



Learning & Teaching Enhancement Programme Case study

As a way of capturing the detail and impact of your Learning & Teaching Enhancement Project, please complete the questions below, which align with the QAA Scotland reporting template. *Please answer all questions in 200 words or fewer.* Case studies may be published on the University's website and elements may be used in reports for QAA Scotland. Project teams may be asked to contribute a Blog or Podcast to help to share project activities and outcomes. Any questions, please contact cad@abdn.ac.uk.

Virtual Café: enhancing Online PGT student experience & inclusion

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Context

This section should provide brief details about the context of the project/activity, highlighting any specific challenges and/or strategies it is intended to address.

Text in this section should not exceed **200 words**.

The Advanced HE Postgraduate Student Experience Survey (Leman, 2023) identified a need to strengthen the quality of staff–student and peer interactions to improve learning, satisfaction, and overall student experience. The survey highlighted that online postgraduate students in particular report higher levels of isolation and disconnection compared to their on-campus peers. Feedback gathered from online MPH students at the University of Aberdeen between 2022 and 2024 confirmed these findings, with students consistently expressing the need for structured opportunities to develop social and peer support networks.

Whilst previous initiatives such as *Learning Better Together* (LTEP 2022–23) and *SUCCESS PLUS* (LTEP 2019–20) have demonstrated success in fostering postgraduate community on campus, no equivalent provision has been available for students studying remotely. The Virtual Café was developed in response, with the aim of providing an accessible, inclusive online hub to support a geographically and culturally diverse cohort of part-time learners. The initiative is aligned with the University's *MySkills* framework and directly addresses Principle 2 of the *Delivery of Education* strategy (community building). A pilot programme was launched in 2024–25, comprising 1-2 cafés per term, supported by ongoing survey and interview-based evaluation to capture impact and inform future

development.

Description of activity

In this section, you should provide brief and descriptive details of the project/activity. Please include information on student engagement in the project here.

Text in this section should not exceed **200 words**.

The Virtual Café initiative was implemented during the 2024–25 academic year to enhance the experience of online postgraduate students through structured community-building activities. A series of five cafés was delivered via Microsoft Teams for IAHS Online PGT students, with topics ranging from informal networking to career development and programme-related discussions.

An evaluation strategy was developed to capture student engagement and feedback. Online community surveys were distributed to IAHS Online PGT students, SMMSN on-Demand students, and School of Education online students, yielding 20, 11, and zero responses respectively. In addition, although focus groups could not be convened due to students' limited availability, seven one-to-one interviews with IAHS Online PGT students were conducted. Interview transcripts informed a thematic analysis exploring student needs, expectations, and suggestions for improvement.

Through this combination of structured cafés, surveys, and interviews, the project engaged directly with students to better understand their experiences, identify barriers to participation, and gather insights to inform the development of more inclusive and engaging online community activities.

Evaluation and impact

This section should provide an analysis of evaluation and impact of the project.

To support evaluative activity, institutions are encouraged to use the [resources](#) developed by Professor Stella Jones-Devitt and Dr Liz Austen, particularly the Enhancement Themes Theory of Change model and the Universal Evaluation Framework (UEF).

Text in this section should not exceed **200 words**

Survey Results

The survey included demographic information, student perceptions and experiences of the University PGT Online Community.

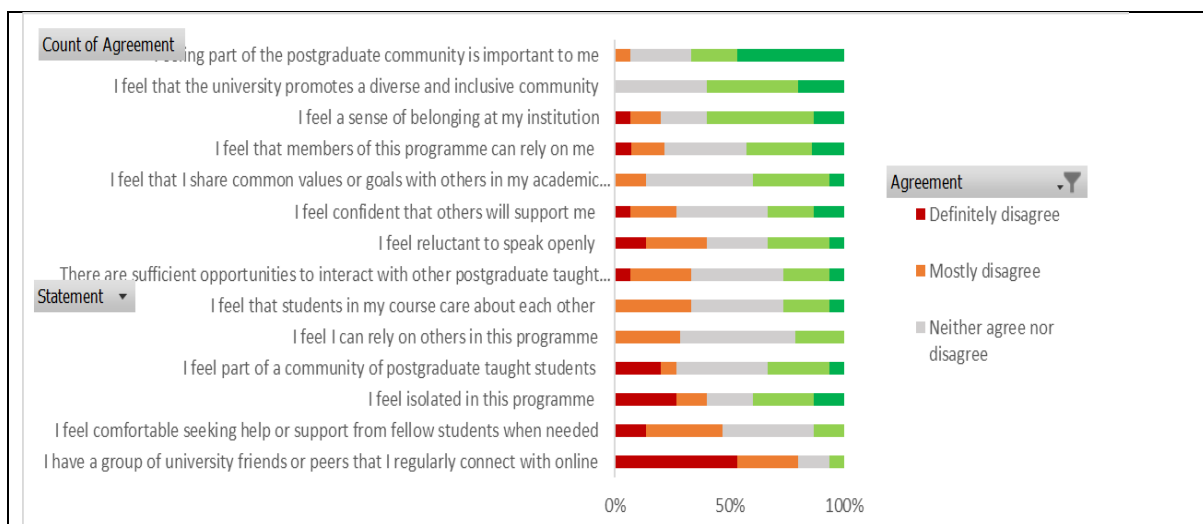


Figure 1. Student Perceptions of the University PGT Online Community (online PGT students)

Interview Results

A thematic analysis identified four key themes emerging from interviews.

Improving café structure and format was a consistent priority. Students found open-ended discussions slow and unfocused, with large-group calls proving intimidating. They suggested shorter sessions (under 1-hour) with clear agendas, such as guest speakers, or career-focused discussions, alongside time for informal interaction.

Importance of coordinator support and presence was strongly emphasised. Active engagement by programme leads and tutors helped students feel acknowledged, supported, and part of the University community.

Barriers of time and accessibility remained significant. Many students juggle professional and family commitments alongside study, and international time zones further limited participation, making it difficult to prioritise optional community events.

Attitudes towards online communities were mixed. Some students considered them awkward or less authentic than in-person interactions, while others valued the cafés as one of the few opportunities to meet peers, share experiences, and build camaraderie.

Despite relatively low attendance (typically fewer than five students per session out of 40–50 eligible participants), the cafés provided valuable opportunities for informal peer interaction and the sharing of student perspectives.

Lessons learned and next steps

In this section, you should reflect on the key learning points drawn from this activity for the institution. You might also consider what learning other universities or the tertiary education sector could take from this activity. If there is any planned follow-on activity, please provide brief details here.

Text in this section should not exceed **200 words**

The Virtual Café pilot has highlighted both the opportunities and challenges of building community among online postgraduate students. A key learning point is that while

students value acknowledgement, connection, and purposeful engagement, participation will remain constrained unless activities are carefully designed around their needs. Time pressures, competing commitments, and international time zones necessitate flexible models that combine shorter, well-structured synchronous events with asynchronous or recorded options.

The evaluation also underlined the importance of the coordinator's presence. Active, visible engagement from staff fosters inclusion and signals institutional recognition of the online student community. However, sustainability requires a gradual shift towards student-led or co-facilitated formats to encourage ownership and authenticity, supported by staff as facilitators rather than organisers.

Future development will focus on embedding clearer structure, purposeful agendas, and interest- or cohort-based groups to reduce barriers and enhance interaction. Opportunities to link social connection with academic and career development will be prioritised, ensuring cafés offer tangible value alongside community building.

The next phase will explore delivering a more structured virtual café model to IAHS online students, incorporating asynchronous discussion spaces in MS Teams, and aiming for a co-designed student-led format. The lessons learned provide transferable insights for other schools seeking to strengthen inclusion and belonging in online postgraduate education.

References

Please provide links to any relevant websites or further information about the activity in this section.

Advance HE. (2023). *Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2023: findings from the survey*. Retrieved from <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/postgraduate-taught-experience-survey-2023>