Building communities of learners and supporting students to feel they belong in their university learning environment underpins many areas of our pedagogic thinking and practice. This is particularly evident in discussions of retention and success where the lens and language of community and belonging frame discussion of students’ resilience in the face of academic and social challenges, and their confidence to seek support.

Institutional interest in belonging has been reinforced by National Student Survey questions on feeling part of a learning community, working with others and, more specifically, being represented and listened to by the student association.

Yet, as concepts and as drivers of practice, such terms can be problematic. Used uncritically, they imply a common understanding of what it is to ‘belong’ and who is (or is not) part of a given ‘community’. Too often perceptions of student community are based on an imagined full-time, young, time-rich student. Yet students – and their relationship with the university – are more diverse and complex than this.

How can we move to understand belonging in a way that recognises the diversity and hybridity of individual and group identities? What aspects of belonging and community are salient, at what points, and to whom?

Here we highlight a series of projects from Edinburgh Napier University that explore belonging and community from different perspectives. Together, they highlight the importance of recognising a multiplicity of student voices and interests. Most importantly, they highlight the implications of this diversity for our action, challenging us to think holistically about learning and teaching, the use of campus space, and how we create opportunities to hear and respond to less powerful and less visible student voices.
Belonging and the Online Learner: Listening to the Distant Voice

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This project investigates what being an ‘Edinburgh Napier student’ is like from the perspective of learners in an undergraduate online Business School degree. What does ‘belonging’ mean to these students and what are the key touchpoints and connections that really matter to these learners who are not based on campus? Furthermore, given the high attrition rates for online learning, what helps these students feel connected and kept on course?

The study maps the support mechanisms for students to develop a sense of belonging on the BA Business Enterprise (BABE) One Year Online Top-up Programme and explores to what extent these mechanisms, such as a monthly virtual office hour with the Programme Leader, have actually supported the development of a sense of belonging in practice. We also focus on what aspects of belonging or community matter to students when only studying with the University for one year (and in many cases are globally dispersed). The work highlights the challenges of capturing the voices of online and distance learners. The research raises key questions about communication and a sense of engagement at a distance – for example, the use of generic student email lists for student invitations/interventions may make some distant learners feel disconnected or even overlooked by the University.

What Makes a ‘Community of Staff and Students’? Developments in Criminology and Social Sciences

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The Social Sciences subject group were in a somewhat unique position regarding NSS question 21: ‘I feel part of a community of staff and students’ in 2017. Our BA Social Sciences and BA Criminology programmes are linked, sharing a large number of modules, academic skills, employability and social events. While responses were positive for Social Sciences (76%), the results for the Criminology programme were significantly poorer (48%), yet there was no obvious reason for the gap between these responses. Drawing on collaborative feedback activities, survey data and reflections on this year’s Criminology U.S. Summer School, this initiative seeks to compare opinions and experiences of students on both programmes about the idea of a ‘community of staff and students’ and what this means to them. The work highlights the importance of exploring anomalies in survey data to deepen our understanding of student voices. Substantively, it challenges us to consider how similar learning experiences can be experienced and responded to in a range of ways. It encourages us to open up questions around student and staff mobility, commuting and studying, and how intertwined students wish their social and learning lives to be.
Feedback Moments

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This exploratory work was student-led. Final-year undergraduates were invited to share their stories and reflections on the kind of feedback that really helped make a positive difference to their time at Edinburgh Napier University. Their views extended beyond traditional (assessment-related) definitions of feedback to also encompass and surface some of the (often largely unshared) social, emotional and community-focused experiences of feedback that students felt helped support them in ways that they perceived to make a difference to their overall experience of being and belonging at the University. It illuminated narratives that framed feedback as support, encouragement, guidance or help which may, importantly, come from a whole range of people, including teachers, those in professional services, peers and others.

The work encourages us to recognise feedback as a way of enhancing a sense of belonging and connection to the University. It challenges us to consider how this alternative lens for viewing feedback may impact on our practice and approach – as students and as staff.

Belonging to Team Napier: Sports Clubs, Societies and the Student Experience

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Sports clubs and societies often play a pivotal role in the lives of their members, shaping and framing their experience of university. They are a key focus of the work of student associations, coordinating and supporting the diverse array of interests and activities and supporting the leadership of individual groups.

This work aimed to capture what being part of ‘Team Napier’ meant to students and asked them to consider the impact that sport and the social engagement, and support that came from it, had on their experience of the University. Edinburgh Napier Student Association led this project, interviewing members of a range of sports clubs about their experience and capturing what Team Napier meant to them. This was presented as a mini-documentary, drawing on footage and voices from the Team Napier Sports Ball.

The project raises a number of key issues to consider. How do we/should we understand and respond to different ways of belonging to the University? What sources of community and support are significant at what points in a student’s university career? How can student associations and universities work closely together to signpost the range of opportunities available – and the multiple ways in which people can become part of the broad university ‘Team’?
In September 2017, our University’s first graduate apprentices began degrees in Software Development, Cybersecurity, or Information Technology Management for Business. Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs) are undergraduate honours degrees in which the students are in full-time employment, studying on campus (e.g.) one day per week, and completing in four years. Modules run through the summer (Tr3) and Professional Practice modules capture work-based learning (completed in the workplace). The students are paid employees, throughout; their fees are paid by Skills Development Scotland (mostly from the Apprenticeship Levy). A series of research interventions (survey, Rich Pictures, narrative interviews) captured the contexts and perspectives of apprentices in the first cohort. They mostly identified as employees; most had been in their job for more than a year, some for many years. Several had previous experience of university; four had dropped out of computing degrees. The apprentices found resources to support their studies, both from their colleagues at work and from each other, as the cohort bonded. They tended to describe themselves as part-time students and in contrast to full-time/traditional students, joked about not having time for student lifestyles, because of their work. However, they still valued their student cards!

The Big Read is a shared reading scheme that began at Edinburgh Napier University in 2016. It was established at Kingston University in 2015 as a research project into how their first-year students spent their spare time, in particular looking at how much they enjoyed reading for pleasure. Whole university pre-arrival reading schemes are common in the US, and Kingston were keen to see how they could work in the UK. The aim was to create a community of staff and students all reading the same book. The effects were immediate – students talked about their pleasure at receiving the book and staff also responded eagerly. Whether or not people had read the book, they were keen to join in the discussion.

In 2018, Edinburgh Napier’s Big Read evolved to adopt a new approach, one that more closely connected with students. Expanding beyond first-year involvement and actively using the student voice (ENSA, student focus groups and social media) to inform and underpin this new direction, the #NapierBigRead became a catalyst for a range of inter-connected activities, both social and academic. This included a link with local homelessness charity Streetreads, with collection points established across all campuses to enable staff and students to donate books before receiving the Big Read book – itself a student publication.

The initiative offers a lens for exploring belonging and community-building in a way that crosses boundaries, opening space for conversations and interconnections across the whole institution. A central concern is the notion of how an institutional activity, rather than adopt a ‘top-down’ approach, can bond and galvanise groups of students (and staff) across diverse disciplines and campuses through shared action linked to academic interests, social conscience, or simply an interest in making personal connections via a great book.
I’m In: The Inclusive Practice Programme

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The programme was launched at the start of September 2018 with an event that brought together staff, students and external specialists who identified key priority areas to focus on:

- Inclusive learning, teaching & assessment
- Quality assurance
- Student-led change
- Supporting staff
- Physical environment
- Technology
- Partnerships
- Culture change

‘I’m In’ is overseen by the Instigators, a group of students and staff. Their next job is to take everything we learned at the September event and plan how we’ll pick up on each theme in turn during the year ahead.

‘I’m In’ is also recruiting Innovators, enthusiasts looking to engage with the programme. Some Innovators will take part in a small way, looking for support to develop how inclusively they personally work. Others will help us to address some of the bigger challenges across the University as a whole.

You can keep up to date with I’m In by visiting the programme’s Moodle site at: https://moodlecommunity.napier.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=290

Using Creative Visual Methodologies to Explore Student Engagement and Belonging

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Talking to students is something that most of us working in universities do almost every day. But in a research project with restricted time to get to know student participants, finding ways to create opportunities for students to express themselves in authentic and ethical ways can be challenging and lies at the heart of advancing our understanding of the student experience. To explore student engagement and belonging, creative visual methodologies were used with groups of participants initially studying in four different college settings, and then on two different degree programmes. Model building and mapping exercises replaced more traditional focus groups and interviews as data generation approaches for a study into the Associate Students Project. The study explores students’ engagement when they arrive on university campus in their third year, having been Associate Students for two years at college. A distinctive, supportive form of engagement has ensured students’ success and attainment on their degree programmes, but their sense of belonging is located with the original group of Associate Students rather than with the university or the School.
Residence Life to Real Life
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Residence Life can be defined as an initiative centred on resident-student wellbeing, safeguarding and engagement. At Edinburgh Napier University, it is made up of two parts; the Service and the Programme.

The Service is the primary component of Residence Life. It is entirely based upon a commitment of promoting student success. Operationally, the provision of on-site support and advice at each residence is available 24-hours a day throughout the entire academic year. Incidentally, the Service is active in the promotion of University support services as well as those that are external. Peer support teams typically make up the resident ‘touch points’ out-of-hours with Resident Assistants (or another title fulfilling a similar role) accessible throughout the night supported by a University security provision. Each member of staff and peer support are also extensively trained in providing accurate and relevant advice as well as crisis support and management.

The Programme exists to raise the visibility and accessibility of the Service. An effective Programme will likely consist of a wide range of initiatives and events available exclusively to resident-students. As a marketing vehicle for the Service, much of the Programme may be based upon healthy living and wellbeing promotion (as well as a few that may be beverage-centric...).

Building Communities of Learners to Improve Skills Acquisition and Graduate Competency: Veterinary Nursing Skills Clubs
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The key to effective skills acquisition is practice, but limitation of laboratory space and teaching time often restricts students ability to practice routine clinical and laboratory skills in a safe supervised environment. Veterinary Nursing Skills Club is an initiative to provide students with space, time and equipment to practice the clinical skills they need to acquire to attain professional registration. The plan is to pilot this model with the veterinary nurses and measure the effectiveness of the approach against the performance of students from previous cohorts in the same modules. If effective similar clubs will be set up for biomedical and conservation biology skills. In this approach students are allowed access to a laboratory, where skills kits, marking schemes, videoed master classes and video recording facilities are available. At certain times in the week student mentors will be available to provide advice to students. Students will then record themselves doing the skills test using their mobile devices and can then upload them for peer assessment using a dedicated learning space created on Moodle.
Continuing the Conversation and Valuing the Voices:
Re-positioning SSLC in the School of Computing

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In October 2017 Edinburgh Napier University adopted the outcomes of a review into the operation of Staff-Student Liaison Committees (renaming these Student-Staff Liaison Committees) intended to clarify the remit and business appropriate to SSLC, the relationship between SSLC and other committees including Boards of Study, the role and remit of Student Reps, and the ways in which the feedback loop was closed and actions reported back to students. The aim of these recommendations was to strengthen the student voice through SSLC, and develop SSLC into an effective channel for change.

The School of Computing took the opportunity opened up by these recommendations to re-think the place of SSLC in the School, moving from one cross-school committee to three undergraduate and one postgraduate committee, each with a clear programme focus. In 2018 an additional SSLC dedicated to Graduate Apprentice programmes was also instituted. The meetings had a clear focus upon Actions (these replaced minutes) and each Action had a named Owner and Timescale for resolution. Progress on Actions are reported via Moodle and Student Reps are encouraged to disseminate.

The new approach to SSLC was accompanied by a stronger focus on ‘place’ in the School, with significant investments made in the refurbishment of dedicated lab spaces to encourage student identification with these spaces, with each other, and with their programme of study. Over the same period, students began to use the SLACK team messaging system as a way to share information and build community, and invited academics to join these conversations. In the 2018 NSS, the School’s scores in the NSS for ‘opportunities to provide feedback’ increased from 79% to 87%, for ‘staff value students views about the course’ from 61% to 71%, for ‘student feedback is acted upon’ from 45% to 51%.

Belonging to a Learning Community: Staff Perspectives

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The Faculty Learning Community (FLC) at Edinburgh Napier University is based on the Miami model developed by Milton D. Cox and seeks to explore the ways in which staff support each other throughout the institution. This formal, time-bound and selective learning community has provided participants drawn from both academic and professional services staff with professional development, networking experience, intellectual stimulation, confidence and community. This project discuss how our learning community was formed and our hopes for its development.
Design Studio Takeover: Space, Community and Belonging

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This project aimed to prioritise the enhancement of the learning community through physically transforming a shared learning space. During Induction week in September 2018, Paul Kerlaff and colleagues from the BDes(Hons) Interior and Spatial Design programme ran a one-day collaborative project with years 1, 2 and 3 in the Merchiston design studio. The project began with a ‘micro-briefing’ process using the Menti interactive presentation format, to identify how students would like to enhance the learning community in their shared studio space. In the space of six hours, cross cohort teams presented ideas, received peer feedback, and realised improvements to improve the learning community using lightweight and quickly adaptable materials (polycarbonate roofing sheets and reinforced tape). The project outcomes include time-lapse films of the one-day event and feedback from the students about the process and outcomes. The process will be followed up with students halfway through the trimester to critically reflect on the day-to-day function of the interventions.

Creating a Meaningful and Productive Rep Community

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Programme reps are an integral part of the student experience at Edinburgh Napier. They allow staff to understand how students are feeling about their time at Edinburgh Napier, to work together on problems and praise each other on good practice. This discussion aims to look at how different groups such as other students, staff and the student association, can help to both sustain a rep community but also to ensure it is productive and rewarding.

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