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**Title** Using an experiential team building activity to promote postgraduate students' social integration and professional skills development  
**Submitter** Ms. Michelle McLardy, Dr. Andre Soares

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### **Introduction**

Trowler summarises the literature on student engagement as the 'interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution' (2010:3). For most students, the initial interaction is at induction where they first meet their peers, course directors and administrators as well as the academic teaching staff however it is often perceived as too short, process driven and packed full of information which all students are expected to absorb. The essence of integration and socialisation does not necessarily come into the equation especially when students are busy trying to understand course requirements and tutors' expectations.

It is therefore difficult to assess the level of engagement at this stage other than focussing on retention rates and this does not reflect the level of social integration achieved by students. This is further supported through the work of Newswander (2009) and Oliver and Coyte (2011) based on the results of their studies into student engagement and the positive experiences of diversity, participation, interactive teaching and learning, and working in diverse teams. A study by Busher, Lewis and Comber (2016) took the view that 'people's social interactions are major mediators of learning processes (Vygotsky 1978), so that students' views of themselves as learners are strongly affected by the relationships they build with other people and their perceptions of the institutional and social processes within which their learning is situated.' (2016:49).

Most academic literature about student engagement focusses on undergraduates and is often linked to both in class and extra-curricular activities. Less is written on the engagement of postgraduate students, who are generally not offered the same opportunities to interact and socialise with their peers outside of the classroom other than for reasons such as group assessments. Therefore, the aim of this study is to address the gap in the literature and to research the impact of using an experiential learning activity to promote engagement for postgraduate students. The objective of this paper is to present the preliminary results of this study by analysing the impact of a team building activity on students' social integration in their programmes of study and on the development of professional skills.

### **The research context**

A case study has been used to assess the impact of an experiential team building activity on the social integration and professional skills development of students studying in two different PG HRM courses in a British university. The team building event took place in the context of the module "Skills for Study and HR Leadership". The main objectives of this event were to allow students to apply and develop further skills that will be important to successful management

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practice, to effective leadership and to promote the social integration of the students so they make the most of their formal programme of study.

The participants were students from PG courses in Human Resources from a British university that have been asked to participate in a one-day team building activity. In total 75 students studying the module "Skills for Study and HR Leadership Human Resources" participated in the activity but only 35 responded to the questionnaire. From these, 60% were female and the average age was 27.63 (SD=6.54). The students participating in this activity were from 12 different countries. A questionnaire composed of two sections has been used to assess the reaction of students to the event. The first section with demographic questions such as gender, age and course the respondent was studying. A second section consisted of a Lickert scale that asked the students their agreement with thirteen statements about the activity. The respondents have been asked to rate their agreement on a scale between 1 (Totally disagree) and 7 (Totally agree).

### **Preliminary Findings**

Due to the sample size (n=35) and taking into account that this is a developmental paper, we have decided to present here only descriptive statistics. Additionally, as this is a first approach to the data of this research project we are more interested in assessing the reactions of students to the team building activity than present an inferential study. According to the results, most of the students found the event useful (71% responses >4). We can highlight the impact of this event at three levels: friendship development, overall student experience and perception of impact in their future professional life.

Most of the students mentioned that the team building event allowed them to make friends (71% responses >4). The development of friendship ties will have an impact on their social integration. This social integration is especially important as research shows that students must be socially integrated to make the most of their formal programme (Rienties et al., 2013). The students also found that team building activity has had a positive impact on the overall student experience (79% responses >4). Research shows that there is a positive relationship between student engagement and student experience (Kahu, 2013). This means that this kind of activity may also contribute to student engagement. Finally, students believe that this event will have an impact in their future professional life (72% responses >4). One factor that might have influenced this result is the fact that most of the students mentioned that they understand the relationship between the activities and the academic course content (79% responses >4).

Based on these preliminary results we can draw some conclusions. Firstly, it seems important to have other induction activities a few weeks after they had the first formal induction. In sum, this event supports the idea that it is possible to link the social integration to the development of professional skills. It is possible and desirable to develop activities that allow students to create positive relationships which will contribute to improve the student experience. Finally, it is possible to develop both soft and hard skills and contribute to the social integration of students in their courses and in the university.

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