

Towards a Sense of Belonging in an Inclusive Learning Environment - #IBelong – Erasmus+ project

Evaluation of Diversity Dialogue Days, Edge Hill University

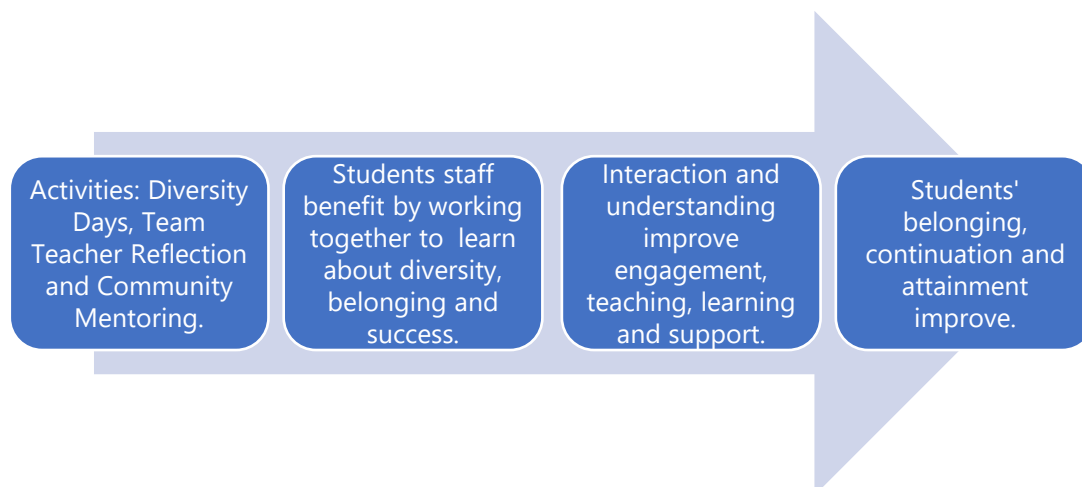
Description of the intervention

One of the interventions developed as part of the #Ibelong Erasmus + project is diversity Dialogue Days (DDs). In summary, DDs bring together all new students and staff on a particular programme or course of study at the start of the academic year for between half a day and a full day. Student-centred activities and authentic sharing about diversity, belonging and success by staff are students are used to initiate conversations and understanding about diversity, belonging and success (the draft principles of DDs are provided in appendix 1). The intervention is informed by research about student retention and success, particularly Thomas 2012 and Thomas et al 2017. A fuller description of the intervention, including guidance materials and resources are being developed.

Context: #Ibelong evaluation approach

The evaluation is informed by programme theory evaluation, in particular logic chains and theory of change. All of the interventions are informed by a generic logic chain, as shown in figure 1 (this is currently in draft form; it can be used to generate a theory of change narrative for the programme as a whole). It is anticipated that the three interventions (DDs, Team Teacher Reflection and Community Mentoring) will work together as a suite of activities to improve students' belonging, continuation and attainment. Evaluation will be applied to each activity and to the programme as a whole.

Figure 1: Generic logic chain for the #Ibelong project



Across the project a range of common methods will be used, together with some common indicators. The activities will have a range of short-term benefits for participants, who will

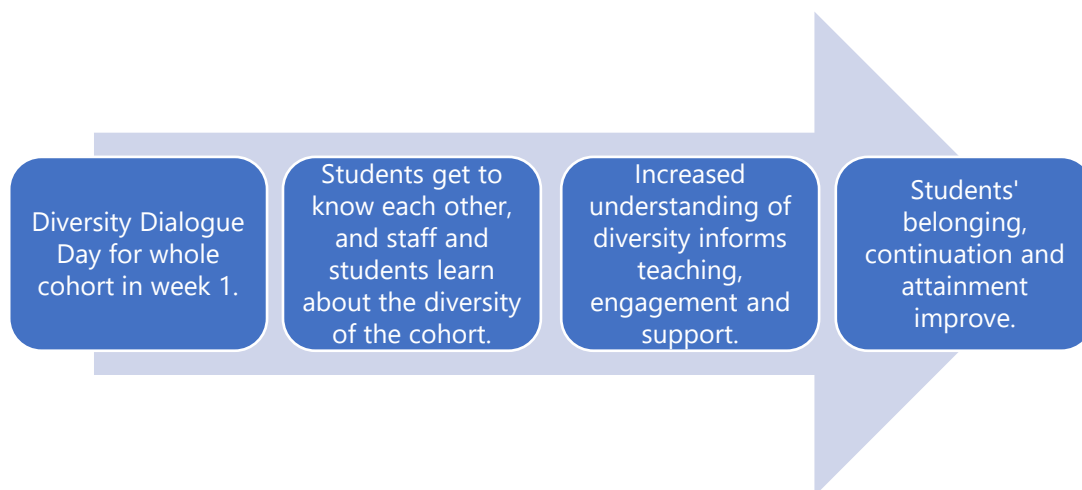
either be staff, or students, or both, and which will come from their interaction with each other, and by developing their understanding of diversity, belonging and success. The exact nature of these benefits will differ however for each intervention. In the medium term the outcomes will also differ, but it is anticipated that there will be changes to things such as how students engage with their courses, how staff interact with their students, how students engage with and support each other, how staff teach the programme, how students learn and students' support seeking and staff responses, etc. The anticipated (or hoped-for) longer term impacts of the interventions are shared across all of the interventions. They are a greater sense of belonging, better continuation and increased attainment; it is anticipated that these improvements will be achieved through the interaction of the separate interventions taking place within a single programme or course of study, and will have a particular impact on first generation entrants and migrant/ethnic minority groups of students. Throughout the programme unintended consequences, whether these are positive or negative, will be actively sought out and recorded – and used to inform the on-going implementation and evaluation.

All of the interventions will be implemented in four sites, Erasmus University (Netherlands), Edge Hill University (UK), University of Porto (Portugal) and Osnabrueck University (Germany). Common methods of evaluation will be used, drawing on a mixed methodology. Focus groups will be conducted with students and with staff about diversity, belonging and success and their experiences of the interventions. A qualitative baseline will be created by undertaking focus groups with students who have not had the #Ibelong interventions (usually this will be done with students in the previous year). As part of the focus groups staff will be asked about what they were doing before the interventions; while this will not create a formal baseline it will provide a comparative perspective. An engagement and belonging survey will be administered to students at key points during the year of implementation to create a baseline and comparative data. Institutional data will be used to compare outcome indicators such as continuation, progression and attainment; the exact measures will not be common to all universities as they will be determined by the data the institution collects. The programme has a particular focus on first generation entrants and ethnic minority students, and data will be explored in relation to these characteristics to consider if the interventions have had a particular impact, or otherwise, on students with either or both of these characteristics, where appropriate.

Approach to the evaluation of the diversity Dialogue Days: Logic chain and theory of change narratives

The DD activities are designed to help students and staff appreciate the diversity of the group, recognise that diversity is widespread, promote engagement and increase a sense of belonging. The overall aim is to improve student retention and attainment in HE. This relationship is shown in the logic chain below.

Fig 2: Diversity Dialogue Days logic chain



Three narrative statements provide further insight into how the DDs are expected to achieve their impact. First, they are anticipated to develop understanding about diversity by students; second they are expected to directly develop relationships and a sense of belonging; and third the staff team will learn about the diversity of the cohort and use this to inform their teaching.

*If **students** participate in the DD then they will develop **understanding about diversity, belonging and success**. If students have greater understanding about diversity and success then they will know that experiencing challenges is common and that challenges can be overcome. If they know that challenges are both common and can be overcome, then they will share their challenges and **seek support**. If they acknowledge challenges and seek support then they will be more likely to be successful – to persist in higher education during the first year, and if they persist for the first year then they are more likely to complete their course.*

*If **students** participate in the DDs then they will **work with other students and get to know them** and they will understand the commitment of the Faculty is for all students to belong. If they get to know some students early in their course in this Faculty then they will feel more comfortable and able to **engage**. If they engage more then they will experience a stronger sense of **belonging**. If they feel like they will belong then they will more likely to persist in HE.*

*If **staff** participate in the DD then they will develop **understanding about the diversity of their students** and how this might impact on their success. If staff have a better understanding of the diversity of their students, and insight into how they can be supported to be successful they can use this knowledge to inform their **interaction with students and their teaching**. If staff's teaching and interaction with students is cognisant of student diversity then students will feel accepted, engaged and like they **belong**. If staff make students feel like they **belong**, then they will be more likely to be successful.*

The longer-term impact is related to improving student success (e.g. retention and attainment), by improving student engagement and belonging. Several intermediate outcomes and indicators of success are anticipated relating to students' appreciation of diversity of success, improved engagement and help seeking behaviour, and their increased sense of belonging. Additional intermediate outcomes include staff changing the way they engage with, support and teach the cohort.

Evaluation of impact of the DDs

(a) Participation (output indicator for accountability and context)

The first DD was held on the second day of term for 300+ first year primary education students from 9.00 until 13.00. An attendance register was not taken, but the room was quite full (see photo), so we are confident that we reached the majority of students. In future however it would be very useful to record who attended and who did not attend, as this information might identify students who are not engaging and who may subsequently be at risk of not succeeding in HE.



No members of core staff from the programme team attended the full session, although it was introduced by the programme leader. Staff saw this as time they could use to get up to date with other activities such as populating the virtual learning environment; the project team should have been clearer about the purpose of the DD and the value of staff attending.

Given the positive responses to the day across the Faculty it is hoped that it will be easier to encourage staff to attend in the future.

(b) Students develop understanding about diversity and success (short-term benefit indicator)

Throughout the session students were encouraged to reflect and write their experiences etc about diversity, belonging and success. Towards the end of the session they were asked to reflect on their understanding of diversity, challenges they may experience and ways in which they have been successful in the past (i.e. developing resilience). While this has not been analysed fully yet, both 1st and 2nd year students commented that they had not realised the breadth of diversity, and they now have greater recognition of the invisibility of many aspects of diversity.

(c) Students share their own concerns about diversity and success (short-term benefit indicator)

Students were asked to share with staff teaching their programme something about themselves and identify how they could be supported to be successful. This was done via the snowballs and aeroplanes activity to enable students to share things anonymously. (Students wrote on a blank sheet of paper and then threw it to the front as either a snowball or aeroplane).

In total 226 responses were received. 23 students identified serious issues and included their name and a request for support (this is just over 10%). The issues raised primarily related to anxiety, caring responsibilities and employment obligations, academic skills and competence, specific learning differences, self-confidence and shyness. These issues were shared with personal academic tutors to be followed up as a matter of urgency. 9 students provided their name but wrote positive comments, including looking forward to the course and offering to support other students. 160 students (over 70%) identified issues and ways in which they would like to be supported to be successful. These included quite serious issues relating to anxiety, caring responsibilities, and concerns about their ability to be a good teacher. Others noted nervousness, shyness, the need to be organised and challenges with commuting and car parking in particular. Frequent ways to be supported included: to be friendly, to be kind, to ask if I'm OK even if I look OK, to be patient, to explain things simply, to be available to offer support and to provide academic guidance with assignments, presentations and developing confidence/public speaking. This feedback in particular will inform the Team Teacher Reflection sessions for the staff team. Positive comments from students included how the day had contributed to their sense of belonging, for example: "I am so glad I got into Edge Hill, I already feel so comfortable and like I belong. Thank you!" The Programme Team and Head of Department have commented on the value of the information shared with them from the DD, and committed to undertake similar activities next year.

(d) Students get to know each other (short-term benefit)

Students worked in groups for several activities, but particularly an activity focusing on belonging (in particular taking photos of campus and sending a title and explanation of the

photo). Frequently the group submitted one photo, and this indicated that groups had been formed. Some of the feedback suggested that friendships had been made. This will be explored further through the focus groups. The photos also demonstrated an understanding of diversity and a commitment to inclusion.

(e) Staff will develop early insight into the diversity and challenges of their students (short-term benefit)

As has been noted above, staff valued receiving early indications of the concerns and issues within their incoming group of students. These insights will be built upon in the Team Teacher reflection work.

(f) A stronger sense of belonging, more help seeking behaviour by students (medium-term outcomes)

These will be explored through focus groups with students, discussions with staff and through the engagement and belonging survey.

(g) Greater belonging, continuation, progression and attainment, particularly by students who are first in their family and/or from an ethnic minority (longer-term impact)

This will be reviewed by looking at institutional data on continuation, progression and attainment, and the survey data on engagement and belonging.

(h) Unintended consequences

Unintended consequences may be discovered through our research methods, especially focus groups. They may arise through other evidence, such as module review processes, or NSS scores.

(i) Learning to improve future DDs

As noted above, the aim is to improve the engagement of programme staff. This will be done by being more explicit in the expectation that they attend, but it is also anticipated that the positive feedback about the day and the information they received about their students will encourage them to attend.

Feedback from second year student facilitators suggested that the order of the activities could be changed.

Three of the seven second year students who co-facilitated the first DD have subsequently travelled to Germany to facilitate a workshop as part of the Erasmus+ programme about the DDs. The feedback has been positive, and will have given them valuable experience to take with them into a career in education.



Conclusion

These interventions have only just begun (September 2019), but the evidence collected during their delivery is positive and encouraging. The formative feedback is being used to improve the intervention, which will be delivered in a different programme next year, and the primary education staff team have said they will embed similar activities next year. The next stage of the evaluation (focus groups and surveys) will explore the medium term outcomes. Longer term impact will be evaluated at the end of each academic year.

Learning from the DDs at Edge Hill University has been used to inform draft principles for delivery; these will be reviewed and revised with feedback from colleagues who have delivered DDs in the partner institutions, and from the participants attending the event in Germany. These principles, together with resources and research evidence will be disseminated to enable others to learn from these pilot interventions and adapt them to their own context.

Appendix 1: Principles* for Dialogue Days

1. Sufficient time for staff and students to get to know each other (at least four hours).
2. Create a safe space to discuss diversity and success, including agreeing ground rules with student participants.
3. Staff share authentic experiences of overcoming challenges to enable them to be successful academics, ideally including staff teaching on the programme.

4. Students from the year above share experiences of overcoming challenges and offer tips on being successful.
5. Students consider their own diversity and that of others in the group to develop understanding of diversity.
6. Students are encouraged to reflect on their paths to success to date, including how they overcame challenges, to develop understanding of diversity.
7. Students participate in activities designed to develop belonging to their subject, institution and/or profession.
8. Students work in small groups with each other on meaningful tasks to enable them to develop friendships and shared sense of purpose.
9. Students are given the opportunity to share things/disclose issues with the academic staff team in an anonymous or named way.
10. Students develop understanding about student diversity and success and feel more like they belong to their programme of study.

*A principle can be understood as a standard (or rule) for guiding the development of the DDs and could be used as part of the evaluation process.

References

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: Final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme.*

London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Thomas, L., Hill, M., O' Mahony, J. & Yorke, M. (2017) *Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change. What Works? Student Retention & Success programme final report,* London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.