

Global Community Conversations:

Exploring approaches to intercultural community-
building at Leeds

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Project Snapshot

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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Project Overview

Students and staff at the University of Leeds come from diverse backgrounds, cultures and life experiences. For students, fostering connections with people from different backgrounds can have many benefits for mutual learning, wellbeing, personal development, and building an overall sense of belonging. However, some students report experiencing divisions or ‘bubbles’ within student communities that make it difficult to foster the kind of social connections they hope for.

Our University Strategy includes aspirations to “deliver an inclusive and intercultural student experience focussed on whole cohort integration, belonging and community-building.” A range of social and co-curricular activities support these aims, offering all students opportunities to step out of comfort zones, interact with people from different backgrounds, find connections, discuss differences, and reflect and act on what they’ve learned. Some activities are specifically described as “global” or “intercultural”, while others may support intercultural community-building without this being their primary stated aim. However, many people may also be unaware of opportunities or activities available, or the benefits of getting involved. This project explored these issues in more depth through a student survey, and workshops for students and staff that were built around a ‘story circle’ activity.

Project Objectives

The Global Community Conversations project aimed to gain a better understanding of different students' experiences of feeling (or not feeling) part of a global or intercultural community at Leeds, in order to:

- improve the design and delivery of social and co-curricular activities that support intercultural community-building;
- improve university communications, to support enhanced awareness and engagement with relevant activities
- inspire a wider ethos of intercultural curiosity
- understand what else may need to change

Methods

Following a student survey, the project brought together students and staff for workshops where they could share experiences and generate insights and ideas for action.

The aims of the workshop were for students and staff to:

- Participate in a story circle to better understand each other’s experiences and perspectives. A story circle is a small group activity where participants share personal stories in response to a prompt that is provided in advance.
- Reflect and share insights arising from the story circle experience
- Participate in activities designed to understand where we are now and where we want to be
- Discuss ideas and recommendations for further action



Key aspirations behind the choice of methods:

- Story circles to explore the complexity of people's experiences, and enable participants to build relationships
- Students and staff to have an opportunity to work together and try to move beyond some of the more obvious suggestions/solutions that have been tried before
- Methods to model the kind of intercultural experience we hope people may encounter at Leeds, as well as taking inspiration from approaches used in community development.

Key findings

- Need to more pro-actively facilitate mixing, connecting and sharing across boundaries at events and activities, and within existing groups/networks. Participants shared a vision for **"a space where we can be all aspects of ourselves and connect with others"**
- Need to recognise the varying impact of using terms like 'global' or 'intercultural' on different people's expectations and engagement. Such terms may feel inviting or inclusive to some, but alienating or confusing to others.
- Need to raise awareness of opportunities and their benefits by sharing authentic stories about people's experiences, while being cautious about the potential for terms like 'global community' or 'intercultural' to be perceived as 'buzzwords'
- As well as individual motivation, a range of institutional support is needed to build a strong and genuine sense of intercultural community
- Need to involve wider circles of students and staff in ongoing conversations – this process can be an intercultural and community-building experience in itself, and the story circle methodology provides a good model for this.

Implications for practice

- Report includes a variety of suggestions to help activity providers test different approaches/tools for facilitating general mixing, as well as deeper sharing and reflection
- Report includes perspectives and suggestions to consider when promoting events and activities, and when communicating about student experience more generally
- Key themes and issues identified in the report highlight the institutional support needed to “deliver an inclusive and intercultural student experience focussed on whole cohort integration, belonging and community-building”, and could help inform action plans
- The story circle methodology used in the project was very well received by participants and could have many potential applications for student/staff engagement and community-building, as well as research.



Outputs

- [Story Circles: Global Community Conversations Case Study and Toolkit](#)
- Global Community Conversations – themes and ideas for action (*project report slide pack available from [project web page](#)*)

Challenges

- The methods used in this project were relatively labour-intensive. As explained in more detail in the case study and toolkit, care was needed at all stages to create the right environment and manage various potential power dynamics. The GCC workshop was 5 hours long (including lunch and breaks), which is a ‘big ask’ in terms of time commitment. This will have prevented some people from wanting or being able to attend (both students and staff).
- The time involved and ‘Global Community Conversations’ project title likely resulted in higher engagement from participants who considered the topic of intercultural community- building to be interesting and important, though incentives offered also helped to engage participants with a wider range of views.
- Due to the nature of the topic and the wide-ranging discussions, the workshops resulted in a large volume of multifaceted data, which presents challenges for analysis. However, I hope that the reports provide a sense of the range of issues participants considered relevant to the question of what it means to be, or aspire to be, a ‘global community’ at Leeds.

Next steps

- Due to the richness of the data already collected, further analysis could be conducted, potentially by students.
- The report identifies many ideas for action that would benefit from further testing in practice, with learning points about what works in different contexts shared with wider networks across campus.
- Many student and staff participants expressed interest in continuing the type of conversations and relationship building that took place in the workshops, and it is hoped that the Story Circles toolkit could help facilitate that.
- If you'd like to connect and share ideas with a professional team who are interested in intercultural opportunities and community-building, please email globalcommunity@leeds.ac.uk

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