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EMPOWERING STUDENTS AND BUILDING COMMUNITY: THE ABC TOOLKIT CONCEPT

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2023-25

PROJECT REPORT

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RACHEL PARKER-STRAK SFHEA

Rachel Parker-Strak is a Reader in Fashion Buying and Merchandising at the University of Manchester and a Senior Fellow of Advance HE. Rachel's scholarship activity revolves around developing pedagogy that fosters a sense of belonging and community within the higher education environment, as well as teaching and learning practice. Focusing on embedding belonging and measuring the impact this has on the student journey.

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Rachel Studd is a Reader in Design at the University of Manchester and a Senior Fellow of Advance HE. Rachel is a Teaching and Scholarship academic. Rachels scholarship focuses on the pedagogy of transition into Higher Education institutions (HEIs) and building a sense of belonging through student community and inclusion. Building relationships with peers, the culture of their degree programme and institution throughout the entirety of their educational journey and beyond.

Fellowship Student Partner Intern
THOMAS PIERCE-JONES

Thomas Pierce-Jones is a PGR student in the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences. His experiences as an undergraduate student inspired him to work as a student partner to examine methods of student support in different departments within the University of Manchester.

EMPOWERING STUDENTS AND BUILDING COMMUNITY: THE ABC TOOLKIT CONCEPT

Context and objectives

For several years prior to the pandemic, we served as Year Managers for the Fashion Business and Technology (FBT) discipline. We identified persistent challenges around community cohesion, clarity of information, and engagement with extracurricular opportunities - issues that became even more pressing in the post-pandemic landscape.

In response, we introduced a streamlined, themed schedule designed to build resilience, confidence, and a sense of belonging among our student cohort – **the ABC Toolkit**. Collaborating with the Library, Careers, and Wellbeing teams, we co-created tailored content. Central to our approach was the student voice: we worked closely with students to shape both content and delivery, grounded in an understanding of their emotional and academic journeys.

The impact of the ABC Toolkit has been significant within our discipline. Session attendance averaged 80%, and students reported increased confidence, improved wellbeing, and stronger community ties. We also observed a reduction in email queries, as students were given structured spaces to ask questions, contextualise challenges, and develop coping strategies.

The initiative still runs now; however, we recognised the need to scale this approach into something more adaptable, inclusive, and impactful across the wider university context. We also wanted to see what other student support good practice was happening with a plan to develop a framework to help others. Our aim was to address a persistent and growing challenge in higher education: how to meaningfully support student belonging, engagement, and voice across large, diverse cohorts.

While our original work was rooted in a successful discipline-specific initiative within Fashion Business and Technology, the **ABC Toolkit** builds on a proven model and reimagines it as a **strategically underpinned, pedagogically sound framework** that can be personalised and implemented across disciplines. The toolkit is not simply a set of resources—it is a structured, student-centred approach to embedding **skills development, wellbeing, employability, and peer engagement** into the academic journey.

At the start of the Fellowship, the project was focused on refining and documenting this model. However, as the work progressed, our objectives evolved. We began to explore how the toolkit could be **co-created with students**, ensuring that their voices were not only heard but actively shaping the design and delivery of support. This shift deepened our commitment to **student partnership** and positioned the toolkit as a vehicle for **institutional change**—one that fosters trust, clarity, and community from day one.

Activities

The Fellowship project unfolded in several key stages, each designed to expand the reach and impact of our ABC Toolkit while deepening our understanding of student support across disciplines.

Our initial goal was to **share our tested concept** and gather insights from other departments and student experiences. We were particularly interested in identifying practices that had been positively received— especially those reflected in high NSS (National Student Survey) scores for student support. This cross-disciplinary exploration aimed to inform the development of a **generic, adaptable framework** that could be scaled across the University and beyond.

To ensure ethical integrity and robust data collection, we began by preparing and submitting a **research ethics application**, along with all supporting documentation. Once approved, we moved into the data collection phase.

A key strength of our approach was the **active involvement of our student partner**, who led on the design and facilitation of staff and student interviews and focus groups. This ensured that the student voice remained central—not only in the content of the toolkit but also in the way we gathered and interpreted data. Their leadership helped foster open, authentic dialogue and ensured that findings were grounded in lived student experience.

Throughout the project, we maintained a reflective and iterative process—continuously reviewing feedback, refining our methods, and adapting our toolkit design in response to emerging insights. This approach allowed us to remain responsive to the evolving needs of students and staff, and to build a model that is both evidence-informed and practically grounded.

Challenges faced

Like many projects involving cross-institutional collaboration and student engagement, our Fellowship journey encountered a number of challenges that shaped both our timeline and our learning.

One of the most significant hurdles was the **extended research ethics approval process**. While essential for ensuring ethical integrity, the time required for approval delayed the start of our data collection phase. As a result, what was initially planned as a one-year Fellowship organically evolved into a two-year project. This shift, while unplanned, ultimately allowed for deeper reflection, more robust data gathering, and a more iterative development of the toolkit.

Another key challenge was **student engagement in the data collection process**. Despite offering incentives and designing accessible, student-led focus groups and interviews, participation remained lower than anticipated. This highlighted the ongoing difficulty of engaging students in research activities—particularly when they are balancing academic, personal, and work commitments.

In response, we adapted our approach by:
- Increasing the visibility of the project through peer networks and academic champions
- Embedding data collection opportunities into existing student activities
- Ensuring that all communications emphasised the value of student voice and the tangible impact of their input

These experiences reinforced the importance of **flexibility, persistence, and student-centred design**. They also underscored the need for institutions to create more sustainable structures for student partnership—ones that are embedded, not added on.

Student Partnership

The success of the ABC Toolkit Fellowship has been deeply rooted in its co-creative foundation, with our Student Partner Intern (SPI) playing a central and transformative role throughout the project.

From the outset, the SPI was not a passive participant but an **equal collaborator**, helping to shape the project's direction, design, and delivery. Together, we established shared goals, clear expectations, and regular milestones to ensure a sense of mutual ownership and accountability. This collaborative ethos was essential in embedding the student voice authentically and meaningfully into every stage of the work.

The SPI led on the **design and facilitation of qualitative research**, including interviews and focus groups with both staff and students. Their leadership ensured that the research was grounded in student experience and conducted with ethical integrity. They also played a key role in developing question protocols that supported impartial data collection and critical evaluation of the toolkit's design and impact.

Beyond the practical contributions, the partnership model itself was a powerful demonstration of **shared leadership and mutual respect**. The SPI's

ability to contribute ideas freely, influence decisions, and feel genuinely valued fostered a strong sense of belonging and reinforced the importance of student voice in institutional development (Healey et al., 2016).

The experience also offered significant **personal and professional development** for the SPI. Through active involvement in planning, evaluation, and reflection, they developed transferable skills in communication, project management, and critical thinking—skills that extend well beyond the academic curriculum.

Flexibility was a key strength of the partnership. We adapted timelines and modes of participation to accommodate the SPI's academic and personal commitments, including asynchronous contributions. This approach aligns with Bovill's (2020) advocacy for flexible partnership models that support sustained student engagement.

However, the partnership was not without its challenges. Navigating **power dynamics** required ongoing attention, particularly in the early stages when staff expertise risked overshadowing student contributions. We addressed this by fostering open dialogue, encouraging student leadership, and consciously creating space for the SPI's voice to shape the project (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Kay et al., 2020).

Ultimately, the SPI's involvement not only enhanced the quality and authenticity of the project but also influenced our broader practice—reinforcing the value of co-creation and the transformative potential of student-staff partnerships in higher education.

Collaborative work

Collaboration beyond the core Fellowship team was instrumental in shaping the success and reach of the ABC Toolkit project. From the early stages, we engaged with colleagues across the University to gather diverse perspectives, test ideas, and ensure the toolkit would be adaptable across disciplines.

We are especially grateful to academic staff in the **Departments of Mathematics, the Business School, and Fashion Business and Technology,** whose support was vital in both the **recruitment of student participants** and the **collection of staff insights.** Their willingness to take part in interviews and facilitate access to students for surveys and focus groups significantly enriched our data and broadened the scope of our findings.

These conversations helped us understand how belonging and student support are perceived and practiced in different academic contexts. This cross-disciplinary engagement was not only useful—it was essential in ensuring the toolkit's relevance and transferability across the institution.
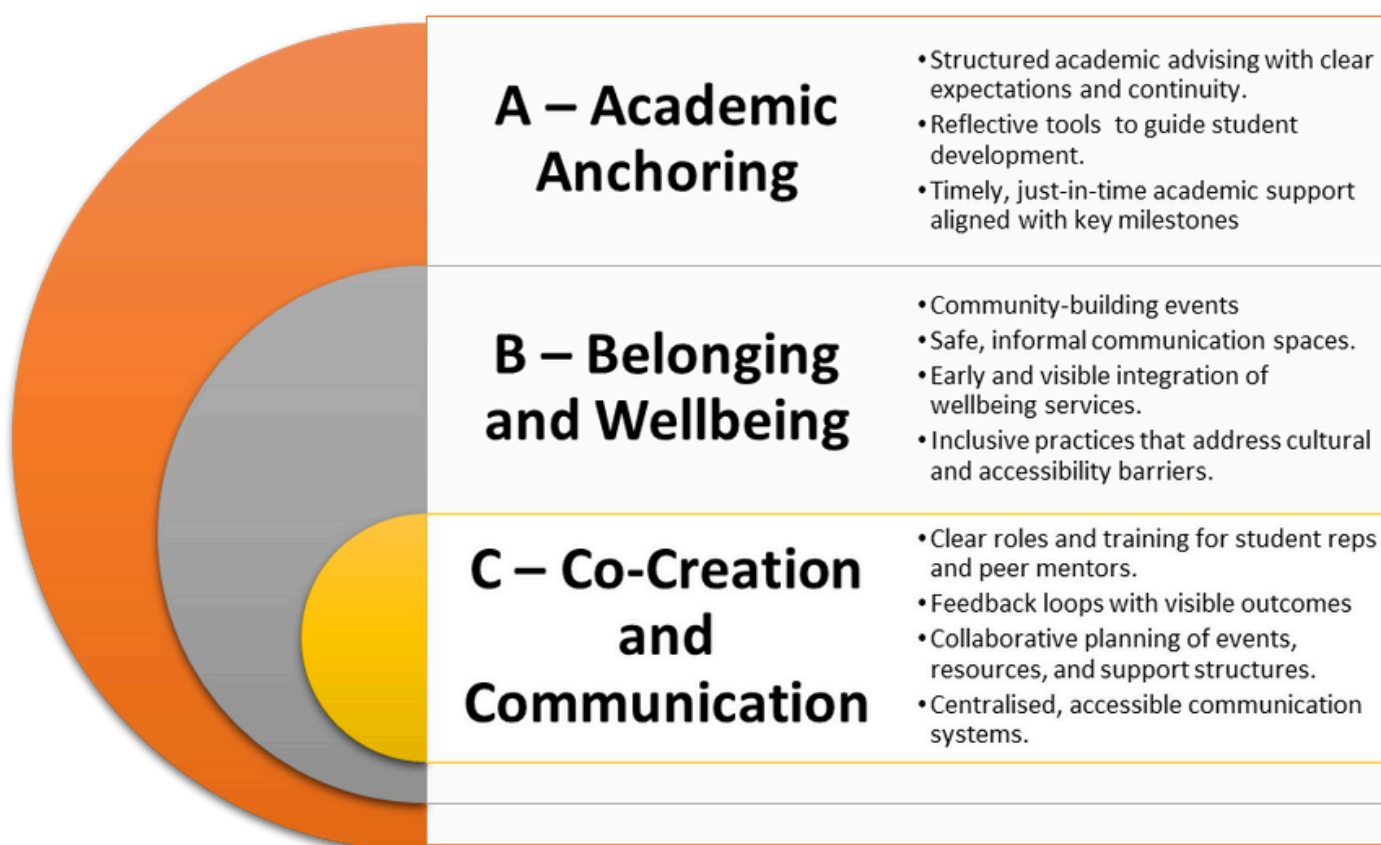
We also benefited from informal discussions with colleagues involved in **student experience and academic advising**, who offered valuable feedback. Their insights helped us refine our approach and align our work with broader institutional priorities.

Outputs

The central output of this Fellowship has been the development of the A**BC Toolkit**—a flexible, pedagogically grounded framework designed to foster belonging, inclusion, and student partnership across disciplines. Originally rooted in the Fashion Business and Technology discipline, the toolkit has been adapted into a **generic model** that can be personalised for use with any student cohort, reflecting their unique academic journeys.

Key outputs

- ABC Toolkit: ABC Toolkit Framework: Anchoring Belonging and Co-Creation (Studd, Parker-Strak, Pierce-Jones, 2025)

A – Academic Anchoring
- Structured academic advising with clear expectations and continuity.
- Reflective tools to guide student development.
- Timely, just-in-time academic support aligned with key milestones

B – Belonging and Wellbeing
- Community-building events
- Safe, informal communication spaces.
- Early and visible integration of wellbeing services.
- Inclusive practices that address cultural and accessibility barriers.

C – Co-Creation and Communication
- Clear roles and training for student reps and peer mentors.
- Feedback loops with visible outcomes
- Collaborative planning of events, resources, and support structures.
- Centralised, accessible communication systems.

Toolkit delivery principles

- **Timeliness**: Support should be aligned with academic and emotional rhythms
- **Flexibility**: Adaptable to different programmes, cohorts, and delivery modes.
- **Visibility**: Services and opportunities must be clearly and consistently communicated.
- **Inclusivity**: Designed to meet the needs of diverse student populations.

Case studies and good practice examples

- Drawn from pilot implementations across departments, highlighting how the toolkit can be tailored to different contexts.

Conference presentations, workshops and seminars

- Parker-Strak, R., Studd, R., and Pierce-Jones, T. (2025). 'Building Belonging and Raising Student Voices: Insights from the ABC Toolkit Fellowship', *The University of Manchester Annual Teaching and Learning Conference*, The University of Manchester, UK. 2-3 July 2025.

- Studd, R. and Parker-Strak, R. (2025), 'Creating Connections: Fostering Belonging and student success through targeted support', *UK Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) Annual Conference: Learning Well*, London, UK. 7-8 April 2025.

- Studd, R., Parker-Strak, R., and Pierce-Jones, T. (2024), 'A Scenario Analysis on the Transformative Potential of Student Partnerships and Co-creation in Fostering Belonging in Student Support', *The University of Manchester Annual Teaching and Learning Conference*, The University of Manchester, UK. 26-27 June 2024.

- Studd, R. and Parker-Strak, R. (2024), 'ABC Toolkit', *Northern Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Conference*, The University of Leeds, UK. 16 April 2024.

- Studd, R. and Parker-Strak, R. (2023). 'Embedding belonging into the student journey: A Case Study Approach', *The University of Manchester Annual Teaching and Learning Conference*, The University of Manchester, UK. 4-6 July 2023.

- Parker-Strak, R., and Studd, R. (2023). 'Developing a collaborative and inclusive student journey that builds belonging, community and engagement', *Advance HE: Annual Teaching and Learning Conference: Shaping the future of teaching in HE*, Keele University, UK. 4-6 July 2023.

Other workshops and seminars

Internal workshops with academic colleagues to explore toolkit implementation, contributions to The University of Manchester Institute of Teaching and Learning (ITL) events, and cross-faculty discussions on student belonging and co-creation.

- Studd, R., and Parker-Strak, R. (2024). 'Student voice: building trust, partnership and clarity', *Manchester Maths Education Seminar*. Department of Maths, The University of Manchester and The University of Liverpool. 12 December 2024.

Planned publications and blogs

Planned publications and blogs currently in development include:

- Parker-Strak, R., Studd, R. and, Pierce-Jones, T., (2025). *A reflective case study on co-creation and student partnership: A scenario analysis on the transformative potential of student partnerships.* International Journal of Students as Partners. (in progress)

- Studd, R., Parker-Strak R., and Pierce-Jones,T., (2025). *A reflective article on the development and impact of the student support-Enhancing student engagement and community spirit: a streamlined support initiative,* Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (in progress)

- Parker-Strak, R., Studd R., and Pierce-Jones, T., (2025). *Building Belonging and Raising Student Voices through the ABC Toolkit,* Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal (in progress)

Recommendations and takeaways

- Belonging must be embedded, not bolted on—start from day one.
- Co-creation with students enhances authenticity, engagement, and impact.
- Flexibility and timing are key: support must be delivered in the right way, at the right time.
- The ABC Toolkit offers a scalable model for embedding inclusive, proactive student support across the institution.

Impact

The primary impact of this Fellowship has been the systematic collection and synthesis of qualitative data on student support experiences across multiple departments, which has directly informed the development of the ABC Toolkit Framework.

Impact on student support understanding

Through interviews and focus groups with students and staff in FBT, Maths, and Business, the project generated a rich dataset capturing diverse perspectives on academic advising, peer support, wellbeing, and belonging. This has provided a clearer, evidence-based picture of what works, what doesn't, and where the gaps lie in current support structures.

Framework development

The insights gathered were thematically coded and distilled into key findings, which now underpin the ABC Toolkit Framework. This framework—structured around Academic Anchoring, Belonging and Wellbeing, and Co-Creation and Communication—offers a scalable, adaptable model for embedding student support into programme design.

Measuring impact

- Thematic analysis of over 10 hours of interview and focus group data.
- Development of a visual and conceptual framework based on lived experiences.
- Creation of a slide-ready toolkit presentation and visual model for dissemination.
- Uptake of the framework in pilot discussions across other programmes.

Future impact

The framework can now be used:

- As a diagnostic tool to evaluate existing support provision.
- As a planning tool for programme teams to embed structured, student-informed support.
- As a foundation for further research and refinement through longitudinal tracking and student feedback.
- This project has laid the groundwork for a more consistent, inclusive, and proactive approach to student support across the institution.

Reflection

Overall, the project has been a deeply rewarding and transformative experience. While we began with high expectations, the outcomes have exceeded them in both scope and impact. The development of the ABC Toolkit, the collaborative ethos of the project, and the integration of student voice throughout have all contributed to what we consider a successful Fellowship.

We measure this success not only by the tangible outputs—such as the toolkit and cross-disciplinary engagement—but also by the **quality of the proces**s: the depth of collaboration, the authenticity of student partnership, and the learning we've gained along the way.

One of the most valuable aspects of the project was working with our **Student Partner Intern (SPI).** Their contributions went far beyond task delivery—they helped shape the direction of the project, brought fresh perspectives, and enriched our understanding of student experience. Their involvement has reaffirmed the value of co-creation and the importance of embedding student voice from the outset.

However, the project was not without its challenges. One key learning point was the difficulty of collecting student data through **passive methods** such as surveys and open invitations to participate. Despite offering incentives, engagement was lower than anticipated. In hindsight, a more **active and embedded approach**—such as integrating data collection into existing teaching sessions or using creative, participatory methods—may have yielded richer insights and greater involvement.

If we were to undertake a similar SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) project again, we would:

- **Plan for more flexible and creative data collection methods** that align with students' schedules and preferences.
- **Build in more time for ethics approval and iterative development**, recognising that meaningful co-creation takes time.

- **Continue to prioritise student partnership,** ensuring that students are not just contributors but co-leaders in shaping educational change.

This project has not only produced a valuable institutional resource but has also shifted our own practice—deepening our commitment to inclusive, student-centred approaches and reinforcing the power of partnership in driving meaningful change.

Next steps

To embed meaningful and lasting change, the next phase of this project must focus on both **institutional integration and wider dissemination** of the ABC Toolkit Framework.

Immediate actions

- **Refine and formalise the framework** into a practical toolkit, including templates, guidance notes, and implementation examples.
- **Pilot the toolkit** in additional programmes beyond FBT, Maths, and Business to test adaptability and gather further feedback.
- **Develop a digital version** of the toolkit to ensure accessibility and ease of use for staff and students.

Institutional collaboration

- Work with Teaching and Learning leadership, programme directors, and academic advising leads to align the toolkit with existing strategies (e.g., Manchester2035, Student Success Framework).
- Collaborate with Professional Services (e.g., Library, Careers, Wellbeing) to embed their resources into the toolkit structure.

Wider sharing

- Present the framework and findings at internal forums (e.g., Teaching and Learning Conference, ITL events).

- Share the toolkit and visual models via the University's Institute of Teaching and Learning.
- Submit a blog post or case study to platforms like Times Higher Education and Advance HE.

Further research

- Conduct a longitudinal study to evaluate the impact of the toolkit on student engagement, belonging, and outcomes.
- Explore opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration to benchmark and refine the model.
- By continuing to build partnerships, share practice, and evaluate impact, the ABC Toolkit can evolve into a sustainable, scalable model for embedding student support and belonging across the institution and beyond.

References

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- Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C. and Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: a guide for faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
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