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**"It's about not achieving the outcomes that you necessarily expected"**  
**Non-formal learning in higher education**

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***“It’s about not achieving the outcomes that you necessarily expected”***  
**Non-formal learning in higher education**

**Introduction**

Much student learning at university happens outside the classroom, giving rise to important personal development. These spaces are usually non-credit bearing, but part of the student experience and are often considered essential by employers. In contrast to many formal experiences, driven by predetermined learning outcomes, non-formal spaces offer opportunities for independence and autonomy over what is learnt and how. For many students, the motivation to get involved in such activities is doing something they enjoy or perceive as meaningful. Student societies, associations and committees are all examples of ways students can be active at university in non-formal settings.

Living-learning communities (LLCs) are another example of non-formal spaces in which students can learn and develop at university. LLCs are structured within on-campus housing with the purpose of encouraging students to connect ideas from different disciplines, and of creating long-term, sustained social interactions (Zhao and Kuh 2004). These commonly consist of first-year students who have elected to reside with peers who share a common dedication to the theme of the LLC, where the residential element facilitates their engagement in that theme. While common in the USA, there are few examples in the UK. In this paper we discuss one case study learning community, in a UK campus-based university.

This LLC, referred to as the *Global Community*, had the theme International Development and Human Rights and we were keen to see whether it could develop students’ interest and action in social justice. Therefore, we took the Capability Approach (Sen 1999) as a framework for analysis. We explored how students developed their capabilities regarding

the outcomes they had reason to value, the extent to which they were able to develop the skills to achieve these, and the processes by which they determined what these outcomes were.

### **Overview of the *Global Community***

The theme of the LLC (International Development and Human Rights) was set broadly, with the idea that students would narrow this to focus on aspects they were most interested in. Learning outcomes were deliberately avoided and the focus was on seeing what emerged as the aspects the students most valued. First-year students were invited before the start of term to register to live in one residential block, allocated to the *Global Community*. Eleven first-year students registered. In addition, all students in the college were given the opportunity to participate on a non-residential basis. Over 30 students attended an information session, and of these four upper-year students became involved with the group, and several others engaged sporadically.

Education department staff then ran a workshop to promote thinking about the theme and organised a networking event. Local development and human rights organisations, equality and diversity groups and other refugee and activist groups, were invited to interact with the students. The event was designed to facilitate dialogue, networking and development of ideas for collaboration. From this point on the *Global Community* was student-led, allowing them free reign to develop their own projects. They met fortnightly to monthly during the year, with intermittent periods of intensity when students met daily, and set their own goals over the long and short-term.

They decided on four main activities: a food drive, to donate food to a local activist group; a cine-forum, regular film showings which touched on a social justice issue with facilitated discussion; an intercultural competencies workshop; and, the focal point was

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2  
3 organising a Refugee Week. Students collaborated with the local refugee action group, and  
4  
5 raised awareness and initiated discussions about refugee issues. Activities for Refugee week  
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7 included a public political debate, clothes swap, quiz, creative art workshop, and a sleep out  
8  
9 in the middle of campus (in February).  
10

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12  
13 **Framing the learning**  
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15 In the US, LLCs embody the concept of non-formal education, facilitated by university staff  
16  
17 but outside traditional classroom confines (Zhao and Kuh 2004). It is argued that these  
18  
19 structures improve retention and completion rates and promote higher academic attainment  
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21 (Inkelas et al. 2004), integration of academic and social experiences, an increased perception  
22  
23 of the positive aspects of university (Zhao and Kuh 2004) and improved employability  
24  
25 (Szelenyi et al. 2013). While these outcomes were not the drivers of this project, they  
26  
27 highlight the multifaceted benefits this type of structure can offer. The *Global Community*  
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29 was intended to take this traditional form of an LLC, however, as it developed it diverged  
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31 from this, most significantly through the engagement of non-residents and the emphasis on  
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33 student-led programming. This was a result of the very different environment of UK higher  
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35 education (HE) where the traditions of on-campus living combined with intentional initiatives  
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37 by university staff are not as developed.  
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42 Therefore, we focus on literature on non-formal and participative approaches to  
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44 learning. This frames our understanding of student-led learning as transformative and an  
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46 important aspect of learning which aims for social justice and social change (Mezirow 2000;  
47  
48 Freire 1972). This links to the use of the Capability Approach due to the connection with  
49  
50 social justice as an outcome of education. We note the contribution of this type of  
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52 extracurricular activity to employability (Stevenson and Clegg 2011), although our focus was  
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on social justice education and capabilities, taking a more holistic approach, which emphasised student-led learning. As such we explored the features that allowed students to develop in multiple ways that they valued.

### ***Non-formal and Participative Approaches to Learning***

Non-formal learning is usually semi-structured, but without formal accreditation (Morgan 2009). One approach to understanding how students learn that takes this into account is Kolb's (1983) Experiential Learning Theory, in which the learner shapes their own educational experiences. Indeed, an understanding of the content and purpose of learning is an important learning experience in itself (Biesta 2006). According to Passarelli and Kolb (2012), learning is best conceived as a holistic process of adaptation and creating knowledge, rather than in terms of outcomes. The move in the UK towards outcome-driven education has been subject to challenge, for example Hussey and Smith (2003) argue that too tight a focus on outcomes is inconsistent with good teaching and learning and empirical evidence. Opening spaces for students to find their own ways of learning about issues they deem important might contribute to their development.

Participative approaches to learning, where all are teachers and all are learners, and where flourishing is seen as a valuable end in itself, imply a challenge to power imbalances which give value according to hierarchical status (Walton 2011). Such approaches demand that students' individual experiences, knowledge, interests and attitudes are valued (Missingham 2013). They must also give students access to processes including risk assessments, problem solving, and the ownership of solutions (Cahill et al. 2014). There are many benefits to encouraging students to lead their own learning, for the transformative potential it may hold and for the deeper understanding they may gain (Mezirow 2000).

Rocha-Schmid (2010), defines participatory approaches as those in which individuals are treated as ‘active beings in charge of transforming their lives through an awareness of the power relations present within societies and the role they play in these dynamics’ (344). This implies understanding and decoding students’ own contexts, cultures and experiences, in order to understand hierarchies that exist beyond immediate experience. It implies not only recognition of injustice, but a move to change this. Central to such an approach is the promotion of dialogue, in which all parties actively participate to co-construct knowledge and negotiate different perspectives (Burbules and Berk 1999).

*The Capability Approach and Social Justice Education*

The Capability Approach ‘focuses on the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have.’ (Sen 2003, 35). A key aspect of the approach is ‘agency’; the ability to pursue goals that one values, which is important for individual freedom, collective action and democratic participation (Sen 1999), making it an essential aspect of education that aims for social justice and social change.

HE offers a potentially fruitful environment to develop critical reflection and independent thought on political and social issues, yet there have been calls for universities to pay greater attention to developing citizens (McCowan 2012). Studies taking the capabilities approach as a framework to understand students’ citizenship engagement, centre on the importance of students exploring conceptions of what they value (Walker and Loots 2016). This implies the development of agency through spaces in which to learn with an element of choice and freedom. Indeed, agency is a ‘significant dimension of a capability citizenship’ and ‘constitutes an enactment of and towards human freedom and obligations for action to change the world (of the university, of society) in some way’ (Walker and Loots 2016, 53).

Walker (2012) argues for considering capabilities in our conceptions of personal development, rather than focusing exclusively on human capital. While human capital can capture the development of many 'goods' that lead to people living a more fulfilled life, there is an economic emphasis that, in a world of 'staggering inequalities', we should aim to complement by capturing notions of what people value (388). Walker (2006) proposes eight basic capabilities for HE including 'social relations and social networks' and 'respect, dignity and recognition' (Walker 2006). In this sense, the aims of HE should align more closely with the development of the whole person, rather than focusing on the skills and knowledge needed to adapt to the job market. McLean et al. (2008) argue that universities ought to be educating citizens with self and ethical awareness for engagement with social and civic responsibilities.

So there is a role for HE, to provide opportunities and resources for students to develop skills that will allow them to access opportunities and make informed decisions. In addition, however, there is an element of the approach that reflects an underlying value of social justice, which must be incorporated into the provision of such opportunities, since the 'freedom to choose gives us the opportunity to decide what we should do, but with that opportunity comes the responsibility for what we do' (Sen 2009, 19). Therefore, human capabilities education is empowering and emancipatory and the benefits include 'enhancing well-being and freedom of individuals and peoples, and influencing social change' (Walker 2012, 389). This connects with ideas around developing democratic citizens (Nussbaum 2006) and participatory and experiential learning discussed above (Freire 1972; Mezirow 2000).

There is a focus in the capability approach on learners deciding what they value and being able to choose their own way as a principle aspect of their freedom and agency. Sen (1999) encourages a critical view of society, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, and



the idea of agency as the capacity to generate social change (19). The capability approach offers a social justice stance on education (Walker 2003). It ‘requires us to go beyond employability (without underestimating it!) as the goal of higher education’ (Lozano et al. 2012, 144).

**The Research**

Drawing on these interrelated themes, the research questions we sought to answer were:

- 1. What features of non-formal learning communities in higher education promote student participation and engagement?
- 2. What outcomes do students value from their participation in non-formal learning communities?

We considered how universities could facilitate participatory student-led learning, without predetermined outcomes and reflect on the challenges surrounding this.

***Methodology and analysis procedures***

This research generated in-depth, qualitative data. Some of the researchers took on the role of participant researchers, attending and observing events and meetings with the group. This facilitated an on-going rapport with the participants and allowed an in-depth insight into the ways the group worked. In addition, interviews were conducted towards the end of the first year of the project, by the researchers who were not involved in the participant observation, giving interviewers a degree of distance.

Interviews were systematically analysed using NVivo11 by all three members of the research team, allowing for a high degree of internal validity. The original nodes used for the analysis were modelled on the capability approach. We wanted to ascertain the extent to which the students felt inspired, through the community, to do and be the things that they had

reason to value. This required exploration of what they valued and how they had been able (or not) to pursue this through their engagement with the community. The three nodes on this basis were freedom, agency and well-being. Our first node, freedom, contained data about expectations and motivations for being involved in the community. Well-being was framed in terms of values, cooperation and personal development, and agency was a key aspect of students feeling empowered and developing functionings to act for change. Within each of these nodes themes emerged grounded in the interview data and through iterative coding practices. The second round of coding dug deeper into each of the themes to determine the ways that participants talked about their experiences. This led to the final level of coding in which anticipated and unanticipated outcomes were identified.

As we went through this iterative process, we cut and re-cut the data in different ways, constantly returning to the question of what did the students value and how did this help them achieve it? We found a strong narrative emerged in which twelve capabilities came through in terms of outcomes that the participants valued. From the ways they referred to these, we found they were both anticipated and unanticipated. Through the interview data, we categorised the enabling factors that the students discussed as features that helped them achieve each of these outcomes. This enabled us to identify four features of the *Global Community* that the participants identified as facilitating their capability growth. Once we had fine-coded the data in this way we conducted a final analysis in which we determined the extent to which the outcome was anticipated by the participants.

### *Sample*

All participants interviewed had been involved in the *Global Community*. This included all core members who remained engaged and active throughout, as well as members of the original core group who lived in the LLC space but became less engaged throughout the year.

Other students living in the LLC space but who did not engage meaningfully with the GC were not interviewed. The participants were of five different nationalities and studied degrees including biology, politics, geography and history. They were given pseudonyms:

- Diana (first-year, living in, involved throughout)
- Leanor (first-year, living in, decreasing engagement throughout)
- Daniel (third-year, involved throughout)
- Amanda (postgraduate, involved periodically)
- Ian (first-year, living in, decreasing engagement throughout)
- Amelie (first-year, living in, involved throughout)
- Henrietta (third-year, involved throughout)
- Sara (second-year, involved throughout)

**Findings and Analysis**

The analysis took an iterative process; thematic coding generated key learning outcomes perceived by the students. These outcomes were divided into those that they had hoped to achieve at the outset, and those that they did not realise they valued until they reflected on their participation. As Daniel commented:

It’s about not achieving the outcomes that you necessarily expected. (Daniel)

The often undetermined nature of learning was both motivating and challenging, but importantly it meant that some participants identified valuable outcomes that they had not expected to achieve.

The four features of the *Global Community* (GC) that emerged throughout the analysis as central to facilitating outcomes students valued were:

- 1) The focus and role that participants envisaged the GC playing.
- 2) Defining and shaping the process and the outcomes of the GC.
- 3) The communities created, within and beyond the University, through the GC.
- 4) The non-hierarchical nature of the GC and not having a predetermined leader.

For each of these features there were several associated learning outcomes valued by participants, both expected and not. There were also challenges presented by these features.

Table 1 outlines our findings in relation to the research questions.

Table 1: - Achieving Valued Outcomes

[insert Table 1 here]

We discuss each of the four features with evidence from the data, and discuss how participants saw these facilitating their achievement of both expected and unanticipated outcomes.

### ***Focus and role of the Global Community***

One key feature that enabled participants to achieve their outcomes was the focus of the GC and the role they envisaged the group playing. This feature was most associated with the outcomes participants expected to gain from the GC, primarily the idea that they would be able to develop, and promote amongst others, attitudes of social justice. This was associated with notions of learning about international development and human rights, thus making a meaningful contribution. The valued outcome that they had not predicted was the extent to which focusing on these global issues would help them understand a range of different perspectives.

*Promoting and developing social justice attitudes*

By living in the learning community a number of the core group identified with the idea that they would be able to connect with others who valued human rights, as Amelie noted:

I just wanted to continue to be involved in human rights and do something for the community and just try and be a bit more active about the issues that I had at heart.  
(Amelie)

Several students identified the importance of the GC in helping them to take small steps towards changes that were important to them, particularly in terms of promoting social justice:

Even if these things are not super massive or game-changing at least you care and if everybody, you know, does a little bit then maybe things will change. (Diana)

*Seeing different perspectives*

Through experiential learning and dialogue, students commented on changes to their values and attitudes, and how they had begun to see the issues from different perspectives, often facilitated by the affective dimension. The sleep out for example was described as ‘very intense’ (Amelie), giving realisations of alternative realities. This often moved beyond naivety, with some taking a more critical stance on human rights and international development that they had not considered before:

I guess I was a bit naïve before thinking that we could just go to countries and help them and it doesn’t exactly work that way because it’s not our place to do that. And so you have different ways and you have to be very careful because...you don’t want to impose your way on other countries. (Amelie)

While many had thought they might learn about other perspectives on human rights, they found that the experiential aspect of their learning had a powerful impact on them:

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3 In schools you're kind of taught that...there are a lot of people out there who aren't as  
4 privileged as you are but it never really struck me how real it was until we came here and  
5 we started looking at all these things and actually started to think about what we might  
6 do about it. (Diana)  
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9

### 10 *Defining and shaping the Global Community*

11  
12 The focus of the GC was deliberately broad so that students could define and shape its  
13 development themselves. This feature was essential in achieving both expected and  
14 unanticipated outcomes. Members of the GC commented that this enabled them to learn new  
15 things and develop skills. They had not anticipated the extent to which this would enable  
16 them to gain confidence in their own abilities, and develop their imaginations to think or do  
17 meaningful things, which they had not thought themselves capable of.  
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### 26 *Learning new things*

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28 Learning about new things, was a key expected outcome. This was accompanied by a sense  
29 of enjoyment, as Amelie said: 'we learnt a lot and it was a lot of fun.' One of the most  
30 important things was learning as a group, through self-education. Another was working to  
31 prepare the activities, such as the quiz in Refugee Week, for the wider community, which  
32 involved sharing ideas and researching issues:  
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41 ...we learned stuff as well, especially when we're preparing each week because we all  
42 had to get information to be able to reply to questions, so for us it was also interesting  
43 because we had to do proper work on it. (Sara)  
44  
45  
46

### 47 *Developing skills*

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49 All participants discussed skills they had developed that would be useful beyond university as  
50 key outcomes. One of the main ways they developed skills was through organising events;  
51 acting within institutional norms, communicating with others, and connecting the form of  
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their events to the awareness they were hoping to raise. These skills were seen as valuable for employability, but also for life:

Beyond that there are many skills that...are very good life skills...like getting in contact with people...organising events, getting all the logistics done, I think they are really, really useful. (Diana)

*Gaining confidence*

Students highlighted the importance of having ownership to gain confidence and a sense of agency. For instance, Sara reflected on her ability to advance her own ideas for creating the cine forum. Indeed, as they began achieving things, the students felt more confident to take on new challenges:

It is not about building your pride it is about achieving something that sounds difficult but when you achieve it you know that you can do that so you can try something harder, and I think that is what I want to do is keep doing things to build myself up and then be able to help other people building something. (Henrietta)

Often the biggest challenges were the things that the participants gained most confidence from.

*Developing imagination*

For many students it was the undefined nature of the community at the outset that encouraged their involvement. It was about doing something different and having the opportunity to define it. Daniel, Henrietta and Amelie all commented that the vagueness of the original description sparked their interest, providing them an opportunity to do something meaningful. They were motivated by the idea of ‘building it up ourselves’ (Amelie), even though at ‘the beginning was bit slow because we didn’t know where we were going’ (Henrietta). By the spring term there seemed to be consensus that they were understanding one another and the

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3 role they could play as a group. They commented on how they developed their own  
4  
5 imagination of what they wanted to learn, what they could achieve, and how they could reach  
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7 their goals, a valuable outcome they had not anticipated. As Diana noted:  
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9

10 ...it was very interesting...to get to know about these issues and then to think  
11 about...what we could do with regards to them. (Diana)  
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13

14 Feeling empowered to make change through successfully shaping activities was rewarding  
15  
16 for participants and made them want to continue developing their ideas:  
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19 ...I was part of something that was being created, that was cool. (Henrietta)  
20  
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22 This ability to define something for themselves made them realise they had the capabilities to  
23  
24 achieve outcomes they valued, developing their sense of agency.  
25  
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### 27 28 *Creating communities* 29

30  
31 The communities created, within and beyond the University, were another essential feature  
32  
33 for participants' personal development. This enabled them to develop strong friendships  
34  
35 within the group, as well as to raise awareness about issues important to them in the wider  
36  
37 community. Less expectedly, within the group, they learned to listen to other perspectives  
38  
39 and respect points of view, helping them to trust each other. This also opened doors for  
40  
41 students to develop networks in the wider community.  
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### 44 45 *Enabling friendships* 46

47 Knowing that they would be living with like-minded people was a motivator for most of  
48  
49 those involved in the *living* aspect of the learning community. Many talked about how the  
50  
51 group had initiated and strengthened friendships they had grown to value. This facilitated  
52  
53 more organic development of the GC:  
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3 In the first term we wanted to sort of do basic research on the refugee situation in the UK  
4 and in [the city] and it was very nice that because we were living together we could just  
5 meet in the kitchen. (Diana)  
6  
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8  
9 These friendships were also extended to non-residential members of the core group.  
10

11  
12 *Raising awareness about global issues*  
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14 The process of engaging with issues of human rights was rewarding and there was an  
15 expectation that one of the outcomes would be raising awareness with others. Many students  
16 discussed incremental ways in which change can be achieved through generating interest:  
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21 ...through this process I really learnt that every little bit counts...getting people aware of  
22 these things isn't just an end in itself...if you get someone to take legitimate interest in it  
23 they are going to want to find out more by themselves and they're going to talk to other  
24 people about it, they're going to want to think "how can I help?" (Diana)  
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28  
29 The students took pride in sensing that their events were seen by others:  
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31  
32 ...the sleep out, people did hear about that...afterwards people talked about it...so I  
33 guess we did reach to some people. (Henrietta)  
34  
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36  
37 *Sharing and respecting others views*  
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39 One of the unanticipated outcomes was the ability to listen to and respect each other's views.  
40 The sense of community they developed provided an opportunity for them to explore  
41 different points of view, entering into dialogue and sharing experiences and ideas. As Amelie  
42 noted, it's 'always very interesting to see how other people think.' The fact that they had a  
43 shared interest helped them feel comfortable to voice their opinions:  
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51 When it just became a group of people who knew each other just sitting around  
52 talking...then it became more interesting and the community aspect of it came out a  
53 bit...just meeting new people from different places and different perspectives, which I  
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3 think was the unexpected side of it, really...everyone's interested to get to know each  
4 other and, because...you have a similar interest, there's not that fear of putting it upfront.  
5 (Daniel)  
6  
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8  
9 Even when there were different opinions, participants saw the community as safe space in  
10 which they could discuss their interests, ask questions, and reflect on the perspectives of their  
11 peers:  
12  
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15  
16 It was really nice...getting to know what everybody thought and what the different  
17 priorities were for different people. (Diana)  
18  
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20  
21 This idea played out in the atmosphere that they created, where even aspects that were  
22 challenging, such as having to negotiate how they wanted to shape the community, gave way  
23 to learning and positive outcomes. As Sara noted, 'even if we were disagreeing we were all  
24 respecting each other.' As the respect developed, the students trusted each other more. They  
25 mentioned events that they doubted would be successful, but then their surprise and  
26 appreciation when they were:  
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33  
34 I didn't think that [the clothes swap] would be such a good idea...and actually it's maybe  
35 the one that was the most important one and it's also maybe the one that makes us a bit  
36 more well-known within the college. (Sara)  
37  
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40 The subtle ways these relationships emerged was a less expected, but highly valued outcome.  
41  
42

### 43 *Developing networks*

44

45  
46 The extent to which they developed networks beyond the university was perceived to be  
47 enormously valuable. This was prompted by the networking event, which was structured with  
48 opportunities to interact and discuss ideas with organisations, leading to actions including the  
49 food drive and Refugee Week.  
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I think it's good that I'm more aware of the opportunities that there are in [the city] with these organisations and I think it's nice to meet people who care about the same kind of things. (Leonor)

The opportunity to develop networks more broadly, and with external partners, was a valuable unanticipated outcome:

The afternoon we had with the charities, I thought that...was really good because you just met so many people and you could actually go and make contacts...and actually creating some sort of network where they could network between each other and learn from each other...I think that was useful because it did actually provide some ideas into what we were going to take forward. (Ian)

While the feeling of agency and empowerment to determine their activities was important, the utility of having some structured provision from the university to give them ideas and contacts to get things started was also valued.

*The non-hierarchical nature of the Global Community*

The non-hierarchical nature of the GC and the fact that there was no nominated leader, created an unfamiliar environment for most of the students. It was apparent that in almost every other aspect of their lives, power relationships and structures dominate interactions; even student societies are governed by structured roles such as presidents. This was, for most, the first time they were involved in a semi-formal structure that had no predetermined hierarchy in place. This forced them to take responsibility for the group in ways that they had not done before, and this was a valued outcome. The repercussions of this were that they learnt how to negotiate different opinions and work to reach consensus, or indeed, learn to overcome lack of consensus.

### *Taking responsibility*

With a non-hierarchical structure, participants had to determine how and when to take responsibility and leadership within the group, commenting on exercising initiative to make things happen:

...when we created the cine forum I think that was a big part in me doing it and I think that was really nice to have also our own things. (Sara)

Students took turns playing different roles and found it motivating as they learnt to trust each other and have 'confidence in people' (Amelie). The importance of generating their own ideas and having the autonomy as a group was highly valued.

### *Negotiating horizontal relationships*

Many cited appreciation for the absence of organized hierarchy. However, working together with no predetermined leader inevitably came with challenges. In particular, negotiating the focus and how they would achieve their aims were difficult decisions on which consensus was not always easily reached. This provided opportunities for students to gain knowledge of themselves and identify means of compromise. For example, Henrietta explained that she learnt how to handle situations where there are stronger voices than her own:

I learnt...self-control and compromise and stuff... I am proud that I managed to do that. (Henrietta)

The complex issues the group engaged with meant that negotiation skills were a useful, yet unanticipated outcome, both in life and in terms of future employment:

Good experience with the difficulty of trying to do stuff around human rights and development, which is obviously a really difficult topic to ever say we are an educated group talking to another group about...because we don't have a rule, this is where we stand on this, often you just get debate from it...so good understanding of how that is

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going to be a challenge if I go into this sort of line of work where...there are ethical stances on it. (Daniel)

This outcome, despite causing significant challenges to the group, turned out to be one of the more valuable outcomes.

**Challenges with participation in the Global Community**

We have discussed how each of the features of the GC contributed to students achieving outcomes of value. However, it is worth noting that there were barriers and challenges to the participants’ engagement. Indeed, the non-hierarchical nature of the group, while proving to be a way in which students gained a lot from the experience, also caused frustrations. The process of negotiating relationships and ideas was not always easy. At times students found that it was difficult to know who was leading on what, partly because they were so used to having a structured environment where they were given clear instructions. Having no hierarchy was a challenge for most of the group as Leanor commented: without ‘an official leader...no one takes responsibility’. This led to people feeling frustrated that ‘nothing was happening’ (Diana), and the pace of decision-making and action was too slow. They saw this as an area they still need to work on:

Sometimes it just annoys me that it’s not going quick enough because it could be solved within ten minutes and sometimes it’s taking three meetings...but I guess it’s part of the community but yeah I don’t know how to create a hierarchy without having the feeling of being underneath different people in the community, but I think we need to find a solution to deal with that. (Sara)

Some identified the lack of focus and having to negotiate themes for themselves at the outset as barriers. Amelie, for instance, noted that they all had ‘different priorities and interests’, which could make consensus difficult. Some had hoped for more of ‘a mix of focus areas’

(Amanda). Therefore, once the focus began to emerge, some students felt that the emphasis was no longer on something they were so interested in:

...I think maybe just Global Community was maybe a little bit too broad so you got people with very different interests actually getting involved so when you went down one route compared to the other you had people drop out. (Ian)

One of the challenges experienced was how to resolve conflicts in relation to individuals' different conceptions of what was of value to achieve. As Deneulin and McGregor (2010) argue, it is a challenge for everyone to achieve their wellbeing goals, whilst at the same time maintaining an inclusive community. The capability approach understates the practical difficulties associated with differences in what people have reason to value, and how to navigate the situation when one person's gain is another's loss.

### **Non-formal spaces and emerging learning outcomes**

The pedagogical approach associated with the GC was intended to be critical and participatory, in which students had freedom to define their own learning needs (including content and processes) through collaborative dialogue. Key elements required for participatory pedagogy include choice and flexibility, navigating between challenge and risk and creating spaces for critical reflection (Simmons et al. 2011). In the GC, this was achieved by giving students freedom to determine their own outcomes, with some support at the outset.

This study set out to explore the possibilities of a LLC to contribute to students' capabilities to lead lives they have reason to value. Our research questions asked what features of non-formal learning communities could facilitate learning outcomes that students value. Based on a capability framework, our interviews allowed participants to articulate what they valued doing and being, and ways in which their participation contributed to developing their values and attitudes, personal and interpersonal development.

We considered what outcomes students valued from their participation. We found that in addition to gaining skills and knowledge, a key valued outcome was the freedom to set the agenda and determine their own objectives. The flat structure of the community was both empowering and frustrating, but a valuable feature in terms of how participants acquired skills and attitudes that they had not anticipated. Despite feeling disoriented at the beginning, with perseverance the students became more comfortable with the idea that outcomes can evolve throughout the learning process, and there can be benefits in not determining these at the outset. Students discussed the importance of gaining confidence, and leadership and negotiation skills. The development of the community, and how they each developed within it, were key aspects of the learning that students reported valuing.

We found that participation contributed to students' agency to act on issues important to them, to take responsibility, and achieve the outcomes they valued more broadly. They were able to gain confidence in these aspects as they learnt to respect each other and to negotiate decision-making where there was uncertainty and differences in outlook. Working in the absence of predetermined learning outcomes made it necessary for students to pursue and the goals that *they* (not staff) valued. This open, horizontal and flexible approach can be engaging precisely because it is unfamiliar and is difficult to achieve in the highly structured world of HE. Non-formal spaces enable students to take risks in ways that can be difficult in formal education.

**Implications for learning in Higher Education**

There is much that universities can gain from this research, in terms of practical approaches and challenges of participatory, student-led learning in non-formal spaces and the value that there may be in learning without predetermined outcomes. While this is something that staff and students often find difficult, it opens a space for creativity, and the opportunity

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3 to challenge assumptions about the way things are or ought to be. This approach to learning  
4 offers possibilities that are difficult to reproduce in the classroom, where learning outcomes  
5 are typically predetermined. For this reason it is important that these initiatives remain  
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7 separate from formal university learning. It would undermine many of the benefits if students  
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9 were obliged to participate, so rather than an expectation, these should be considered an  
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11 optional opportunity.  
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16 We argue that the role universities can play is primarily about opening the spaces for  
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18 these types of collaboration to evolve, and providing some support, recognition or  
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20 encouragement. Ideally, the initial process needs to be mediated, to a certain extent, by  
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22 facilitated interventions by staff or older peers. This may take the form of registering to live  
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24 in a particular university residence or attending some initial meetings with staff, before being  
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26 encouraged to take their own ideas forward.  
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29 We argue that these HE non-formal learning communities can facilitate opportunities  
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31 for students to learn and engage with issues they value. Defining their own processes and  
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33 creating a non-hierarchical community, students must negotiate different perspectives, and  
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35 learn to take responsibility for their learning. This can support the development of agency to  
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37 act on issues of social importance, which relates to some attributes universities aspire to for  
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39 their graduates, such as being good global citizens. From this perspective, it is desirable for  
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41 students to develop skills that enable them to imagine possibilities, gain confidence, and trust  
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43 and respect each other. The community in which they do this provides a space for them to  
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45 interpret what outcomes are important, and how they achieve them, including how to manage  
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47 difference and uncertainty. Indeed, it is precisely the scarcity of educational spaces in which  
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49 the learning outcomes are not predetermined that makes this such an interesting and  
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51 important case study to explore. Replicating similar initiatives would not require a large  
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53 investment, but would need commitment from a group of dedicated staff.  
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Table 1: – Achieving valued outcomes

Anticipated learning outcomes	Central features	Unanticipated learning outcomes
Promoting and developing social justice attitudes	<i>The focus of the global community</i>	Seeing different perspectives
Learning new things	<i>Defining and shaping the process</i>	Gaining confidence
Developing skills		Developing imagination
Enabling friendships	<i>Creating communities within and beyond the University</i>	Sharing and respecting others' views
Raising awareness about global issues		Developing networks
Taking responsibility	<i>The non-hierarchical nature of the Global Community</i>	Negotiating horizontal relationships