
COURAGE Project
Strand A NBI PIPS Placement Report:
Developing research community culture

NORWICH BIOSCIENCE INSTITUTES

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1 Introduction

The Strand A of the Courage project deals with planning and implementing a new and innovative pilot project that contributes to the development of research culture and community within a Faculty of the University of East Anglia, the Norwich Bioscience Institutes or University of Suffolk.

As my placement was at the Norwich Bioscience Institutes, my research focused on the problems specific to this site. During my placement here I familiarised myself with the relevant literature, and prepared multiple modes of action based on this. A review of the relevant literature written by Dr. Dave Watson and Dr. John Turnpenny titled "*Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Postgraduate Research students: A rapid review*" served as the starting point of my literature review. The document highlights two important points I focused on during my placement: PGR isolation and (potential lack of overarching NBI) PGR community.

Based on what I found in the relevant literature I developed a survey aimed at mapping attitudes at research culture and community at the NBI, and I launched an event series aimed at building community through mutual skill sharing. The information gathered here surveys what the PGRs experience with the community and research culture at NBI has been like, what they feel lacking, and use the feedback to inform decision making in the future.

2 Results

2.1 Building a hypothesis

Based on my own personal experiences, PhD students at NBI face similar pressures as their counterparts do at the UEA or University of Suffolk. Because of this, it made sense to focus on elements that make the situation at NBI different, that are specific to this environment, and fit in the scope of this project.

One of the important effects specific to the NBI students is the increased level of isolation they might encounter compared to the rest of the student body. Borrowing an analogy from ecology, the situation is similar to the road barrier effect, where roads and highways cutting across habitats act as physical barriers for species, reducing connectivity. One could argue a similar situation can be found at NBI, where the (overall) smaller student body is cut in four among the research institutes, creating an additional degree of separation for the students working here.

While the institute specific robust student communities can ameliorate this effect, if a student cannot fit into those environments, they might become isolated, and bear its negative effects on wellbeing and mental health. The PGR community can serve as a psychological reservoir potentially enhancing confidence, resilience, providing emotional support and even as a source of skills through shared/group training.

Because of this, I decided to survey the NBI students, asked whether they feel like establishing or strengthening an overarching NBI community is warranted, asked what their experiences have been with the community and research culture at NBI, what they think is lacking or could be changed.

2.1.1 The survey in detail

The following topics were included in the survey, each of them with a specific goal in mind:

1. Section 1: this first "demographics" section tries to map whether there are differences in attitudes based on their study status or where the students come from (e.g. are they UK citizens or EU citizens).
2. Section 2: these questions aim to map personal wellbeing. The questions are the same ones used by the Office of National Statistics, they focus on satisfaction, happiness, anxiety.
3. Section 3: These questions try to measure the degree of isolation people encounter, and how often they interact with various communities. Some of the questions were adapted from this study: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2756979/>.

We did extend the range of answers a bit, to give people an option to not answer the questions ("prefer not to say") and to increase resolution.

4. Section 4: These questions try to map the attitudes students feel towards the various institutes they interact with, to try and quantify "belonging" to these communities.
5. Section 5: These questions try to find out how open people find the various communities they encounter. I defined "open" as *one that is welcoming, easy to approach and integrate into*.
6. Section 6: This last section tries to find out what the attitudes are towards communities in general, whether the PGRs feel the need of them or find them important, and whether they feel supported.

Since the survey includes questions that inquire about wellbeing, we included a list of local and national resources, and clear guidance on how to access support, in case the PGRs would like to discuss something further with someone.

The survey was distributed to NBI students on 18/06/19, and was open until the end of July. The full survey is available on request.

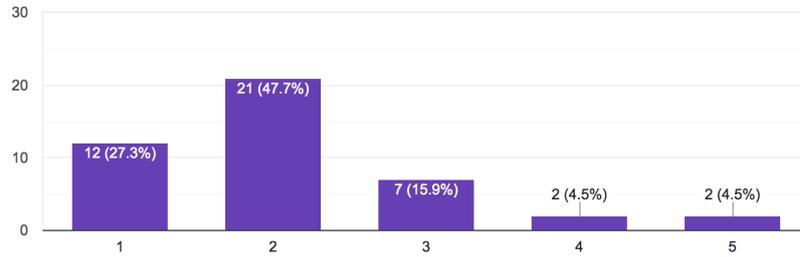
2.1.2 Results of the survey

The survey had 44 participants, with a roughly even split among three institutes, and a handful of representatives from the fourth (The Sainsbury Laboratory). Two thirds of the participants are UK citizens, and a similar ratio answered 'No' to the question if they had lived or studied in Norwich before.

The results are generally positive, although there are some things to take into consideration. The mean values given to the wellbeing questions (how happy / satisfied are you with your life; to what extent do you feel that things are worth doing) all hover around 7 on a scale of 1 to 10, with comparable standard deviations. This remains the same if we group the data by institutes, citizenship, or whether people lived in Norwich before. When it comes to a feeling of belonging, PGRs report similar levels of belonging to their research institute and the NBI, and slightly less so when it comes to the University of East Anglia.

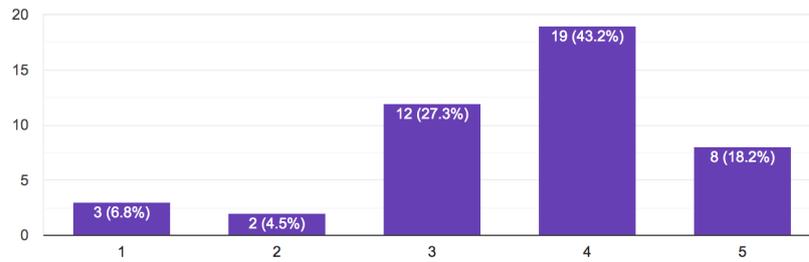
How much do you feel like you belong to the University of East Anglia?

44 responses



How much do you feel like you belong to the Norwich BioScience Institutes?

44 responses



How much do you feel like you belong to your research institute?

44 responses

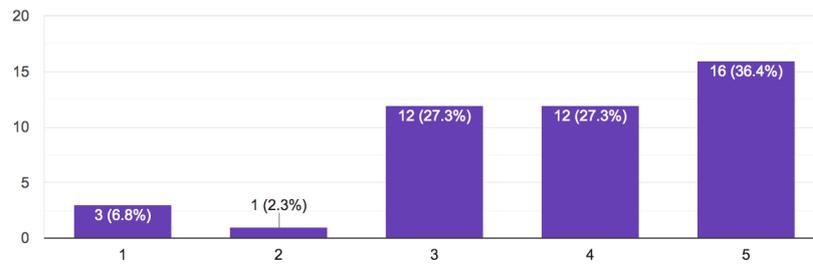
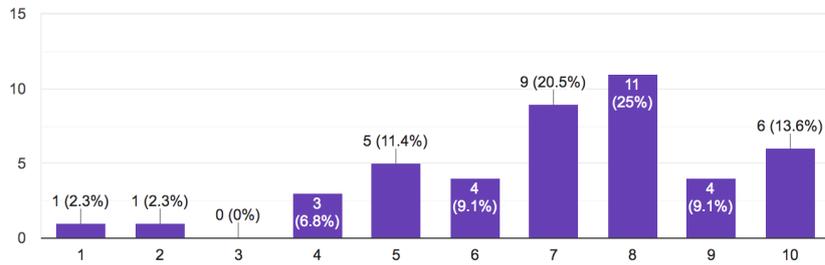


Figure 1: Sense of belonging across the various institutes.

This sentiment is shared when it comes to the strength of the sense of communities.

Overall, how strong would you say is the sense of community at your research institute?

44 responses



Overall, how strong would you say is the sense of community at the Norwich BioScience Institutes?

44 responses

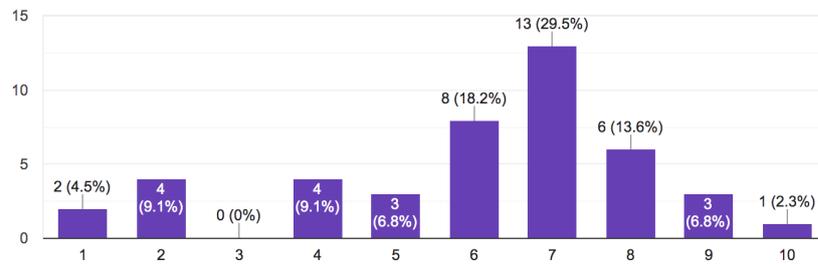
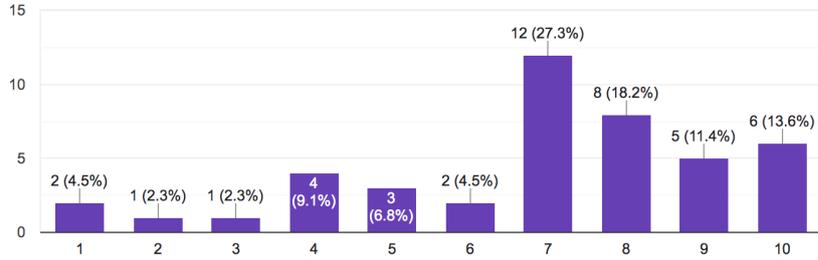


Figure 2: Perceived strength of communities at NBI and the research institutes.

PGRs also find these communities quite open, where we defined open as "as one that is welcoming, easy to approach and integrate into."

Overall, in your opinion how open is the community at your research institute?

44 responses



Overall, in your opinion how open is the community at the Norwich BioScience Institutes?

44 responses

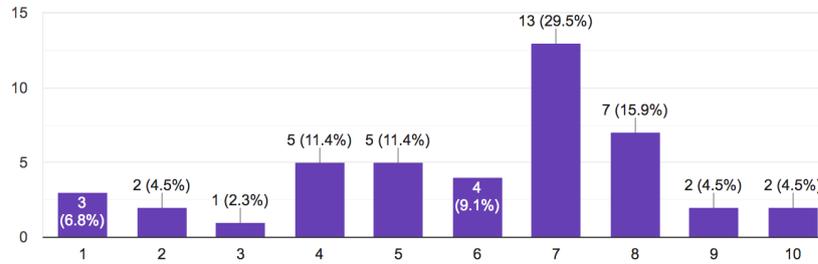
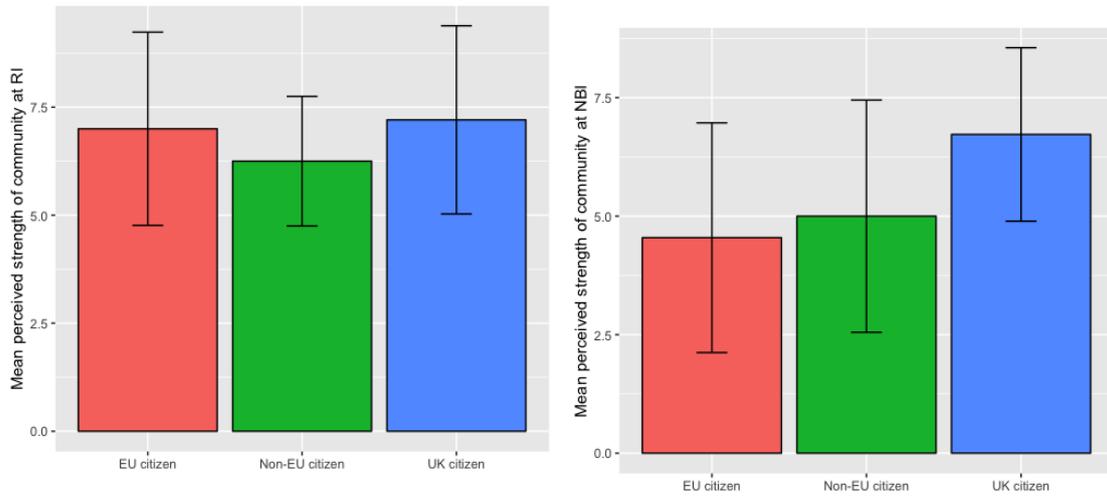


Figure 3: Openness of communities at NBI and the research institutes.

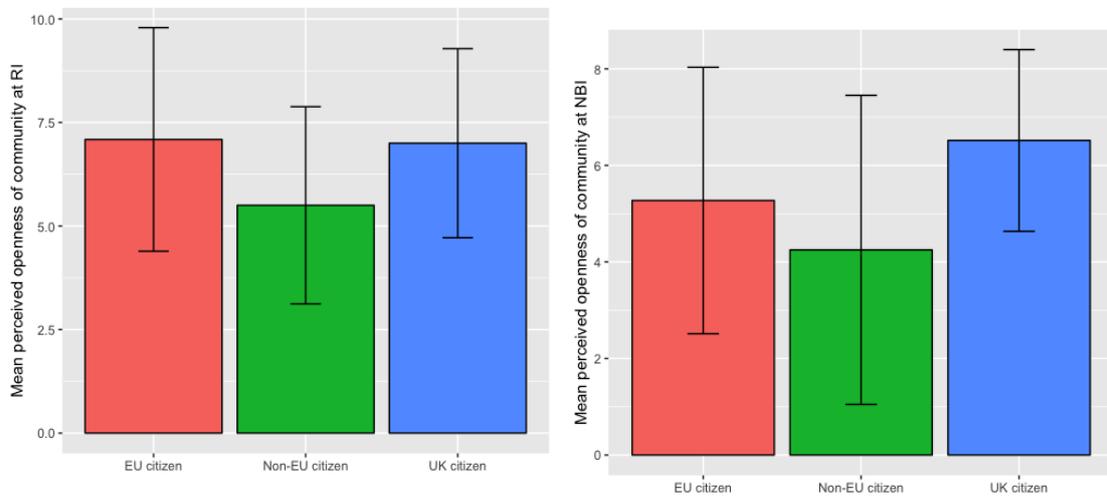
There are differences in the perceived strength of communities and openness if we group the data by geographical origin (UK citizens, EU citizens, Non-EU citizens). While these findings are interesting, we must take note that there were only 3 participants who identified as Non-EU citizens, and as such these findings should be treated cautiously. Interestingly, despite the mostly positive results above, people still report being anxious, where people who lived in Norwich previously submitted slightly lower values.



(a) Perceived strength of communities at the research institute.

(b) Perceived strength of communities at NBI.

Figure 4: Differences in perceived strength of communities can be detected if we group the responses based on geographic origin.



(a) Perceived openness of communities at the research institute.

(b) Perceived openness of communities at NBI.

Figure 5: Differences in perceived openness of communities can be detected if we group the responses based on geographic origin.

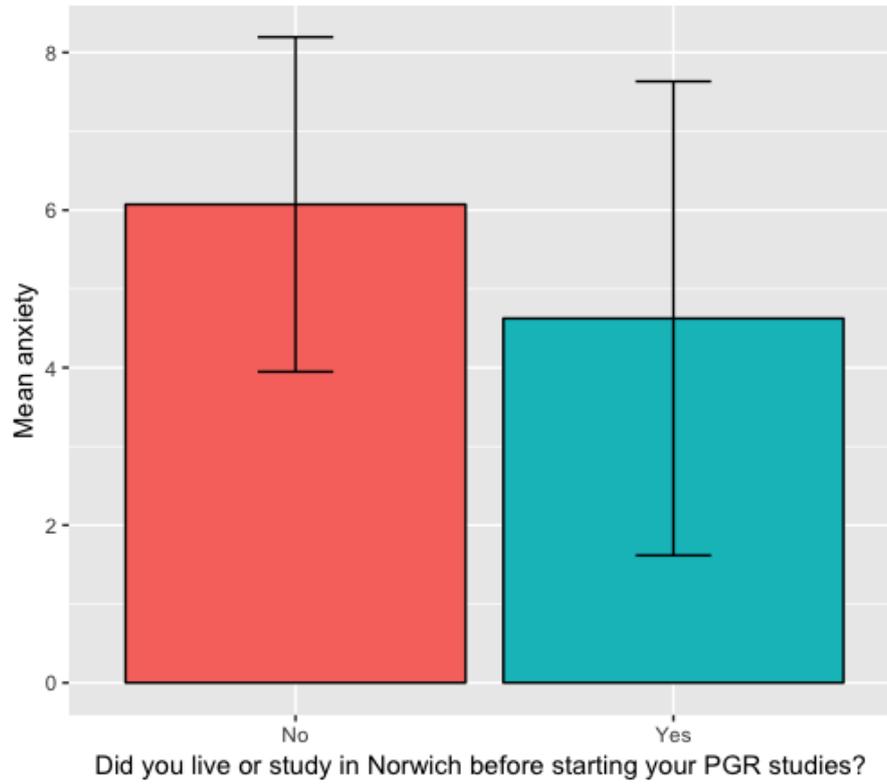


Figure 6: Perceived anxiety.

Isolation is also present in the answers, only 36% of participants replied with "hardly ever".

How often do you feel isolated from others?

44 responses

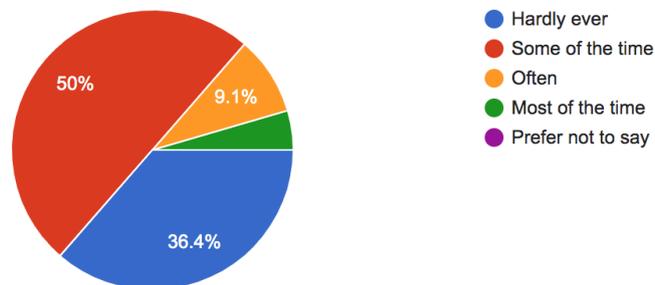


Figure 7: Feeling of isolation among PGRs.

2.2 BIKE

While I was devising the survey, I was also planning an event series. Based on the relevant literature a potential mode of building communities is group skill sharing. An optimal candidate for this was the extension of BIKE (Bioinformatics Knowledge Exchange), a program we used to run at the Earlham Institute, with the Earlham Institute student body. It is a workshop/seminar series, where we invite experts from within the institute to demonstrate certain computational tools, programming languages that could be useful in our day-to-day work. Although the last event before my placement was years ago, we still had some of the core concepts we used back then, which made it relatively easy to implement.

First of all, we had to identify some of the skills that people would be interested in learning about, to gauge interest and to check availability. A large part of biology is computational these days, but the specific skills and tools needed vary from field to field.

To achieve this, we launched a survey that turned out to be very informative. Using information gathered here, we managed to start up the event series. The first session ran on the 29th of May, in the Darwin Room of the Earlham Institute, led by Anthony Etuk, Alice Minotto and Martin Ayling from Robert Davey's group. I received a lot of help in terms of organisation from Emily Angiolini, the Earlham Institute Training Coordinator. The topic was: **Managing**

your data. The trainers talked about common pitfalls of data gathering and organisation, best practices, and where to turn for help.



Think long term

- If you return to your current work in three years time, could you quickly and easily reproduce it?
- Create a working framework for yourself that makes life easy for Future You.

One of the most important slides from Martin Ayling's presentation.

Following the course the participants filled out a questionnaire about the session.

3 Discussion

3.1 Outcomes and Recommendations

Based on the results of the survey I was able to formulate a few recommendations and observations that could be beneficial to the decision making process regarding mental, health, wellbeing, and attitudes towards research culture and community at NBI.

- Further attention to research institute specific communities and focus on more NBI-wide opportunities. Although the surveyed attitudes towards the research institute and NBI communities are positive, I think they could be monitored in some way in the future (perhaps as an addendum to the PRES survey), should they change for the worse.
- Looking into why the EU and non-EU students experience the communities as less open and less strong, and finding ways that could make them potentially more welcoming and inclusive.
- While it is already ongoing important work, I also have to highlight the importance of the support services dealing with mental health issues and anxiety, which we also captured in this survey.
- During the creation of the survey I had a lot of anecdotal feedback about the various issues people face, just talking to students about my project, and I definitely think the students would appreciate a more focused, NBI-specific questionnaire in the future.

The other main outcome of my placement was the extension and re-launch of the BIKE series. We learned a lot on how to organise them better from this first session, and are excited to take these lessons into the future events, and make them a programme that will hopefully solidify as something the students look forward to.

4 Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Bryony Porter, Benjamin Marshall, Kate Conway and Dave Evans for supporting me through the whole project, they are great mentors, and were always readily available whenever I encountered any issues. I would like to thank my funders for the support, and the Courage Project for accepting my application to do a placement with them, and teaching me so much about student wellbeing.