

Students as partners: enhancing employability skills through running transition book clubs.

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Presentation abstract

One of the challenges that many students face when they start university is finding a sense of belonging in a new and unfamiliar environment. Feeling connected and supported can have a positive impact on students' academic success and well-being. That is why the Get Ahead Transition project at Queen Mary University of London launched a book club initiative to help students build a sense of belonging before attending university.

The book club was based on the book *The Psychology of Effective Studying* by Paul Penn, which offers practical and evidence-based strategies for students to overcome procrastination, improve academic reading and note-taking skills, and produce high-quality assignments. The book also features short YouTube videos that summarise some of the key concepts. The book club was led by current students who facilitated the discussions and shared their personal experiences of studying at university.

The book club was a great success as nearly all the participants had read the chapters and came prepared with questions and insights. The discussions were so engaging that the leaders suggested extending the sessions by an extra 30 minutes to allow time for questions and answers. The participants also appreciated the opportunity to learn from their peers and get a glimpse of what university life is like.

The book club leaders also benefited beyond expectation from the experience as they enhanced their leadership, communication, and technical skills. They received feedback and guidance from the project team on how to highlight these skills to future employers. The book club leaders also qualified for two university awards for their contribution to the project.

Keywords: employability; transition; book club; partnership.

Community response

The presentation by Gianna on the book club initiative at Queen Mary University of London received a positive and enthusiastic response from the audience members who attended the session. They appreciated the unique aspects of the book club, such as the choice of a study skills book, the option to watch videos instead of reading, and the role of students as leaders. They also highlighted their biggest takeaways from the session, such as:

- The book club was a creative and effective way to help students build a sense of belonging before attending university, which can enhance their academic success and well-being.
- The book club leaders gained valuable employability skills from the experience, such as leadership, communication, and technical skills. They also received recognition and awards for their contribution to the project.
- The book club initiative could be replicated and adapted in other contexts and institutions, as well as extended into the academic year to reach more students and collect more data on its impact.
- The book club also opened up discussions about what studying at university is like and what challenges and opportunities students might face.

The audience members expressed their interest and curiosity in following up on the project and seeing how it evolves in the future. One participant said:

The feedback seems overwhelmingly positive, and it would be interesting to see whether participation in the clubs has any long-term effect on students, for example whether these students are more likely to progress or get higher grades than students who did not attend. I'd also be interested to know whether student participants go on to become leaders in future years.

Other participants noted the focus on the student book club leaders and pondered potential developments, stating:

I loved the concept of students as book club leaders and the time and training invested by Gianna and her team in these students, such that they developed the skills and confidence to facilitate the book clubs by themselves. With these skills, could these students be encouraged to facilitate other programmes within Learning Development at Queen Mary University London, e.g., workshops? Further fostering the concept of student as teacher as well as maintaining and further developing those book club leader skills? This could potentially be an interesting avenue to explore.

It is interesting that Gianna's focus was on the employability skills of the leaders - this is something we always find easier to demonstrate for Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) leaders than the effect PASS has on those that attend - it will be interesting to see if Gianna is able to follow her attendees to see if they felt it had a positive effect on their studies after arrival. The ideas for development into the academic year should make it reach more students and so more data should become available. I watch this space with interest.

The participants learned from the book's content as well as from the leaders' personal experiences. They also thanked Gianna for sharing her experience and insights with them. As one of them said, 'this was a fantastic initiative and has given me many ideas to take away'.

Editorial comment

Book clubs are not only about reading a book, but also about creating a community. Through participation in the book club and connection with the community, students are empowered to have collaborative conversations (Petrich, 2015). Book clubs can provide students with opportunities to: engage in meaningful discussions that enhance their critical thinking and communication skills; develop friendships and social networks that can support their academic and personal growth; and participate in fun and creative shared experience with others who have similar interests. Therefore, book clubs can offer

students a rewarding and enjoyable reading experience that can benefit them academically and personally. The book club initiative is an example of how a simple and engaging intervention can foster a sense of belonging among students and prepare them for the transition to university.

Next steps and additional questions

While this project was funded short-term, the team would very much like the role of Transitions Officer to carry on in a more permanent way. This would include continuing to offer the book clubs as a way for new students to get to know each other before coming onto campus. It may be that other groups are created out of this main one, for example, a group with a focus on international students or post-graduate students.

Now that a solid foundation for the Get Ahead Programme has been established, there is scope for this and other similar initiatives to be created and expanded upon. And with the book club running for a second year similar to the previous format, it is also a good opportunity to gather more data, combine it with the previous year's data and look at the journey the participants in the groups take afterwards, both from an academic and personal development standpoint.

Author's reflection

I very much enjoyed speaking and sharing my ideas with fellow colleagues at the ALDinHE conference. Through this report, discussions that were had throughout the event and in learning from the presentations of others, I have come away with so many ideas of where this project can go in the future. One participant mentioned tracking the students' progress and that is definitely something we are exploring at Queen Mary. Of particular note is whether any of the participants go on to take up leadership roles at the university which I think would be fantastic to find out as it would be a great example of student leaders encouraging others to traverse a similar path.

Encouragingly, three out of the nine previous book club leaders applied to be leaders again for the new academic year. I think that is a testament to what they got out of the role.

Their willingness to assist new students again also shows they understood the importance of the support they were providing.

I will be moving out of this role into a new one at Queen Mary, but will simultaneously be running the book club this term and keeping a close eye on this project going forward. There is a lot more that can be done with this initiative, particularly to continue to build and foster a community of new and existing students and encourage them to go on to help others in the future.

Acknowledgments

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References

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Author details

Gianna De Salvo is the Project Officer for the Get Ahead Transition Programme at Queen Mary University of London. She moved into the role of Library Engagement Manager at Queen Mary in September 2023 but will still be involved in projects that support students in transitioning throughout their journeys in higher education.

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