



An Academics Guide to Learning Communities

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Welcome

Teesside University Students' Union (TUSU) currently engage with over 8000 students and provides them with a fantastic experience whilst at University. Over the past few years we have looked to developing and growing Learning Communities, with the goal that at some point in the future all students will have a Learning Community they can be part of, in hope of contributing towards building strong student communities and overall student experience. We hope that by developing partnerships with the schools we can be well on our way to achieving this goal. We have seen an increase in Learning Communities over the years; we currently have 18 active academic groups, and we look forward to seeing more develop.

What are Learning Communities?

Learning Communities are student-led academic groups, based around a student's University course, who are supported by the Students' Union. A minimum of three students are needed to form the committee, and these students will lead on the day to day running of the group, as well as shaping the overall goals and objectives of the society, with the aim of providing a positive and meaningful student experience for all involved. Learning Communities give students the opportunity to extend their academic communities further than the classroom, providing extra-curricular opportunities and peer support networks. Learning Communities give students the space to discuss, create and develop in their subject area as well as providing the opportunity to socialise with like-minded individuals. Learning Communities receive financial and administrative support from the Students' Union, as well as full training to ensure that all society activities are inclusive, accessible and beneficial for all members.

Why are Learning Communities so important?

Research conducted by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) suggests that peer-led learning contributes positively to the progression and retention of students, as well as creating a greater sense of belonging for the student and subsequently improving academic confidence (Keenan, 2014). TUSU have conducted their own research in recent years, TUSU Premium, looking at the effect that being involved in a Club or Society can have on student retention and progression at Teesside University.

Benefits

Benefits to Schools

- Learning Communities support students' learning outside of lectures
- Learning Communities are a great way to enhance student satisfaction results
- They are a great way to build stronger relationships and partnerships between staff and students

Benefits to Students

- Students are supported and encouraged to explore an area they are passionate about with peers who share a common interest
- Allows students to expand their networks, amongst each other, and the wider professional community

- Students will get the chance to explore their academic field outside of the classroom, and study further in a way that interests them
- Allows students to build stronger relationships with the University through their academic tutors, and with their peers, developing a stronger sense of belonging and part of a supportive community
- Students can expect to develop key transferable skills for their future

Benefits to University

- Can contribute towards the retention of students due to a sense of belonging within the University
- Learning Communities often engage with external professional bodies or activities within the community, therefore representing the University on a wider platform
- Learning Communities demonstrate a commitment to the student experience

Case Study- Midwifery Society

The Midwifery Society was founded in 2016 by student midwives. Their aim was to build a community that could provide a space for them to deepen their learning and to build on the skills gained within University, enhancing their performance when they qualified as midwives.

The society have had a very successful 3 years going from strength to strength. This shows from the quality of events they deliver to their member's year on year, arranging study days with multiple external organisations and individuals coming to the University, training sessions and fundraising for local charities. On top of this they have proven just how successful they have been winning 'Teesside University Students' Union of the Year 2017/18', "Teesside University Students' Union Most Enterprising Society 2018/19" as well as being shortlisted for a National Award at the Patient Experience Network (PEN) Awards in 2019.

Statement from the Committee

"As a committee, we have managed to create fantastic links with many contemporary speakers and professionals within the scope of midwifery practice, using social media and links made at conferences and other study days. These speakers have been kind enough to come and discuss many contemporary issues within midwifery practice, such as FGM, forced marriage, non-pharmacological methods of pain relief and normalising childbirth. By learning about these topics in more detail by listening to professionals and service users within the field, our midwifery students are then equipped with new and up to date, evidence based knowledge and skills to be able to enter maternity practice and feel confident in their practice.

We have worked closely with the local charity 4Louis, who create memory boxes for bereaved parents. We have raised money for them at a variety of fundraisers to aid their amazing work.

On a whole, the midwifery society has become an extremely important and complementary part of midwifery education at Teesside University, and we are very proud of how it helps students with their confidence, skills and employability."

Statement from Academic Rosemary Dawson

“The Midwifery society has flourished in the last year and it has been great to see the society grow. The students themselves have shown great skills which I know will stand them in good stead in the future in clinical practice. They have shown organisation skills, awareness of political agenda and most of all great kindness in their raising money and awareness for local charities and raising issues in maternity.

The study days, events and open forums they have organised have made links with local communities, charities and other societies which have allowed other students to become culturally aware, involved and educated in subjects such as bereavement, downs syndrome and perinatal mental health. The experiences they have provided has enriched the midwives from Teesside University to be the best they can be, standing above the rest. These students are a shining example of what can be achieved with care, compassion and commitment. It has been a pleasure to work alongside them.”

How to set up a Learning Community

Step 1.

Encourage students on your course to set up a Learning Community (or invite one of our staff along to speak to them about it- we are happy to do so!). You could perhaps start by asking your engaged students or Course Reps to take the lead.

Step 2.

Once you have some interested students, 3 of them will need to form the committee. An Annual General Meeting (AGM) will need to be organised with the Students' Union. At least 10 students must be in attendance to elect a committee into position.

Step 3.

Once the AGM is complete the new society committee will be invited to a meeting with the Activities Development Coordinator who will deliver an induction involving relevant training on how to run and develop their society. The meeting also outlines the rules and regulations students must adhere to.

Step 4.

Throughout the academic year the student committee will be supported by the Students' Union to organise events, meetings and trips for their members. As a new Learning Community, once they have 10 paid members they will receive £100 bonus to help them on their way. We hope that as a Learning Community the students will build strong partnership with their school and hopefully receive some academic support along the way!

How to engage with Learning Communities in your School

There may already be Learning Communities within your school that you have not engaged with yet or you are not sure how to. Here are just a few tips that you might consider to help you engage with the society and that may benefit you, your students and the University.

1. *Help them have a presence in the School*

You can really help increase participation in a Learning Community by your students just by making the group feel like they are a meaningful part of the school. This can be as simple as encouraging the committee to share updates with other students in the department via email and social media, or even helping them to advertise via Blackboard, or allowing them to do a shout out in lectures to get other students involved.

2. Get Involved

Learning Communities will organise a fantastic range of events over the year and there will always be the opportunity for staff to attend or even participate. It is a great way for you to get to know your students a bit better and strengthen those staff student relationships, and it will really be appreciated as well.

3. Celebrate your Learning Communities!

Learning Communities are fantastic space for students to get creative and do some fantastic extra-curricular events, enhancing their studies. They truly deserve recognition for their hard-work and efforts and it will feel fantastic for them coming from their school. Societies in turn can show appreciation for staff in the STAR Awards, highlighting excellent partnership!

Key Contacts

If you wish to discuss anything in this document further you can contact the following members of the Students' Union Activities Team.;

Chris Walton - Activities Manager

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Kristy Weegram – Activities Development Coordinator

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In addition, if you are interested in seeing what your students are already involved in, we collect our own data of involvement across the academic year so would be happy to carry out some data mapping at school, department or individual course level to help you get a better idea.