activities with catering provided, getting to know and remembering students' names, or sending emails to students on special days (birthdays or graduations) are some of the ways to help build community.

❯ **Student-led, staff supported**

Building a strong and vibrant community takes planning and effort and needs active participation. The research undertaken by all our PhD Interns across the three years of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme found that community building activities work best when they are led by students (the ideas and motivation) and supported by staff (to navigate organisational aspects and provide continuity).

Further resources

Many students find a sense of community and belonging through sports. Edinburgh University Sports Union (EUSU)

❯ **Student feedback**

Gathering and responding to student feedback helps to build a sense of community. There are guides for **students** and **postgraduate researchers** on giving feedback.

❯ **Student engagement and building community**

The Institute for Academic Development (IAD) have created some **practical guides to student engagement** containing lots of examples and ideas for enhancing practice and aimed specifically at academic staff. IAD have also created some webpages for **Cohort Leads**, including a specific page on useful resources for building community.

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