Developing a toolkit for tutors to promote a sense of belonging for online, distance and rural learners at the module and programme levels

Introduction

This collaborative cluster project aimed to develop a practitioner's online toolkit to help tutors develop a sense of belonging (SoB) through their online modules and programmes. The work was funded by QAA Scotland through the Enhancement Theme, Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience.

Developing SoB in the online and distance context has not been examined widely either in the literature, or as a practice, leading to a lack of resources or sources of help.

Colleagues from five higher education institutions in Scotland worked together to pool knowledge and experience about their practice into an online resource: the Sense of Belonging Toolkit.

A toolkit was considered to provide a permanent resource that could be used by the five contributing institutions, and others, to initiate and facilitate discussion about SoB for open distance learning. OpenLearn Create was chosen to host the resource because it is an open source platform, maintained by the Open University and, therefore, likely to be stable and have longevity.

The Sense of Belonging Toolkit can be found at:
https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=4183#tabs-2

Toolkit structure and aims

The toolkit comprises six parts.

1   A comprehensive introduction to situate the user.
2   A literature review assessing current understanding around SoB.
3   A toolkit for tutors to consider prior to, and when, delivering modules.
4   Case studies to exemplify good practice.
5   A tool for the tutor to reflect and evaluate on the development of the SoB in their students.
6   Videos of tutors and students talking about SoB.

The approach to developing the toolkit was to provide a practical and usable resource, rather than a heavily academic artefact with the emphasis on keeping the language simple and the descriptions short. Real-life examples were used for each aspect of the toolkit. In an early workshop to gain practitioner feedback, this approach received positive comment. The literature review provides a deeper theoretical understanding of practice for those who want this.

The toolkit is intended to be used as a faculty development or dip-in resource, and is designed with three specific user groups in mind: those new to online teaching, those experienced in online teaching, and those in management/policy-setting roles within institutions either already delivering or considering embarking on online provision.

It is anticipated that individuals:

who are new to the concept of SoB should be able to:

- explain the meaning of SoB, the reasons given for its importance in higher education, and the aspects of provision and tutoring which can contribute to its promotion online
- using the suggested outlines for collegial discussion, analyse and evaluate the examples presented in case studies and documentation, identifying features which they are persuaded to embody in their tutoring
- identify other aspects of their students' experience which may contribute to their SoB.

who already value the generation of a SoB in their online tutoring should be able to:

- engage in structured collegial discussions in which members will identify from the documentation and case studies suggestions for enhancement of their own practice, and that of supporting colleagues, in promoting a SoB on the part of their online students.

with managerial responsibility for the planning and provision of online learning should be able to:

- explain the meaning of SoB and its importance for retention and progression in higher education
- identify viable and feasible features which could enhance their online provision.

Project contribution and methodology

The five institutions contributing to the cluster were:

- University of Dundee (co-lead)
- Edinburgh Napier University (critical friend)
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- Open University in Scotland (co-lead)
- Queen Margaret University (lead).

Overall project leadership was carried out by Queen Margaret University until April 2019 and, thereafter, by the University of Dundee and the Open University in Scotland.

Each institution took the lead on the production of particular parts of the toolkit.

The project progressed through regular team meetings, both face-to-face and online. Ethical approval for the project was obtained. Workshops were held involving one or more of the team presenting at various locations, including those to specifically generate feedback on parts 3 and 5 of the toolkit. A literature review was undertaken, which included development

of SoB in students and impact on key performance indicators such as attrition and progression.

Development of a prototype, written in Microsoft Word, was used for feedback from tutors outwith the project team from the five cluster institutions. One student gave feedback on the first toolkit iteration. Videos from tutors were created and one featuring a student from outwith the project team. Case studies were developed from four of the partners to show a range of online and rural online experiences.

The results from the feedback work were used to revise and finalise the toolkit, which was built and launched online in July 2019.

Evaluation and further work

Staff from the five contributing institutions are promoting the cluster work and toolkit within and outwith Scotland, for example:

- Enhancement Themes, Theme Leaders' Group meetings (December 2018, February 2019)
- Chemistry in Education Conference (April 2019)
- Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) Conference (May 2019) and associated journal article
- Asian Pacific Medical Education Conference (January 2020).

As the project involved five partner institutions, including individuals outwith the immediate project team providing feedback, there has already been impact from the development of the toolkit itself.

Cluster partners are now working with the toolkit in their own institutions to evaluate what is changing around SoB. Some interesting developments are in progress, for example, the use of *Viewpoint* cards and a possible PhD studentship.