Students' Perceptions of a Pre-arrival Online Peer Community

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Context

Fostering peer communities can be a sustainable and transformative approach to enhancing student experience, belonging, and satisfaction while positively impacting attainment and progression. Research demonstrates (Lochtie and McConnell, 2024; Emsley-Jones et al., 2024, Emsley-Jones, 2024) that peer communities foster reciprocal relationships, a shared repertoire of academic and professional skills, and collaborative problem-solving. Online peer communities provide opportunities for asynchronous peer interaction, enabling students feel part of an institutional community, and develop agency through being supported and being able to support others going through similar experiences (Kear, 2011).

A Pre-Arrival Peer Community

The University has utilised the Unibuddy© platform since 2019, enabling potential applicants to connect with current students and gain insight from their lived experiences. Post-COVID-19 reflections highlighted the importance of fostering community in an online space before arrival, as students seek connections with like-minded peers during their transition from further education to higher education. This emerging need drove the strategic decision to expand the platform and introduce a new peer-to-peer engagement space. Additionally, the platform's announcements section serves as a key communication tool, providing updates on events, important deadlines, student finance, and accommodation offers. By enhancing this space, the University aims to strengthen engagement, support student transitions, and ensure a more connected and informed applicant experience in the short, medium, and long term.

Methods

This qualitative study explored 10 students' experiences of the Unibuddy© community platform through two online focus groups. Using a set of semi-structured questions, with additional prompting in the online chat, the data collection was designed to examine how students engaged with Unibuddy© communities, or not. The questions elicited students' perceptions of their engagement at the early stages of applying to and joining the university, and its role in easing their transition to university life. One focus group involved five participants who had been engaging with peers on the platform, and another focus group involved five participants who had never used it, providing a useful comparison group. Ethical approval was obtained for this research project through De Montfort University's Ethics Panel.

Findings

The Unibuddy© platform saw increased, organic use by students, resembling mainstream social media engagement. Students autonomously created interest-specific groups, resulting in visible, meaningful connections and friendships. Students benefited most, gaining opportunities for authentic connections and support. The institution also gained by building a trustworthy and engaging community, which strengthened its appeal to prospective students. Several factors contributed to this success. Existing students acting as Unibuddy© Ambassadors were pivotal, moderating interactions, offering reassurance through lived experiences, and building trust. Their myth-busting efforts helped address misinformation. Fewer, more active groups fostered better engagement and prevented fragmentation. The announcements section effectively reached the entire community. Additionally, embracing external social media groups as a natural extension of the platform reinforced community ties.

> "It was a great way to meet some others from my course, [...it] was good to be introduced here"

An unexpected outcome was the platform's growth into a social-media-like community, demonstrating students' genuine desire to connect. Challenges included managing misinformation and balancing official and external social media groups. This approach offers a replicable model for building engaged, supportive student communities. By leveraging Ambassador involvement, myth-busting practices, and strategic communication, institutions can foster trust and create vibrant environments that benefit both students and staff.

> "It really helped with course-specific queries, on which tech and software to buy"

Chatting with students already enrolled at the University of Brighton provided prospective students valuable pre-arrival insights and tips. Finding peers on the same course created a support network for academic and social activities. The ability to ask questions and receive quick answers offered reassurance and reduced anxiety, as students realised they were not alone in their concerns. Additionally, learning about university facilities helped students make the most of the resources available to them, if they were to come and study at Brighton. These interactions and information exchanges played a crucial role in helping students feel prepared, supported, and integrated into university life, ultimately contributing to their decision to stick with their choice of studying at Brighton.

> "The accommodation section was the most helpful and reduced my anxiety about moving in"

Institutional Impact

The platform has significantly enhanced community engagement, peer support, and student communication, with 58.7% of students reporting having used and benefited from the platform upon arrival. Building on this success, 2025 aims to offer even greater support to new offer holders. This research has provided valuable insights into student concerns throughout the application cycle, highlighting key challenges and trends. Notably, student-initiated groups have emerged, including spaces for neurodiverse students, trans and non-binary students, and popular culture discussions to name but a few. With its user-friendly design, the platform is sustainable, scalable, and easily re-purposed each year. It enables Student Ambassadors, academic staff, and support teams to engage effectively, ensuring lasting impact and continued institutional growth.

Next steps

Building on the platform's success, several opportunities can enhance its impact. A key initiative is inviting new applicants to join on a rolling basis, ensuring continuous engagement. We also intend to launch a dedicated postgraduate community and address the unique needs of this student group. Increasing the platform's presence at open days and applicant events will further strengthen its visibility and credibility. To maximise engagement, plans include enhancing Student Ambassador involvement, embedding more content in the announcements section, and encouraging greater participation from academic and support staff. Finally, optimising the platform to align with student recruitment strategies will further solidify its role in fostering peer connections and improve the pre-arrival and enrolling student experience.

References

Emsley-Jones, Carly, Garratt, Carly and McConnell, Catherine (2024) Student-led peer learning and support: Part 3 - Mapping peer learning and support practices: findings from a sector-wide survey. Project Report. Advance HE.

Emsley-Jones, C. (Ed.) (2024) Student-led Peer Learning and Support: Case studies of practice. Advance HE.

Kear, K. (2011). Online and Social Networking Communities: A Best Practice Guide for Educators (1st ed.). Routledge.

Lochtie, D. and McConnell, C. (2024) Student-led peer learning: Executive Summary. Advance HE.

Resources

Unibuddy | Foster connections with Groups

Student-led peer learning and support | Advance HE