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What is good practice in respect of belonging, mattering and student voice at Manchester Metropolitan University?

A LEED Associate Innovation Scholarship project exploring students' sense of belonging, mattering and voice using End of Module Survey data.

Introduction



This research has been informed by analysis of quantitative data from the University's End of Module Survey, identifying modules and programmes with sustained high performance across the belonging, mattering and voice questions, along with reasonable response rates. Where provision have been noted of being high performing in these areas, module and programme leaders were invited to complete an exploratory questionnaire. Interested parties are then invited to volunteer to participate in an interview to expand upon their practice.

From the study, the following 12 themes emerged:

- Understanding Students' Backgrounds
- Adaptable Learning and Assessments
- Co-Design
- Accessible Communication
- Clear Rules and Expectations
- Shared Goals
- Peer to Peer Connections
- Safe Spaces
- Playful Pedagogies
- Transitions to University
- Student Agency

Explore each theme, with supporting quotes, insights and tips to see what might work for your module or programme.

Understanding Students' Backgrounds

A commitment to understanding, appreciating and responding to students' diverse backgrounds, valuing their varied perspectives and allowing space for individual interpretation and creative autonomy.

"When students see you as someone who understands their goals and can support them through relevant teaching and guidance, they become more willing to participate fully in the module. This leads to greater engagement, more questions, and more positive and constructive feedback."

"It's really important for the students to know that they're not just a number, they're not just a paying customers, and that everybody kind of is human in the room, including the teacher."

"I think the students appreciate that, okay, there's 500 of us. (The academic) won't be able to remember all the names, but if they see that you're making an effort, then they feel like, oh, they actually care and therefore there's a sense of belonging."

"By recognising that students enter the module with varied levels of confidence, prior experience and cultural reference points, the workshop format is used to make the learning environment more accessible, supportive and motivating."

"Through blended resources, clear scaffolded instructions, and opportunities for self□directed engagement, students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning while feeling supported throughout the process."

"Workshop activities are designed with flexibility and multiple points of entry, enabling students to engage in different ways and from different starting points."

Adaptable Learning and Assessments

Facilitating the personalisation of learning experiences and assessment, encouraging student input to module content. Students feel represented active participants in their bespoke learning experience.

"Students are given great scope to develop their engagement with the module along lines that interest and challenge them as individuals. This is about ensuring equitable and flexible opportunities - this is most apparent in the opportunity to determine the parameters of their own assessment, allowing students to play to their strengths and/or interests."

"We tie content into students desired career paths and businesses they would be interested in."

"A culture of agility within the programme means that we are able to pivot into different things should we feel like things aren't working."

"When I set a brief the students are encouraged to develop a starting point in different ways, one being that they might have a heritage/family values etc that they wish to explore. This has worked to ensure students have equal representation in their work and also provide flexible opportunities."

"The agency of designing their own assessment projects also facilitates independent student voice."

"I have redesigned elements of the assessment and for this academic year used the racially inclusive practice in assessment guidance toolkit to devise a session that solely focussed on demystifying the assessment brief and marking criteria."

Co-Design

A culture of co-design of curricula, activities and assessments, that is adaptable to individual student needs and backgrounds, supporting inclusivity and equity.

"(We) allowed students to share their opinions while completing activities, including how these activities enhanced their understanding or whether additional activities were needed and in which direction. In doing so, there was an ongoing co-design process to tailor activities to students' needs, while keeping their voices central."

"One of the foundational principles of this module is that students and academics are equal partners in the design, delivery and direction of the module."

"(It) involves a shift in mindset that I am of equal footing in the classroom as they are. By shifting my perspective of my role and arriving at my teaching from a place of shared curiosity about the subject of the work (and about them as individuals!), I am able to build stronger relationships with them as peers."

"Before introducing the EMS, we went through a recap of the module, what was covered, what support was offered, what changes have been made since last year, and how their student voice has impact on change."

"Our programme is very much a collaboration and we are constantly communicating with them regarding content they want to see and the ways in which we approach their pedagogy."

"I would ask whether the material connected with the students and what could have been done better to aid their learning. I would do this at the start of each tutorial as a discussion. I would try to relax the tone and invite them to share their views by admitting to the things I thought could have been improved!"

Accessible Communication

Setting the expectation of and facilitating accessible communication that is shaped by the needs of the cohort and the individuals within it, E.g.,

- **Regular check ins by email or in person.**
- **Judgement free emails and responses.**
- **Anonymised Padlets.**

"Weekly drop□ins and prompt, judgement□free email responses ensure communication is accessible and predictable."

"Be as approachable as you can, you know, be welcoming, make students want to come and ask you for advice or help."

"...recognising language difficulty from both a nationality perspective and a subject perspective and ensuring clarity when presenting in lecture and tutorials."

"So, if I'm accessible, then they feel like they can be accessible to each other, and therefore that builds. It's an exponential thing, isn't it? Like, if they can be accessible to each other, then they have a sense of belonging as a community of students, and then they have a sense of belonging within the classroom, which then they get a sense of belonging within the department, and then that's, you know, and then it grows and it grows and it grows and it grows."

"Students were consistently signposted to the relevant Moodle content and shown how to use it effectively for their assignments."

"My natural style of communication is open and not very 'academic' which I hope translates as being accessible for students."

Clear Rules and Expectations

Rules and expectations co-designed by students early in their study, communicated clearly and reiterated when necessary, which places shared responsibility on the module leader and students and supports students as partners.

"dedicate time on 'ways of working' which aligns strongly to mutual respect and expectations between teaching team and students."

"...creating a classroom environment where every contribution is acknowledged and quieter voices are invited in without pressure."

"I've created rituals as part of my class - I open every class that I do. I start with a check-in, one word check-in. It doesn't have to be very long. How are we feeling today? And then I'll offer time for storytelling very briefly. What happened? Tell me something exciting that happened to you yesterday. What surprised you since I last saw you? Something like that. And then we go with a game...It just builds community. It builds bond and enthusiasm."

"It is a professional course, so we treat them as professionals."

"Clarity of structure was important to convey to the students with this being semester one so that there were markers all throughout the semester to align to expectations of learning and progress at every point."

"We also set really high expectations of the students, which we communicate clearly."



Shared Goals

Cohort culture enables a sense of shared goals, growth and motivation, and encouraging "collaboration rather than comparison".

“This module gives students the confidence that they are future change makers and their actions can make positive change real life.“

“We emphasise that students are not in competition with one another; instead, the professional relationships they build now are likely to continue throughout their careers. By encouraging collaboration rather than comparison, we help establish a culture of mutual respect and shared growth.”

“Since the module has been running a two-phase exam assessment, we instituted group working in each week's tutorial session. This involved randomising the student groups each week (using a shuffled deck of playing cards) and providing a session from the study skills team on how to work well in groups. This has contributed to students getting to know others in the group and given them a shared goal to work towards.”

“…we hold regular one-to-one feedback sessions within the classroom setting. These are conducted openly, allowing all students to hear each other’s feedback. This approach promotes transparency, enables students to recognise one another’s progress, and creates opportunities for shared praise, constructive dialogue, and collective support.”

“Students are taught the power of psychological safety within their classes, and they understand that we are on their side; whilst we are there to critique and assess them as students, they also know that we care about them as people, and that we are on their side. We are in it together and they understand that we are pulling for them.”

Peer to Peer Connections

Students required to work together on shared goals, developing a relationship with Manchester as their current home, building a group identity, cultivating a culture of care and compassion.

"I see my students as my peers always. That's the mindset. I don't carry knowledge. I'm here to uncover the knowledge with them."

"...opportunities for students to share relevant aspects of themselves and their motivations and goals. Providing opportunities to play together, and to share individuality affords us the opportunity to develop good student experience."

"opportunities for social interaction and group-identity building (often with pizzas)."

"Connections are galvanised through all sorts of networking and social events which are delivered throughout the year - they understand that they are a community of practice and very much 'all in the same boat'; they also understand the power of their networks, both as future creative media graduates and via the nature of the working world."

"Teaching spaces being shared with different year groups leading to informal encouragement and peer support for those who may be struggling."

"(facilitating reflection) on previous experiences of group work, including what they need from their peers and how they support their peers. This is reinforced by discussing theories and models of wellbeing and group work, to support reflexive practice from the beginning of the module. I believe this supports awareness of self and others and cultivates compassion and care. enabling students to learn collaboratively and develop confidence through collective participation."

Safe Spaces

Supporting the open sharing of opinions and honing a positive environment where all perspectives feel valued.

"(We) emphasise from the beginning of the unit that we want to hear different experiences as all can learn from these and so create an atmosphere where can respect and listen to each other."

Considering spatial dynamics as a tool: "(considering) how I operate and place myself within the room to physically build and to really decentralise my role and bring the students up. Where do I place myself in the room, depending on what I want to achieve. Very rarely am I going to be at the front of the room, with them kind of in a line. I'm going to be either in a circle with them or on the outskirts while I'm giving them the space to kind of discover."

"Working on building knowledge and not being worried about getting it wrong."

"I believe that we nurture and fertilise a learning environment which allows students to feel psychologically safe to voice their concerns or successes without recrimination. This allows them to grow in confidence and agency via the knowledge that we're all working to successful outcomes together."

"During reflective group discussions, while I never force any of my students to speak, if I notice specific students remain quiet or do not participate, I will often go them privately first to encourage them to speak and participate during these discussion exercises. This often reveals the reasons why they don't speak up during exercises (e.g. self-confidence, English second-language), and enables me to have a conversation with them that empowers and validates their experiences and encourages them to speak up during class."

"I actively promote students telling me what they think about the module right from the first week."

Playful Pedagogies

Providing opportunities for students to play together, facilitating the teaching space as a social energetic place, with practical creative and interactive activities.

"(This) is fostered through the creation of an inclusive, energetic and well-structured studio environment. Workshops are intentionally designed to be engaging and dynamic, using high-tempo music, practical activities and fast-paced creative exercises."

"We make sure our teaching space is also a social space (e.g. playing music over lunch while students eat and chat)."

"To have a lecture for two hours and then a seminar for another hour and to have three hours, if you have three hours of just delivery, it's draining and it's mental fatigue. So to have like a seminar where the students kind of take a bit more control...Students have got to want to do it and it's got to be fun."

"Playful and critical pedagogies facilitate the opportunity for students to connect with each other, and with staff."

"I would say, always go back to the story and play. Gamification is a huge tool that can be applied anywhere, any discipline."

"This approach helps to establish an atmosphere in which students feel more comfortable contributing, taking creative risks and engaging with one another."

"Providing opportunities to play together, and to share individuality affords us the opportunity to develop good student experience."



Transition to University

Being appreciative of the challenge of transition for students and supporting them to do so in ways appropriate to their individual needs and background.

"We carefully consider a smooth transition, particularly as foundation students have often had prior negative education experiences. This means setting the scene in our opening interactions with students that demonstrate an understanding of their potential context, and our positive view and aspirations for them."

"We also use playful pedagogy to make the transition into university enjoyable and fun."

"Smooth transition into the module is supported through accessible workshop design, clear organisation and a progressive approach to building confidence within the studio environment. This helps students adapt to expectations gradually while feeling supported in their development."

"The 'drip-feed' of information was designed and co-ordinated at a course level to ensure a smooth transition into university world."

"In the first few weeks of term, I engage students to reflect on how the activities and/or learning events apply and converse with their previous experiences of this kind of work. This critical reflective practice enables students to bridge the gap in their knowledge between their own experiences and histories to the new learning, ensuring smooth transition in knowledge. Often, during these conversations, students will also share moments of their personal lives and give me a preview about the kinds of transitions they are undergoing outside of class and which impacts their abilities to engage with their learning/education."

Student Agency

Enabling students to be instrumental and influential in their journey, reinforcing high expectations of students as active participants.

"I encourage students to recognise their voice not only as individuals, but also as a collective cohort that can raise ideas, make requests and articulate shared needs constructively."

"Flexibility encourages authentic representation and helps students feel a stronger sense of ownership over their work."

"...allowing the students agency over the work they do and having high expectations of such."

"Students devise their own projects for assessment, in which they take independent decisions about content and design (students are asked to briefly explain their decisions at the start of their projects). This is about enabling agency, but it is also about enabling professionalisation of academic skills in which students determine the best ways to present material."

"One of the foundational principles of this module is that students and academics are equal partners in the design, delivery and direction of the module."

"Students are encouraged to work with children and young people as agents and work with compassion and it is in that spirit that the course is delivered. We therefore have a culture that is inclined towards working in a participatory manner and framing our students as collaborators in their education."



Feedback

Encouraging students to see feedback as constructive and continuous and making this available via varied formats, E.g.,

- **1:1**
- **1:1 in front of class so others can also benefit**
- **Peer feedback**

"I include peer feedback within the formative assessment task, usually halfway through the module, and explain the importance of this feedback as well as the value in giving feedback to others and positioning this as an essential skill."

"(Facilitating) opportunities for shared praise, constructive dialogue, and collective support."

"Dialogue around feedback was encouraged, with an emphasis on seeing feedback as constructive and continuous for personal and academic development."

"I emphasise how every interaction is a feedback opportunity and that feedback is not always formal."

"Sharing feedback openly helps ensure that all students feel heard and can see that feedback is consistent and equitable across the group."

"Students are given time during the practical sessions and formative feedback to talk to one another and crucially to reflect on their own performance."

"Students are also encouraged to comment on each other's ideas, offering constructive feedback and sharing best practice."

Overview of findings

- Students' sense of belonging, mattering and voice on their modules does not happy by accident, but from a commitment from leaders to curating a such a culture. Many themes and comments touched upon the need for a sense of psychological safety being embedded into the module or programme.
- Staff modelling their own sense of belonging can support translation into belonging for students; students can benefit from staffing stability and from a warm sense of community beyond their module or programme and into their department, faculty, campus and the institution.
- Generating and maintaining a sense of belonging can be easier with smaller cohorts but isn't impossible with larger ones. Practices and methods used in certain fields can have wider application both in terms of academic disciplines and scale.

