The benefits of community building in teaching EAP online

OUR RESEARCH AIM IS TO INVESTIGATE COMMON BELIEFS ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING AND HOW IT AIDS LEARNING, LEADING TO POSITIVE STUDENT EXPERIENCE. THE SELECTED RESEARCH METHODS INCLUDE INTERVIEWING ONE OF THE COURSE DESIGNERS, AS WELL AS CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS AND DISTRIBUTING QUESTIONNAIRES TO BOTH STUDENTS AND TUTORS INVOLVED IN THIS YEAR'S SIX-WEEK PRE-SESSIONAL COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER.

By Michelle Nixon and Kamil Stobiecki

Outline

1. Background of Community Building

    1.1 The benefits

    1.2 The strategies

2. Our context

    2.1 Methods

    2.2 Findings/Discussion

3. Conclusion

1. Background of Community Building
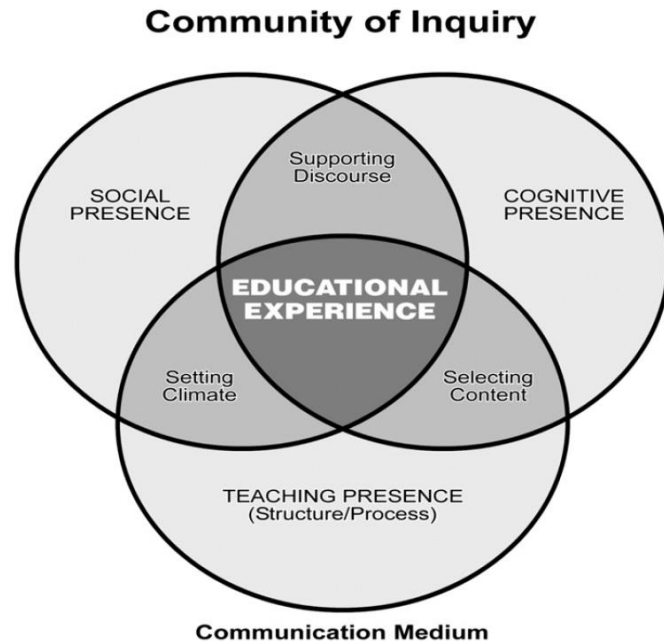

Community of Inquiry

Fig. 1. Community of inquiry framework.

(Garrison et al., 2010, p. 6)

Figure 1.

ELEMENTS	CATEGORIES	INDICATORS (examples only)
Social Presence	Open Communication Group Cohesion Personal/Affective	Learning climate/risk-free expression Group identity/collaboration Self projection/expressing emotions
Cognitive Presence	Triggering Event Exploration Integration Resolution	Sense of puzzlement Information exchange Connecting ideas Appling new ideas
Teaching Presence	Design & Organization Facilitating Discourse Direct Instruction	Setting curriculum & methods Shaping constructive exchange Focusing and resolving issues

(Garrison, 2009, p. 3)

1. Background of Community Building

'Classroom community was defined as the connections among students and between students and instructors that lead to increased learning' (Young and Bruce 2011, p. 220).

1.1 The benefits

'A sense of community is central to student engagement and satisfaction.'

(Berry 2019, p. 164)

'Higher education has consistently viewed community as essential to support collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning.'

(Garrison and Arbaugh 2007, p. 158)

'Student engagement and sense of classroom community are closely related to one another; students who feel a sense of connectedness rather than isolation are very likely better prepared to become more actively involved with course learning, successfully persist, and experience real world success.'

(Young and Bruce 2011, p. 227)

1.2 The strategies

Berry (2019, p. 164) identifies four strategies for building community online:

1. reaching out to students often

2. limiting time spent lecturing

3. using video and chat as modes to engage students

4. allowing class time to be used for personal and professional updates

Online community can be improved by:

1. decreasing the learners' transactional space

2. increasing social presence

3. providing equal opportunity for involvement

4. designing small group activities

5. facilitating group discussions

6. matching teaching style with the learning stage

7. limiting class size

(Rovai 2002, pp. 7-10)

2. Our context

- Six-week pre-sessional online course at the University of Manchester
- Synchronous and asynchronous elements

2.1 Methods

1. Questionnaires distributed to approximately over 500 students with **147 responses**

2. Questionnaires distributed to 47 tutors with **9 responses**

3. A small focus group with 2 students

4. An interview with one of the course designers

# 2.2 Findings/Discussion

1. Cameras on or off?

I feel more connected to the class when other students have their cameras on.
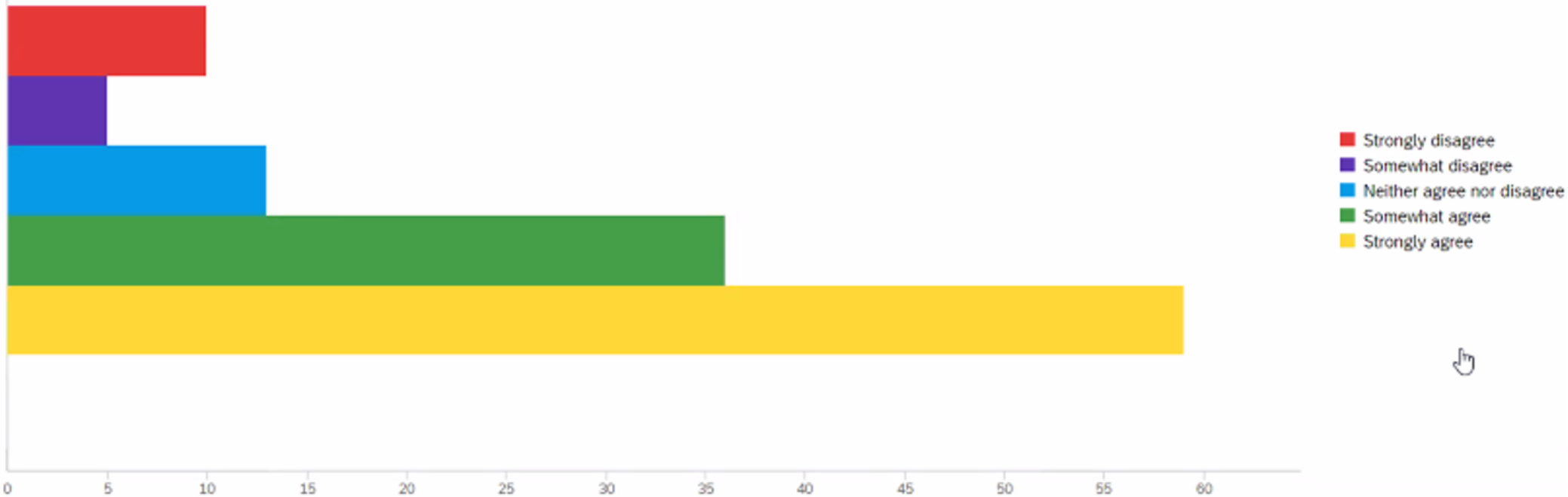
S1: 'Well, as for me, I think if we keep our cameras on, I can see the other people's face , and I will know what their feelings are. So, I will know them better I think in this way . I will feel more connected to them. And I can know their reaction...'

S2: 'Same as me I think that (...) through the camera, (...) I can see other people's feelings, through their expression, body language, and something to judge their reactions and (...), it is helpful for our seminar or lecture.'

1. Cameras on or off?
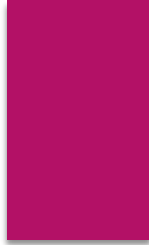
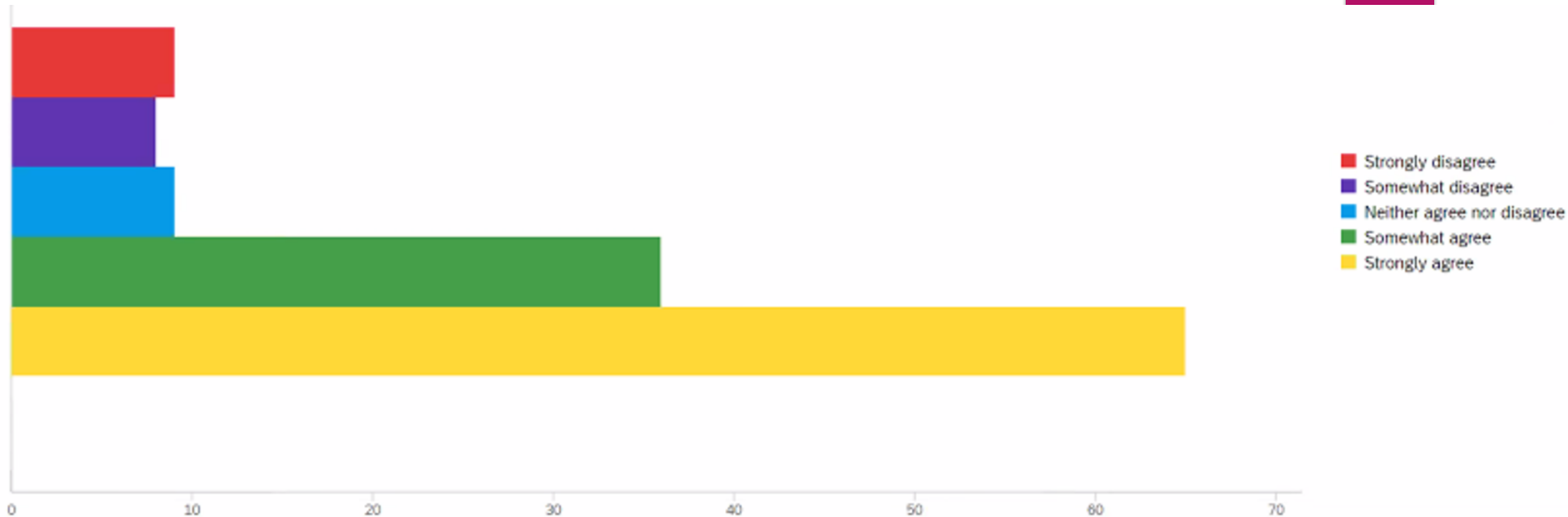The students seem more connected to the class when they have their cameras on.

I prefer tutors and students to have their camera on. Why/Why not?

CD: 'On the whole yes, cameras should be on, I think that in the pre-sessional we sort of set this as an expectation and a norm (…), you wouldn't turn your back if you were in a physical classroom, so why not camera on? But you don't have to have it on all the time.'

2. The value of getting to know each other

It's easier for me to learn after getting to know my class.

Legend:
- **Strongly disagree** (red)
- **Somewhat disagree** (purple)
- **Neither agree nor disagree** (blue)
- **Somewhat agree** (green)
- **Strongly agree** (yellow)

S1: 'Well, I think for me, if I know somebody, it will be easier for me to maybe ask some questions, or express my opinions, because I will feel like that I know that person that I can express my opinions very, erm, freely. So, I think it is really easier to learn if I know the person and if I study with somebody I don't know, maybe I will be shy and I will be not that confident and I will maybe, erm, don't want to share my opinions.'

S2: 'Maybe I think it will be better to know the class students before we start the course so we can, so it may be easier for us to start group work or participate...'

2. The value of getting to know each other
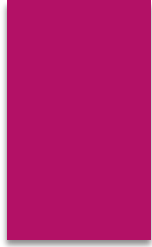
It's easier for my students to learn after getting to know their class.
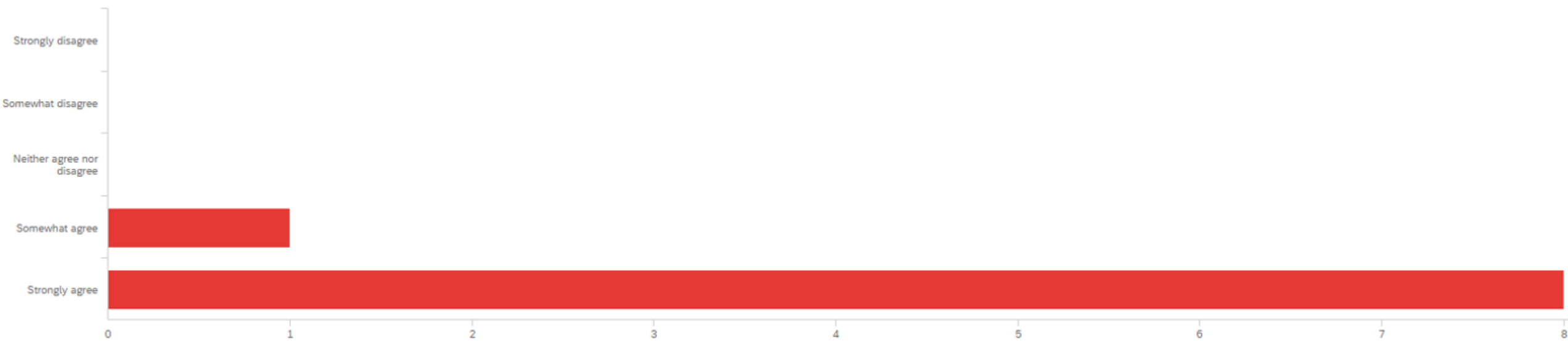
Have you included any activities that foster community building? Why?

CD: 'The first sort of community building was that word cloud, how are you feeling about the course, get everybody engaged (…) and get people to start to feel 'oh I'm not the only person out there', which in learning remotely is massively important (…) Then there were those introductory Padlets (…) that we've just spoken about, the welcome talks (…) The point of this welcome week is to make them feel that they belong, they belong to something, and they're not just that island.'
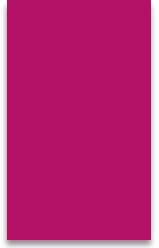
3. The value of sharing personal and study updates

It's important that our tutor gives us time to get to know each other and share personal (and study) updates.
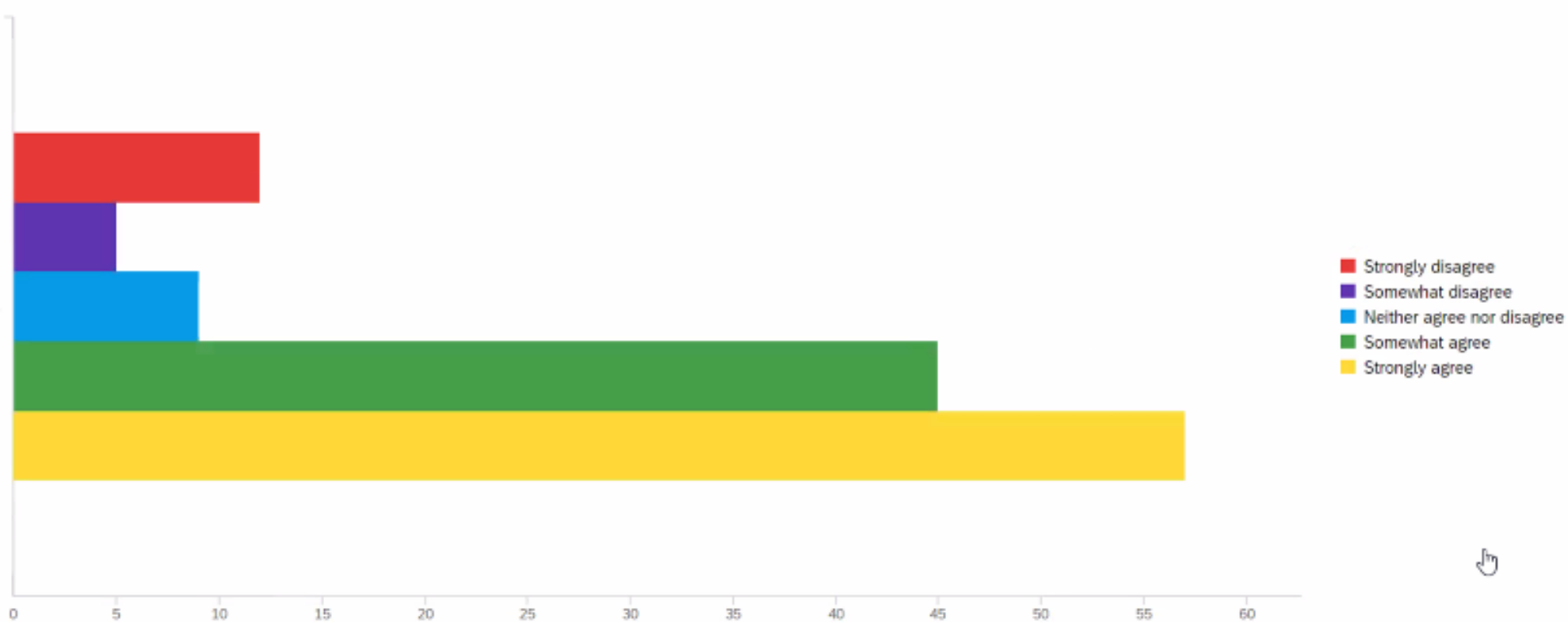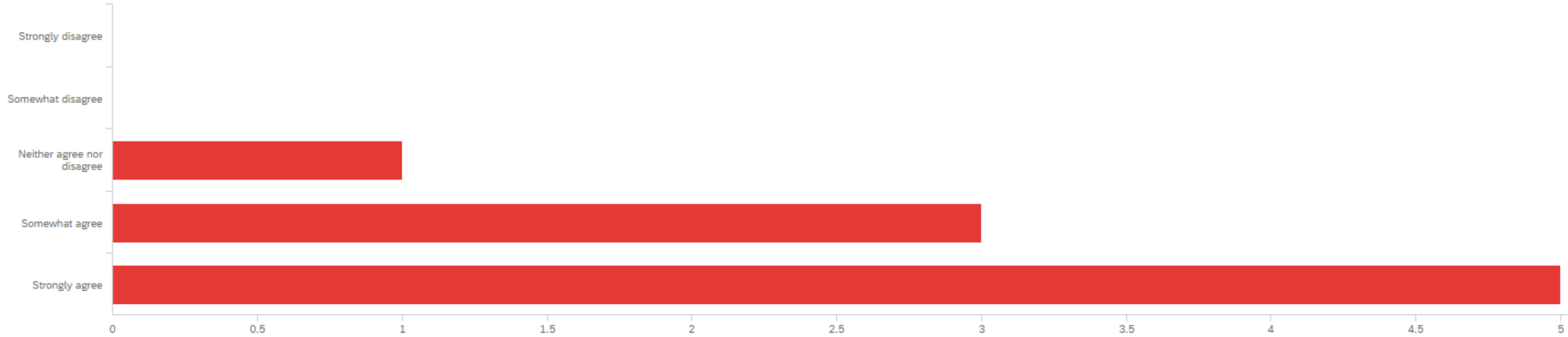

S2: 'Such questions make the course more active. Everybody can share their life and (...) exchange our information and make us more familiar with each other.'

S1: 'I think it's really helpful because it makes us feel more relaxed.'

3. The value of sharing personal and study updates

It's important that I give them time to get to know each other and share personal (and study) updates
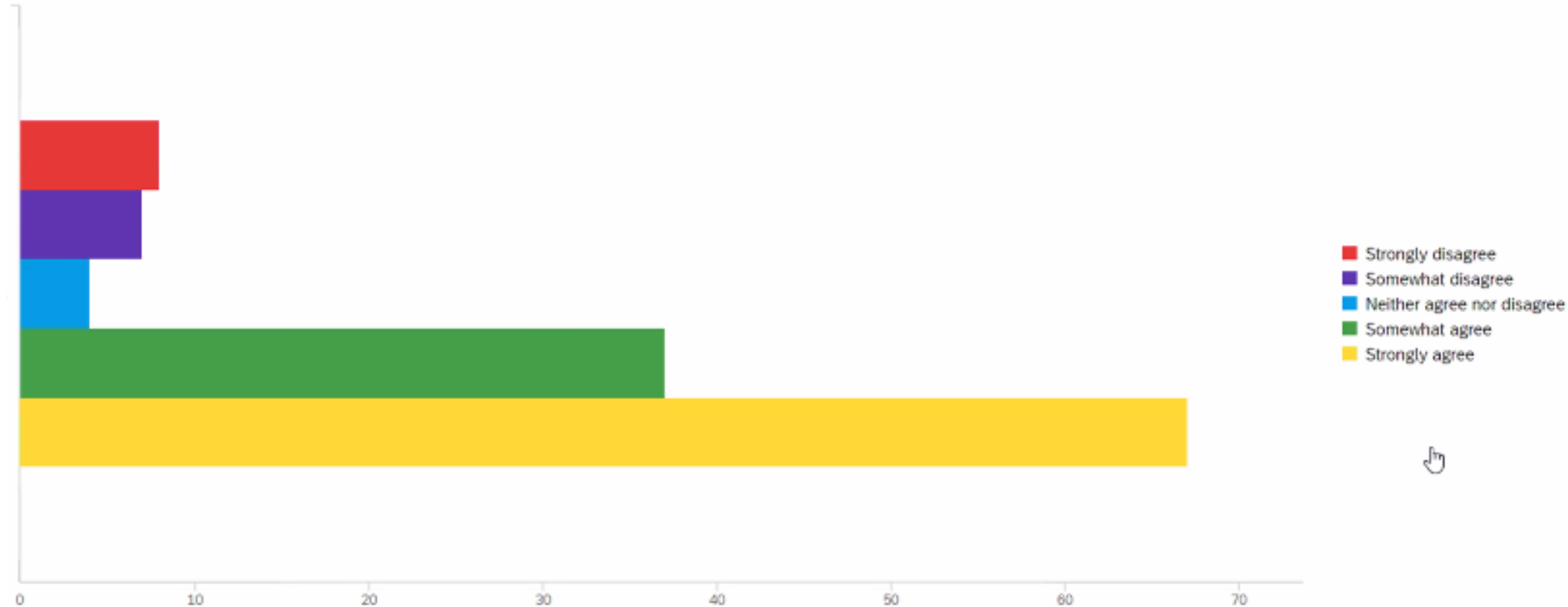

Should tutors on this course give students opportunities to get to know one another and project themselves by sharing updates or giving opinions?

CD: 'I think it's just built-in all of our materials, there are questions like 'what is your opinion?', 'what do you think?' (…) And I think that we try to make them reflect on their degree programmes (…) they're given personal information, personal sort of perspective on things. (…)I'd expect tutors, e.g. on a Monday that their first warmer would be to ask what happened over the weekend.'

4. The value of developing a sense of community further

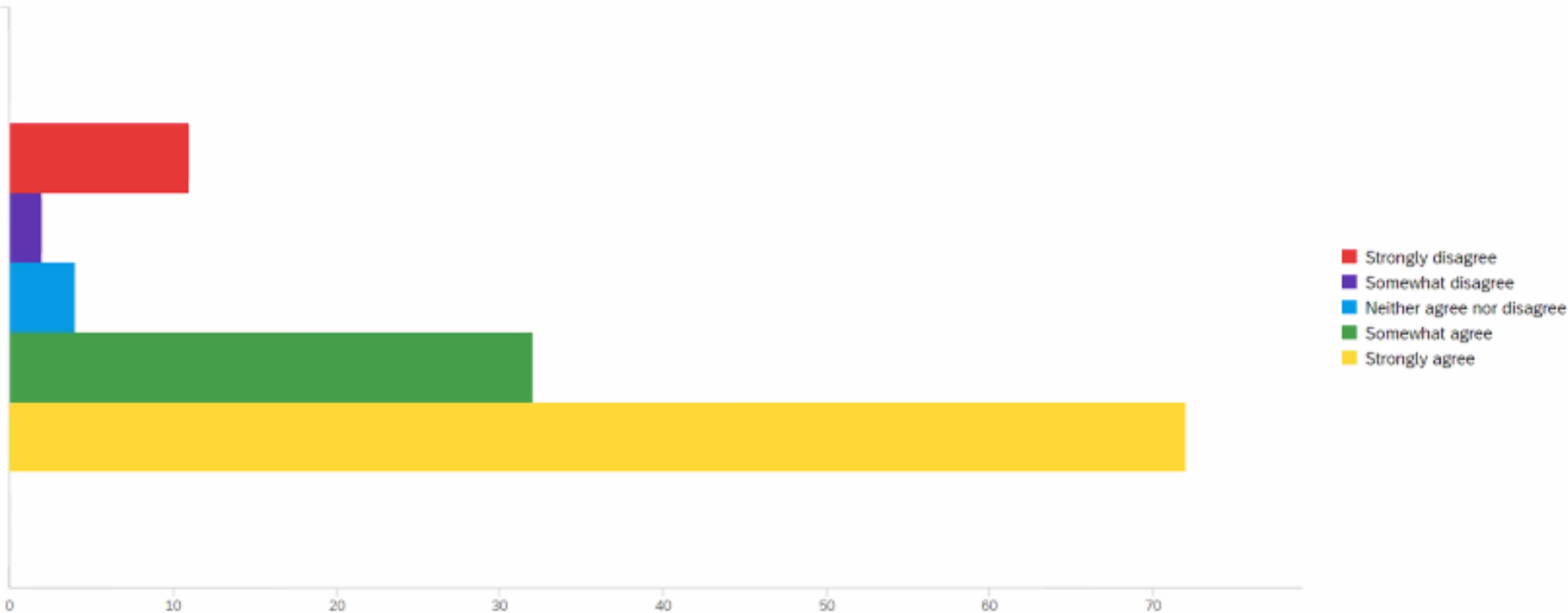I think it's easier for me to learn in a class that feels connected.

Legend:
- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

S1: 'I think if we are connected in a class, we can share our ideas and er we can maybe not be that shy, more confidence, and it will all help us fit the class.'

S2: 'I think that if there is a strong connection between students, it will be very helpful in group work, such as seminar exam. We can share our opinion and practise the seminar exam after the lecture. So, I think it's (…) very important to build a strong connection (…) during the course.'

4. The value of developing a sense of community further

Good rapport with the tutor and other students is important for my course satisfaction.

Legend:
- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

S1: 'I think it will make me, erm, make me feel happy to take the class. I am more willing to spend time on the courses, instead of maybe than doing something else when we are doing the courses. If we have a good rapport (...) we can concentrate on the courses.'

S2: 'I think a good rapport between teacher and students (...) can help us communicate, er, easily, and maybe it is (...) helpful in the tutorial, (...) because in the tutorial we usually ask our individual questions to the (...) teacher so if we have a good rapport with the teacher it may be easier for us to ask difficult or individual questions.'

4. The value of developing a sense of community further

It's easier for my students to learn in a class that has a sense of togetherness.
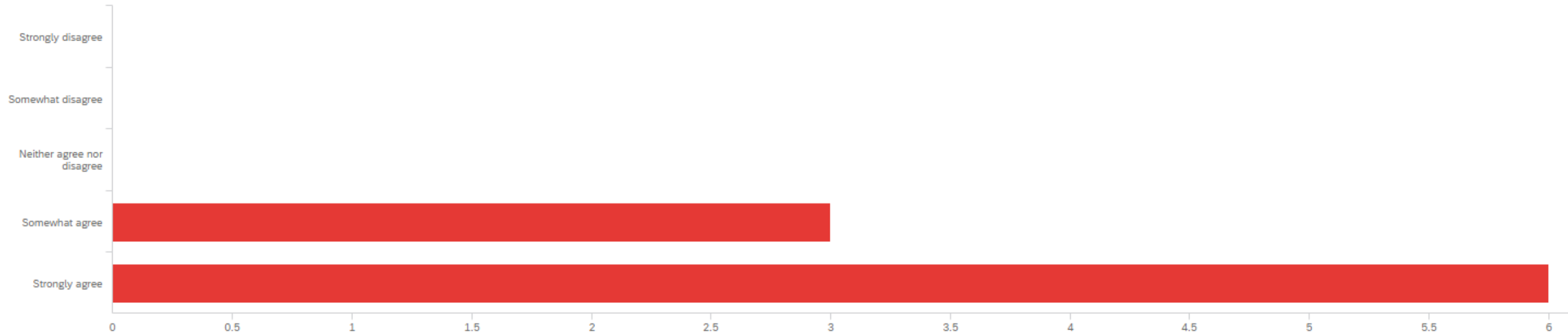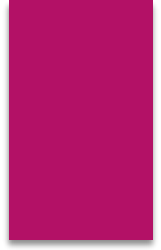
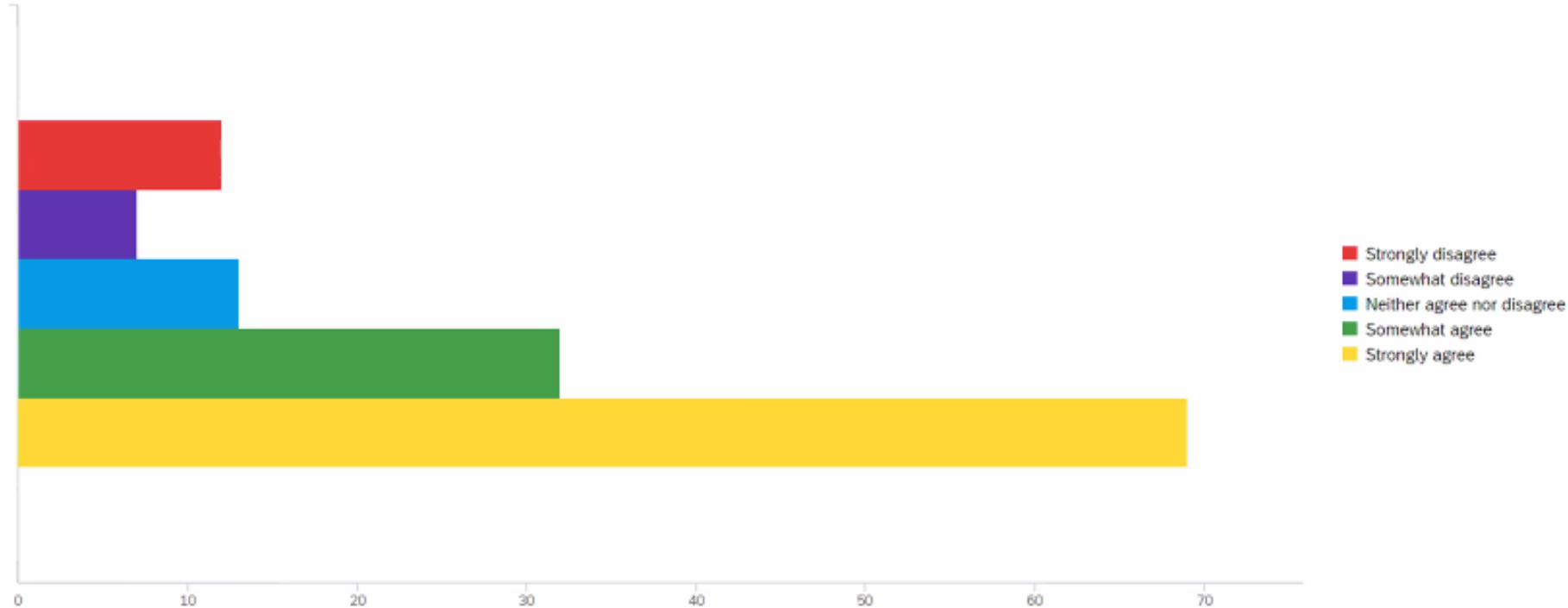Are the community building activities different throughout the course?

CD: '…all stages are important but maintaining is very important so the tutor presence is at the beginning to start but then to facilitate e.g. if something is wrong with groups they can step in.'

Is good rapport with the tutor and other students important for their course satisfaction?

CD: 'Yes, happy students make progress, there's evidence, can't quote of the top of my head, there is evidence that if students are happy they feel they are learning more.'

5. The value of working in groups

Completing tasks as a group helps me to learn more.

Legend:
- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
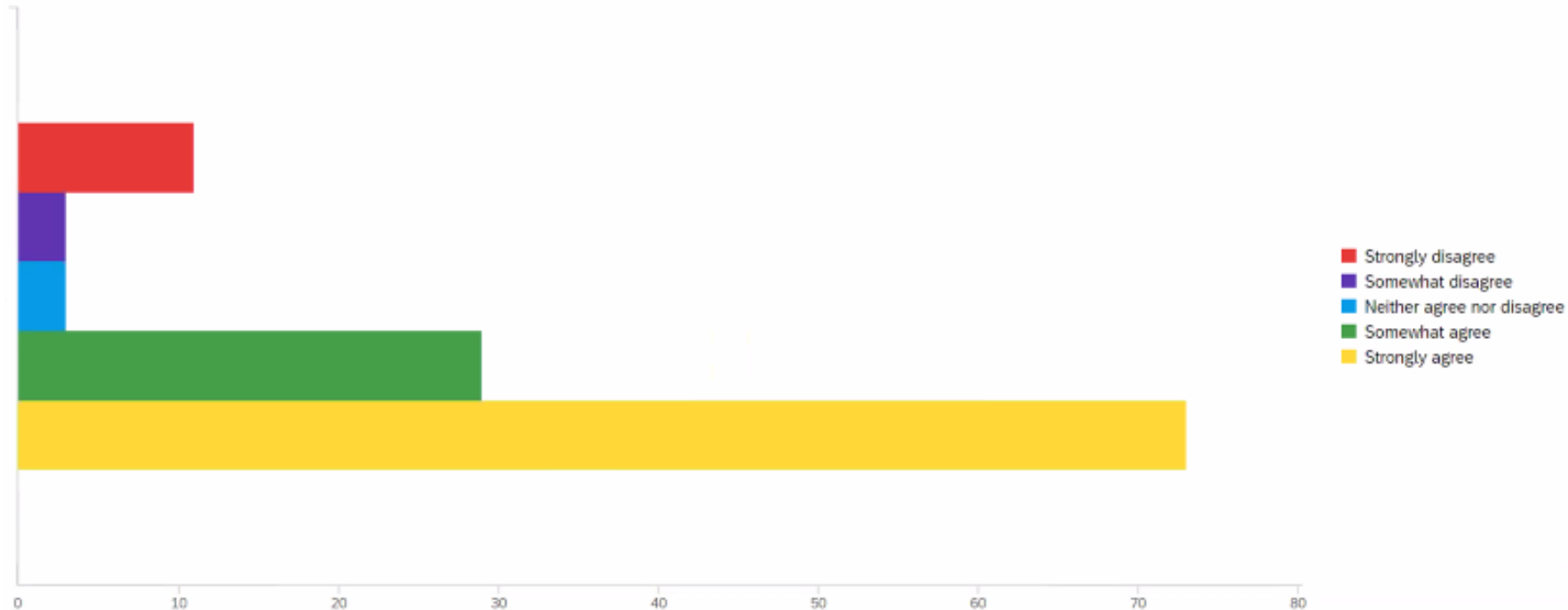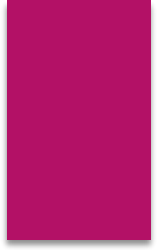- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

S1: 'I think the advantages, maybe it will help each other to exchange our ideas, and it will help us get to know the knowledge much better than doing that by yourself.'

S2: '…we need to (…) take the seminar exam as a group. So, we need to adapt to the group study earlier, and er (…) try to find the skills of group study, such as group seminar or study the booklet together, exchange our opinions and knowledge so it maybe, so it can make up for our shortcomings.'

5. The value of working in groups

Working in breakout rooms in smaller groups has helped me to feel more 'connected' to the class.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

S1: 'I think for me, I prefer to stay in the breakout room because the less persons and I can speak more and I can express my ideas more than in the main room because you don't need to consider about all the persons they are gonna speaking, they are gonna expressing their ideas. I don't need to think oh I should leave some time for them. I just express my ideas with the other persons in my breakout room. (…) I think four people is the best group because I can know different, I can hear different voices but I don't want too many different voices because I want to have a chance to express myself.'

S2: 'Well, I think maybe four people or eight people is an appropriate number for me because I think maybe a smaller room or few people may make me feel embarrassed and everybody just keeps silent and don't want to speak at first so maybe 4 people or 8 eight people, everybody can speak actively and exchange our opinions.'

5. The value of working in groups

Working in breakout rooms in smaller groups has helped my students to feel more 'connected' to the class.
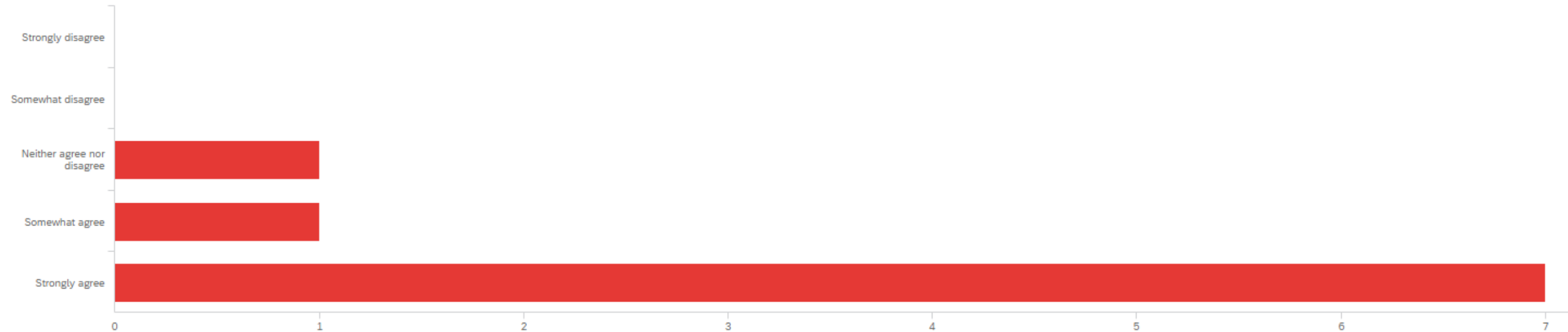
What is the reason for including 'group study' sessions?

CD: 'Student have to do work outside of the synchronous sessions, they have to do it and one of the reasons is that we can't cover everything nor should we as we don't want to spoon-feed them, it reflects their degree programmes at UoM, part of it is also learner training; many of them and I know it's a generalisation but many need to learn to see the benefits of working as a group and responding to other opinions; it's a contrived version of what may or should happen with the incidental learning on campus; you end up building friendships and study groups, it doesn't happen online in the same way even for British students.'

Many sessions on PS6 ask students to work in breakout rooms. What are the benefits of breakout rooms in terms of community building?

CD: 'It allows quieter students to speak up, if set up and monitored correctly then it allows space for purposeful academic discussion, that's the cognitive presence of the community.'

## 6. The value of various tools: PADLET, chat etc.

I think that using tools that allow me to communicate/exchange information (e.g. chat) helps me to learn.
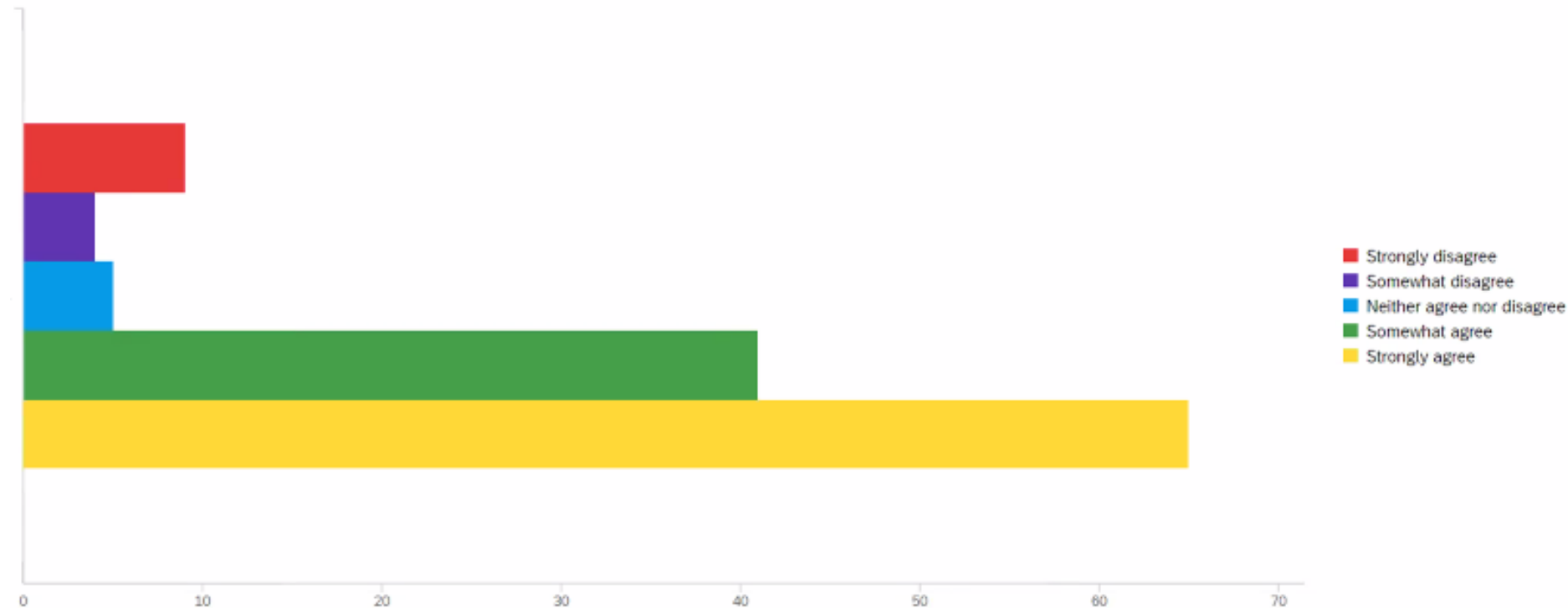
S1: 'I think the Padlet and the Welcome Days and the first class really helps a lot (…) for us to know each other, and I think the better communication of us makes the courses much easier, and much fascinating.'

S2: 'Well, I think maybe, as for classmates, I think the most useful, useful tool is the seminar, because through the seminar we became more familiar with everyone's name (…) name and we can, (…)communicate not only on the lesson, but also in the chat so we can exchange our questions or knowledge more easily.'

## 6. The value of various tools: PADLET, chat etc.
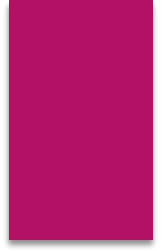
How do you use the chat function in class?

S1: 'I think for me the private chat is a chance for me to not to show everything to the whole class. It's really a relief. It's really embarrassed for us to show maybe our article or something. So, I think it's really a relief.'

S2: 'Er well, as for me, maybe I prefer open chat because I want to know that if any students have the same questions with me, and if my question is a public question and teachers can answer the questions for everybody not only for me. So, I think maybe open chat is more useful in the lecture and maybe we can raise our individual question or private chat in the tutorial but in the lecture maybe open chat is more useful…'

6. The value of various tools: PADLET, chat etc.

Using tools that allow them to communicate/exchange information e.g. the chat, helps my students to learn better.
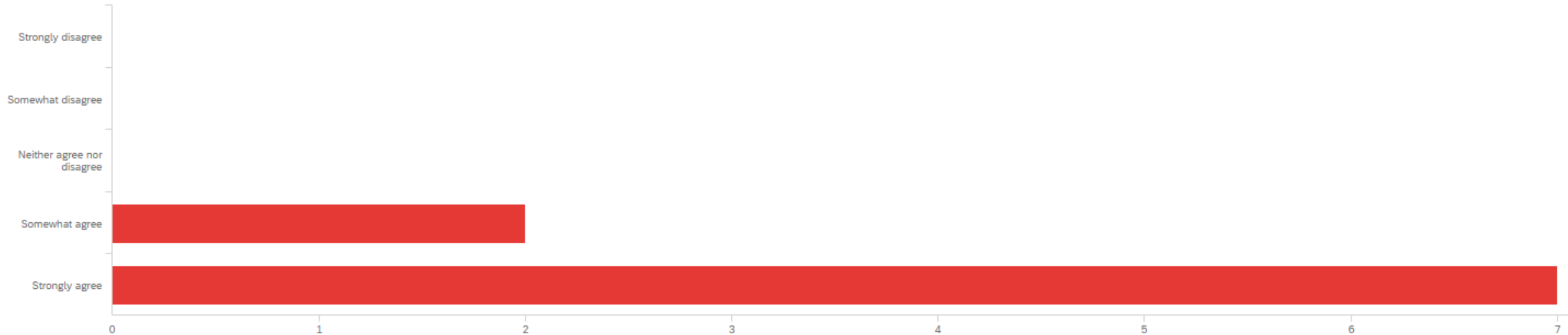
Using tools that allow students to communicate/exchange information e.g. the chat/padlet, helps them to learn better?

CD: 'The chat allows students who are a bit reticent to get involved (...) This is one of the major advantages of teaching online (...) Padlets are good depending on how they are used; ours are mainly for social presence but tutors can set up others to share and exchange information.'

3. Conclusion

Our aim was to investigate common beliefs about the benefits of community building and how it aids learning, leading to positive student experience.

Benefits:

- In our context, a sense of community appears vital for student engagement and satisfaction (Berry, 2019).

- Community seems instrumental in supporting collaborative learning (Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007).

- Students who feel a sense of 'connectedness' are likely to be more active and motivated in their learning (Young and Bruce, 2011).

3. Conclusion

Strategies:

- ▶ Switching cameras on seems to be worth encouraging.

- ▶ Getting to know other students is important.

- ▶ It is valuable to develop a sense of community further during the course.

- ▶ It appears that good rapport with the tutor and other students is important for course satisfaction.

- ▶ It seems vital to give students opportunities to share personal and study updates.

- ▶ Students value group work and perceive it as helpful to their learning.

- ▶ It is useful to give students opportunities to work in smaller groups in breakout rooms.

- ▶ Using different tools for communication facilitates engagement and can have a positive influence on emotional wellbeing.

References

Berry, S. (2019). Teaching to connect: Community-building strategies for the virtual classroom. *Online Learning, 23*(1), 164-183. http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i1.1425

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. (2010). 'The first decade of the community of inquiry framework: A retrospective'. *The Internet and Higher Education, 13*(1–2), 5-9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2009.10.003

Garrison, D. R. (2009) Communities of Inquiry in Online Learning. *Encyclopedia of Distance Learning*, 352-355. https://doi.org10.4018/978-1-60566-198-8.ch052

Garrison, D.R. & Arbaugh, J. B. (2007) 'Researching the community of inquiry framework: Review, issues, and future directions'. *Internet and Higher Education 10 (2007), 157-172*

Rovai, A. (2002). 'Building sense of community at a distance'. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 3(1), 1-16.

Young, S. & Bruce, M. A. (2011). 'Classroom Community and Student Engagement in Online Courses'. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 7* (2)*, 219 – 230.*