Student Futures Manifesto Theme 5: Activities inside and outside the curriculum that build skills, networks, and communities

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Overview

It is essential for students to be able to build skills, networks, and communities both inside and outside of the curriculum during their time at university to have a fruitful experience. The main objective of this report is to highlight the current resources that are already available and provide recommendations of what can be done to improve on this theme.

Introduction

Activities inside and outside the curriculum that build skills, networks and communities is an important theme as it essentially captures the expectations of the overall university experience that students want. University is a time in which individuals can hone and nurture their skills whilst also discovering new skills. It is also a time in which it is essential that students build strong networks and communities, so that they have a more positive experience during university and after graduation. Furthermore, networking both inside and outside the curriculum can lead to prospective job offers once an individual has graduated.

Currently, within the university several opportunities to build these three areas do exist, such as sports and academic societies that are facilitated by the Students' Union and the careers and employability hub. Within the curriculum, there are also skills that are embedded within each course to enable students to develop skills, networks, and communities. However, this is not always evident to students, therefore it is important to investigate whether students are aware and feel that they can build skills, networks, and communities both inside and outside the curriculum.

The key areas and questions of importance regarding this theme that will be discussed in this report are:
- Do students agree that there are opportunities both inside and outside the curriculum that help to build skills, networks, and communities at university?
- What opportunities are students aware of both inside and outside the curriculum?

Methods

Survey

Questions were drafted by all Student Consultants across each theme for a survey, which was developed with support from the Students' Union (SU). The survey was open from the 3rd of May 2023 to the 31st of May 2023. However, due to a low number of responses, a second shorter updated version of the survey was developed and kept open until the 11th of June 2023.

Both surveys were distributed by the Students' Union to all students of every demographic and university course via email. It included questions for each theme that collated both quantitative and qualitative data. For the theme of: 'Activities inside and outside the curriculum that build skills, networks, and communities', the following three questions were asked:

1. Please rate how far you agree 'There are opportunities inside and outside the curriculum that help build your skills at university'.

2. Please rate how far you agree 'There are opportunities inside and outside the curriculum that allow you to build communities at university'.
3. Please list 3 opportunities that you are aware of that help you to build your skills, networks, and communities both inside and outside the university curriculum.

The rating scales for the first two questions were: 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Neutral', 'Disagree' and 'Strongly disagree'. The final question was an open text box and participants only had to list 3 items.

The overall response rate for both surveys was 102, in which 81 completed the updated version and 26 had completed the initial survey. Of the 26, 5 of those students had completed both versions. However, throughout this report the updated survey results will be mainly considered due to the larger sample size of respondents.

Focus Group

To follow up the information provided for the survey, respondents were invited to focus groups to discuss further. For the focus groups, two themes were paired due to time constraints and were held for an hour. Therefore, the theme of 'Activities inside and outside the curriculum that build skills, networks, and communities', was paired with the theme of 'Graduate Outcomes and Inductions'.

Results

Sample Size and Demographics

Although the sample size provides insight into student's awareness and ratings of opportunities, it is too small to provide sufficient evidence on the entire student body at the university. Therefore, no clear conclusions should be drawn based on a specific demographic. For example, only two Foundation Year students completed the survey, thus this is not a representative view of the entire Foundation Year demographic. For the remainder of the results section however, the overall survey data results have been broken down into each group. The demographics of the respondents are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of respondents from the survey

Demographic	Count	Percentage
Total	81	100%
Home Students	57	70%
International Students	24	30%
Disabled Students	19	23%
Age 18-21	39	48%
Age 22-25	18	22%
Age 26-30	10	12%
Age 30+	14	17%
Year 0 (Foundation)	2	2%
Year 1	22	27%
Year 2	15	19%
Year 3 & 4	22	27%
Post-Graduate	20	25%
Identify as Female	46	57%
Identify as Male	35	43%
Lincoln International Business School	21	26%
College of Arts	17	21%

College of Social Science	16	20%
College of Science	27	33%
Part-time	3	4%
Full-time	78	96%
Involved in a Sport or Society	47	58%

Survey data: Key Findings for skill building opportunities (Question 1)

Figure 1. Bar chart representing results from each age demographic.

Majority of the respondents either strongly agree or agree that there are opportunities available to build skills, with 67% of those in the 17-21 age bracket selecting agree. Within the older two age brackets of 26-30 and 30+, 10% and 7% of students respectively, were the only groups to disagree. This suggests that there may be a difference of opinion based on the age groups of what they perceive as opportunities that help build skills at university.
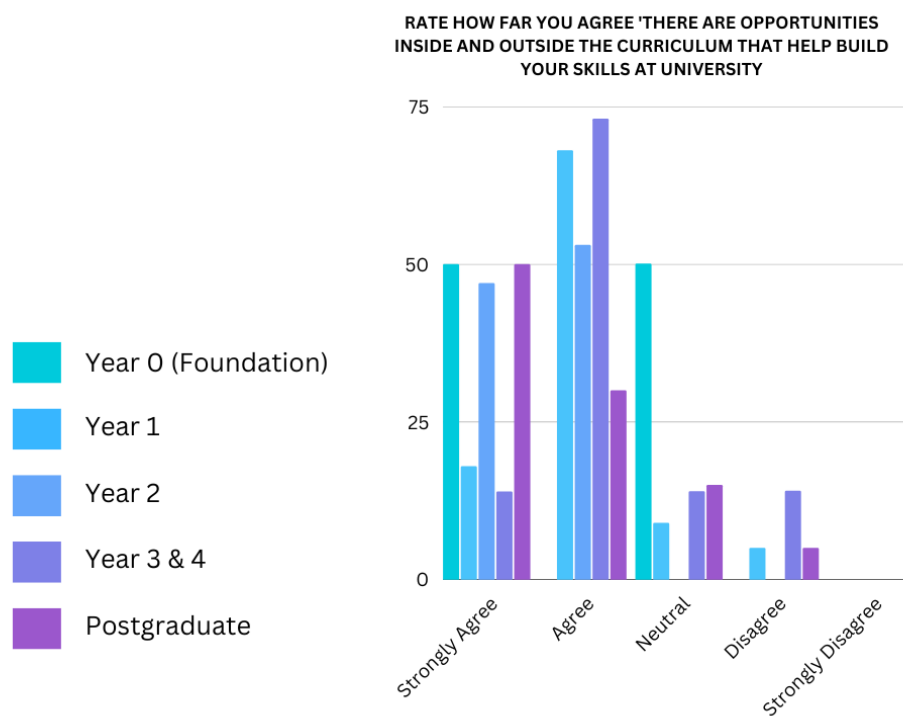

Figure 2. Bar chart representing results from each year group.

Out of each year group, 73% of those in Years 3 and 4 agreed that there are opportunities that help build skills inside and outside the curriculum. However, those in the postgraduate group varied, which may further suggest a difference in opinion of what mature students perceive as opportunities to build skills. Furthermore, it may be that students in Years 3 and 4 have had more exposure to opportunities due to the length of time that they have been at university compared to those in earlier years. Amongst students that identified as female, they were less satisfied than those who identified as male in terms of opportunities available, which may also suggest a gap between the two groups and accessibility.

RATE HOW FAR YOU AGREE 'THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CURRICULUM THAT HELP BUILD YOUR SKILLS AT UNIVERSITY
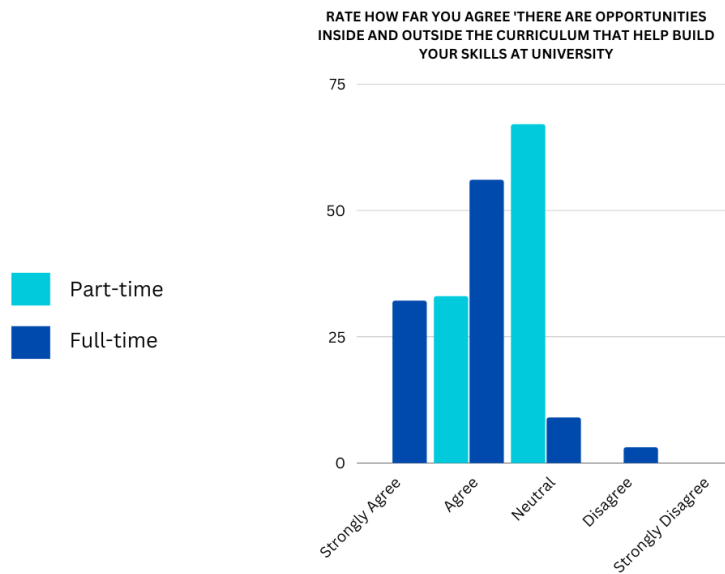

Figure 3. Bar chart representing differences in ratings between Part-time versus Full-time students.

Figure 3 demonstrates that many of the part-time students felt neutral regarding opportunities in comparison to those who were full-time, in which only 9% selected neutral. This finding suggests that those who are part-time may have less access or provision because of not being full-time students. Lastly, within the Colleges, the College of Science had the highest rating of 'agree' at 70% which may indicate that within this college there is more provision compared to the others.

Survey data: Key Findings for community building opportunities (Question 2)

It appeared that international students felt less like they can build communities at university, in comparison to home students (Figure 4). Furthermore, this was also found within the older students (Figure 5) as well, which may suggest that community building may either be more accessible or easier for younger students. This was further supported by the postgraduate students, who felt 10% less confident that they are a part of a community compared to undergraduates. Within the College of Science, it appears that there is a sense of belonging and community, as 85% agreed that they do have community building opportunities. Lincoln International Business School, Arts and Social Science Colleges all rated lower however in agreeing, therefore this needs to be further investigated.
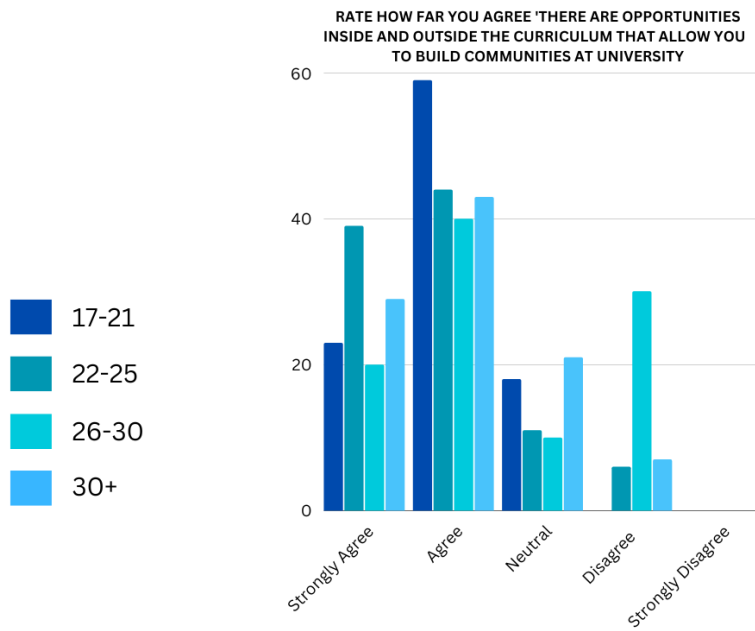
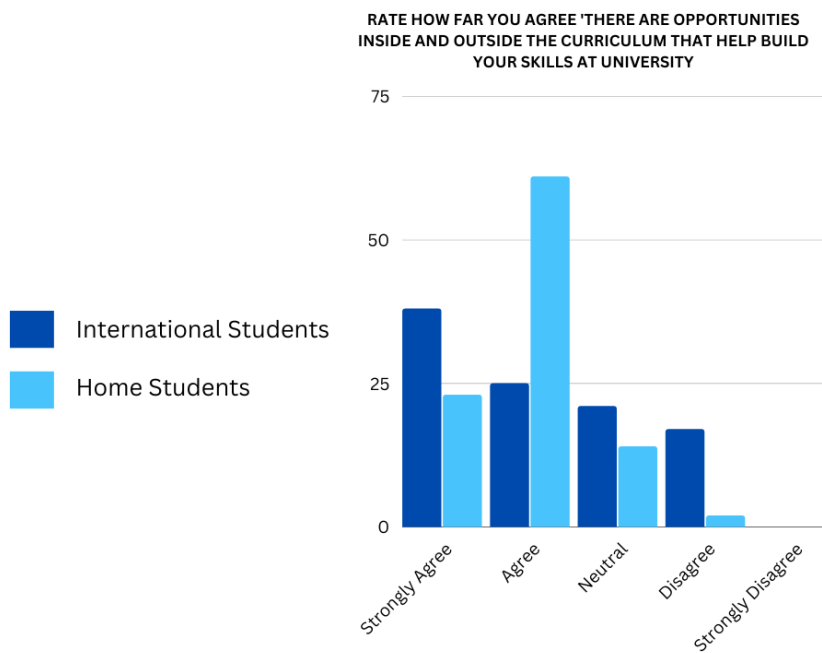Figure 4. Bar chart representing the different age groups ratings on opportunities to build communities.

Figure 5. Bar chart representing percentage of home versus international students ratings on opportunities to build communities.

Survey Data: Key findings (Question 3)

When asked about the opportunities that students were mainly aware of, the three most given were: The Lincoln Award, Student Rep opportunities and SU Events & Societies. These three are opportunities outside the curriculum, thus it is evident that students are either not aware or shown the importance of opportunities found within the curriculum.

Focus Group

Two postgraduate students attended the focus group for this theme, in which both gave examples of internships or industry related opportunities which they perceived as being both within and outside their curriculum. However, as these statements came from postgraduate students, it is important to consider that this may not be the same perception of undergraduate students. In addition, these statements also contradict the survey data which found that the older students disagree that there are opportunities available for them, therefore it may be unique for these two students and their course. Furthermore, the students discussed how industry related opportunities allow them to network and connect with companies to provide them with insight in their respective fields. This opportunity allows the students to apply their academic knowledge in practice, which is essential for post-graduation. However, they did feel this element was limited due to ineffective communication between the University and partnered institutions.

Students were also asked during the focus groups of which opportunities they were aware of outside the curriculum, and they mentioned the student representative role which has been a key for them to network and feel part of a community. Throughout the focus group, the Students' Union and individual school communities were mentioned, in which both students felt as though these areas contributed to building networks and communities. However, both students did mention that there is a lack of student participation in events or opportunities introduced by the Students' Union or schools which limits the effectiveness of both areas.

Lastly, both participants were asked what they would recommend to improve student participation and experience within the curriculum. One of the students suggested student-led groups within the curriculum, in which students are given the authority to create events supported by the University and Students' Union to enable them to build up more skills, networks and communities. Another suggestion was to ensure that enrolling into events or opportunities was more seamless and easier to improve student participation and engagement.

Recommendations

It is evident that further research in this theme does need to be carried out, with a larger number of students, to be able to fully understand how aware students are of opportunities available to them. This is to enable the university to enhance and improve the current opportunities and/or create new ones. However, from the results of the survey and the focus group, three key areas have been significant and thus can be further developed. These are:

1. Increasing student participation via use of incentives

This has been a key area that was highlighted in the focus group, and evident with the low number of responses to the survey. There is uncertainty as to why student engagement and participation is low when opportunities are given. For example, staff leads for the theme also mentioned that engagement and participation was low when the Careers and Employability Hub offered industry experts to host events at the University. A suggestion from one of the participants in the focus group was to offer certificates or micro-credentials as an incentive as this would contribute to their employability. If this is offered, there may potentially be a rise in engagement that could be measured once this is implemented.

It appears to be essential to investigate why student participation is low, and this could be assessed by asking students as to why they do or do not attend opportunities that can help build skills, networks, and communities.

2. Student curriculum groups

Having student-led groups within the curriculum may also enhance this theme, as it will enable collaboration between staff and students and truly make learning have a student-focused approach so that they are able to achieve the best outcomes. This would also improve engagement as students will feel as though they have more involvement and contribution in what they are being taught, rather than having a rigid curriculum that may not meet all their needs to help build skills, networks, and communities. Furthermore, this may also allow students to network more with staff and other students on their course, leading to a more community-like atmosphere.

3. More exposure of opportunities within the curriculum that help build skills, networks, and communities.

Based on the survey results and comments made in the focus group, it seems as though students are either not aware of opportunities or feel as though they are unable to participate. However, these reasons are not very clear and requires further investigation. Students were aware of many Students' Union related opportunities, however, within the curriculum it is not always evident. A recommendation to provide more exposure of these within the curriculum is to have College specific announcements released monthly, so that students are aware of what is available. Furthermore, encouragement from staff members on a student's course may also provide more exposure. As the Students' Union appears to be the strongest community for most individuals and has aided in connecting students, another suggestion is that the Students' Union could work in collaboration with societies to propose more activities that focus on building skills, networks, and communities.