

NEON Awards 2024 Nominations

Category

NEON Widening Access Initiative (Retention and Progression) Award

Name of project and institution

Middle Ground Network, University of Leeds

Brief Description

The Middle Ground Network at the University of Leeds is a community initiative aimed at bringing together younger mature students. Created in December 2022 through collaboration between the Lifelong Learning Centre, the Student Success Unit, and Leeds University Union (LUU), this network focuses on enhancing social interaction for younger mature students. By providing opportunities for both in-person and virtual connections, the Middle Ground Network aims to foster a stronger sense of belonging among this student group. It has successfully increased the sense of belonging for its members and serves as a valuable model for supporting younger mature students in higher education.

Why has this project been nominated

The Middle Ground Network is an innovative initiative established to support a specific group of underrepresented students (typically aged ~21-30) at the University of Leeds. Its primary goal is to enhance students' sense of belonging, thereby improving retention rates. This effort aligns with our institutional Access and Student Success Strategy, where belonging is a central focus. The network's inception stemmed from a mature undergraduate student who reached out after participating in another project for mature students: "I'm not sure if there's much that can be done about this but I'm finding it a little difficult to find friends around my own age at the minute. I'm 28 and find that most people either seem to be 18 or c. 40+. As much as I'm happy to talk to people of all ages, it would be great to find some people who are in a similar stage of life... I just wondered if this was a common problem for inbetweeners like me and if you had any advice at all?" Their candid message highlighted the challenge of finding peers within their age range and sparked subsequent research where university staff discovered that younger mature students lacked opportunities to connect with like-minded peers. Evaluation data from a mature-focused peer-to-peer scheme also emphasized the value of targeted age interventions, especially for the younger end of the age demographic. With only 10% of mature undergraduates at Leeds being 36+, the need for a tailored project became evident. Thus, the Middle Ground Network was launched in December 2022. Since then, it has significantly enhanced belonging for younger mature students and provided compelling evidence for supporting this group in higher education—a unique approach not found in any other institution.

How long has the project been running

1 year (2023/24 is the 2nd year of the project)

Number of participants for each year of the project's operation

169 students registered for the Middle Ground Network in 2022/23. This has increased to 234 in 2023/24, even when factoring in attrition of members who graduated in 22/23.

More details

<https://www.instagram.com/leedsunimiddleground/>

