

Exploring the SLE model at SVR meetings: Community and Belonging (November)

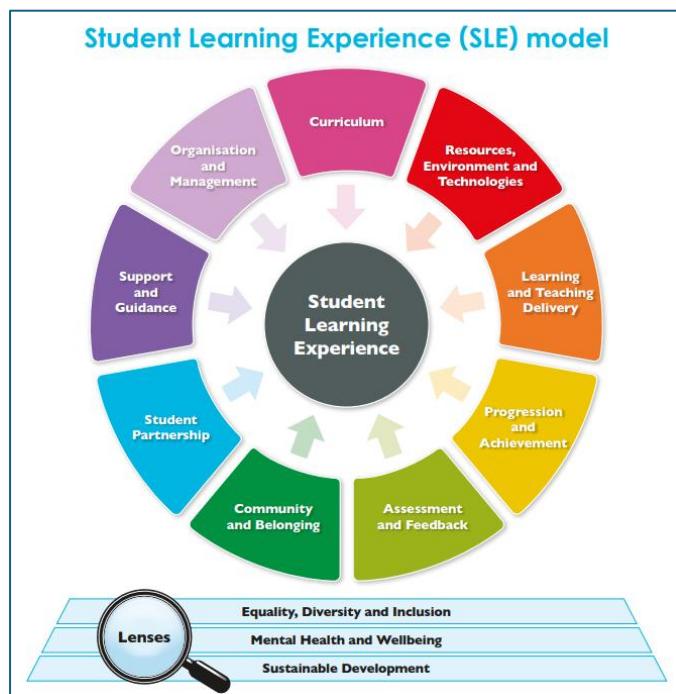
Introduction

The [Student Voice Rep system](#) is a key element of staff-student conversations about learning, links between students and HISA, and a core part of UHI's effective quality enhancement system. HISA organises meetings across the academic year for SVRs, to update them on key developments in the student experience, and gather ideas and suggestions from SVRs about their and their coursemates' learning. Feedback is used to inform HISA's work and is passed on where relevant to UHI/AP staff.

The Student Learning Experience (SLE) model

Scotland's [Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework](#) uses [the SLE model](#) to provide a framework for conversations with students about their learning. It comprises **nine building blocks** with three underpinning **lenses**. Each building block contains nine questions that can be used or adapted to explore learning with students and staff.

Over 2025-26, and following a trial in 2024-25, HISA is using most building blocks as prompts for discussion at SVR meetings and through other channels. This allows SVR input to be gathered proactively and spread across the learning experience.



November's theme: Community and Belonging

The building block Community and Belonging was chosen for November's meetings as a means of exploring how students are settling into their learning and wider communities at UHI, recognising the strategic priority of building community for both HISA and UHI, and low scores on questions relating to this topic in student surveys for instance the 2025 PTES.

Our meetings in November were run across Academic Partners by our local teams.

Discussion was generated both at those meetings and in the SVR Teams space, around three key questions:

1. What does community and belonging mean to you in your course?
2. What are the examples of community and belonging that you can see in your course?
3. What would help you create more community and belonging in your course?

The following is a summary of comments and discussions.

1. What does community and belonging mean to you in your course?

Responses overwhelmingly testified to the importance of community and belonging. Summed up by one SVR, “*Everything. It is vital for my course.*”

Within this, a number of themes were prominent, such as it meaning **inclusion: feeling welcomed, respected and safe**. Elements of this identified by students included safe spaces to be themselves, and a recognition of diversity.

Secondly, many comments defined community and belonging as **mutual support and friendship** among students. As one SVR put it: “*Community is a supportive group that learns and grows together. Belonging means feeling accepted, valued, and safe to share ideas. Together, they create connection, confidence, and shared purpose.*”

Another strong theme in contributions linked community and belonging to **successful engagement and outcomes in learning**. Comments referred to the impact of community on the ability to seek help, enjoyment of studies and positive feelings about classes, and the benefit of interactivity in classes as a contributor to community. To quote one SVR, it means “*getting on well with fellow classmates especially when doing group projects. There is a lot I can learn from other students who have different backgrounds and experiences from me.*” Another SVR called for compulsory “cameras on” making for a better learning experience. In very much a minority view, one rep stated “*I'm not here to make friends, I just want the qualification.*”

A final theme, though not one mentioned by many, was the availability of **volunteering opportunities**.

2. What are the examples of community and belonging that you can see in your course?

Overall, comments were quite general and vague, and not every meeting had the opportunity to dig deeply into experiences. However, examples where given were plentiful and can be grouped into three themes.

Students helping each other came up in many responses, with references to students working together in classes in a mutually supportive way that benefited students’ confidence and engagement. As one rep put it, “*it is especially heartening to have seen students who are initially self-conscious gradually come out of their shell, partly in thanks to the gentle encouragement of the others*”. There were also references to support for SVRs, including the Teams space, as an example of community and belonging. Specific commendation was made by SVRs at SAMS: “*I too believe that SAMS supports a strong community, and that it is typically a very welcoming environment for many people. My experience has been generally very positive and I feel that a large part of this is due to having such a friendly relationship with other students.*” While there was broad commendation for the support provided by UHI staff, one rep

reported that this was unfortunately found to be lacking in contrast to student peer support in their course.

Secondly, several contributions can be described as **collaboration in learning**, with group exercises and projects, sharing of resources, hands-on practicals and field trips, plus hugely supportive staff, helping to build community and belonging and get students out of comfort zones. In one notable example from an arts class at UHI Shetland: “*We all worked together on a big mural piece as a kind of bonding/working together exercise at the start of our course.*”

A third set of examples related to **social interaction outside formal learning**, including spending social time and lunchtimes together, with food an important theme for community. Course trips, while noted as not always possible, were stated as important, as were interactive apps such as WhatsApp, Discord or other chat platforms to share resources and ideas.

Curiously, there was no mention in responses to this question to HISA’s clubs, societies and networks, nor of university tools such as Brightspace, suggesting the potential to further promote them as a basis for building community and belonging.

3. What would help you create more community and belonging in your course?

Unfortunately, a major theme in answers to this question was **uncertainty about what would help**, or **satisfaction with the current situation**. This might suggest that achieving enhanced community and belonging may not be something that students have critically reflected on before and more could be done to test and explore this.

Where there were substantial clusters of comments, they related to a few key points:

- More **in-class community and peer support**, including more group projects, open discussions, educational trips, peer mentoring, inclusive activities and chances to share personal experiences. One rep stated they’d heard there was in the past a buddy system at their AP linking fourth years with first years which they’d like to see return.
- More **use of campus space for social activities**, such as bigger seating areas, evening access, use of unused facilities in certain campuses such as kitchens, plus (perhaps controversially) smoking facilities.
- More **gatherings and events organised by students/HISA**, such as social events, end of term celebrations relating to subjects (eg art shows or cookery displays). There were suggestions for more integration between students across years and subjects due to the benefit of socialising beyond your immediate class

Further smaller groups of comments referred to **more input from PATs and equivalents**, **overcoming financial barriers**, and **more use of chat tools such as WhatsApp**.

It was argued however by at least one rep that enhancing community and belonging depends on students taking the initiative, coming forward themselves to volunteer and organise. But more positively, it is important to note that there were no responses in any meetings saying that there should not be any more community and belonging.

As with question 2, it was again notable that there was little reference to HISA’s function here other than organising events, reinforcing the scope for HISA to further promote opportunities available through clubs, societies and networks.

Where relevant, we are taking up individual comments with relevant staff in UHI/APs. All comments are also being taken on board to inform HISA's approaches and activities.

HISA
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