

QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project

Improving retention and attainment: The promotion of the 'sticky course'



Project Evaluation Report: March 2025

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1. Project Overview

This final project report is an output from a [Collaborative Enhancement Project](#) supported and funded by QAA membership. The project is led by De Montfort University in partnership with Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Brighton and University of the Arts London. Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).

Following a successful application for Collaborative Enhancement Project (CEP) funding, our project to **Improving retention and attainment: The promotion of the 'sticky course'** commenced in February 2024. The following participants led or contributed to project outputs:

- De Montfort University (Lead Institution) – Dr Claire Orwin (Project lead), Professor Susan Orr, Professor Alasdair Blair, Dr Jason Eyre, Tracy Slawson
- University of Brighton - Joanna MacDonnell, Dr Catherine McConnell
- University of the Arts London - Leanne Grice, Dr Wayne Clark, Tanyem Hussain, Siobhan Clay
- Glasgow Caledonian University - Professor Alastair Robertson, Dr Colin Milligan

Additional authors contributed to project outputs as specified in each resource.

The project also engaged students as co-creators of the project from students and alumnus blog posts and video outputs to students acting as research, project assistants and developing graphic outputs to convey project ideas. The student voice was also incorporated through interviews, surveys and focus groups.

Further details of collaborative partner profiles and contributors can be found on the project website

The project was conceived by building on prior work on the importance of the sticky campus (Robertson 2018, Berman et al 2022) and the sticky curriculum (Orr and Shreeve 2019) in supporting student learning. By developing a 'sticky course' concept working with staff and students to identify, develop and evaluate ways in which courses can embed 'sticky' approaches in relation to induction, assessment, online peer learning communities, and enquiry-based learning pedagogy to support retention.

Research demonstrates the difficulty that many students face engaging with extracurricular activities. The 2022 UKES survey (2023) noted a larger proportion of students were working and caring for others than previously and a recent DMU survey (Nous 2023) highlighted that a significant number of our students are limited in their engagement with our extracurricular offer due to personal, work, commuting, and caring reasons. It is therefore essential to explore 'sticky' interventions at the course level to maximise the classroom experience and provide the greatest impact in improving student retention, transforming equity of student opportunities.

Working with our partner universities the project explored what makes a course and our transitions 'sticky' to maximise student experience & engagement. The project has drawn on quantitative data and qualitative data to evaluate our project activities.

The project comprised of three strands of activity:

Preparedness for study & managing assessment load via curriculum design

There is widespread recognition of the impact of the pandemic on learning and the implications for future study (Ofqual 2021) and the need for enhanced transitional support to manage learning loss and personal readiness for university. The Student Academic Experience Survey (2023) reported 28% of those surveyed considered leaving University because of assessment workload pressures. At DMU we have redesigned our assessment in line with our Block curriculum. In this strand we explored induction, curriculum design and students experience of managing assessment loads associated with 'long and thin' and short and immersive modules via student focus groups.

Promoting peer communities online

The OFS Blended Learning Review (Orr 2023) noted that mainstream universities struggle to deploy online platforms to promote community. Commonly there is a Post Covid view that community building is 'best done' face-to-face on campus. However, as we move to more flexibility of study modes post lockdown it is essential to explore how online platforms can be part of the solution to building community and belonging. In this strand we have explored peer communities and piloted different approaches and platforms to explore ways to connect students in a digital space to enhance community.

Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) pedagogy to support retention

This strand explored ways that active teaching and learning approaches support engagement and retention. We have developed case studies from partners where EBL/active learning/participatory teaching approaches are adopted incorporating the student perspective via focus groups/surveys/interviews to explore the relationship between the teaching approach, outcomes and their experience of belonging and community.

De Montfort University (DMU) as the lead institution worked across all three strands, whereas partners each opted for a specific strand as detailed below:

- Preparedness for study & managing assessment load via curriculum design (Glasgow Caledonian University, GCU)
- Promoting peer communities online (University of Brighton, UoB)
- Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) pedagogy to support retention (University of the Arts, London, UAL).

Noting wider mutual interests and existing work taking place across these strands partners also considered where they could contribute more widely to project activity.

2. Project Impact and Outcomes

The projects deliverables included:

Project website materials comprising case studies, references, and project reports

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Deliverables by strand are detailed below:

Preparedness for study & managing assessment load via curriculum design

- Case studies
 - DMU BaseCamp – Tracy Slawson, Jason Eyre, De Montfort University
 - A ‘Sticky’ Post Graduate Research Student Induction and Student Experience at GCU– Colin Milligan, Glasgow Caledonian University
 - Students Experiences of Assessment Load between ‘Long and Thin’ and Short and Immersive Modules – Dr Claire Orwin, De Montfort University

Online peer communities

- Case Studies
 - Students’ Perceptions of a Pre-arrival Online Peer Community - Catherine McConnell & James Barron, University of Brighton
 - The Placement Network: Online Peer Community Pilot
- Infographics
 - Designing Online Peer Communities, University of Brighton
 - Defining the Purpose of Online Peer Communities, University of Brighton
 - Mentoring and Peer Learning: Setting Up a Scheme in HE, De Montfort University
 - Online Peer Communities Decision Tree, De Montfort University

Enquiry Based Learning

- Case Studies
 - London College of Fashion: Attainment Mentoring Project – Kath Melandri, Kelly Dearsley, Siobhan Clay, Dr. Wayne Clark, Tanyeem Hussain, University of the Arts London
 - Camberwell College of Arts: The Writers’ Collective and Writing Advocates - Caroline King, Sakis Kyratzis, Siobhan Clay, Leanne Grice, University of the Arts London
 - Queering Fashion as a sticky course - Siobhan Clay & Fenella Hitchcock, University of the Arts London
 - Operation Enigma: A novel TAME (Tri Active Modal Experiential) Learning Case Study Investigation - Leisa Nichols-Drew, Alexandra Russell, Gemma Donovan, Joel Able, De Montfort University
 - Developing Belonging in BA & BSc Product Design – Nick Rowan, De Montfort University

The outputs have a breadth of perspectives and whilst predominantly undergraduate, outputs which reference up to post graduate research provision are also included.

There have been some minor revisions to our initial ideas. University of Brighton, for example, had originally planned to complete a similar online peer community pilot to De Montfort University, aiming at Allied Health professions with mandatory placements, however staff changes made this unworkable. In light of this an alternative case study on online community in transition was created which has added a different point in time in which online community building is key. DMU’s placement student peer community pilot has not had the student engagement anticipated, however the case study has identified a number of key lessons learnt which have helped to inform our infographics resource ‘Online Peer Communities Decision Tree’. In this peer space

we have also added resources which talk to peer communities and peer learning more generally to give a more holistic view. Staffing changing within partners have also impacted the project participants however they haven't impacted the overall outcomes.

Additional outputs included...

A witness seminar that will bring together students and staff to provide a resource which will inform the toolkit and course design guidelines

The witness seminar took place in December 2024 and brought together project partners to discuss a pre-agreed bank of questions which covered each of the three stand areas as well as drawing that together to discuss sticky courses. The format and questions were shared with participants in advance along with information about the event and consent forms to align with our agreed ethics processes. *See Appendix 1*

Noting the format, logistical challenges and participants, project partners agreed that the student voice would be best included via additional student interviews using parallel questions to those asked to project partners. Whilst all partner institutions aimed to complete student interviews gaining access to appropriate student union executive able to answer the questions was challenging, hence this was limited to three of the four institutions. Whilst the student interviews didn't feed into the witness seminar directly outcomes were considered in developing the sticky course guidelines.

The witness seminar created a valuable opportunity for partners to meet face to face for the first time. The discussion enabled a wide range of perspectives and projects to be covered which were relevant to the project. Partner reflections on the structure of the event were positive recognizing the level of organization to ensure time keeping and focus whilst giving the space to be able to respond to one another, hear voices and respond to key themes.



Figure 1: Witness seminar contributors

Guidelines to inform course design

The Sticky Course Guidelines were developed informed by the project's activities and outputs. In particular the witness seminar and student interviews. They sought to consider what helps to make a course sticky and provided links to our project resources for further information and a series of provocations for reflection so readers could consider how the concept of 'stickiness' can be developed within their own course.

Sticky course toolkit co created with students

The concept for the Sticky Course Toolkit was ideated through partner project meetings and brought into visual form as part of follow-on activity to the witness seminar where we were challenged to ideate swiftly and draw together our collective ideas to develop a visual concept. This was further refined into a digital graphical model initially by our student project assistant and then internal graphics placement student. As a group we wanted the toolkit to be a visual and a resource on a page which could help to provide a framework through which to draw together our project resources.

QAA blog posts

A variety of blog posts were created through the course of the project authored by staff and students:

- Introducing the sticky course approach — Dr Claire Orwin, De Montfort University
- Belong at Brighton — Angelica Blake-Lawson, University of Brighton (Alumnus)
- Investigating a Student-Led Peer Community Initiative: BESST Buddies Scheme— Angelica Blake-Lawson, University of Brighton (Alumnus)
- Understanding Student Experiences of Induction — Dr Colin Milligan and Professor Alastair Robertson, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Reflecting on the Enhancing Engagement Forum at the University of the Arts London: Fostering connections — Bee Yogasivam and Tanyem Hussain, University of the Arts London
- Challenges and Best Practices in classroom and student engagement at University of the Arts London — Tia Riaz and Dr Wayne Clark, University of the Arts London
- Reflections from a mature student on the Student Learning and Engagement Pilot at University of the Arts London — Nicky Backlund and Leanne Grice, University of the Arts London

The latter 3 were dialogic blog posts and formed an innovative way to draw together staff and student/alumnus voices into this format and helped to demonstrate how a shared student-centered perspective can be a powerful voice in influencing academics' understanding of student experience.

3. Project Management Meetings & Coordination

To ensure regular and clear communication with the QAA a rolling online catch-up meeting with our QAA link colleague, Ruth Burchell took place every 4 weeks (with either the project lead or wider project team). To coordinate the project, we also met online every 4 weeks with all partners. This alternated between a purely project partner meeting and joining the QAA catch up meeting to bring wider colleagues together and to also allow QAA insight into our meeting processes. There was excellent engagement from all partners with really good representation at meeting. The QAA link support was incredibly helpful in providing that external view and providing valuable advice and guidance.

The project was managed via a shared MS Teams site which all partner colleagues could access hosted by De Montfort University. This site housed all the resources for the project, including meeting agendas and notes of the meetings with any actions arising, resources such as templates and exemplars from the QAA, key documentation such as ethics processes, the contract, any brand guidelines and original expression of interest. This has been an effective repository, co working and communication hub for the project. It also forms a central location for primary data is held in line with our approved ethics process.

Project outputs were detailed in our Project Activities & Deliverables Plan which outlined by strand and partner the proposed activities, deliverables and its destination on the project website. As a project group we also worked with QAA colleagues to specify the design the webpage structure to ensure project cohesion and to realize the Sticky Course Toolkit model.

4. Project Communications and Dissemination Plan

A project document detailing opportunities for dissemination was produced and shared with partners to support how we will collectively communicate and disseminate this collaborative enhancement project. Dissemination which has either taken place or is planned to take place is as follows, with more to be added once all the outputs are published on the project website.

- De Montfort University – Paper outlining the project outcomes shared to University Education Committee
- De Montfort University – Staff seminar event planned spring 2025 via DMU’s Education Academy
- Glasgow Caledonian University - project description and outputs linked from relevant section of staff L&T SharePoint pages. Poster planned for Education Day (April 2025).
- University of the Arts London Presented at UAL Student Transition and Retention Groups. Will be uploaded to Canvas staff hub
- University of Brighton – Staff workshop planned for our institutional Education and Student Experience Conference (July 2025); project description to be presented at the International Forum for Peer Learning and Support (April 2025) at Cardiff University.
- QAA Student Engagement Network April 2025 – Project overview - Claire Orwin De Montfort University & Colin Milligan, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Association of National Teaching Fellows (ANTF) Symposium 2025, May 2025- Exploring Student Retention Through a Witness Seminar Approach – Claire Orwin & Alasdair Blair, De Montfort University

5. Project Evaluation, Legacy and Impact

The project has provided a wide range of outputs to support the overall aim of the project. Noting the timeline of the project (12 months) there is a limitation in how any activity or pilot can demonstrate impact. Where possible, however qualitative or quantitative data is included in outputs to illustrate how any of the sticky interventions have impacted attainment, retention and/or student experience. There have been some small changes to original intended outputs and staffing changing within partners have also impacted the project participants over time. The project though has effectively drawn on partners collective expertise and experience to cultivate a deeper understanding of how retention and student engagement can be developed at the heart of the curriculum. The project website and the resources contained therein will be a key part of the legacy of the project for QAA members as will any subsequent publications or dissemination activities which sit in the wider public domain. The project may also provide a springboard for other ongoing work at partners including pursuing the online community space pilot into a further year to reflect on lessons learnt to a more substantial university wide student retention project at De Montfort University.

This Collaborative Enhancement Project provided the framework to draw together four institutions that hadn’t worked together before. Building a network of colleagues with shared interests and expertise, developing new future opportunities for collaboration. The project team would like to formally thank the QAA for their support of the project both in terms of the excellent guidance and support through Ruth Burchell our QAA link officer and through the financial support of the QAA provided to facilitate the work.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1 Witness Seminar Structure & Questions

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Witness Seminar 13th December 2024: De Montfort University

Background context

What is a witness seminar?

A witness seminar draws upon the knowledge and experience of a panel of experts to reflect upon and discuss issues around a defined subject to form a resource.

The approach is often used to add further dimension to historical & broader academic debates on a range of subjects. It is a form of group interview, in this case used to explore the issue of student retention in University, exploring this in line with the strands of the project and a 'sticky course' lens.

Format:

The seminar takes a panel approach. Following introductions witnesses detail their understanding of a topic. The chair will ask a series of questions to initiate discussion to explore the topic from the participants different experiences and perspectives. The wider audience is then invited for comment or to add testimony which aids in developing further context.

The seminar is recorded and transcribed following consent based on our ethical procedures. A copy of the transcription will be shared with participants to ensure accuracy, spelling & revision for the sake of clarity.

Panel:

Project strand contributors as nominated.

Audience:

Project members & nominated colleagues from partner institutions.

Witness seminar: Questions

These questions would be posed to the panel to help to draw out colleague's experiences & insights so both institutions experiences can be drawn out.

Indicative timing for each question is 5 minutes per nominated panel member with 10 minutes for reflections from the audience.

Transition

- What are the challenges in successfully transitioning students into university? (Tracy DMU & Colin GCU)
- What activities have been successful in your institution in helping to retain students during this period? (Tracy DMU & Colin GCU)

- What are the key points through the student lifecycle where students are most at risk of not continuing with their study? (Claire DMU & Colin GCU)
- What activities have been effective in retaining students through those periods? (Claire DMU & Colin GCU)
- Reflections from the audience (All)

Peer Communities

Catherine and/or Alex – UoB

Jason – DMU

Why are peer communities important in supporting retention across the student journey? (UoB Catherine/Alex & Jason DMU)

What peer community activities have you utilised & what has been the impact of those? (UoB Catherine/Alex & Jason DMU)

How can online platforms be used as part of the solution to building community and belonging? (UoB TBC & Jason DMU)

Reflections from the audience (All)

Student Centred Learning

Leanne, Siobhan, Wayne, Tanyeem – UAL

Claire & Alasdair - DMU

Why is enquiry based/student centred learning important in supporting student retention? (Alasdair DMU & Leanne, Tanyeem, Wayne UAL)

What are the examples of practice at your institution where you use this approach? (Alasdair DMU & Leanne, Tanyeem, Wayne UAL)

What has been the impact of enquiry based/student centred learning on student attendance & engagement in their studies? (Claire DMU & Leanne, Tanyeem, Wayne UAL)

Questions/reflections from the audience

Sticky courses

All

We define a sticky course as that which helps students 'stick to and stick with' their learning

How have our conversations helped to articulate what is effective in helping students stick to & stick with their course? (*drawing out key themes*) (All)

Looking at sector and our own practice, what opportunities or challenges might there be to developing our sticky course concept further (All)

Appendix 2: Student Union Executive Interview Questions

Transition

What are the challenges for students successfully transitioning into university?

What activities do you think are successful in your institution in helping students transition into university during this period?

What are the key points through a student's time at university where they are most at risk of not continuing with their study?

What activities do you think have been effective in helping to support students through those periods?

Peer Communities

Why are peer communities important at university?

What peer community activities are you aware of?

In your opinion are these successful in supporting students to stay at university?

Student Centred Learning

What types of teaching and learning activities help maximise student attendance & engagement with their course?

Can you give some examples of these?

Sticky courses

A sticky course helps students 'stick to and stick with' their learning

What are the challenges students face in sticking to & with their university course?

What practices have you noted which helped students to stick to & with their learning?

What else might institutions do to support students to stay at university?