

5. Course Identity

A course should be an identifiable entity, studied by an identifiable cohort of students, and facilitated by an identifiable team because student engagement is supported through a sense of mattering and belonging to a course community.

Student engagement is enhanced by a student's sense of mattering and belonging. Belonging (social, personal, academic) is complex and can fluctuate - students can choose to belong at different times and in different spaces - but belonging is tightly related to student wellbeing, to students' motivation and to academic outcomes.

A strong course identity can improve belonging and mattering. Course identity is best developed through an identifiable course team who feel a sense of responsibility for an identifiable cohort of students. Developing relationships between staff and students has been shown to contribute to a sense of belonging and mattering, and to higher achievement and increased progression. Consistent course communications from a clearly identified course team help develop a sense of shared understanding of course expectations from pre-entry onwards. Dedicated physical and online course spaces, and course activities can make students feel secure. Course identity is further strengthened when students share experiences across levels and cohorts or engage with course-based peer mentoring.

Reflective questions for course teams

Is the course an identifiable entity?

1. How is the course **distinctive**? What do students need to know about the course before deciding to study it? What might attract students to the course, and how do you promote this to potential students (and to graduate employers)?
2. Does the course have optional modules or **pathways**? Does the course share modules with other courses? If so, does this impact on students' sense of identity, shared experience, and belonging to a course cohort? Does this detract from the sense of course identity or does it foster new perspectives and life skills?
3. Is the course more than a collection of modules? Is assessment at module level or are there opportunities for students to bring their learning together through **synoptic** assessment?
4. What do you do to specifically develop and strengthen a sense of **course community**? How do you foster a sense of social and personal belonging (particularly if the students are studying online or part-time)?
5. What course communications do you have? Do your **course communications** clarify the course's specific identity and the course's professional, behavioural, social and academic expectations? Is there a strong course culture?

6. Does the course have a physical and/or virtual **home** that is consistently used as an entry point for students on the course to interact with one another and the course team, and to access all their course related resources? If not, are there any barriers to doing this? What course social/welcome activities and networks are there?

Is there an identifiable cohort of students?

7. Is the course designed to support students to build relationships with other students on the course? What does the course team do to encourage students to see themselves as **members** of a cohort and members of the course? Does the course team use any targeted interventions to ensure students from non-traditional backgrounds or disadvantaged students can develop a sense of belonging?
8. Do members of the course team know the **names** of the students on the course? If not, what are the barriers to this?

Is there an identifiable course team?

9. How do the course team **introduce themselves**, and make themselves known, to the students?
10. Does the course team feel a **sense of ownership** of the course? If not, what are the barriers?
11. Do all staff teaching or supporting the course (including part time and fractional staff) know who else teaches on/facilitates the course? Does the extended course team include **identifiable colleagues** from the library, student services, careers and other professional services?
12. Does the course team **meet**/communicate regularly? If not, why not? Are members of the extended course team included in course team meetings and communications? Are course team reflections captured at various points of the year and used to implement changes?
13. How do staff work together? Are there any opportunities for **staff collaboration** across the course? Do course team members 'team teach' or actively observe and/or contribute to each other's sessions?

For further reading on [Course Identity](#), see the associated Talis Reading List. For case studies, resources and further support developing your course's identity contact CLT.