

# Case Study 5: Trialling ‘Relatedness Nudges’ to Support Student Engagement

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Undergraduate  
Level 4 - 6

Sport & Exercise  
Science

## *Context*

At the time the project was planned in the summer of 2023, student belonging was becoming a priority concern for many HE institutions in the UK, underlined by Advance HE introducing a programme on fostering student belonging during the following year (Morgan, 2024). As the Advance HE programme explains, there are benefits of belonging not only for student retention and wellbeing, but also for institutional finances, as greater retention leads to more stable income.

Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) suggests that people have three basic psychological needs: for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Meeting these needs promotes a sense of wellbeing and intrinsic motivation, which in turn should support engagement in the associated activity; in this case, one’s university studies. Meeting students’ relatedness/belonging needs can, however, be challenging with large cohorts of students. One way in which this might be achieved is by addressing students’ sense of relatedness in university messaging (Blumenstein et al., 2018). Blumenstein et al. discuss ‘nudges’ as a form of messaging which can promote student engagement and success, with nudges in the broader sense being any simple interventions which can influence decision-making and alter behaviour without coercion. Furthermore, nudges are not just for those students at risk (e.g. of drop-out) but can be addressed to all learners to promote ongoing engagement. Therefore, sending nudge messages which promote a greater sense of relatedness between university students and the staff on their programmes should support students’ engagement with their studies, with benefits for their retention and wellbeing.

## *Purpose of Activity*

As the number of students on our course has increased over recent years (from 375 in 22/23 to 458 in 23/24 alone), the risk of students feeling a lack of belonging to the

programme has also grown. Across the university, students whose attendance and engagement data indicate a risk of poor outcomes (e.g. drop-out) are sent nudges to encourage re-engagement; however, these messages are sent from teams unknown to the students and as such there was scope to increase the sense of relatedness offered in nudge messaging. The nudges in this project were sent by the programme leader, allowing reference to be made to specific modules and upcoming deadlines in addition to making the programme leader more visible. Subsequently, we anticipated positive effects on metrics and that students would feel more comfortable in reaching out to the programme leader with any difficulties they were experiencing.

### ***What happened?***

Throughout the 23/24 academic year, the programme leader for Sport and Exercise Science (SES) sent 'relatedness nudges' reminding students of support structures, upcoming assessments, and other information relevant to their programme.

Sixteen batches of emails were sent (5-6 per year group). Batches were differentiated into two types of messages: those for students with 'good' engagement and those with 'concerning' engagement, according to learning analytics data on recent attendance levels and engagement with online learning materials. Data were routinely collected by the university for consenting students, though workload implications were evident for the project team. Consistent with the aim to promote relatedness, both nudges were positively framed and differed only slightly in their content, e.g. phrases such as 'keep it up' were used in the opening of 'good' messages, whereas there was a focus in the 'concerning' messages on reminding students that staff were available to help.

Emails were supplemented by four batches of telephone calls following key assessment periods. While the time required for this will remain similar going forward, time for planning the schedule and writing nudges will be reduced in future years now that templates exist. Responding to return emails took around 1-2 hours for each batch of nudges, depending on the number and complexity of responses.

### ***What was the impact?***

Students engaged with the relatedness nudges to a greater degree than messages sent from central university teams at a similar time, with seemingly greater open (69

vs. 57%) and click-through rates to further information (8 vs. 3%). The number of direct replies to each batch of nudges ranged from 0 to 9 (Mean  $\pm$  SD = 2.13  $\pm$  2.36).

Although various factors impact retention rates, it is noteworthy that the number of withdrawals for the SES programme was 12 in 23/24, compared to 23 in 22/23 and 22 in 21/22, observed in the face of greater student numbers on the programme which can reduce students' sense of relatedness. Moreover, during the last two academic years, SES has accounted for 37-47% of total withdrawals in the department and that figure is only 27% this year.

Only 2.4% of students did not submit two or more of their Semester 1 assessments and received follow-up telephone calls about this. We particularly monitored submission rates for the first of the Level 4 assessments as an indicator of first-year students' likely continuation on the programme. Three weeks prior to the assessment a nudge was sent to remind students about the deadline, and only 1.8% of the 169 students failed to submit; a favourable finding given the non-submission rates of 4.1, 6.2, and 7.8% for the same module from other sport programmes within the department (with smaller cohorts of 122, 97, and 64, respectively).

### ***Reflections and implications***

For the next stage of the project, we intend to collect qualitative data from students to further enhance the nudges based on input regarding aspects such as the content and timing of the messages. The greatest workload implications came in identifying the students with different engagement levels, and we are looking into ways to make this more efficient. One of the most valuable outcomes of the project was that several students felt able to come forward with difficult personal circumstances in response to the nudges and were offered further wellbeing support.

### ***Advice***

After the initial planning regarding the timeline and data/systems required, this was a relatively straightforward project which we would recommend to other organisations. One point to bear in mind when crafting the messages is that the wording should be considered from the perspectives of different recipients to avoid confusion and depersonalisation, affecting the 'relatedness' element of the nudges. For instance, advice such as to contact "your personal tutor" or "your dissertation supervisor" should

be avoided in messages being sent to a group that includes students who are the sender's personal tutees or supervisees.

## ***References***

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