Safe start to studies

Dr Gareth Hughes

@StudentMindsOrg
#UniMentalHealthCharter
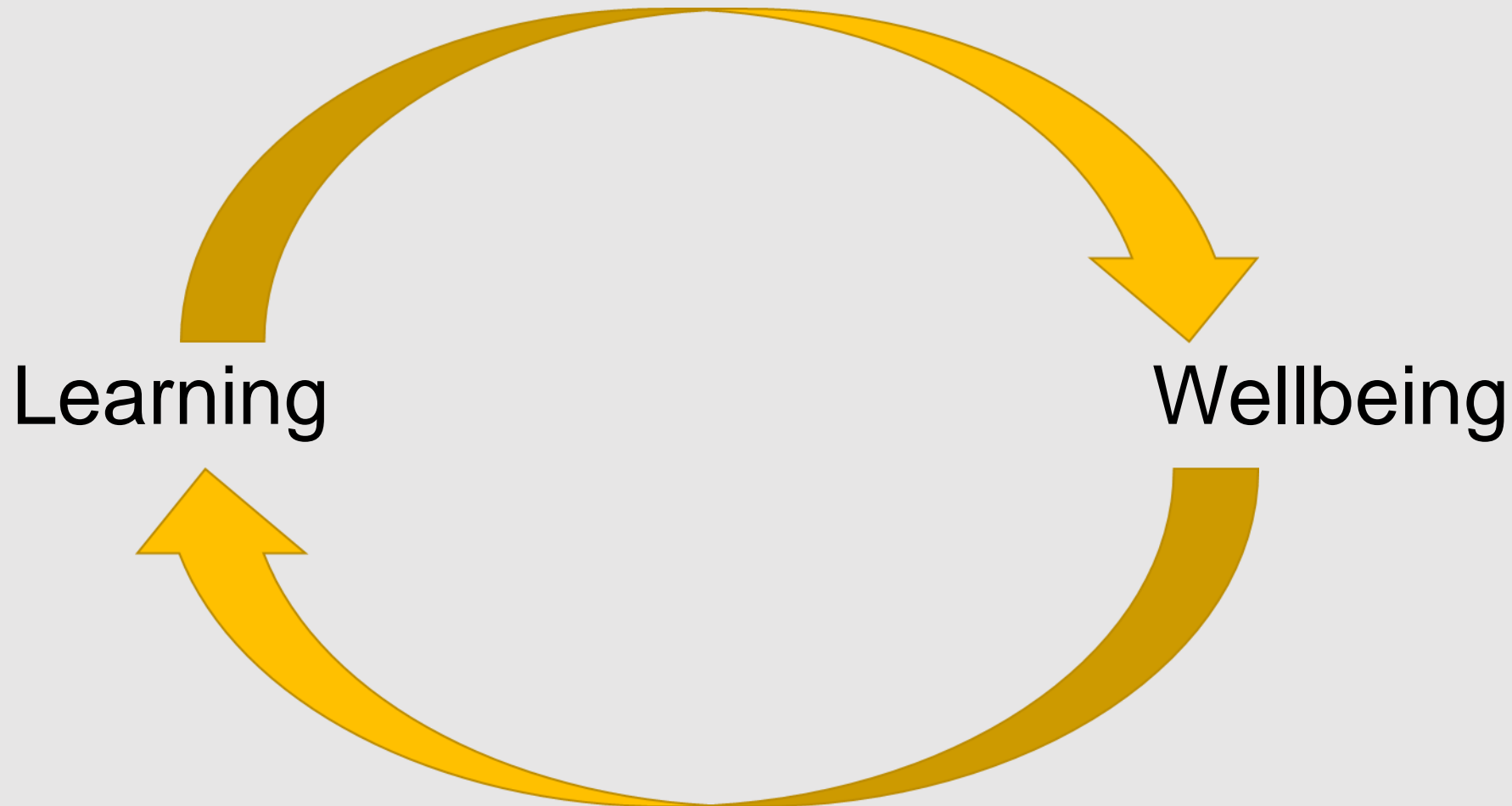
An initiative by

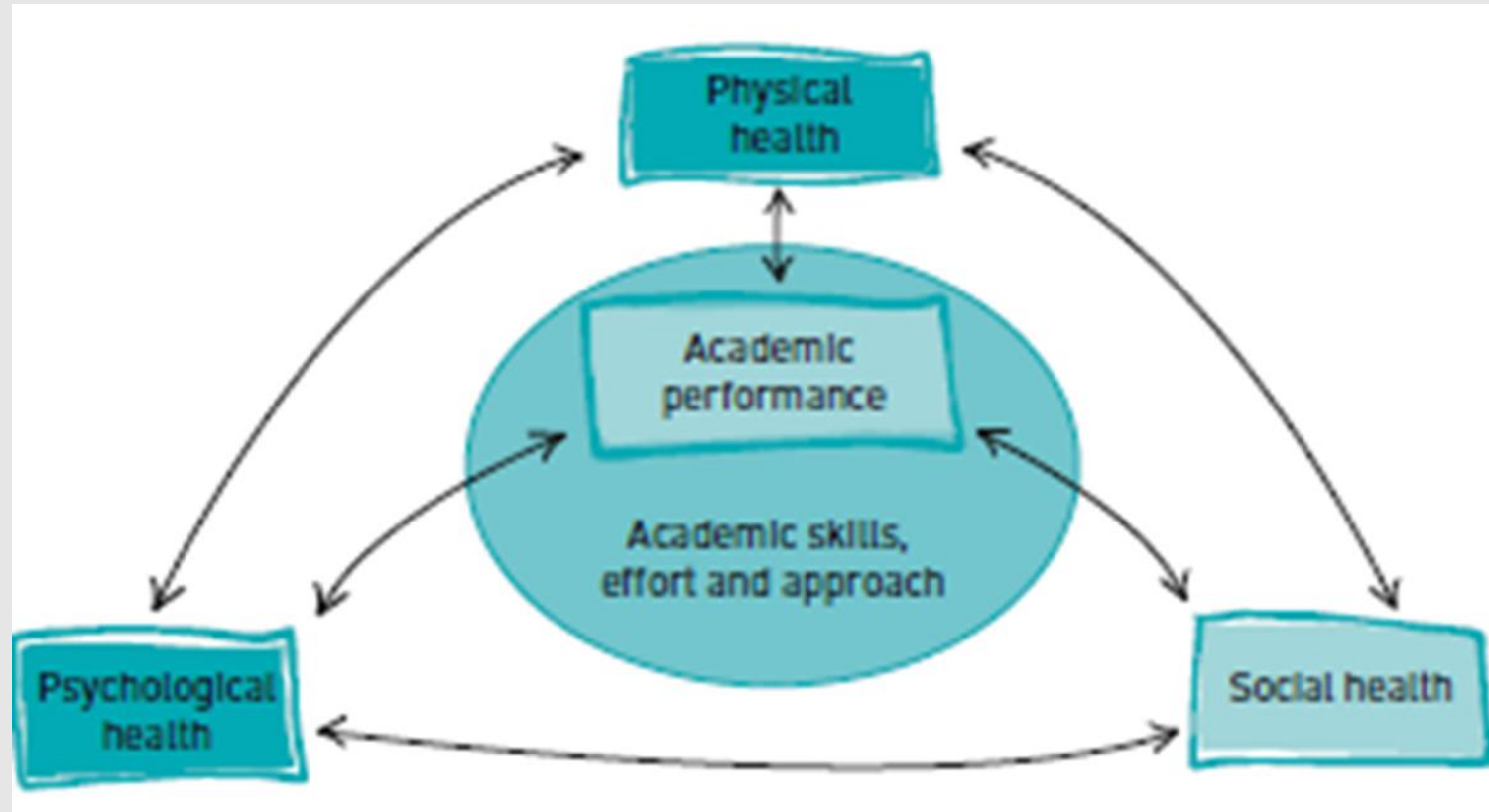student minds | University Mental Health Charter

Psychosocial approaches

Why is it important for universities to take a psychosocial approach?

Learning

Wellbeing

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Student wellbeing

(Hughes, 2020)

Loneliness

Loneliness

Cognitive function
Concentration
Problem solving
Academic performance

(Based on Caccioppo & Patrick, 2008)

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Psychological safety

A sense of community, belonging and psychological safety are crucial to academic learning, performance and wellbeing

Psychological safety comes from feeling supported in the environment, believing that you can safely be and express yourself and that you can feel secure and comfortable expressing thoughts, ideas, and concerns without fear of negative consequences

A lack of psychological safety results in heightened emotional arousal, reduced cognitive function, adjustments to behaviours to remain safe and ongoing monitoring of the environment, which leads to reduced cognitive capacity for learning

(Hanshaw & Hanshaw, 2023; Howanskey, et al, 2022 Frazier, et al, 2017)

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Social needs

Need to belong to community

Need for attention and intimacy

Need for a sense of value and status

Need for privacy

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Why a whole-university approach?

The evidence clearly shows that our environment is a key determinant of mental health and wellbeing – **physical, cultural, social, personal**

What this means is that all universities already have a whole university impact on their students and this is supported by newer research of different aspects of university life

Everything we do will be having an impact positively or negatively, whether we've thought about it or not

We must, therefore, become conscious of what we are doing and take steps to ensure our impact is as positive as possible

(Hughes & Spanner, 2024)

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Multiple opportunities for improvement

Links

Transition

Belonging

Learning

Wellbeing
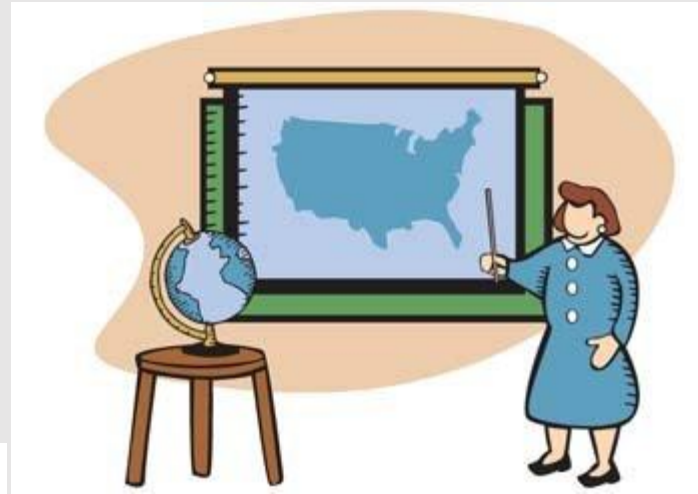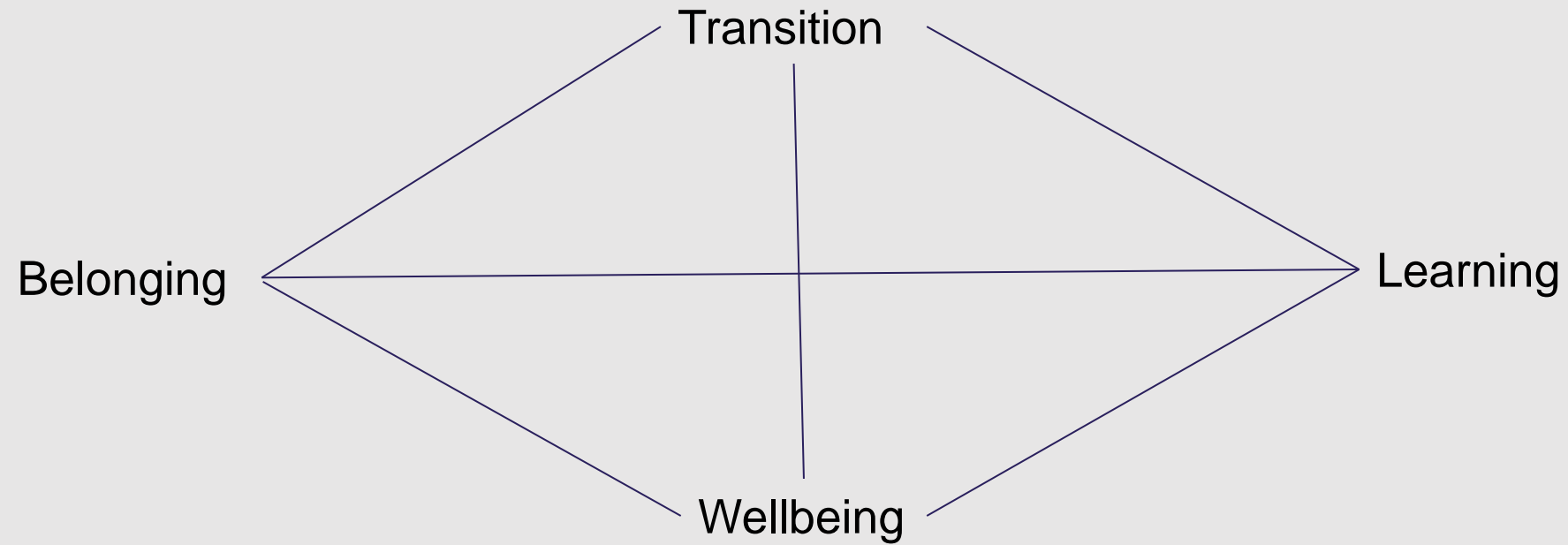
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University Mental Health Charter

The University Mental Health Charter was created in the UK to support universities to take a whole university approach to improving student and staff mental health

The framework is set out over 18 themes that cover every element of university life

Today we are particularly interested in

Theme 1 – Transition and the First Year

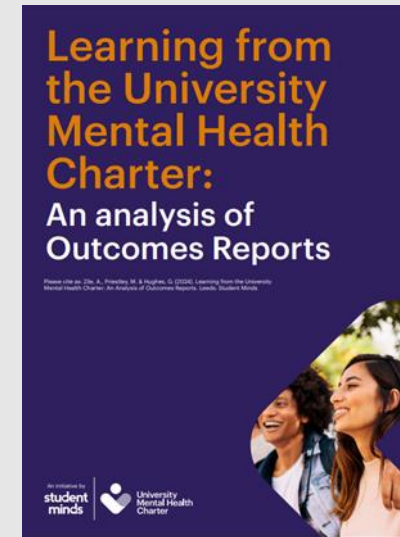Theme 12 – Social Integration and belonging

The Insights Report

This report was compiled following analysis of 24 Outcome Reports, completed between 2022 and 2024

Each example of Excellent and Good Practice and each Recommendation and identified Risk was coded thematically and compiled by Framework Theme. A second level of analysis was then conducted within each Framework Theme to identify commonalities across universities

Learning from the University Mental Health Charter: An analysis of Outcomes Reports

(Zile, Priestley & Hughes, 2024)

Following this, a final level of analysis was conducted to identify issues recurring across multiple Themes and which have implications for universities in developing their whole university approach. As part of a grounded approach, the team also reviewed Panel feedback to universities who were granted an Award, having met conditions that were part of their Award in Progress.

Three large issues

Consistency

Governance

Evaluation

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Transition and wellbeing

What is the relationship between the transition into university and student mental health and wellbeing?

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Transition and mental health

Research has identified that, during this period of transition, many students experience psychological distress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, a reduction in self–esteem and isolation.

Students are leaving old networks behind

The entry into university also appears to cause distress – this can be influenced by how alien the new environment appears

One of the factors that influences how transition impacts on mental health and wellbeing is how well students can meet their needs in the new environment of their university

(Tinto, 2023; Gravett & Winston, 2021; Thompson, 2021; Kahu & Nelson, 2018)

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Transition – what is happening?

A lot of work to develop the support offered to students before they arrive and during the early weeks of first year – these include starter programmes to develop academic skills, buddy schemes and redeveloped orientation

However, this is often not joined up – for example there is little consideration of the role of curriculum and students often experienced inconsistencies between different parts of the university, which lowers their trust in the university

Much of the work ends after the first few weeks of the first year – there is an assumption that by this point students must be ok. Often this is not true.

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Transition – what needs to happen?

Consistent support from before students arrive to the end of the first year (at least)

Support to develop academic skills and confidence

Support to feel a sense of belonging and to develop community

Consideration of the role of curriculum in transition, developing community and wellbeing – more on this later

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Questions

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Social belonging

Research has clearly demonstrated that belonging and social integration are important, not just for student wellbeing, but also for academic achievement and persistence to graduation

Research and feedback from universities indicates that we are seeing more students experiencing loneliness

Universities are also telling us that they are finding it more difficult to keep students on campus and create belonging

(Pedlar, et al, 2022; McIntyre, 2018)

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Some questions

Why are so many students lonely?

How do students find friends? Why do some students not find friends?

How much of this is our responsibility to address?

What can or should we do about it?

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What do we mean by 'community'?

We want students to feel they belong to the community – but what community? Who and how are these communities created?

There are pre-existing pieces

University staff   Students Unions

Welfare organisation   Policies and processes

Language   Physical environment

Discipline   Fashion

Demographics   Students in years above

Any of these may help a student feel included or excluded

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Do we mean 'communities'?
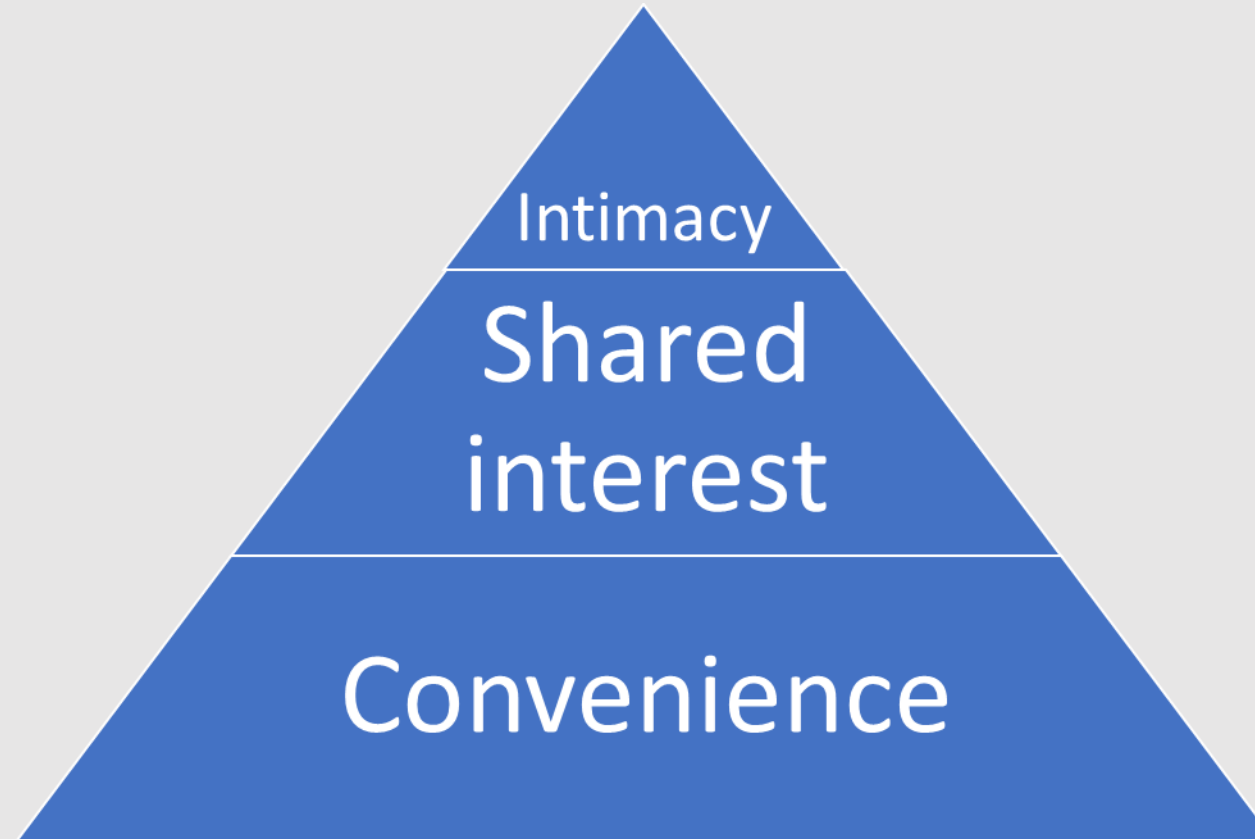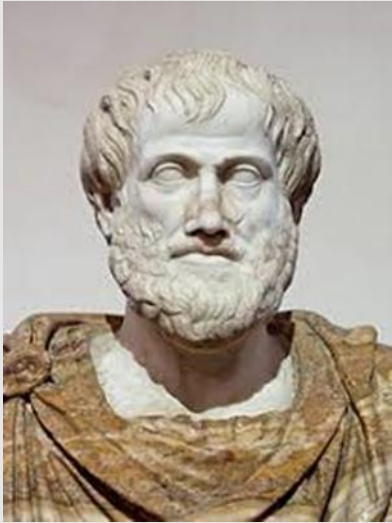
Is there one community within a university?

Or are there many communities?

Or are both of these things true?

Or if not should they both be true?

How do students find their communities?

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Do we help students to learn how to build community?

Intimacy

Shared interest

Convenience

Taking proactive steps to create more friendships based on convenience and shared interests increases the possibility of friendships that are intimate

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What is happening?

Pre-entry

Support to help students prepare for university life, often including online resources and guides, opportunities to speak to staff and current students and introductory webinars

Some support has been targeted at specific student groups who are seen to find the transition more challenging

Students with autism

Disabled students

Students from low participation areas

Black students

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University responses

On and after arrival

Growth of non-alcoholic events to appeal to more people

More social programmes in student halls of residence

Attempts to create a 'sticky campus'

Subsidised food

Attempts to create more social space

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A challenge to discuss

A lot of these interventions focus on helping students adapt to university life

They help them to understand university language, ways of behaving, ways of studying etc.

The position seems to be that the problem is with the students – they can't integrate into university life without changing

But what if the problem is us – do we need to change so that the students coming to us find it easier

What would that mean for us? What would have to change?

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But what's missing

Most interventions to promote community in UK universities have been extra-curricular – outside teaching and learning

Belonging to the community and the classroom seem to be kept in separate boxes

But the classroom is a social space and one of the few guaranteed contact points between student and university

Learning is also a social endeavour

(Hanshaw & Hanshaw, 2023; Hughes, et al, 2022).

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What needs to happen?

For universities to create a strategic, proactive, and consistent approach to social integration and belonging that considers the whole student journey

Universities need to embed social integration and community within curriculum design and ensure initiatives are embedded across courses, cohorts, and campuses (in multi-site institutions).

We need to get better at identifying those least likely to feel a sense of belonging and those who become lonely to target interventions more effectively

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Social belonging in the classroom

Classroom culture (online and in person) is crucial to student learning, persistence and wellbeing

Students can benefit from a shared social identity, a sense of community and helpful and healthy social norms and rule

Students learn better and feel better in an environment that facilitates peer-learning and collaboration rather than a competitive environment.

Creating a healthy classroom culture requires explicit attention and should be a feature of curriculum design

(Hughes, et al, 2022)
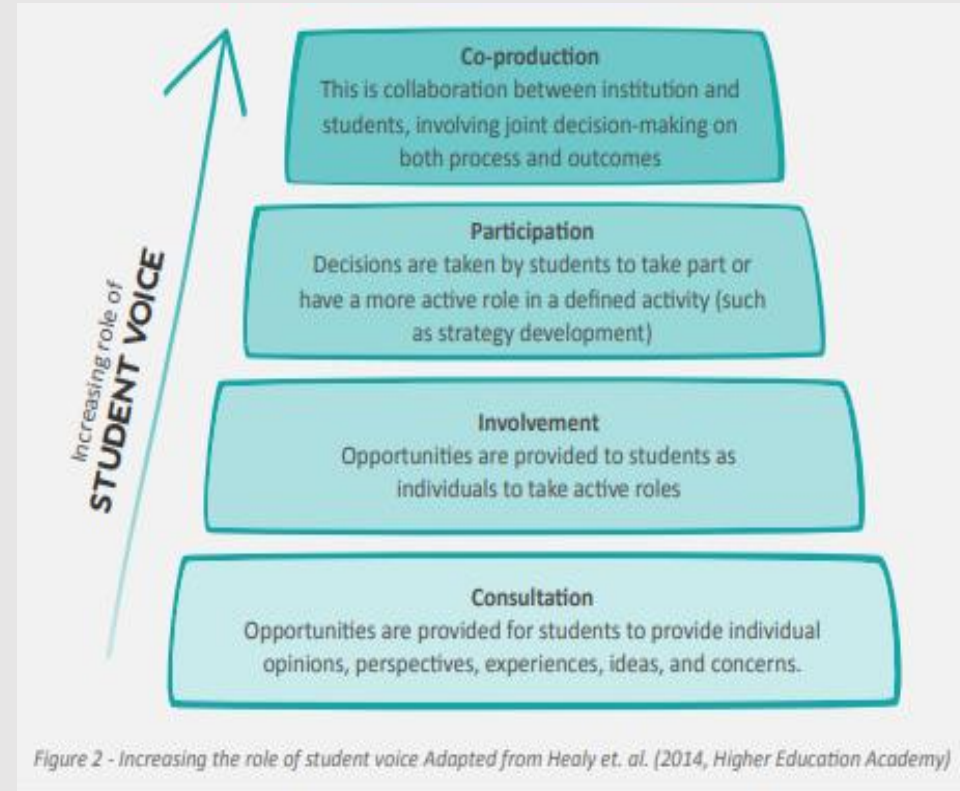
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Student voice

Who gets to create community?

Can students genuinely change the factors that impact on community?

For example, which parts of the physical campus do students control?

How can we create community for students if we don't hear their experiences?

How do we ensure we hear all voices?

Figure 2 - Increasing the role of student voice Adapted from Healy et. al. (2014, Higher Education Academy)

(Piper & Emmanual, 2019)

Whole university

Ultimately the universities that are doing best in this area are the ones with the best culture and the clearest narrative about who they are

This is driven by university leaders but can be seen in the lived experiences of students and staff – they understand who they are and why they do what they do

This drives all decision making and everyone understands it

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'Defining Whole University'

Sally Kift offers a three generational model of change

1st gen: Ad hoc interventions, usually within departments, not connected or embedded and each intervention could disappear if key personnel leave

2nd gen: Work joining up between departments, easy synthesis being acted upon, some strategy led from the top, but some areas not yet connected and not fully embedded – strategy views the issue as largely separate from, not core to, business

3rd gen: Issue embedded into the way the university views itself and its work, embedded into core aspects of university life, collaboration between all parts of the university as usual – moving from embedded to habitual.

(Kift et al, 2010)

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Whole University

How whole university is your approach to creating community?

Which generation of change are you in?

How might you think about building a whole university approach?

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Questions

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