

## Exploring the Potential of Chatbots in Higher Education: A Preliminary Study

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**Abstract :** We report upon a study introducing a chatbot to develop learning communities at a London University, with a largely international student base. The focus of the chatbot was twofold; to ease the transition for students into their first year of university study, and to increase study engagement. Four learning communities were created using the chatbot; level 3 foundation, level 4 undergraduate, level 6 undergraduate and level 7 post-graduate. Students and programme leaders were provided with access to the chat bot via mobile app prior to their study induction and throughout the autumn term of 2019. At the end of the term, data were collected via questionnaires and focus groups with students and teaching staff to allow for identification of benefits and challenges. Findings indicated a positive correlation between study engagement and engagement with peers. Students reported that the chatbot enabled them to obtain support and connect to their programme leader. Both staff and students also made recommendation on how engagement could be further enhanced using the bot in terms of; clearly specified purpose, integration with existing university systems, leading by example and connectivity. Extending upon these recommendations, a second pilot study is planned for September 2020, for which the focus will be upon improving attendance rates, student satisfaction and module pass rates.

**Keywords :** chatbot, e-learning, learning communities, student engagement

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