

The third intervention - The Graduation Community Program

The third intervention prototyped at the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering was The Graduation Community Program (CGP). The goal of the program was to connect students and create graduating cohorts, a community that supports and motivates students while pandemic restrictions were in place. The program ran for twenty weeks, which is the same time as the duration of a nominal graduation project. Students were divided into fixed groups of six to eight students and stayed together throughout the program. This program was designed by 'the project team', a team of two researchers and two junior design researchers of the Faculty of IDE. The design rationale can be found in table 7 and 8.

Table 7: The design rationale of the third intervention

What	Where	Who	Why
The graduation CP is a program for graduating students of IDE that connects them to each other and where graduating groups are shaped who support and motivate each other during the graduation journey	Announced the intervention via Newsletter, brightspace, e-mail; Sign-up: google form Place of meeting: zoom as meeting place. MS team as communication channel for the whole community Miro as online whiteboard where students work with our pre-made templates	Graduating students starting between the beginning of February and half March in fixed groups of 6 to 8 students. Student could tell their preference based on: frequency of meeting Master track project content preferred fellow students	to connect students to each other over a longer period of time and let them experience graduation with a fixed group of graduating students.
Kick-off half day	online session via zoom in miro	Students	To kick-off the graduation groups part of the GCP. The students get to know their graduating group, shape their "rules" and activities.
Journey sessions	online session via zoom in miro	Supervisors and students	To let students reflect on their (work) attitude and mindset during the graduation project and let them reflect/learn about what designer they are and want to become

Table 8: Journey sessions and their topics

Who	Topic Journey sessions	How	Value
Students and project team	Motivation	A facilitated session with exercises based on the book: 'designing your life'	It gave students a moment to reflect about their work. What gives them energy, what activities are they engaged in? When are they in a flow?
Students, supervisors and project team	Balance between learning and performing	A facilitated session with discussions amongst supervisors and students separately and mixed.	It provided students as well as supervisors with a different perspective on graduation.
Students and project team	Theme carrousel	a session with different topics (challenges of graduation) per break-out room for students to join and discuss.	It gave students the chance to talk to others outside their graduating group and provided them with the space and time to discuss these challenges
Students and project team	Career planning	A facilitated session with tips and tricks provided by alumni and a discussion about what's next	Provided students with tips and room to discuss their worries and ideas for after graduation.

Evaluation of the GCP

We identified three main findings, mainly that: (1) facilitating connections between students generated a sense of community, (2) the customizable program supports student agency, (3) this program shifted the design focus from performance to student success as a more holistic framing.

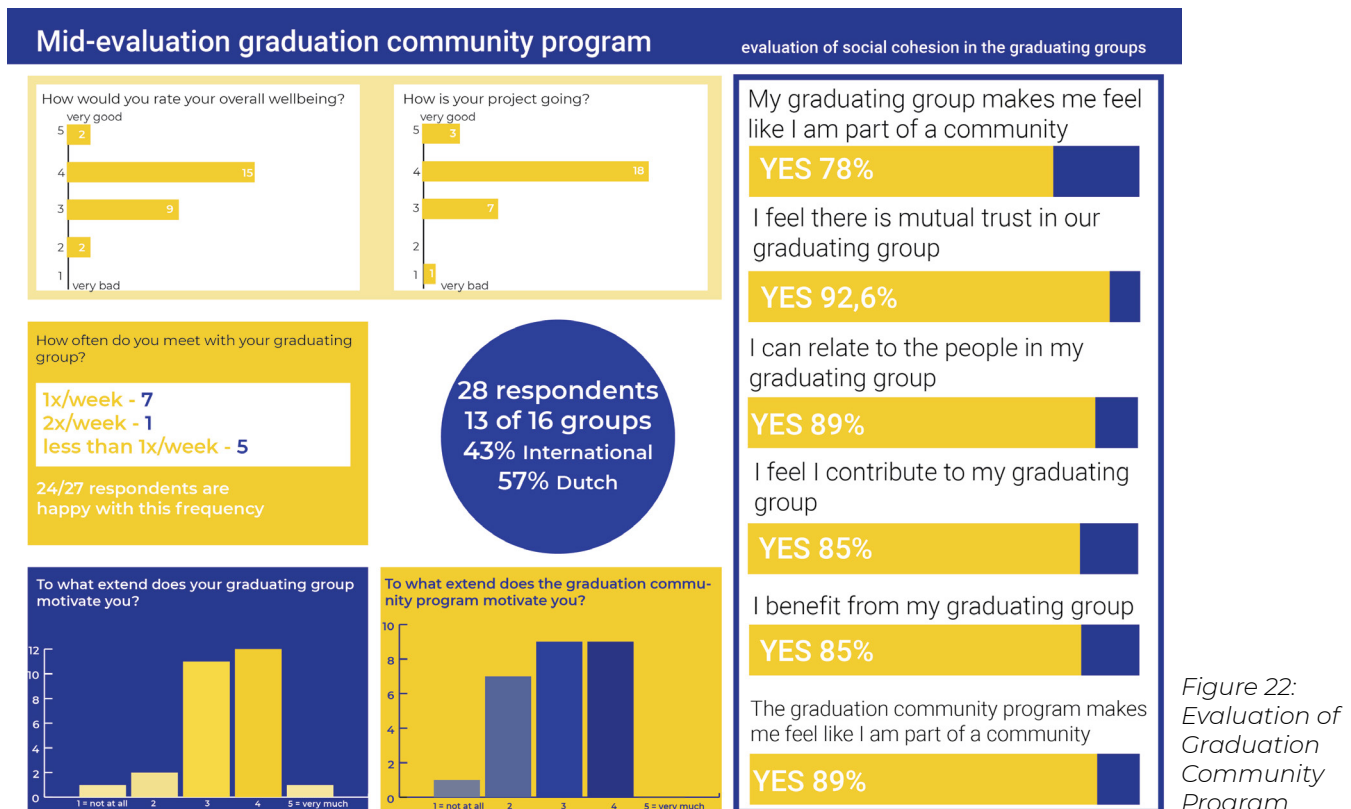


Figure 22: Evaluation of Graduation Community Program

1.1 Facilitating connections between students generates a sense of community

The kick-off day proved to be important to the students, as it created connections for the students for the rest of the graduation project. One student shared: “The kick-off day made me feel part of a community because we ‘built’ our group and we had a nice talk, and our topics are somewhat related. Also, we have similar issues, doubts, etc.”

When it comes to what this program, in general, brought the students, many respond it gave them a community, relationships and made groups by connecting them. For 80% of respondents of the final survey, the GCP made them feel like they were part of a community (see Figure 23). Since this prototype took place during COVID, these human connections were especially valuable to the students. It renewed old relationships and created new ones. As one student shared: “It did the brilliant job of connecting new people during this online version of the graduation project”.

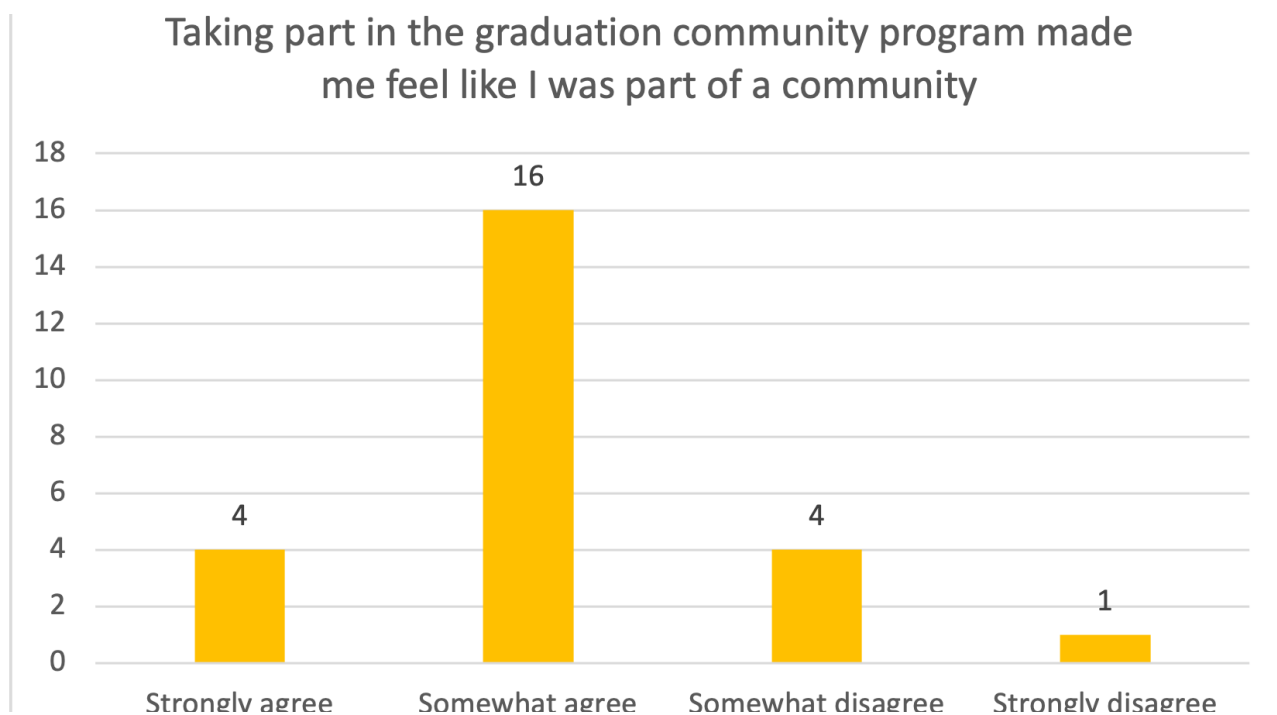


Figure 23: Student evaluation of feeling part of a community created by The GCP

The program not only connected students but also created a sense of belonging to the university. This connection was important to students since they perform an individual project with low interaction with peers, staff or the university. One student said: “The contact with TU Delft is important, I would feel lonely, disconnected if this was not here. I feel more engaged now.”

The general level of engagement and number of participants dropped throughout the program. As some students shared, this was because students required more support and structure at the beginning of the graduation journey.

Shared emotional connection and membership are essential elements of a sense of community. 75% of the students shared that they could relate to one another (see Figure 24). Students said that going through the same struggles helps. One student wrote: “I mainly benefit from my graduation group by giving and receiving emotional support. We all have different projects, but we go through similar struggles, like worrying about the quality of our work.” Having a group gave the students the feeling that they were not alone. “What this program brought me is a group of graduate students. This made me feel less alone and feel recognized in the situation.” Lastly, the group gave them a feeling of comfort and companionship.

Mutual interdependence is crucial to feel part of a group. 75% of the responding students answered they benefited from their group and 85% said they felt they contributed to the group (see Figure 24). Students supported each other by listening and sharing their challenges and worries. Just the fact that they had a group of people they could rely on was of high value, 78% said they felt there was mutual trust in their group (see Figure 24).

One student shared with us: “Graduation is hard and lonely. We are used to working in groups, it is nice to have a group of people who will make time for you and whom you can contact.”

In the final evaluation of the program, 72% of the respondents felt motivated by their graduating groups. One of the things that contributed to this was the activities the students performed in their groups. As one student said: “It [the weekly check-ins every week with his graduation group] is motivating, you want to be able to share something that you have been working on every week.” Other students shared it was motivating to know that the meetings with their group occur every week and that the group gave an energy boost.

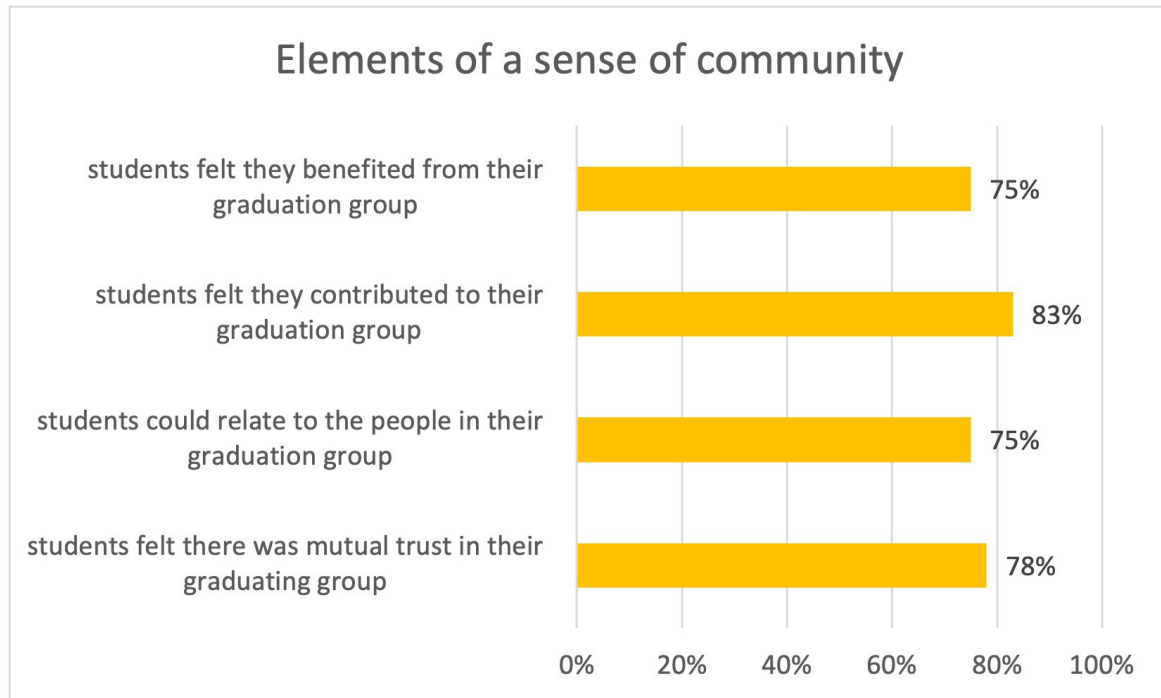


Figure 24: Student evaluation of elements of a sense of community

Lastly, the students also shared their group is a place to reflect on the graduation process and to seek advice. One student wrote the following: “It gives me a place to reflect on my progress, my work, share my worries, downs or ‘trophies’, and the support really helps in the progress.” The personal experience of one student can be found in Figure 25.

The GCP and the graduation groups had an impact on the learning experiences of the students. The students supported each other in design activities, for example, helping with performing interviews, facilitating creative sessions, and prototyping. As a student shared: “When I was lacking participants for testing, I know I was welcome to ask my graduation groups to help.” Students learn from and with each other. As a student wrote: “We share our visions, tools for the project, compare methods and support each other”. Students were able to compare and receive reassurance about their work by sharing with others. It helped them to see where they were in the project and how well they were doing. A student told us: “It helps me to compare with them, to see that I am on the right track.”

1.2 A customizable program supports student agency

The graduating group activities were self-organized and initiated by the students. Consequently, students depended on themselves and their teammates to make it work. When we performed an intermediate check-in at the middle of the program, we learnt that most groups (13 of the 16 groups responded) met each other once per week. What students benefited from were the weekly meetings they planned. It helped them to start the week together on Mondays. Some groups also set up a check-out, to end the week together. A student wrote:

“Every Monday at 9 AM we discuss how our weekend was, what we did last week, what we plan to do and the challenges we are facing. I like that it is on Monday, so you are a bit forced to start. And it is nice that you start with social contact.”

Another student shared: “The group works the best when everyone is there, and you know that. So, you feel responsible and obliged to come.” There was a wide variety amongst the graduation groups of activities and platforms they used for communication. Some groups had a slack channel, others a WhatsApp group. Some students met at the faculty when this was possible or studied together. Part of the suggested weekly check-in format was to pledge together, meaning that students shared what they would work on the coming week.

Several students expressed the provided structure of the GCP helped their groups to start the conversations. This structure consisted of some templates provided by the program. They liked the guided parts of the program and expressed that the activities forced them to plan. One student reported:

"We use the template, then it is easier to talk about the type of problems we face. It makes it easier to first write down what you think [...]. I feel like we would not share so much if the questions wouldn't be there."

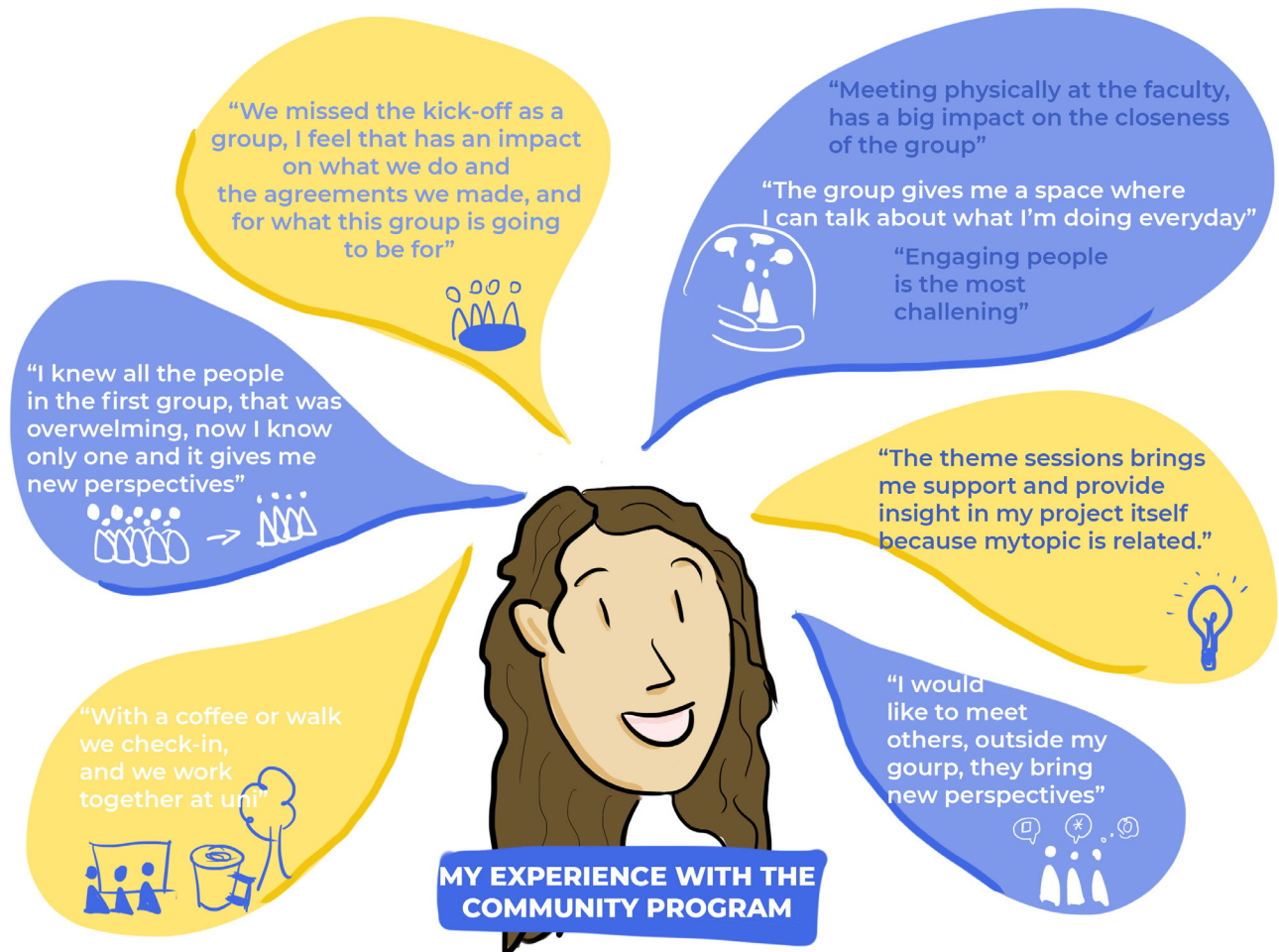


Figure 25: The personal story of a participating student at the midterm evaluation

The program created a sense of belonging however, not all students felt the same way about their groups. 61% of the student said the graduation groups gave them a sense of community. This number is low compared to the feeling of community the program gave them (80%). There were differences between groups: some groups met once or twice every week though others didn't speak or meet each other after the facilitated kick-off day. Students dedicated the challenge of staying connected, engaged, and involved to this inactivity. One student wrote: "Each person has different expectations and organises the day differently. Not everyone sees it the same way. It is not a priority for everyone." A proposed solution by students was to make participation voluntarily, but when people sign up, they are responsible to commit. Lacking students who took responsibility was also a challenge as one student shared: "There is no responsible person, that might be nice in our group, it is very personality depending, I could use a leader."

1.3 A focus on student success instead of performance improves wellbeing

The journey sessions were specific learning moments for students to work together on a topic outside their graduation work. One of these activities was the journey session on the balance between learning and performing. Students interacted with graduation supervisors on the goal of the thesis project. This session specifically was valued by the students as it provided them with a different perspective on graduation and helped them to reflect on their personal goals for graduation. We learned that it is interesting for students to interact with graduation supervisors about the goal of this final project since it created a healthier perspective on what graduation is about. A student wrote: "I liked the session where there was an interaction with the supervisors. This gave me a lot of info about how they think. And their perspective about learning and performance, which helped me!" A student also shared how the session affected her wellbeing: "In the beginning, I had a lot of anxiety, and couldn't sleep. When I heard the idea, you should learn and not focus on performing, I could sleep again (laughs). It helped my mental health."

Another student shared: "The faculty presents an unrealistic picture of the thesis. Having the graduation group helps you to see that there are more outliers than you thought."

2. What could we improve the next time? (Student perspective and project team perspective)

As always there are points of improvement. When the students were asked to share what could have made their experience with the community program and specifically the graduating groups better, the four following aspects were named.

Students said that the same level of engagement was very important to make the graduating groups work and that in some groups this was the main reason why the graduating group didn't work out. They shared that in the future students need to be dedicated to participating in the group. Next to this, they would keep the frequency of meetings high throughout the whole graduation journey and would make a better planning on when to meet and how much time it would take in their planning. Lastly, students shared that they would meet more in person in the future and work together in the same room. Some groups did this, and it benefitted their feeling of belonging to the group.

With regards to the organisation of the GCP, students expressed the need for a more realistic view on graduation to be shared with them at the start of graduation. Now, this was part of a journey session in the third week and during the career session with tips from alumni at the end. Students also pointed out that communication via e-mail was not the best way to inform them. Often, they forgot journey sessions were planned and it felt like participation was not required. Since this community was a prototype, participation was on a voluntary basis. Students suggest making participation more obliged once they signed up for this programme. This could also benefit the engagement of the students with their own graduation groups. To make sure that there is a good match between the students of one graduation group, different ways should be looked at on how to organise the graduating groups.