Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Supporting Online Personal Tutoring with gather.town: An Innovative Approach to Foster Student Belonging

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Research Domain: Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract: Transition to university can be a challenging experience for many students but an important opportunity to develop connections, create a sense of belonging, and identify learning communities which can support an individual's academic journey and wellbeing through their university career. Through social distancing measures brought on by the COVID pandemic, many students have lost out on this vital opportunity which has contributed to increased feelings of isolation, disengagement, and ultimately reduced mental health. Digital platforms can offer some relief to this, enabling students to interact with each other and their educators, however success has been variable with many platforms offering environments which are perceived as too formal for students to engage with fully. Here we use gather.town to support personal tutoring groups in students transitioning to university to support belonging and engagement in a remote environment. Student and educators' perspectives are collected to evaluate the effectiveness of this initiative.

Paper: Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) around the world have experienced unparalleled disruption due to the Pandemic outbreak. Staff and students have had to quickly adapt to a distance learning mode of education in order to ensure the safety of all stakeholders (Dhawan, 2020). Research on learning and teaching has shown a significant decrease in student engagement both in synchronous and asynchronous online sessions within distance learning contexts (Zhao, et. al, 2020). In particular, research suggests that students' lack of Hpeer support and sense of belonging has negatively impacted their learning experience (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020; Weiss, 2021) as well as their overall wellbeing (Browning et al., 2021). Although many universities have announced a hybrid learning model for the next academic year, issues such as a lack of identity and belonging among students remain crucial for educators to address.

Many studies have highlighted the importance of orientation or induction-related activities in supporting student transition from school to university, achieving academic success, and forming a sense of belonging within peer groups (Thomas, 2012; van Herpen et al., 2019). In particular, research emphasises the roles of personal tutors in connecting students with their academic departments in addition to the university's various services (Vinson et al., 2010), where effective student-personal tutor relationships have been shown to improve student retention and engagement, particularly within the first year (McFarlane, 2016). Traditionally, the success of such

orientation events, including personal tutoring systems, is in part attributed to their face-to-face nature (Lindsay, 2011) and their use of small groups (Glogowska, Young & Lockyer, 2007). However, opportunities for these have been reduced due to the pandemic and fostering a sense of belonging through similar events in distance learning contexts is known to be a challenge.

Informal interaction between students as well as with academics, is acknowledged to be an important element of student belonging as well as first-year academic performance (Severiens & Wolff 2008; van Herpen et al., 2019). Common online teaching platforms, such as Google Classroom or Microsoft Teams, offer predominantly synchronised video conferencing (SVC) in place of traditional face-to-face teaching or student support sessions. Although very effective applications, sessions delivered via these platforms offer limited opportunity for informal discussion between students, or indeed between students and academics (Themeli, 2016). Recent research has called for additional digital resources and training for personal tutors when conducting tutorials online (Woods, 2020).

Gather.town is an online application which offers users a proximity-based, video-conferencing experience in an avatar-populated 2-D environment whereby participants can engage with each other and pre-placed objects (e.g. images, videos, documents etc.) by moving closer to them in virtual space. Although the use of this technology within HE student-facing initiatives is limited, recent work has demonstrated it is preferred over conventional SVC platforms, particularly due to the increased opportunity for informal interaction between peers as well as with academics (McClure & Williams, in press), scenarios which are difficult to foster in remote learning contexts.

With limited opportunities for HEIs to promote effective student belonging in distance-learning contexts and the majority of institutions intending to adopt a more hybrid model of teaching following the pandemic (Paudel, 2021), GT may provide a useful tool to encourage a sense of belonging within students transitioning to university, and thus to improve student retention, achievement, and the overall student experience. This study aims to investigate this hypothesis by the means of integrating GT into the personal tutoring systems of two UK universities to determine the impact of belonging within transitioning students.

Methods

Implementation

Academic personal tutors from two research-intensive UK universities were encouraged to use GT as a way to communicate with their first year, personal tutor groups remotely. As individual personal tutorial group numbers were below 25, the use of GT was free, and students were encouraged to use the space outside of official academic-led sessions for peer-support purposes throughout the academic year.

Informed by the Scale of belonging model (Meeuwisse, Severiens & Born, 2010), this research aims to explore the impact of adoption of GT by personal tutors and measure its effectiveness in fostering students' sense of identity. The project adopts a sequential mixed methods approach, collecting online structured questionnaires followed by semi-structured interviews of students. Data analysis includes quantitative analysis using SPSS software and Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Results for this study are yet to be collected, but will be obtained, analysed before presenting at the conference. The research findings will hopefully showcase an effective tool for fostering student belonging through online personal tutorial systems.

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