

# Your final design project - "Is it your masterpiece project or a great building block in your life-career-journey?"

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*A TU Delft project: Co-creating the graduation journey*

**“How would you define your final design project as a Master student? Is it your masterpiece project or a great building block in your life-career-journey?”**

*I graduated not that long ago, but during my journey, I would have answered the first. Now that I am finished, I say there will never be just one masterpiece in my life since there will always appear a new challenge where one wants to master in. It is about giving perspective to your situation and realizing that this pressure to perform is unreasonable and unhealthy. A shift in mindset is necessary to realize what the real significance is of this project and to create a balanced perspective on the pressure graduate students put on themselves.*

In October 2020, Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer, Rebecca Price, Eva Legemaate and I (Marie Van den Bergh) started working on the research project: “Co-creating the Graduation Journey” funded by the TU Delft Study Climate program. **The overall goal of this project is to research and learn how to better integrate wellbeing, learning and human connection in MSc student’s graduation journeys.**

The motivation for this “Co-creating the Graduation Journey” project goes beyond student wellbeing. It is about student success. Focusing on student success for us means creating a learning environment where master students graduate within a reasonable time, have room for personal development, where there is attention for student wellbeing, where students self-regulate their personal learning objectives, where there is room for (skill)development outside the study program and where students can work on self-actualization (1). An example is that students should be able to put and have a realistic view of their graduation instead of putting impossible expectations to deliver a masterpiece.

We apply a systemic and co-creative design approach in this project, which means we involve all stakeholders connected to the students’ graduation journey and co-create the interventions together. We aim to prototype how we can improve the study climate and support system of our students and academic staff by designing different interventions. **As a result of this project, guidelines and, proven working principles on how to develop a support system for all people involved in the design students’ final project will be shared among a broader audience.**

This work builds upon student wellbeing research conducted in spring 2020. (Click [here](#) and [here](#) to read more about the results)

## Connecting graduation students — the first intervention

The final design project of a student at the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering is individually assessed and an individual piece of work, resulting in students who find themselves often isolated in their project and overwhelmed with the pressure to create a project to be proud of. However, working together actually benefits our learning experience and our design process (2). That is why we thought it a good idea **to connect graduate students to each other and create a group of peers.**

This idea resulted in our first intervention, a weekly check-in, which started on the 23rd of November with the first cohort of graduate students joining us. For four Monday mornings, graduate students were able to join a one-hour zoom session, facilitated by two design researchers of IDE.

We started with a short plenary check-in, where we asked how they were doing, using the online tool Mentimeter (figure 1). The goal of this first exercise was to **give the students the chance to reflect on their own experiences, their progress of the graduation project and, to find out how everyone else is doing.**

### Slide the scale

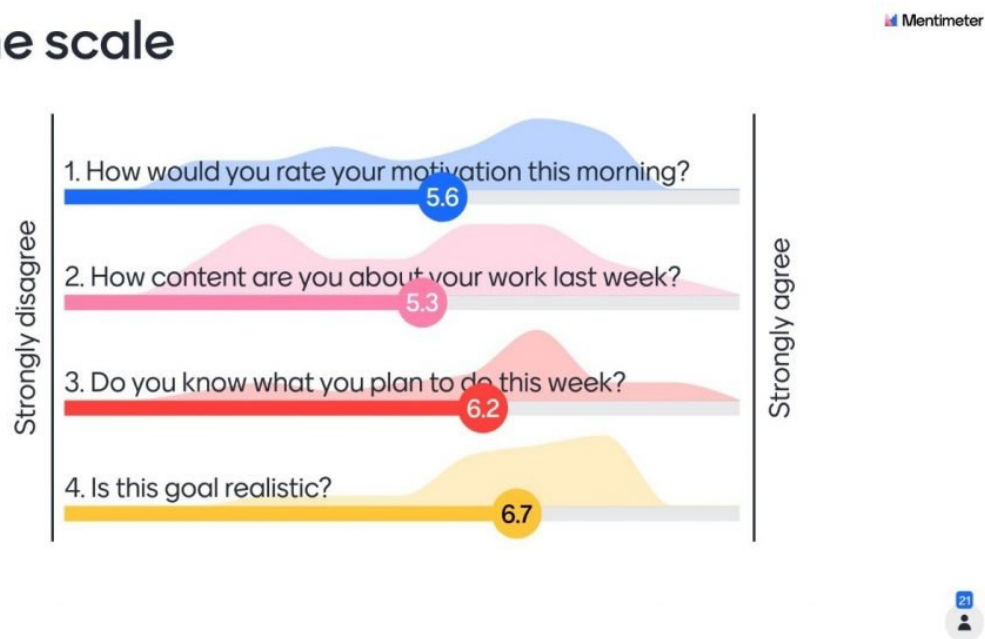


Figure 1: four questions asked at the beginning of every weekly check-in

In the second and main part of the weekly check-in, students were split up in groups of four to five students in break-out rooms to spark smaller and engaging discussions. The group discussions were initiated by content provided by the facilitators. **The goal was to challenge the students to question their mindset and approach towards the graduation project.** In other words, to let them reflect and challenge their own 'masterpiece' thinking.

Different working principles, the design rationales behind an idea (3), were used to design the weekly check-ins. We will briefly discuss them below, by describing the result with an illustration of the students' reactions.

### **1. Building a safe environment where challenges can be shared.**

The groups of graduate students stayed the same during all the weekly check-ins to provide a safe environment to share struggles or questions. This is built on the idea that one needs time to get to know and trust another to feel comfortable to share personal experiences.

### **2. When you share you belong and, you feel motivated**

One student said: *"I felt part of the group of graduate students when sharing our self-sabotaging behaviours and similar struggles in being happy with our projects"*. This is based on the working principle that sharing your battles and successes leads to a sense of belonging (4). The lack of that feeling of belonging or community feeling during the graduation journey was highly recognized by alumni students (67%). The feeling of belonging, 'relatedness', to a group is necessary for individuals to feel motivated (5) and affects students' motivation positively (6). Also, discussing their struggles gave the students the motivation to continue. One student said: *"When others share what they are doing and share their struggles and how they try to solve them, it inspires me to also look at the positive side and to see how I can continue instead of being stuck in my negative thoughts."*

Graduate students that participated in the weekly check-ins explained that multiple WhatsApp groups and a Slack channel were created by some students and that this contributed to their sense of community feeling. These different initiatives from students that arose from our first intervention are good examples of what is called 'design for emergence' where designers do not design the end product but design for things to emerge from the design (7).

### **3. Coaching others helps you to feel better (8)**

One graduate student said the following about the intervention: *"Everything actually helped me today, each of the people I talked to solved one of my questions or gave me a nice tip"*. The weekly check-ins enabled students to give and receive feedback from a different source than their supervisors. Moreover, the type of feedback was different, as it was on a more personal level than the content focused feedback students get during their supervisory meetings. This was valued by the students: *"having a general start with peers that focused on how we are feeling and what the plans are, instead of diving into doing research is what helped me the most today"*. When we teach something, we reinforce the knowledge we already have. This can be a refreshing perspective change for students.

### **4. Peer planning simulates structure**

During the first check-in, students were asked to share their planning for the next week and to formulate a pledge. This is connected to the principle of peer planning and stimulating structure. We assumed that if you 'pledge' together or share your plan of the week you are more likely to

execute it as you can be held accountable by the others for what you promised to yourself. This idea of making pledges together was well received by students, one student said: *“We pledged together to work on something and then motivated each other through WhatsApp”*, another student said: *“the pledge made me do stuff I would have probably not done at all otherwise”*. Additionally, numerous students pointed out that the sessions on Monday morning also helped them to get out of bed.

## Conclusion of the first intervention

The ultimate goal of this intervention was to improve the overall experience of a graduation project, by connecting graduate students so that they can support and coach each other. What the students valued the most was that **this intervention allowed them to work on their wellbeing and learning experience** and was not focused on the content of their project. We have seen that this first intervention increased their level of motivation (53% of the graduate students that filled in the survey about the weekly check-ins said that the intervention motivated them), made them feel like they belonged to a group (80%) and that peer discussions supported them in their graduation project (67%). An overview of the students’ opinions of the first weekly check-in is shown in figure 2.

## What do you think of this weekly check-in?

Mentimeter



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Figure 2: Description of students about the weekly check-in

Based on the positive reactions of students we suggest the following points.

- We recommend that the faculty explores ways to keep on organizing these peer connection moments for graduate students.

- A tip for teachers is to be aware and pay attention to community forming in their courses. Feeling part of a community showed to positively affect the graduate students motivation and learning experience.
- Specifically for supervisors, we would recommend stimulating students to form a group with their peers.
- A suggestion for graduate students is to stay connected to each other. Try to reach out to each other or form a group with people around you and plan for example short weekly meetings, like the weekly check-ins we described in this blog post. In these meetings, it is important to try to stay away from the content and discuss how you are feeling in your project. Sharing your experiences or even just hearing the same struggles from others can already motivate and comfort you.

Our team of researchers will further research how we can design the creation of a community in education and how we can design for the emergence of interactions within that community. We will also explore other ways of support that can be provided to the students and academic staff in the following prototypes.

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