Guidance

Best practices
for online community building
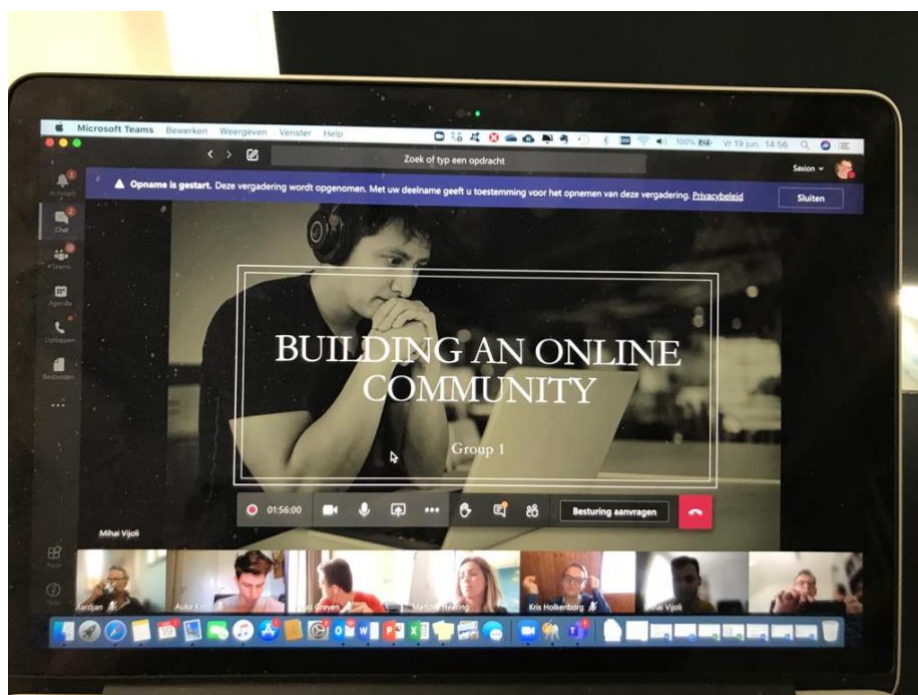## in higher education

Community building

Photo: Saxion's experiment in Online Community Building 19 June 2020

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1. Introduction

In the upcoming academic year, we will be faced with the challenge of building a sense of community among students and with the degree programme. Despite the fact that students are spending less time physically seeing each other and learning together, it is our aim that they should form a community to enable them to study successfully. This guidance is intended as a source of support and advice for counsellors on helping students to form a community during online education, possibly with the help of a student coach.

Councellors already build community. This guidance is intended to make it easier for study career counsellors (SCCs) to build community among students during online supervision, working alongside buddy groups and student coaches.

This guidance for higher education is a guidance that was written for Saxion, which was tailored to the educational situation at Saxion. The presented insights are gathered from ten years of experience with community building in honours programmes of Saxion. In addition to this guidance, explanatory videos regarding community building and another guidance regarding work forms are being produced.

Please note: this document is based on the assumption that degree programmes split buddy groups into study career counselling classes during the intro week, degree programmes (or schools) recruit student coaches, and a weekly or fortnightly meeting is scheduled for an SCC with the study career counselling class (comprised of several buddy groups), see figure 1.

The terminology in this document is as follows:
- the buddy group is comprised of first-year students who are each other's buddies;
- with a student coach supporting the buddy group;
- and an SCC (study career counsellor).

Chapter 2 discusses the role of a counsellor to encourage engagement among students. This involves facilitating development, group reflection, an equal stance and several interventions in online meetings. Chapter 3 then deals with practical matters and the design of a meeting.

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![Saxion Hogeschool logo]

2. Co-operation between SCC and student coach

To understand how the SCC and student coach will work together, we begin by explaining the role of the student coach, then we will describe the aims of the buddy groups. This is followed by an overview of co-operation between the SCC and the student coach, and the support they can both expect.

2.1. The role of the student coach

A student coach is a senior student who supports buddy groups of first-year students. In this role, student coaches strengthen a sense of community among first-year students, with the degree programme, and with Saxion. They do this by holding weekly meetings with the buddy group, which are an opportunity to get to know each other as well as the degree programme, Saxion, and the city. This might entail organising various activities with the buddy group, with the emphasis on fun, and using various working methods at the meetings. In addition, student coaches create space for students to ask questions and to discuss the subjects and/or issues they encounter when they begin their degree programme at Saxion.

The support provided by student coaches supplements the supervision by the SCC, which is one hour per week, per buddy group. The timings can be agreed by the buddy groups and student coach; there is no need to set aside a specific time on the timetable. Student coaches also prepare for these meetings and coordinate the content of meetings with the buddy group's allotted SCC.

The limits of the role of student coach
- The support provided by student coaches does not extend to assisting students with personal issues which affect their studies.
- Student coaches work with first-year students in buddy groups, and do not get involved in one-to-one conversations with students. Support is only provided within the buddy group setting.
- Student coaches should refer students on to the SCC if they identify a need for extra support with particular issues; they should not refer cases to third parties. Only the SCCs do this.
- Whilst student coaches are not responsible for teaching students particular competences and/or skills, they may contribute to this by employing particular working methods and through their conversations with students.

Figure 1 shows an example of a class of 32 students and one student coach for every four buddy groups. **It is up to the degree programme to decide on the actual structure.**
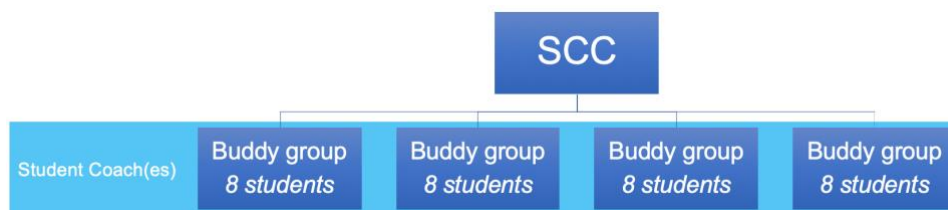

Figure 1: Structure for buddy group, student coach(es) and SCCs

For inspiration, the Teams environment **Buddy groups, Study Career Counselling and Student Coaches** has a role description for a student coach in **Guidance for student coaches.**

2.2. Requirements for and objectives of buddy groups

The requirements for community building and the generic aims of buddy groups were identified during a session with various coordinators from Saxion's honours programmes. These have been shown to be

important in establishing a a sense of community among students within groups of honours programmes.

Based on experiences from Top Talent, the following requirements are important to community building:
- make the purpose of the buddy group clear
- introduce basic rules
- make agreements with regard to co-operation, behaviour, and attendance clear

These requirements are relevant to the both the student coach and the SCC. For more on this, see the information on practical aspects of holding a meeting in paragraph 4.1.

Based on experience from Top Talent, the following generic aims are important to community building. It is advisable for the student coach and SCC to emphasise these aims at the meetings, and that the working methods used in a programme are conducive to these aims. The aims are as follows:
- Students get to know and trust each other
- Students build a community with each other and the degree programme
- Students can find their way around Saxion and higher education, both physically and online
- Saxion is aware of students' welfare
- Students feel a sense of responsibility for each other
- Students value the group, because they learn through group reflection
- Students learn from each other's experiences

2.3.   Aims and tasks of the SCC and student coach

Study career counsellor	Student coach

Requirements and aims

Objectives: • Saxion is aware of students' welfare • Students feel a sense of responsibility for each other • Students value the group, because they learn through group reflection • Students learn from each other's experiences **In the absence of the student coach, the SCC can implement the requirements and aims described for the student coach.**	Requirements: • make clear the purpose of the buddy group • introducing basic rules • make clear agreements with regard to co-operation, behaviour, and attendance Objectives: • Students get to know and trust each other • Students bond with each other and the programme • Students can find their way around Saxion and higher education, both physically and online • Saxion is aware of students' welfare • Students feel a sense of responsibility for each other • Students learn from each other's experiences

Tasks involved in building community among students

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• Responsible for the formal study career counselling learning pathway (competence development and study progress), developing general higher education skills, exploring the professional field, group unity, personal and professional development • Referring students on to OSS when extra support is needed ***In the absence of the student coach, the SCC can implement the tasks described for the student coach.***	• Using working methods to strengthen a sense of community among students and with the degree programme • Familiarisation with Saxion and higher education environment, both physically and online • Monitoring student attendance at the buddy group meetings and involving the SCC if there are concerns

Coordinating content of meetings

It is advisable for the degree programme to provide the student coach with a student coach programme tailored to the study career counselling programme in the individual degree programmes. The student coach can then co-operate with the SCC by tailoring the content of the meetings to the SCC meetings. The student coach can tailor his meetings to those of the SCC by drawing on students' experiences during their time with the SCC or in the degree programme to start a conversation in the buddy group. In order to do this, the student coach should regularly confer with the SCC about the meetings, student attendance, and possible concerns about particular students.

2.4.   Support for the SCC and student coach

OSS offers SCCs the following:
1. Online Q&I (questions and insights) sessions to support SCCs with buddy groups, as well as video material for SCCs.
    a. *These Q&I sessions are an opportunity to draw on each other's experiences, particularly in regard to working methods. Join if you have questions, but also if you have some good tips! We gather the knowledge to share with each other.*
2. This guidance for first-year student SCCs.
3. 'Community Learning' training by forming a learning community

In term 1, an interdisciplinary 'Community Learning' training session is offered, which is particularly suitable for SCCs working with first-year students on degree programmes which are making provision for SOM home groups. There is capacity for 16 first-year student SCCs.

OSS offers student coaches the following:
1. A document of best practices for student coaches, with an annex describing working methods;
2. If necessary, student coaches can use the Blackboard 'SkillsCoach' environment, which has a number of tools.

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It is advisable for the school to offer student coaches the following:
1. Student coaches should be told their allotted SCC during the intro week;
2. A student coach programme, with content tailored to the SCC programme for the individual degree programmes;
3. School points of contact:
   a. The SCC who supervises the same buddy groups as the student coach
   b. The SCC coordinator for general questions
4. Peer feedback and assessment session with student coaches
   a. Advisable for the school to organise frequent peer feedback sessions with student coaches
   b. Advisable to organise regular buddy group performance reviews

Figure 2 illustrates the ideal situation as regards supervision by the degree programme of SCCs and student coaches. In figure 2, arrows indicate that the student coach coordinates the meetings with the SCC.
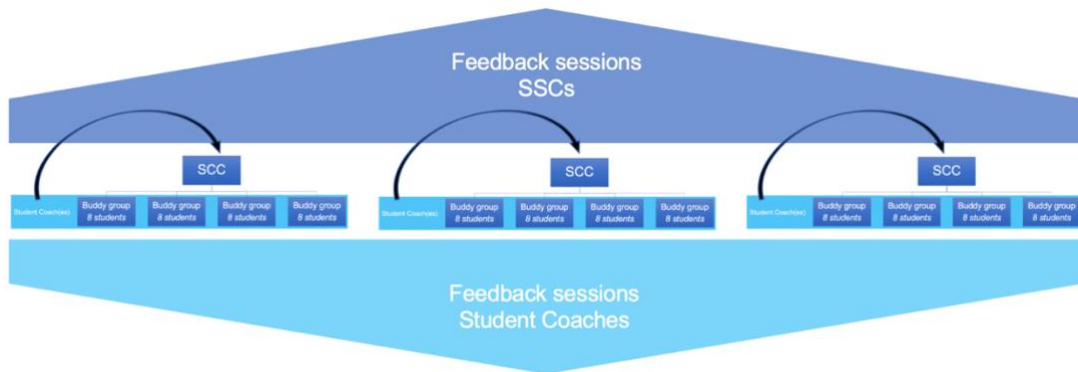

Figure 2: The ideal situation as regards supervision of student coaches and SCCs

The support that OSS provides to SCCs can be illustrated as follows:

* Links for the explanatory videos for SCCs (Dutch):
Video 1/4: What are Buddy Groups? | Link
Video 2/4: How to build communities? | Link
Video 3/4: Collaborating with a student coach | Link
Video 4/4: Online community | Link

** These are online meetings to support SCCs who work with buddy groups, on the following dates:
- Weds 26 August 15:00 – 16:30 | Link (Dutch session)
- Thurs 27 August 15:00 – 16:30 | Link (English session)
- Fri 28 August 9:30 – 11:00 | Link (Dutch session)

*** Starting in term 2, an interdisciplinary 'Community Learning' training session will be offered, which is particularly suitable for SCCs of first-year students on degree programmes which are making provision for SOM home groups. Spaces are limited. *This training is part of the Comenius Leadership Fellows project.*

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3. Role of the SCC in building community in buddy groups

In the immediate future, when offline working will be limited and we will be relying heavily on online teaching, SCCs will be faced with an additional challenge: building community between students, SCC, and the degree programme. Below are some insights into how SCCs can fulfil their role when undertaking study career counselling in groups. These insights are drawn from experiences during the Top Talent programme.

As an SCC, how can you help build community? The SCC:
- Facilitates a programme for the buddy group by:
    - starting the work process
    - making the basic rules clear at the outset and leading by example
    - explaining the content and aim of the meetings
    - tailoring the work process to what the group wants and needs
    - involving all students
    - giving students as many responsibilities as possible
    - venturing away from the programme when deemed necessary
- Encourages positive growth by:
    - making individual students or the whole group think
    - sharing observations and stimulating and actively inviting reflection
    - questioning students and encouraging students to ask each other questions
    - stimulating positive and forward-looking reflection
- Engages in dialogue on an equal footing by:
    - asking unbiased questions and follow-up questions
    - responding to students' input with enthusiasm and curiosity
    - encouraging students to give input at meetings
    - personalising things, for example by involving the student's physical environment
    - showing their vulnerability and not hiding the fact that SCCs don't know everything
    - sharing their own experiences during reflection sessions
- Intervenes to encourage community building by:
    - stimulating interaction in the group
    - keeping the meetings moving along at a fast pace
    - sharing attention among students
    - responding in the moment to what is going on in the group

3.1. Facilitating meetings

Based on experience gained from the Top Talent programme, there are various ways in which SCCs can facilitate the community building process. The SCC:
1. Starts the work process: introducing the aim of buddy groups, clarifying the basic rules and the support expected from both the SCC and the student coach.
    a. The basic rules relate to agreements with the group on communication, interaction and confidentiality (paragraph 4.1).
2. Facilitates a weekly programme, with working methods that bond the group.
3. Puts the student in a position to take responsibility, so that the student can take the lead. There are various ways of doing this, such as getting students to take minutes, inform absent people, or telephone absent people to get them to join.
4. Uses various situations that arise between students to offer supervision, with the aim of stimulating self-determinism among the group. One way is to solicit the group's opinion on the pace and clarity of assignments after they have been completed. This gives students the opportunity to think about the programme and assignments, and (subconsciously) gives them control over the process.
5. Undertakes interventions to clarify the dynamic in the group and what motivates students. It is important that the SCC ensures that all students in the group are involved. Various behaviours for doing this are described in paragraph 4.4.

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6. Shortly before the meeting concerned, adapts the content of the meeting to the pace of the group. Some groups take longer to bond. It is important to be particularly mindful of this. The group sets the pace and the SCC adapts the content accordingly. It's about going with the flow.
7. Ask the buddy group what they want to do when the programme overruns. This enables you to tailor meetings to what the group needs. It is important that you design a programme that can then be flexibly adapted to the situation.
8. Can improvise if technology doesn't play ball. Maybe put this to the group, what do they want?

3.2.   Group reflection

The following insights are based on recent experience of online group reflection sessions: The SCC:
1. Asks questions after each assignment about the process and encourages students to write down the learning outcome. One way to do this is to use the reflective approach. This ensures the reflection is perfectly timed, and short and sweet.
2. Invites students to share their observations, concerns or reflections. This helps the individual participant as well as the other students, whom it encourages to internally formulate their thoughts.
3. Uses time wisely. Not everyone always has time to reflect when the group is together, but it is important to ensure that everybody gets attention at the various points.
4. Explicitly articulates it when something is learned by the student, or asks other students if they had the same experience.
5. Emphasises that the purpose of reflection is positive. The SCC reformulates reflections, gearing them towards growth and the future. Positive reinforcement is important.
6. Stresses the fact that reflection is a group activity: students learn by hearing about others' experiences.

As well as engaging in reflection with students, it is advisable for the SCC to also reflect on his own actions. One way of doing this is for SCCs to hold a peer feedback and inspiration session with each other, to ask questions and discuss cases.

3.3.   Treating everyone as equals

Based on experience during the Top Talent programme, when the SCC takes an egalitarian approach it is easier for build community within the group. There are various things the SCC can do to ensure this. The SCC:
1. Presents himself on an equal footing, as a learner, to promote a sense of security and trust within the group.
   a. Whilst the SCC is an equal as a person, he does have responsibility in his role. He puts himself on a equal footing by asking searching questions without judging the answers, responding enthusiastically to students' input, and delegating decisions about the group, to the group. In this way, the SCC can put himself in the students' shoes. Rather than using his own position of expertise to supervise, the SCC treats the student as the expert in his own development.
   b. The SCC also makes clear that group formation is a shared quest, and should be enjoyable for everyone in the group.
   c. The SCC invites the students to present initiatives conducive to community building.
2. Makes it 'personal' to bond the group.
   a. The SCC plays an important role in encouraging students. This positive approach promotes trust, making it more likely that students will show their vulnerability and, in the process, become inter-connected or develop understanding.
   b. The SCC's approach is informed by the environment. Use everything you see, hear and feel. For instance, look at students' physical environment during the online meetings.
3. If there is no contact with a student, a student is not taking part in the buddy group or meetings, or a student cancels at the last minute,

a. put this to the buddy group: ask whether the agreements about this are clear. Are there agreements in place about who takes the initiative for making contact, and the communication method?
b. For example, ask one of the attendees to reach out to students who fail to attend ('we miss you', for instance). Ideally, this should be done online in an online environment in which all participants in the buddy group can keep track of the exchanges.
c. This is important, because a buddy group is the sum of its parts. So, if one member is absent, this affects the whole buddy group.

3.4.   Interventions

Based on experiences of the Top Talent programme, behaviours have been identified which the SCC is advised to adopt in order to stimulate community building in a buddy group. The SCC:
1. Is careful not to be too strict about shutting off the microphone, for the sake of community building in buddy groups. Allowing everyone to spontaneously speak is conductive to community building.
2. Ensures interaction in the group by taking an active attitude, sets a good example to the group, responds enthusiastically and acts on spontaneous input, does not over-contribute.
3. Asks questions about the pace and clarity of assignments.
4. Makes participants aware of their individual responsibility: establishing online group unity relies on students being fully involved in a buddy group.
5. Keeps the pace of the meeting fast, by setting time pressure for assignments; this requires participants to be creative when solving the assignment.
6. Sets assignments or topics for reflection during breaks.
7. Makes sure that everyone gets an opportunity to speak, specifically addressing questions to individuals if necessary (e.g. if someone is shy).
8. Occasionally steps back from an ongoing conversation, discussion or assignment, allowing the students to sort it out themselves. The SCC does not have to control or steer everything.
9. Proactively responds to events in the group, moment by moment.
10. Deals with all personal matters related to professional development in the group; anything beyond this scope can be better dealt with in a one-to-one meeting between student and SCC.

4. Approach to buddy groups

As part of the Top Talent Comenius project, an Online Community Building project was undertaken with a view to organising teaching in buddy groups which form an online community. This experiment sought to gain an insight into practical applications which contribute positively to building community in buddy groups. The conclusions on preparing and designing a programme for online community building are described below.

4.1.   Preparing buddy groups

Based on experience during the Top Talent programme, better outcomes are achieved by preparing for each meeting beforehand. It is advisable for the SCC or SCC coordinator to prepare for the meetings.

Some ways in which the degree programme or school can prepare
• Make sure that students live in the same region in the physical world, so that they can meet each other in person where possible.
• Make sure the buddy groups can also work together on different modules.
Set aside at least one hour per week for student community building.

Some ways in which an SCC can prepare

- Ideally, the SCC should hold admission advice sessions very early on (preferably before the start of teaching, or in the first week, possibly the second). In principle, this is the only one-to-one moment; after that, everything is group-based.

Practical aspects of meetings
- Rules
  - The SCC leads the online meeting and is a moderator.
  - The SCC makes students aware of their responsibility as participants in the buddy group. This means things like: attend, be on time, listen and ask questions, have respect for each other, take part and take the initiative.
  - Make students aware that what is discussed in the group stays in the group. Formally agree this, in order to establish trust and a sense of security in the group.
  - Everyone in the group must be at the first meeting; this is the opportunity for the SCC or student coach to set the tone for the whole year. Treat the students like motivated students and encourage a professional attitude.
- Communication channel
  - Meetings take place via online video calls, in Teams chats.
  - Decide with the group which channel they want to use to communicate outside meetings, e.g. via a WhatsApp group, Teams (chat) or e-mail.
  - Decide with the group where documentation (such as minutes) will be kept for the group.
- Video, audio and network
  - Encourage students to turn on their camera during the meeting. To bond with each other, it is important that students and SCC can see each other.
  - Choose a calm background and avoid sunlight or other bright light from behind.
  - Try to reduce background by holding the meeting a calm, quiet space; shut the window if necessary.
  - Use a headset (or earpieces with a microphone).
  - Try to find a place with good WiFi connection.

4.2.   Design of a meeting

A number of insights are given here which may be helpful when designing the programme.
- Design programmes for the meetings for both student coaches and SCCs.
  - It is advisable for the SCC/SCC coordinator to structure a programme consisting of a series of meetings on a particular topic, with specific subjects for each meeting.
  - It is advisable for the staff team to check whether programmes like these have already been developed, including for student coaches, either by the SCC coordinator or someone else.
  - It is also advisable to check with the staff team whether allowance has been made for the online start to the academic year.
  - The programmes for the first three weeks will have to be put together over the summer holiday, so that SCCs and student coaches know what to expect when term starts.
- Use clear time blocks, in which the working methods, breaks and assignments are described.
  - Develop assignments that don't take long to complete, i.e. no more than one hour per assignment, ideally involving several working methods.
  - Take a break of at least five minutes each hour if the meeting lasts longer than an hour.
  - Allow time during the programme to think about a new assignment. This can frequently be combined with a break.
  - Allow scope in the programme for students to move around, e.g. by having them stand up. Movement can also be powerful took in working methods, be creative.
- Use varied, creative and challenging working methods, to make it fun, interactive and energetic. It is important to start a dialogue. In this case, dialogue is not just speech, but also visual communication. Here are a few examples:

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- - Set assignments that are varied: talking, drawing, writing. This draws on different talents and strengths. Using the online whiteboard is one way to do this.
  - Use parallel groups so that students can work things out, brainstorm or discuss particular subjects in small groups. Get them to present their thoughts to the whole buddy group afterwards. It is important that everyone knows what's going on.
- Use group assignments as an opportunity for reflection:
  - a group assignment has a goal and students must decide how they will achieve that together. Devise an assignment so that students need each other, and have to interact in order to achieve the deliverables.
  - Allow plenty of time for group assignments, so that students can develop them fully.
  - The deliverables of a group assignment may change along the way. The deliverables need not be the desired aim; they may also be a reflection on the process. Each assignment has its own content, but is about the process by which the content was established.
  - In this process, students can observe each other. This brings students' strengths and weaknesses to the fore, which is important for the reflection stage.
  - When setting group assignments as homework, divide the group or ask the group to split into pairs for each homework assignment. Make sure that different pairs are formed each time, as this helps the group to bond.
- Stimulate students' intrinsic motivation.
  - Students discover where their particular strengths lie, what they need to work on, what their pitfalls and opportunities are, what drives them, what energises them, and when they feel good.
  - To stir intrinsic motivation, it is important that students set targets, so they have perspective about what they are working towards.
  - The steps that students take in this process are the learning moments upon which they can reflect.
  - Reflecting leads to fresh insights, which stimulates a student's intrinsic motivation.
- Create a varied homework assignment (which doesn't have to be big) for each meeting. Alternate between individual assignments and assignments done in pairs.

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