

Improving sense of belonging in blended online and in-person learning: findings from the Imperial College London School of Public Health

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IMPERIAL

Community dynamics in the Imperial School of Public Health were disrupted by a shift from face-to-face to blended online and in-person learning, negatively impacting student sense of belonging. Using findings from interviews and focus groups of students, staff and alumni, strategies to enhance **student sense of belonging** have been implemented.

These include encouraging course and module teams to take ownership of **community-building** by identifying more opportunities for informal student and staff interaction, such as **research and career seminars**, and **coffee chats**.

Students are encouraged to plan their own **social events**, with **funding support** from the Graduate School

BACKGROUND

How can student sense of belonging be enhanced in blended online and in-person teaching and learning post COVID-19 lockdowns?

Following COVID-19 induced lockdowns and emergency remote teaching, the Imperial College London School of Public Health (SPH) implemented blended online and in-person teaching and learning for taught post-graduate students, which persists to date. While blended learning has the potential to maximise learning outcomes, routine surveys and anecdotal evidence indicated that it had variable effects on student sense of belonging.

METHODS

- Experiences of blended learning and teaching by students, faculty and alumni were explored using a **phenomenological** qualitative research approach.
- Data were collected through one-to-one **interviews** with staff and alumni, and a **focus group** of current students (2022-23 cohort).
- From these data, **themes** were both deductively derived from the literature and inductively developed based on commonality in participant responses.

RESULTS

Table 1: Study participants

	Eligible and invited to study	Participated in study	Participation
Faculty members	40+	10	1-to-1 Interview
Alumni	135	5	1-to-1 Interview
Current students	138	3	Focus group

- Students and faculty were from the MSc in Epidemiology and Master of Public Health in SPH
- Giving an in-person coffee-chat as an example of how face-to-face meetings facilitated greater interaction, an alumnus noted, **"And then after the coffee, everyone went home... It was nothing more than that. But it does make you feel like you can ask more questions"** (Alumnus C)
- Human interactions were also seen by staff as vital for connection and collaborations; **"So some of the students, even the ones that I haven't tutored, I've seen them in the corridor, and they've come up to ask me a question....and you know... I see them and clearly recognise them. They recognise me. We have like a friendly thing. I feel like there is a feel of trust and a feel of like they can count on us."**

RESULTS CONTINUED

Table 2: Emergent themes

Engagement	Relatable context
Participation	Socialising
Shared identity	Community
Fitting in	Language barrier

- The main aspect of blended learning that seemed to increase engagement and interaction was the opportunity to meet peers and faculty in person.
- Students expressed a desire for more opportunities for informal (rather than formal) in-person interactions.
- Themes highlighted a need for organic participation, engagement, shared identity, fitting-in, reliability, socialising and community.
- In-person interactions were missed by faculty for their vital role in forming relationships, which often led to research collaboration.
- Some sense of belonging online came from familiarity with online College branding, and reliability of content'

CONCLUSIONS

- Students should feel accepted, valued, and included in learning
- Blended learning presents a challenge as students consistently reported that they felt more connected to their peers and instructors when they were able to meet them in person.
- This model of learning requires course teams to be more creative in seeking opportunities to build and strengthen the community intentionally, both through and outside regular teaching.
- At the Imperial School of Public Health, this has been through research and career seminars, coffee chats, and student-led social activities (with funding support from the College)
- Sense of belonging can still be enhanced online, by provision of relatable content, and familiar online experiences
- Module leaders should consider the diversity of their students, and the accessibility of scenarios/ case studies used to demonstrate and reiterate concepts, both online and in person.

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